

## INTRODUCTION

It's not even a starter home; it's just a start.

—JASON LASERRE, VANCOUVERITE

Jason Laserre grew up in a large, single-family house. Moving from the suburban outskirts of metropolitan Vancouver in toward the core, the newlywed spoke somewhat disparagingly of the modest rental apartment he shared with his wife. It offered not a home, but “just a start.” Where would this start take him? Jason drew on a widespread cultural script as well as his parents’ experiences in describing the most obvious destination: “[You] get married, then you move out to the suburbs, and you get a two-layer house, and it’s like, however many bedrooms and a backyard and a dog.” For Jason, as for many others, a house was expected as part of the package deal of adulthood. Houses have become the standard habitat for North American humanity.<sup>1</sup>

But Vancouver does not work that way anymore. As a local headline would have it, “In the city, single-family homes are a dying breed.”<sup>2</sup> Houses, it seems, are not simply habitats for people. Houses have habitats of their own. Across most of North America, these habitats remain protected by law. But Vancouver is tinkering with the legal protections afforded its houses and has largely prevented the expansion of suburban sprawl into its remaining agricultural hinterland. Scarcity amid growth has produced speculation. The

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<sup>1</sup> See Townsend 2002 for more on cultural scripts and package deals. Here and throughout the book, I use “North America” as shorthand for the United States and Canada, following Population Reference Bureau convention ([www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org)), with no slight intended toward Mexico or any of the countries of Central America and the Caribbean. Quotes from Jason come from interview data, as discussed below and in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Bellett 2013.

benchmark price of a detached house across Metro Vancouver now tops a million dollars, and few can afford even the worn-looking bungalows that remain.<sup>3</sup> Instead, most people now live in the various urban alternatives, low-rise and high-rise, increasingly springing up across the metropolitan area.

These transformations would seem to directly challenge cultural expectations about the good life. What a surprise, then, that Vancouver is frequently touted as the “most livable” city in North America.<sup>4</sup> How should we make sense of this remarkable discrepancy? How do people like Jason Laserre cope with the steadily increasing likelihood they will never acquire a house of their own?

As it turns out, Jason seems to be coping fairly well. A house, he noted mildly, is “just not feasible for some people.” Along with the exorbitant cost of reproducing his parents’ lifestyle, Jason considered the hardship of his father’s daily commute: “Watching him come home tired every day, and having to sit through all those extra hours—wasted hours—in the car. . . . I mean, it just doesn’t seem very enjoyable.” Living in his apartment near downtown, it took Jason ten minutes to walk to work: “And when I finish working, I’m tired, and I can be home ten minutes later—it’s . . . it’s great!” Though he initially seemed to reject the notion that the little apartment he shared with his wife constituted anything but a “start,” he later contradicted himself, noting that he is making no plans to move. Even imagining raising a baby there, Jason suggested, “We would make do.” As he put it, “This is our first home together, you know, it feels great!”

In this book, I describe the dramatic transformation in Vancouver’s built environment and provide tools for analyzing how it came about. I also explore how most residents of Vancouver attempt to make themselves at home without a house. Sometimes they fail. Single-family detached houses do things for their inhabitants that are hard to replace, providing meaning and structure to everyday life. Nevertheless, most Vancouverites succeed in assembling a home, both for themselves and their families, and many even find that local lifestyles improve on what a house might have to offer. There are lessons here for the rest of North America. We can start building our cities differently without sacrificing their livability. We can rethink the extraordinary legal protections that support the single-family detached house. Maybe they are no longer necessary. Maybe we can let them die away. This raises an important question: how did they come alive in the first place?

As I argue, the death and life of the single-family house cannot be disentangled from the notion of habitat. In this book, I move back and forth

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<sup>3</sup> See the popular Internet game *Crack Shack or Mansion*, available at <http://www.crackshackormansion.com/>. Dollar figures here in Canadian currency.

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Press 2011; *The Economist* Intelligence Unit 2015.

between two conceptions of what I call “house habitat”: the first is concerned with the habitat houses create for people, and the second with the habitat people create for houses.<sup>5</sup> Investigating the former sort of house habitat requires detailing the experiences of urban residents. Looking into the latter—the habitat people create for houses—means taking history seriously. The past informs the future of the “Great American Cities” that U.S.-Canadian urbanist Jane Jacobs wrote about so passionately a half-century ago.<sup>6</sup> During the early decades of the twentieth century, houses were molded into important social positions and turned into regulations to be set loose within the expansive and interconnected urban ecologies of North America. From there, newly defined “single-family detached” houses took on a life of their own, grew wild, and overran the landscape. What do we get by taking houses seriously as creatures built, defined, and protected by our regulations? For one thing, we can better figure out how to get them under control. But why would we want to?

