

A house of last resort

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Michael's rooming house just south of Sargent Avenue in the Spence neighbourhood is ground zero for one of the city's most intractable and often tragic social policy problems, one that's shifting into a full-blown crisis thanks to Winnipeg's real estate boom.

Michael lives on a block with 19 other rooming houses, the biggest concentration in the neighbourhood. Even the longtime home of legendary Free Press editor John Dafoe is among them.

And, Michael's neighbourhood has the most rooming houses in Winnipeg at nearly 120.

His is one of the more troublesome ones, bedevilled by crack dealers and addicts, young prostitutes and the kind of dreary dilapidation that breeds conflict among residents. Cockroaches and bedbugs compete for insect domination. There is no real caretaker, and the landlords are so absentee that residents joke they must be in the Cayman Islands. The only way to contact them is to leave a note in the safe where rent cheques are dropped.

But, shuttering the Spence Street mansion would make at least 18 people homeless.

As bad as it is, the three-storey warren of rooms represent a proper roof for some of the city's most vulnerable, hardest-to-house people — not lazy welfare bums, mostly, but folks who have obvious mental or cognitive problems, chronic addictions like the young Red Seal welder who works just enough to support his crack habit, or who have weathered hardships and violence that most suburbanites cannot fathom.

"Rooming houses are a last resort for a lot of people, the only option," said Mary Burton, the rental housing worker at the Spence Neighbourhood Association. "You can't judge a person by where they live. You don't know what their story is."

For more on this story, [click here](#).

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