



Indigenous Social Housing

Lessons from British Columbia

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ABSTRACT

There's an identified need for affordable, safe, and culturally appropriate housing for Winnipeg's Indigenous community. Canada has released its first National Housing Strategy, which announced a 10-year commitment to provide funding to maintain, repair, and support the development of social housing. The NHS provides opportunities for unique and innovative housing solutions to support Indigenous communities.

Nuutsumuut Lelum is an affordable, environmentally sustainable housing complex located in Nanaimo British Columbia. This design is unique in its approach and can serve as a valuable precedent for the Winnipeg context.

INTRODUCTION

The federal government recently announced a 10-year agreement to invest in affordable housing as part of Canada's first National Housing Strategy. This national strategy includes bilateral agreements with each province. The partnership between the federal and provincial government of Manitoba includes a key strategy to invest approximately \$450.8 million over 10-years. \$225.4 million is from the Government of Manitoba, and \$225.4 million is from the Government of Canada (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2018). This funding will be used to maintain existing social housing, while Manitoba Housing transitions from its current role as a housing provider to emphasize its responsibilities as a funder and regulator (Government of Manitoba, 2019). Manitoba housing is working to devolve housing management to the non-profit and municipal sectors and focus on upgrading and selling assets to these partners.



FIGURE 2 | Manitoba -Canada Bilateral Agreement Press Release

Let's Talk Housing

Healthy vibrant communities
are built on housing options that meet
the diverse needs of all Canadians



FIGURE 1 | Quote from National Housing Strategy

“The government of Canada is committed to ensuring that every Canadian has a safe and affordable place to call home”

— Adam Vaughan, parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Families

BACKGROUND

The need for Indigenous social housing has been recognized by the Manitoba government and various non-profit agencies in the province. In 2018, 22.1% of Indigenous households in Winnipeg experienced a core housing need (Rappaport, 2019, p.4). Winnipeg has a high rate of homelessness. A study conducted in 2018 identified 1,519 were people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg, with 65.9% of those experiencing homelessness identifying as Indigenous (Brandon et al, 2018, p.4). Homelessness in Winnipeg has been addressed in the past through projects such as At Home Chez Soi, which was conducted by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. This project looked at the benefits of a housing first model paired with a treatment plan for chronic homelessness. However, it was acknowledged by members working on the project that this model of housing focuses on a Western perspective

and doesn't align with Indigenous perspectives on housing (Distasio et al, 2018, p. 10). Indigenous social housing must be addressed from a localized, Indigenous perspective. Winnipeg's community commented that, "Housing First has to be about balance, healing, strength and striving" (Distasio, 2019, p. 10). With a lack of culturally appropriate and affordable housing for Winnipeg's urban Indigenous population, the release of the National Housing Strategy provides opportunities to make change at a community level. The implementation of bilateral agreements gives organizations the chance to create unique partnerships and look to a housing first model which incorporates Indigenous, culture, education, and values.



FIGURE 3 | Homelessness in Winnipeg



FIGURE 4 | Indigenous Homeless Camp in Winnipeg

FACTS OF THE CASE

Nanaimo, a city of 104,936 determined through a study conducted by the United Way as part of their End Homelessness in Nanaimo Action Plan 2018-2023, that approximately 335 people were experiencing absolute homelessness. Of this number 35% were experiencing chronic homelessness and 25% identify as First Nations. Some non-profit organizations in British Columbia have utilized the Indigenous fund through BC Housing to provide social housing for Indigenous populations. Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre is an example of how this fund can foster effective social housing from a localized level

"By signing this bilateral, we are committing to a decade of strategic investments that will make a difference in the lives of children, families, seniors, vulnerable people and many others"

— Heather Stefanson, Minister of Families

Despite the fact that Winnipeg has the highest rate of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness, the Government of Manitoba does not have a dedicated Indigenous fund for social housing. The BC Housing Indigenous fund will invest \$550 million over the next ten years. This initiative plans to build and operate 1,750 new units of social housing for Indigenous people both on and off reserve. This program is intended to be a collaborative effort. The goal is to foster partnerships between community organizations, non-profit housing providers, the Aboriginal Housing Management Association, Indigenous Housing Societies and First Nations. Once the project has gone through the development process, the provider is responsible for programs and services offered within the housing model, collection of rents, resident relations, selection of new residents, building maintenance and upkeep, community relations, capital planning and operating budgets.

NANAIMO ABORIGINAL CENTRE

In May 2019, Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre partnered with government agencies, the City of Nanaimo and the Regional District of Nanaimo to build a \$6.4 million, 25-unit, two-storey affordable housing complex for Indigenous families, youth and elders. This space is also used for youth transitioning to independent living. The units in the complex are



FIGURE 5 | Street view of Nuutsumuut Lelum

considered townhouses and it is the first affordable housing development for families in Nanaimo in 20 years. The complex is named Nuutsumuut Lelum, which means “all in one house” in Hulquimium, the language of the Salish people. Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre, who manages the complex, is a non-profit organization focused on education, culture and family for the urban Indigenous community. The concept of the complex was built with the intent to create a sense of “togetherness” among tenants. The complex features a communal space for gatherings, celebrations and other traditional activities. Cultural representation was incorporated into the design process. The “forms and materials that are traditional to Indigenous people are what drove the design” explains David Simpson from DYS Architects, the firm that designed the complex. Additionally, there is Métis public art at each end of the development, as well as a 37-foot carved Coast Salish totem pole at the entrance of the complex to greet visitors (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2018).

