Community Housing Canada

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Home-Making and Tenancy Sustainability

From the Community Housing Canada Inquiry:
Conceptualizing Community Housing Within a Human-Rights Framework

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COMMUNITY HOUSING CANADA

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on rental tenants' ability to perform home-making practices and the subsequent effects on tenancy sustainability. It includes an original analysis of landlords' and tenants' rights vis-a-vis home-making practices in two Canadian provinces: Alberta and British Columbia.

Key Findings

- Home-making practices help people obtain and stabilize their housing

- Cleanliness constitutes a major home-making practice

- There is a broad, informal understanding of the importance of home-making, but little by way of official regulation to allow, promote, or support it

- Academic literature on home-making tends to focus on home-owners because it is assumed that they have more control over their space

- Rental tenants' agency is limited because rental-housing is assumed to be short-term and regulations support landlords

- Examples of case law concerning landlord-tenant disputes are difficult to find, probably because most disputes are dealt with informally or not reported

- Photo-elicitation is a common methodology to examine the interior of people's homes, but it is deployed with the understanding that photographs are truthful, as opposed to the art historical understanding that they are manipulated

- The primary difference between rental tenants' in B.C. and Alberta is that tenants in B.C. have more access to well-designed financial programs and advocacy groups

- While many housing providers are willing to support tenants to maintain their home, tenants can be rendered homeless due to compulsions primarily outside of their control, such as hoarding

- The New Zealand Parliament's amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1986, No. 120* could serve as guide to other jurisdictions that wish to make rental tenancy more tenable

- Despite restrictions, rental tenants find ways to home-make so that their houses can be homes, as seen on Reddit decor threads

1. Introduction

Rental tenants inherently have limitations on their ability to home-make because they do not own their home. Home-making refers to the modifications that tenants' make to their home to become attached to it. These modifications include decorative changes (painting, hanging art, wallpapering), rearranging furniture, cleaning, and major structural changes (drilling holes, changing flooring, knocking down walls). This report explores home-making practices, how they are influenced and limited by rental tenure, and how they affect tenancy sustainability. Tenancy sustainability in this context means both a tenant knowing where they will be living and how long they will be living there, along with them having agency and feeling safe and comfortable in their home. Of course, the ability to pay rent is the most major threat to tenancy sustainability because not paying rent leads to eviction, but there are many other ways of being evicted, such as not complying to cleanliness standards and doing undue damage to a unit. If the ability to modify, decorate, and clean a living space is what allows residents to become comfortable and create an attachment to their space, then home-making is crucial to tenancy sustainability.

This report begins with an overview of previous research on the subject, from both housing and art history perspectives. An art historical analysis of home-making

helps to explain the importance of objects and the visual codes they create. It also helps to detail and critique the common data collection methodology of photo-elicitation, which involves researchers asking participants to photograph their homes and then conducting follow-up interviews to discuss the photographs and their implications. This report also outlines the rights and responsibilities of tenants in two Canadian jurisdictions, with insight from community housing providers on their policies around home-making. A case study from New Zealand about modifications to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1986, No. 120* serves as an example of how non-Canadian jurisdictions deal with home-making policies and laws. Finally, this report investigates how home-making ideas and skills are shared online and how these sources confirm that rental tenants are limited in their ability to home-make, but that tenants find ways to home-make anyway. As this report discovers, rental tenancies are not inherently precarious, but are made so through policy and social understandings of what it means to be a renter.

2. Home-Making and Housing

Home-making is defined by Barratt and Green (2017) as "the ability of tenants to make changes and effectively maintain the property in which they lived" (p. 4). Overall, the body of literature on home-making focused primarily on home-owners, as opposed to those in the rental sector, and their ability to engage with home-making practices (Steele & Keys 2015; Jørgensen 2016; Madsen 2018; Mackay & Perkins 2019; Gillon 2018; Cheshire et al 2019). The reasoning behind this was that many authors assumed owning a home not only grants occupants freedom from landlords, but that buying a house is an investment of both money and feeling. Renovations and decorating -- both of which constitute home-making practices -- are therefore linked to home-owners' financial ability but also to their hopes of what home could be like. Essentially, home-owners are assumed to be more attached to their homes than tenants, although little primary evidence was presented to support this position.

A shared thread across the articles, regardless of geographical location, seemed to be that the more precarious or unsuitable housing is, the less agency tenants have to rearrange furniture or make decorative changes. Considering that most articles relate rental housing with lack of economic agency to begin with, the lack of agency within the home further undermines tenants' well-being and housing sustainability.

Easthope et al. (2015) use the concept of ontological security to describe this phenomenon. Ontological security is confidence in the continuity of the self and of things. Housing agency -- in terms of where to live, structuring the home in terms of routine, and being able to make structural and decorative changes without the discretion of a landlord -- develops and maintains ontological security. As suggested by various authors (Barratt & Green 2017, Eashope 2014, Nasreen & Ruming 2020, and Soaita & Mckee 2020), being able to make even minor changes in decoration drastically increases the happiness of tenants and their sense of home because they have control and agency.

Articles that focused specifically on the private rental sector (PRS) discussed the political and social mechanisms that lead or compel individuals to live in particular forms of housing. For example, Crawford & McKee (2018) discuss the mechanisms that enable British people at large to have economic agency. Interviewees are divided into four "generations": Generation Social Tenant, Generation Lucky Owner, Generation Housing Bubble, and Generation Private Rent. The most interesting category for my research purposes is Generation Private Rent, because they are generally under the age of 35 and report being unhappy in their situation because of issues with "repairs, deposits, and unlawful premiums and charges" (106). They are 'forced' to be renters because they have been priced out of housing ownership, shaping and limiting their

aspirations. However, beyond this, the authors do not explicitly examine the renters' relationship with the materiality of their homes, or objects within them.

Both Soaita & McKee (2020) and Barratt & Green (2017) discuss the merits of photo-elicitation as a method in housing research and consider the materiality of renters' homes. Soaita & McKee find that photo-elicitation encourages reflection, as all interviewees described their homes in more detail post-photo-taking. One interviewee, Fiona, used very few words to describe her home during the initial phone interview, but later, when discussing photos she took of her house, she used ~370 words to describe each. The authors suggest that this is a form of interviewee empowerment, because 42% of their sample size was living in dwellings classified as "uninhabitable" (p.9). Photo-elicitation prompted tenants to air their grievances and discuss their housing precarity without inhibition and at their own will. The authors also noted a large amount of pride stemming from DIY or self-assembled furniture, particularly in less-than-ideal housing situations (see Clara from Sheffield's couch photo on p.10 of the article). This phenomenon was noted as being an expression of agency and a form of home-making that made even undesirable living situations more bearable because tenants had the ability to personalize and control their living space (p.10).

