

Case-in-Point 2023



REVITALIZATION TO COMBAT CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Lessons Learned From the Bell Hotel Conversion Project

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1.0 Introduction

According to End Homelessness Winnipeg, a key challenge to addressing homelessness in Winnipeg is the lack of supportive housing options (2014). Research has consistently shown that the combination of affordable housing and coordinated support services

results in a significant decline in individuals falling back into homelessness (Dohler, 2016). This case study examines the Bell Hotel Conversion as a successful supportive housing project. By examining this project, this research aims to highlight key lessons that can be considered by professionals undertaking similar projects.

2.0 Background & Context

Bell Hotel History

In 1906 the four-story Bell Hotel located at 662 Main Street was built near the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Peterson, 2015). In its early years, the hotel was extremely prosperous and often considered to be one of Winnipeg's luxury medium-sized hotels. The original hotel design was of a Classical Revival style with 75 rooms and public and private baths in the basement (Peterson, 2015). Over the years, the neighbourhood context along Main Street began to decline, as issues of crime and addiction became more frequent. By the 1980s, the Bell Hotel had become a deteriorating single-room occupancy hotel that housed low-income residents, many of whom suffered from mental health and substance abuse issues (Mackay, 2016). This trend continued into the early 2000s making the hotel notorious for its poor housing conditions and high criminal activity, often perpetuated by the beverage room located on the hotel's main floor (Mackay, 2016). By the mid-2000s the hotel faced many bylaw infractions and required upgrades, resulting in the owner listing the hotel for sale in 2007 (Mackay, 2016). Having just purchased an adjacent property, the City-owned CentreVenture Development Corporation bought the hotel in 2007 (Charette et al., 2014). Once purchased, the hotel sat vacant as CentreVenture contemplated potential outcomes for the existing site and building. On April 23, 2010, it was announced that the hotel would undergo a \$6.16 million adaptive reuse conversion for the development of 42 units of supportive housing for individuals experiencing homelessness (Province of Manitoba, 2010).

Adaptive Reuse Development

The conversion of the Bell Hotel into a housing development is not a novel form of development. The reuse of an existing building into other functions has been used to support neighbourhood revitalization efforts in many municipalities throughout the world (Misirlisoy & Gunce, 2016). Often coined as "adaptive reuse", this form of development offers an alternative to demolition by extending the life of a building for new use (Bullen, 2007). Adaptive reuse requires the construction/renovation of a building beyond general maintenance, to allow the structure to successfully serve a new function while retaining as much of the original structure as possible (Bullen, 2007). Often achieved through partnerships between local government and private developers, this form of development is increasing in popularity as a mechanism for municipalities to reduce vacant buildings while addressing issues such as housing shortages (Tan et al., 2018).



Figure 1: Bell Hotel Mid 20th Century. From Peterson, 2015

Winnipeg Homelessness Context 2007-2008

The issue of homelessness in Winnipeg continues to be an ongoing issue that requires significant resources in order to be adequately addressed. The context of homelessness in Winnipeg prior to the purchase of the Bell Hotel by CentreVenture, highlights the importance of providing increased support for vulnerable populations. In particular, between February 2007 and December 2008, the use of homeless shelters in Winnipeg increased by 41 percent (IGH Hub, 2009). Additionally, the total number of nights being spent by people in homeless shelters for either emergency or transitional purposes also increased by 50 percent during this period (IGH Hub, 2009). The impact of rising homelessness was also becoming both resource-depleting and costly for emergency services. Within five months the Winnipeg Police Service, Winnipeg Fire Paramedic Service, Winnipeg Transit, and the Downtown Winnipeg Biz, received 1,066 calls related to support needed for individuals facing homelessness. This resulted in public expenditures of \$209,135 (IGH Hub, 2009).



Figure 2: Bell Hotel Prior to Conversion. Source: Charette et al., 2014

3.0 Facts of the Case

The conversion of the Bell Hotel was achieved through innovative partnerships and division of roles and tasks across a variety of sectors and organizations, including:

CentreVenture Development Corporation

As the property owner and developer, CentreVenture oversaw the entire development and construction process to support the project's completion. CentreVenture's initial role in the project focused on two tasks, securing funding and community engagement. They helped secure project funding through grant applications to the Provincial and Federal governments. The company then conducted community engagement processes in partnership with the Main Street Project. This process included conducting focus groups with individuals experiencing homelessness to identify ways in which the development could better support the needs of residents. Additionally, CentreVenture and the Main Street Project met support workers involved in providing support and housing for at-risk populations, to further inform ways in which the new development could support future residents.

Following the initial stage of securing funding, the company hired an architect, and began researching and touring precedent cases of hotel-to-residential conversions in Vancouver. Once the project design was selected the company hired and worked closely with a contractor to undertake the construction of the project.

