



# Case In Point

## Pocket Suites:

### Innovative Affordable Housing through Functional Form Fitting Design

By: Misty Sklar and Paul McNeil

#### Abstract

S.A.M Management a non-profit corporation that provides professional property management retained ND LEA Engineering & Planners in 2003 to undertake a feasibility study for an affordable alternative to rooming housing for single room occupancy (SRO). The results were functional form fitting designs met with a variety of planning implementation difficulties. ND LEA along with Prairie Architects came up with an innovative infill project that was successful in fitting a multi-occupancy building onto the empty narrow residential lots of some of Winnipeg’s oldest neighbourhoods. The struggle to fit not only the actual building design in place but also the multi-resident occupancy concept into the neighbourhoods mindset makes this unique planning strategy a pioneer in affordable housing projects.

#### Context

As planners we sometimes have “tendency to address urban problems in isolation when a comprehensive, integrated approach is required” (Seasons, 2005). On paper many ideas appear as the answers to some of the most difficult city planning problems. However in practice the ideas must face the challenges and difficulties of planning in the real world. In the case of “pocket suites” an innovative approach to the development and implementation of affordable housing, single room occupancies was required to overcome all the hurdles associated with planning in the real world.

In 2003 S.A.M Management retained ND LEA Engineering & Planners to undertake a feasibility study for an affordable alternative to single room occupancy (SRO) housing. The study which was funded through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporations Proposal Development Funding (PDF) loan, yielded a unique alternative to conventional rooming houses. It concluded that construction of new houses on scattered 25-foot wide infill lots, configured purposely for single persons with low incomes, would fit well with the City of Winnipeg’s inventory of vacant lots in residential neighbourhoods.

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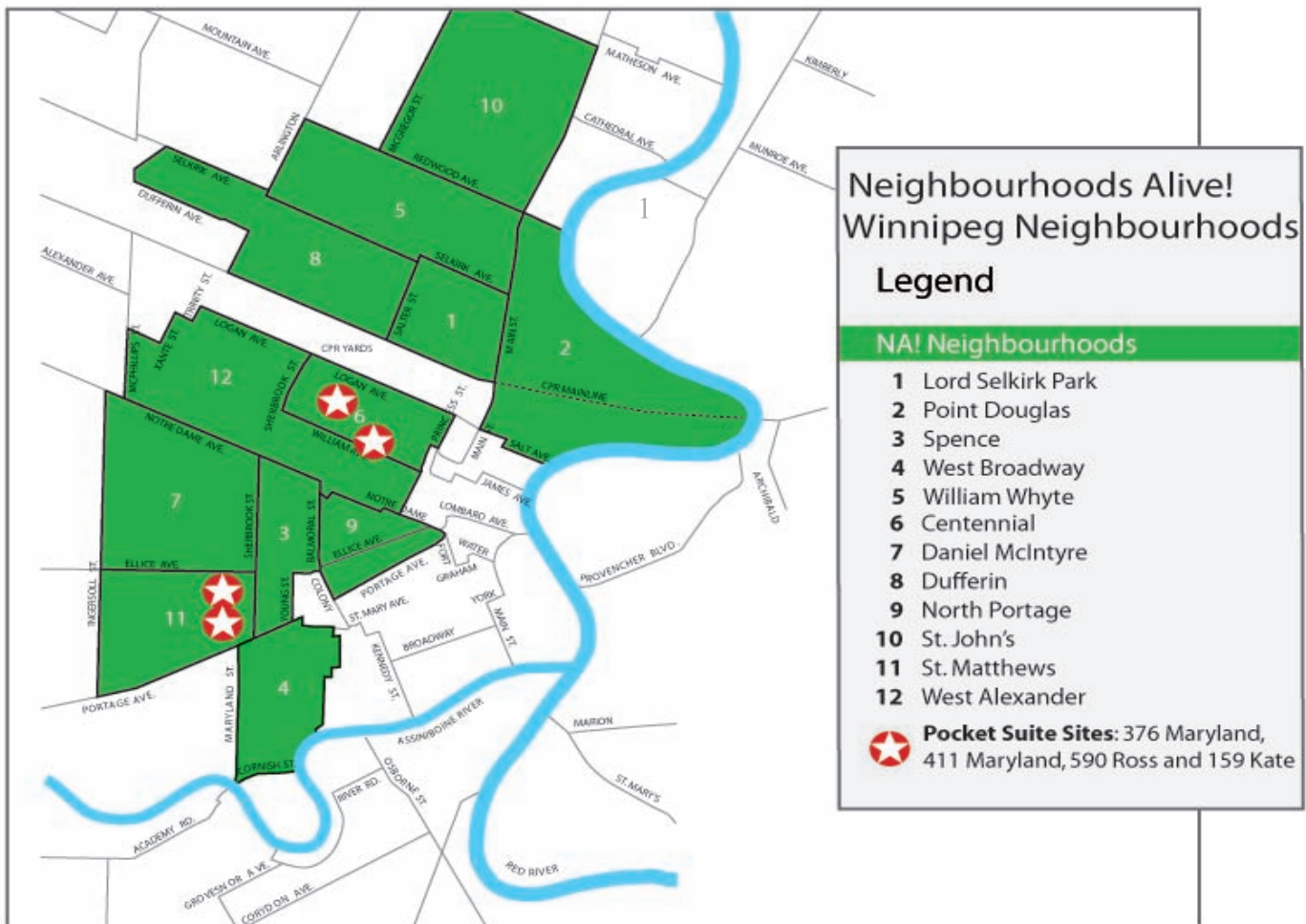
## Context