Barratt & Green (2017) found that the major constraints on home-making practices in UK Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) -- properties where three or

more unrelated tenants share bathrooms and sometimes kitchens -- is the lack of space, shared spaces, and the temporary nature of this type of housing. Participants in photo-elicitation and interviews spoke openly about their frustrations, namely lack of agency and stigmatization from their community for being HMO tenants. Overall, the authors noted that tenants' lack of agency and inability to personalize their own space led to dissatisfaction with their living space and shortened tenancies. In addition, it ought to be noted that HMOs generally attract vulnerable populations -- such as recovering addicts or those with physical disabilities -- because they are fairly cheap. This is related to the stigmatization that the tenants discuss.

This was not the only case of vulnerable populations coupled with inadequate housing in the literature. Nasreen and Ruming (2020) focused on Australian "shared room housing": a form of rental accommodation that generally denotes multiple tenants and shared sleeping spaces. The authors note that "these precarious living arrangements meet the Australian definition of 'homelessness', as tenants live in overcrowded housing, lack secure occupancy and have limited control over the use of space and resources in the dwellings" (p.4). People living in these dwellings were primarily international students or international short-term workers. The authors suggest that the ability to rearrange furniture to increase privacy between tenants and reduce the feelings of "homelessness" lengthens the stay of tenants in shared housing.

Although many tenants interviewed were not allowed to make structural changes to their accommodations, the ability to display calendars and photographs enabled attachment and feelings of homeliness. However, tenants also described conflicts with landlords over the inability to rearrange furniture and make decorative changes, limiting their housing agency and subsequently shortening their tenancies.

Easthope (2014) directly discussed the tension between landlords and tenants in the private rental sector. Her theoretical framework is that housing rights exist in two forms: core and contingent. A core right of home ownership for example is the ability to sell. Contingent rights are ones that exist regardless of the form of housing, such as the ability to decorate or dictate where furniture goes. In her analysis of the private rental sectors in Australia and Germany, she describes the societal, political, and market conditions that mean that Australia puts these contingent rights into the hands of landlords, whereas Germany puts them in the hands of tenants.

In Australia, landlords have the ability to end tenancies without cause, must approve any structural changes, and often sell their properties within 12 months of acquiring them. As such, the PRS in Australia is set-up to act as precarious short-term housing with little room for tenants' agency. Germany differs in that landlords are usually part of larger management property companies and therefore hold onto their properties for many years. Tenants have more responsibility for their housing in that

they pay a "second" rent which goes towards trash disposal and lawn keeping, usually the responsibilities of the landlord. Essentially, German housing provides tenants with more security, responsibility, and adaptability.

In conclusion, the housing literature on home-making identifies a lack of agency available to tenants in the rental sector. Critically, this is *not inherent* to rental housing, but rather constructed around both the assumption that rental housing is short-term, as well as structural and policy settings that allow landlords to claim contingent rights. This is despite the fact that home-making practices increase the length of tenancy and the reported happiness and ontological security of tenants. There is also a general correlation between the instability of the housing, the lack of housing agency, and vulnerable and/or low-income populations.

3. Home-Making and Art History

Most articles that offer some form of art historical or material culture analysis focus on

DIY home-improvement, gendered spaces, and/or a Bourdeusian analysis of class and

taste. I will discuss each of these in turn, with discussions about DIY being the focus.

Almost every article mentioned DIY as a form of home-making and exertion of

ownership. In addition, at the end of this section, there is a figure that summarizes the

key differences between housing and art historical analyses of home-making.

3.1 DIY

The definition of DIY used by most articles is captured by Rosenburg (2011): "DIY

home improvement refers to the processes of renovating, redecorating, aesthetically

upgrading, or making additions to one's home primarily through one's own labor" (pp.

6-7). As Rosenburg suggests, most people will undoubtedly perform some form of

home-improvement in their lives, but DIY culture is particularly noticeable in countries

"obsessed with home-ownership such as the UK and Australia" (p.7). This once again

brings up the bias many authors have for home-ownership versus renting, which

reflects how home-owners are more readily engaged in home-improvement and home-

making practices.

Many articles focused on men's engagement in DIY, mostly handy-work and structural renovations such as building a deck. Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry (2013) describe how DIY is understood between men with high cultural capital (HCC) and low cultural capital (LCC). HCC men view DIY work as an escape from their more cerebral working jobs and as a form of romanticization of the working-class hero. LCC men view it as a necessary part of life and a way of being supportive and engaged partners and fathers. Both sets of men view it as a legitimization of masculinity, and even if they give lip-service to equality, they understand it as a man's job.

There is a lack of articles about women's engagement in DIY. However, DIY can be a form of empowerment for women as it gives them power over their homes and labour, power from going against traditional gender roles, and power to engage with new forms of knowledge (Wolf, Albinsson and Becker, 2015). Neumark (2013), after interviewing primarily women who had been forcibly displaced from their countries of origin, suggests that home beautification is a way of recovering from trauma and creating new attachments to your space, home location, and self.

Most authors examining DIY attitudes and engagements *specifically* focus on structural renovations. This leaves out *many* DIY activities, such as decorative renovations, crafts, or any sort of fabric usage such as sewing or weaving. Due to this omission, I suspect participation by women is underestimated. It also appears to

contribute to the bias towards home-owners, who have the authority to undertake structural changes; renters who are usually restricted to more decorative practices are overlooked. However, other articles that do not *specifically* focus on DIY, but do mention it, often bring up different gendered practices.

3.2 Gendered spaces

The overall thread through the articles focused on gendered spaces was that home-making labour was divided between physically-intensive tasks (coded as masculine) and cleaning, entertaining, and furnishing/decorating (coded as feminine). Consequently, spaces evolve in homes to facilitate and legitimize these tasks and the associated gender division.

An example of this phenomenon includes historical American advice columns suggesting that women ought to be "Mrs. Three-in-One" -- part hostess, part cook, and part waitress -- in order to compensate for the disuse of servants post-WWI. Consequently, design solutions are offered in both furniture arrangement and interior decor to combine "domestic zones" such as the kitchen and the dining room (Lees-Maffei, 2007). One suggestion is using hot-plates to cook food on the table, that way women are able to entertain guests while still being the cook and reducing their waitressing responsibilities (Lees-Maffei, 2007, p.736).

