

Vancouver - The Road Home: To Live in a Mobile Home on Canada's West Coast

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Abstract

For the past number of years there has been an increase in mobile homes occupying city streets along Metro Vancouver and the West coast of Canada outside of permitted spaces. Their presence has been well noted by news organisations and internet platforms that routinely discuss their existence. The main question this thesis wishes to determine is why this phenomenon exists and what is propelling it to its current level of prominence. While such an unorthodox lifestyle is seen as a positive by some, others are weary of the social stigma surrounding mobile homes due to stereotypes of poverty that are often unfair. Based on a review of existing literature, observation notes and a series of interviews from eleven willing participants while in the Metro Vancouver area, I can say that one of the underlying pressures influencing people to live in a vehicular home in this region is the extreme gentrification responsible for high housing prices. In fact, urban mobile homes are part of a much larger trend of alternative housing strategies as minimalist living gains broader support to cut back on living costs.

Despite these facts, mobile home dwellers come from all walks of life with different economic backgrounds and motivations. Thus, while lowering financial costs are an important part of the discussions around this phenomenon, they are by no means the sole reason. More interestingly the mobility of the homes themselves are part of the driving force in popularity, allowing occupants to more freely move around to see or do things they wish to partake in. This gives dwellers a better sense of control and autonomy over their own lives. Thus, mobile home dwellers should be seen less as impoverished squalors and more as a complex group of people whose motivations are far more intricate. Mobile homes are less a desperate housing solution for people on the verge of homelessness and more akin to a means to gain a personal sense of freedom beyond overcoming mere economic constraints.

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Acknowledgements

Since the beginning of my inquiries into the subject of mobile home dwellers living on the side of the streets in cities on or near the West coast of Canada, I was confronted with the issue of how exactly to go about searching for willing volunteers to conduct interviews with. Fortunately for me, the many online communities of bloggers, YouTubers and Facebookers have provided a crucial source of passionate individuals who share information about their lifestyles. While many dwellers are strongly private individuals, they also share a strong sense of attachment to both their mobile homes and the way of life that is provided by these wheeled dwellings. Most of the people that I have had the privilege of communicating with have shared with me their enthusiasm of what a life on the road means for them. For some their past choices to transition into a mobile home were made from a desire to overcome difficult circumstances brought on to their lives. For others, the choices were made due to convenience, curiosity or an already existing appreciation for what a mobile lifestyle could bring for them. Regardless of the differing circumstances, most of the mobile home dwellers I spoke with had stood by those decisions and were dedicated to the lives they led.

I dedicate the work of this thesis to these individuals who have shared with me their stories, their challenges and in some cases have invited me into their homes. Without them this thesis could not have been written.

Thesis Introduction

On the Road Again

It was close to nightfall. The area around Trout Lake was becoming packed with vehicles once again. There were ordinances against overnight parking, but the ban had little effect in deterring the parking lot attendees. Some were being discreet about their stay by traveling incognito and blending in wherever they were. Others made no effort to hide the fact that they were setting up for another night in the crowded parking lot. In one spot a man was deploying his makeshift water tank made from a five-gallon jug. Another person opened the back of his pickup, revealing the stovetop inside the camper shell. That person unrolled his sleeping bag and slept amid walls layered with insulation foam. Meanwhile, people in similar situations were inside the municipally owned sports complex just adjacent to the parking lot. Some actively worked out, but others were merely content to have the shower access the facilities offer. The rest were scattered about in the cafeteria to eat or in the lounge area to surf the Web. Once the sun was down, others would quietly park their campers on the adjacent side streets. They would pull up to the curb and use their blinds or sun blockers to cover the windows.

When morning light came, most of the parked vehicles began vacating. Their owners would either set off to buy breakfast, go to work or find something else to entertain them for the day. Out of the latter, one might go jogging along the beach at the Spanish Banks. Another might set off to the local library to spend hours reading. Another still might decide to film a video about themselves and upload it on a video sharing platform or an online blog. Finally, a couple of them may decide to meet up at a local café to share tips, discuss pop-culture or venture into other topics. They might meet old acquaintances or introduce themselves to the newcomers to the streets of Metro

Vancouver. Regardless of who each of these people is, their background and what vehicle they drive, they all shared one commonality. Each and every one presently lives inside their vehicles. At the wheel, these unorthodox residents of the Metro Vancouver region travel far and wide. They make their homes in parks, in back alleys, near the train yards, along the waterfront, beside the malls, between high rise apartments and around industrial businesses. They make their homes everywhere from North Vancouver, to Burnaby, to Surrey, to Richmond and beyond. Vehicle dwelling arrangements are far from a rare occurrence and are well known across the landscape.

A Tale of Two Homes

These events are a brief glimpse into the lives of thousands of people, many of them local, but many others from farther afield who have made their way to the western coast in order to become part of an unconventional way of life among the streets, parks, water fronts and various other locales. However, it is not the scenery alone that motivates them. What has some people attentive on Canada's Pacific Coast is the rise of mobile home dwellers in and around the Metro Vancouver region. These dwellers live on the side of the road in various vans, trailer attachments and other assorted vehicular homes. While the personal reasons for the change in lifestyle can vary greatly from person to person, many of the underlying factors stem from three consistent sources. The first is an overly expensive housing market pushing low- to middle-income earners out. The second is a desire to cut back on non-essential costs and market pragmatism – a redefining of material accumulation for the twenty-first century economy. Last but not least is the pursuit of freedom by removing geo-economic restrictions tying people down and enabling personal autonomy.

The issues and questions at the heart of the conversation that mobile home dwellers engage in are many, such as the skyrocketing housing costs and how that compels people outright to find alternative solutions. Others feel like they cannot be bothered with spending large sums of their income on an ideal material lifestyle, increasingly difficult to maintain. However, beneath these general sentiments lies an increasing disillusionment with traditional narratives of economic success and prosperity. This disillusionment is based on disruptions caused by the neoliberal effects of globalization. More specifically, the disruptions affect all aspects of life, from housing to economic opportunities to the basic costs of living conditions. All of these play an important role in how people must cope in a world where traditional norms and definitions of prosperity are being challenged by fewer financial securities. In an urban world where suitable housing has become synonymous with extensive commitments in time, money, and stress due to rising property values, people look towards other avenues to find a space to call home.

While these challenges are being exhibited all across Canada and much of the Global North in general, the West Coast is where the symptoms are felt the hardest. The traditional housing market continues to be a major point of contention for many people due to unprecedented price hikes over the last few decades. There are many contributing factors, such as artificial rises in demand caused by years of unrestricted foreign buyers, property investors and land speculators (Rosen and Walks 167). Urban developers motivated by the higher profitability of luxurious housing units, are incentivized to cater to this market rather than focus on more affordable housing for the average working- to middle-class consumer (Rosen and Walks 162-163).

As mentioned before, the Metro Vancouver region is not unique in this trend. But, its port access to the Pacific economies make it extremely vulnerable, and thus consequences become noticeably extreme when compared to other regions. The result has been the condominium

redevelopment boom that picked up from the early 2000s onward (Harris 715, 720). The outcome has been that people who either have limited prospects for upward economic mobility or suffer from expense-related issues must rely on improvised solutions when dealing with their personal housing needs.

While mobile homes in urban spaces have become one of the more prominent solutions to gentrification, they are by far not the only ones. In fact, mobile homes have remained mere novelties after other major economic crises. For example, mobile homes were put forward to deal with urban issues such as congestion and affordability during the Great Depression (Bair 286). So while economic disparity can contribute to the mobile home phenomenon, it cannot fully explain why the number of mobile home dwellers is surging with any great satisfaction. A key factor is missing to fully explain why mobile homes have become a prominent fixture in the greater Metro Vancouver region.

This other factor that needs mentioning is more complex. It is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the way people interact with material consumption. This does not mean that the relationship between consumers and consumption is being rejected. Rather, the nature of the relationship is shifting thanks in part due to the way market forces are defining the twenty-first century. To elaborate, market restructuring from the 1980s to present have changed the way in which Global North economies function. The result is that production economies have been replaced by service ones, economies that offer more precarious employment, fewer benefits, fewer prospects of upward mobility, stagnant earnings, higher entry-level requirements, longer working hours, higher productivity demands and more. While companies, entrepreneurs and large investors (groups that are far more capable of moving when needed) have seen increases in earnings, all other income brackets have either stagnated or shrunk (Sassen 17-18, 22-23). This coupled with

the rising cost of living helps foster attitudes of disaffection. People experience a sense of inability to control their own fate.

In response to this dissolution, some prospective homeowners and tenants are looking towards alternative housing solutions to exert more personal control over spending, work concerns, time management and personal pursuits. Alternative homes that can provide these measures through lower price points and other benefits can help people feel a greater degree of freedom. Freedom in this case implies not only the removal of obligation-related barriers (such as cost of living expenditures) but the ability to make new and meaningful choices about how to spend one's resources, and time. In a word, autonomy. Mobile homes have become a prime candidate for alternative home seekers because their mobility provides another unique quality in the pursuit of autonomy – the ability to pick up and go wherever you want whenever you want.

In short, the emphasis or goal of a mobile lifestyle is the rearrangement of a person's living conditions towards seeking meaningful active experiences over investing time and money in property. This is not to say that such an approach encompasses all mobile home dwellers, especially as some share many of the same issues as homeless or impoverished residents. Some do suffer from the effects of destitution to the point of developing psychological or drug-related issues. Even some of the mobile home dwellers I have had the chance to speak to freely admit that this category of dwellers does exist. In fact, such groups are often enough the target of negative media coverage, complaints and city ordinances, to the detriment of their peers.

Despite this, however, mobile home dwellers come from a wide range of economic circumstances. Some dwellers work for minimum wage at a café, while others have become instructors or film crewmen or even run self-employed businesses. Mobile home dwellers come from all walks of life, and categorizing them as a by-product of urban impoverishment is highly

inaccurate in most cases. For this reason, this thesis will largely focus on the perspective of mobile home dwellers themselves rather than heavily rely on outside points of view. Instead, such views will be used as juxtaposition to deconstruct the narrative of economic precariousness among dwellers.

Why Mobile Homes?

When conducting inquiries into topics related to housing issues in Canada, many studies focus primarily on Indigenous home access or urban poverty. While these are all important subjects to discuss, my area of interest has quickly turned towards the West Coast as housing problems in the region tend to be on a sharper incline when compared to the rest of the country. Gentrification is the main culprit. No other region in Canada, except for perhaps the Greater Toronto Area, suffers from this problem to such a degree. However, what makes Metro Vancouver's housing geography unique is precisely the greater presence of mobile homes in the region. We know so much about street-side mobile homes through media publications because of the sensationalism they provide. Yet, despite their highly publicized presence, there are very few academic studies about these vehicular dwellings.

Most academic publications that focus on mobile homes tend to frame them in the context of trailer park studies, and it's not hard to see why. Trailer parks (especially those in the United States) have often been critiqued or observed for income imbalances, lack of tenant rights and poor living conditions. There is a certain stigma, even some interview participants I have talked to will admit this, that mobile homes are often associated with financial instability. It is a stigma the participants vehemently disagree with, but it is there. Like with some stereotypes, there is a kernel

of truth in the matter, but it is one that is often unfair to the recipients. But mobile homes that exist outside of designated sites belong in their own category. True to the name, these mobile homes mostly remain mobile. These urban vehicle dwellers remain on the move for the most part, switching locations almost every night with some exceptions. Most are ready to pick up and move at a moment's notice. This adds a whole new dimension to a mobile home dweller that partly defines the lifestyle. It is a unique feature that has sadly been overlooked in academic work.

But lack of previous research alone is not why this topic is important. Rather, it is both the growing popularity of mobile homes in terms of usage and the minor deviancy associated with them that make the topic a worthwhile endeavor for study. On top of the traditional stigma surrounding mobile homes due to trailer parks, most occupants that reside in them on the side of a city street undoubtedly must deal with parking regulations that they are almost certainly violating. Granted, most of the Metro municipalities have more or less adopted a *laissez faire* approach to dealing with these dwellers (with certain caveats). Be that as it may, not having a fixed home location to return to and constantly having to be careful about where to park adds new uncertainties that do not exist with conventional housing. It adds a whole dimension of interesting inquiries. Why do mobile home dwellers feel the need to remain transient and not settle down? If high housing prices are the sole issue, then couldn't other alternative housing strategies be applied instead? What makes mobile homes valued among both existing and prospective users? What do users ultimately gain outside of cheaper dwelling options? These are all questions that cannot be answered purely from an economic framing. The point of this thesis is to explore possible answers. If nothing else, this may help remove misconceptions and lead to further discussions about modern city accommodations in the wake of rising alternative housing strategies.

Theoretical Framework

As already alluded to, gentrification is a main theme. Therefore, I will be using critique of neoliberal city planning as a major foundation block for this ethnographic thesis. For this I have decided to take inspiration from David Harvey, an urban anthropologist. Harvey's focus has been on the formation and reimagining of urban spaces through means of monetary capital. In one of his most recent publications, Harvey looks at how the modern housing sector has developed based on property speculation and financialization. More importantly, he looks at how the integration of many regional markets into the global economy has led to a boom in high finance property assets and overall property value inflation to the detriment of local buyers (Harvey 11-13). In his eyes, urban space has become a commodity promising spectacles, tourism and high culture (Harvey 14). In the aftermath of the economic restructuring of the 1980s and the collapse of the Fordist economy where cities relied on industrial enterprises (Hajnal 501), excess capital needed to move somewhere in order to keep cities from collapsing financially.

The solution has been to redirect investments towards urban redevelopment, sacrificing and building over former industrial zones, where less affluent residents lived (Rosen and Walks 160-163). This is what he refers to as "creative destruction" – the process of pushing poverty away from urban centers and onto the periphery (Harvey 16-17). As Harvey points out, this free flow of global capital creates artificial supply shortages that impact local property demands and drive out people in lower economic strata (Smith 50). We can see much of this trend happening in urban spaces across Canada. But the West Coast has been hit especially hard during the recent condo market explosion. This is an essential context for the existence of alternative housing markets, and this thesis recognizes it as such.

As stated, while this economic viewpoint is important, it does not provide a fully satisfactory answer. In trying to understand how people inhabit the mobile lifestyle and derive personal meaning from it, I have found Michel Foucault's work on self-formation very useful. Parts of Foucault's work delve into many aspects of personal transformation through everyday norms and practices. These daily practices, along with the belief systems and rhetoric that accompany them, are what Foucault would describe as ethics, or ethics of the self. He uses this notion to explain how people form identities based on the adoption of norms, values and modes of being.

Commenting on the subject through historical examples, Foucault states,

In the Greco-Roman world, the care of the self was the mode in which individual freedom – or civic liberty, up to a point – was reflected as an ethics. If you take a whole series of texts going from the first Platonic dialogues up to the major texts of late Stoicism—Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and so on – you will see that the theme of the care of the self thoroughly permeated moral reflection. (Foucault 284)

In his works, Foucault looks very carefully at how people undergo a process of self-improvement through a “care of the self.” He stipulates that for this process to be undertaken, people need to understand who or what the self is. To do this, Foucault explains that people need to understand their own conceptions of truth, conduct and principles based on their environment. Only then can they try to embody key facets of these ethical imperatives to transform their *ethos* – a way of being or behaviour (Foucault 285-286). I use this ethics of the self to underscore how mobile home dwellers undergo a process of personal transformation through the lifestyle changes they have made in order to better their own lives. As stated above, financial circumstances range widely among dwellers, and there is no commonality on this point.

Upon further exploration, many mobile home dwellers often do not see themselves as economically precarious subjects. Despite living on the side of the road, often enough illegally due to parking bylaws, the dwellers I have spoken with do not understand themselves as victims of poverty, much less homeless. As a matter of fact, most dwellers have strong positive outlooks about their lives in vehicular dwellings. Their degree of content mainly stems from how their switch from a conventional home to a mobile one has been met with many beneficial outcomes. Admittedly, not everyone who attempts this change stays with it. The first months and even the first year can be difficult for newcomers. There can be many technical and personal challenges that need to be overcome. But once these challenges have been met, dwellers often remain resilient against returning to conventional housing. At least, this has been the case with my own findings. Therefore, understanding that process of change from living in one form of housing and moving into another is an integral part of this thesis. It is about understanding where mobile home dwellers come from, the challenges they have to face when making the transition into a mobile home and ultimately what they find to be the most rewarding features of that change.

