



Figure 1: Architectural Perspective (photo: John Duerksen)

SUITEHOM: A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE MODEL FOR SECONDARY SUITES IN WINNIPEG

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ABSTRACT

A unique model of providing affordable housing for Manitobans is being developed in Winnipeg. *Suitehom* is a social enterprise which will support an existing and expanding complex trauma and addiction focused gang exit program called *About Face*. Former gang members are often marginalized from mainstream society and the workforce. Upon completion of the *About Face* program, *Suitehom* will engage participants in building infill housing, providing them with meaningful employment opportunities, on-the-job training and continued care, while also increasing the stock of affordable housing in Manitoba. This case-in-point examines *Suitehom's* model, the collaboration needed to make it possible, and lessons learnt through the development process.

Background & Context

More and more Winnipeggers are being priced out of the housing market. Winnipeg experiences a slower pace of growth and less development pressure than cities with the hottest housing markets, like Toronto and Vancouver. Even so, the disparity is growing between the amount low-income Winnipeggers receive from low-wage employment and income supplements and the cost of private market rental units¹. Historically, social housing has helped to fill this gap, by giving Winnipeggers access to subsidized housing provided by governments and non-profit organizations. Across Canada, social housing operating agreements between the Federal government and non-profit housing providers are expiring, and non-profit housing providers must raise rents to compensate for the losses in funding². In Manitoba, the provincial government has also reduced investment in social housing and sold off some of their portfolio in recent years³. Together, these trends have made it more difficult for the poorest Winnipeggers to access adequate, safe and affordable housing.



Figure 2: 185 Smith St, sold by Manitoba Housing in 2018 (Source: CBC News)

Recent initiatives have begun to recognize that without renewed support for affordable housing and innovative solutions, more vulnerable families and individuals will end up homeless or living in inadequate, unsafe or unaffordable units in the private market. In 2017, the Government of Canada announced its first *National Housing Strategy*, committing 40 billion to affordable housing over ten years⁴. There is increasing support for the recognition of shelter as a human right, and for *Housing First* initiatives, which enable some of the most marginalized Canadians to move from homelessness into stable accommodation with wrap-around supports. In Manitoba, *Rent Assist*, a monthly benefit which was previously available only to individuals on *Employment and Income Assistance*, has been extended to other low-income families renting in the private market⁵.

Housing is not the only aspect of development being recognized as unaffordable. Municipalities are beginning to recognize that the typical suburban pattern of expansion is impacting their ability to sustain existing infrastructure, and many have developed policies and incentives to promote infill development in older neighbourhoods. Currently, the City of Winnipeg is developing its first *Residential Infill Strategy*, which will bring together and build on previous initiatives to support infill development in the city⁶. One of the existing initiatives is zoning that is increasingly supportive of secondary suites, private self-contained units which are either attached to an owner-occupied single-family home or located on a lot which has an owner-occupied single-family home⁷. Winnipeg's *Zoning By-law* was amended in 2006 to allow attached secondary suites, and in 2012 to allow detached secondary suites,

both as conditional uses⁸. The Government of Manitoba has recognized secondary suites as an opportunity to increase affordable housing stock, and now provide a matching grant of up to \$35,000 per unit for homeowners who build secondary suites and sign an agreement to keep them occupied and affordable for a minimum of 10 years⁹.

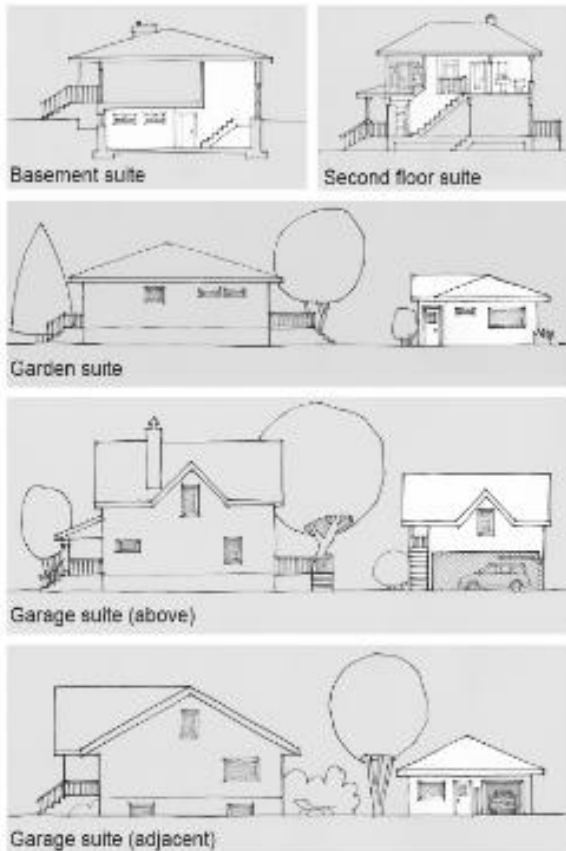


Figure 3: Examples of Secondary Suites
(Source: City of Winnipeg)