Passive Design Model

Nuutsumuut Lelum was built to meet the passive building model. This model is a cost effective, energy efficient method for building homes. The goal of the passive house model is to minimize heat loss and optimize the thermal performance of the building envelope. The building envelope is the shell of your home (Passive Design Solutions, 2019). Passive Design Solutions (2019) explains this can be accomplished in a few ways; the first step is using quality insulation. The passive model typically has insulation levels 2-3 times higher than a standard new home. Secondly, reducing heat loss through air leakage in windows or other openings is another way to keep your house warm. A third principle in the passive design model is to eliminate any thermal bridges throughout the house. A thermal bridge is where two materials join together, such as the joints between the roof and the wall, or the wall and the floor. These are spaces where heat is typically lost. The placement of the house is also an important design component of the passive house model. Ensuring the placement of your home utilizes the heat from the sun during the winter months and incorporating design elements that will allow for shade in the summer are key to an effective design.

Following these steps will lead to the reduction of heating energy by 75-90% (Passive Design Solutions, 2019). With this type of approach to heating a home, a traditional furnace wouldn't be necessary. A tiny heating system which would typically be used to heat one room in a conventional home is sufficient in a passive house. (Passive Design Solutions, 2019).

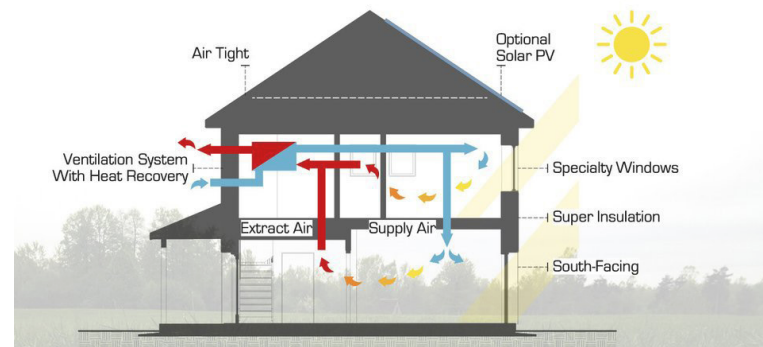


FIGURE 6 | Passive Design Diagram

OUTCOMES

Many positive outcomes can be seen from the development of Nuutsumuut Lelum. Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre provided Indigenous people at high risk of homelessness a place to live which is affordable and culturally appropriate. They created a space which would generate a sense of community and promote interaction among residents. Chris Beaton, the executive director of Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre explained during Nuutsumuut Lelum’s grand opening that the,

“original vision was a place for children, a place for elders and a place for youth and young families to be able to live together, but also we didn’t want a four-storey building where folks jumped in an elevator, went to their floor and never met their neighbours” (Nanaimo News Bulletin, 2018).

This vision was achieved by building a central circular courtyard for the residents. It was intended to act as “the heart” of the complex. Here residents can gather around a fire pit, enjoy cultural entertainment on a raised stage that was built, and strengthen community connection.



FIGURE 7 | Communal space at Nuutsumuut Lelum

The architects used design to create a sense of community and enhance interaction. This was done by building the entrances of each suite facing the courtyard- this way residents have the opportunity to see their neighbours regularly. The communal kitchen is another element of the complex which creates a space for residents to gather together and socialize. This design feature is an important component in Indigenous housing. Indigenous views on housing is often different than Western views.

Research done by the University of Winnipeg notes how housing first models typically focus on one bedroom apartments built for one person, but “this narrow view does not always fit Indigenous understandings of housing” (Distasio, 2019, p. 51). Having a communal space indoors and outdoors which brings people together is an important cultural component to Indigenous housing. The passive design model chosen by Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre also addresses the aspect of affordability. Executive director Chris Beaton explains

“what it means really is that energy use or consumption is reduced dramatically in every one of the units, which results in lower energy costs and energy bill for our tenants” (Nanaimo Bulletin, 2019).



FIGURE 8 | Community garden at Nuutsumuut Lelum

LESSONS LEARNED

The successful development of Nuutsumuut Lelum has many positive takeaways that can be applied within the Winnipeg context. Such as sustainable, culturally appropriate housing for high risk populations, which emphasizes the importance of community and a collective living model. This has been identified as a needed focus in Winnipeg. As expressed in a report put out by the University of Winnipeg,

“A community-led approach to Housing First is fundamentally recognized as different, and based on relationships people have with each other and the traditional lands they occupy. Change has to be rooted within an Indigenous set of values, understandings and subsequent actions” (Distasio et al, 2019, p.19).

End Homelessness Winnipeg, an Indigenous agency, is facilitating the development of culturally-appropriate housing for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg. Preliminary plans for a new housing complex for Indigenous women and families has already identified the importance of similar themes that Nuutsumuut Lelum incorporates including:

- Communal areas that reflect inter-dependence in building design versus independence; communal gathering areas at the centre of the building help reflect communal ways of living.
- The integration of natural and environmentally friendly building design and construction
- Intercultural living

(L. Rappaport, April 3, 2020)

Finally, Nuutsumuut Lelum is a great example of affordable housing that aligns with the National Housing Strategy’s sustainability goals. The NHS expresses the

“federal government will support demonstrations of forward-looking technologies, practices, programs, policies and strategies that show what is possible for the future of housing in Canada. Demonstrations that support sustainable, energy-efficient, accessible, age-friendly and socially inclusive affordable housing will be prioritized” (National Housing Strategy, 2017, p.21).

Sustainable, affordable and culturally appropriate housing is in high demand for Winnipeg’s Indigenous population. This case study provides a positive example of what effective partnerships and great design can accomplish.



FIGURE 9 | Indoor communal space at Nuutsumuut Lelum

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Image Resources

Cover image: Nuutsumuut Lelum. Retrieved from <http://rdh.com/our-case-studies/nuutsumuut-lelum-nanaimo-passive-house/>

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