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By Nathan Crompton

Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward (as when Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, "Well said, old mole! canst work i' the ground so fast?") until grown strong in itself it bursts asunder the crust of earth which divided it from the sun, its Notion, so that the earth crumbles away.

- Hegel

The old mole follows unseen routes that do not obey any historic law. In certain moments – moments that are accidental? advantageous to its interests? – the old mole emerges without warning, all the more unannounced since "moles don't use systems."[1] By the same unforseen movement, the mole returns to its sub-earthly existence to build its channels and dwell in its place as the absent figure of history.

To say that the old mole is the absent figure of history is to say that it is its absent cause; propelling history and yet seeing without being seen. In the illusory harmony of the City there has always lurked what Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg called, following Hegel, the old mole: "We recognize our old friend, our old mole, who knows so well how to work underground, suddenly to appear: the revolution." In today's paradisiac consensus of colonial land grabs and renovicted seniors with all their belongings under one arm, are there also faint points of weakness in the system? Are there, as Sergio Bologna once said, "entry holes through which the mole has started to dig once again"?[2]

The housing movement in Vancouver has always moved according to the logic of the old mole. In the face of an imagined state of balance that never existed, the struggle for housing represents a blind spot in the tunnel vi-

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1   Christian Schulte and Rainer Stollmann, "Moles Don't Use Systems: A Conversation with Oskar Negt," *October 149,* Summer 2014, 69-88.

2   Sergio Bologna, "The Tribe of Moles" in *Italy: Autonomia,* ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (New York: Semiotext(e), 1980), 50-52.

sion of middle-class history. This struggle has been at times explosive, and at other times marked by a slow but persistent energy. In the 1940s groups like the Vancouver Housing Association (VHA) and the '5,000 Homes Now!' coalition forced the housing issue into existence, leading to the creation of social housing projects like Little Mountain public housing. The VHA had been created in 1937-38 on a wave of class struggle coinciding with the election of feminist socialist Helena Gutteridge to Vancouver city council. Yet in 1939 Gutteridge was defeated by the NPA (Non-Partisan Association) and the movement went underground. "Activism faded between 1940 and 1943," according to historian Jill Wade, "but never actually died."[3] This uneven logic had been familiar from the intermittent upheavals of the interwar period, with strikes at Ballantyne Pier (1935), the uprising of the relief camp workers in the early '30s, the Vancouver Museum occupation (1935), as well as the Vancouver Post Office occupation (1938), to invoke only a few instances of working-class insubordination.

After the Gutteridge period, the early 1940s were a moment of "relative quiet," which continued during the postwar demobilization.[4] And yet the movement erupted with the occupation of the Hotel Vancouver in 1946, and a new cycle of struggle with the Communist-led demand for '5,000 Homes Now!' The liberal state responded with a set of counter-measures to control the market and experiment with Modernist mass housing. Contrary to what is often claimed, Vancouver's belated Modernism did not emerge from an autonomous and top-down Keynesian

imperative, but was a much more complex and symptomatic phenomenon propelled from below. Modernism is also often stripped of its political subtext and characterized strictly as a design paradigm, or alternatively as a building technology, each modelled on the European interwar avant-garde. In reality it emerged as a defensive act in multiple local contexts, as a re-grouping of state power in the context of the escalated agitation of the masses both

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3   Jill Wade, *Houses for All: The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver, 1919-50, (*Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), 138.
4   Ibid., 115.

Fig. 1. Roy Arden; *Rupture, detail 1,* 1985, http://www.royarden.com/pages/archival.html; photograph.

Fig. 2. Roy Arden; *Rupture, detail 2,* 1985, http://www.royarden.com/pages/archival.html; photograph.

Fig. 3. Roy Arden; *Rupture, detail 3,* 1985, http://www.royarden.com/pages/archival.html; photograph.

Fig. 4. Stan Douglas; *Ballantyne Pier, 18 June 1935,* 2008, https://www.hasselbladfoundation.org/wp/portfolio_page/stan-doug-las-2/; digital c-print mounted on Dibond aluminum.

inside and outside the trade unions. In this way the fight for housing was registered symptomatically since, as Sepake Angiama recently put it, "rights are an invisible aspect of architecture."[5]

From 1945–46, mass agitation and demonstrations became increasingly widespread and ungovernable. With the occupation of the Hotel Vancouver a new antagonism emerged, shaped by the reactive adaptations of the state, on one side, and the affirmative deepening of popular sovereignty on the other.[6] The gap between the masses and government widened to a point of crisis, with letters exchanged between local officials and federal ministers revealing fears of "insurrection."[7] In this period the state was forced into its role as "planner state" (*Stato piano*), defined by Antonio Negri as a "new class dynamic at work within the framework of state interventionism."[8] During the World War years the national security threat was posed internationally but then became transposed as an internal menace after the war, reconstituted as the threat of communism."[9] In 1948, Leonard Marsh summarized the function of the new state relation in a talk delivered to the CBC, where he called for the entrenchment of liberal planning as a safeguard against working-class organization: "Democratic national planning is the strongest of all bulwarks against communism."