Girl's Own Paper, a turn-of-the-twentieth-century magazine targeted towards young women and girls, suggested that it was essential for girls to take part in DIY activities, such as re-upholstery, and even advised young girls to have their own tool-kit (Yan, 2019, p.195). This is interesting because physically-intensive labour tasks within the home are often deemed the responsibility of adult men. In fact, DIY was suggested to young women and girls as a form of self-improvement and wifery training. It gives them "busy brains and useful fingers" (p.194), and is a form of domestic socialization and sensitization. The ability to understand and be able to decorate a home was a sign of a successful housewife (p.183) and "girl readers were advised to conform to the female gender role in both religious and moral terms" (p. 184). These messages conveyed the commonly held stereotype that women are more sensitive to their domestic surroundings and therefore better suited to be the decorators and arrangers of the home, similar to the profession of interior design being occupied by women because of their "innate" ability (McNeil, 1994).

A space that has evolved to facilitate and legitimize men's labour is the man-cave. Contrary to common interpretation, Moisio and Beruchashvili (2016) argue that man-caves do not exist entirely in opposition to women's spaces in the home, but rather are social places where domestic masculinity can be built therapeutically. They are a refuge from both work and family strains, while also being a venue for fraternal

and paternal relationships. These qualities are labelled "therapeutic" in that they help construct masculine identity (p.672).

Additionally, man-caves are legitimized as valuable spaces because productive consumption activities take place within them (p.664). Productive consumption includes almost any DIY project, but also activities such as grilling, where a "product" is being created. As these activities are coupled with decor and possessions coded with masculine identity -- sports memorabilia, comfy reclining chairs, bar equipment -- man-caves combine leisure with productivity to create an enclave that produces masculinity while also representing it.

3.3 LGBTQ2+ Domestic Spaces

Similar to Neumark (2013) arguing that home beautification is a way of recovering from trauma and creating new attachments to domestic space, home-making and home itself is important to the LGBTQ2+ community because it is a place of identity affirmation. Notably, research on LGBTQ2+ home-making often focuses on renters, unlike most other areas of inquiry reviewed here. This likely reflects not only recent increases in rental tenure, but also that LGBTQ2+ people encounter unique barriers when trying to secure housing, leaving them more reliant on lower-cost rentals than many other groups (McDowell, 2020). Put another way, the social precariousness of

many LGBTQ2+ individuals and households often lead to precarious housing, and this appears to be reflected in the literature.

As an example of home acting as a safe place for an otherwise disenfranchised social group, Andrucki and Kaplan (2017) examine transmasculine people's use of decor. They identify how physical objects in the home are key to making a home space trans; for example, one tenant displaying a photo of himself with his twin sister as children, before he transitioned. The purpose of this photograph is not only to affirm family roots, but to index the passage of "queer time" (p.13) as opposed to clock time; the photograph materializes multiple points of life and transition in one moment.

Penner and Scicluna's introduction to the book *Sexuality and Gender: Experience, Politics, Transgression* (2017) relates the overall findings of the various contributors to bell hooks' understanding of home for African-American women. Home is a place of social and political affirmation for disenfranchised social groups but creating and maintaining home involves labour and effort (p.17). This daily labour could include physical tasks of home-making such as cleaning and decorating, mental tasks such as coordinating with other household members and knowing what needs to be done when, and emotional tasks such as navigating barriers to housing, recovering from trauma, and exploring domesticity and its effects. Emotional tasks are particularly laborious because they are created from and explored within the framework of

disenfranchisement. LGBTQ2+ folk's relationship with domesticity is an example of this; it could be affirming in that home is a private and intimate space, but it is often complicated and problematized by external factors, which may include the illegality of marriage, criminalization of homosexuality, difficulties in adopting children, trauma from and ostracization in past living situations, and overall barriers to housing. Essentially, home is more than just access to housing but also the ability to consistently home-make and perform labour.

In an effort to counter the idea that LGBTQ2+ couples and families are simply trying to emulate an American heteronormative ideal of home, Gorman-Murray (2017) discusses how home-making practice ideals and are navigated by *everyone*, regardless of sexual orientation. The American heteronormative domestic ideal can roughly be summed up by the values of "monogamy, marriage, family planning, 'standard' life courses and community integration" (p. 155, original apostrophes) within the history and neoliberal politics of the United States. Gorman-Murray discusses how homonormativity -- attempting to normalize LGBTQ2+ households within this American ideal -- has issues because LGBTQ2+ households are 'normalized' by being privatized (p.155). Privatized in this case means both private in the sense of behind closed doors, but also private in the sense of neoliberal economics, wherein households are agents that use their money to buy goods in a free market. This version of homonormativity

reduces the potential for domestic spaces to be sites of "political leverage" (2017, p.149) because it assumes LQBTQ2+ households are interested in heterosexual mimicry, and it privileges households that are economically advantaged because they appear 'normal' under neoliberalism. It also suggests that LGBTQ2+ domestic desires for peace and calm are the same as desiring sameness in relationship to straight family units (p.156). Fundamentally, the issue at play is the conflation of domestic and private with normalcy, and Gorman-Murray argues against this conflation using the concept of "quiet politics'' and "quiet revolutions" (p.157).

There are many quiet politics, and consequent quiet revolutions, within homo- and heterosexual households that fissure the domestic ideal because, in every household, there are divergences in routines as simple as cooking, cleaning, and buying furniture. Examples given are households that have green or anti-consumerist principles, or couples that divvy household tasks counter to gender norms. The importance of this point is that it asserts the universal need to home-make, as well reframes the LGBTQ2+ community's home-making as a navigation of domesticity, as opposed to another example of disenfranchisement or a search for 'sameness'. Gorman-Murray describes this as "not matter of belonging or alienation, resistance or conformity, but a negotiation between these different engagements" (2017, p.150).

