Abstract

The concept of pocket suits was devised as a means of providing dignified, private, affordable residences as an alternative to rooming houses in Winnipeg’s central city areas. Four pocket suite apartment buildings have been constructed in Winnipeg, providing a successful example of the provision of affordable housing and the integration of higher density development into established neighbourhoods. This was done primarily through community engagement and creative design.
Introduction

Responding to the needs of low-income residents, Pocket Houses integrate seamlessly into the existing neighbourhood to provide new housing opportunities to those in need. Through an admirable mix of creative design and innovative planning, Pocket Houses have provided a dignified, private, affordable dwelling for individuals living in poverty. This Case-in-Point will explain the background of the Pocket House project, articulate its benefits, and assess how this type of development was integrated into an established neighbourhood and community.
Background

Pocket Houses are a form of affordable housing implemented within Winnipeg’s inner city neighbourhoods. Each building contains eight small units (known as Pocket Suites) and is designed to be situated on a narrow residential lot. The design is intended to blend the units into the existing neighbourhood and provide a healthy, private and secure residence for those who are in need.

The purpose of Pocket Suites is to address a shortage of quality, affordable housing for singles in the downtown area. This group has typically been forced to endure the conditions of rooming houses (also known as single room occupancies, SROs) which have been associated with poor living standards and other problems such as crime and compromised health. Housing is an important social determinant of health. Individuals living in crowded, inadequate living conditions experience a greater incidence of negative health conditions and ailments and are more likely to succumb to the negative effects of chronic disease. Simply stated, homelessness and poor quality living conditions decrease quality of life and shorten life expectancy. By introducing quality, private, affordable housing the Pocket House initiative has the potential to significantly increase the quality of life of those living in poverty. On the individual level, this leads to improved health and increased quality of life; on the macro level, decreased crime and lower costs for health care are potential long-term results. Therefore, the Pocket House project was challenged with devising an alternative to rooming houses while keeping development costs low enough that the units remain affordable for its residents.
The project was initiated by Winnipeg Planning and Engineering consulting firm MMM Group (formerly ND LEA) who partnered with SAM Management, a local not-for-profit residential management company, to conduct a feasibility study examining alternatives to rooming houses. The study was funded by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporations (CMHC) proposal development fund. This study concluded that integrating new affordable housing units onto vacant, city-owned residential lots provides an opportunity to address the shortage of affordable single’s housing. The study also concluded the following, which are intended to guide the building and suite design and counteract the problems associated with rooming houses:

1. Residents need their own private toilet and washroom for reasons of sanitation, privacy, 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 (e.g., second hand smoke).

(SAM Management, 2007)

Following the initial study, the project proceeded to the design phase with funding from the Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness initiative. The first step involved engaging the local residents to discuss the benefits of the Pocket Houses and listening to any concerns expressed. Because affordable housing is often negatively perceived, it was important to be open and in constant dialogue with all concerned stakeholders. Therefore, throughout the process stakeholders were continuously included and engaged through meetings and discussions.

The next step was site selection. The project relied on land provided from the City of Winnipeg’s land inventory to be financially viable. Several central city neighbourhoods have been designated as Major Improvement Areas which means that they require major investment to rehabilitate the physical environment and address social challenges such high incidents of crime and poverty. As a result, the city recognized the potential benefits of the project to address such challenges, and provided four lots for $1.00 each.

Two of the sites are located in the St. Matthews neighbourhood (374 and 409 Maryland) and the other two in the Centennial neighbourhood (156 Kate St., and 592 Ross Ave.). In addition to land availability, site selection was also guided by access to public transportation and...
everyday services. Because the residents of the Pocket suites were low income and probably would not have access to private vehicles, locating the units near established public transportation routes was important to provide mobility and allow residents quick and easy access to everyday services such as employment, health care, and education.

To produce the Pocket House building and unit design, MMM Group was joined by Cohlemyer Architects. The building design was heavily constrained by the size of the lots. The lots are small and narrow residential parcels with 8.5 metre (28 foot) frontages and an area which averaged about 320 square metres (3,400 square feet). Also, to effectively integrate the building with the surrounding neighbourhood, the building envelope and siting had to remain consistent with neighbouring houses, providing a further design parameter.

The exterior design successfully maintains the scale of the established neighbourhood; however, side yard setback distances did not permit the necessary building width. As a result, it was eventually determined that the distances would have to be varied to provide enough room inside the building for all eight units (additional variances would be required for parking, lot coverage, and density). While the variances were successfully obtained, they required additional time and attention preparing
for and attending meetings with the City. One area where the Pocket Houses deviate from the surrounding neighbourhood’s form and character is the modern architectural style; however, this style seems to work well with the neighbourhood’s Victorian architecture and provides some interesting variation.

The building’s interior design has two stories with four units on each floor. The units are approximately 22 square metres (210 square feet) each (including the private bathroom) and contain a kitchenette, bed, and sitting area. There is also one unit in each building for mobility challenged individuals which is slightly larger and includes more spacious bathroom and shower facilities. Each unit has separate, exterior accesses which not only provides additional privacy for residents but eliminates interior hallways which would have increased the building’s size. It also reduces both capital and operating costs of the buildings, makes the units more private, secure, and reduces inter-unit noise. Concerning ventilation, each unit also has two windows and separated ventilation systems to improve air quality and allow a cross breeze to natural ventilate the units.