Provincial and Federal Government

The two levels of government supported the project by providing the majority of the capital funding. The Government of Manitoba's HOMEWorks! Program provided \$2.5 million, while the Federal government's Homelessness Partnering Strategy provided \$2.75 million (Gov of Manitoba, 2010).

Winnipeg Housing and Rehabilitation Corporation (WHRC)

The WHRC were hired by CentreVenture to undertake the property management role following the completion of the project.

Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and Main Street Project

These two organizations helped develop the Bell Hotel's service system to adequately support the needs of future residents. Specifically, the Main Street Project was responsible for providing tenant-related support such as life skills, resident capacity building, and eviction prevention. The Health Authority focused on providing clinical support and health services coordination (Charette et al., 2014).

Bell Hotel Supportive Living Context

The Main Street Project focused on tenant-related support through advocacy and leading a "Housing First" approach at the Bell Hotel. This approach emphasizes rapidly moving people experiencing homelessness into appropriate housing with support (Turner, 2014). Once housed, they are offered unconditional programming to address issues that have contributed to their homelessness (MHCHS, 2014). The Bell Hotel's adoption of this approach allows tenants to access supportive programming for challenges such as mental health, addictions, trauma, poor rental histories and lack of life skills (Charette et al., 2014).

As a supportive housing development, to be considered eligible for tenancy at The Bell, persons must be chronic or chronically episodic users of emergency shelters (Charette, et al., 2014). The rental agreement is a rent-to-income model in which a rent supplement is available for all units over 15 years (Charette et al., 2014). Tenants are helped to move to other community housing if outgrowing the need for support and wish for more independent living.

"It isn't just about the housing, it's about all the pieces around it"

- Rick Lees - Executive Director
Main Street Project (Hoye, 2020)

4.0 Outcomes

In June 2011, the 42-suite supportive housing development was opened and began housing vulnerable individuals. The units were self-contained bachelor suites that have a kitchenette and bathroom. Six of the suites are fully accessible to accommodate potential residents with disabilities.