3.4 Class, taste, and capital

Following Bourdieu (1984) in arguing that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (p.6), there is ample literature on how class shapes perceptions of good taste and how people interpret and consume material possessions, therefore legitimizing social differences and hierarchies. One major thread was the prominence of the design regime of "soft modernism", coined by Rosenburg (2011). Soft modernism, characterized by neutral colours, wood flooring, and geometric furniture, is argued to be the most prominent current interior design concept (Rosenburg 2011, Arsel & Bean 2013). Its main appeal is that it occupies the space of being understood as tasteful while not too personal, allowing for ease of resale (Rosenburg, 2011). It is also highly promoted by DIY and design media, such as the online blog *Apartment Therapy* (AT), which even offers a multi-step program to "cure" your living space of bad design and energy (Arsel & Bean, 2013).

Arsel & Bean expand on AT at length and relate it to Bourdieu's theory of socialized understandings of taste based on class. Taste is expressed and shaped through consumption. The home is a site where taste is expressed very prominently because of the amount of consumption that goes on within it: the buying of furniture, decoration, food, clothing, and renovations. AT enforces soft modernism by problematizing an object or function (e.g. the storage of house keys), ritualizing a

"doing" that fixes the problem (always immediately hanging up keys when coming home), and then instrumentalizing this solution by relating the "doing" and the object together (giving the solution meanings of "calm" or "organized").

Ideas around cleanliness, calmness, or organization were also major threads in the literature. Deeming (2014), Madigan & Munro (1996), and Saatcioglu & Ozanne (2013) all found that people understood cleanliness as not only something that made a home comfortable and showed that it was cared for, but that this care indicated a better sense of taste. However, as Madigan & Munro (1994) point out, responsibility for decor choices and general upkeep and cleanliness of the house falls disproportionately to women, making the tensions of home-making and taste a women's problem.

Saatcioglu & Ozanne (2013) interviewed members of an American trailer park community to understand their moral actions in relation to their class and neighbours. The authors categorized different groups of residents based on how they thought and behaved towards the rest of the community. For example, there are "The Nesters" who are the disciplined selves (p. 698). They were openly religious, had a Protestant work attitude, and were friendly towards other Nesters, but thought poorly of some other residents whose lifestyles were antithetical to theirs. The authors drew from the idea of "moral habitus" that Bourdieu theorized (p.694). Similar to taste, Bourdieu argued that how we act and feel about people is taught, as opposed to innate, and is

class dependent. It is deployed as a means of status negotiation and class stratification, and is an iterative process based around what and how one consumes. Homes and home-making practices are an example of this consumption. The authors found that residents with more financial and social capital generally kept their houses cleaner, more organized, and more thoroughly decorated. In addition, residents with clean homes usually thought less of other members of the trailer park who did not have well-maintained homes (p.699).

The final aspect of the literature was the focus on capital. Capital is a major aspect of Bourdieu's understanding of class (Deeming, 2014) and most authors classified their interviewees with respect to high or low quantities of capital. One author, Boterman (2012), also argued that beyond the obvious forms of capital -- such as economic, social, and cultural -- there were tacit forms, such as "criminal" capital (willingness to cheat the system), and "taste" capital (a subset of cultural capital centered on understandings of popular trends). An example of criminal capital would be knowingly and willingly living in a sublet apartment, which is an illegal although common practice in Amsterdam (p.329). Taste capital includes the ability to identify popular neighbourhoods, particularly ones that are just becoming popular, and living in these neighbourhoods in order to gain financial reward from your living space because these neighbourhoods appreciate in value (p.333). These forms of capital were

important because they helped middle class Danes and Dutch to sustain their housing by being more likely to obtain housing in the first place and by making it a more achievable and rewarding financial investment.

3.5 Summary

The most important insight is that taste and home-making practices help people obtain and stabilize their housing. The ability to keep one's living space clean and tidy, as well as DIY home-improvements, are the most commonly discussed home-making practices. DIY discussions tend to focus on structural renovations however, therefore omitting both work most associated with women, and work undertaken by renters. Further research could investigate women's engagement in DIY and the formal and informal ways renters are denied the ability to perform home-making practices.

4. Table and Figure Analysis

In order to aid comprehension of the different bodies of literature, I have included a table and a figure. Table 1 compares different types of home-making practices and material objects with the number of times they are mentioned in a sample of housing literature and art history literature. The table is arranged according to the amount home-practices are mentioned in housing articles, in descending order. Tenants/home-owners utilizing minor decorations is the most commonly mentioned practice across both fields of literature, suggesting that it is the most prevalent form of home-making for many people.

Figure 1 follows this and compares how the different fields of literature approach home-making research, according to a sample of literature. They share in common a focus on home-owners, DIY considerations, and how home-making creates new attachments to space. Note that one of the major characteristics that separates these fields is whether they analyze policy or objects and design regimes. This distinction shapes whether or not an article is considering how and why people occupy homes, or what is materially present in a home. Additionally, figure 1 features areas of inquiry that both fields exclude.

Home-making practices and material objects	Mentions in housing articles	Mentions in art history articles
Minor Decorations (personal photographs, calendars, soft furnishings, magazine cut-outs, posters)	8	9
Control over Tidiness (ability to remove dirt and debris, storage space, lawn maintenance)	7	5
Decorative Renovations (wallpaper, painting, hanging photographs/art)	6	9
Furniture Rearrangement	6	6
Structural Renovations (drilling holes, knocking down walls, changing flooring, "fixer-uppers")	5	4
Control over Noise (inside and outside the home)	5	0
Control over Schedule of Tasks (using the bathroom, cooking, working in communal spaces)	5	4
Ability to replace or repair objects (appliances, pipes, furniture)	4	4
DIY Furniture Assembling	2	6

Table 1: Mentions of different forms of home-making in a sample of housing and art history literature (n = number of mentions)

Housing literature on home-making   **Art History literature on home-making**

- Preference to examine policy and data as opposed to objects and design regimes

- Homemaking increases one's ontological security

- Analyses of overcrowded and underfunded housing

- Tenant's homemaking limited by policies that allow landlords to claim contingent rights

- Focus on homeowners as opposed to renters

- DIY prominence

- Home-making as a way of recovering from trauma and making new attachments to your space

- Preference to examine objects and design regimes as opposed to policy and data

- Cleanliness as a form of homemaking and as a representation of taste

- Historical analyses of decor advice and magazines

- Bourdieusian analysis of taste and access to housing; the more capital one has, the easier housing is to access and maintain

