

REPORT:
SASKATOON URBAN ABORIGINAL
DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT

KIRSTEN ANDERSON, B.F.A.

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A project of the Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing, an initiative of the Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) Program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)

Background

The Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing, an initiative of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, anticipated the need for quality documentary photography of Aboriginal housing and living conditions in Saskatoon. Such photographs could be used in displays at conferences, special exhibits, brochures, posters, and publications of the Project. It was felt that documentary photography could be an important – in some senses (“a picture is worth 1000 words”) the best – way to describe urban Aboriginal life, compared to surveys and written commentaries.

Following receipt of a formal proposal dated April 26, 2002 for a documentary photography project, the Management Committee of the Project contracted Kirsten Anderson, BFA to photograph various aspects of Aboriginal life in Saskatoon. The initial draft of the contract was submitted by Dr. Alan Anderson, Research Director of the Bridges and Foundations Project, July 1, 2002 and approved by the committee July 22. The contract specified the financial limits of this particular project after negotiating various estimates for the photographing , developing and printing with the photographer. A further contract governing specific requisitions of prints for display and publicity purposes was approved May 5, 2003; this contract reserved the first right of printing and copyright to the photographer, in accordance with conventional artistic rights.

Kirsten Anderson, a graduate of the photography program in the School of Fine Arts at Concordia University, was a former resident of Saskatoon familiar with the city’s neighbourhoods. She returned to Saskatoon on a two-month assignment to carry out this project during July and August 2002, and later continued this work during December.

The Work

The assignment involved photographing: first, housing types (abandoned properties, homes in disrepair, apartment blocks, as well as better quality homes); second, housing provided by partner organizations (eg. Quint, Sunridge, Central Urban Metis Federation Inc., Cress/Saskatoon Tribal Council, etc.); third, housing conditions (interior dilapidation, mold, overcrowding, and better conditions); fourth, urban Aboriginal life and social problems in general (residents, families, children, elderly, street scenes indicative of inner-city living); fifth, development of Aboriginal infrastructure in the city (educational institutions, community centres, financial services, etc.).

Results

In sum, 491 black and white photographs and 20 colour photographs were taken, comprising an informative and diverse documentary record of Aboriginal life in Saskatoon. Contact sheets of all photographs commissioned are retained in the archives of the Bridges and Foundations Project.

Ethical Guidelines

In accordance with standard ethical guidelines, permission forms (sample appended) were signed by all human subjects who allowed photographs to be randomly taken in their homes, with the understanding that these photographs could be used in Project reports, exhibits, brochures, posters, and publications. Absolute confidentiality was ensured, in that these subjects would not be personally identified (of course, unless they were recognized by someone viewing the photographs). All of these people photographed at home gave their permission without specifying any qualifications of how the photographs could be used (if used for these express purposes). Much interest was shown for the Bridges and Foundations Project. In turn, the Project is most appreciative of the remarkable generosity and openness shown by these residents. Street scenes could,

and did, include human subjects; however such photographs were not considered in any sense an intrusion on people's privacy. Nevertheless, these photographs were not used if the people in them did not want them to be used; and the photographer always attempted to talk to people being photographed and to secure their approval.

Exhibits and Other Uses of the Photographs

To date, photographs have been selected for three exhibits at conferences:

The Aboriginal Policy Research Conference, Ottawa, Nov. 25-28, 2002.

CUExpo, Community-University Institute for Social Research, Saskatoon, May 8-10, 2003.

Bridges and Foundations Conference, Saskatoon, Nov. 1-3, 2004.

In addition, photographs from this collection have been used in the Project brochure, in several posters, and are expected to be used in the final report and further publications.