Planning for People and Places
How Winnipeg’s Bell Hotel Redevelopment will Improve the Downtown Core and Opportunities for the People who Call it Home

Abstract

Placemaking is not just about building redevelopment or the design needed to make places go from the subjective ‘bad’ to ‘better.’ Placemaking is about ongoing, community directed processes intended to create and revitalize spaces, and improve the lives of those who use those them. It is the synergy created between people and a place.

In 2007, a placemaking process began in the downtown core of Winnipeg through the redevelopment of the defunct Bell Hotel. Prior to its closure, the Bell was seedy, poorly managed and not what most planners would consider a good place to live. It was, however, a home to many individuals living on fixed incomes and those who had limited housing options. Many view the Bell’s closure as one of many actions contributing to an increase in homelessness in Winnipeg.

Centreventure, the City’s arms-length development corporation, purchased the Bell Hotel in 2007. At that time there were many options for redevelopment. After intensive examination of the issues facing the surrounding neighbourhood, a choice was made to develop supportive housing for Winnipeg’s chronically homeless population who frequent the area. This was seen as a positive choice for those living without homes and for the local businesses and social agencies experiencing the daily stress and pressure of the high rates of street homelessness in the area.

Redevelopment of the Bell has followed a process that recognizes the needs and wishes of the people who will be housed there, as well as those who live and work in the neighbouring area. The planning process has centred on the principles of social justice, community partnership, lessons from other jurisdictions, and most importantly on the input of the people who would once again call the Bell Hotel home. The redevelopment process is an excellent example of authentic placemaking in Winnipeg.
Background

The Place
Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels were built across North American cities in the early 1900s, often serving as temporary homes for those moving to cities. Throughout their history, SRO hotels remained no-frills housing. Distasio and Mulligan (2005) showed how the rise and fall of SRO hotels in Winnipeg followed the boom and later decline of downtown as a whole. In general, the sparse rooms have become homes for people who cannot afford to live anywhere else, with monthly rents at or below the welfare rate, but with little security of tenure. North American cities have dealt with their declining SRO hotels in different ways. Some cities choose to create boutique hotels, others develop for higher income residents, and some let the SROs continue to house low income people with varying levels of support or protection from government legislation or programs. Many cities have recognized the value of SROs in providing homes for people with few other housing options, and have transformed them into supportive housing to better maintain and manage them.

The People
Various scholars have traced the existence of homelessness in Canada and pointed at different contributing factors (Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang & Pradis, 2009). Hulchanski et al. (2009) argue that the term “homelessness” did not become common until 1985. “Homelessness” has since taken on a life of its own, and remarkably, the study of homelessness has almost become divorced from the study of housing. This is in part due to a growing scholarship throughout the 1990’s pointing to individual causes of being without shelter. Currently, as more and more people experience homelessness, it is becoming increasingly difficult for politicians to blame individuals and ignore the systemic reasons for this severe social problem (Laird, 2007).

Systemic factors affecting a person’s ability to find and maintain housing include discrimination in housing and employment markets, and the lack of an adequate health and social support system. Evidence indicates that the hardest to house individuals tend to be those suffering from mental illness and/or addictions. They are evicted from market housing first and most often, and because these are seen as ‘personal’ factors, housing strategies have often focused on ‘fixing’ the people before trying to address their homelessness. A new model, referred to as Housing First and developed in New York City in 1992 by Dr. Sam Tsemberis, has since challenged this convention.

Housing First recognizes housing as a basic human right, and provides people experiencing homelessness with immediate access to housing, coupled with the support they need to be able to maintain it. Once in a safe and stable place, people become recognized as members of a community, gain higher levels of confidence, well-being, and self-determination, and are better able to maintain their tenancies.
Context
The Bell Hotel was built in 1906. At the time it was a high-end hotel, said to have been one of the “finest small hotels” in Winnipeg (City of Winnipeg, 2004). The hotel changed along with the gradual deterioration of Main Street in Winnipeg, and the Bell shifted from a “luxury hotel” to a “single room occupancy hotel.” In 2007 the owner of the hotel was forced to sell because he could not afford to fix the boiler. The notoriously rowdy bar, eccentric behaviour of the owner, and numerous health and safety violations provided the opportunity and incentive for Centreventure to purchase the building. Though it was obvious that major repairs were required, closing the building meant that 72 people with little income and few housing options in Winnipeg would be displaced. The Bell Hotel was not an ideal place to live, but it was a community of sorts and it was home. Many of the tenants had been homeless prior to rooming there, and they had been evicted from other SRO hotels and rooming houses in the city. Most struggled with mental illness and/or drug addiction. Although social workers or local programs tried to find new homes for them, many ended up at Main Street Project, a nearby emergency homeless shelter.