- Legal cases of renters' homemaking limitations

- Women's labour and DIY
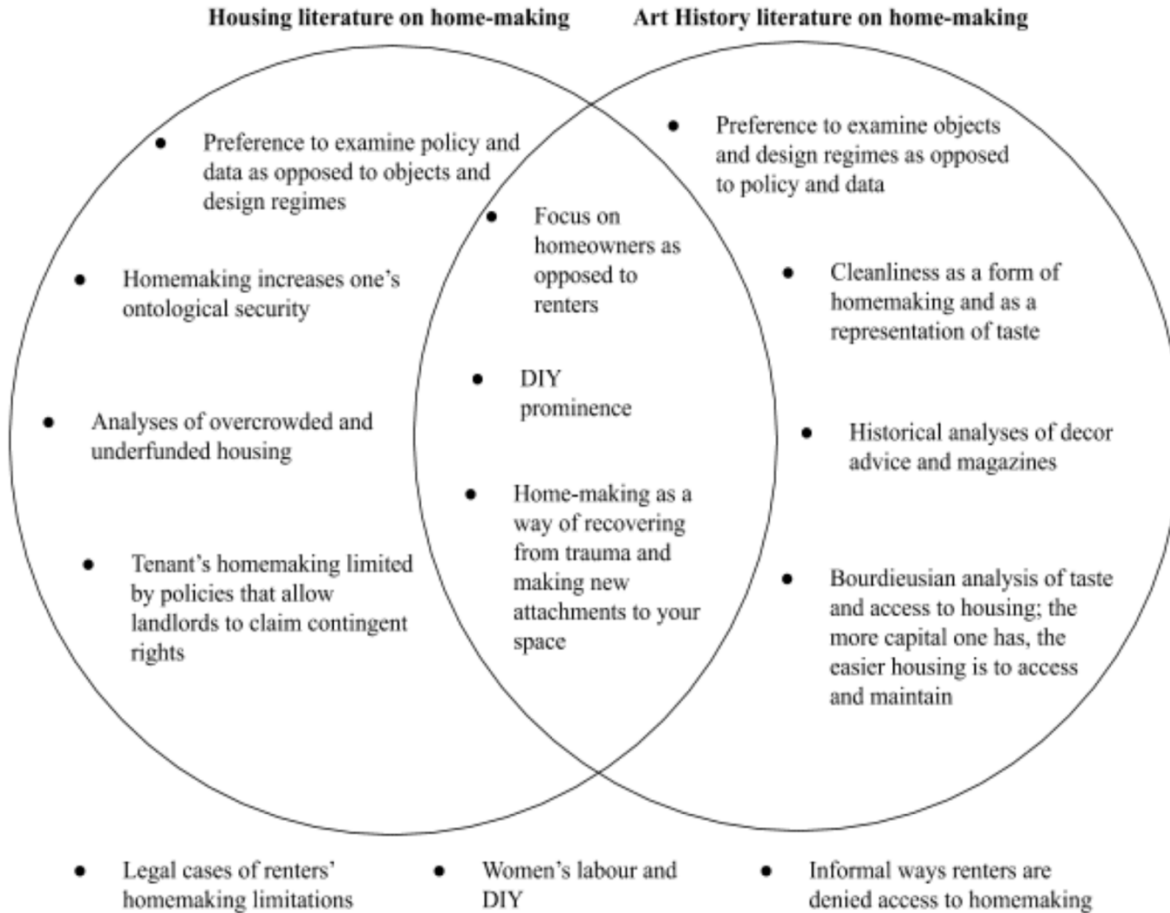
- Informal ways renters are denied access to homemaking

Figure 1: Similarities and differences between home-making analyses between housing and art history literature

5. Home-Making Online

In order to begin a consideration of social media and its relation to home-making, I reviewed the Reddit threads r/amateurroomporn, r/malelivingspace, r/femalelivingspace, r/livingspace, r/apartmentdesign, r/apartmenthacks, and r/interiordecorating with the intention of comparing the rooms and advice presented with the design regime of soft modernism. Soft modernism -- which Arsel and Bean (2013) identified to be the most prominent design regime -- is characterized by neutral colours, geometric furniture, and a high resale value because it is both 'tasteful' while also 'impersonal'.

The vast majority of rental rooms on the Reddit threads had white walls, even if they were heavily decorated. It is possible that tenants are not allowed to paint their walls, and white is an easy colour to re-let or sell from the landlord's perspective, but white also appears to be a recommended design choice in that it is a neutral, easy tone to pair furniture and soft furnishings with. This differs slightly from soft modernism, which usually favours warm browns and greys, but it does fit into the goals of the regime which is overall cohesiveness paired with inoffensiveness.

An additional observation is that the manner in which Reddit users decorated their rental spaces tended to be non-damaging and creatively circumvented common

landlord regulations. For example, tenants primarily decorated their apartments using soft furnishings, an ample amount of potted plants, and framed posters. None of these are damaging to the unit when used correctly. In the case of frames, there were many questions asked about using small nails to avoid heavy damage, and in the case when nails were not allowed, what sort of sticky hanging strips were best. In a similar vein, contact paper -- a sort of adhesive paper commonly used as wallpaper or as faux stone countertops -- was regularly discussed. Contact paper circumvents restrictions on tenants' ability to paint, hang art, and replace cabinets because it usually comes in interesting patterns, is easy to use, and is temporary and non-damaging.

Within most of these discussions, it was not just other tenants weighing in. Users who identified as landlords also commented on what they would let a tenant do and what causes them strife. Many disliked command strips and contact paper because of the sticky residue they leave behind, and said they were unforgiving when it came to damage deposits.

The importance of the information in these threads is that it helps to fill a gap in the existing research on home-making practices. There are obvious and significant restrictions to tenants' ability to home-make, and consequently many academics have chosen to focus on home-owners who have more freedom and an assumed deeper attachment to where they live. However, we also know that more and more people are

priced out of home ownership and are effectively lifelong renters. Consequently,

tenants must be engaging in some form of home-making because that is one way to

become attached to a living space. These threads provide insight into how tenants

home-make, what restrictions are placed on them, and whether or not their design

choices correspond with those encouraged by the most prominent design regime, and

if they are accepted by landlords.

