RESEARCH-SUPPORTED TENANT ORGANIZING IN VANCOUVER’S single room occupancy HOTELS

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Project Overview
This project addresses the privately owned and run-down Single Room Occupancy (SRO) habitability and long-term security in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Tenants in these buildings, number about 4500 in the city, use this sort of housing as a last resort before homelessness (Figure A). The Right to Remain project examines the actions tenant organizations can take when their human rights are infringed by planning and property regulations which hinders their ability to stay in place. By advocating and using legal mechanisms, the project uses the SRO history to highlight existing human rights health and housing struggles in these buildings and prioritizing their right to safe and adequate housing, right to basic necessities and the their right to form and sustain communities.

Peer Interviews
Tenant co-researchers conduct peer-based interviews in 14 SRO buildings and discuss about their living conditions, relationships between landlords and tenants and a sense of community in the building. As part of a collaborative participatory research, my role was to transcribe these interviews and dig into tenant struggles that provide raw information about tangible tenant experiences that reveal health hazards like rats, cockroaches and bedbug infestations. I had the opportunity to examine the differences peer-based interviews make in the tenants’ ability to identify common struggles like landlord actions that force them to live under harsh conditions (Figure B), demanding sex for rent. These interviews initiated the capacity to organize tenant organizations in the buildings that are essential for tenants to take a step to collectively protect their rights.

Participatory Archival Research
The archival research gathered by the team (Figure C) is used to shift the narrative of the SRO’s. Health and Standards of Maintenance by-laws protect tenants’ health and housing rights, but their implementation is questioned. A medical officer and/or a city inspector is responsible for the building inspection to make sure that the housing is habitable, safe, structurally sound, equipped and any health hazards are controlled and destroyed. My role was putting together the history of the SRO housing and health by-laws. Through the compilation, I learnt that the change in oversight from the city’s Public Health Department to its Permits and Licensing Department may have resulted in a withdrawal of housing as a health priority (Figure D).

Next Steps: Supporting Tenant Organizing
By implementing tenant peer-based interviews, tenants learn about their rights, SRO history and discuss the steps they could take to protect their rights. We’ve had Haiku workshops to relay the sentiments and messages the SRO tenants want to advocate to the city leaders and the general public. Tenant co-researchers have started tenant organizations in their buildings to foster a sense of community between the tenants and use that support to challenge any unlawful actions.

Acknowledgements
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