

From House to Home

Exploring Socially Inclusive Housing Design

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Author's Note

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Report Overview

How can a shared housing environment foster belonging and inclusion?

Purpose

The aim of this project is to learn from women with experience in shelters and/or criminal justice-related institutions about how communal living environments could be designed to better foster social inclusion. While studies often focus on either physical design or social dynamics, there is growing recognition that both elements work together to create socially-inclusive spaces. Further, in a region with high rates of loneliness and isolation, particularly in lower-income households, inclusion is an especially critical aim. Social inclusion affects trust and sense of agency, increases community participation, and is associated with better physical and mental health.

With the above in mind, the following questions guided this project:

- What would socially-inclusive shared housing (i.e. housing with at least one shared living space) look and feel like from the perspective of women who have stayed in shelters or criminal justice-related institutions?
- What physical design and social factors support community-building, safety and personal autonomy, and positive interactions between residents?

Project Context

The *Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver* is a not-for-profit organization that serves women, girls, and children who are socially vulnerable or involved with the criminal justice system. Connections between the criminal justice system, poverty, and homelessness are well established. Most of Elizabeth Fry's clientele lives in poverty: a 2014-15 demographics survey found that 78% of the organization's clients had an annual income of under \$10,000 (Elizabeth Fry, 2015). Connecting poverty to housing, the organization is interested in how permanent housing spaces can be socially-inclusive and facilitate community-building between diverse residents.

Who did this project include?

Fifteen women participated in focus group discussions at four Elizabeth Fry programs across Metro Vancouver. The discussions looked at the importance of both physical elements (how the space looks and is organized) and the social environment (house rules, resident responsibilities, social activities). Participatory design principles were incorporated into a visioning exercise, recognizing that centering those with lived experience makes it more likely that the outcome of a process will reflect the wants and needs of the target population.

While those who participated brought a wide range of perspectives and backgrounds, they had at least one experience in common: living with others in a shared space. This combined with their diversity of other experiences led to rich discussions about housing ideas and priorities. Although this report focuses on women with experiences of homelessness and/or criminalization, its findings arguably also have applicability for social planning and communal housing more broadly. Indeed, changing households and rising unaffordability mean that many households are looking to the potential that different shared living models offer (e.g. intergenerational housing, student housing, supportive housing).

Findings: What does socially inclusive housing look like?

Balancing **privacy and personal space** with **opportunities for community building** emerged as a core challenge in shared housing, as well as **allowing flexibility to accommodate diverse needs and lifestyles**.

Six key learnings were identified based on the focus group discussions:

1. Kitchens and cooking spaces offer great of potential as shared spaces - but they are hard to get right.
2. Onsite activities provide valuable opportunities for community-building and skill-development.
3. Bedrooms & bathrooms are important personal spaces.
4. There is a maximum number of people who can live together and share spaces comfortably.
5. Common space(s) should be flexible and allow for multiple uses.
6. Determining house expectations and guidelines as a community contributes to ownership and sense of belonging.

Three **case studies** with an explicit focus on creating community were then identified to build on themes raised by the women who participated in the discussions. Finally, drawing on the literature overview, findings from the focus groups, and case studies, **recommendations** are outlined related to physical design, social dynamics, and development process.



Social Inclusion, Housing & Homelessness

Housing Insecurity & Homelessness with a Gendered Lens

Over the past decade, women experiencing homelessness in Metro Vancouver have consistently represented around 30 percent of the region's homeless population (BCNPHA & M. Thomson Consulting, 2017). Yet this number is almost certainly an undercount. Point-in-time counts are recognized to be undercounts in general, but do an especially poor job of capturing people experiencing homelessness in less visible ways, such as couch surfing, staying with friends, or living in precarious or unsuitable living environments. Women disproportionately make up this 'hidden homeless.'