6. An Art Historical Analysis of Photo-Elicitation

In order to have access to the interior of people's homes, a common methodology utilized within the home-making literature is photo-elicitation (Madsen 2018; Soaita & McKee 2020; Nasreen & Ruming 2020; Barratt & Green 2017). This involves participants taking photographs of their living spaces prompted by researcher questions, which are then followed up with at least one interview to discuss and interpret the images. Photo-elicitation can utilize images that are researcher-generated (Buchcyzk 2016 and Andrucki & Kaplan 2018) but for the purposes of this overview, I will be focusing on participant-generated photographs. Another version of photo-elicitation is photovoice, which emphasizes political activism and policy change (Sutton-Brown 2014). It does so by giving cameras to people who are 'silenced' on a political or social level and by reaching policy makers and suggesting areas of change based on the reflections and conversations of the participants. Soaita & Mckee (2020) utilize this method to a degree, discussing the length and depth of participants' explanations of photographs and how photo-elicitation leads to empowerment. More generally, however, the home-making literature utilizes photo-elicitation in order to see into people's homes and to do content analysis. Content analysis is the interpretation of communication; the purpose of the interviews is to explore what the researchers and

participants understand the content of the photograph to be and what it means within the scope of the project. Figure 4 provides an overview of the key differences between photo-elicitation and the more specialized photovoice approach.

Standard photo-elicitation	Photovoice
Can use researcher or participant-generated images	Uses participant-generated images
Research questions likely formulated by researcher	Research questions formulated by co-researchers (researcher and participants)
Utilizes follow-ups interviews	Utilizes follow-up interviews
Does not necessarily present images to policy makers and community leaders	Prioritizes presentation of images to policy makers and community leaders

Table 2: Standard photo-elicitation compared to Photovoice

Due to the technological requirements of photo-elicitation, there is a degree of participant self-selection. Participants will need to have access to a camera, either a place to develop the film or internet access to share the digital files, general knowledge of how to operate a camera, and the ability to take photographs and then to discuss them at-length. Researchers can provide cameras -- as many of the studies do -- and instructions on how to use them and on how to take legible photographs -- which none of the studies explicitly mention doing -- but as a method, it is fairly knowledge and time intensive for the participants. This means researchers will only

have participants who are willing and able to commit themselves for an extended

period.

The issue with photo-elicitation from an art historical perspective is that

researchers tend to analyze the photographs from a point of view of truthfulness. The

photographs are viewed as data that the image-creators then explain in more detail

through interviews. This is not the common interpretation of photographs in the artistic

field. Cameras, at their most rudimentary level, capture light using a photo-sensitive

paper or sensor. The impression that the light leaves is then developed into a

photograph. Due to this process, the photograph serves as an index of a pre-

photograph subject, but this does not mean it represents that subject objectively.

There are still the formal elements of framing, lighting, colour, and angle that

manipulate a viewer's perception and understanding of the photograph. A common art

historical understanding of photography is that it is the manipulation of light and that

any 'truth' that the image holds is culturally and personally coded (Skopik 2003).

Within the photo-elicitation literature, there is very little consideration of

photography's manipulative qualities. This may be because many researchers and

participants are assuming that 'snapshot' or amateur photography does not consider

formal elements as actively as professional or 'art' photography. However, if

participants gave no consideration whatsoever to these elements, the photographs

would be completely illegible. For example, asking participants to take photographs of places within their homes where they feel comfortable, such as in Madsen (2018), leads to clear photographs of couches, living rooms, and cozy spaces. 'Clear' in this case means in-frame and centered on the primary object of comfort. These are formal elements that photographers, at all levels of skill and artistry, consider. The photograph therefore is not a neutral index of interior decor, but a conscious representation of objects that have been deemed important enough to photograph in the first place.

What this means for photo-elicitation research is that researchers ought to consider photographs as more than just data; researchers ought to consider the *act* of photography. In Barrat & Green (2017) the authors are partly using photo-elicitation to quantify the physical state of a relatively marginalized housing tenure. Notably, when discussing photographs provided by a participant, the authors say that the participant "was shocked about how messy his room appeared in the pictures and that he had actually tidied up before taking them suggesting that he had wanted to portray his home in a particular way" (2017, p.7). In this case, there is clear indication that, even though the photographs strive to represent the reality of a participant's living space, they are fundamentally staged. The act of photography implies value judgements and behind-the-scenes modifications.

To address this issue, researchers could ask participants questions during the interview stage pertaining to how they modified the room before taking a photograph, what formal elements they considered when taking the photograph, and, most importantly, how the act of photographing their home affects them emotionally. Not being able to present the home as one wishes is a jarring experience, as seen both in Barratt & Green (2017) and the home-making literature at large. Being able to tidy-up before taking a photograph is an act of home-making in itself, which means participants who are able to clean are likely those who will be willing to take a photograph, leaving researchers interested in limitations to home-making in a bind. To compensate for these limitations, and to avoid participant attrition, researchers need to consider what it actually means to photograph a home as opposed to just content analysis.

7. Tenants' Rights in Alberta and B.C.

In order to understand what tenancy actually looks like and what restrictions can be placed on tenants vis-a-vis home-making practices, it's necessary to look at their rights and responsibilities. I chose Alberta and B.C. as case studies primarily for their geographical proximity to each other and myself, and because of the opportunity to connect with community housing providers (i.e. landlords) in each. The following section outlines the legislation that binds tenants and landlords and the general support available for tenants in each province.

In Alberta, neither the alberta.gov site nor the *Residential Tenancies Act SA 2004, c R-17* (RTA) -- which outlines the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants -- directly address home modification and home-making practices. One role of tenants is that they must not do damage to their unit (RTA Handbook 2018, p. 21), which is presumably the rule that allows landlords to forbid home-modifications, although this is not explicitly stated. Damage is defined broadly as "harm to property or a person. The court or Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service (RTDRS) decides if there has been damage and who caused it" (RTA Handbook 2018, p.9).

Keeping the unit "reasonably clean" (RTA Handbook 2018, p.21) is also considered a role of the tenant. Being able to keep living spaces clean is a commonly noted home-making practice, so it is interesting that the *inability* to engage with this

practice is grounds for complaint on behalf of the landlord. Landlords are expected to clean and maintain common areas, where applicable, as well as the structural aspects of the building (RTA Handbook 2018, p.14). This includes covering costs for renovations within a unit related to normal wear and tear, defined as "the deterioration that occurs over time with the use of the premises, even though the premises receive reasonable care and maintenance" (RTA Handbook 2018, 36).

Under the RTDRS, landlords can apply for financial damages from a tenant's rental agreement breach, and therefore are able to punish tenants who decorate or modify their homes if that is specifically forbidden. Tenants can apply for compensation for performing the landlord's obligations as outlined in the rental agreement, but this likely would not cover being compensated for not being able to engage with home-making practices.

