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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

# Lessons from Russia on communal living

## Shared living spaces created during the Soviet era drew mixed reviews from their residents

My paternal grandfather was forced to flee Russia in the late 19th century following the anti-Jewish riots that swept through southwestern Imperial Russia, today part of Ukraine. It was therefore with ironic pleasure that in late 2013, I accepted an invitation to return to my grandfather's homeland as one of five international jurors for a planning competition to design Moscow's new International Financial Centre.



The invitation was extended by the Strelka Institute on behalf of Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, and owner of a 400-hectare site 18 kilometres from the Kremlin, where the new financial centre is to be built.

While Russian architects, planners and developers are seeking international input for their new projects, I concluded after three trips to Moscow that Vancouver and other Canadian cities could benefit from Russia's experience when it comes to government involvement in housing, and especially communal living.

Communal apartments were first built in the Soviet Union to address the urban housing crisis following the Russian Revolution. These were typically shared by two to seven households, each having one or two rooms serving as the living, dining and sleeping space. The hallways, kitchen, bathroom and telephone were shared by all residents.

The communal apartment was considered revolutionary in that it mixed different social and economic groups in one building. However, the families in these buildings were placed together by the government with little commitment to communal life or one another. While some managed to get along in a communal way, others did not.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the housing sector was essentially privatized and government withdrew from much of the housing development. Many renters were offered title to their units at no cost, although somewhat surprisingly, many older Russians decided to forego the necessary paperwork to acquire their units and continued to rent.

By the mid-1990s, more than half of Russia's housing was privately owned, with the remainder administered by municipal authorities. Conditions improved considerably in owner-occupied housing, since the owners ensured a higher standard of maintenance. However, due to a lack of funds from local authorities, most of the public housing deteriorated.

It is interesting to compare the Russian and Canadian experiences with communal or co-operative housing.

There are essentially two kinds of housing co-operatives in Canada: market or equity co-ops and government-subsidized non-profit or continuing co-ops.

The co- operative housing movement in Canada first gained momentum in the Maritimes in the 1930s, inspired in part by developments in New York.

Until the introduction of condominium legislation in the late 1960s, co-operatives were the only way to own a suite in an apartment building. In fact, co-op members did not own their suite as they would in a condominium. Rather, they owned a share in the company that owns the entire building.

While most of us tend to think of co-operatives as providing affordable housing, this is not always the case. John Lennon lived in The Dakota, an expensive New York co-op, and today most of the exclusive apartments in New York are co-ops, not condominiums. One of the perceived advantages of a co-op is the owners can restrict who can buy into the building. This, of course, is not possible in a condominium.

A number of equity co-ops were built in Vancouver including Ocean Towers, the 20-storey apartment building on Morton Avenue overlooking English Bay, and McRae Mews, a small townhouse development adjacent to Shaughnessy's Hycroft Mansion. Recently, the owners of some Kerrisdale and West Vancouver co-ops have sold their buildings as future condominium sites.

Canada's first governmentassisted co-operatives were built in the 1960s and in 1973, CMHC created a program to make it easier to finance new projects. One of the key features of the program was that 15 to 20 per cent of the units had to be occupied by lowerincome households, which paid monthly charges based on their income. CMHC provided 100-per-cent financing at a fixed, preferential interest rate, along with ongoing subsidies.

Today, there are more than 14,500 units in 260 government-assisted projects in British Columbia.

In the mid-1990s, CMHC stopped funding co-operative housing. While the federal government continues to honour its mortgage agreements with co- ops across the country, many are set to expire in the next few years as the mortgages are paid in full.

Co-op members have security of tenure in that they can live in their units for as long as they wish, provided they follow the rules of the co-op and pay monthly housing charges.



In the absence of government funding for co-ops, some communally-minded people are now seeking to develop co-housing projects, a hybrid form of condominium living offering a greater amount of shared communal space. This attractive form of housing, popular in Scandinavia and other countries, will be the subject of a future Homes Away from Home column.

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