

Case-in-Point 2023



ASTUM API NIIKINAAHK

Focusing on Housing Solutions

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Abstract

Astum Api Niikinaahk is a tiny-home supportive housing project in Downtown Winnipeg that welcomed its first residents in January 2023. The project responds to an urgent need in Winnipeg for Indigenous-led housing for those transitioning out of homelessness. Astum Api Niikinaahk's development was led by a partnership of Indigenous organizations and informed by Elders and people with lived experience of unsheltered homelessness. This case study will provide an overview of the project and conclude by identifying lessons from the project that may be helpful for future supportive housing developments.

1.0 Background & Context

Crisis of housing and homelessness

Since the late 1980s, homelessness has been a growing crisis both in Winnipeg and across North America. In Canada, government disinvestment in the construction and operation of social housing, combined with broader economic restructuring, has led to growth in both the number and diversity of people experiencing homelessness on a given night (Gaetz et al., 2016). However, while homelessness in Winnipeg is related both to housing market factors and a growing crisis of affordability, it should also be “understood in the context of historical and ongoing structural racism and colonization in Canada, whereby Indigenous peoples have been systemically discriminated against and dispossessed of their lands, properties, and legal systems” (Farha & Schwan, 2020, p.5).

Since 2015, Winnipeg’s Street Census has collected data regarding homelessness and has consistently found that Indigenous people are vastly overrepresented in Winnipeg’s unhoused population. While 12% of people living in Winnipeg identify as Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2022), 68% of those experiencing homelessness identify as Indigenous. The Street Census has also found that Indigenous people are more likely to experience unsheltered homelessness, with 89% of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the 2022 Street Census identifying as Indigenous (Brandon, 2022).

Encampments

Encampments have become an increasingly visible outcome of Canada’s housing crisis. Encampments have been increasing because of barriers in emergency shelter systems such as insufficient capacity, rules that pose a barrier to entry, and concerns regarding safety, comfort, or privacy. Additionally, the community offered by encampments can create a sense of safety and allow those that

live there autonomy and privacy (Cohen et al., 2019). Even though encampments represent a lack of alternative housing options available, municipalities have tended to respond to them through punitive policies such as “sweeping” where police disperse the camps and remove resident belongings. Often, this may lead to people losing critical personal belongings, such as ID, medication, and other personal items (Farha & Schwan, 2020). There is a growing recognition that sweeping is an inhumane and ineffective practice that addresses the symptoms of homelessness, rather than the reasons that people are unhoused. Instead, there is a need for responses from all levels of government that focus on housing solutions.

Definitions

Minimal Barrier Housing is an approach to housing based in the principles of harm reduction. It focuses on providing housing that limits barriers that may exclude people. Examples of barriers may include requirements regarding sobriety, and other prescriptive rules (Springs Rescue Mission, n.d.).

Modular Housing is a building style that uses prefabricated units or sections of housing that are built off-site and then shipped and assembled on-site, allowing for faster construction times.

Supportive Housing incorporates a variety of services for residents. This may include support related to physical and mental health, substance use, or employment.

Unsheltered Homelessness refers to a situation where someone is sleeping outside, often in tents, bus shelters, cars, doorways, or empty buildings (End Homelessness Winnipeg, 2020).



Figure 1: Othello Village, a tiny home community in Seattle

Tiny Homes

Tiny Homes and other forms of modular housing are becoming a more common response to homelessness and can be found in multiple cities in the United States and Canada. Typically, tiny home communities include small, individual units where residents live. Some units are equipped with a small kitchenette and private washroom, while other communities have shared showers, washrooms, and dining areas. They also typically incorporate programming to ensure residents have access to support services onsite.

In December of 2022, City of Winnipeg Councillor Sherri Rollins put forward a motion directing the public service to explore sites for the construction of 6 modular housing projects that would create 270 units of housing for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (Pursaga, 2022). This case study may therefore be useful for both policymakers and housing providers as further supportive housing projects in Winnipeg move forward.

2.0 Facts of the Case

The vision for a supportive tiny home community in Downtown Winnipeg emerged from community engagement with people living in encampments in the South Point Douglas neighbourhood as a part of Nii'kaanaagaa (Our Hopes and Dreams): Strategy to Address First Nations Homelessness. Engagement for this strategy identified a desire to see Indigenous-led supportive housing villages developed for those experiencing homelessness in Winnipeg's core (End Homelessness Winnipeg, n.d.). When the COVID-19 pandemic brought about the need for immediate housing for those experiencing homelessness, Astum Api Niikinaahk (formerly called the Village) emerged as a possible response. While the project did not end up being a rapid housing project, the interest in following the vision that had been put forward ultimately led to a series of community engagement events that would guide the Astum Api Niikinaahk project (End Homelessness Winnipeg, n.d.).