Fieldwork and Methodology

Research in the field began in early January 2019 and ended six weeks later in mid-February. This time of the year was chosen to minimize or even eliminate the possibility of meeting with seasonal recreational vehicle users as it is usually only full-time dwellers that operate in winter conditions. While the area of study was open to all the municipalities of Metro Vancouver, the three most prominent areas were Vancouver Proper, Burnaby and North Vancouver. It was in these three cities where most of my observation notes were taken. Common locales I frequently combed consisted of areas around Capilano Mall, Terminal Avenue, Trout Lake, Grandview

Highway and Boundary Road. It was in these areas where I met nearly half of my interview participants. Each one of these areas provided plenty of examples of mobile home activity to compare and contrast.

Before discussing the findings themselves in detail, it is necessary to understand what the term mobile home dweller means and who this applied to while researching. In basic terms, anyone who lives inside a vehicular home on a permanent basis qualifies. Many vehicular home users prefer the term “van-dweller.” But since vans only make up a portion of vehicular homes, I have decided to use the more general term “mobile home dweller.” The housing unit itself does not have to be part of the vehicle’s superstructure. There are plenty of people who live inside of a trailer unit that can be attached and detached depending on needs. Some dwellers in Metro Vancouver live in such dwellings near or on their work site along with other mobile homes. While I have not interviewed anyone who lives on their work site, I do consider them to be part of the wider urban mobile home phenomenon. Some dwellers do not even have a full housing unit. Instead, they sleep in the rear of their vehicle with a makeshift bed or sleeping bag. The extent of other amenities may include a few storage units, a water pump and a camping stove top. Minimal conversions such as these are not uncommon and, in some cases, preferred over another mobile home with more complete amenities, such as a running sink, shower, mini-fridge and toilet. Nevertheless, dwellers do live with these arrangements full-time and are also counted towards my findings. Cases I have not counted in my study include part-time or seasonal dwellers. Metro Vancouver and the West Coast in general are popular destinations for many recreational mobile users for site-seeing and camping. If a person only uses a mobile home for these purposes rather than to live in full-time, then they are not considered a mobile home dweller. Dwellers use these homes on a permanent basis rather than for mere recreational use.

Another group my thesis does not include in its study are those living permanently in trailer parks. Metro Vancouver is not unfamiliar with this group. In fact, there is a sizable trailer park in North Vancouver. I have already briefly discussed how I see trailer park tenants as categorically different from street-side dwellers. Those living there are tenants who pay rent. Mobile home dwellers who live on the side of the road typically reject paying rent or do not see the need to do so. People living in trailer parks do not typically move once they are settled. Their trailers are often built over or connected indefinitely to the park's infrastructure and thus become permanent fixtures like houses. Such residents are tied down to the property they live on. For many mobile home dwellers, this is antithetical to the kind of mobile lifestyle they have. Part of being a mobile home dweller is that a dweller can get up and move whenever that person wants or needs to. Furthermore, while living next to a curb or inside a parking lot may not always be met with hostility by authorities (bylaws or not), there is still a level of deviancy not associated with trailer park residents. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, trailer park residents are treated the same as conventional housing residents.

As for those who participated in the interview process, they all resided in or passed through the greater Metro Vancouver region at the time of fieldwork. Nine of the participants were recruited online via a Facebook group called "Vancouver Vanlife." This group was approached with a combination of Facebook posts and event participation. The remaining dwellers, Clark and Lucy, were recruited from face to face encounters while I was scouring for field sites. Every participant was given the chance to choose when and where interviews were conducted in order to facilitate any unease they may have had. Three of the participants were interviewed inside their mobile homes, one in a mall, one over the phone, and the rest inside various cafes. Four of the nine interviews took place between Vancouver Proper and Burnaby along Grandview Highway. Two

others took place in Vancouver proper's Kitsilano neighbourhood near the Spanish Banks. The last three were scattered in South Burnaby, close to the waterfront in North Vancouver and a South Vancouver park. The ages of the participants were diverse with three in their mid-twenties, three in their thirties, one in his forties and the final three in their fifties. Seven were single at the time of the interview, four were coupled together and one by the name of Karen was raising a daughter in her R.V. until summer of that year upon her completion of high school. The ethnic makeup of the participants was predominantly Euro-descendent except for one of the couples living in a green bus that had been converted by a prior owner. The couple, Whan and Rida, were Filipino and East-Indian, respectively.

Many online blogs, forums, video sharing platforms and social media sites are hosts to a large group of dwellers. Such dwellers use these Web spaces to try to network, share tips or otherwise provide insight for outsiders who may want more information about living as a mobile home dweller. While researching these various platforms is beyond the scope of my thesis, these online spaces nevertheless help serve active communities and are recommended places for any future researchers that wish to broach the subject.

Perhaps the negative impact of having so many interview participants recruited from this method rather than from person-to-person encounters is that they might generally be more vocal advocates of "van life," as many dwellers call it. Not everyone is part of an active group online. These participants may even be skewed more towards greater socioeconomic stability given their access to online resources. Thus, I accept the possibility that my findings may reflect a skewed recruitment method. As I have already stated, it is my firm impression based on observations and various answers from interviewees that the majority of mobile home dwellers do not belong in a category of social or economic precariousness. Nevertheless, I do accept that my research focuses

heavily on one specific group of a larger phenomenon that likely encompasses multiple subgroups. All walks of life (with widely different employment opportunities) are represented. Therefore, I remain confident with the findings from the sample size of people involved. The only point of note about face-to-face recruitment has been that dwellers tend to be apprehensive when approached at street level. Some might be approachable enough to answer a couple of questions, but shy away from formal interviews. There are also many dwellers who are away from their mobile homes during the day for various reasons such as work or other activities.

It should also be noted that there have been no comprehensive statistical data found about mobile home dwellers in the region at the time of the initial study. While my own thesis is based on qualitative ethnographic research methods, it should be noted that a large portion of mobile home dwellers use vehicular homes that blend with normal vehicles. Unless someone knows what signs to look for or makes a close inspection, many vehicular homes can be missed. Such homes are often made inside vans, used buses and trucks, to name a few. While the lack of statistics is in some ways unfortunate, it does emphasize the point that mobile home dwellers encompass a large and complex group of people who do not meet the simple definition of impoverished squatters they are often labeled as. Many mobile home dwellers I have met can often be savvy and resourceful and generally try to avoid negative attention. This is in complete contrast with the relatively few examples of dirty and weathered mobile homes that are typically used to provide the image of precariousness among dwellers. Regardless of existing stigmas, individual reasons or financial circumstances, life as a mobile home dweller is one with many challenges but also many personal rewards. Such rewards are enough to keep people in that lifestyle while also inspiring others to join. In the following three chapters, I aim to explore the reasons why.

Chapter Summary

As stated above, this thesis's thematic component is separated into three main parts. These are gentrification, a shift in market consumption relationships and a perceived sense of freedom. The first of the following chapters tackles gentrification. This includes a brief general synopsis about how the contemporary housing market developed and of the post-Fordist economic restructuring under the neoliberal school of economics in North America. From there the chapter focuses on how this has developed in Vancouver specifically due to its condo market. This is intended to explore the ever-changing relationships between the design of urban landscapes, productivity and residents. Wage stagnation, redevelopment and the international free flow of monetary capital into condominiums have all contributed to affordability issues for residents (Rosen and Walks 160-167). Metro Vancouver is certainly among the most extreme examples with high homeless rates and poverty in general. This helps explain some of the underlying socioeconomic circumstances urban mobile homes exist in. But these circumstances also foster a highly negative myth about dwellers being nothing more than squatters on wheels – destitute individuals who are a mere extension of economic precariousness. However, this myth is dispelled by both the far more complex reality on the ground and supportive publications that often romanticize life as a dweller (Macleod). Overall, the economic status of most dwellers is far removed from the negative images of destitution. There is even a highly active alternative housing market that cannot be explained by destitution. Thus, despite the financial concerns individual dwellers may have thanks to higher costs of living associated with conventional housing, they are not living precariously.

The second of the coming chapters looks at consumption patterns among mobile home dwellers and the locales where many of them move around. Beginning where the first chapter

leaves off on the subject of mobile home dwellers and their economic standing, this chapter focuses on how dwellers make a living and their relationship with alternative housing markets as a whole. Mobile homes are only one part of a growing demand for alternative houses that promote lifestyle changes. Other examples include tiny home villages and eco-housing. This phenomenon is predicated on adopting features of neoliberalism in order to better navigate cost-of-living trends. By utilizing facets of neoliberal ideals, people can better navigate through the negative outcomes a neoliberal economic structure may bring. People become “autonomous citizens” where they can better manage their own lives (McNay 61). This can be seen in the way dwellers use their mobile homes to overcome financial restraints in order to make more meaningful decisions in their everyday lives.

The third and final of the main chapters, prior to the conclusion, moves away from economic relationships and focuses instead on what I consider to be the most important topic among mobile home dwellers and of this thesis. The topic in question is the concept of freedom that dwellers experience. For this thesis’s purposes, there are two kinds of freedoms, positive and negative. Negative freedom stipulates the removal of social or economic barriers, while the positive is a focus on the enhancement of personal choice through autonomy (Berlin 168, 178). Aside from the financial benefits from low costs of living that contribute to negative freedom, mobile homes provide another core feature that attracts people to live in them full-time, that being the mobility itself. Dwellers can live wherever they want, move whenever they want and plan activities in ways not easily viable with conventional housing or permanent settling in general. This provides mobile home dwellers a great deal of flexibility in the kind of work they can engage in as well as how to spend leisure time. This flexibility in the ability to make more meaningful choices in daily life is positive freedom. It is an exercise in utilizing personal autonomy on one’s

self to achieve certain aspirations. This is where Michael Foucault's concepts of "self-formation" and "care of the self" mentioned above apply as mobile home dwellers transform their own notion of the self in order to redefine who they are and the lifestyle(s) they wish to embody (284-286). It is through the practice of transitioning into a mobile home and overcoming its challenges that the people involved find the means to better their own lives.

Chapter 1: The Development of Modern Housing and Gentrification

Introduction

Before addressing mobile home dwellers directly, I wish to outline the current economic forces that are increasingly drawing people to move away from traditional housing norms and exploring more novelty solutions, such as living vehicular spaces. This is part of a broad trend around housing gentrification and its impact on urban spaces. This includes a brief examination of post-war development that has come to define contemporary housing as long-term investments, a process that has been made possible through the expansion and liberalization of loans to allow costs to go down (Bacher 5-11; Kennedy 257-259). The consequences of such a shift are numerous but have resulted in unsustainable growth, particularly during the economic restructuring periods in the 1980s and 1990s. The result is the marginalization of many people from the housing market as property values have soared once again to unprecedented heights. The effects include a shortage in affordable dwellings, an overburdened social housing and social welfare sector, slow government responses and rising homelessness. It is in this kind of environment that urban mobile homes have become a focal point of interest. They are in many ways a reaction to current housing trends, but is that all mobile homes are?

News articles around this phenomenon are plenty, and yet the narratives are typically consistent. Media outlets often view mobile home dwellers within the same context of impoverishment and homelessness that afflicts many in the Metro Vancouver region due to the affordability crisis. To a small extent, this might even be warranted as some dwellers may fall into the category of economically struggling people. However, many mobile home dwellers I have

spoken with and the observations I have taken seem to suggest otherwise in most cases. At the very least, many dwellers take exception with the way the media portrays them. A question, therefore, must be asked: who are mobile home dwellers really? This chapter aims to provide the environmental context mobile homes exist in on the West Coast, how they are perceived and why the perception is insufficient.

Birth of Sprawl

The rise in expanding outward from the inner-city was not a quick process. The first substantive moves to push outward, however, at least in North America, began during the Roaring 20s as economic conditions encouraged the expansion of personal consumption and individual home ownership. This was reflected by policy makers such as President Herbert Hoover in the United States and William Clifford Clark, the Deputy Minister of Finance in Canada. However, due to a major market crash, housing development fell by 95% by 1931 (Kennedy 257; Bacher 5). This strategy was quickly revised in both countries under the new administrations of President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Mackenzie King. As part of the overall plan to create local employment and provide shelters, housing construction was seen as a stable job creator across all regions, a way to tackle an essential demand and resist the pressure of increasing public housing (Kennedy 257; Bacher 5).

The following year saw the creation of home building standards, a uniform appraisal method for the estate market, insured loans and the ability for mortgages to be sold to increase lender liquidity under the American legislation (and later publicly traded company) of the Federal National Mortgage Association, commonly known as Fannie Mae. The legislation itself

did not provide funding for home construction, but it did create an institution that was pivotal for easing the flow of large sums of capital into the housing market post-war as borrowing money became much more secure and stable, bringing up financial confidence for both creditors and borrowers alike (Kennedy 258). In Canada, Clark (still a member of several committees) helped strengthen mortgage lenders by pushing the Dominion Housing Act. The result was a reduction of down payments (which were as high as 40%), lower interest rates and the allowance of monthly payment plans (Bacher 7). Clark's influence was then used in forming the National Housing Act of 1944, extending amortization periods, encouraging joint loans, creating even lower down payments and decreasing interest rates further (Bacher 10-11). Following the period of post-war economic demobilization, the intended effects of this enhanced privately driven housing scheme began to take effect. The scheme was so successful that between the 1920s and 2000s, the number of Americans living in a family-owned home jumped from four in ten to about seven in ten (Kennedy 258-259) in spite of the population increasing roughly 2.56 times in size by the turn of the century (Historical National Population Estimates, 2000).

By the 1960s, suburban dwellers made up the largest housing cohort among the American population (and North American in general), with urban centres increasingly expanding outward with ever more low-density neighbourhoods (Fava 11-12). Land that had previously belonged to the countryside and rural communities was quickly turned over to larger metropolitan bodies, creeping ever closer to wildlife sanctuaries, retirement communities and even other growing metropolitan areas. The term "megalopolis" was increasingly used to describe how multiple urban centres expanded into each other to form urban environments that comprise multiple city municipalities (Fava 11-12). Suburban growth had not stopped, not even during the short-lived energy crisis or economic recession of the 1970s (Fava 13). North Americans were generally

leaving the inner-cities. In fact, between 1950 and 1970, a third of the American population living in a highly dense area of 10,000 people per square mile dropped (Fava 14).

The Canadian experience saw similar effects, with almost all major city centres seeing outward expansion. For example, Toronto, which had previously been 39 square miles in 1951, annexed surrounding towns until it grew to its 2001 size of 245 square miles. Out West, Calgary went from a municipality of 39 square miles to 270 (Lewyn 91). Both countries pursued many public policies that encouraged this type of sprawl through highway construction, zoning practices and other automobile-dependent incentives (Lewyn 99). Overall, suburban expansion was a success across the continent. Government policies that linked housing to privatized ownership and financial investment enabled a flow of personal capital in levels unprecedented in the market. Lenders, borrowers and insurers created new financial relationships that boosted confidence across the board. Asset value management was made uniform, and people had greater access to long-term spending plans as well as equity building. This coupled with the post-war reimagining of cities through the annexation of smaller, rural communities and the building of large infrastructure projects meant that urban areas had room to grow. So, they grew exponentially in an outward sprawl in what was by far the largest low-density housing boom in history.

Growing Pains

Of course, urban sprawl did not appear without its faults. As mentioned earlier, entire small communities were annexed and swallowed up in the scramble for the outer-city and its promise of low-density living. However, the largest concern was inside the inner-cities themselves. More

specifically, the development of inner-cities declined in the growing imbalance of attention and resource allocation. It was in this environment where the focus of suburban development began to show shortcomings and where its promise of prosperity conflicted with reality. Governments, having a clear part to play in enacting policies that propped up suburban growth, often overlooked urban segments in development plans, recreating communities of segregation and transporting that phenomenon to the outer-cities (La Gory 413-414). This was especially true in the core of inner-cities, where the residential areas near the industrial heart were neglected for many years. As a result, by the 1970s, urban poverty was noticeably concentrated in these specific zones, often under ethnic/racial and regional lines, with many of the same educational deficiencies, lack of employment opportunities for advancement and other social disorders (Hajnal 498). While Canada's demographics differed from those of the United States in that visible minorities formed a smaller percentage of the population, and thus active discrimination could not account for the whole rate of similar inner-city neglect, it was nonetheless present as well (Hajnal 504). In fact, part of the reason why inner-city economies continued to function was that immigrants often took the place of 'non-immigrants' (who migrated to the suburbs), leaving newcomers to take their place in the high-density projects with whatever opportunities that were available (Hajnal 506).

Overall, suburbia left much to be desired and perpetuated unequal development. It encouraged a certain kind of ideal lifestyle that city planners continued to push while failing to allocate enough resources towards their central cores. Rather than uplifting everyone from poverty and allowing families to build up wealth and equity over time as originally envisioned in the 1920s to 1940s through increased privatization, loan access and finance strategies, suburbia concentrated poverty in inner-city areas left behind by the outward sprawl. Some were unable or unwilling to participate in the scheme, and signs of trouble began to brew. Said trouble came to a head when

the shortcomings of suburbia's designs began to turn the paradigm on its head in the wake of economic restructuring.

