

From the Outside In: Vancouver's Olympic Housing Crisis

an interview with Claire Mahon

Am Johal, 2009-02-09

Claire Mahon is an international human rights lawyer based in Geneva, Switzerland. She is a dual national of Australia and New Zealand. She has practiced as a lawyer both at the national and international level. She is the principle author of Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights (Geneva: COHRE, 2007), available at:

[http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/COHRE's Olympics Report.pdf](http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/COHRE's%20Olympics%20Report.pdf)

and prepared the MultiStakeholder Guidelines for Mega-Events and Housing Rights (Geneva: COHRE, 2007) available at:

[http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/guideline Fair Play.pdf](http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/guideline%20Fair%20Play.pdf)

She spoke with Am Johal at the Sylvia Hotel during her visit to Vancouver in November 2007.

What are some of your observations since being in Vancouver?

The reason I've come to Vancouver is that it is such an interesting case study because Vancouver had made an inner-city commitment in their bid. There seems to be some problems with implementing the first socially sustainable games.

There were some really great inroads that we'd like to see – making sure that there is some legacy of new buildings for social housing. Some of those things have not been procured yet. But at the same time, there are a lot of things that do scare me how much it compares to other cities. The visibility of homelessness and the measures that it takes to maintain that violates human rights.

The concept of affordable housing becomes even more difficult to realize after the Games. This raises a lot of questions as to whether they can actually pull it off.

One of the ideas that is interesting to me is that civil society organizations are not really at the table. There was great pressure at the time for the bid to be done in a different way. VANOC and the government partners have been praised for having a social sustainability lens on the Games - it wasn't initiated by them though. They were dragged their kicking and screaming. So far it has been a triumph of public relations in terms of how it's perceived. It doesn't really reflect any degree of reality.

I think from what I've seen is a huge lost opportunity. Here in Vancouver you have such a vibrant civil society. They have been so active in pushing these principles of what they wanted government to adopt. Some of the commitments would be addressed.

The Games happens in a context of cities that have existing problems. With the Olympic movement, one of the key principles is participation. With a movement whose objective include activities that are built around participation. It is a missed

opportunity in that regard. Who knows how to produce a legacy for the local community except the local community?

Should VANOC be given credit is a good question. The research that we've done, we've pushed organizations to push for social sustainability. If the body is not prioritizing commitments, then it becomes an optional part of the process. It needs to go beyond a PR exercise. It can't just be commitments, but must be legally enforceable. As a host city, as a federal government, you have to be committed to increasing the number of positive legacies and accountability targets and involving the whole community. You need that engagement.

When we raised the issue of evictions, most of the bureaucrats, politicians and bid boosters said, 'what do these evictions have do with the Olympics?' Our argument was that the speculative environment had amplified the situation in the community. What is the link between housing and evictions in these environments, and what role do the media play in playing up this irrational exuberance, this injection of new language in to the public sphere of a city? Any criticism by civil society is viewed as anti-Olympic.

The first is that the Olympics are difficult to directly form a link to evictions as a direct correlation in the years leading up to the Games. The way we see it is that the Olympics act as an instigating factor, it impacts on housing affordability, it amplifies the lack of social housing with regards to homelessness. It ties in with trends that are already going on and accelerating them, pushing beautification programs -- those most in need of affordable housing are often ignored. The Olympics are not the sole cause of course but have an amplifying affect. Would some of these things happen on their own? Would they happen to such an extent? It certainly creates an enabling environment. We become more accepting of non-transparency and lack of democracy. This idea of 'we need to be ready for the Games' takes over. We want a city to be proud of. In order to do that, we suffer the sacrifices that comes with that. The things that we normally wouldn't accept become normal.

The Games can be a really good force. It creates a huge leverage factor. A lot of investment dollars come in. It can sometimes be a good. It depends on how much the community gets to say it is a good thing and have a say in shaping that economic development. In the case of Vancouver, that doesn't seem to have gone very well.