Figure 3: Bell Hotel After Conversion. From Peterson, 2015

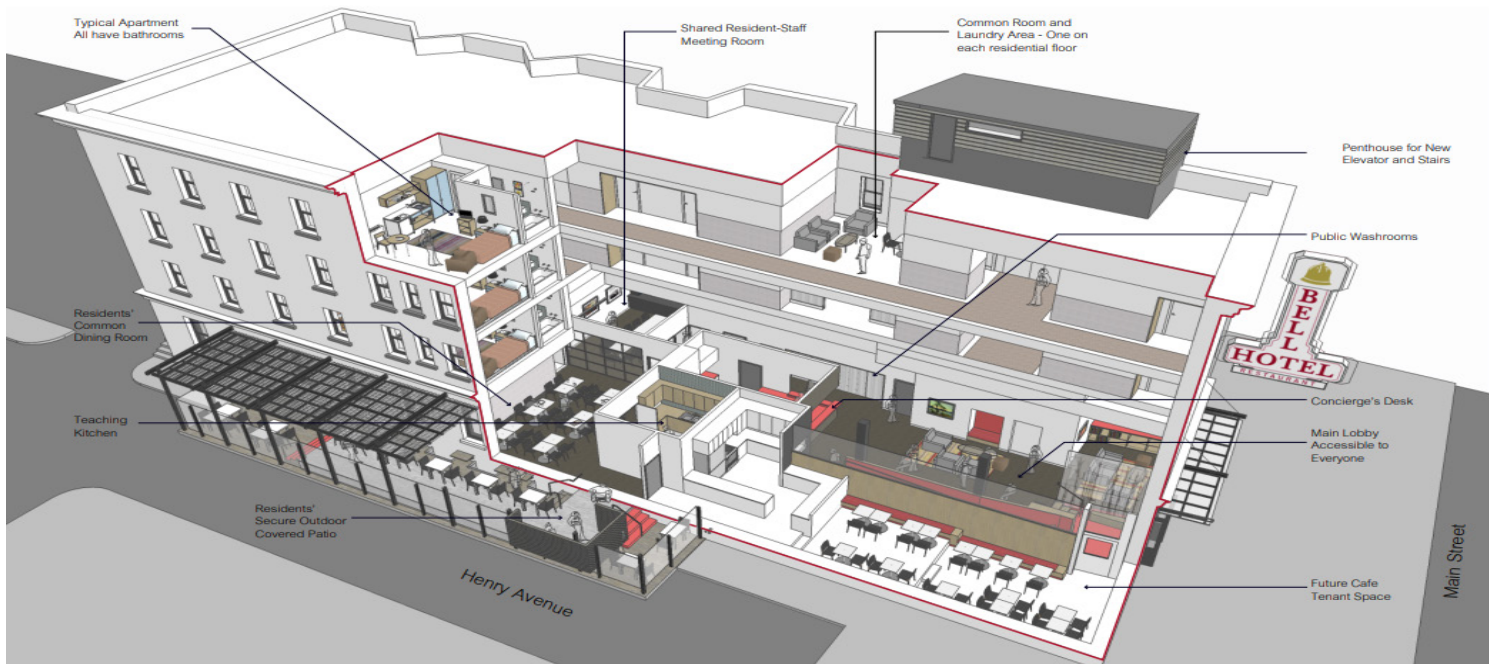


Figure 4: Cut Away View After Conversion. From Charette et al., 2014

Beyond providing housing for individuals experiencing homelessness, the Bell Hotel conversion also had a dramatic impact on tenants' use of public services. At 13 months post-tenancy, 40 percent of residents experienced reduced involvement with the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS) (Charette et al., 2014). The number of contacts with the WPS related to issues of intoxicated persons declined by 71 percent. Additionally, during the first 13-month period there was a dramatic drop in emergency room use. There were 251 visits in 13 months for residents before the conversion, which was reduced to 118 visits during the first 13 months, resulting in a decline of 53 percent (Charette et al., 2014). Today, the Bell Hotel remains a supportive housing development for individuals facing homelessness. It has frequently been championed as a successful example of collaboration and partnership across sectors to help address housing stability for chronically unhoused adults (Charette et al., 2014; Hoyer, 2020).

5.0 Lessons Learned

A Need for Professionals to Champion Important Projects

When discussing the project Jeff Palmer (former CentreVenture employee), noted that the Bell Hotel conversion emphasizes the need for professionals to be proactive and act as a catalyst for initiatives that address growing issues in cities. Palmer highlighted that at the time of purchasing the property, CentreVenture was undecided on what to do with the existing building and site. He identified that the hotel could have easily been demolished by CentreVenture as the existing building required extensive renovations. However, Professionals within the organization voluntarily showed interest and championed the opportunity for CentreVenture to examine a conversion project to support at-risk individuals. Over ten years since the completion of the project, the hotel continues to house and support vulnerable populations in Winnipeg. As such, a key lesson from this example is that it is important for professionals such as planners to be vocal and have a willingness

to identify and champion opportunities that support important initiatives in cities. Without the identification and willingness to undertake the project by professionals at CentreVenture, this valuable project may not have occurred,

The Importance of Partnerships Across Sectors

The success of the Bell Hotel conversion project highlights the benefit of having strong partnerships across various disciplines working towards a common goal. As highlighted in the “facts of the case” section, each organization involved in the project undertook tasks related to their area of specialization. For example, CentreVenture focused on tasks related to the construction and design of the project, while the Main Street Project and Winnipeg Regional Health Authority focused on providing tenant-related support. Establishing partnerships among organizations to undertake areas related to their expertise allowed the project to be more comprehensive. Each organization was able to contribute its unique skills and knowledge toward the shared goal of creating a supportive living development. Establishing partnerships also fostered learning opportunities for professionals. Palmer highlighted that at the time of this project, homelessness strategies such as “Housing First” were not widely known within the private sector. Having the opportunity to work with organizations with different areas of expertise helped expose professionals to new strategies and processes coming out of different fields.

Community Engagement Informing Design

As mentioned, CentreVenture and the Main Street Project undertook community engagement with individuals experiencing homelessness to help inform the overall design of the project. Palmer noted that this opportunity aided the design process as

many of the participants identified ways in which the design could impact the safety of residents. In particular, several participants identified the need for personal bathrooms, highlighting past safety issues that had occurred in shared bathrooms. Kitchenettes were determined to be sufficient, with communal cooking and dining facilities located on the main floor to teach skills and build community. As a result, conducting community engagement helped assist CentreVenture to understand ways in which they could suit the needs of future residents.

Importance of Government Funding

More than half of the projects capital funding for the Bell Hotel development came from the Provincial and Federal governments. Palmer explained that undertaking a redevelopment project is not something CentreVenture would have normally considered, as often the organization helps facilitate private redevelopment or the resell of the builds. The opportunity to access government funding made the project feasible for CentreVenture to undertake. As a result, the Bell Hotel example highlights the need for continued government funding for affordable and supportive housing initiatives.

Concluding Remarks

The Bell Hotel conversion represents a practical way for cities to reuse deteriorating buildings to support vulnerable populations. Centreventure’s championing of the project and collaborative approach to development, highlights a way for professionals across sectors to combine knowledge to best support housing development for at-risk individuals. As chronic homelessness in Winnipeg continues to be an issue, the lessons from this case study are particularly relevant to development professionals, support workers, and policymakers interested in facilitating supportive housing development.

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Figures

Cover Image: Charette, C., Kuropatwa, S., Warkentin, J., & Cloutier, R. (2014). Vignette: The Bell Hotel Supportive Housing Project: Early Outcomes & Learnings. Homeless Hub. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/1.5%20Charette.pdf>

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