Economic Collapse and Unsustainability

While inner-city poverty and degradation had become a visible problem with limited address, the 1980s exacerbated the issues. The reasons for this were complicated and numerous, but many of them stem from a period of industrial decline and major shifts in the market. Manufacturing began to decline in the 1970s, but the following decade saw its decimation from the urban core. The service jobs that replaced them were either too low in salary or required skills that were not available to many working-class people. As a result, poverty and inner-city destitution became rampant (Hajnal 501). Major cities such as Montreal stagnated economically, and government bodies offered no solutions other than more outward migration. Older buildings became run down, and investors fled. Rates of inherited poverty were higher than those in Western Europe (Hajnal 506-508).

Exactly why manufacturing declined was due to a new wave of overseas investment where local capital, industry and infrastructure support were sent away. In basic terms, as the Cold War ceased and other countries were opening their economies to international commerce, a major trend emerged in which investment funds and employment opportunities moved to the Global South. For the first time it was more profitable to move resource extraction and production away from local economies and shift them abroad, and then ship the finished products to their intended markets. As a result, outsourcing became a common theme across North American cities (Sassen

18). Unfortunately, this led to a vacuum where the economic spaces once occupied by outsourced industries began to shrink, wealth outside the top 1% of income earners stagnated and access to capital became very uneven. Since the year 2000, 80% of wealth growth went to the said 1% of earners (Sassen 17, 22-23). Inflation caused by that sharp increase in concentrated wealth surpassed stagnant wages' ability to match said inflation (Sassen 18). This coupled with the rising cost of building new suburban homes meant that newer generations of home buyers were increasingly being pushed out of the market (Smith 50). Furthermore, other costs such as commuting long distances to work with vehicles in terms of gasoline and car maintenance, as well as increased traffic congestion, made suburbia less economically viable.

With rising costs everywhere and working- to middle-class employment opportunities becoming rarer, both current and aspiring homeowners alike found themselves losing their relative position of control (Smith 50). Upkeep was higher, so were down payments and mortgages on new loans, even if the percentile rates for down payments and interest stayed relatively the same. Because of this trend, home buyers had to readjust their expectations in accommodations. Not surprisingly, this meant re-exploring prospects of living in the inner-city. City planners, for their part, were only too willing to cater to that demand (Rosen and Walks 160-161). They were already seeing the inner-city as a space for white-collar work and were willing to redesign the space available to cater to the growing high finance and service dependency (Smith 50). In the end, what choice did city officials have if they wanted to recover lost revenue streams with new sources? As one prominent figure in urban studies, Jane Jacobs, once wrote, "The overwhelming fact about cities is that if they do not maintain self-generating economies, they will ultimately stagnate and decline" (Jacobs 652). Part of that revitalization effort was regenerating parts of the inner-city that had fallen into decay and disrepair, often to bring new investments into the area. This effort usually

took the form of condominiums, which were becoming popular among residents looking to avoid congested roadways and because of their direct proximity to the entertainment districts and work (Rosen and Walks 160-161).

In theory, condos provided cheaper and more affordable housing spaces than suburbia. They could be built as part of a multi-story complex, just like traditional apartment buildings, providing a large quantity of units more efficiently. Plus, the building infrastructure would be more modern than the aging rental units from the projects. However, there was a series of issues that undermined the process. First, they were being built inside the older projects themselves, a practice that meant the demolition of the more affordable apartment blocks used by low-income tenants. Thus, the same economic segregation practices that helped build suburbia were exported back into the inner-city (Rosen and Walks 162-163). Second, this redevelopment trend across North America, in part a reaction to the way in which globalization was changing the economic structure of cities themselves, had to deal with the international free flow of capital into the housing sector. Suddenly, home investment was no longer restricted to local homeowners but opened to affluent foreigners seeking a fast pass towards city centres and property speculators who invested in housing assets. Even non-permanent residents saw condominiums as an easy way to be in direct proximity to important functions such as educational institutions, international communication and finance centres, even if it was just part-time for overseas business (Rosen and Walks 167).

This phenomenon became a crucial pillar in the present housing issues because it created an artificial rise in demand for units that otherwise would not have existed with domestic buyers. As a result, the price for what was supposed to be cheaper condominium units rose beyond the buying power of local residents. As anthropologist David Harvey once wrote, "... markets require

scarcity to function. If scarcity does not exist then it must be socially created. This is what private property and the profit rate do. The result is much unnecessary deprivation (unemployment, housing shortages, etc.) in the midst of plenty” (Harvey 940-941). Whatever social inequalities and other ailments were created by the outward sprawl (which was also pushed by policies beyond market demand), condominiums surpassed that trend immeasurably in ways that were (and are) still being studied.

By the 1990s, the situation was dire for many of this new wave of homeless and those at risk of falling into such a state. Not since the Great Depression had North American cities seen large-scale homeless gatherings, a problem especially noticeable on the West Coast (Herring 285). As has been demonstrated, the general trend of housing favours increasing exclusivity. Worse still, despite the intentions that policy makers had, the desire to push for an overwhelmingly private sector in housing construction based on the institutions of financial investment had done the opposite in the long term. While such failings could be attributed to factors that the original architects in the 1930s could not have foreseen, congestion and the economic effects of globalization, the paradigm of treating homes as financial assets that often undervalued and scorned public housing or maintaining rental apartments culminated in an unsustainable model that began to turn in on itself by the turn of the century.

Ply the Coast

While understanding the historical context and social forces behind gentrification may help us to understand the generalities of North American urbanism in both Canada and the United

States, I wanted to examine how this applied to the Metro Vancouver region specifically. As mentioned earlier, the West Coast was hit particularly hard by these market forces, generating homelessness at a more noticeable rate, something not lost on British Columbia's coastal communities. After the period of economic restructuring in the 1980s, the Vancouver area, along with the U.S. Western Seaboard, were interconnected with the Pacific Rim economies in Asia. This brought in immeasurable investment capital to the port cities, but much of that monetary flow was directed towards affluent/high-end housing construction. This led to skyrocketing prices and encouraged existing property owners to either sell or upscale their existing real estate to cater to this more luxurious market of wealthier consumers (Harris 713-715). Moreover, the Metro Vancouver region was not unfamiliar with subdivided condo construction; such building projects had been in place since the 1970s as part of its own early revitalization effort and had provided needed space for middle-class income residents and was not seen as particularly detrimental (Harris 695, 706).

However, by the early 2000s, the trend had exacerbated itself, and low-income neighbourhoods felt the negative consequences, namely affordable homes being redeveloped into luxury units. This in turn caused the remainder of affordable housing units to raise their rents in relation to property value, and traditional tenants began to be evicted in large numbers as they could no longer afford to stay (Harris 715, 720) or because of other related schemes. City planners, for their part, missed the opportunity to recognise the growing issue and instead allowed these disaffected groups to be forced into the fringes of their redeveloped spaces (Herring 289). Even substandard housing became a difficult alternative, not only for their own property value hikes but from the overcrowding issue associated with them as well as their general state of decay. Other options such as subsidies to offset rising costs of living were few and far between (Francis and

Hiebert 10-11). In fact, the subdivision and overcrowding of living spaces were common themes among discussions I had with mobile home dwellers. My informants cited many instances where the affordability of rent in a basic apartment hinged on having several roommates, some needing half a dozen or more to split rents in an affordable manner. Otherwise, they could expect to pay roughly two thousand dollars a month for room and board. In any event, by the year 2010, the amount of affordable housing units needed to tackle these problems were short by 45,000, all while existing ones continued to disappear either from demolition or major renovations. In a region where low-income homes were the only strata to shrink, brand new ones were being sold for the upwards market value of a million Canadian dollars (Francis and Hiebert 24-26).

Why exactly was there such a dramatic shift after the turn of the century with such little impediment? This degradation of affordable housing options was once again linked to public policy, more specifically a lack of willingness to enforce it. In the twenty or so years prior to 2000, the condominium expansion was only slowed by bylaw enforcement that resulted in existing apartment owners being forced to maintain their units. However, once entering the new millennium the *Standards of Maintenance Bylaw* that was designed to keep said units in good functioning order was infrequently enforced. As a result, the already aging buildings that made up affordable apartments were quickly falling into disrepair (Eby and Misura 5-6). This neglect was arguably by design as owners knew the value-on-return they would receive should their property require major renovations (at which point apartments would be upgraded from their low-income status and relisted) or be demolished entirely to make way for offers by developers. In any event, the influx of middle- to upper-income clients in the form of condo buyers or tourists looking for hostels was enough incentive to allow older apartments to simply become condemned as such methods were the simplest way to evict pre-existing renters without becoming embroiled in legal complications

(Eby and Misura 17-18). The result of such predatory practices was that by the year 2008, tens of thousands of would-be tenants were on provincial waitlists (most of whom were in the Metro Vancouver region) for social housing, figures that were leading up to or at the very early stages of the Great Recession (Francis and Hiebert 31). Even worse, other government programs were also failing to remedy the situation. For instance, the shelter allowance used by recipients to subsidize their housing costs remained at a flat rate of \$325 per month in 2006, the same rate it was at in 1994 despite inflation. Other social welfare payments such as living allowances also suffered from this same lack of update (Eby and Misura 5). A succession of municipal and provincial governments, through rezoning and inaction, allowed bylaws to be violated and encouraged an already volatile situation of *laissez-faire* redevelopment processes to exacerbate housing issues to the point of unmanageability.

Like in many other instances, low- to middle-income earners bore the brunt of the negative consequences, being forced out of home and into the fringes. For some, this meant the substandard housing and overcrowding already discussed; for others it was the city streets or shelters. This was especially true for certain minority groups, such as Indigenous residents, who made up 34% of the official homeless population (BCNPHA and Thomson Consulting 4). A prominent researcher on the subject, Mat Thomson, in one of his recent publications, *Vancouver Homeless Count*, outlined that an estimated 61% of Vancouver's homeless population (both in and out of emergency shelters) had been recent additions rather than long-time homeless, occupying the spaces within the previous five years from the date of the study (Thomson 6). In his later study, which encompassed the whole of Metro Vancouver, the closest tally he gave to the number of confirmed homeless count was 3,605. The study found that in a four-year period, the confirmed homeless population had grown by 30%. In that same period, the greater Metro Vancouver's population had only grown

by approximately 6.5%. This was a dramatic increase in homelessness that was both sudden and very telling about the prospects of low-income earners that were trailing behind to meet financial stability. What made the situation more alarming was that about a fifth of those counted had some form of employment, be it part-time or full-time. Seven in ten even had public assistance of some kind, whether it be basic welfare or disability benefits. As for why this began to happen even among those working, respondents cited three key factors: high rent, low wages or a lack of the appropriate necessary housing altogether (BCNPHA and Thomson Consulting 3-8). This trend was unique because it was atypical for homelessness to count full-time workers.

Role of Employment

People with employment opportunities who had fallen into precarious moments in their lives could usually readily move out of emergency shelters rapidly. However, long-term homelessness could usually be attributed to a breakdown of social, familial and emotional ties followed by psychological deterioration and in some cases drug abuse. In short, a loss of support networks was usually a key factor. The homelessness trends in Vancouver, on the other hand, are also attributed to higher costs of living associated with housing. Work opportunities were plentiful enough in the region, and many new homeless individuals were employed, but anything that would be considered a working-class salary was not enough to sustain any desirable accommodation beyond the overcrowding and decaying structures mentioned previously. My own experiences walking in and around the City of Vancouver reinforced this particular point. Many industries, especially service, had enormous difficulty finding and keeping staff and recruitment signs were common outside many establishments throughout the city. In some instances, employers offered

above minimum wage and other benefits that were usually atypical of the sector, as the poster in Figure 1 illustrates. Yet, despite these above-minimum legal market value offers and an easing of entry requirements, stores continued to struggle in filling general staff positions that would likely be already filled in other regions. On the surface, this seemed like an unlikely possibility given that there were plenty of homeless or at-risk of being homeless people who could fill these required jobs, but as stated earlier, they could not offer enough to meet costs of living requirements for the area, thus they remained vacant. Just like with the general trends from the rest of the service industry examined earlier, they could not meet rising living costs. In this kind of economic environment, basic wages were incapable of covering basic necessities, and there were few avenues to remedy the situation.

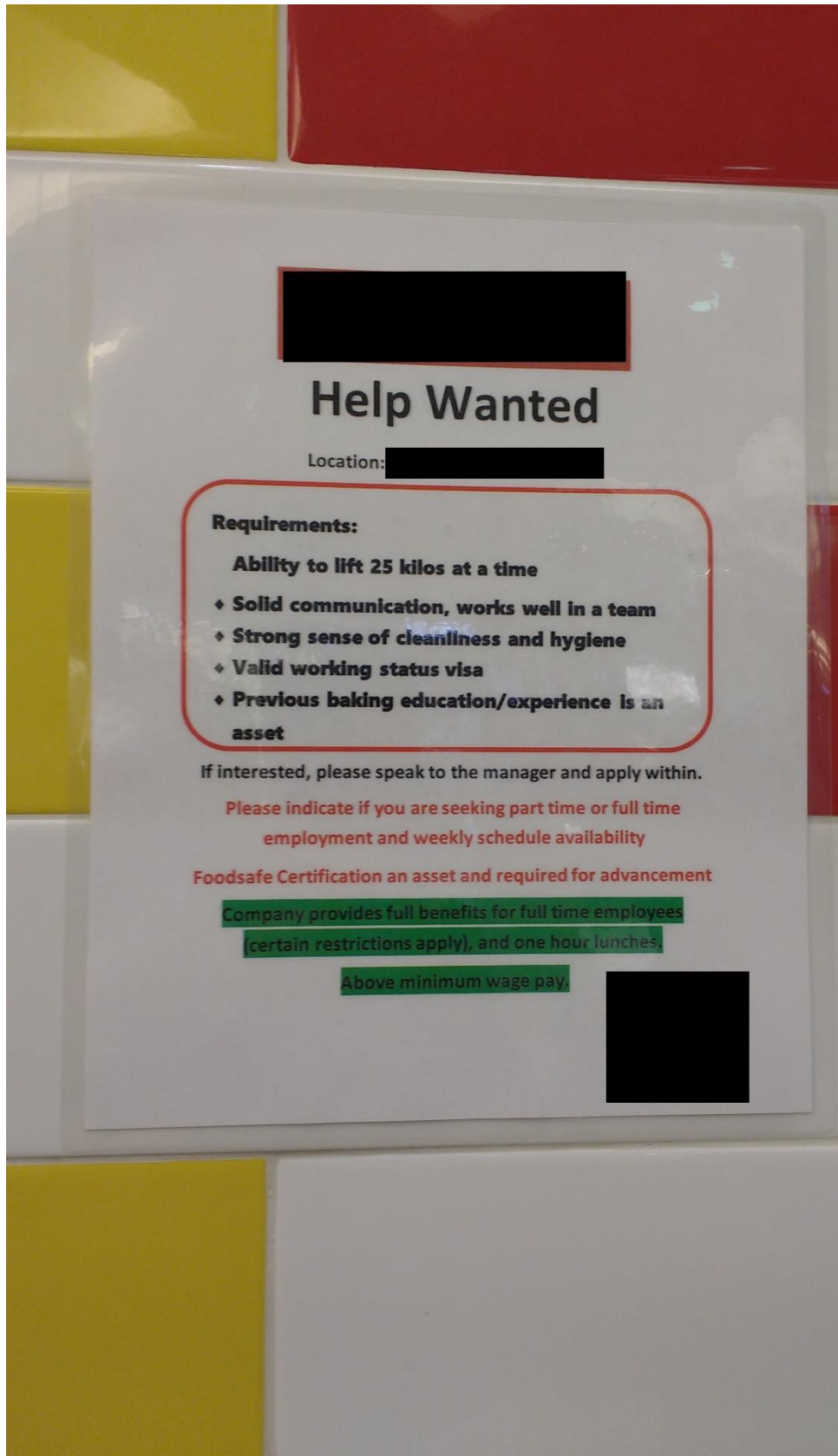


Figure 1. Recruitment poster for a local business offering above-minimum benefits.

Reactions and Consequences

Overall, the situation appeared bleak, and steps to resolve these matters were few and far between. Some modest reforms had since been introduced and implemented, such as a new property transfer tax on foreign buyers, be they individuals, corporations or trustees. This included properties both whole and divided in proportional shares for specific B.C. districts, such as Nanaimo, Fraser Valley, Victoria, Central Okanagan and Metro Vancouver (Vacancy Tax, n.d.). As for Vancouver itself, a new vacancy tax was added into bylaw as a means to enable more homes to be used for their intended purposes and discourage the practice of treating properties as flip assets more in line with finance stocks than livable units (Vacancy Tax, n.d.). While these reforms were positive steps, their full effects could not be measured by the time of this project. It remained to be seen if they would have the intended desired outcomes. Meanwhile, the market value of homes was still high, and the effects of gentrification remained plainly existent, with thousands of people still removed from the market and many more who were at risk of being pushed out due to high costs of living.