While it is important to emphasize that women's experiences and pathways to homelessness are incredibly diverse, gender plays into experiences with homelessness and housing insecurity in a number of ways (Bayes & Brewin, 2012; Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018). Gender intersects with other factors and identities – such as class, race, sexuality, and ability, among others – to influence experiences with housing, homelessness, and incarceration. While around two percent of the Vancouver population identifies as Indigenous, those with Indigenous identities make up almost 40 percent of the region's homeless population (BCNPHA & M. Thomson Consulting, 2017). Further, approximately

one in five racialized families in Canada live in poverty, compared to one in 20 families within the total population (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2019). As the following section discusses, those who experience racialization are also over-represented in the justice system.

Systemic discrimination also influences access to housing. Approximately one in five trans women¹ in the United States has been refused a home or apartment, and many are routinely turned away from women's shelters or other gender-based programming (Grant et al, 2011). *Coming Together* (2010), a five-year community-based and participatory action project in Toronto, found that individual homelessness women's experiences remain deeply affected by systemic marginalization, and must be understood at the structural level in order to be addressed adequately. The project also heard that for women and trans women with homelessness experiences, peer support networks are critical for survival, advocacy, and resource-sharing (Sakamoto et al, 2010).

Women experiencing homelessness often face gender-based safety concerns, higher risks of sexual assault, and reproductive health challenges (Fingfeld-Connett, 2010). Single parent families are disproportionately led by women, and access to affordable housing for larger families is extremely limited. About 61 percent of families waiting for subsidized

1. Trans women experiencing homelessness face additional systemic discrimination & barriers that are not adequately covered in this report. For two useful resources, see *Coming Together: Homelessness Women, Housing, and Social Support* (2010) and *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (2011).



Incarceration
frequently triggers
a lifetime struggle
with homelessness
- Bayes & Brewin,
2012

housing on the BC Housing registry are single-parent, and 87 percent of these are headed by women (BC Housing, 2018).

Weighing their options, some women stay in abusive relationships rather than going to a shelter or out on the street, especially if they have children (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Prioritizing children's safety was a sentiment strongly reflected by women in this study (see **Findings**). Meanwhile, shelter spaces for women with children are limited. Across the Lower Mainland, some communities still do not have shelters that accept children (Bayes & Brewin, 2012). The above factors combined with Metro Vancouver's housing crisis suggest that the number of women seeking shelter in the region is likely to continue to increase.

Homelessness & Incarceration

It would be difficult to overstate the reinforcing relationship between homelessness and the criminal justice system. Put simply, homelessness increases the likelihood of incarceration, with incarceration increasing the likelihood of homelessness. A 2018 report based in the United States found that people who were formerly incarcerated are around 10 times more likely to become homeless than the general population (Prison Policy Institute, 2018). Formerly incarcerated women are more likely than men to find themselves homeless, with women of colour the most likely to experience homelessness. These statistics evoke legacies of systemic racism and sexism, as well as the criminalization of homelessness.

Meanwhile, Indigenous women are the

fastest growing incarcerated population in Canada (Vecchio, 2018), and it is critical to think about the complex connections between homelessness and incarceration, and about the ways these systems affect individuals with different interplaying identities and experiences. Canada's ongoing colonial legacy means there is significant over-representation of Indigenous peoples within the criminal justice system and experiencing homelessness. Nationally, Indigenous women make up approximately 5 percent of the Canadian population, while accounting for 40 percent of women in prison (Zinger, 2018). It is further estimated that 1 in 2 Indigenous women in federal custody have a personal or family member's experience with the residential school system (Vecchio, 2018). More broadly, a 2007 study by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation estimated that approximately 30 percent of people leaving jail have no place to go upon release (CMHC, 2007).

Housing Needs

Physical design elements and the social environment (including interpersonal relationships) work together to create safe and welcoming spaces. Although not about permanent housing, Elizabeth Fry's (2012) study on women's safety in shelters highlights important lessons about design principles for women who have experiences with homelessness or in institutional settings.