The Marsh plan for Vancouver's Strathcona, to take one instance, was

5   Sepake Angiama, "No Land Beyond" (Chicago Architecture Biennial at 221a, Vancouver, Roundtable discussion, January 15, 2019).

6   Jill Wade, "A Palace for the Public: Housing Reform and the 1946 Occupation of the Old Hotel Vancouver" in *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History*, ed. Robert A. J. McDonald, Jean Barman (Canada: UBC Press, 1986), 288 – 310.

7   In their dispatches and correspondences of the middle 1940s, "[Minister] MacKenzie and local officials feared public insurrection at the failure of privately funded low-rental housing projects." *The New Spirit*, 184 (f.n. 68).

8   Toni Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State" (1968) in *Revolution Retrieved: Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects, 1967-83* (London: Red Notes, 1988), 22.

9   Harold Butler: "the very security of the state…[now] depend[s] not only on the inviolability of its frontiers but upon its ability to provide an orderly and sufficient existence to its citizens." quoted in *The New Spirit, (*Ibid.), 64.

equal parts racialized urban renewal, social democratic urban planning, and historic redemption of the class system on the part of a newly reorganized ruling elite. It was, as Nancy Shaw and Sianne Ngai put it, "deployed by planners in the interests of neutralizing class antagonisms and maintaining a pre-existing social order."[10] In this context

of intensified Cold War anti-communism, the 1950s would become a period of apparent stasis and compromise. This meant the partial retreat of the old mole, particularly after the normalization of labour relations following a series of strikes in the early part of the post-war period. The 1950s would be remembered as a period when negotiations gradually came to take precedent over bottom up rank-and-file organization, when "contracts, not combativity, become sacrosanct."[11]

The housing militancy of the 1960s and 70s was part of a re-awakening of the combative spirit, and in 1968 the Vancouver Tenant Council was established. The Tenant Council was part of a broader moment of class antagonism that included a wave of rent strikes throughout Vancouver. The strikes and related economic actions (pickets, boycotts, etc.) culminated in partial victory in the 1970s. This period witnessed the birth of significant rent control legislation and other pro-tenant measures, first at the local and then provincial level.[12] Landed elites and the bourgeoisie more generally attempted to re-assert their control in the settler colonial context, but precisely at this moment the colonial system came under pressure by subaltern anti-colonial movements. Indigenous organization was at a new height in Vancouver following rejection of the White Paper in 1969-70. In addition to local urban Aboriginal organizing associated with the red power groups, the Vancouver Indian Centre, and in 1973 the American Indian Movement, this period also witnessed the formation of the new "big organizations" in British

10   Sianne Ngai and Nancy Shaw, "Site/Stake/Struggle: Stan Douglas's Win, Place or Show" in *Double Vision: Stan Douglas and Douglas Gordon* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2000), 25.
11   Bryan Palmer, *Operation Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987),16.
12   Bruce York, "The Tenant Movement in B.C. from 1968 to 1978," *The Mainlander*, November 9, 2012. http://themainlander.com/2012/11/09/the-tenant-movement-in-b-c-from-1968-to-1978/
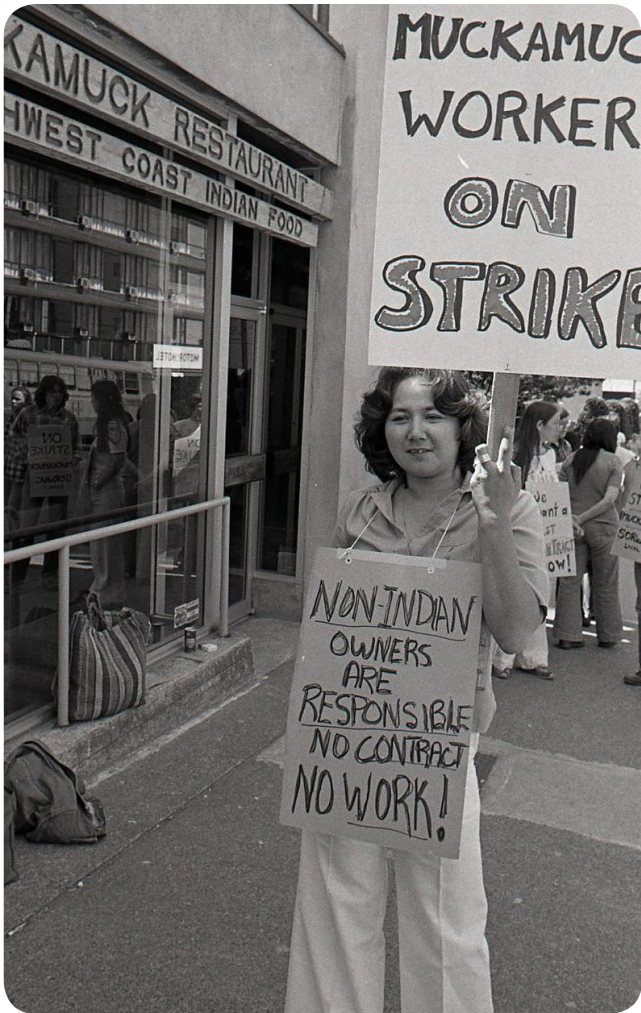
Fig. 6. Unknown; "Muckamuck Strikers March, Downtown Vancouver"; *Pacific Tribune,* 12 August 1978, https://digital.lib.sfu.ca/pt-1274/muckamuck-strikers-march-downtown-vancouver; photograph.