The damage had already been dealt, and these reforms seemed minor in the face of a multi-decade-long trend, as articulated in this chapter. Social housing still appeared in very short supply, with only incremental adjustments being made. The most noteworthy policy initiative taken to that end was a sixty-six-million-dollar project to construct over six hundred temporary modular apartment units (as seen in Figure 2) with all the basic necessities, training programs, meals and other volunteer support services (Temporary Modular Housing, n.d.). Despite this, the precarious nature of modern housing still loomed over the region, and it could be seen vividly in thousands of homeless gathering along the streets of Downtown Eastside and the adjacent Chinatown. I was

able to see much of it myself along East Hastings Street, where many gathered to beg or sell bobbles at the end of the sidewalk. Homelessness was concentrated, especially on the corner with Columbia Street near an outdoor market. Suitcases, presumably filled with belongings, littered the side of the road. Others used the opportunity to sell trinkets on small blankets or mats. I also managed to see it in the packed alleyways, where people slept on cardboard boxes, and the smell in the air was extremely rancid.

People had sickly complexions, and the smell of urination was strong all throughout the back alleys. These areas spanned whole blocks, and no alley was vacant of people. Even with new policies implementing course corrections, the situation in Metro Vancouver was one brought about by generations of housing management that reflected a wider continental trend. Decades of sprawl turned inward on the inner-city, inward migration leading to redevelopment and redevelopment leading to the supplanting of already existing residents before being compounded by global financial forces, whereupon the value of the home skyrocketed from the new influx of capital. Vulnerable people were pushed out, and many others that were financially stable were made precarious after years of economic restructuring and rising living costs. With this gentrification process, only one question remained: what could many of these displaced residents (who were pushed to the periphery) do to alleviate their circumstances? This was where mobile homes enter the conversation surrounding these issues.



Figure 2. Temporary modular apartment units.

The Place of Mobile Homes in Homelessness Discussions

With the topics of gentrification, the current housing problems in Vancouver and the latter's effects on residents summarized, I now turn towards mobile homes themselves. So far, this chapter has been exploring the underlying economic parameters in which mobile homes in Vancouver find themselves. The housing crisis in the region provides a contextual lens in which mobile homes are framed to be part of the homelessness or at-risk of homelessness discussion. Some of my initial questions when setting out to conduct this thesis were as follows: Exactly who are mobile home dwellers, and why do they live on the side of the road? Is it purely because of economic precariousness? What is the nature of the relationship between mobile home dwellers and the region's urban environment? While answering these questions is the purview of the

following chapters, it is important to first lay out what the public perception is and how mobile home dwellers may feel about it.

On the basis of the people I interviewed and researching various news articles, perceptions can be quite negative. This is especially reflected in the discourse surrounding mobile homes in the media and among non-mobile residents. As this chapter demonstrates, unattainably high costs of living and a push out of conventional dwellings are underlying forces that negatively impact how people interact with the municipalities of Metro Vancouver. These forces not only help shape the decisions prospective mobile home dwellers make to alleviate themselves of the problems, they also export discussions around homelessness unto vehicular homes. This is not helped by the fact that some of the mobile homes that make themselves visible throughout the city are notorious for being ill maintained, surrounded by garbage and associated with economic and/or social precariousness. For example, an article by Chad Pawson from the *C.B.C.* titled “*Time for RV Dwellers to Move Home, East Vancouver Businesses Say*” (2018) provides an unflattering view of mobile homes in the city as a disruption to daily affairs. One of the reported plaintiffs talks about rodent infestations and roadside extension cords. He complains that the city should move mobile home dwellers to a more secure location with proper garbage pickup and other facilities. A picture furthers this uncleanly portrayal by focusing on a pile of litter near a curb along with a sofa chair. A second image focuses on the rear end of a camper with tires, fuel cans and bicycles all disorganized and secured with rusty chains. Meanwhile, a white tarp covers portions of the roof.

While the author does end the article with responses from dwellers who do feel secure in their lifestyle and the cheaper living it provides, much of the piece speaks to a popular image non-mobile home dwellers have of the phenomenon (Pawson 2018) – that being filthy and disorganized and lacking sanitation, all which mirror portrayals of homelessness and stigmatize as such. Not all

news articles try to enforce this type of imagery. One journalist for *The Loop*, Laurel Macleod, conducts an interview with a couple who voluntarily chose their lifestyle in order to offset rising condo costs (Macleod 2019). She writes,

Sarah Porco and Tyler Archibald gave up their condo rental in downtown Vancouver in favour of living in a camper van. Yes, really, and no, they aren't unemployed. In fact, they might actually be happier than ever. The couple, who have since started documenting their mobile life on YouTube, estimate the move is saving them about \$25,000 per year, which is almost enough for us to head straight to the nearest car dealership (Macleod 2019).

Unpacking this passage, we can see that the author purposefully rebuts the portrayal of mobile home dwellers as homeless in their own fashion. The portrayal is only implied, but it is nonetheless addressed as if brought up by the readers themselves. The couple's decision to live in a mobile home is voluntary, and they have income.

Despite these more positive articles, the relationship between news media outlets and mobile home dwellers is often strained or distant. When dwellers are asked about how they feel about media portrayal, the answers tend to be mixed. One of my interviewees, named Whan, who lives in a bus with his spouse, Rida, describes the general portrayal as "Not putting any effort into society, things like that. Stigma." Indeed, much of the media focus still remains on the more precarious groups within the larger phenomenon. Another participant, by the name of Sam, notes the following during my discussion with him:

Sam: They portray it as what they see, and what they see isn't good. They see the garbage and derelict homes. They're not there because they want to do it, they do it because they don't have any other choice.

David: So, that's the big common misconception?

Sam: They're always going to focus on the negative, rarely on the positive.

David: Why do you think they do that?

Sam: It's the media. At the end of the day it's all complaint-driven, so they sell what is complaint-driven.

Not all responses are quite as opposed. One mobile home dweller who helps manage the online Facebook group where most of my research participants have been drawn from provides a more complex answer. He states,

I think they see us as a hard-luck case. They see us as a step above homeless and often show up at meetups. I've had about three times where the media showed up at events, television media, radio media and newspaper media. I've had numerous people contact me through social media asking me to do interviews. It's a very news-worthy story in Vancouver. They want to see why people do this. They know why, they just want more information since it's common. In Vancouver proper there's thousands, probably five thousand in totals. It's an interesting thing to cover. But, there's two distinct classes; you have the people who are regular people working day jobs, paying bills, etc. ... But then you have another class that are like forced into it. They do it because they have a lot of mental health issues – and a lot of people have mental health issues – and they end up living in an R.V. where they're one step away from being homeless, and that's a whole different can of fish.

There is a certain amount of truth in the linkage between mobile homes and homelessness. However, despite the heavy focus on this aspect by media sources, it is also true that such a

perspective overlooks another reality. The reality in question is that many mobile home dwellers do not feel that homelessness accurately portrays the kinds of lives they lead. Thus, framing mobile homes as primarily related to economic precariousness is unhelpful even if urban socioeconomics do comprise part of the underlying factors involved. From my own observations, I can attest that while some mobile homes show signs of poor upkeep, have piles of litter around the vehicle and park near homeless tents, these examples are far from the norm. In fact, these examples are usually concentrated in small sections of Metro Vancouver (the most prominent being near the Telus World of Science Centre), while most mobile home dwellers prefer to scatter away from these zones. Most mobile home dwellers I have spoken with typically do not wish to be associated with these areas and prefer to find their own spaces. Some even go out of their way not to be close to other mobile dwellers they feel are part of the precarious group, even in typically well-maintained locations.

Moreover, many mobile home dwellers I have met take pride in their vehicular dwellings, personalizing them through décor and modification and even purchasing new vehicles that better fit their needs. One couple I have come across even builds trailer homes on flatbeds in order to sell them to prospective buyers, as shown in Figure 3. This seems to indicate that enough mobile home dwellers have the necessary purchasing power to develop an active sub-market in housing. Hence, while the current housing crisis has helped foster a rise in homelessness or at-risk homelessness, the phenomenon of mobile homes cannot be interpreted entirely in these terms. Despite both the rise in homelessness and the rise in urban mobile home usage being bolstered by the same problems and having some overlap in terms of certain people involved, a different lens is needed to explore who mobile home dwellers are and why they live the way they do.



Figure 3. Homemade mobile home.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have located contemporary housing trends and gentrification within the historical context of post-war economic policies. The creation of a cohesive and robust banking system of stable practices led to loans and property value appraisals becoming uniform. Single homes became affordable and thus far more accessible than ever before. People were granted the ability to trust and use credit that they once couldn't attain. The exodus from the inner-city in an increasingly automotive society became possible. However, after several decades, the sprawl has stagnated, and its shortfalls are much more apparent. Population reactively returns to the inner-city's older and lower-income neighbourhoods. However, this new influx, coupled with the collapse of industrial work and foreign property investment devastated these traditionally local communities, which then suffered mass eviction, rising poverty, homelessness rates not seen since the Great Depression and the loss of space repurposed for high-income development projects. In

such an environment, how can residents cope with this matter? Sub-par housing, overcrowding and applying for the already limited social housing have strained residents. The result is that people turn to alternative methods to cope with the problems, and mobile homes present such opportunities. But is an economic coping mechanism all that mobile homes are? As shown above, treating mobile homes as primarily an extension of issues related to poverty, homelessness and precariousness is not completely accurate, despite how the media may portray it. There is some overlap, but only in a small number of cases. It is therefore better to shift the paradigm away from homelessness and explore other avenues of inquiry. Who really are mobile home dwellers if not a mere extension of the subject of housing precariousness? What possible motivations do dwellers have to partake in living inside a vehicle? How do they go about their lives? What are their end goals? How do they see themselves in relationship to current socioeconomic trends? These are all basic questions that will be explored in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: All Roads Lead to Home

Introduction

My previous chapter explored the socioeconomic context of the mobile homes phenomenon and the inadequacy of framing it purely in terms of precarity. This chapter suggests other perspectives that might help explain this phenomenon. Specifically, it aims to dispel the homelessness narrative by detailing the everyday affairs of dwellers and how both they and their ongoing activities refute the label of precarity. As previously mentioned, mobile home dwellers do participate in the contemporary economy more so than the label of vagrant or homeless would suggest. Understanding how dwellers participate economically is the focal point of this chapter. I will first establish where mobile home dwellers reside in Metro Vancouver and how they cope with living inside a vehicular dwelling. Through this we can see how the labels reflecting precarity are largely misrepresenting and what dwellers do to refute them. The second step is seeing why this lifestyle is seemingly attracting thousands of people to voluntarily switch to this mode of living. This includes dealing with daily necessities, mechanical needs and strategic placement or routines. Mobile home dwellers must constantly organize and plan their days, whether it be going to work or taking a shower at a gym. The life of a mobile home dweller requires a new set of habits and parking strategies.

Next, I intend to contextualize mobile home living within the larger phenomenon of an alternative housing industry. This includes a brief overview of the history of alternative housing and its current place within minimalist movements (Meissner 185). To understand why alternative housing is on the rise, one must observe the many intended consumers it attracts. More specifically, these consumers are looking to ease the financial and social pressures associated with conventional

housing to live with greater flexibility in their lifestyle. While this includes basic costs of living considerations and the housing crisis, motivations quickly shift to discussions of self-development – a process of scaling back certain material obligations in order to pursue more meaningful living conditions (Meissner 186). With these aspects about mobile home living explored, a better understanding about this lifestyle and the motivations behind it may emerge.

Dweller Homes

To begin understanding the relationship between mobile home dwellers and the urban landscape around them, I must first address the strengths and drawbacks in researching the topic. The placement of mobile homes in the greater Metro Vancouver area is a complicated matter. On one hand, some mobile homes are easy to discern due to their manufactured make. Industrial parks, back roads, garages and auto dealerships will almost always have a presence of mobile dwellers in proximity. Trailers, pickup truck campers and recreational vehicles are all present amongst the more visible settlement sights. This category includes three size classes of vehicles organized by the automobile industry and used by the dwellers themselves. Class A entails full city bus-sized motor homes, Class B comprises relatively small campervans and Class C includes mid-sized hybrids of various sizes with a truck or van-like driving compartments.

On the other hand, I have seen many mobile homes that largely remain undetected due to the nature of other vehicles used. I have seen moving pickups, cars, former commercial moving vehicles and even buses converted for permanent residency. Some have basic amenities such as a bed and storage units. Others have fully functional kitchens and showers that are built by hand by the owners. One of the most popular choices for conversion vehicles is a van-based model. These

include minivans and commercial variants. Those who take the time and put forth the effort and money to create a mobile home out of a regular vehicle often take pride in their modifications, even if they sometimes move on to newer and better converted vehicles.

Intentionally Invisible

Regardless of which form dwellers prefer, many mobile homes exist almost completely incognito to the untrained eye. This is in part by design as many mobile home dwellers do not wish to draw attention to themselves. One person I interviewed, Sam, lived in a suburban truck with the rear covered over in a fashion similar to a station wagon. As of the time of our interview, he lived three years as a dweller. He began his lifestyle change after a breakup that left him having to pay rent on his own. With modest conversion efforts, Sam initially lived in a van before purchasing his current vehicle. His inspiration to live this way came from his own outdoorsman desires and YouTube videos on the subject. He states, “My vehicle is very stealth, so unless you know I’m there, it’s hard to tell if someone is in it.” Typically, a closer inspection might reveal signs of an overnight occupant, such as curtains, sun reflectors, solar panels and the occasional blanket sprawled and visible through a window. However, these signs are not always present nor are they definitive markers of a mobile home dweller. As such, a complete and thorough analysis of how many mobile home dwellers there are and where they all park within the Metro Vancouver area does not exist. The best numerical count could perhaps be conducted online, but that itself is incomplete. The Facebook group, known as “Vancouver Vandwellers,” where most of this study’s participants were recruited from, has over five hundred members alone, but not all are full-time mobile home dwellers nor are they all present in Vancouver at once.

Based on my own observations throughout the region, discussions and the people that have been interviewed, most mobile home dwellers avoid public attention and actively stay away from residential neighbourhoods. Instead, most dwellers prefer to stay in fringe locations, such as industrial zones, parks, apartment blocks, recreational centres and the occasional parking lot (this last option is exceedingly rare). The reasons for these choices range from privacy to personal preferences towards certain parking areas. However, underlying all of them is the desire to avoid police complaints. In fact, many mobile home dwellers take this avoidance of attention to a point where they actively frown on other dwellers who openly cause trouble, such as choosing to leave behind piles of litter on the side of the road. Not long after my arrival in the area, there was an event held by the Facebook group to clean up garbage left behind by less tidy peers near a big box store and a creek. The event gathered multiple participants who brought their own rubber gloves, trash pickers, bags and a truck to haul away what was removed. This was where I met some of Facebook group's members and a couple of the interview participants for the first time. While these acts may not receive wide public notice, they do highlight how dwellers go out of their way to avoid provocation when possible. This is especially necessary as the relationship between mobile home dwellers and traditional homeowners can be a strenuous one at best. This is not to say that said homeowners lack empathy or are outwardly hostile, but there is something of an unwritten agreement about parking near non-rental housing units.

One couple's response when asked about their interaction with such residents has been rather mixed. Whan and Rida had been living together in their green bus for roughly six years and employed part way through the year doing various farming related work and other odd jobs. When not working through some of the winter months they remain in Metro Vancouver. They both have extensive experience with the hospitality of others who allow them to park on their land during

farming work. But, they also aware of the trepidations some people may have, especially in the city. Rida, the girlfriend, responds with, “We don’t really interact with people. I think if some of them see us, they’re pretty excited. But others probably don’t want us around.” Her boyfriend, Whan, chimes in, “Wealthier neighbourhoods really don’t want us. Middle class and lower really don’t mind.” Thus, one can see the pattern of negative attitudes towards homelessness or other labels for precarity already discussed. Those who rent or are unconcerned about neighbourhood resale value tend to be indifferent. Thus, mobile home dwellers will generally avoid suburban neighbourhoods altogether. This lack of confrontation with other residents and authorities is important as dwellers try to coexist alongside institutions that have traditionally been unwelcoming towards them.