The four Pocket House developments have now been in operation since 2006. Due to the low-cost design, rents have been kept low ($320-$350 per unit) with four of the eight units reserved exclusively for low income tenants. The other four are available for rental by other people in need of single’s accommodation. Most importantly, the project has successfully created and integrated housing attainable to those on social assistance - an achievement it was recognized for with the 2007 Canadian Institute of Planners excellence award in housing.
Keys to Successful Integration

This case provides a fantastic example of the provision of affordable housing. Specifically, this case demonstrates the benefits of providing dignified affordable housing, and the importance of location, siting and design in the integration of the development into the community. Moreover, it exemplifies the benefits of community and stakeholder engagement in communicating the benefits of the project and gaining support, resulting in a successful project.

Dignified Place to Live

“Core need” housing is defined by the CMHC as the number of households unable to access adequate rental accommodation in their community. The term measures affordability (ie. Spending more than 30% gross income on housing), suitability of accommodation (overcrowded conditions) and adequacy (lacking full bathroom facilities, or requiring significant repairs). In Winnipeg, unstable housing and homelessness present a major challenge to low-income individuals – with many downtown shelters meeting capacity for accommodation each night. A grave lack of affordable rental accommodations has triggered a marked increase in homelessness in Winnipeg. The Pocket House concept has addressed core need housing that is affordable (even within social assistance budgets), suitable (private), and adequate (self-contained).
Location, Siting and Design

Site selection was an important aspect of integrating the Pocket Houses into their respective neighbourhoods. Past affordable housing models have clustered affordable housing, creating a stigmatized area isolated from the surrounding community. In Winnipeg, Lord Selkirk Park provides an example where affordable housing was clustered together with many negative results. In contrast, the Pocket House model disperses the developments throughout the community to integrate rather than segregate the residents. This also helped gain support from stakeholder groups because no one area would be overwhelmed with the new housing; rather, the housing would be distributed throughout.

Perhaps the greatest success of this project was its ability to integrate a high density building into a low to medium density neighbourhood, predominantly comprised of one and two family homes. From the front, the building looks like a one or two unit house, consistent with the surrounding neighbourhood. Other than the modern architectural design, the structure effectively disguises its true density and blends into the neighbourhood.

Blending the building with the surrounding neighbourhood was achieved by siting

Maryland St.
the building so that it maintained the same front yard setback as the surrounding houses. Many medium and high density buildings in the neighbourhoods are closer to the street than abutting houses. This changes the streetscape design and emphasizing the higher density building over the lower density houses. However, in this case, the front setback was maintained effectively blending this high-density building with the surroundings and leaving no indication that the project is a multi-unit structure.

Although the Pocket House’s building envelope is different than the surrounding houses, it is still similar enough to blend the development with the established neighbourhood. Within the neighbourhood the houses are mostly two and 2.5 stories in height and cover approximately 45 percent of their parcel. While the Pocket Suite buildings conform to the permitted height, the lot coverage is closer to 50 percent. However, this does not seem to alter the character of the neighbourhood as the additional bulk is distributed within both side and rear yard setbacks.

Finally, the quality interior design of the building reduces anxiety towards the project by illustrating that it will not suffer from the same problems associated with rooming houses such as compromised health, crime and poor living standards. Elements designed to increase privacy and air quality increase living standards while the lack of common space and enhanced security features discourage crime.
Community Engagement

Communicating the benefits of such housing was critical in gaining stakeholder support for the project. Negative perceptions of affordable housing often result in citizen opposition towards these initiatives and prevent them from being implemented. In this case, communicating the fact that the housing would uphold high living standards, be well maintained and managed, and help address Winnipeg’s homeless problem, brought stakeholder groups on side in their support of the project.

The engagement consisted of three primary components:

1. Discussions with local politicians to generate support for the Pocket House concept
2. Discussions with City of Winnipeg to generate support for required variances by emphasizing the intention of Pocket Houses as affordable housing
3. Meetings with neighbourhood associations to communicate the numerous benefits of the project

Lessons Learned and Implications for Planning

Blending into the surrounding buildings, the facade of the Pocket House looks like others in the neighbourhood but provides a unique function: private, affordable housing for individuals in need. Integration was a key component of the success of the Pocket House development. Ongoing community consultation lead a design and planning process that produced an innovative design that blends into existing neighbourhood structures, functions, and designs. The success of Pocket Houses relies on blending in seamlessly with the surrounding houses – this is accomplished through creative architectural design and planning that is responsive to community needs and interests. The end result, though new, has the potential to alter the current reality of low-income residents of Winnipeg by providing an affordable, private residence. Specifically, this case provides lessons for the planning practice in the creation and integration of affordable housing into established communities.
Collaborators

Veronica Hicks, MCP, MCIP
Veronica is an Associate at MMM Group where she has worked for five years as a planner and project manager. Prior to this, she worked for five years with the Brandon and Area Planning District. Veronica graduated from the City Planning program at the University of Manitoba in 2004.

Matthew Fitzgerald
Matthew joined Dillon Consulting’s Winnipeg office as a planner upon completion of course work from the city planning program. In his spare time, he works tirelessly to complete his MDP on form-based zoning.

Additional information about the project was generously provided by Paul McNeil of MMM Group.

Sources