The study also drew on the assessed needs of single persons with low incomes commonly living in SRO's and concluded that following would become key design program concerns based on the needs of the tenants:

1. Residents need their own private toilet and wash-room for reasons of sanitation and dignity.
2. Individuals need reduced noise transmission between units to promote independent lifestyles and accommodate individuals employed on shift work or with early morning start times.
3. Air quality within the building should be maintained at a high level due to legislation governing health regulations

## Facts of the Case

Affordable housing is a need felt by residents in all Canadian cities, and in all cities world wide. The concept of affordable housing makes reference to housing which is intended to serve families or individuals with low, low-moderate or moderate incomes. "Housing affordability is commonly defined, particularly for public policy purposes, as a relationship between housing costs and income" (Chisholm, 2003:3). This contrasts with solely low-income housing that is specifically intended for those people living below a specified income level. Housing affordability can be expressed in comparative or absolute terms.



## Facts of the Case

The Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation (CMHC) offers the following definitions:

“CMHC’s core housing need model is used to determine if households are in need. The model has two stages. The first identifies households living below currently accepted housing standards. The second determines whether or not these households, given their incomes, could obtain accepted housing standards” (CMHC, 2003). “Core housing need refers to households which are unable to afford shelter that meets adequacy, suitability, and affordability norms. The norms have been adjusted over time to reflect the housing expectations of Canadians. Affordability, one of the elements used to determine core housing need, is recognized as a maximum of 30 percent of the household income spent on shelter... The cost of adequate shelter should not exceed 30 percent of household income. Housing which costs less than this is considered affordable.” (CMHC, 2006)

The definitions from the CMHC are suitable for this project because affordability is then linked with capability of the household to afford the correct dwelling size, and appropriateness for the household. Factors such as housing shortages, economic recessions, increased levels of personal indebtedness, high levels of unemployment, high mortgage rates, and changes within the typical so-called nuclear family are also factors that affect affordable housing (Cooper and Rodman, 1994).

There are a variety of demographic, and socio-economic influences that affect housing demand, and thus affordability. International migration; creating increased population growth, a rapidly aging population, Canada’s Aboriginal population growth, and increased occurrences of one-person households affect demands on housing units driving up demand, and putting households that are unable to afford increases in housing costs in a position of need. In Manitoba, 2001 statistics show that 14.9 percent of all households were in core need. This can be compared to the even higher national average of 15.8 percent (Government of Manitoba Report, 2005).

Disturbingly, the incidence of core housing need is particularly high among Aboriginal people, immigrants, female lone-parents, and seniors living in rental accommodation. Households that rent are also more likely to be affected by the economic fluctuations than homeowners (The Daily, 2005). Twenty-seven percent of Aboriginal women, and thirteen percent of non-aboriginal women head single parent households, however Aboriginal women are twice as likely as non-Aboriginal women to have an income less than \$20,000 and are more likely to have difficulties affording acceptable housing.

