



Book reviews

Safe Haven: The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women.

Rae Bridgman. (2003) Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

This thoughtfully written book uses ethnographic research data to tell the story of Savard's, an alternative shelter program for "hard-to-house" chronically homeless mentally ill women in Toronto, Canada. Four years of field research is synthesized to record the evolution of this feminist-based alternative shelter model, from its conception as an innovative demonstration project through its initial implementation and programmatic transitions.

This book is recommended for students of sociology, anthropology and social work, as well as beginning ethnographic researchers, who are interested in glimpsing the challenges and excitement of long-term fieldwork and qualitative research. The author successfully captures "ethnography in action" as she describes the process of discovery in the field and creatively reports what happens when fieldwork is done. As noted by the author, *Safe Haven* is also "written for those who want to learn more about the work being done to help homeless women and to inspire other initiatives to help women street survivors".

The author acknowledges several challenges to and limitations of this research study, including: perceived intrusiveness, distrust and concerns about privacy noted by staff and residents; the possible confounding influence of another small evaluation study that was conducted during a period of the fieldwork; the slanted view of written documents used in the analysis, as they reported events from the perception of the staff recording the incidents; and the necessity for the researcher to renegotiate her presence

with "new players" as Savard's experienced organizational restructuring, high staff turnover and funding uncertainties.

The first chapter introduces the reader to Savard's innovative self-governance model, used to help hard-to-serve homeless mentally ill women transition from street life to more permanent housing. Savard's was designed to provide a flexible, non-judgmental, low-demand, highly supportive living environment. This alternative housing model attempts to implement avant-garde policies, including non-barring or zero eviction, non-intervention, few rules, no expectation for change and no time limit for stay. A two-person female-only staff is available to the women 24 hours a day.

The author describes two uniting themes that guide the storytelling and analysis of Savard's: "Utopian Pragmatics" and "ethnography in action". Utopian Pragmatics refers to the tension between the vision of an ideal feminist-based "safe haven" for homeless women and the reality-based constraints of day-to-day living within this alternative housing model. The "ethnography in action" theme reveals the culture of shelter life at Savard's through the use of passages from fieldnotes, informal interviews with residents, staff, administrators and other service providers, excerpts from transcriptions of development and staff meetings, and simulated logbook entries.

The second chapter provides a colorful narrative of the author's experience accompanying two outreach workers as they seek to identify and build relationships with chronically homeless women who might qualify for shelter at Savard's. The chapter briefly describes poignant scenes of life on the street as experienced by these elusive and adaptively distrustful homeless women. The author authentically portrays the challenges

involved and the patience required for outreach workers to make meaningful connections with women street survivors.

The next chapter reviews the literature on homelessness in Canada with a focus on mental illness as an important risk factor. It also describes the lives of homeless women and briefly surveys existing facilities that serve them. The chapter provides a larger context for the story of Savard's to answer the question, "Why do we need Savard's or other women-only emergency facilities and sex-segregated housing?".

The next two chapters document and analyze the initial planning discussions and decisions about the establishment of Savard's. Excerpts from initial planning team meetings of the Women's Street Survivor Group provide insights into the myriad and complex issues that must be considered in order to envision and launch a "radical alternative to current paradigms of shelter provisions for chronically homeless women in Toronto" (p. 45). When the founding ideals, called "First Principles", are detailed, it becomes very clear that a strengths perspective guided the planning group's vision. The author also chronicles the discussion of how the physical space should be designed to reflect the vision and philosophy of the project. Specifically, the planning team grappled with how the space could embody the founding ideas about a low-demand and highly supportive environment. The floor plan and pictures of the space after construction reveal how the final design evolved from the discussions and research of the planning team. Strategies for recruiting staff that would embrace and could implement the philosophy of Savard's are also discussed in this chapter.

The next chapter simulates a week of entries written by Savard's staff in

the daily logbook. This interesting and engaging chapter seeks to convey “the daily cyclical rhythms of life at Savards” (p. 77). The simulated logbook provides insightful descriptions of the cadence of the house, relationships among residents and between residents and staff. While the logbook is maintained for purposes of surveillance, organizational accountability and a means of communication for staff, it still provides reality-based glimpses of how Savard’s offers its residents a “safe haven” as they continue high risk behaviors and cope with the challenges of street life (e.g., prostitution, arrest, alcohol and other drug abuse, physical and mental illness).