The metaphor of the invasive species may be useful here. Consider, for a moment, the mountain pine beetle. The pine beetle is a small insect, less than five millimeters in length. Nevertheless, it has been blamed for enormous losses within the coniferous forests of western North America. The sticky sap in pine trees usually works to repel insects and larvae looking for a meal. But the mountain pine beetle has developed a symbiotic relationship with a sort of fungus, commonly known as blue stain fungus, that stops pine trees from producing resin. The mountain pine beetle carries spores of the fungus from tree to tree on a special structure in its head.<sup>7</sup> In exchange, fungal infection stops the pine tree from being able to kill or expel pine beetle larvae with sap. Together, feeding larvae and fungal infection tend to kill off trees within a few weeks of an attack. Pine beetle infections occur most readily among older or weakened trees. Healthy trees are more resistant. But something, possibly linked to climate change (pine beetles do not weather very cold winters well), has allowed the pine beetle to devastate vast swaths of western forests in recent years, killing weakened and otherwise healthy trees alike. As the pine forests die off, many scientists worry about their loss as a carbon sink leading in turn to further global warming.

There is a direct relationship between the spread of the beetle and the supply of housing, insofar as much of the lumber used to build houses

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<sup>5</sup> As noted in the Acknowledgments, my son coined this term. See Gieryn 2002 on the structured and structuring roles of buildings.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobs 1961.

<sup>7</sup> Fungi are actually carried as spores in mycangia, structures located near the mouth parts of the beetle that are specialized for the purpose. Six and Bentz (2007) and Rice and Langor (2009) provide fascinating insights into the complexity of the various species of blue stain fungi often simultaneously carried around by pine beetles, furthering its ability to sustain a destructive march across northwestern forests.

around the world is harvested from the mountainous forests of western North America. But more intriguingly, there is the unsettling relationship between the pine beetle and blue stain fungus to consider. While the pine beetle most often takes the blame for the destruction of these forests, we could just as easily imagine the blue stain fungus as the primary villain. Or, even more accurately, we could think of the symbiotic relationship between pine beetle and blue stain fungus as the true culprit. Break the relationship and we could save the forest. This is a thought worth holding on to.

As people spread outward from North American cities, so too do detached houses. The house makes all sorts of environments inhabitable for people, and is especially linked to family formation and reproduction. People seem to carry around favorable ideas about houses, regularly identifying them in surveys as the places they want to live. This is especially the case for parents with children. The sprawl associated with the outward progress of the house displaces existing ecosystems, one habitat for another. The use of carbon-intensive energy to heat and cool houses, as well as to get from the house to other places in the city, further contributes to climate change, disrupting ever more habitats. Arguably, the relationship between houses and people is to the world as the relationship between fungi and pine beetles is to the forest: trouble. Maybe we should break the relationship.

## Transforming a Troublesome Habitat

Habitat and invasion: these ecological concepts are worth taking back to the city. They were first brought there with the founding of urban sociology. Once upon a time, the industrial and commercial Urban Core of the city, rather than the single-family house, was viewed as invasive. Urban Cores were problematically understood as sprawling outward, deluging nearby neighborhoods with wave after wave of ethnic minorities and members of the lower classes along the way. Neighborhood succession from one habitat to the next was viewed as “naturally” accompanying urban growth.<sup>8</sup>

A central argument of this book is that the regulations defining the single-family house were hammered into the shape of a white picket fence capable of halting this process. Our forebears set in place a Great House Reserve around the Urban Cores of North America, and to this day not much else can get in there. Even in the City of Vancouver, where this reserve is arguably under the most sustained attack, it still covers some 80 percent of

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<sup>8</sup> The Chicago School founding the field of urban sociology within North America relied heavily on ecological metaphors (Abbott 1997; Wachsmuth 2012). See Burgess 1928 for a few lasting examples.

the residential land base, while accommodating substantially less than 40 percent of the population.<sup>9</sup>

The Great House Reserve was built as a wall to contain the market-governed city, taming it for human inhabitation. Once built, the regulatory framework mostly faded into the background, so that most of us do not see the lines drawn between Urban Core and house reserve unless we happen to peruse the technical maps appended to local zoning bylaws.<sup>10</sup> Only then do the stark limitations placed on urban development across most of North America become clear. Only then does the house take shape as a creature of land-use standards: the single-family detached dwelling. Though this regulatory form of the house is a relatively recent invention—just about a century old—the house written down on paper has been quite successful at defending and expanding the domain of the house in concrete.