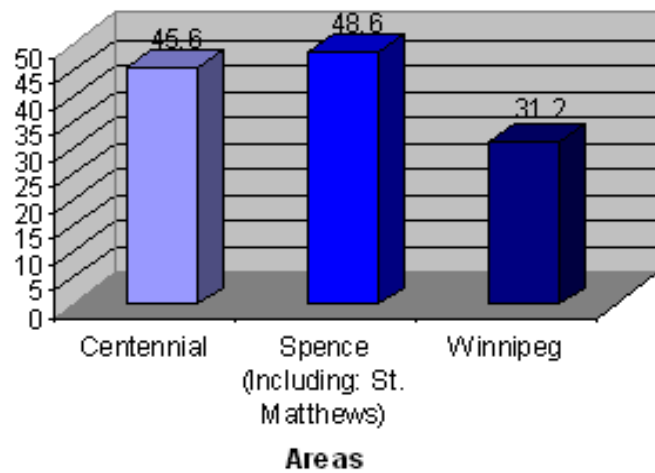
In 2001, recent immigrants made up 2.1 percent of Canada’s entire population but counted for 5.5 percent of the share of housing need. These statistics mirror that of the elderly single population which made up only 9.8 percent of the population of Canada but shared in 21.2 percent of the housing need. These statistics reflect the fact that the majority of groups in need of suitable, affordable housing fall into the lowest-income categories under \$20,000 a year, and make up 16 percent of the population with close to two-thirds of those households renting. Renters are four times more commonly in need of core housing than homeowners; 27.9 percent of non-aboriginal renting households, and 37.3 percent of Aboriginal renting household fall into this category as opposed to the 6.5 percent of non-Aboriginal home owner, and the 10.2 percent of Aboriginal home owners. Affordability is clearly a strong component in core housing need making the creation of affordable housing a solution to one of the key issues faced by some of Canada’s most vulnerable groups.

The City of Winnipeg has classified Winnipeg’s highest needs neighbourhoods as Major Improvement Areas (MIAs), based on a variety of indicators (e.g. condition of housing, rental and ownership rates, unemployment and poverty rates, income levels, incidence of crime).

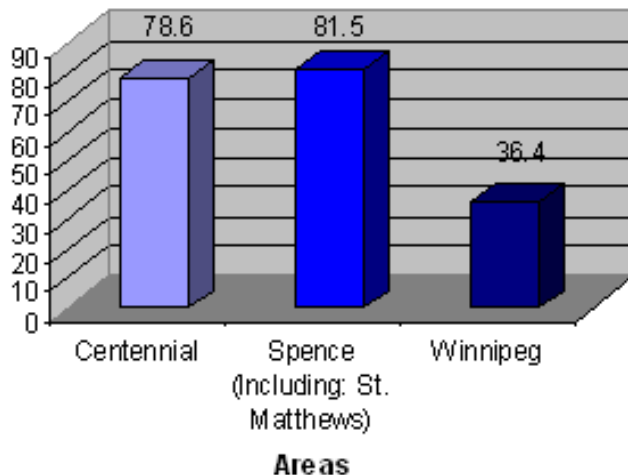
## Facts of the Case

Several MIA neighbourhoods in Winnipeg have been designated including: West Broadway, Spence, William Whyte, Lord Selkirk Park, Point Douglas, Dufferin, St. John's, Daniel McIntyre, St. Matthews, Centennial, and North Portage.

**Figure 1: Percentages of One-Person Households**



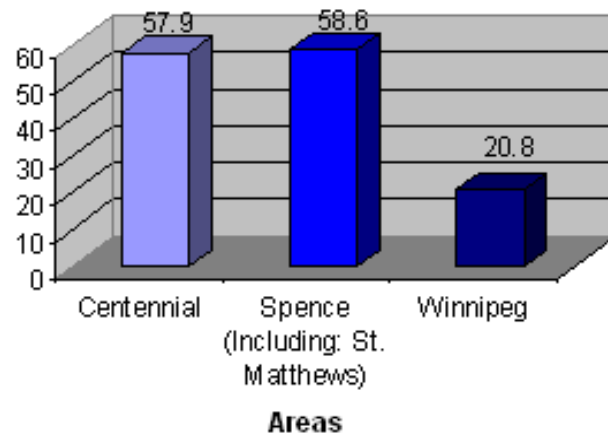
**Figure 2: Percentages of Residents in Rental Units**



The neighbourhoods listed above have also been specifically targeted under the federal Housing and Homelessness Initiative which provides an opportunity to direct more resources into these communities for maximum impact (Neighbourhoods Alive, 2005).

The areas of Spence/ St. Matthews and Centennial that will feature the pocket housing also experience significantly high proportions of one-person household, residents living in rental accommodations, and households with incomes under \$19,999 per year. These statistics were compared with figures for the rest of the city. The figures below reflect 2001 Census data collected from these neighbourhoods.