Policy analysts for The Province of Manitoba’s Cross Departmental Coordination Initiative were, at the time of the Bell Hotel’s purchase, putting together a strategy for reducing homelessness in the province. Research showed that a Housing First model had been successful in other jurisdictions, and most cities across the United States and Canada were including Housing First approaches in their policies and programs. Lacking the spectrum of housing options needed to support Housing First, one of the policy recommendations for Winnipeg included purchasing SRO hotels and converting them into supportive housing. Although a comprehensive homelessness reduction strategy was not adopted, in 2008 this particular recommendation was with the Bell Hotel in mind. was reduction strategy was not The Bell Hotel, because of its location, history, ownership, and current lack of tenants, made it an ideal building for SRO conversion.

Unlike traditional developments, this redevelopment project was aimed not at replacing what many might consider undesirable tenants with
"If I had a question about the design, Brian Bechtel [the Executive Director of Main Street Project] would ask me ‘what’s normal?’ because this is a home, and it should be normal.”
-Desmond Burke of BIOS Architecture

better ones. The focus was on making the building and its management safer and more supportive for the sort of tenants who had lived there and people already living in the community who needed a home.

Lessons Learned: Pushing for Great Placemaking
Challenging Conventions on Homelessness is Difficult
Policy development related to homelessness is heavily influenced by stereotypes. Those lacking experience or objective evidence on the issue continue to believe that people choose to be homeless or that it is due to personal character flaws, that homelessness is unsolvable, and that homeless people must jump through a variety of hoops before they are ‘housing ready.’ A philosophical shift toward the successful Housing First model requires a radical change in thinking around homelessness. The project managers for the Bell Hotel had to have clear and consistent information about the theory and research behind the Model. Strong relationships had to be built with all the stakeholders who were needed to ensure on-going support for the project. Community opposition was surprisingly minimal because businesses and social services in the area were engaged early and could see how the project would be in their interests. Other stakeholders and partners of the project were educated through open exchanges of information to get them onside.

For the People, By the People
The Project for Public Spaces (n.d.) states that placemaking “involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover their needs and aspirations.” Authentic tenant engagement is a challenge for bureaucrats and developers but nonetheless was notionally part of the Bell Hotel redevelopment from the beginning. The design of the new building was created by BIOS Architecture with initial input from a group of individuals with lived experience of homelessness. This group was considered to be representative of the population of future tenants of the Bell Hotel. Despite early involvement, the tenant perspective has not always been front and centre in the planning of the building, and future tenants have not been (to date) a part of choosing the service package or property management. Follow-up will be important to determine to what extent this lack of authentic engagement at later stages of the project will impact upon its success.

Partnership Means Letting Go
A partnership of government organizations developing an innovative, first-of-its-kind project in a city is rare. The partners had to think differently about their work in order to make the project a success. An increase in consultation and cooperation on project decisions, along with a decrease in individual organizational control, is critical.
Not a One Size Fits All Housing Model
SRO conversions into supportive housing have been successful in other jurisdictions, but placemaking is about more than ‘cookie-cutter’ models. The development process is not linear and must work with the specific context of the project. The tasks of the redevelopment project are interdependent and iterative, forcing the partners involved to work in a way that challenged ‘silod’ thinking about the essentials: physical redesign, tenant management and the service package. Each partner has discrete processes that need to work with all the other partners’ processes. Risk mitigation for the project manager is key. Timing is critical in bridging the processes and keeping the project on track. There are a number of variables in SRO conversion, many of which could change with the context, timing, and people involved. There are, however, some components that are non-negotiable:
- People
- Place
- Support Services
- Money
- Organization (short & long term)

The Method is in the Madness
The process of redeveloping the Bell Hotel at times seemed fragmented because of the number of partners and interests. Shoring up support earlier rather than later prevents divisions from disrupting the project. There were a number of

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The Bell Hotel is scheduled to reopen for tenants in the summer of 2011. Decisions over the final service package have not yet been made, and will be vital to the success of the project. Engagement with potential tenants at the later stages appears to be less of a priority than at the beginning of the project, yet will be necessary as people move in and make the Bell into their place once again. A good place is not just built, it is sustained and improved. Ongoing evaluation of the Bell Hotel as a supportive housing project is crucial and will help to ensure the opportunities for downtown and its residents are realized.

Next Steps

Key decisions to be made and included in a partnership agreement:
- Ownership
- Site identification and selection
- Architectural design
- Tenant make up

skeptics, even among the partners, and project managers had a primary role in challenging pessimistic or dichotomous thinking. A clear partnership agreement with terms of reference would have reduced some of the ‘madness’ and made decisions simpler.

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References