Capital Region Housing (CRHC), the largest provider of social and near market housing in the Edmonton area, very specifically states that tenants "may not repaint, wallpaper, change the flooring, redecorate, finish the basement, add or remove walls, or make any other interior changes. It is not permitted to add or remove fencing, install items such as sheds, gazebos, decks, patios, or play structures, or make any other changes in the yard" (CRHC, *Modifying your home*).

The Government of Alberta offers the Seniors Home Adaptation and Repair Program (SHARP) wherein low-income seniors can apply for funds to adapt and renovate their permanent residences. This is not available to senior rental tenants as, to be eligible, applicants must maintain at least 25% equity in their primary residence. Little information or mention of modification and home-making practices existed on other advocacy sites or databases, such as the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association or the Canadian Rental Housing Index.

Similar to Alberta, tenants and landlords in British Columbia have their rights and responsibilities outlined in the *Residential Tenancy Act, SBC 2002, Chapter 78* (RTA). Tenants are expected to keep their residences clean and to pay for damages at the end of their tenancy. Landlords are expected to paint the unit regularly and respond to regular wear and tear (*Residency Policy Guideline* [RPG], 2004, p.1). Modifications and renovations cannot be done unless approved by the landlord (RPG, p.2). The RPG includes the statement that "most tenants will put up pictures in their unit" (p. 4), an acknowledgement of the commonality of decorative home-making practices. Considerations of home-making practices that lie between cleanliness and major renovations in nature are otherwise few and far between, and even this statement in the RPG is under the section concerning damage caused by nail holes. However, the RPG seems to treat decorative home-making practices as a given,

suggesting that even if tenants are prohibited from decorating their units, many do it anyway.

Although tenants in B.C. have essentially the same rights and responsibilities as in Alberta, broader financial programs aimed towards tenants exist in the former. For example, BC Housing, the province's major provider of subsidized housing, offers three support programs for renters. The first is the Home Adaptabilities For Independence (HAFI) program; "HAFI is a grant program for people with diminished physical abilities. Landlords who rent to low-income households can submit a joint application with their tenants to pay for modifications to their rental unit to allow the tenant to live independently" ("Tenant and Landlord Eligibility and Application Process", n.d.). The main difference between HAFI and SHARP -- a similar grant offered by Alberta -- is that the language of the grant does not limit it to seniors, and applicants must specifically be renters.

The Tenants Resource and Advisory Centre (TRAC) is one example of the many tenant advocacy groups in B.C. They offer both a tenant survival guide and a guide to roommate agreements. Interestingly, their roommate agreements guide has no section concerning decoration or renovations, which seems like a likely area for roommate disagreements.

Section 28 of the RTA states that tenants are entitled to quiet enjoyment of their unit. This includes reasonable privacy. Many restrictions on home-making practices come from the angle that they could cause damage. The idea of quiet enjoyment and reasonable privacy could possibly be used as a counter-argument if the manner in which tenants decorate is construed as a facet of their privacy and enjoyment of where they live.

The Residential Tenancies Branch, the overseeing body for landlord-tenant disputes in BC, has a feature that allows one to search all past decisions. I searched it using keywords such as "modify", "renovation", "decor", "decorating", "paint", the code "MDN" meaning that the landlord filed for a monetary order due to damages to the unit, as well as "quiet enjoyment". Partly due to the manner in which the search engine is designed, very few results were relevant. Decision 6069 however concerned a tenant that painted their unit walls an unapproved colour and then the landlord filed for financial compensation once the tenancy had ended. The landlord's application was successful and they were awarded $1,319.80.

To summarize, the primary difference between B.C. and Alberta is not that tenants have more rights, but rather that those in B.C. have greater access to well-designed financial programs and advocacy groups. The major route of further inquiry would be a thorough examination of decisions made by the Residential Tenancy

Branch concerning home-making practices, particularly if a tenant argues that their

right to privacy and quiet enjoyment outweighs their responsibility to keep the unit

undamaged.

8. Community Partner Insights

As part of my research, I contacted various community housing providers within Alberta and B.C. and asked them background questions concerning their policies and procedures. Questions covered a range of topics, including tenants' ability to decorate and make changes (indoors and out), what limits are in place, the links between tenants' autonomy and tenancy sustainability, and why disputes arise and how they are regulated and managed.

The providers I spoke with informed me that their units are either unfurnished -- including drapery and blinds -- so tenants are free to buy, rearrange, and modify their furniture as they see fit. Tenants could be charged for damage caused from improper installation, and they are not allowed to make structural changes. Painting walls is allowed but only with permission from the organization and it almost always has to be a neutral colour in order to make the unit easy to relet once the current tenant has left. Painting walls without permission or performing structural changes is a significant breach in most tenants' leases and can seriously jeopardize the stability of their tenancy.

Tenants are allowed to use nails to hang art, with small and shallow nails being favoured. One organization even said that allowing tenants to hang art and decorations is a necessary part of people taking pride in their home and feeling comfortable. This

corresponds with most organizations expressing the view that if tenants were able to

make more modifications, their tenancies are likely to be more sustainable. However,

because of the need to both upkeep and standardize a large quantity of units in order

to operate effectively as large housing providers, the priority is keeping potentially

damaging modifications to a minimum. For organizations that house seniors, there is

the added risk that tenants could be injured when undertaking home modifications.

Policies that organizations have in place -- such as standards of maintenance,

tenant maintenance responsibilities, and alteration requests -- correspond with the

regulations set out in the provinces' Residential Tenancy/Tenancies Acts. Major

disputes concerning the cleanliness of units and decoration are rare; generally the issue

for landlords within these disputes is portrayed as damage caused by tenants ripping

out carpet, painting, damaging walls, pest infestations, or having hoarding tendencies.

If the issue is pests or extreme clutter, a provincial health service can become involved

in order to make recommendations and ensure changes happen within a specific

timeframe. Tenants may also be referred to a hoarding hotline by property managers.

Some of the property managers I spoke with acknowledged that tenants'

difficulties with cleanliness and maintenance can be related to their demographic;

senior tenants may have issues with mobility and therefore need more support, for

example. If this is the case, organizations will aim to provide extra support and

understanding, as well as contacts for assistive services. Similarly to issues around modification, failure to comply with maintenance and cleanliness standards can lead to significant disputes, compliance orders from the city, and eviction.