Highlighting the regulatory construction of the house offers a different story from those more commonly told about the shape of North American cities. Both detractors and apologists of sprawl tend to treat the house as little more than an extension of human nature or North American culture, enacting a morality play across the metropolitan landscape. For apologists, house life epitomizes that which is best in humanity: market freedom coupled with family values. This is a position championed, for instance, by works like Robert Bruegmann's *Sprawl: A Compact History*, which points, quite correctly, to the many problems houses seem to solve for us.<sup>11</sup> Read this way, the suburban spread of houses represents not an invasive and destructive plague on the land but a monument to continental contentment. For detractors, the vision turns darker, focusing—also quite correctly—on the many problems associated with house living, but ultimately attributing these problems to the rapaciousness of our culture or lifestyles: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”<sup>12</sup> This is the theme of a long line of books, most recently *The Housing Bomb*, whose central metaphor concerns North America's “house addiction.”<sup>13</sup> The case for change seems either depraved or futile. By contrast,

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<sup>9</sup> Rough figures are drawn from Metro Vancouver Policy and Planning Department (2008) land-use estimates for 2006 for the City of Vancouver, combined with 2006 census figures for households by structure. Importantly, houses here include semidetached and duplex structures to match land-use categories, making these numbers more inclusive than census categories alone—see Chapter 1 for further detail.

<sup>10</sup> Or, in other cases, the deed restrictions systematically imposed on lots.

<sup>11</sup> Bruegmann 2005; see also less scholarly illustrations by Kotkin (2012).

<sup>12</sup> The quote is from various iterations of Walt Kelly's environmentalism message in his comic strip *Pogo*.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, Peterson, and Liu 2013. See also Beauregard 2006, 6, for a more Freudian interpretation of futility: “Life in the suburbs was a mark of American exceptionalism. . . . [N]eglect of the cities has deep roots in the American consciousness.” Despite their dark outlooks, both books still have much to offer analysts.

if we start from a position where we can clearly separate ourselves from our houses—we are not our houses; they offer just one of many possible habitats—then the case for change does not look quite so scary or grim.

The metaphor of pine beetle and blue stain fails us here. If we have become symbiotically related to our houses, then any attack on the house—our coevolved partner in crime—remains an attack on humanity. But what if our relationship to the house is not symbiotic after all? What if it is more parasitic? Let's set aside all the farms, fields, and forests displaced by houses. Let's set aside even the associated warming of the planet: devastation of habitat on a massive scale. Putting things in a more human perspective, are houses even good for people?

Conversations with a diverse collection of Vancouverites provide insights into how houses mold our thinking and shape our routines. Houses definitely seem like solutions to many problems of everyday urban living, maximizing control over space, but ultimately they cause more trouble than they are worth. In terms of everyday life, they take a great deal of work to maintain, they can be boring and isolating, and they tend to reduce our adaptability. More broadly, houses fail to support our health, our families, our communities, and our systems of democratic governance. This book offers a close study of the “life” of the house, spanning its historical evolution and present inhabitance. Through this research, I suggest that we could do better for ourselves, our cities, and our world by letting the house as a regulatory creature die away.

## Situating the Study

Vancouver, the third largest metropolitan area in Canada and twenty-fifth largest in North America, provides a useful illustration of an urban habitat in transition. As demonstrated by archival research, Vancouver was an early adopter of house-oriented zoning bylaws in North America, producing by the middle of the twentieth century one of the most house-dominated metropolises on the continent. But since the 1960s, Vancouver has rapidly broken with the single-family detached house, in a fashion more complete than any other urban area on the continent. In a challenge to the idea that consumers demand houses, Vancouver's dramatic transformation has left it recognized as one of the most livable cities in the world as well as an international model for sustainability and urbanism. Indeed, Vancouver has rebranded itself as the world's “Greenest City,” and its downtown planning principles have been spread around the globe as Vancouverism. But Vancouver's story as planning icon remains incomplete without investigating its turn away from the single-family detached house.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Boddy 2003, 2005; Peck 2010; and Punter 2003 on the rise of Vancouverism.