Legalities

The cities of the Metro Vancouver region, just like their counterparts elsewhere, have officially banned the practice of overnight sleeping in vehicles within the urban setting. However, as the number of dwellers living within the cities rise, so too does the need for authorities to be more lenient regarding such matters. Authorities often take a hands-off approach when dealing with the matter outside of extreme cases. The fear is that any large crackdown on the usage of mobile homes will inevitably lead to skyrocketing homeless rates beyond what is already present. As a result, the number of officers issuing tickets or tows has been quite low. Even when mobile homes are being forced to move, the order often comes in the form of a verbal warning or even a cease and desist letter attached to the front windshield of the vehicle as part of a city ordinance. One man who I had bumped into while exploring field sites, Clark, living with his significant other Lucy in a Volkswagen near a big box store close to Grandview Highway, shared his own story

about police interaction when being asked about a ticket history: “I don’t think we have ... except one time when we were up near a school. They gave us two to three hours to move; I went to get gas, and I was five minutes late. So, one time.” This type of hands-off attitude by the police is echoed in many of the responses I’ve received. An admin for the online van-dwelling group, Thomas, explains this situation quite well while telling a story about his interaction with municipal law enforcement:

The only time I’ve ever had trouble was when I’m working on a van. If I’m out, working with a hammer and bang something loudly, I’ve had security guards say, “We had a complaint about loud noises.” It’s never been an issue, I never had trouble with the police. I never had them bang on my door in the middle of the night. In Vancouver the police are pretty sympathetic to van dwellers because the rent is so outrageous. They would rather have people live in a van than on the street, so they kind of turn a blind eye. There are laws; it’s technically illegal to live in a van, but they don’t enforce them. They only enforce them if a neighbour complains. I’ve never had that happen because I don’t park in front of people’s house. But I do know people where that has happened because they park out in Kitsalano.

In short, while most mobile home dwellers continue to actively avoid confrontations with authorities and other residents, the authorities in turn have adopted an approach of non-intervention unless an extreme case should require it. Many of these dwellers find themselves being left alone (unless called upon by neighbours lodging complaints or concerns), and the gesture is reciprocated as they go about their daily lives in private without causing community disturbances. From day to day, most mobile home dwellers commute, work and park overnight in non-residential areas

(sometimes secluded) with an ever-changing scenery around them. With all this being said on how invisible mobile home dwellers can be and how any possible method to mark them for statistical analysis will have limits, there are some distinctive patterns (as mentioned above) that are worth exploring.

Settlement Patterns

As mentioned in the first chapter, one of the most potent images of squalor and homelessness is a mobile home surrounded by trash and in a general state of disrepair. However, many mobile home dwellers I've witnessed prefer to be near specific stores and services that help them maintain their living spaces and engage in daily necessities. Logistical factors that help determine a good site to settle vehicular homes are dependent on technical needs. For instance, many of the manufactured mobile homes parked on the side of road are models from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. These can often be distinguished from other models by their typical beige and tan colouring schemes. Newer models typically use white or grey schemes. The biggest manufacturers of these vehicular homes are Chevrolet, G.M.C. and Ford. To a lesser extent there is also a presence of Volkswagen vehicles, known for smaller and more compact camper van/bus models. As a result of the older age range, some mobile homes require special maintenance services that are not always provided in general technician shops. It is partly because of this and hazards associated with a technical breakdown that many of the visible R.V. dwellers park beside or near a dealership. The most prominent site in the City of Vancouver itself that reflects this is on Terminal Avenue near the Science World Station.

Despite some of the more visibly dilapidated vehicles that reside nearby, the mobile homes closest to the dealerships are outwardly well maintained and have minimal grime and rust despite

their advanced ages. A good example of this is the large Class C Frontier recreational vehicle shown in Figure 4. Located on Vernon Drive, this older motor home that resides near the dealerships on Terminal Avenue and beside another technician shop is still visibly well maintained. By contrast, a couple of mobile homes have flat tires, worn surfaces and even duct tape covering cracks or keeping doors in place. This type of proper care displayed by the Frontier is unsurprising since any mechanical issues can leave a dweller vulnerable. For many this can be nerve-racking. Some mobile home dwellers feel exceptionally attached to their mobile homes and worry about their mechanical integrity, while others must contemplate the costs associated with staying in a motel until the repairs are done. Regardless, becoming stuck is a common concern, and some of the more visible mobile home dwellers present in the region can usually be found parked near a mechanic. Of course, while maintenance is always an ongoing concern, mechanical issues are not the only factor when deciding where to park.



Figure 4. Class C recreational vehicle maintained in good condition.

Another site I have frequented during my time in the field is near the demarcation line between Vancouver Proper and Burnaby. The two municipalities are separated by a major north-to-south street called Burnaby Road. This area has many overlapping industrial zones. On the Vancouver side adjacent to Grandview Highway, there are several big box stores, film studios and a multi-level strip mall parking garage with a technician shop inside the lower half of the structure. There are close to twenty motor homes (all manufactured R.V. models) adjacent or near the strip mall, with many others close to the area. Besides utility-centric stores, mobile home dwellers will

also occasionally settle near supermarkets. Grocery parking is much rarer for a couple of reasons. Many groceries in Vancouver are locally owned (non-affiliated with franchises) businesses that are too small to accommodate any congregation of mobile homes and often have limited parking to begin with. Many of the larger super stores even implement a time limit, placing signs warning customers about a prohibition on overnight parking. Those parked are expected to vacate after 10 p.m. in many places.

Yet, despite these signs, not all groceries strictly enforce the rules. One locale where this is the case is one block to the west of the strip mall at a Canadian Super Store. Unlike the Wal-Mart parking lot to the east, there always seems to be no fewer than half a dozen mobile homes at any given time, some staying there quite frequently. The vast majority of them are usually parked in the lots furthest from the store itself. While the reasons for this location are speculative, this store's parking lot seems to be the largest in the area. Even on a busy day there is enough parking space available to accommodate a fair number of vehicular homes, even those large enough to require multiple lots, such as a Class C or bigger. However, not all noticeable settlement patterns evolve around big box stores. In many instances, mobile home dwellers are very far removed from industrial sites for other reasons. Once a mobile home is well stocked and fit for driving, the owner typically must think about personal hygiene.

Dealing with Hygiene

Hygienic needs are always a challenge when living in a mobile home. Most camper vans and converted vehicles are built without toilets and showers. While toilets are relatively easy to find as they are mandatory in all establishments, bathing areas are few and far between. Thus, arrangements have to be made to gain access to appropriate facilities. Some mobile home dwellers

will have friends and family with homes at their disposal. Others might take sponge baths in their vehicle. Returning to the online group manager, Thomas, he notes, “Yes. I have the very basics; to bathe I would boil a pot of water and then use a microfiber cloth – under a bowl which I use as a sink – with soap to cover my face and my head and then use a second cloth to rinse off. It’s not as good as a shower, but I have to do that three to four times a week.” However, most dwellers often stay close to other major facilities.

As stated previously, other important locations where mobile home dwellers congregate are parks and recreational centres. Parks tend to be out of the way of many services, but not always. In some instances, a park will be on the same block as a recreational building or sports complex. One site I have been able to visit on a regular basis with this combination is the Trout Lake Park and Trout Lake Community Centre. Inside the centre there is a multitude of art studios, gymnasiums, recreational courses, general fitness rooms and an ice-skating rink. The building itself remains open until 10 p.m. on most days, and its own parking lot can host dozens of mobile homes on any given night. Others settle on the streets around the park. Most of them are either small Class B camper vans or various converted vehicles, such as regular vans, trucks and even some cars.

In many instances, mobile home dwellers buy gym memberships just to bathe rather than actively work out. While some might see this as just an added expense given the lack of gym usage, the relatively low costs of living associated with a mobile home means that mobile home dwellers are often willing to pay for it. In fact, two of the participants I talked to have a shower of sorts in their vehicle but use it only on certain occasions. In their case, they still prefer to pay for access to a sports complex. For example, when Sam was asked about his bathing habits he replied, “I have a 24-hour gym membership, which gives me access to showers. For bathrooms, I just go for gas

stations, anywhere where you can find bathrooms when out and about during the day. I also have a portable shower in my truck during the summer. Not so comfortable during the winter, but wherever I go where I can't access a shower, I will use it."

Aside from gyms, publicly owned pools are also popular destinations for shower access as entry fees are relatively low even without a monthly pass. Overall, bathing can be a challenge at first given the lack of a ready place to wash. Dwellers might even only bathe a couple of times a week given the lack of conveniences a mobile lifestyle involves. However, public centres and gyms are common enough in the Metro Vancouver region that accommodations can be found relatively easily. Thus, when parking permits it, some choose to settle nearby. Of course, while hygiene is important, and mobile home dwellers often stop at a gym, many park overnight elsewhere. "Elsewhere" tends to be near where mobile home dwellers usually spend the day. And, not surprisingly, where they spend their day tends to be near their place of employment.

Employment

When it comes to places of work, mobile home dwellers are generally relatively scattered and do not congregate in large groups. The only exceptions to this rule are professions where long hours and being on call are the norm. The largest and most well-known example I have been able to find involves the Vancouver Film Studios. Placed in the same industrial zone as the strip mall and super store near the demarcation line between Vancouver Proper and Burnaby, the site has many fully-fledged recreational vehicles and campers representing all three mobile home classes outside the gated area. I even got to meet one such employee who lives in a Volkswagen camper at one of the monthly group activities organized by the same Facebook group where I acquired most of my informants from. Granted, not all the mobile homes belong to workers as some R.V.s

along East 11th Avenue are visibly in a dilapidated state. As such, their occupants are unlikely to be employed. In any event, professions among mobile home dwellers vary greatly and are not subject to any pattern. The exception of course being places such as film studios or industrial sites where long hours and the occasional need to relocate make mobile homes the reasonably viable option. Examples given in interviews include landscaping, agriculture, teaching, corrections contractor, scuba instructor, commercial shredding, bartending, tree planting, tourism and coffee shop clerk.

While some of these jobs belong in the low-wage category and others are seasonal, a couple of those listed require specialized skills and provide middle-class wages or higher. In fact, one of the mobile home dwellers named above, Sam, has been a corporate manager and then voluntarily changed to commercial shredding. I have even seen one Class B mobile home (though not the owner) with a red diplomatic license plate in a parking lot close to the North Vancouver beach front. Granted, whether or not the occupant is a full-time mobile home dweller or merely vacationing in the vehicle in late January is unconfirmed. Even if this noteworthy example is disqualified, there are still enough instances of brand-new recreational vehicles (some even costing a hundred thousand dollars or more) to suggest that a small upper-middle to upper class of mobile home dwellers exists, as depicted in Figure 5. Top of the line models in this category include Mercedes recreational vehicles, a relatively uncommon but noticeable brand I have seen on the side of the road.



Figure.5, Newer Majestic camper, Ford.

While there is no common denominator between mobile home dwellers and their professions, they all still need to find ways to commute. In many instances, as mentioned, dwellers will park near their place of work. This was confirmed in some of my interviews when participants have been asked where they stay overnight and why. Returning to the example of Sam, as part of his occupation as a commercial shredder, he often works in the area of Langley. As a result, he often remains there for the duration of the work week. This is not too dissimilar from Whan and Rida, who work seasonally in agriculture. In many instances they often stay on the farm property as part of their work agreement. One relatively new mobile home dweller (for four months at the time of the interview), Jina, will often stay in South Vancouver or Richmond since her job in tourism is near the airport. Outside of the film studios and those described in interviews, there are

plenty of examples to be found where places of employment have one or more mobile homes near them. While most of these cases remain unconfirmed without interacting with the occupants, the phenomenon happens regardless. One example of note is in Burnaby near Fraser Foreshore Parks, where an asphalt company has employees living in a series of personal trailers in the front area of the premises. The trailers remain behind the property's fences. One occupant admitted to such when briefly passing by.

As previously mentioned, most mobile home dwellers are scattered and vary on occupations. However, the desire to be close to work is consistent enough that a large portion of dwellers settle down overnight in places to make the commuting effort minimal or even non-existent. In any event, the disposition of mobile home dwellers in the work force is very diverse and crosses all social classes, not just the economically precarious. In fact, the patterns of settlement observed indicate consumption behaviours that run contrary to notions of homelessness or vagrancy. Many mobile home dwellers put a lot of time, effort and money into both themselves and the vehicular shelters they occupy. Much care is taken to not only properly maintain their homes but in some cases to modify and improve them based on personal tastes. Most dwellers actively avoid negative attention and reinforcing negative images about them. These are atypical characteristics of the homeless or vagrant terms often used to describe mobile home dwellers.

New Horizons

The desire for an easily accessible and inexpensive market of housing units has existed for many decades. Such a niche demand can be traced back to the Great Depression with the existence of shack towns such as Hoovervilles and when the first modern mobile homes were introduced. There are accounts of early mobile home advocates having been excited at the prospects of new

possibilities they might introduce. Arguments for their usage include reducing high-density congestion and opening up the countryside (Bair 286). Although, as noted in the previous chapter, low-density suburban housing has historically defined the urban development of the late twentieth century. Despite this setback, the concept of an alternative housing market has never died away. This desire for full-time living in alternative housing units outside of mainstream consumption can be seen manifested in later mobile home designs in the 1950s and 1960s thanks to the developments in manufactured appliances and furnishings. By the late 1960s, many of the different models (trailers, R.V.s, campervans, camper tents, etc....) and size classes had been introduced. The small and previously insignificant niche industry has grown to sell millions of units (Bair 286-288). Within this time the first trailer parks were developed. Outside of recreational uses by conventional home dwellers, these mobile homes have become popular for full-time occupants for their low financial investment. They can also be moved when circumstances require, and, unlike renting, there is also a possible return on investment through second-hand markets. This process allows the owners to either convert back into a more conventional housing arrangement or to upgrade their current mobile homes into something newer and that better reflects personal tastes (Goss et al. 136).

Of course, while mobile homes have helped fill this niche role, especially in milder climates, where trailer parks operate year-round, they have always been relegated to a limited use by low-income earners, young people with no familial obligations and retirees (Bair 286). This is especially true in urban areas, where city zoning measures (still focused on suburban expansion) have often discouraged alternative housing and have excluded such homes from the urban environment. Trailer parks have often been associated with poverty, rendering their social value as a point of stigma. The term “trailer trash” often conjures negative stereotypes of laziness,

seediness and lower class (Irby 182). However, political and economic circumstances in the new millennium have transformed both the views of and trends in the alternative housing industry with the characteristics of a movement.

In the previous chapter, I explained how the rising cost of homes through gentrification coupled with a stagnant wage economy are leading factors in unsustainable consumer patterns with regard to the current housing market. Economic growth in the Global North countries has slowed down. This is further exacerbated by more recent events such as the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession. This in turn has caused discussions about how the home itself can be more sustainable in terms of both upfront cost and maintenance. This has resulted in skepticism about the current economic-growth model of maximum material consumption and its ability to meet twenty-first century demands (Meissner 1-2).

Between these two factors a paradigm shift has emerged among both scholars and the public at large with regards to what Meissner calls a de-growth economic model. It is through this de-growth that material minimalism becomes part of the discussion. What is minimalism? Minimalism, at least according to the definition of Miriam Meissner, is any current trend whose discourse advises or promotes lifestyle changes that prioritizes cutting down in terms of both material consumption and the physical or financial obligations it requires (Meissner 185-186). This type of lifestyle is ideal for the alternative housing market because it complements its emphasis on lower upfront costs and financial maintenance. A less expansive home, be it vehicular or otherwise, is not only far less burdensome economically, but its energy requirements are much lower than any singular house or apartment unit. On top of these positive traits, alternative housing has been seen as a method to combat the symptoms of contemporary homelessness, limited wages and fewer

affordable housing units in urban areas. An example of this comes from the increasingly popular “tiny homes” sub-group of alternative housing.

These homes, usually no bigger than a large shed, have acquired recent fame in the press. They are often portrayed as the new and ideal sustainable home model for a disaffected population (particularly young people) who cannot afford a conventional house (Ford and Gomez-Lanier 397). In fact, there is much discussion about building whole villages of these tiny homes in the middle of a city. The first municipality in the United States to promote this, Eugene, Oregon, has been instrumental in constructing the first of these settlements – named Opportunity Village. From there, another sixty have been built (as of 2016) in other municipalities throughout the country (Deaton 76). Discussions about tiny homes in the context of homelessness and housing issues ignore the motivations behind why people with at least some measure of financial means have huge interests in alternative housing accommodations.

