

- Tools for equality: A gender-based perspective for the City
- Cities initiatives: Examples of good practices

The publication will be available in English, French and Spanish. Contact Catherine Seaborn at cseaborn@fcm.ca for a copy. An electronic version will also be available later in 2004 on the ICMD web site <http://www.icmd-cidm.ca/>

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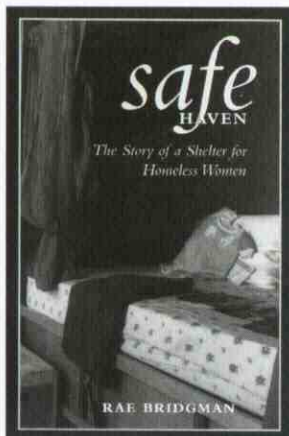
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SAFE HAVEN The Story of a Woman's Shelter

Rae Bridgman

University of Toronto Press, 160pp, CAD \$21.95 paperback

Reviewed by Sylvia Novac



This ethnographic account by Rae Bridgman is a vivid description of the conception, birth, and early life of an "experimental alternative to the street or traditional hostel or shelter models" for chronically homeless women in Toronto, Canada. Based on years of painstaking participant observation, interviews and staff records, Bridgman unfolds the unique story of how the Women's Street Survivor Project responded to a gap in services for the most forgotten, if not forsaken, women

— those living on the street.

A group of front-line workers formed the Women's Street Survivor Project to devise a solution that would respect these women's experiences, coping techniques, and preferences. Determined to create and maintain a non-institutional, flexible shelter service, the project's initiators assiduously avoided pre-conceived assumptions about what homeless women needed and wanted. The project would have few rules or sanctions, no limits on length of stay, and no expectations of change.

Once opened, ten women settled into the project that came to be called Savard's. Within a large communal space that included a kitchen, bath facilities, and a staff room, the residents slept and stored their belongings in three-sided 'nooks' whose design accommodated their need for privacy

and their fear of enclosed spaces. Architect's drawings and photos, such as that on the book cover, show how the nook design evolved and give the reader a visual sense of the building and space in which Savard's was developed.

Throughout the book, fundamental dilemmas are explored by the author and highlighted by the use of quotes from staff and residents. The primary thread is the tension over faithful adherence to the original ideal of "non-intervention" and zero eviction versus staff desires to improve the women's health and quality of life, and to balance the interests of the individual and the group in a communal setting, within a context of organizational restructuring and insecure funding. A related theme is the "fluid" nature of Savard's as a hostel, transitional housing, or permanent home in the perceptions of residents, staff, and founders.

In a chapter entitled "Come Inside," a compilation of staff log notes offers a compelling 'fly on the wall' record of daily life at Savard's. Snatches of the daily doings of each of the residents and their interactions with each other and with the staff evolve into a dramatic narrative.

Bridgman's analysis shows how various factors affect a project such as this: "the political, economic, and policy contexts in which the service arises, the perspectives of the actors engaged in developing the service, the specific group [of service users], and the fact that those using the service can equally well transform [it]" (p. 127).

Bridgman masterfully reveals the complexity of translating a feminist service philosophy into a reality and documents the pressures and shifts that tempered the service during its first few years of existence. Her use of ethnographic techniques provides the reader with a sense of immediacy, of almost being there oneself to experience critical and revealing moments as she witnessed them.

HABITAT DEBATE The electronic Newsletter of the UN Human Settlements Programme

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Vol 8 No 4 www.unhabitat.org/hd/hdv8n4/default.asp focuses on Women-friendly Cities and a full range of women's issues in cities around the world with many interesting and illustrated articles. Unfortunately a gender analysis or perspective is missing as a consistent component in every issue. Yet, it does present an excellent resource for urbanists around the world; it's a pity that no hard copy is available.

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