By virtue of its startling trajectory, Vancouver offers an ideal case study. In its early similarity to cities across the United States, Vancouver's history challenges strong arguments about American exceptionalism in urban form.<sup>15</sup> Sprawl readily crossed the U.S. border, and explanations for the rise of the house need to do the same. Shared history provides fertile ground for drawing lessons from Vancouver's subsequent transformation. What changed? As I argue, Vancouver's transformation, though unique, was never predestined by geography or demography. Instead, regulatory transformations enabled Vancouver to renovate, build over, and build around the house. Could this process work elsewhere? How are Vancouver's residents coping with their new environs? Could others cope as well?

I am one of Vancouver's residents. As a local, I have tracked media stories about housing as they develop. Donning the cap of the historian, I have similarly explored the archival records and policy documents defining housing types and promoting their spread. As a housing researcher and demographer, I have worked extensively with census and survey data concerning people's relationships with their dwellings. I return to these data sources in the pages ahead, paying special attention to how they might be used to document Vancouver's history with the house and, through this history, speak to North American patterns as a whole.

Through the years from 2008 to 2010, I also worked with my talented research assistant, Mia Chung, to gather in-depth interview data from over fifty residents of the Vancouver metropolitan area. At first we sought to gather information on the moral connections people made between their housing and family situations. But increasingly it became clear that the practical elements of everyday life occupied at least as central a role in residents' narratives of how they "fit" with their housing. Most members of our sample did not live in houses, but a few did, especially as we ventured out into surrounding suburban municipalities. We asked residents probing questions about their experiences with housing, their problems, their desires, and their plans. We followed up by interviewing realtors and other professionals about their experiences working with clients. In order to both encourage openness and honor the privacy of those who spoke with us, interviewees were granted confidentiality and are identified here only pseudonymously. But many of our recorded discussions are recounted in this book, often circling back to how and why people feel connected to houses, and what might prompt them to accept dwelling in a different fashion.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Hirt's (2014) *Zoned in the USA* and Beauregard's (2006) *When America Became Suburban*.

<sup>16</sup> More details on the method of recruitment, sample characteristics, and procedures followed are provided in the Appendix.

Since so many people generously volunteered their stories to help me understand the relationship between people and houses, it seems only fitting that I should share a little of my own. During most of the writing of this book, I lived with my common-law spouse, Amy, in the two-bedroom apartment she owned on the eastern border of the Kitsilano neighborhood in Vancouver. We shared her 734-square-foot apartment, on the top floor of a low-rise building, with two cats and our young son. He took over one of the bedrooms (our former office) when he was born. The cats took over the rest. As I began to revise this manuscript for publication, we had a second child and moved to a townhouse that more than doubled the size of our former space. We now border Vancouver's Great House Reserve. We are surrounded by the green of trees here, and the townhouse is nice, but the green of "real house" envy starts just across the street.

As children, Amy and I both grew up mostly in the suburbs of the United States. We got used to living in houses. To be sure, we both experienced alternative housing situations as we moved out, including dormitories in college and apartments in our graduate school and early working days. Now we are both relatively well-paid employees of the University of British Columbia.<sup>17</sup> It seems natural that we should be living in a house at least as magnificent as those of our parents. Our employer even offers a generous program to help out with down payments on mortgages. Nevertheless, we consider buying a decent house to be well out of our financial reach. On our side of Vancouver, houses tend to start at around two million dollars.<sup>18</sup>

Our inability to afford the exorbitant cost of a detached house in and around Vancouver clashes with the expectations we held in our younger days. The role a house played in our youthful imaginings of the future, even if often implicitly, intrigues me now that I seem unlikely to own one. What I find even more interesting, as a sociologist, is that so many other people have or had similar expectations. Indeed, many of us seem to carry houses around with us, even if we do not live in them. This is the personal history of expectation and dismay, redirected toward curiosity, that I bring to the present research project. Am I okay with never owning a house? All things considered, I think I am, and I would like to encourage other people to think they would be, too.

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<sup>17</sup> Our earnings are estimated to be in the top 5 percent of Vancouver households, though it is likely that many households underreport income.

<sup>18</sup> The May 2014 Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver (2016) benchmark price (i.e., what you could expect to pay) for a detached house in Vancouver's West Side was C\$2,229,800. As seen from BC Assessments data from the City of Vancouver's "VanMap" application, available at <http://vancouver.ca/your-government/vanmap.aspx>, the modest ranch house across the street from us was assessed around C\$2.5 million in 2014, while its newer and larger neighbor was assessed at C\$3 million.