Maximum Life through Minimal Objects

As stated above, few people who participate in alternative housing endeavors are homeless or financially precarious. Rather, many opt into downgrading from conventional housing in an effort to leave smaller environmental impacts or ease burdens associated with maintaining a certain level of material possession (Meissner 191). It is the seeking of a more flexible lifestyle. A good example of this would be the eco-housing sub-movement. Eco-homes, like tiny homes, are often smaller than a single detached home in the conventional market. While the sizes of eco-homes vary, they are often self-built homes that emphasize both inexpensiveness and sustainable consumption, such as renewable energy (e.g., solar power), subsistence garden plots and the encouragement of biodiversity (Pickerill 55-59). Regardless of personal motivation, the concept

of doing away with excess for promises of greater life satisfaction and overall happiness is important in most cases (Meissner 191). This cutting down on possessions takes many forms, from decluttering the home to reducing stress-inducing work hours. The goal is usually to find value in leisure, reinvigoration and a more personal use of time (Meissner 186).

As previously mentioned, one of my interviewees, Sam, has deliberately downgraded his job title from company manager to be a corporate shredder. His own words on the subject are as follows: “I do commercial shredding. Got a truck with a big shredder in it. I left a very stressful job about eight months ago; I was manager of a company and ran a crew. There was a lot of hours and a lot of work, I burnt out finally.” His career change began over two years after his initial transfer into a mobile home. When asked about his transition into a new home, Sam states, “I was in a relationship, it ended, and I didn’t really feel like going out and pay two thousand dollars rent in Vancouver. So, I bought myself a van [prior vehicle]. Had a really rough winter because I didn’t plan it well. Since then I changed my ways, I live comfortably.”

As his statement shows, Sam could have paid the exceptionally high rental prices or condo fees. His management salary could have afforded that, but his refusal speaks of an unwillingness to spend resources that could be put to better use. It is this sense of better use that has allowed him to break from his work obligations once they became unhealthy and above his tolerance for stress. Thus, he continues to live by a bare minimum of material needs. Sam continues, “I’m helping a buddy right now converting a bus. It’s a lot of work, though. It’s not my thing, I don’t need all that space, I’m a minimalist. So, everything I owned is in my truck. I can fit everything I own in two Tupperware containers.” This point about keeping very few items of interest is a sentiment that can be found among many other mobile home dwellers I interviewed. While most participants did not explicitly use the term “minimalist,” it is my impression that the sentiment stems from a similar

viewpoint. Why spend more financially when you can make do with less? The other mobile home dweller already mentioned who brings this point up is Thomas, when talking about his own work-life situation. He says:

For now, I work only three days a week, and I'm still saving a lot of money. I'm saving two thousand dollars a month in saving, plus I only work three days a week. So, I could live in an apartment easily, but I chose not to because I would have to work five days a week – I wouldn't have to – I could, but I wouldn't be able to save anyway. Right now, I can save money and work three days a week rather than work five days a week and not save a penny.

As with Sam's case, there is a present desire for reduced working obligations. However, unlike Sam, Thomas also directly emphasizes the other important point of minimalism, which is creating a more personal usage of time. The mobile home in this case is not just a cheap housing alternative that provides flexibility; it is a conduit to fulfil more personal aspirations outside of career building based on lower consumption. I understand that just because someone cuts down on consumerist practices and everyday expenditures, it does not mean they reject materialist consumption in general. In fact, in some ways such minimalism may enhance an individual's relationship to consumption.

As Meissner herself points out in her article on the subject of de-growth consumption, there is a paradox in that for a minimalist lifestyle to function, it also requires consumption of a different kind. After all, most mobile homes are manufactured, and they require constant maintenance through tank (both gas and water) refills. Their owners need to be in contact with capable technicians, and they often network online where most discussions about alternative housing are

active (Meissner 185, 192). Minimalism can therefore be interpreted as a conflicting concept in that it attempts to reject or be critical of free-market consumption on one hand while embracing certain aspects of it on the other. At the very least, minimalism relies on a certain level of infrastructure within the mass consumption market it remains critical of.

Of course, the point of material minimalism is not the outright rejection of modern consumption. Rather, it is transforming said consumption patterns into ones focusing more on the aesthetic qualities of living life than the material gains themselves. In this way, minimalist practices are more than just doing away with excesses and finding a more affordable lifestyle. Instead, minimalism can be seen as taking responsibility over one's life, valuing discipline and focusing on self-development (Meissner 192-193). Meissner defines this process as "double-orientation." Minimalism helps people navigate the contemporary economic climate by using its foundation to compensate for its negative impacts. This defines the strategy of self-help that encourages self-determination (Meissner 192-193).

In short, it can be understood as an orientation towards freedom, which may in turn be profitably explored through Foucault's influential conceptualization of practices of freedom. Lois McNay, in her interpretation of Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics* lectures from 1978-1979, notes how he repeatedly discusses the neoliberal reshaping of society, where individuals are compelled to adopt the characteristics of enterprising actors. According to both neoliberal and ordoliberal thought, state actors are to refrain from intervening in the economy. Such interventions are usually spurred by public pressures to resolve social dysfunctions caused by the market. Instead, both neoliberalists and ordoliberalists argue that social dysfunctions are better managed by economic rationality on the part of individual actors. In short, problems are to be resolved with personal financial agency (McNay 56-58). Instead of being reliant on state efforts, individuals are to

embody the aspects of an enterprise as part of the self in order to navigate a web of support structures and networks (pensions, property, insurance, etc....) to act as what McNay calls an “autonomous citizen.” The autonomous citizen would then manage their own networks and economic risks to become financially responsible actors in order to maximize their own happiness (McNay 61).

In many ways, minimalist mobile home dwellers may be viewed as forms of this autonomous enterprising self in that they use their own sense of financial agency when calculating important lifestyle choices. Dwellers recognise the woes associated with trying to find an affordable place to live. Others see the value of mobile homes to help preserve both time and money, which could be better used for other, more meaningful pursuits – an option not usually afforded to people who spend most of their working hours just to cover living expenses. Mobile homes allow their occupants time for hobbies and leisure that may otherwise be impractical. If financial stresses are also reduced, then it is an added benefit well worth the effort. Because of these positive traits, minimalism and the alternative housing market that is attached to it have become an increasingly attractive phenomenon given economic trends. This in turn, at least to my own understanding of the subject, helps explain why mobile homes, as an alternative housing strategy and its subsequent alternate lifestyle, have become popular among prospective dwellers who wish to change their predicaments.

Conclusion

Mobile homes make up a noticeable part of the urban landscape in and around the Metro Vancouver area. They are the subject of many discussions around economic precariousness and vagrancy. This viewpoint is challenged by the fact that mobile home dwellers are active economic

participants whose relationship with the market at large is reshaped around greater flexibility. This relationship is explored in the ways in which dwellers go about their daily lives. Dwellers can be seen in many places, especially along industrial zones and near parks and recreational facilities. Yet, at the same time many are invisible and do not showcase themselves wherever they choose to go. Dwellers take an active part in both maintaining and even enhancing their homes through extensive care, modifications and personalized space usage. For other amenities, such as personal hygiene, sports venues and public community centres have become popular destinations for bathing purposes. Mobile home dwellers also tend to prioritize parking locations near their place of work. Work itself may vary among dwellers, who thus make up various levels of economic classes.

To explore why this type of lifestyle is becoming popular and an acceptable alternative to conventional housing accommodations, I have decided to contextualize mobile homes within the larger alternative housing market, the history of which is several decades old, born out of financial turmoil, such as the Great Depression. But much of its current form is born out of recent economic and social upheavals. Such concerns manifest themselves in the conception of minimalism. Minimalism as a paradigm transforms alternative housing from being merely a market that caters predominantly to financially struggling individuals to a holistic strategy that redefines a way of life. It is a concept that advocates for people to pursue the maximizing of meaningful living experiences by cutting down on certain material demands and their subsequent upkeeps. People such as mobile home dwellers follow a lifestyle of self-improvement and personal pursuits and an overall better management of time. Many mobile home dwellers and those aspiring to convert see the inherent benefits in lower living costs, more free time, larger monetary savings and better opportunities to pursue hobbies or other fulfilling activities. Mobile homes allow their occupants

to have more control over their lives, which may never occur while working to cover rents or mortgages in a conventional home. It gives mobile home dwellers a sense of freedom, but such discussions are relegated to the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Flight to Freedom

Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have contextualized the phenomenon of mobile homes on the West Coast of Canada mainly from the perspective of economic necessity and overwhelming financial obligations that may have driven people to become mobile home dwellers due to the neoliberal forces at work. However, one key drawback from this perspective is that it fails to account for the retention mobile homes seem to have, and other non-economic factors that influence people's decision making in staying in them. What would happen if gentrification abruptly stopped, wages rose and higher consumer consumption could be possible again? Would mobile home dwellers stop living as dwellers altogether? Would they trade in their camper or R.V. for a roomier apartment, condo or house with all their easily accessible conveniences? Perhaps some would. The rate of new mobile home dwellers arriving in Metro Vancouver might even slow down. But based on my own findings and the testament of the interview participants, many existing dwellers are reluctant to contemplate such a possibility or even refuse it outright. Why? If the underlying economic circumstances change, would the need for alternative housing not also change to reflect this? I have already illustrated that a large portion of mobile home dwellers have the economic means to rent or buy a conventional home but refuse based on stress or a wish to reduce working hours to have more personal time. So then, what is the value of that personal time? What do mobile home dwellers do with it? Does this time represent something larger worth considering?

I think the words of Sam state these questions most plainly: "My freedom. I have nowhere I have to be if I choose not to be." It is a very simple statement. Yet, within that statement we can

unpack a concept that recurred in many of my conversations with mobile dwellers. The term is freedom. What is freedom in the eyes of dwellers? How is it applied in their context? One could make the argument that the economic rationale provides a certain financial freedom in the sense that dwellers can better live within their means as their costs of living go down. Minimalism has the potential to, and does indeed, provide this kind of freedom. But from my own experiences while interacting with mobile home dwellers, I draw the conclusion that freedom goes beyond this point to the everyday activities dwellers engage in. These activities may be conceptualised as an exercise of another type of freedom. This is a freedom that encompasses and is to an extent enabled by financial freedom. However, it cannot be conceived purely in terms of financial incentives or freedom. To better understand the concept of freedom in this light, one must ask what actually makes a person free? Free from what?

To understand what freedom means for someone who lives in a vehicle on the side of the road, this chapter explores the subject in two sections. The first examines how the concept of freedom is defined and applied within the everyday experiences of mobile home dwellers. It looks at how people choose to lead their lives and the reasons behind their choice. This includes why people do not want to return to conventional housing or even a permanently fixed space with their vehicle. The mobile home dwellers I encountered typically see paying rent, mortgages or other forms of upkeep as not only wasteful but also objectionable, regardless of the actual cost. Another important point is what dwellers perceive they lose when engaging in fixed placement. This consists in the undesirability of being “tied down” and how they understand this as being antithetical to what mobile living can offer.

The second section explores this freedom phenomenon through the anthropological literature to explain the processes involved. Generally, within social scientific work, freedom is

categorized into two forms – negative freedom, which generally consists of the removal of social barriers and constraints, and positive freedom, which stipulates the ability to act autonomously. Sources for my discussion include Michael Foucault and his exploration of self-constitution through ethical practice. For my purposes, I am relying on his concept of the self to explain how people transform their circumstances by changing the ways in which they conduct themselves when interacting with their surroundings and the effects that produces (Mitcheson 59). This process is then used to observe how mobile home dwellers achieve autonomy through their own transformation in lifestyles. By adopting certain measures of the neoliberal self, dwellers can transform their own relationship with the market, the urban landscape and placement to achieve the kinds of freedom conventional housing does not provide. This allows dwellers a greater degree of control over how they lead their lives – to go where they want to go, when they want to do it and what they wish to do when they get there.

Who Recognises Freedom and How

When I first began conducting interviews, a key question I asked at the end of each session was, “What was the most rewarding aspect about living in a mobile home?” The answers participants gave me were quite interesting. Out of the eleven respondents, seven used the word ‘freedom’ in conjunction with their answers in order to describe a type of lifestyle they had. When asked to expand upon their meaning of ‘freedom’ responses tended to describe a combination of effects such as more personal control over certain aspects of their daily lives. These included where and when to spend their personal time; how much personal time they could make; their ability to physically move away from bad situations (problematic neighbours being a recurring example);

and the ability to go and do things that they otherwise might not be able to do as a result of maintaining conventional homes.

In short, freedom in this case was the addition of personal control over daily affairs or sense of it that otherwise felt lacking when not living in a mobile home. The world around a mobile home dweller might change constantly due to being on the road, but the inherent advantages a vehicular shelter gives is the constant the lifestyle provides. This could be seen in Rida's response to the question, "Do whatever we want, whenever we want. It's comfort too, comfort being on the road. It's having that one thing constant while everything is moving all the time." Another example came from an interview with one of the other female mobile home dwellers, Jenny. Jenny was a very recent dweller, living inside her campervan for four months prior to the interview. She originated from Calgary and worked in tourism in the South Vancouver area of city proper. She enjoyed not having to rely on others and found her mobile home empowering. She stated, "Being the controller of your own life, having freedom and saying, 'I'm doing this.' A lot of people think that's a crazy thing to do... I'm like, 'I can do this, I can pretty much do anything.'"

As for the other four respondents who didn't use the word 'freedom' in their answers, they did describe beneficial aspects about mobile home life that often overlapped with the more idealised responses. For instance, the other couple I mentioned, Clark and Lucy, said the following:

Lucy: That we get to be together.

Clark: Yeah, and the scenery, it can change, and we can get away from everybody, and anybody, and they won't know where we are.

Lucy: Yeah, we can go any time we want.

In this case, Clark and Lucy's response was less about an abstract idea and more about tangible pragmatism such as their shared accommodations. Yet despite this, the sense of being able to control the placement of their surroundings is still appreciated. So, while not all mobile home dwellers may necessarily use the connotations of freedom to describe their lifestyle, the underlying benefits the lifestyle provides are recognised by all. Those benefits being a personal sense of control and independence through mobility, a concept worth expanding upon.

A Question of Owing

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the discussion around current habitation trends in relation to alternative housing is related to uncontrollable variables such as pricing and environmental concerns. There is a growing apathy and skeptical outlook towards conventional materialism. Thus, minimalistic choices that emphasize a "more with less" mindset have become popular alternatives to meet these current trends. Such choices are meant to allow a reinvestment of time and energy towards more personalized endeavours. However, rather than reject modern economic participation, minimalist ideals are akin to navigational tools to support easier living conditions in the face of overbearing socioeconomic forces.

While this explanation provides the underlying mechanisms involved with alternative housing in general, it needs to be pushed beyond the basic paradigm of economic rationale. Financial freedom is certainly important for dwellers, but that is not in itself enough to describe some of the other aspects of freedom mentioned above such as those related to mobility. What if the housing market suddenly changed? Would alternative housing enthusiasts suddenly change their behaviors? Would they revert to using conventional dwellings? While some people involved in alternative housing might take such steps (at least one participant admitted to leaving their

options open), many more are rather resilient when it comes to their lifestyle choices. The life of a mobile home dweller is by no means always easy or convenient for those involved. Vehicular homes have their challenges as well as their benefits. Yet, people from various economic circumstances do continue to pursue such a life.

At the beginning of the interview process, I asked all the participants if they ever considered returning to a conventional dwelling, be it a house, a condo or an apartment. Some had considered it, but others had not. One positive response worth mentioning came from the Facebook group organizer himself, Thomas. His response was as follows:

Yes, I have. In fact, recently I did when I got a significant pay raise a few months ago. I thought about it. I decided all the pros and cons, and I decided that monetarily it's really not worth it to live in an apartment. Basically, van life is just a series of inconveniences. You got to heat yourself? Buy propane. If you run out of propane, then you get cold. So, you make sure you don't run out. It's an inconvenience, if you don't have water, you don't have water to drink and it could be a problem. If you got to poop and you're not near a toilet it can be a problem. There's a series of inconveniences that need to be fixed. Once you "solve" those, you ask yourself, "Is the inconvenience worth it compared to paying fifteen hundred to two thousand dollars a month?" The answer is yes, it is worth it.

While this answer largely reflects the economic savings associated with downsizing and minimalism in general, it does hint at a more principled viewpoint about owing rent or having debt when taken in context with the sentiment of respondents in general. This sentiment is about whether or not someone in a mobile home dweller's position really needs to put themselves in a situation where they must pay any monetary upkeep. Even when broached about owning a condo

rather than renting, Thomas does not change his answer. Yes, Thomas could have paid an extra fifteen hundred dollars for conventional accommodations, but that is not an excessive burden given his means. Instead, he wishes to spend the money where he prefers to spend it rather than let the financial drain consume part of his finances. A better example of this sentiment can be illustrated by the comments of Martin, a dweller who moved to Vancouver from Montreal seven months prior to the interview. When asked if he ever considered returning to conventional homes, he replied,

People ask me, “So do you still live in your van?” I’m like, “Do you still pay rent?” Obviously. I feel like I’m at a stage where I want to try different things. Living in a van allows me to go on my way and try different projects and put money into them that if I was paying rent I could just not do. I feel like, as someone who is interested in branching off and starting his own thing, it offers that opportunity.