Recognizing that housing instability often brings negative experiences with security, personal safety is critical in designing these spaces. As the report explains,

If the space is not arranged in a way that takes into account women's safety concerns, women will not use those services. What are the considerations that must go into creating safe space for women? And even more importantly, what can we do to create spaces that build a homeless woman's sense of safety? (Bayes & Brewin 2012, 24)

The report outlines a number of specific features characterizing safe and accessible shelter spaces, including:

- Secure access and entry-ways;
- Open sightlines in shared spaces;
- Private sleeping areas (including locks on private doors);
- Well- and consistently-lit spaces;
- Contrasting colours and visual cues for wayfinding; and
- Avoiding institutional environments wherever possible (while recognizing that this can be challenging due to bed bugs, safety concerns, wear and tear, etc.).

Moving from homelessness, institutionalization, or both, to stable housing can be a long-term and complex process. Traumatic past experiences can lead to distrust, resulting in self-reliance and making living with others amidst community expectations sometimes challenging (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Nonetheless, a number of suggestions have been identified in previous research and through talking to women about their preferences (Elizabeth Fry Toronto, 2014; Finfgeld-Connett, 2010), including:

- Supporting peer-to-peer relationships and creating opportunities for learning

- and sharing between residents;
- Allowing residents to play a role in determining house rules and expectations (and generally avoiding paternalism);
- Offering training in basic life skills; and
- Providing services like onsite childcare and health services where possible.

Design-wise, providing sufficient space to let residents set their own physical boundaries promotes agency and sense of ownership over a shared space (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010).

Social Inclusion: Why does it matter?

This project aims to identify ways to make shared housing more socially inclusive. What does that mean and why is it important? In its 2012 and 2017 *Connect & Engage* reports, the Vancouver Foundation found that Metro Vancouver is an especially challenging place to make connections, with declining rates of community involvement. Further, those living in low-income households or experiencing unemployment disproportionately face frequent loneliness and isolation (Vancouver Foundation, 2017; Vancouver Coastal & Fraser Health, 2014).

These findings are important because a person's sense of belonging, often referred to as social inclusion, has many benefits. Regular, positive interactions between neighbours or housemates play a critical role in building trust and encouraging participation in community and political life (Chavis and Wandersman, 1990). Sense of community, or the relationship between a person and their surrounding social

structures, is also connected to perceptions of agency. That is, the more connected someone feels to those around them, the more influence they believe they have on their environment and community (McMillian & Chavis, 1986).

In addition to negatively affecting participation and trust, social isolation adversely affects mental and physical health. Chronic loneliness or a lack of meaningful social relationships increases the risk of heart disease and other illnesses (Vancouver Coastal & Fraser Health, 2014). To foster agency and support positive health outcomes among those who have experienced marginalization and systemic exclusion, it is important to look at what makes people feel included in their social environments and living spaces.

Connecting Social Inclusion to Housing

Where a person lives determines who they interact with on a daily basis, making housing an important factor in addressing isolation. Although not always the case, housing and shelter environments for people who have experienced homelessness or have been incarcerated – and large scale social housing buildings more broadly – often mirror institutional environments. These settings are also common among residences designed for the elderly. Peters (2014) explains that “modernism led to many ‘machines for healing’ – hospitals, housing and clinics designed for old age that were intentionally modular, industrially inspired and institutional” (47). The post-

war modernist era continues to shape how shelters and residences for people that are aging, have limited mobility, or have experienced homelessness are built, especially those designed at a large scale (Salingaros et al, 2019).

How do we move towards more socially inclusive housing? Aging demographics in Western countries mean that there is growing emphasis on design that serves a range of needs and abilities and allows residents to age in place. Looking to the Scandinavian context,

“there has been a particular focus in recent Danish designs for an ageing population on using architectural design to reduce the stigma of old age and to promote social inclusion. Another key concept has been in creating environments with domestic spaces that remind the users of, and feel like, their own homes, breaking down preconceptions of the ‘nursing home’ stereotype.” (Peters, 48).