In the work ahead, I draw on a set of ideological lenses that offer keen insight into housing, especially those derived from pragmatist and actor-network theoretical traditions, as well as feminism and political economy. These lenses inform both my empirical view of what cities *are* doing and my normative vision of what cities *should be* doing. I circle back to this normative vision, concerned with the promotion of justice and diversity within a democratic tradition, toward the end of the book. As I suggest there, habitat thinking and social justice thinking go hand in hand in offering ways to better understand our history, our housing, and what our cities should be doing for us.

## Chapters Ahead

The text that follows is divided into eight chapters, with the first half focused on the history of how cities created so much habitat for houses, and the second on the sort of habitat that houses create for people. Chapter 1 defines what a house is and why it might matter. I argue that the house was unfolded into multiple forms—a concrete thing, a fuzzy cultural idea, a market commodity, and a regulatory creature. I focus on laying out this last and generally least familiar form of the house, providing a brief and sociologically informed history of how the house was written into local bylaws all across the continent. From there I argue that once the regulatory creature went to work, it structured much that followed. Culturally, people generally came to understand the house as a flexible sort of package deal associated with family, a concept pulling together plentiful space, ownership, and a yard.

In Chapter 2, I lay out the case for labeling the house an urban parasite. I draw on a variety of data as well as diverse literatures bridging the fields of anthropology, ecology, economics, engineering, geography, planning, political science, public health, sociology, and urban studies. Ecological ramifications, including habitat loss and climate change, take center stage, but I also note the trouble created by houses for urban vitality, the poor, democracy, family, and human health.

The next two chapters chart the rise and fall of the house within the history of Vancouver. Together they describe how the house as a regulatory creature was brought to life, put into service, and ultimately put in its place. Chapter 3 reveals Vancouver's early story, as a young metropolis rapidly sprawling out from its center and leaving ordered rows of houses in its wake. In the first part of the chapter, I examine Vancouver's frontier past, exploring the problems associated with its settlement and dramatic market-led growth. In the second part, I detail how the City of Vancouver took up the international fad of town planning as a solution to its diverse problems, initiating the formation of its Great House Reserve. The detached house became just

about the only thing people could build outside Vancouver's older urbanized core. The metropolis seemed destined for house domination, just like most of the rest of the continent.

In Chapter 4, I describe how, during the 1960s, the character of the region began to change in dramatic ways. First the modernization of planning drew Vancouver into the same trajectory as other North American metropolises. Then it rather spectacularly unraveled. Both what was built and what went unbuilt matter for the recent history of Vancouver. Ultimately Vancouver built around the house, built over the house, and renovated its very nature as a regulatory creature. Its rapidly developing regulatory ecology made the denser city a more desirable place to live. The chapter charts the amazingly precipitous decline of the house as the dominant technology for dwelling in Vancouver, and provides a sense of the contingency involved.

In the remaining chapters of the book, I populate Vancouver's urban landscape by interviewing its contemporary residents. What do they think of the death of the single-family house as an accessible way of life? In Chapter 5, I draw out the implications of this question by considering whether Vancouver has become uninhabitable for everyone save the ridiculously wealthy. One question leads to others concerning the relationship between habits and habitats. How hard is it for people to change the lifestyles to which they have grown accustomed? What distinguishes a lifestyle from a living standard? Ultimately, it seems, Vancouver provides the cultural scaffolding for many people to reinterpret their lives as success stories even when they do not own houses.

In Chapter 6, I take seriously the notion that on an everyday basis, the house still provides the most inhabitable of living environments. What gets in the way of establishing decent working routines for all of those Vancouverites who cannot afford houses? I investigate the difficulties associated with lacking control over enough space. The problems apartment dwellers and their like encounter with their living spaces are embedded in their relationships with one another, as well as in their attempts to fully inhabit the world around them. The house, as a package, often seems a ready solution to the problems associated with making city life livable.

In Chapter 7, I chart alternative visions of the good life, derived from urban inhabitants who reject the single-family house. Urban residents describe how apartments, townhouses, and the like both remain more accessible than detached homes and require far less maintenance work. Moreover, they remain surprisingly good places to raise children. A different version of home and inhabitability ultimately emerges from conversations with Vancouverites. Urban living provides excitement and promotes adaptability. It permits access to more communal space, and encourages people to

more fully share and engage with others as they occupy the diverse landscapes around them.

In Chapter 8, I build on earlier chapters in describing how habitat thinking and social justice thinking complement one another. I also suggest directions for better city building. Vancouver provides valuable lessons about how to diversify cities. At the same time, it has many lessons to learn in order to better promote social justice. I argue for tearing down the walls separating the Great House Reserve from the rest of the city. But mostly that is because these barriers are getting in the way of what we should be doing: building more and building better.