

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Housing is a fundamental need of all members of our society. The physical and psychological protection it affords, the privacy and retreat it offers and the identity it provides make housing an essential element in our existence. It is argued in this report that women have specific housing needs such as affordability, and accessibility and proximity to social services such as transportation, shopping, schools, medical centres and employment, that are often neglected when new neighbourhoods and housing are created. Instead of identifying the needs of women, and how they differ from the largely androcentric norms used to construct housing, planners and developers have remained committed to a household model centring upon the heterosexual, male-headed, one-income family.

In the past several years women have begun to take an active role in the planning process, which involves creating, constructing and living within their own housing environments. In Autumn 1993, a group of women founded the Common Patch Cooperative in Kingston, Ontario. They came together with a common vision of creating a cooperative housing project sympathetic to the needs of women in both design and location, and operated under feminist principles. The members of this group became the participants in this study.

The idea to build such a cooperative was borne out of the displeasure felt by two women residing at a Kingston cooperative. Instead of a community atmosphere in which residents worked and lived in support of one another, it had become a site of disharmony and on-going battles among residents. After contacting several women, both friends and colleagues, a general meeting was held in October, 1993. Known as Common Patch, the group was granted funding by the Ontario Ministry of Housing in May 1994, following their successful proposal and interview. Although a site was selected in June 1995, the newly elected Progressive Conservative government placed a moratorium on all non-profit housing projects. For the time, Common Patch remains defunct.

The question answered in this report is as follows: What is the need in Kingston for a women-centred cooperative as perceived by the members of the Common Patch organization? The forces that brought these women together to undertake this project were identified and the importance of the project to Kingston discussed. By the very existence of the group, their work, and the subsequent acceptance of their proposal by the Ministry of Housing in August 1994, the assumption was made that there was indeed a need for a women-centred cooperative in Kingston. It was the task of this research to identify and discuss the nature of this expressed need.

Examining related studies, the housing needs of women were identified,

recognizing that needs vary according to particular circumstances, and are not the same for all women. The barriers women encounter in accessing housing were then presented, along with a discussion of what actions women are presently taking to overcome those barriers. Most of the sources originate from both the United States and Great Britain. Their arguments and discussions have been extrapolated here for use in the Canadian context.

For some women, finding housing that meets their needs is problematic for a variety of reasons. In addition to difficulties due to single motherhood, race or income, some women find themselves "doubly disadvantaged", that is, experiencing discrimination from a combination of those elements. Many of these problems in attaining appropriate housing relate to the housing policies instituted during the decades following the Second World War, policies which are now outdated and not in keeping with the needs of residents in the 1990's.

The participation of women in constructing and developing their own living environments appears to be the result of systemic discrimination against women, and family and household changes which leave women in need of shelter. At the same time, a shift in the women's movement has made housing a priority for action and advocacy (Wekerle 1993: 179). In recreating housing, women empower themselves with their mutual support, the sharing of ideas and learning from one another, recognizing their own skills and valuing their own experiences as women (Hood and Woods 1994:72). They are permitted to provide input into such aspects as locale, design, and the actual construction of the building, all of which reflect the diversity of women's needs.

Given that women are the focus of this research, it was decided that a feminist research method should be employed. Feminist research seeks to improve the lives of women. It asks questions about women's lives from their own perspective, and thus the realities they face, pointing to areas in need of social reform. Instead of the dichotomous 'researcher' and 'researched,' with its implicit hierarchy, research becomes an exercise in collaboration.

As Kirby and McKenna write, gaining entry and acceptance into a participant group is of great importance in conducting research as it can determine the type of information gathered (1989: 118). Involvement began with attending a Common Patch meeting in January 1994. The women present were extremely welcoming and supportive, and meetings were attended on a regular basis.

It was determined that the best way of answering the research question would be to conduct participant interviews using open-ended questions. Interviews, as a principle means of conducting feminist research allow women an opportunity to interact with their participants while constructing data about their lives (Reinhartz

1992: 18). Because the technique results in non-standardized information, researchers can then make full use of differences among people (Ibid.: 18-9). Responses can be clarified if necessary and are offered in the participants' own words, rather than in those of the researcher.