Yearly unit inspections are utilized by most organizations to verify that units are undamaged and habitable, and they form the first step in dispute resolution. If problems are identified within the unit, site managers will organize a minimum of three follow-up visits with two to three weeks in-between each. The goal of these meetings is to implement strategies and outline requirements. If there is no compliance or change after this process, a final warning will be issued. If there is no improvement after that, the organization will file with the Residential Tenancy Dispute Resolution Service, a provincial authority that essentially functions as a court for tenants and landlords. Usually, an agreement is made and the tenant and organization will work together on a conditional order and see improvement. If not, a hearing officer may grant an eviction.

As a mitigation technique, some organizations encourage tenants to sign contracts for good tenancy. These are usually signed while a dispute is on-going as a last chance for tenants to 'prove' that they can follow an organizations' rules. These documents are not legally binding, but rather provide examples of how good tenancy is performed: paying rent on-time, keeping set appointments with property managers and tenants liaisons, and keeping units clean, undamaged, and free of excess

accumulation (hoarding). They also make clear that failure to perform good tenancy could result in non-renewal of a lease. As a method of dispute resolution, good tenant contracts also encourage tenants to plan and strategize around issues that could negatively impact a tenancy; this includes accessing anger management services, working with a tenant liaison to reduce police call-outs, and utilizing relapse prevention support in the case of out-of-control partying. Finally, these contracts serve as a record of the organization attempting to resolve the dispute.

The information from these community housing providers is valuable, partially because it is not readily available to the public. It also confirms an issue that has been identified during other phases of research; the ability to home-make contributes to the sustainability of a tenancy, but most tenants' home-making is very limited because of property managers' interest in being able to relet their units quickly. In the case of community housing organizations, they are additionally limited by their number of staff versus the number of people they house. They can only provide adequate support to so many people and therefore regulations are in place to prevent and mitigate disputes, and lessen their workload. While much of the information provided suggests that housing organizations are willing to work with and support tenants with complex needs, it also suggests how people can be rendered homeless due to compulsions primarily outside of their control.

9. New Zealand Case Study: How do you Amend an RTA?

The purpose of this section is to analyze what evidence was presented to the New Zealand Parliament to amend the *Residential Tenancies Act 1986, No. 120* ("RTA") and how home-making regulations are approached in a jurisdiction other than Alberta and B.C. The information in this section was gathered from watching Parliamentary proceedings videos, primarily the first two discussions, which can be found on the New Zealand Parliament home page: https://cutt.ly/ifaRLml.

The major changes that come from New Zealand's *Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill 218-2* are banning rental bidding, limiting rent increases to once every 12 months, allowing tenants to make minor structural changes such as baby-proofing their home, landlords having to install fibre-optic cables if tenants request them to do so, and the replacement of no-cause eviction with a three-count procedure. With regards to eviction, landlords must now provide three examples of a tenant's "anti-social behaviour" - which appears to be the term to describe committing any type of infraction - over three months before being able to evict them.

The argument presented to Parliament has primarily three parts. First, the 1986 Act was seen to be outdated because it did not allow for technological updates in rental homes and because 32% of the NZ population are renters, with 43% of NZ

children living in rental homes in 2020, compared to 26% in 1986. This increase in not only the number and proportion of renters, but also the number of people who would likely be lifelong renters, requires rental units be technologically updated as well as stable and sustainable. The second aspect of the argument was that housing ought to be a core public good as opposed to something left to the market. Generally, MPs in favour of the amendments also said there was a housing shortage and this was due in part to the lack of "state housing" (known as social or public housing elsewhere). Finally, there were approximately 4700 submissions from the public expressing support or opposition for the bill. Most submissions were from landlords, tenants, interest groups, and housing providers.

Opposition towards the bill was primarily based on the belief that landlords, faced with the prospect of lengthy procedures to evict tenants who do not pay rent due to the three-case procedure and therefore losing money, would pull out of the sector, resulting in a net loss of rental properties. The rebuttal to this argument was that having safer rental properties would actually increase demand, above and beyond the demand created from more people living in rental units generally, because it becomes a viable living option as opposed to where people end-up after being cornered out of the housing market.

These changes could be a guide for other jurisdictions, including Alberta and BC, in terms of the attitude presented towards home modifications. It was generally understood that to make rental units more tenable, they had to be able to change to suit tenants' needs. The ability to baby-proof homes and install fibre-optic cables were not hotly debated topics, and were rather considered to be natural and inevitable given the proportion of children living in rental homes and societal technological advancements. However, the number of public submissions to parliament concerning the bill was very high, and in jurisdictions with less obvious tenancy activism such as Alberta, public engagement with such a bill could be much less substantial, limiting its ability to pass in the legislature.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

This report provided an overview of research on home-making from both housing and art history perspectives. This report also outlined the rights and responsibilities of tenants in Alberta and British Columbia, with insights from housing providers. The common research methodology of photo-elicitation was critiqued, and Reddit home decor threads served as an example of rental tenants creatively circumventing home-making constraints. Finally, New Zealand's *Residential Tenancies Act 1986, No. 120* showed how an RTA could be amended successfully to support tenants.

As demonstrated in this report, rental tenants are limited in their ability to engage with home-making practices, despite there being a broad understanding of its importance. These limitations primarily come from landlords fearing damage to units, policies and legislation that protect landlords, and the social perception of rental housing as being temporary. Additionally, these limitations can decrease tenancy length as a result of tenants' frustration about lack of agency and inability to personalize their own space. Lease renewal can also be affected, in the case of landlords taking action against tenants for violating rules on home-making activities, or tenants being evicted for failure to comply with cleanliness standards. Overall, these limitations likely lead to increased housing precarity because where a tenant will be

living and how long they will be living there becomes more uncertain. These are suggestions to respond to these issues:

- Increase the academic attention payed to how rental tenants decorate and home-make

- Utilize photo-elicitation to investigate renters' home-making practices, but with an understanding that the act of taking a photograph is in itself an area of investigation

- Amend Alberta and B.C.'s tenancy legislation in order to allow and support tenants' ability to modify their homes, following the New Zealand example.

- Create and support tenants' unions in Alberta in order to assist policy changes concerning tenants' rights and ability to home-make

- Formalize and reorganize dispute resolution between landlords and tenants in order to make disputes less likely to be dealt with informally; perhaps guidelines surrounding home-making shared across multiple housing providers within a province, for example.

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