

You can sell a house, but you can't sell a home

by Sabine Eiche

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Speaking on 5 June about supporting a house flipping tax, Gregor Robertson, mayor of Vancouver, said: "First and foremost, housing needs to be for homes, not just treated as a commodity." I was relieved – not because of the tax, but because finally someone has sensed there's a difference between house and home.

Every word has a distinct meaning. In spite of what realtors claim in their ads, it's houses they sell, not homes. Home is an abstract noun, referring to something intangible, such as a concept or condition. House is a concrete noun – it's tangible, you can touch a house. The words home and house are not interchangeable – you can't say houseland for homeland, or housetown for hometown.

So, what is a home, if it's not the same as a house? The American poet Edgar Guest (1881-1959) summed it up in his poem entitled "Home," in particular in two of the lines: "Home ain't a place that gold can buy or get up in a minute" and "It takes a heap o' livin' in a house t' make it home."

A house is a structure built with a variety of materials. A house becomes a home when it's inhabited, when it shelters the occupants. But a home doesn't have to be in a house – it could be in a tent or trailer, for instance. Also animals make homes, inhabiting caves, trees, constructing nests, lodges, and so forth.

There is only one word for home, but there are many words for house, describing the different types of constructions humans build. When reading the classified ads in early twentieth-century editions of the Richmond paper, I found mention not only of houses but also cottages, bungalows and shacks.

Shack, especially, tickled my curiosity. Perhaps derived from the Aztec “xacatli” (wooden hut), shack was North American slang for house by 1910. A late nineteenth-century drawing at the University of Saskatchewan, showing the interior of a small log cabin, is identified on the back as depicting “a typical bachelor shack,” with the additional information that “most western men have lived in just such a shack.” Richmond Archives possesses two photographs (1893 and ca. 1910) of bachelor shacks formerly located on No. 2 Road.

North Americans nowadays use the word cottage mostly to mean their vacation house, but originally cottage (a Late Middle English word) was a humble dwelling, akin to a hut or shed (the word cote, as in dovecote, is related to cottage). By 1765, cottage described a small country residence, though in early twentieth-century Richmond it’s likely to have been a modest house surrounded by gardens.

The word bungalow, in use since 1676, comes from the Hindi “bangla,” meaning Bengalese. It referred to the type of low house built in Bengal for European settlers. We use bungalow to mean a one-storey house, and it’s the descriptor appearing most often in Richmond’s early ads.

But soon, the last of Richmond’s indigenous homey houses will be crunched into extinction, because Richmond’s ubiquitous house type is now the McMansion, described by Oxford Dictionary as a “large modern house that is considered ostentatious and lacking in architectural integrity.”