Winnipeg does not only have an affordable housing problem. Gang activity and drug use are also on the rise¹⁰. An ongoing meth crisis has led to increases in property and violent crime¹¹. The problem is not disassociated from the issues which cause unaffordability in the housing market. The root of all these issues is poverty and the complex trauma, addictions, and marginalization that go along

with it. While low-income individuals are priced out of the housing market, they are also marginalized when it comes to employment and educational opportunities, especially if they have a criminal record¹². Few meaningful employment and training opportunities exist for former gang members and others reintegrating into society after incarceration. In Winnipeg, a few positive examples of organizations which work to bridge this gap exist, including *BUILD* and *Manitoba Green Retrofit*, which provide employment and training for individuals facing barriers to employment¹³.

Facts of the Case

Achieving financial stability is challenging for non-profits. Agencies are often pitted against each other, vying for the same limited funding dollars. There simply aren't enough grants available to support all the community initiatives, which are so important in helping people overcome poverty, addictions, and other challenges.



Figure 4: Suitehom Logo (designed by Alyssa Schatz)

Social enterprises can help non-profits survive while providing marginalized individuals with meaningful employment and training opportunities. This is exactly what *Suitehom* hopes to achieve. The project was

developed to support an existing and expanding gang exit program called *About Face*¹⁴. *About Face* works with men as they recover from addictions, incarceration, and complex trauma. The program is the brainchild of Mike Millard, a former addict who uses his lived experience to help others overcome many of the same challenges he did. It has received support from the *Winnipeg Police Service Endowment Fund*, the *United Way*, and *Assiniboine Credit Union*. To support their plan to construct a 28-bed residential treatment centre for *About Face*, Mike and others developed *Suitehom*, which will enable men in the program to gain important employment skills while providing affordable housing to the broader community.

conditional uses, but detached secondary suites must meet additional standards, and a public hearing is always required. Matching funds of up to \$35,000 per unit are available from the Province of Manitoba¹⁶.



Figure 6: Mike Millard discusses dimensions of shipping containers (CBC News)



Figure 5: Suitehom Architectural Perspective with partners recognized (supplied by Mike Millard)

Suitehom will take advantage of financial support provided by the Province of Manitoba for secondary suites, and increasing support from the City of Winnipeg’s *Planning, Property and Development* department, to engage former gang members in the construction of shipping container secondary suites. Winnipeg’s zoning regulations allow homeowners to apply to build both attached and detached secondary suites¹⁵. Both are

While they have not made it to Winnipeg yet, shipping container homes are popular in other cities and have also been used in the construction of multi-family housing¹⁷, something which Mike is considering for the treatment centre. *Suitehom* has garnered support from construction companies and professionals who have donated their time



Figure 7: Supportive Housing Facility constructed from shipping containers, Vancouver, BC (Atira Women’s Resource Centre)

and materials to build the first shipping container home prototype, which will be on display at *Canadian Mennonite University* later this year. In attracting partners, the *Suitehom* team has pitched the initiative as a marketing opportunity and a way for companies and professionals to increase their corporate social responsibility.

Anticipated Benefits

Since the project is still in development, it's far too early to evaluate its impacts. Despite this, it is important to note the broad impacts which the project is expected to have:

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Funding from the Province of Manitoba requires that homeowners who build secondary suites keep them affordable for at least ten years¹⁸. *Suitehom* is not designating where units will be located, so the initiative has the potential to create affordable housing which is integrated throughout a variety of neighbourhoods in Winnipeg, and across Manitoba.