The final list of interviewees consisted of nine individuals: four of five board members, four long-time associates including the group's lawyer, and a one-time board member who in June 1995 resigned her position and was no longer meeting with the group. Despite her leaving, it was felt that her insights and experiences as a founding member of the group were of great importance to the thoroughness of the research. It was felt that the nine interviews would allow the research question to be properly answered since it included virtually all of the active members of Common Patch, and included many founding members. These women were the ones most involved in the project and aware of all aspects of the undertaking.

The first step in analysing the responses was to code the information from the interview transcripts. Coding would serve to link comments made by participants to the concepts and categories appearing in this report (Weiss 1994: 154). It is a method advocated by Kirby and McKenna (1989), when they refer to coding as "the identification of an idea, event, theme or common property that identifies the content of a [statement]" (p.139). After reviewing all the transcripts, files were made for each question and deposited all the interview answers to that question in that file. Any answers appearing to deal with more than one issue, or to answer more than one question, were copied into as many files as applied.

After reviewing each of the files several times, recurring ideas and thoughts were brought together. Although responses differed for each woman, discernable themes ran strongly through virtually every one. These were collated and discussed in Chapter Four. The first two sections of the analysis chapter provide a background of the participants, including who they are and the roles they played within Common Patch. This information was considered important as a point of reference for understanding group dynamics and histories. Likewise, the personal histories and housing experiences of the women themselves, and the influence those experiences have had over their present attitudes toward women's housing, were also considered relevant in gaining a more complete understanding of the participants themselves. As such, they form the chapter's third section. It was hoped that learning about the participants' difficulties and successes with housing would provide a snapshot of what housing needs were most important to them. Moreover, it was anticipated that their attitudes toward and opinions about housing would emerge through this discussion and lead into what they hoped to achieve through Common Patch.

Next, the participants were asked to depict an ideal living environment and

how Common Patch meets that ideal. The question was intended to permit an understanding of what these women felt were the most important features of housing as well as to acknowledge the shortcomings of traditional housing.

Their perception of the importance of this project to Kingston, coupled with their awareness of other women's housing situations, knowledge of the city's housing market and existing housing cooperatives, was important in assessing why they had committed themselves to the project. Since it was assumed from the beginning that the fact that the Common Patch group existed at all was to do with a perception of need for the type of housing it could offer to women, it was necessary to understand from where this need stemmed.

Lastly, the women were asked about the roles that the government and the planning profession should undertake in the area of housing for women. Since a partnership with those groups is inevitable, and certainly helpful in some instances, it was interesting to hear how the participants conceived of that partnership.

Despite their personal differences, the women of Common Patch shared a common devotion to the cause of creating housing geared toward the needs of women. Their diversity would suggest that the needs for affordable, appropriate housing is not an isolated phenomenon. Many spoke about the lack of economic status among women and the absence of female voices calling for change among the various levels of government.

Virtually every woman who participated in this study had lived, or knew women who lived in less-than-ideal housing circumstances. Their response was to attempt to make a change, to articulate the housing needs of women by creating housing that would meet those same needs.

The findings from the interview were remarkably similar to those of the literature examined. Financing, lack of power within male dominated hierarchies, and the need to care for children and elderly relatives, all kept women from achieving housing that met their needs. Common Patch's housing concept would have proffered a different approach, an alternative model for housing that could be adopted by other groups in other cities. For the planning profession, women's changing housing needs should be incorporated into the planning and provision of housing in urban municipalities.

The report's recommendations are as follows:

1. Because this research concentrated on the efforts of only one group of women, further research should be undertaken to test this perceived need among similar groups. In particular, women with different incomes and

education levels than the women of Common Patch should be interviewed. Such studies would lend credibility to the call for housing sympathetic to the needs of women in Kingston and elsewhere.

2. In July 1995, the Ontario government cancelled funding for non-profit housing projects. Assuming that the need for women's housing does exist, further study should be undertaken to determine alternate methods for women to construct their own housing projects.
3. Municipal and provincial governments should promote the creation of women's housing projects by offering more comprehensive training and support services in order for groups to overcome any lack of experience or ability that might threaten the project's viability.