Although the target population of this report is different, the principles connecting social inclusion and housing are relevant. Some of these aims include: integrating the housing into the surrounding community; designing in a way that contributes to de-stigmatization (whether related to aging, medical condition, or socioeconomic status); and balancing privacy and security to create a community-oriented space.

Shared housing - i.e. housing shared between two or more unrelated adults - has also been gaining momentum as an alternative to living alone. In the United States, the majority of organizations registered with the National Shared



Maintaining an intimate, residential scale is important for promoting social cohesion. Programs can divide a larger property into smaller wings or floors.
- Best practices for Shared Living Spaces, 2012

Housing network are 'match up' programs: they facilitate matches between people with extra space and those looking for accommodation (National Shared Housing, 2019). The most common programs are targeted at seniors (45%), followed by those aimed at low-income individuals (35%), and then people experiencing homelessness (8%) (ALA, 2012). With a focus on aging in place, Affordable Living for the Aging (2012) advocates that sharing a home can be a way to remain independent, while also benefitting from the support and company of at least one co-resident and decreasing housing costs.

The second type of shared housing programs are Shared Living Residences (SLRs), in which multiple tenants have their own bedrooms (and sometimes bathrooms) yet share common spaces. These residences can take the form of group homes or communal living spaces and may offer a supportive living environment. There are considerably less organizations that focus on SLRs, likely in part due to the greater number of accompanying regulations. Once again, ALA emphasizes the importance of both design and management of the space. Design-wise, a number of the features articulated in their best practices closely parallel women's comments in the focus group discussions (see **Findings**), including lockable bedrooms, open sightlines, and a balance of private and shared spaces.

Finally, there are lessons to be learned from the growing body of research and practice

on co-housing. While shared housing means residents have their own bedroom and most other spaces are shared, in cohousing complexes residents have their own fully self-contained space (including kitchen, living space) but share larger common areas, responsibilities, and governance. Co-housing emerged from Denmark in the 1960s as an alternative to single-family residences. Akin to this project's objectives, one aim of co-housing is balancing privacy and community, by providing a combination of individual living spaces and shared amenities. While the majority of co-housing environments are oriented towards higher-income households, Garciano (2011) and others suggest that affordable housing providers should look to co-housing as an option for lower-income families. Participatory processes are central to cohousing: while social housing is often top down, cohousing emphasizes working from the bottom up and encourages resident participation with design (Salingaros, 2019). Strategies that have been used to make co-housing viable for affordable housing include: internal subsidization to integrate low-income units, combinations of public and private financing, and using limited equity models or land trusts as alternative ownership models (See the **Case Studies** section for an example of affordable co-housing in the United States).

The overall goal [of cohousing] is to achieve a physical design that encourages interaction among residents without sacrificing private individual space - Garciano, 2011

Approach

Overview

An important starting point in approaching this project is recognizing that some communities and individuals have been subject to virtually unending research. Research involving people who have experienced homelessness, use or have used drugs, or have been involved with the criminal justice system has in many cases been extractive or served to further reinforce stigma (Boilevin et al, 2019). Further, these studies often tell stories of pain and tragedy rather than community resistance and ingenuity (Tuck and Yang, 2016).

For these reasons, it is imperative to think about how research can be done in more ethical and reciprocal ways. *Research 101: A Manifesto for Ethical Research in the Downtown Eastside* (DTES) was developed out of a 2018 workshop series about ethical research practices that involved representatives from a range of DTES organizations. Although the focus groups for this project were not held in the DTES, many principles and findings in *Research 101* provide important considerations. The report emphasizes the importance of compensating participants for their time and expertise (see also Becu & Allan, 2017); working from a trauma-informed perspective; and being transparent about research outcomes.