Fig. 5. Unknown; "Muckamuck Strike Opening"; *Pacific Tribune,* 2 June 1978, https://digital.lib.sfu.ca/pt-2471/muckamuck-strike-opening; photograph.

Fig. 7. Unknown; "Muckamuck Restaurant Strike Begins"; *Pacfic Tribune,* 4 June 1978, https://digital.lib.sfu.ca/pt-2474/muckamuck-restaurant-strike-begins, photograph.

Columbia between 1969 and 1971, opening another chapter in the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty.[13]

This era should specifically be recalled for the creation of new forms of overlapping struggle, captured in events such as the Muckamuck Restaurant dispute, where feminist, trade union, and First Nations working-class activists sustained a three-year strike and picket action at the site of their former employer.[14] The late 1970s and early 1980s were marked by the simultaneous growth of organized labour, on the one hand, and other forms of "community" organizing outside the official trade unions, including the Canadian Farmworkers' Union. These overlapping struggles helped build unity in the period leading to the General Strike of 1983, also known as "Operation Solidarity."

In the decades after the defeats of 1983, movements have often been stuck in a defensive position, fighting against the neoliberal roll-back of hard won gains. This has been particularly true for housing struggles. Today the very idea of social housing has been effectively dismantled, both in the absence of funding for mass construction and in the re-definition of social housing as highly controlled and surveilled "supportive" housing, within the broader framework of the neoliberal containment state.[15] Nominally progressive organizations like the NDP, the Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives, or OneCity have abandoned the fight for social housing on a mass scale. While these remnant forces of social democracy remain vaguely attached to

13   Paul Tennant, "The Formation of the New Organizations, 1969–1971," in *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849–1989* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), 151–64. For a brief contextualization of the period see Glen Coulthard, "#IdleNoMore in Historical Context," in *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, ed. Kino-nda-niimi Collective (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2014), 32–36.

14   Janet Mary Nicol, "'Unions Aren't Native': The Muckamuck Restaurant Labour Dispute Vancouver, B.C. (1978–1983)," *Labour/Le Travail, no. 40,* Fall 1997, 235–51.

15   See Jakob Knudsen, "Stranger Than Kindness: Allyship Versus Support in the DTES," *The Mainlander,* March 12, 2019. http://themainlander.com/2019/03/12/stranger-than-kindness-allyship-versus-support-in-the-dtes/; see Aiyanas Ormond, "The emergence of the neoliberal containment state in Canada: Part I," *The Mainlander*, June 13, 2014. http://themainlander.com/2014/06/13/the-emergence-of-the-neoliberal-containment-state-in-canada-part-i/

the theory of progressive taxation for *some* large industries, housing and real-estate are exempt from their program owing to the unique power of the settler-colonial mythology of homeownership and landlord rights.

Yet in moments of creative invention, the old mole has continued to make its entrance, breaking away from defensive and strictly reformist entrapments. In 2002 Indigenous and proletarian forces created Woodsquat, the prolonged winter squat of Woodward's (documented and archived by Sid Chow Tan), which entered like a meteorite in the politics of the city. Indigenous women led the Olympic Village tent city in February 2010, followed by the revolt of May 15, 2010 when the disaffected masses stormed the grand opening of the Olympic Village, after promised social housing units were sold off as market condos. The May 15 confrontation forced the city to lock down all Open House suites and cut short the international sales event for the day.

Today the old mole is finding its way to the surface in yet another conjuncture. In Vancouver, and beyond its artifical borders, we are witnessing a constellation of spontaneous resistance and new mass organizations — from the Vancouver Tenants Union to the Alliance Against Displacement, and in the DTES the Our Homes Can't Wait coalition, the SRO Collaborative, and the numerous Chinatown organizations (Action Group, Concern Group, etc). In our new context we might look at the horizon ahead while casting an eye back at the traces left by previous incarnations of struggle. They reveal that when it strikes, the old mole hits its target.

Produced in Response to:

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