**Figure 3: Percentages of Households with Incomes Under \$19,999**



## Challenges

Similar to many projects based on cutting edge, unique designing principles, Pocket Suites has encountered a number of challenges; most of which have been address through time, innovation and public consultation. The first challenge that arose was lot size. Developing units at the right price point with all desired attributes while utilizing infill lots became difficult when it was realized that the building footprint would not fit on existing 25-foot lots and be compatible with the City's zoning regulations. Local neighbours were also concerned that the Pocket Suites on the 25-foot lots too closely resembled mobile homes.

Luckily, 33 foot lots were found in the same neighbourhoods providing an extra 8 feet of space to make the design work.

The second challenge encountered was in the desire to design the buildings without a common space. Common spaces such as hallways and lobbies need cleaning and maintenance, and often create a loud environment. Private separate entrances were designed into the floor plan to accommodate this desire. Site locations were also chosen due to their relative proximity to local laundry facilities featured on busier routes.

The third challenge came during the community consultation process. The local communities required significantly thorough consultations to help dispel their fears regarding the development of the SRO's in their neighbourhoods along with their concerns regarding the tenant groups. S.A.M Management along with ND LEA discussed measures such as tenant supports provided by S.A.M Management and high fences that could be installed to mitigate their concerns. The end result of the community consultation process was community support for the project including consent for the numerous rezoning and variance applications that were needed for the project to conform to City regulations. These variances included side yard allowances, increased densities and parking issues.

The fourth challenge continues to affect the project. The rising cost of construction have reeked havoc on the projects budgets. However project collaborators have chosen to take a long term outlook on the project even in the face of financial difficulties. The implementation of different green technologies has been seen as a long term cost benefit for the project. Low flush toilets, new hot water tanks, single piece kitchen units, and effective ventilation systems are only some of the technologies featured in the buildings to help mitigate costs on a long term basis.

Lastly, complying with the Winnipeg Housing and Homeless Initiative's (WHHI) request for units that were wheelchair accessible or suitable for mobility challenged persons, posed a unique design challenge. The challenge was answered by altering the design of the door way to be wider to accommodate individuals with mobility issues and designing the ground units to be a grade level to avoid the use of ramps or modified stairs.



## Challenges

Featured below are photographs of the lots chosen for the Pocket Suites. The photographs not only help to display the lot size but also the relative proximity of these lots to be infill within the context of the surrounding neighbors.