In this case, Martin is not so much concerned about the price tag itself as much as he is concerned with what he wants to do with his finances and how removing the cost of rent frees up his spending abilities. Thomas and Martin are not alone in voicing this sentiment; this is a common attitude found with many dwellers. For instance, when I asked Rida and Whan the same question, the following dialogue ensued:

Whan: It’s a thought, renting and buying a home.

Rida: But it’s definitely never ending, paying rent.

Whan: Yes, doesn’t seem right.

Rida: Or an efficient use of time.

Apart from renting or buying a conventional home, I also asked participants about their possible plans for moving with their mobile homes into a more designated location, such as an official trailer park or a year-long active campground. Their answers to this question were even

more negative than to the first. An example of this is another previously unmentioned dweller named Karen. Karen travels quite frequently and rejects having to pay for a “home base” of sorts. Given her travels, she sees paying for a lot as a wasted investment, even when she could afford it. When asked about placing her vehicle in a more settled location such as a campground, she says she has thought about it but ultimately rejects the notion. When asked why, she affirms as follows: “Once there (the trailer park or campground), you’re committed to paying for that site. I have property to park on while I’m in Surrey on the island and a few safe spots in the city. If I had to pay and then leave to do a circuit on the mainland, then I’m gone for two weeks paying for something that I am not using.” While this statement can be read as another mere cost-cutting motive, given how wasteful the expenditure may be, the operational word is “committed.” Thus, her concern is not necessarily the amount she would have to pay for trailer park access but the thought of having to pay for access altogether. When Martin, a close friend of Jenny from Montreal, was asked if he would consider a designated campground or trailer park along with the latter, they respond as follows:

Martin: No, I think the goal with van life is to be able to move around. I have plans for traveling with my vehicle for sure.

Jenny: Maybe down the road if I’m looking to stay somewhere for a while, and it’s not as big as Vancouver. If trailer parks are the only place where I can have a shower and hook up, sure. But with this city, you really don’t need to.

Martin: If on a big road trip, we really fall in love with a town or something, then yeah. I would look for a place. But I wouldn’t pay for a spot, though.

Jenny: If they don't have community centres, and they don't have accessible bathrooms, and I want to work while still living in my vehicle then sure, I might pay for a spot. But chances are no.

There is a great degree of reluctance on the part of these two interview participants about paying for a place to park their vans. Both do acknowledge circumstances where it might be necessary to pay for designated parking in a camper space. However, even then it is seen as a last resort if all other free options are exhausted. At present, the subject of any type of continuous payment or financial debt is an alienating prospect for many mobile home dwellers. However, it is by far not the only one. Another disincentive that many dwellers feel dismayed by regarding having any type of settled home is related to geographic obligations. Martin's remarks about "van life" emphasizes this point. Being able to travel around is its own goal rather than just a means. As the term "mobile home" suggests, there is a mobility aspect that is easily overlooked and requires more serious consideration.

Loosening the Knot

One concept I noticed in the responses of several participants is the notion of being "tied down." What does this mean exactly, and how does it relate to the overall discussion about freedom? For my purpose in this research, it is the undesired constraints that are often associated with housing maintenance and spatial commitment. This could mean everything from upkeep to bills to geographical placement, which are often an impediment to certain forms of mobility. Why is this the case? What makes even affordable conventional housing seem undesirable? One prominent answer that might explain these questions comes from the scuba instructor, Max. Max is in a somewhat interesting position as he can actively pick up and take his work with him

wherever he goes as he carries his equipment inside his converted bus. What he says on the subject is brief but poignant. Max states, “Just being able to go where I want to go, when I want to go. Not having to be tied down paying rent and utilities. If you don’t like your neighbors, just go somewhere else, park somewhere else.” From this statement, we see that the end goal for this mobile home dweller is not the ability to be sheltered. Instead, the end goal is the ability to travel freely and having more freedom of choice.

As stated above, purpose of the mobile home becomes less about the shelter or living compartment itself and more about the mobility it carries. What is articulated here is the desire for a portability that a permanent settled shelter cannot allow. This transient quality that a mobile home offers is in itself the primary value that draws many dwellers to own one – to be able to go anywhere at any time on a whim. To settle one’s mobile home in a rented space, be it a trailer park, a campground or even a privately owned parking lot is in many ways a contradiction to transience and may as well be treated no differently than a conventional home. In Sam’s response to the campground question, he says, “No, that would take my freedom away. If I always have to go back to the same place every night, then that defeats the purpose of this lifestyle. Might as well rent an apartment; prices are not much different (both are equally expensive). Not in this city anyways.” When questioned further about his involvement with other private parking spots, he recounts a moment of watching over the property of his sister (also known as house sitting) for a couple of weeks. His description of his experience is as follows: “The hardest three weeks of my life – I just stay in my truck.”

Indeed, for many mobile home dwellers, the chance to be bound to settled space is by no means a sought-after experience. It is instead an interruption to an otherwise transient lifestyle. More often than not, it conflicts with the various activities that make up a dweller’s personal

pursuits, which a mobile dwelling can often enable. A good example of this is Karen. In-between her daughter's schooling and seasonal jobs, she often travels on long road trips. This is partly to explore and partly to experiment with new activities. When asked about any challenges she faces while living in a mobile home, she states,

I don't know if there's a challenge to it. I have a really good community. Most people are just curious, so I don't wrestle with a lot of disenfranchisement with my community. Occasionally I get sick of the rain. I have been working a lot lately, so I haven't had an excursion in a long time. It's time to go skiing. Occasionally I get tired of all the fun stuff I do. We went to Harrison Hot Springs in the fall. We got there, and my daughter and I looked at each other. We thought, 'So what?' I need a new excursion, something new to do. Something fun to learn and do, or some new people to hang out with.

Based on this answer, we can see that Karen's passionate pursuit is not any one particular set of activities. Rather, it is the ability to find new pursuits seldom tried that piques her interest. There is a genuine excitement to being able to continuously change one's environment in order to seek out new experiences. The hobbies, activities and events are all linked by certain geographic constraints. Many mobile home dwellers thrive on pursuing such hedonism, but these hedonistic enterprises are just steppingstones to a much larger phenomenon at play.

Just like with Sam and Max, Karen's response suggests that the quality of her lifestyle comes from her enjoyment of moving around. For Karen, her constant road trips are the most valued aspects of her life outside of her immediate family. She continuously makes new plans and factors improvisation into her trips. Based on my impression, it seems that being constantly free from geographical limitations in order to experience changing circumstances at one's own leisure

is how she defines freedom. In her closing remarks, she describes how in the summer her daughter will have begun working, leaving her the opportunity to visit Washington State. Karen concludes,

I don't exactly have a plan. I'll look around and see what events there are. Once I get down there, I'll bring my backpacking gear and find a place to be a hiker, do an overnight hike. Just to mix things up I'll go see some music festivals. If I can bump into something like that, that would really round up the summer for me. Or ... I find some good snorkeling place in some secluded waters that has some very neat ocean sea life for me to see. So, eels, octopus or something like that. Do something spur of the moment.

Admittedly, not every mobile home dweller I have been able to communicate with and interview has gone on such long excursions. In fact, apart from Whan, Rida, Karren, Max, and perhaps Sam to an extent, the most mobile home dwellers I encountered have jobs or mechanical limits that prevent them from leaving Metro Vancouver altogether for any extended periods of time. This is not necessarily a drawback as the region is ideal for permanent mobile home living all year round due to milder weather even in winter. People like Martin and Jenny have come from outside the province to be in Metro Vancouver specifically. Even so, the degree in which some mobile home dwellers experience mobility varies. Some prefer to remain in the Metro Vancouver region. Others prefer to go further afield depending on the season and amount of time in-between work. And that's to say nothing about the mobile homes that remain firmly planted on a semi-permanent basis like near the film studios near Grandview Highway. Despite the grounded limits listed and existing counterexamples, the sentiment for mobile life remains strong among many dwellers, especially the ones I interviewed. Even something as small as choosing a location to park overnight allows dwellers to exercise the ability to navigate the world on their own terms through

their own transience. It is an exercise of a form of asserted autonomy from both financial and geographic ties that may otherwise keep them in fixed places.

A Question of Autonomy

Now that I have located the subject of freedom within the context of mobile home dwellers and examined its application in everyday affairs, I want to ask a series of further questions. Why do vehicular homeowners see themselves as practitioners of this form of freedom? Why does the concept have this widespread appeal? Furthermore, how might my findings speak to broader scholarship on the theme of freedom? To answer these fundamental questions, it is important to begin unboxing the very defining trait of this freedom, autonomy. Broadly speaking, social scientific work has identified two forms of freedom, one negative and one positive (Berlin 168, 178). For much of the previous chapter and a good part of this one, I primarily explored freedom in its negative form, as the removal of social and economic barriers or hindrances. Positive freedom may be understood as the enhancement of being able to act in a manner as to take personal control or fulfil a sought-after purpose. It is a form of interaction where one modifies or sets the terms. That is the essence of autonomy (Berlin 168-179). Some aspects of mobile home living may be understood as articulations of autonomy in this sense.

As discussed previously, mobile homes allow dwellers to better manage their time and finances in ways life in conventional dwellings does not afford. While there is a large amount of negative freedom involved through the cutting back on expenses and not being tied to specific property, positive freedom emerges in the opportunities for more meaningful life choices. Dwellers value this positive freedom in the way they practice daily living. For example, most mobile home dwellers I have had contact with are reluctant to use assistance services from food banks to

emergency shelters, even the few whom I have met who might otherwise need such services. This includes both government programs and private not-for-profit organizations. Mobile homes allow people to live their lives within any means, even on a minimum wage or during long periods in-between seasonal jobs. Dwellers can sustain themselves with the means they have or choose to have at their disposal, on their terms, without outside forces undermining that process, forcibly making them reliant on others.

As shown, many mobile home dwellers do not like being tied down, much preferring to spend their lives actively pursuing their own enterprises and living for the moment anywhere, at any time. Above the given financial independence of such a lifestyle is the ability for dwellers to change their circumstances at their own discretion. If someone does not like their surroundings or has other misgivings involving their situation, then that person can immediately address those issues. This is a key point brought up by several interview participants. When discussing housing accommodations and the entrapment he feels towards conventional homeownership, Thomas recollects:

I have a friend that bought a condo, costed five hundred and ten thousand dollars, works his butt off, can't afford a car because of his mortgage. But, he's the type of guy who likes to roll his windows down half the time to get fresh air. Guess what? People above him smoke. So, he's always getting smoke in his apartment, and it drives him nuts. Now that marijuana is legal, there's marijuana smoking going into his apartment, and it drives him absolutely insane, and he's paying all this money. I don't know how I would deal with that, if I absolutely don't like it – if I'm in a situation where I don't like what's happening – then I can get up, get into the front seat, turn the key and leave.

This sentiment highlights a point of contention for a lot of mobile home dwellers: any other type of home will almost certainly be the subject of unfavourable neighbours, zoning regulations and/or other restrictive rules that prevent homeowners from actively controlling their home. Each house, apartment or condo will ultimately have inflexible settings that bind their respective occupant, be it either by rent or purchase. Thus, mobile homes offer a form of independence from many of these constraints not by removing the option to live in a conventional home but by providing new possibilities. The result is that dwellers usually find themselves being able to exert more control over all aspects of their own lives, regardless of what their individual pursuits are. That power is the very essence of the autonomy that encapsulates the mobile concept of freedom.

While these examples neatly showcase autonomy in action and its value to mobile home dwellers, they ignore the fact that in order for dwellers to find autonomy from the economic and geographical relationships around them, they need to opt into some of those same relationships. As discussed in the previous chapter, by the neoliberal reshaping of society, people are compelled to adopt the characteristics of enterprising actors and use economic rationales and agency to alleviate their financial problems. In other words, mobile life involves reorienting one's relationship to the economy that is responsible for negative outcomes in order to find better outcomes in that very same economy. But as discussed in this chapter, financial incentives alone do not account for all the reasons why people prefer to live in a mobile home. The transient lifestyle incumbent on this life is its own value. Transience is its own end rather than a mere means to that end.

Anthropological Literature

Freedom within the context of controlling one's own life and personal agency are concepts that have existed within philosophical treatises and academic debates for a long time. It is only in recent decades, however, that the discipline of anthropology has turned to conceptualizing ethics as form of agentic work on the self, embedded within everyday life (Laidlaw 1-3). But what is ethics in this context? Is it simply a moral guideline? As Laidlaw puts it, "Ethical considerations – recognition of persons, attributions of agency and responsibility, evaluations of states of affairs – are ubiquitous, and built into the very structure of language and interaction" (Laidlaw 2). In short, ethics can be understood not necessarily as a contrast between good moral conduct and bad but as a form of personhood. It is how people form paradigms in which to evaluate themselves within the various social relationships around them. This is summarized further by Laidlaw: "The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative" (Laidlaw 3). By understanding ethics in this fashion, I may begin to explore how ethics functions in the realm of everyday life for mobile home dwellers – more specifically, how they measure their own sense of self or personhood in relation to their lifestyle.

As previously mentioned, Foucault emphasizes the "free" enterprising actor as part of the neoliberal and ordoliberal creed for resolving social problems (McNay 56-58). Foucault explores freedom not as a liberation from overarching political entities but as a type of exploration of the self through daily practice. What this means is that while mobile home dwellers have been subjected to the many negative effects of neoliberal market forces, they can change their lifestyle to transform these inhibitors into advantages. The practice or method of living in a mobile home becomes part of the dweller's state in order to achieve a certain level of happiness, contentment or

fulfilment. It is a mode through which to improve one's self (Mahmood 28). This can be seen readily enough with the previous examples of how mobile home dwellers chose to spend their time once having made the transition.

To better understand the concept of this kind of self-transformation for a certain betterment, it is necessary to look at Foucault's lecture content and discussions from the *College de France*. In them, Foucault stresses the importance of the self in what he refers to as "self-formation" (Foucault 282). He explains, "It is what one could call an ascetic practice, taking asceticism in a very general sense—in other words, not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being" (Foucault 282). For Foucault, the process in which people transform themselves in this manner has three parts. Understanding one's self, forming one's self and ultimately surpassing one's self. The process of taking care of one's self is an important facet of our ethical identity or mode of being because it is an exercise in learning personal truths about ourselves. He often gives the example of how the ancient Greeks have seen "self-care" as a pillar of individual freedom in practice due to one's own efforts to exercise self-improvement through the adoption of new conducts (Foucault 284-285).

Mobile Ethics

So, how does this anthropological literature relate to mobile home dwellers? Mobile home dwellers are very much in a situation similar to that described above. Not necessarily in the sense that dwellers are actively soul searching or attempting to achieve a new moral being but in the sense that many dwellers want to look for positive changes and more meaningful experiences in

their lives. People who become full-time vehicular home users go through a gradual process of major change and adaptation in order to achieve these goals. Mobile home dwellers do not start out living a mobile lifestyle. Rather, they are slowly drawn to it through dissatisfaction in the housing market, the monotony of being tied down, financial stresses and a desire to travel and have greater personal autonomy. There is a recognition that under conventional relationships with the neoliberal market, dwellers could rarely resolve these ongoing issues or have the freedom to achieve their individual pursuits.

Thus, rather than reject the forces of the market, dwellers reorient their relationship to it by transforming their lifestyle. To achieve this, dwellers adopt the mobile home not only for its relative inexpensiveness but because the mobility provided is its own merit. Being tied to a home with geographic constraints limits possibilities in what dwellers can do, where they can go and when. However, by making the home itself mobile, new possibilities emerge. This is not to say that life in a mobile home is without its own set of challenges, concerns and constraints. In fact, the transition period can be very hard for a newcomer in vehicular homes.

The combination of losing certain conveniences of conventional housing settings taken for granted and added safety concerns by being more exposed can be nerve racking. As Thomas explains,

You definitely second guess yourself. In the first three months it's the most – the initial transition period is the hardest part because you second guess your decision. "What am I doing here, am I crazy?" You are parked beside the traffic all the time, people walking by, the noise level is high and you don't feel like you have much security because there's a piece of machine between you and the outside world, whereas if you live in an apartment

on the third floor you're kind of tucked away in your tower when compared to your vehicle on the side of the road.