Partner Organizations

Community engagement began in July 2020 with a meeting of key Indigenous organizations. This meeting established a commitment to moving forward with the project and established several core principles. These included a commitment to incorporating the clan system, traditional ways of living, and a wide range of supportive services in the project. This meeting also identified that the project should be guided by an Elders Circle, and informed by encampment residents to understand what they would like to see in a supportive housing project (End Homelessness Winnipeg, n.d.).

Astum Api Niikinaahk is led by Ma Mawi Wii Chi Itata Centre and supported by:

End Homelessness Winnipeg

Thunderbird House

Ka Ni Kanichihk

Eagle Urban Transition Centre

The Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg

Elders Circle

Following the initial partners' meeting, an Elders Circle was established. The Elders Circle informed key themes including the importance of spirit and culture, resources to meet basic needs, the importance both of privacy and community, and the value of reciprocity to the project. The Elders Circle also informed the planned Community Ceremony with encampment residents (see below) and continued to guide the project through to its completion.

Community Ceremony and Feast

In the summer of 2020, an encampment near the Disraeli Bridge had to be dismantled due to ongoing safety and security issues (End Homelessness Winnipeg, 2020, p. 17). This dismantling was necessary due to the conditions, yet was still traumatizing for individuals living there. In September 2020, a ceremony and feast was held on the site as an opportunity for healing. Around 75 people who had been residents of the Disraeli encampment, or those nearby, were in attendance. The event included a pipe ceremony, sacred fire, songs, and a discussion regarding what people would like to see in housing.

Key feedback received during the feast informed several aspects of the project's design. This included its location, the use of small living spaces, minimal barriers for residency, and the inclusion of on-site supportive services that incorporate Indigenous culture (End Homelessness Winnipeg, n.d.).

While guidance from the project partners, Elders Circle, and people with lived experience informed the vision and guiding values for Astum Api Niikinaahk, the project also builds upon a vision for an Indigenous community hub at Higgins and Main that dates to projects such as the Neeginan Plan from 1975. Both the Neeginan Plan and initial visions for the Circle of Life Thunderbird House incorporated community housing and services that would respond to the social and economic needs of the growing Indigenous population living in Winnipeg.

3.0 Outcomes

Astum Api Niikinaahk officially welcomed its first residents in January of 2023. While initially the project had been called “The Village”, the name Astum Api Niikinaahk, meaning “Come sit at our home” in Michif, was gifted to the project by two-spirit Métis Elder, Charlotte Nolin. The project features 22 tiny home units complete with a kitchenette, bathroom, bed, and access to the internet and a telephone (Jonsa, 2023). Units are fully furnished with all the appliances and supplies that residents would need to transition from living unsheltered. Astum Api Niikinaahk is a minimal barrier housing project, meaning that residents will not need to be sober to be tenants, and there are no time limits for how long people can live in their units (Maclean, 2022).

Key themes from the project’s community engagement are incorporated both into Astum Api Niikinaahk’s programming and design. The doors of the units face inward on a courtyard that is home to a sacred fire, and space for a sweat lodge (Maclean, 2022). This aspect of the design was informed by feedback from Elders regarding the layout of traditional Anishinaabe and Cree villages. The design of individual units was also informed by the community. Site coordinator Melissa Stone emphasized that a key element of the design of individual units was ensuring that residents could feel safe at night. This meant being mindful of where windows were and ensuring each unit had a locking steel door. Astum Api Niikinaahk also includes a main building on site that houses wraparound supports based on Indigenous culture for residents to access. This includes access to a cultural mentor who residents can speak to, a medical centre, as well as mental health and harm reduction supports (Jonsa, 2023).



Figure 2: A unit at Astum Api Niikinaahk



Figure 3: The round room in Astum Api Niikinaahk’s main building is stocked with traditional Indigenous medicines



Figure 4: A rendering of Astum Api Niikinaahk from Cibinel Architecture Ltd.

4.0 Lessons Learned

Astum Api Niikinaahk holds several lessons for those involved in the delivery and development of transitional housing projects. It also presents lessons for policymakers and funders regarding ways that they can support future Indigenous-led affordable housing developments.

1 - Importance of Partnerships & Relationships

Information from the public engagement project coordinator Melissa Stone highlights the importance of partnerships and relationships to the project. The site is adjacent to Thunderbird House, a location that was noted as important by attendees at the community feast. This location has a large concentration of homeless-serving agencies that have existing relationships with the unhoused community downtown. Stone also shared that the project staff worked to build new relationships that would help them support tenants upon moving in. This included building strong relationships with EIA to ensure that residents of Astum Api Niikinaahk would be supported in accessing social assistance if desired. Stone noted that they also developed a relationship with the Residential Tenancies Branch to establish a lease structure that protects tenants and the organization as a housing provider.

