



## News

### Social housing sell-off uprooting homes

I put down roots, but the home I planted them around is on Rob Ford's chopping block

|By Emily Weedon

At my west-end house near Dufferin Grove Park I did something I've never done before. I planted. Tulips. Hyacinths. Even potatoes.

I really put down roots. The tulips seem especially meaningful. Unlike me, they'll be here in a year's time. The market-rent home I planted them around is going on the chopping block when Rob Ford ends mixed-portfolio social housing.

No, I don't own the place. I could never afford to buy in the neighbourhood.

Should the city be in the business of being a landlord? I don't know. But it is and has been since the mid-50s, and it so happens I'm one of its tenants – one of those real live people who have to pull up roots from the place they call home.

To me it isn't an entry on some ledger. It's where I put out a bowl for hordes of trick-or-treaters at my daughter's first Halloween. It's where a big family gathered for Papa on his 70th birthday. It's where the car lights paint the dining room wall when my partner finally makes it home from work at 3 am.

I've taught piano on this street for years. One of my clients joked that her daughter is going to build a shrine on our front yard. I know my neighbours on all sides by their first names. I've knocked on doors at election time, gotten involved in park politics and traded goutweed eradication tips over the fence.

I've herded feral kittens into boxes and sent them to good homes. I've lent out garden tools. I've shovelled the walk two houses up and two houses down in big storms because I knew my neighbours would appreciate it. I'm a good neighbour, dammit.

Yes, we will land on our feet. We'll allocate a much larger portion of our income to rent, stop eating out, and scrimp.

But what about John and his housemates two doors up? John is as much a part of the neighbourhood as any tree or shrub. He's painfully shy. He's older than God. He's not able to get out there and hustle a job. He's got issues you hope you never have. Right now he gets to live on a calm street, harming no one.

I suppose Ford has a Dickensian plan for people like John; herd them into high-rises. Dead weight – put them together for convenience. Tranquil, leafy streets are for those who can afford them. It's all too clear that there's no room for

compassion on the gravy train express.

Let's talk turkey about the house itself: There's black mould in the bathroom. The faucets all leak. The cheap kitchen reno 30 years ago isn't holding up (particleboard likes to suck up water). The front steps are coming away from the building. The eaves fill up every year when the leaves come down. A crack showed up in the back bedroom not long ago, from ceiling to floor.

Our requests for repairs got routed through an email system and a nameless bureaucracy, and from what we could gather, got filed under "So what?"

Frustrated, we took on the upkeep of the house ourselves – and paid out of our pockets because the alternative was serious structural damage to the place. My partner installed a dishwasher on his dime after he got the okay from Toronto Community Housing. Their bizarre caveat was that he remove it when he vacates the premises. These homes were mismanaged, and the city was a bad landlord.

The TCHC sell-off targets homes that aren't earning enough (20 per cent less than their potential) or that will sell high on the real estate market. The rent could have been higher in our non-subsidized place. The thing is, no one bothered to ask: "Say, would you consider a one-time big spike in your rent in order to get on with your lives?" We would.

I'd rather pay rent that's a lot higher than move, because – I really want to stress this – it's my home.

While Ford is the villain turfing us out – small child and all, away from a wonderful neighbourhood with safe streets and a great local school – all the blame can't be laid at his feet. You have to wonder how TCHC went from a well-intentioned plan in the 50s to keep low-income residents out of slums to a landlord with an astonishing \$600 million backlog of necessary repairs.

Here's where the gravy math just doesn't make sense: a \$600-odd million backlog. Once the land transfers, legal and real estate fees are accounted for, the city figures the sell-off will garner some \$350 million. Great. So how do we cover the rest a few years from now when there's nothing left to sell? How can a one-time sale be equated with a revenue stream?

The numbers are tiresome, frankly. I didn't neglect my home. Our rent was paid on time, we made the place better, we saved the city money. In fact, the city will get a way better deal from our place than from some, because we've kept it up. And we've kept it up because we loved our little home.

I've got that mournful Morrissey refrain in my head: "It's only bricks and mortar." To me, those bricks and mortar have become very dear.

I'm even going to miss the spindly guy who roots through my recyclables every morning, even though for years I've been putting out the LCBO bottles separately just for him. Still, I'd appreciate it if he'd use the sidewalk for once and not walk over the bloody tulips.

I'm going to miss when one of my piano students, holding hands with her mum on the walk home from school, calls out, "Hi, Emily!"

That's not gravy. That's the flesh and lifeblood of one community that helps build a city.

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