590 Ross



159 Kate



376 Maryland

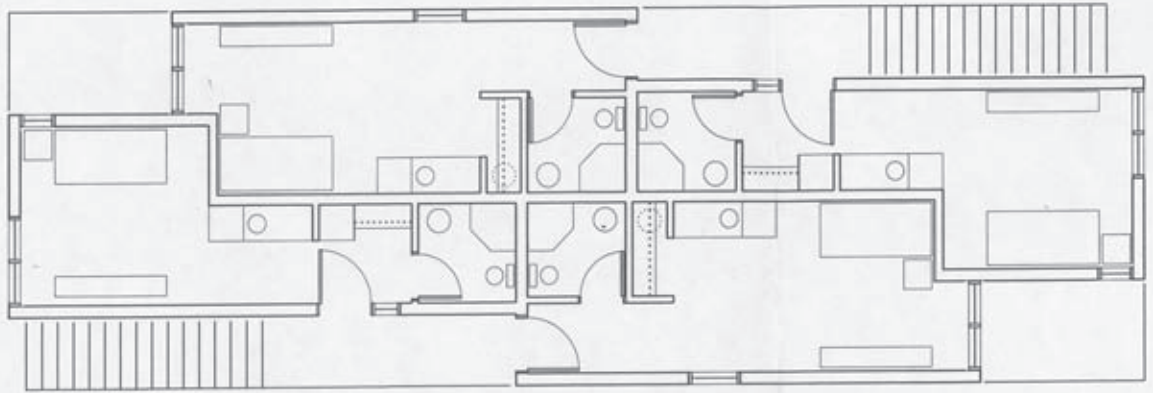


411 Maryland

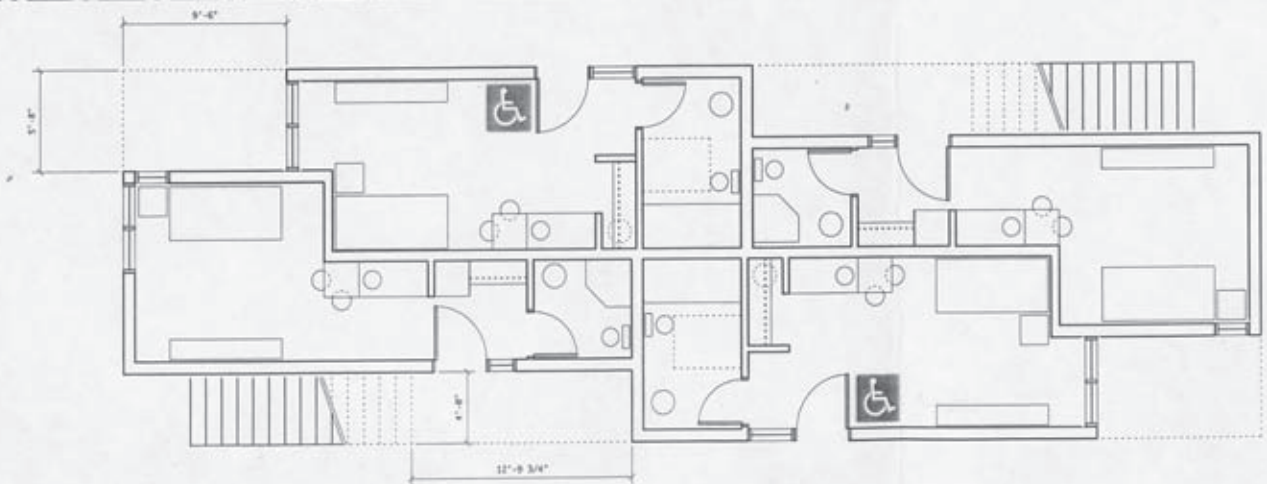
## Outcomes

Although Pocket Suites are still in their early of development stage, the construction of the 4 separate buildings has begun. Each building will be two stories high and have 8 units, all with separate entrances, separate ventilation and with neighborhood collaboration and cooperation from S.A.M as the property manager and tenant supporter. Most buildings are also planning to have handicap access to one or two units in reach residents. Below are basic floor plans of the new units which may be slightly altered during the construction process.

The outcomes of this project, although physical, should not be limited solely to construction. Community involvement through workshops and open houses, expanded partnerships between non-profits and private companies, neighborhood revitalization and the additional affordable housing option for single residents are only some of the tangible outcomes created by this project.



**ALTERNATIVE 1**  
**second floor plan** pocket suites  
scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"



**ALTERNATIVE 1**  
**ground floor plan** pocket suites  
scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"

## Lessons Learned

Through the development of Pocket Suites as a housing innovation that uses form fitting design, a variety of lessons were learned. These lessons have included:

- Not raising expectations to say what people want to hear. By this we mean not promising more than you are able to provide. With such a new and innovative project people are often cautious and have higher expectations of an unfamiliar project in this area, fully understanding the project's limitations helps mitigate this problem and allows all promises to be kept.
- Keeping the project simple and testing one thing at a time instead of trying to use one project to solve all problems and answer all questions was another important lesson learned. The focus of the project is to provide affordable housing and although it is an extremely innovative design, not all new innovations could be applied to the project due to budgetary constraints. The key lesson learned was you cannot be all things to all people and although the project was able to incorporate some environmentally friendly technologies the overall goal is to be affordable.

These lessons learned by those involved will help to improve the continued process of designing and implementing affordable housing through functional form fitting design.

## Relevance to Planning

Planning is an important component in the creation of affordable housing for some of Canada's most vulnerable groups. Urban planners play a fundamental role in addressing the public's needs because they often act as mobilizers that develop support for plan implementation and make allies of non-profit groups and private businesses (Alexander, 1992). In terms of affordable housing, development planners can be employed to apply well-organized resource management strategies to affordable housing development, and influence the distribution of resources among the various neighborhoods throughout a city. Since 1996, when the Federal government withdrew from funding housing, leaving the provinces and cities to pick up the tab, many urban planners have also been tasked with the responsibility of dealing with issues of housing supply, and affordability combined with concerns regarding urban revitalization, and economic competitiveness (Carroll and Jones, 2000).

This case in point highlighted an exceptional case of the relevance of planning in investigating complementary partnerships between a non-profit entity and private companies that have utilized innovative practices to address affordable housing concerns.



## Authors

**Misty Sklar** is finishing her course work in the Master's of City Planning program at the University of Manitoba. She is also in the process of finishing her thesis on public-private partnerships for affordable housing development in Manitoba while working at ND LEA.

**Paul McNeil** holds a Masters in City Planning and is the Regional Vice President with the engineering, planning and project management firm, ND LEA. Paul enjoys working directly with communities and developing unique affordable housing options.



*Responding to Your  
Unique Housing Needs*



## Resources

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