But despite these drawbacks, the benefits of living in a mobile home are apparent. Nonetheless, it is not an adjustment without consequences. Dwellers may often find themselves in tough situations. It is relatively easy for an individual to break into your home or at the very least damage a window. Not only do dwellers have to contend with costly repairs and replacements, but they can find themselves in a more vulnerable position should a burglary take place. For example, one basic unwritten rule for parking that multiple participants have mentioned is to keep away from construction zones. The reason for this has to do with tradesmen's tools. Specialized on-site workers such as electricians and plumbers often leave their tool kits near their place of work. Thus, any mobile home (especially commercial vans) may be prime targets for pilfering such valuables. Yet, despite these drawbacks, many dwellers endure beyond the transition period.

These potential hardships aside, once a mobile home dweller is duly acclimated, he or she will almost certainly remain in a mobile home full-time. Between acclimation, the sharing of information and newly gained experience in handling daily issues, mobile homeowners find ways to succeed by making mobile life work for them. When asked about the most challenging feature of living in a mobile home, most participants struggled to construe an answer. Some focus on access to toiletries and hygienic facilities, others on the humidity through the lack of insulation. But these are often referenced as trivial once the transition phase is complete. For example, In Sam's response he states, "My most challenging was that first year where I was stupid and didn't plan it. Since then, it's been a cakewalk. I have exactly what I need to survive comfortably. I hear about the other qualms that other people have, and I don't have those problems." In other words,

when a prospective dweller does complete acclimation, there are no other major challenges to overcome.

Dwellers can seemingly travel anywhere they want to go, do things they want to do and do said things when they want to do them. Mobile home dwellers have therefore, through their own process of self-constitution and creating a new mobile ethical self, found a new relationship with the neoliberal market that better suits their needs and aspirations. From taking long road trips to working seasonally in personally fulfilling occupations despite the financial limitations, mobility is an integral part of a lifestyle of such flexibility. Vehicular housing is used to bring a certain degree of personal control over many aspects of daily life and a change in power dynamics not easily accessible in a conventional home setting. It is this rejection of being “tied down” and this constant emphasis on mobility that is at the heart of the day-to-day living ethics that many dwellers ascribe to. By choosing to conduct themselves in this manner, mobile home dwellers reorganize the many facets about how they live in order to better reflect the types of relationships they want to have with the social institutions around them – thus creating a mobile form of autonomy necessary for the practice of positive freedom.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, while finances and the minimalist trend are important factors to consider when exploring mobile home usage as part of the larger alternative housing market, such explanations are inadequate when considering why mobile home dwellers willingly stay in their vehicular lodges even when economic circumstances change. Some dwellers may very well return to conventional housing if market conditions for purchase and rent improve. But as discussed,

most of the dwellers who participated in the interviews much prefer to persevere in their current lifestyle and will not move back into an apartment, condo or house. Others simply refuse to even entertain the possibility of parking in designated trailer parks or campgrounds on any permanent basis. Thus, unfavourable socioeconomic conditions might explain why people purchase mobile homes but do not explain why they stay in them beyond these circumstances. Therefore, other meaningful considerations must be weighed. Dwellers are attached to their vehicular homes because they allow them a greater deal of flexibility in deciding where they want to go, what they want to do and how to do it. Mobile home dwellers are adamant about this point because it allows them to engage with the world around them on their own terms. This newfound control creates a sense of freedom that conventional housing does not offer. This can be seen in the cost of living reductions that belong to the category of negative freedom.

However, this chapter focuses on the positive freedom element, autonomy, which is at the heart of what dwellers value. This concept of freedom is so deeply ingrained into living on the road that compromising mobility even on a short-term basis is considered antithetical. In this case the dweller is being “tied down.” Granted, every lifestyle has its own set of challenges, and living in a mobile home is not without its own difficulties. This is especially true in the early transitional period. But drawbacks soon become minor inconveniences that are far from being inhibitive and are ultimately disregarded by people who remain dwellers. The mobility is itself a value. Whether it is taking long road trips, changing scenery at any time of day or moving around as part of a profession such as scuba diving, a personalized mobile home can accommodate all these scenarios. Vehicular homes are part of a way of life that facilitates new and meaningful ways of living.

Conclusion

Overview

As has been demonstrated, life for mobile home dwellers is a variety of complex circumstances that can be attributed to many factors, ranging from gentrification, to better managing expenditures, to desires for more personal autonomy and mobility. Mobile living is part of a larger alternative housing market that is both old in its roots but also new in its contemporary inception. Modern alternative housing can be traced back many decades. But it is a combination of twenty-first century economic realities, more recent industry innovations and better communication that has propelled this niche market towards a wider audience. Suburban expansion has reached its limit, and the economic restructuring of employment has led to the cost of living outpacing working- to middle-class wage growth. This is especially noticeable on Canada's West Coast, where both the excesses of the housing market and milder climate conditions have encouraged lateral solutions such as mobile homes. As the economic makeup of urban landscapes changes, so too does the relationship between residents, their environs and what is considered a home.

Mobile home dwellers are no exception to these socioeconomic changes as the increase in vehicular housing mirrors many other alternative housing trends. One example listed is the tiny home, a large shed-sized structure that is increasingly becoming a recognized solution to alleviate poverty and homelessness. But mobile home dwellers often do not consider themselves part of this socially precarious category. Dwellers come from all walks of life and a wide range of occupations with differing salary rates. Many see themselves as partaking in a minimalist lifestyle whereupon one of the main goals is to cut back on unneeded expenses and wearying obligations associated

with the maintenance of certain material lifestyles. These lifestyles usually come in the form of conventional homes and their many limitations. For some, this a pragmatic approach due to the nature of their occupation, such as spending large amounts of time at their work site to being employed seasonally at different locations. For others, a mobile home allows them to cut back on work hours and pursue more satisfying forms of work without having to worry about being short on rent or mortgage payments. Others still are just dissatisfied with conventional housing in general, regardless of costs, and prefer to move around and spend time in locales such as parks, near the waterfront or in the back country. Based on my own perceptions during interviews and event discussions, mobile home dwellers largely see themselves as people who want to have more control over their own lives and find better satisfaction through their own mobile lifestyle.

This lifestyle leads to what many mobile home dwellers see as the most important feature of living in a vehicle on the side of the road: freedom. Freedom can generally be seen in two forms. The first is negative freedom, which is attributed to the removal of social, physical and economic barriers. This has been seen in many of the examples listed previously. This includes removing cost of living barriers, freeing up monetary savings that would otherwise be spent in less desirable places and being stuck working in undesirable places. But the second (and perhaps more important) form is positive freedom. In this case, freedom is measured by one's ability to act. It is the enabling feature of choice making that is crucial. A life in a mobile home does not just provide a cut to costs and the restrictions associated with them. It enables people to spend their time in a more satisfactory way. To accomplish this, more autonomy is needed to help encourage those satisfying life choices. This is further emphasized by the fact that most mobile home dwellers refuse to be tied to one location. The mobile home becomes an accessory that helps its occupants spend their time the way they want to as well as when and where. The mobility aspect of the home stops

becoming a mere means to a goal but ultimately part of it. This is seen in the ways some dwellers chose occupations that require moving from place to place, such as seasonal work. It is also seen in the ways others decide to take extensive road trips abroad, take long nature excursions and explore new pursuits. Granted, there are drawbacks to overcome and inconveniences to accept. Not everyone will choose to stay in a mobile home on a permanent basis. But for those that do, these challenges are an acceptable part of the greater experience.

Lingering Concerns

Starting very early on in my initial inquiries into the subject matter of mobile homes, I approached the topic from the debate around their social standing. As shown in the first chapter, media depictions of mobile homes in the Metro Vancouver region can be extremely divisive. One narrative stipulates the economic precariousness shown by very visible mobile home dwellers. The other showcases the longing for freedom on the road even to the point of romanticizing the phenomenon. The point of my research has been to see where the reality lies between these two opposing views. The best place to start has been asking basic questions. How do mobile home dwellers generally see themselves? Why do people live in mobile homes? Based on my own findings, I see freedom to be one of the more compelling subjects.

This is not to say that there are no elements that can easily fit the more negative description. As I have said, mobile home dwellers come from all walks of life, and there are those that live precariously in squalid conditions and poor sanitation. Even by the admission of some of the participants, this is indeed the case. Dwellers can and do categorize each other by classes, where some do appear closer to the “homeless” description. Some participants do believe that a few people are stuck in a mobile home due to drug addictions and/or mental health issues. Then again,

even the most economically precarious couple I interviewed, with a broken-down camper, still saw themselves differently from someone without any roof over their heads. So, the distinction between where homelessness ends and where mobile homeownership begins is not a clearly defined one.

It is also unhelpful that most participants I managed to interview skewed heavily from online recruitment rather than street-level encounters. This has been due in large part to the fact that online recruitment garners more enthusiasm than approaching dwellers where they park. Those with online access would usually have more resources at their disposal, better networking and more organizational opportunities. Their viewpoints, while largely consistent, might not reflect a wide enough set of circumstances. My fieldwork has also not covered the opinions of local residents who do not live in mobile homes and how they classify dwellers. Very few conventional residents interact with dwellers directly or knowingly. Many dwellers also prefer solitude when not interacting with their circle of friends and family, not even interacting with each other for long stretches. Outside of perhaps discussions online, there are few direct opportunities to share opinions or information outside of the divisive media narratives. I therefore suggest that any future inquiries into the topic of mobile homes and their relationship to urban spaces consider expanding the potential search field by including other stakeholders.

Areas of Further Inquiry

Despite acknowledging some of the limitations of the fieldwork and challenges undertaken, it should not take away from the testimonies of the participants involved. I can confidently state that communicating with them and being able to glimpse at how they interact within the Greater Metro Vancouver region has shed some crucial light onto a growing phenomenon – a phenomenon

that, so far, has had little attention in academic studies. At the very least it occupies a niche between studies about mobile homes in trailer parks and urban housing. The number of mobile home dwellers on the West Coast is in the thousands and will continue to increase as socioeconomic trends continue in their current direction. It is possible that other urban regions of Canada may one day see a noticeable rise in mobile homes as well. In fact, there is also a sizeable number of mobile home dwellers on Vancouver Island in places such as Victoria. It should be remembered that while gentrification in Metro Vancouver has increased at a higher rate than the rest of the country, it is by no means an isolated case. Many of the same issues that plague residents of Metro Vancouver discussed in Chapter 1 are also occurring elsewhere and have consistently been moving in that general direction for close to half a century. Whether it be cost of living concerns or home buyers becoming increasingly disillusioned with the conventional housing climate, more people will find their own solutions through alternative avenues.

So where can inquiries go from here? As stated, there are relatively few studies about urban mobile homes. Even my own contribution is only a glimpse when compared to how widespread the phenomenon is. It certainly has become more widespread than even I initially thought. There are many visible mobile home dwellers if you know where to search. There are even many more dwellers still that are invisible (probably the majority), choosing vehicles based on their subtlety to blend in. Such individuals also prefer to choose parking locations that are least frequented. Such dwellers rarely stay in the same place for more than one or two nights. Any future studies will have to take these factors into account if they want to have a successful outreach strategy. Even the places I have listed in Chapter 2 only apply for a portion of dwellers as many prefer to disperse. Another thing to consider is the different types of mobile homes out there. While my own research covers these differences only briefly, others may wish to focus on this sub-topic.

For instance, there is a highly active market for second-hand vehicular homes and conversions. The second-hand market is understandable given the entry prices for new vehicles, but personally built recreational vehicles and trailers are an interesting phenomenon unto themselves. The man-hours and resources required to make these dwellings can potentially take weeks, if not months, of work on the part of their owners depending on the kinds of conversions being done. Some are simple in concept, with storage spaces and portable stove tops. Others are much more comprehensive, with makeshift beds, kitchens and bathrooms built into the structure. Potential future studies may be used to explore the many processes involved in the creation of personally fabricated mobile homes. Having a better understanding as to why some dwellers prefer creating their own personalized home over a prefabricated model (a topic I touch on only briefly) and how they utilize these personal spaces when compared to factory-built units may yield unique findings. Perhaps a participatory methodology may be employed in which a researcher helps convert a home alongside participants.

Redefining Spaces

New areas of focus and differing methodologies aside, what other value can be generated from this research? What are its broad applications? As stated above, the number of mobile home dwellers on the West Coast keeps growing, and it is likely that the phenomenon will spread to other parts of Canada. This thesis and other similar future studies can help municipal policy makers provide better outreach support and better recognize the place of mobile homes within the urban community. As it stands, the narrative that mobile home dwellers are precariously impoverished and share many traits similar to homelessness is still a powerful one. It would be easy to dismiss dwellers as a sanitation or safety concern as we often see with tent cities and homeless

concentrations. But in the majority of cases it is an inaccurate assumption. To discourage mobile home dwellers from being able to freely park overnight on the side of the street is unfair. Not only that but such actions can be counter-productive to local economies as well. In Chapter 1 I briefly talked about how dwellers are in a position to occupy jobs left empty due to normal cost of living restraints brought on by conventional housing. As gentrification worsens, working class salaries will increasingly be unable to cope with covering basic necessities. If wage increases are not possible for local businesses to give, then measures will have to be encouraged to bring costs down. Municipal governments usually have little power to resolve such predicaments. What other options could there be?

Just like with tiny homes and eco-homes, mobile homes occupy a portion of a growing alternative market that is slowly becoming more popular and may one day become part of the mainstream. For this very reason, it is imperative for city planners to take alternative housing into consideration when managing urban space. Suburbia is in decline and no longer a core strategy for North American cities to deal with general housing demand. Redeveloping the inner city has proven to be detrimental for low- and middle-income earners in the face of economic restructuring. It seems that twentieth century models of urban development and zoning laws are ill fitted to handle the twenty-first century's neoliberal market forces. In many ways these practices may even be counterintuitive because they restrict the ways in which housing is managed in the face of major changes.

If cities want to survive, it may be necessary for zoning laws, property regulations, infrastructure and parking rules to be overhauled to accommodate alternative housing demand. Examples may include tiny home villages in the middle of cities and overnight parking zones for mobile homes. Regardless of what measures do get adopted, mobile homes are becoming a

permanent fixture of daily life on the West Coast of Canada. Whatever anxieties other residents may feel in regard to the more precarious dwellers in their rundown recreational vehicles with litter all around, such people do not represent the bigger community of mobile home enthusiasts. Relying on such stereotypes will not reverse multi-decade long market trends nor take into account the productive contributions mobile home dwellers make to the principalities in which they reside. Treating such people as part of a refocus on solutions and not part of a growing problem will be key in overcoming twenty-first century city challenges due to gentrification. The ways in which the urban landscape is designed and used may change over time, but the need to enable people to place a roof over their heads has not.

Closing Remarks

The time I spent researching the subject of mobile homes in the field has had many surprises. The time used to prepare for this undertaking was mostly focused on housing shortages and other related issues. To some extent I even referred to trailer park studies to see any possible socioeconomic parallels between campground residents and dwellers living on the side of the road that I may come across. However, once in the field and having been able to contact some of the mobile home dwellers directly, this approach was abandoned. First, drawing such parallels would require statistical information that either does not exist or is incomplete at best and beyond the scope of my thesis. Second, aside from cost of living concerns, discussions around social and economic disfunction that are often attributed to trailer park studies had little to no bearing on most dwellers involved. Many of them even seemed to have felt privileged in some way because of their mobile homes.

Yes, all mentioned housing prices as being a large underlying contributor to making that transition choice. Two participants even had no other alternative options at the time of making the choice to live in mobile shelters. Yet my own impression at the time was that there had been no hint of dissatisfaction, resentment, bitterness or regret among the participants' answers. Only one participant admitted to leaving the option for conventional housing open. Even then, he had no outstanding issues beyond what other participants had mentioned and still appreciated the ability to up and move whenever he wanted. He did not feel an urgent need to move back.

The point was that despite the obvious pressure gentrification and urban living costs in general had (and continue to have) on prospective dwellers looking for alternative solutions to their troubles, there was a high degree of satisfaction with becoming a mobile home dweller. The versatility of the lifestyle was a clear selling point. The time, energy and adaptation required to live on the side of the road were all seen as a small price for what participants perceived as a worthwhile endeavour. There was a genuine attitude of eagerness among many participants of always being on the move. Even when presented with the option to settle down in one location, there was refusal. For many dwellers a life on the move will always be the main point of their choice to live in a vehicular home and any settling down is viewed as antithetical to that end.

No matter the reasons why participants chose to begin their lives in mobile homes, mobile homes became an integral part of who they were and the life choices that followed. Some decided to cut back on work hours to have more personal time, some were able to more frequently leave jobs they found stressful and others decided to travel long distances to look for new and exciting opportunities that may come their way. Thus, what may have begun as a predominantly financial decision evolved into being much more. The lifestyle changes made by many of the mobile home dwellers I spoke with were ones that seemed to have been empowering them to freely go wherever

they wanted and to freely engage in activities that were once seen as impractical while living in conventional dwellings.

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