2 - Person-centred

Community feedback emphasized the need to make Astum Api Niikinaahk a minimal barrier supportive living environment. The project aims to meet residents where they are, by not including requirements such as sobriety that may create barriers. Instead, the project includes principles to guide residents and encourage harmonious co-living, while respecting residents' rights to privacy and autonomy. The project also promotes a strengths-based approach that allows for contributions to the project as people's capacity and skills allow and ensures that people are compensated accordingly for their contributions and time.

3 - Importance of Indigenous traditions and practices

Indigenous culture has informed all aspects of Astum Api Niikinaahk's process, design, governance, and supports. This is reflected in the collaborative governance model of the project's partner organizations, as well as in the incorporation of traditional Anishinaabe and Cree village layouts. Indigenous traditions and cultural teachings are also at the core of the supports being offered to residents, in recognition of the importance of culture and spirituality in the healing process.

4 - Informed by community engagement & vision

Astum Api Niikinaahk was informed by an Elders and Knowledge Keepers Circle, as well as people with lived experience of unsheltered homelessness at all stages of the project. This community involvement was critical to both the physical design, the engagement process, and programming development. Particularly the involvement of people with lived experience was essential to creating a space where residents could feel safe and secure in their units. Michael Robertson, the project's architect emphasized the importance of incorporating the feedback from residents in the physical design of the space, stating "the best parts of the design are responses to what we heard."

5 - Using planning tools

Rappaport noted that there is a need to understand how Indigenous-led developments can be supported both in Winnipeg and across Canada. This project demonstrated the need to understand where planning tools can be used to expedite the process and reduce barriers for Indigenous-led developments. Astum Api Niikinaahk was initially proposed for a site in South Point Douglas, however, it could not proceed due to this site awaiting a secondary plan. Identifying tools that municipalities can implement to reduce barriers and expedite processes at key locations should be a priority as cities look to support future developments.

6 – Funding

The project also holds several lessons regarding funding. First, it highlights the need for increased commitment to providing operational funding to projects such as Astum Api Niikinaahk over the long term. Currently, the project needs to re-apply annually for operational funding. This impacts the ability to hire permanent staff and diverts capacity away from the delivery of services in order to apply for funding and carry out reporting requirements.

One large cost Stone noted was that currently, the budget does not include funding for food, a large expense that requires creative problem-solving to address. Stone noted that securing funding for food should be a priority for future projects.

This project also identified the need for new sources of funding support for Indigenous non-profits looking to acquire land for housing projects. Lissie Rappaport, a planner on the project noted that Indigenous non-profits typically don't have the same type of collateral that other developers do, which creates a challenge for securing the financing needed to purchase land. Providing funding opportunities that specifically target the costs of land acquisition would help to reduce this financial barrier.

"The best parts of the design are responses to what we heard"

- Michael Robertson, Cibinel Architecture Ltd.

7 - Building capacity in the non-profit sector

Non-profits face challenges that are unique from other housing developers. Limited capacity, financing, and experience in undertaking complex development projects may all pose challenges for non-profits undertaking this work. Several lessons that Melissa Stone shared from this experience were the importance of researching the companies you're working with, and the need to maintain momentum in the project with regular meetings. While the pandemic added delays related to materials and labour for the project, Stone noted that the environmental testing on the site also presented a major additional expense that they had not initially anticipated. These challenges underline the importance of building partnerships and relationships that can help non-profits who are new to development build capacity, learning from others' experiences on similar projects.

Astum Api Niikinaahk represents an exciting moment in terms of momentum for a long-standing vision of an Indigenous hub at the city's centre, and an important case study for the development of future Indigenous-led supportive housing projects in Winnipeg. Given the City's current interest in the development of rapid modular housing, the lessons are particularly relevant to policymakers who may be looking for opportunities to improve the feasibility of future projects like Astum Api Niikinaahk, and other Indigenous-led non-profits who are interested in leading future projects.

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Figure List

Cover Image: MacLean, C. (2022). Astum Api Niikinaahk: Winnipeg's tiny homes project getting ready to welcome its 1st residents. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/winnipeg-tiny-homes-project-nearly-complete-1.6660920>

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Figure 2: Mackenzie, M. (2022). An individual unit at Astum Api Niikinaahk. The Walrus. <https://thewalrus.ca/no-place-to-live/>

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