Figure 8: Infill Housing on Vivian Street in Winnipeg (CBC News)

INCREASED DENSITY

Recently, the City of Winnipeg announced that new guidelines for infill housing may

restrict the size of homes built on older lots, an attempt to ensure new development is consistent with existing neighbourhood character. Secondary suites are an interesting alternative to the large homes and multi-family units which have characterized recent infill projects in Winnipeg, and have garnered backlash from nearby residents¹⁹.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

There are millions of retired shipping containers around the world. While they have not yet been used in residential construction in Winnipeg, there is evidence from other cities that shipping containers can be a cost-effective alternative to using new materials. Small homes built out of shipping containers also have lower heating, cooling, and ventilation costs and a reduced environmental footprint²⁰.

TRAINING & EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

To overcome addiction or leave a life of criminal involvement, individuals must have other goals to aspire to. Work, and especially work that has a social impact can create great meaning in life. *Suitehom* will provide the training, work experience, and references needed for participants to transition into the workforce and overcome the stigma of a criminal record.

REDUCED CRIME & RECIDIVISM

Suitehom will contribute to a reduction in crime and recidivism by giving former gang members an alternative to criminal involvement. *About Face* and *Suitehom* have received support from the *Winnipeg Police Service* and Inspector Max Waddell of the *Organized Crime Unit* sits on the Board of Directors.

Challenges & Lessons Learned

Without access to adequate, safe and affordable housing, other challenges that low-income and marginalized individuals face are exacerbated. Without shelter, taking the difficult steps needed to leave a gang, overcome an addiction, get a job or go back to school, can seem impossible.

For a social enterprise model of affordable housing provision to work, collaboration is needed between stakeholders across public, private and non-profit sectors. *About Face* participants are dealing with complex issues, and the participation of government and non-profit social service providers is integral to their success. Since a lot must happen before the social enterprise aspect of the project kicks in, the involvement of professionals willing to provide their expertise pro bono, and construction companies willing to donate labour and materials, have made the *Suitehom* project viable.



Figure 9: Suitehom Presentation, CMU Centre for Resilience (photo: James Magnus Johnson)

Securing funding for any non-profit project is challenging, especially in the early stages. Funders and partners want to see feasibility studies and business plans before they invest or make in-kind contributions. *Suitehom* has had to be creative in engaging *Canadian Mennonite University's Centre for Resilience*, the construction industry, and other professionals in the project early. These initial partners have helped *Suitehom* demonstrate legitimacy in the project and garner support from others.



Figure 10: Mario Costantini (ADM Storage), Mike Millard (Suitehom), Chief Danny Smyth (Winnipeg Police Service) and Billy Granger (SEED Winnipeg/Wiltshire Business) (photo: Mel Buhler)

A project like this also needs champions, who, at least at first, are not compensated for their time. The fact that this project is volunteer-led has made sustaining momentum difficult. Concurrent development of *About Face* creates other issues, as focus must switch from one project to another at times. Although timelines have had to be extended to accommodate this, both projects continue to move forward.

While people with lived experience are the most informed on what will work when it comes to supporting people experiencing complex trauma, poverty and addictions, they are often marginalized from mainstream society and rarely empowered to take leadership roles in creating solutions. Mike has had to work hard to overcome the stigma which his previous addiction and involvement with the criminal justice system carries. A collaborative planning process, the establishment of a legal non-profit and an application for charitable status have increased legitimacy of the project, and faith in Mike as a capable leader.



Figure 11: Mike Millard, Winnipeg Police Service Press Conference on Winnipeg's Meth Problem (supplied by Mike Millard)

Even for a private developer building market-rate rental units or condominiums, the development process can be complex and arduous. Most retain a planner to assist in navigating the process. Building affordable housing is more challenging because budgets are constrained and there are often governments or non-profits involved in providing subsidies or grants, which come with additional regulations and timelines. For *Suitehom*, this whole process

is being carried out by people who are not planners or developers. They are doing it for the first time and figuring it out as they go along.

The concept of shipping container secondary suites is also untested in the local context, so getting clear information about design guidelines and building codes has been challenging. The *Suitehom* team hopes early engagement with the City of Winnipeg's Planning, Property and Development Department will be the key to making sure that their prototype meets the appropriate standards.

Conclusion

As *Suitehom* demonstrates, it is possible to design a project that will create affordable housing while providing training and employment for marginalized individuals. Many *About Face* participants will have a second chance to participate in society, through the opportunities that *Suitehom* will provide. The project challenges us to think differently about how we provide services to people living in poverty, and to create opportunities for people to participate in developing their own communities.

Endnotes

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