

"The Question of Housing, Human Rights and the 2010 Olympics"

Hosted by the Vancouver Flying University¹

Wednesday, November 5, 2008

6pm – 8pm

Gallery Gachet (88 East Cordova Street)

This document presents the main issues and challenges related to housing and the Olympics, as well as possible solutions, discussed by each panelist at this event.

Claire Mahon, the Geneva-based principal author of the report *"Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights"* and the *"Multi-Stakeholder Guidelines on Mega-Events and Housing Rights"*, published by the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) last year (http://www.cohre.org/view_page.php?page_id=123). As part of the COHRE project, a couple of years ago she undertook missions to visit previous Olympic Host Cities, namely Seoul, Atlanta, Barcelona, Athens, Sydney, and London.

The issues and challenges:

- In the report "Fair Play for Housing Rights," issues common to all cities who had hosted the Olympic Games were found. These issues were displacement (e.g., forced evictions, gentrification, etc.), the curtailment of public participation, and discrimination against vulnerable groups who were already marginalized (e.g., the homeless, minorities, etc.).

Possible solutions:

- Governments could follow the Multi-Stakeholder Guidelines to use the Olympic Games as leverage for action.

¹ Based on the concept of mobile seminars and talks that Hungarian and Polish dissidents used to skirt authoritarian state institutions, Vancouver Flying University considers the current context of gentrification and economic distortion of Vancouver's inner city in the lead up to the Olympics.

An active reframing of the political and social dimension of the civic dialogue has taken place to prepare the public for the coming of the spectacle. Vancouver Flying University is looking to take a critical view of displacement, private security expansion, changes in policing policies and the development of concepts and positions which limit the right to the city and the processes by which they have become normalized in the civic imagination.

David Eby, *housing advocate, Pivot Legal Society and principal author of Cracks in the Foundation. David is a board member with the Impact on Communities Coalition and the BC Civil Liberties Association.*

The issues and challenges:

- Although the Inner-city Inclusive Commitment was part of Vancouver's Bid Book, the parties (government, Vancouver organizing committee for the Games) who agreed to the Commitments can not be sued. This is because the Commitments are not a contract.
- The process for individuals in trying to resolve forced evictions is neither easy nor instant. Police also do not deal with illegal evictions.
- Over 1,400 SRO units (single room occupancy) have been lost in Vancouver since the Bid was won in 2003. It is a positive action that the BC Government has bought buildings for social housing, but the 600 units promised to be ready before the Games, and the 600 units after the Games will not make up for the number of units already lost.

Possible solutions:

- The only way is for communities to hold the government accountable to enforce the Commitments through means such as petitions, etc.

Michael Byers, *Professor of Global Politics and International Law at UBC and author of numerous books including "Intent for a Nation" and "War Law."*

The issues and challenges:

- Homelessness is not limited to the Downtown Eastside. For example, there is homelessness in the West End as well.
- Homelessness is a violation of human rights, and leads to other human rights being violated as well, such as civil liberties and the right to vote (the homeless have no fixed address).

Possible solutions:

- In the U.S., a new government was just elected last night. We could do the same here, because municipal and provincial elections are coming up.

Monte Paulson, *investigative editor of the Tyee, in which he has written extensively on the affordable housing crisis in Vancouver.*

The issues and challenges:

- There are twice as many homeless people here as there are Olympic athletes.

Possible solutions:

- We are at a tipping point now, and should use the Olympics as leverage.
- Without letting the government off the hook, community groups can act as well.
- Anyone with solutions can email their ideas to Monte: monte@thetyee.ca

Laura Track, *housing advocate, Pivot Legal Society is a Board member with the Impact on Communities Coalition and is involved with a human rights complaint against the City of Vancouver's Civil City Commissioner.*

The issues and challenges:

- There has been a growth in employment in private security.
- The Downtown Ambassadors program, which received some public funding, hires private security for the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association. Ambassadors have asked homeless people to leave public spaces, although no laws were being broken. The Ambassadors and private security don't have any police rights, but they act like they do.

Possible solutions:

- Stop public funding of private security. Stop private security from moving homeless people around.
- The City needs to provide spaces for homeless people to sit, eat, and go to the bathroom.
- Educate people on the rights and authority of private security. For example, not many people know that there is a private security complaints process.
- Private security personnel need to be aware of the needs of homeless people.
- Implement a system of accountability for private security.

Mike Powar, *UBC student and researcher on human rights complaint against Canada to the UN by Impact on Communities Coalition, Pivot Legal Society and Carnegie Community Action Project.*

The issues and challenges:

- There is still a high level of ignorance regarding human rights.

Possible solutions:

- Trying to resolve homelessness is disheartening, but we need to keep trying and believe that we can make a difference.

Additional Solutions from Question & Answer Period

- Use the media to show the world what is really happening, in order to prompt the government into action. For example in Atlanta, organizations gave visitors the "real" tour of Atlanta.
- Know your rights to peaceful protest.
- Expose the hypocrisy of government to prompt them to act. For example, how can Canada claim to support human rights when violations of human rights (homelessness) are happening?
- VANOC (Vancouver organizing committee for the Games) bows to its financial sponsors. These sponsors can be used as leverage for action.
- All future Olympics should include housing/homelessness as one of the criteria for selecting a city to host and organize the Games.