

# Trapped in Hostel Hell

by Ryan Scott

*"We're people too, just like those rich people. We shouldn't have to live on the streets like stray dogs."*

Homeless men and women have been shamelessly flaunting their poverty in Nathan Phillips Square, the public area in front of Toronto's City Hall. At night, they sleep on the concrete benches surrounding the square, in full view of the respectable citizens of Toronto the Tidy. They have even been seen huddled around the Peace Flame. When a few of the bolder vagrants used the flame to cook their dinner, local politicians were enraged.

Most of our elected officials were content to complain about the eyesore and nuisance created by the homeless — the square is a showpiece for visiting American tourists, and one must consider what is on display. Alderman Tony O'Donohue felt he had to do something. Told that the people in the square had no place to live, O'Donohue said that was nonsense; on any given night, a few hostel beds would be empty. He added that, if the vagrants lacked cab-fare to get to the empty beds, he would provide a van and driver to transport them to the hostel of their choice. Anyone refusing to go would be at the mercy of the police.

## Assistance causes the problem

Having no home should not mean being forced to accept the kinds of accommodation and services that are presently being offered. Often it's the kind of "assistance" that is available that causes the problem in the first place, especially if you are an ex-inmate. An institution incapacitates you physically and emotionally, and then discharges you, with no resources, into a hostile world. You may well have lost your job (or welfare or family benefits), your friends, and your home in the process of being hospitalized.

You could end up sleeping on a construction site, or in a doorway, alley,

park, abandoned car or building, the stairwell of a government building, a bus shelter — anywhere that people will leave you alone. Or you could sleep in a hostel.

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Hostels are not homes. They are intended to provide short-term emergency accommodation. Hostels for single men evolved in the early 1900s in response to the need to house a growing migratory workforce. Most have a maximum stay of one or two weeks. That used to be long enough to find work and a room to rent. Unskilled jobs are now harder to find. Most pay minimum wage, which is not enough to rent a room. Affordable rental accommodation has practically vanished from large North American cities over the past ten years.

Toronto, either directly or through purchase-of-service agreements, operates about 25 hostels, with a total of 2,500 beds. In 1987, 15,000 people will use those beds. It used to be that most hostel residents were older, single men. Now 50 percent of people using hostels are under 25. Single men, single women, families (including but not limited to single parents with children), disabled people, elderly people and the psychiatrized all use hostels. More people need the services of the hostel system than ever before, and need them for longer periods of time. So the hostels are forced, by default, to take on the role of subsidized housing.

## No fixed address

As a homeless person obliged to leave one hostel, often all you can do is move on to the next. This forced transience is exhausting, and wears down your confidence. According to Jim Hart of Evangel Hall, a mission of the Presbyterian Church, "homelessness affects more than just your living situation — by lowering your horizons, it attacks who you are and who you can become." You begin to

feel that you have no hope for a place of your own, no opportunities. Hart also points out that you usually can't vote without an address. "You lose the feeling that you belong in the community." With no place to invite friends to, your chances for socializing or having a lover are severely limited.

Hostels operate on a first-come-first-served basis — there is competition for beds in the better hostels. You must check in by a certain time and observe numerous regulations during your stay. You must leave early in the morning. Your quarters are often cramped, with as many as 50 beds to a room. You have no privacy.

Hostels are noisy, intimidating, and sometimes violent. With no place to keep your personal possessions, you may well have them stolen. Some hostels require that you hand over your money for safekeeping during your stay. Sometimes they don't return it all. Many beds are infested with lice, fleas, or crabs. Overcrowding and lack of ventilation promote the spread of disease. The stress of hostel living, and the lack of control over your life, are made worse by health problems. With no fixed address and no telephone, you're not likely to get a job. You can't get money from welfare without an address, and you can't get an address without money. So you're trapped in the hostel circuit.

## Maliciously wasted space

Many who are trapped condemn hostel living as unfit for human beings, an indignity they are forced to accept if they don't want to live on the street. In December 1986, a man who had been sleeping in the doorway of an empty, boarded-up apartment building died. The building, Walnut Hall Apartments, is government-owned — only one of many examples of (maliciously) wasted space in Toronto.

The government has all the resources it needs to alleviate the homelessness crisis, now. What it doesn't have is the political will. Politicians pay lip-service to the rights of the homeless, but in practice easily dismiss the lives of people who, more often than not, can't vote. People who take for granted not only food and shelter, but



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privilege and power, are not bothered by the fact that their comfort depends on the desperate poverty of other people.

Poor people have a right to be angry. Real-estate speculators depend on part of the population doing without housing. What we are taught to accept as inevitable tragedy is really just sound business practice.

What if poor people started claiming what is theirs by right? What if they organized to occupy those boarded-up, government-owned buildings? How would the government react?



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