The seventh chapter explores “shifts in the operation of Savard’s, as staff worked daily with the original vision” (p. 101). The author reviews both expected and unanticipated changes in the program model of Savard’s as it transitioned from a pilot project to a government-funded program under the auspices of the Homes First Society. Programmatic changes were influenced by funding agency mandates, changes in administrative management and staff that embraced different views of service delivery, especially regarding non-intervention.

The final chapter presents brief profiles of three Savard’s residents to illustrate how some women were able to stabilize their lives. This chapter offers some lessons learned from the Savard’s model and identifies conditions that hinder or facilitate interventions. Challenges in evaluating the success of this alternative housing model are also discussed. Unfortunately, this concluding chapter falls short of providing a well-developed analysis of the rich qualitative data reported throughout the book. Only 10 pages are reserved to review lessons learned and the discussion is more descriptive than analytical. No recommendations for “best practice” strategies for serving chronically homeless women are provided and the author proposes no clear direction for future research.

In sum, even with the notable shortcoming of the final chapter, *Safe Haven* offers readers an informative glance at homelessness and shelter life

for women, an intriguing “insiders” view of the evolution of an innovative program, and a scholar’s thoughtful discourse on the challenges and rewards of extended ethnographic research.

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Suburban Xanadu: The Casino Resort on the Las Vegas Strip and Beyond.

Schwartz, David G. (2003) New York and London: Routledge.

My own experiences with the world of casino gambling, presumably like most middle-class Americans, have been few and are difficult to categorize: forays into tribal casinos currently mushrooming across the Pacific Northwest, nicotine-enshrouded industrial casinos in downtown Detroit (one in an old Wonder Bread factory), and childhood memories of trips to the desert oasis that was Las Vegas—the *old* Las Vegas. I once even spent a virtually incomprehensible 17 hours on a bus seated next to a teenage Mormon heroin addict with a gambling problem from (where else?) Las Vegas. In other words, we need people like David Schwartz to make sense of the formidable presence of gambling in the American landscape. In *Suburban Xanadu: The Casino Resort on the Las Vegas Strip and Beyond*, his highly engaging new book, he provides the beginnings of a framework to help situate places like Las Vegas (and people like the Mormon heroin addict) within a more nuanced interpretative framework. He argues that gambling as it has evolved throughout the 20th century can best be understood as a quarantine process, an enforced shift from an increasingly vice-ridden and uncontrollable urban phenomenon to an isolated, carefully packaged suburban

entertainment zone located at a safe distance from the rest of life.

Schwartz is above all an historian, trained in American history at UCLA. *Suburban Xanadu* is best approached as a history of the classic Las Vegas casino resort from its inception in the early 1940s through the 1970s. Schwartz traces ‘resort’ construction as part of three broader overlapping trends pioneered on the Las Vegas Strip: gambling as an increasingly suburban phenomenon, the resort as the quintessential architectural style to support it, and the hyperreality of a simulacra-based lifestyle. After briefly introducing the landscape of American gambling before World War II in general, and Nevada’s peculiar take on it in particular, Schwartz devotes an entire chapter to a careful and finely grained reconstruction of the conditions surrounding the development of the Strip’s first three resorts, the El Rancho Vegas (1941), the Hotel Last Frontier (1942), and the Flamingo (1946), in order to demonstrate that to treat the better known “Bugsy Siegel” Flamingo as the first true casino on the Strip, as is commonly done, is to miss virtually every important trend launched before it. Subsequent chapters likewise detail resort design (and endless redesign), construction, ownership, operations and management, and social landscapes against the (mostly archival and descriptive) backcloth of broader political, economic, and cultural processes. Schwartz depicts the 1950s entrenchment of the resort formula as a direct by-product of McCarthy-era anti-gambling sentiment, especially as manifested in the hands of Estes Kefauver’s Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce. As both national and local anti-gambling efforts drove bookmaking, slot machines, and other illegal gambling activities out of urban centers, Las Vegas enjoyed unprecedented growth. Schwartz also repeatedly points to the emerging post-war suburban ethos as a crucial factor in Las Vegas’s success; Las Vegas, he argues, boomed because of consumer demand from a nation of suburbanites eager to condone and participate in gambling and its related sex trade vices, as long as it could be