Given the fact that there is a clear body of social scientific evidence that outlines the kind of impacts that happen virtually every time, why is that these games are organized using a cookie cutter approach? Perhaps it changes to the nature and degree of the impacts, but we have a clear sense of what they do - why is that we simply continue down the same path? We knew this in Vancouver back in 2002. Why is it that city after city bid for these games in different shades of the same way, but the IOC as an organization has not taken this more seriously? There's nothing substantive behind their language when they visit our city. There is a deep irrationality in the scope at which they look at the world and real impacts that the event they are responsible for has on the host cities. We are a city far more divided today and the divisions have become even more exacerbated.

The IOC have always said they are not a human rights organization. It's not their responsibility. They aren't, but the event that they organize and host every four years, summer and winter, the IOC can't ignore the fact has a huge impact on millions of people. There are human rights impacts, as a collection of individual people have a responsibility - we should be helping everyone enjoy their human rights. What that means is that there are some simple things that can and should be done. We have seen this change happen. The Olympics have been criticized, but the environment became one of its pillars. It is now part of the bid criteria.

There are national bid committees that don't ignore the environmental impacts. We are asking for the same thing about social impacts. There are some very simple things that they can do. They need to comply with international human rights law. Ensuring that all the other commitments it has made is taken seriously. They are told that they have to, if they can. That's a really patronizing attitude.

VANOC, senior bureaucrats and politicians placed very little thought on community economic development, utilizing the economic activities of the Games to generate social revenues. It was a disproportionate benefit to specific areas of the economy, just like the cookie cutter approach they used here. When the organization morphed from the Bid to the organizing of the Games, it was as if there was no institutional memory that transferred between the organizations.

It's a good analogy. The organizing committee does the same thing over and over.

We need to do things differently with social sustainability. That's what we would love to see Vancouver do. It can have the most change possible. The next time we have an Olympic event, it would make such a difference. It's really crunch time for Vancouver right now.

Anything else?

The fact is that the world is watching what's happening in Vancouver. Millions will be watching on TV. There's that aspect and they will see Vancouver in a whole range of other perspectives. They're going to see how Vancouver deals with these other things. The world is watching how Vancouver can follow through on their objectives. What are the things that Vancouver is doing? What are the gaps that Vancouver is dealing with? What lessons can they draw from this?

What would I say to local communities and all the levels of government? It's about really making solid commitments, putting the appropriate amount of resources that commitments can be made and that they not just be researched. They shouldn't be used as spin. You've got to walk the talk. The commitments that you are making do make sense. For example, affordable housing needs to be a priority, especially in this economic climate. Every possible effort was made for a 2 and a 1/2 week event, but the appropriate time and money that social housing would become a reality didn't happen.

One of the questions and one of the concerns is the Downtown Ambassadors (private security) and what power they have. Every single one of us have a responsibility about educating ourselves about what our rights are. What can a police force do,

what can private security do in dealing with homelessness? Citizens need to know their rights and to stand up for their fellow citizens rights. It's really important that our communities are as active as they can be. I've heard a lot of how VANOC and others are constrained. It's only from community pressure. They have to work together. It's the national government that has the primary duty. They can't pass the buck. It also means that everyone shares responsibility in terms of other levels of government - every level of government plays a role. As supporters, as participants, we need to be asking questions - it's not appropriate what is happening right now. All those other things that we should be doing, to show our support and concern needs to be louder.

In Chicago, we intend to talk to them in the early process of developing the 2016 bid. The eyes on the world are on Vancouver. It began with some good in mind, but there was little follow through. We have to take it one step further. There's a lot of lessons, both good and bad. They feel as though they are reinventing the wheel. Monitoring also needs to happen by the community.

So, what is the impact on tenancy rights and what should be done about it?

In the guidelines we presented, we looked at the ways in which commitments can be made and implemented - we outlined what the Multi-Stakeholders can do. Regulatory protection to ensure that housing is affordable. Not just from a policy perspective but from a legislative perspective. Rental protection legislation, legal security of tenure. Our research shows that there should be appropriate legislative protection for everybody and that affordable housing is protected from gentrification pressure. It can be either the carrot or stick approach provided that it is effective. It is important that people in Vancouver realize that anyone could be under threat, not just the inner-city. There is a lot of exuberance about benefits – the idea that renting out your own apartment will make you a lot of money. That just doesn't work in other cities. There could be a system of fines and other disincentives in place. Don't be fooled that you will make a lot of money.