“Desire-centered” research (i.e. research based on participants’ priorities and ideas) is likewise proposed to counteract the ubiquity of pain narratives. Tuck and Yang

(2016) explain: “Desire-centered research does not deny the experience of tragedy, trauma, and pain, but positions the knowing derived from such experiences as wise” (231). While still making space to acknowledge difficult experiences, research that focuses on desires and priorities aims to recognize participants’ agency and expertise from lived experiences. Drawing on the above resources, the following guiding principles were developed to inform this project:

1. Centre the expertise and ideas of those with lived experience
2. Compensate participants for their time and contributions
3. Be honest about what may or may not result from this project
4. Give participants the chance to review their input if desired and withdraw consent at any time before publication
5. Make the final report publicly available and accessible

What and who did the project involve?

Focus groups were held at four Elizabeth Fry programs across Metro Vancouver, including three shelters and one community residential facility for women on parole. 15 women participated, all with experience residing in communal living spaces. While most were current residents, three participants were previous residents who returned to attend the discussion. The focus groups were held between June 29 and July 20, 2019, and ranged from 2 to 6 participants (see **Appendix C** for more

information on focus groups and locations). Ethics approval for this project was granted through UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (certificate number H19-01111).

Setting up the focus groups was coordinated through shelter staff. Residents were informed about the opportunity to participate in a discussion about housing experiences through staff or program managers, typically at resident house meetings. The women who participated were provided with a \$50 gift card to thank them for their time and important contributions.

The topic of the study was shaped by conversations between the author and Elizabeth Fry. After volunteering with one of the organization's programs for some time, the author spoke to Elizabeth Fry management about whether there would be research that would interest the organization. Based on that discussion, the aim of the focus groups was to hear from women about how shared living spaces can facilitate community and better serve those who have experienced homelessness or been institutionalized, with a particular focus on counteracting social isolation.

Prompts and activities asked about physical spaces and social structures, recognizing the strong significance of both (see also Williams, 2006). Throughout the discussions, women were asked to draw on any and all experiences they had in shared housing, not only their experiences within Elizabeth Fry programs. The focus groups were around 90 minutes long, with the first half a semi-

structured discussion and the second half an activity asking participants to envision an ideal housing design (for more details, see Focus Group Outline, [Appendix A](#)). Each participant was asked whether they wanted their real name used in the report or a pseudonym of their choice.

Case Studies were selected to look at how housing with at least one shared living space have been arranged and designed to facilitate social inclusion and community. Three relatively different examples from across North America were chosen that connect to some of the key themes and suggestions identified in the focus group discussions. An interview with the architect of one of the case studies was conducted to gather more information.

Integrating Participatory Design

While this project is not related to a specific building, its approach was informed by principles of participatory design. Participatory design refers to involving people who may be affected by the outcome of a process within that process (Shin, 2009; Enterprise Community Partners, 2014), based on the recognition that those with lived experience bring critical knowledge. The underlying idea suggests that including future residents (or in this case, the target demographic) in the design process makes it more likely that the outcome will reflect their wants and needs.

Participatory design has been used for co-housing developments, particularly in looking at how to balance privacy and community (Kraus, 2017). When used for

specific developments, participatory design also generally increases the ownership that residents feel over a building.

Recommended Resource

Enterprise Community Partners. (2014). *Participatory Design Toolkit: Using community engagement to improve the design and performance of affordable housing*.

Limitations

This project has a number of limitations. Its scope and timeline (i.e. carried out from April to August 2019) did not allow for the research approach to be subject to a community ethics review (see Boilevin et al, 2019). The number of participants were also limited by this scope: there was enough interest that at least one further discussion could have been held if the timeline had been longer.

Two focus group participants spoke minimal limited English, and the project did not involve funding for a translator. In these cases, we relied on another participant and a staff member to support rough translation. Childcare was also not provided, meaning participants with children had to watch them during the discussions.

Further, while the participating women came with a wide range of experiences, their perspectives should not be assumed to be representative of women experiencing housing insecurity or involved with the criminal justice system in Vancouver. As is implied through the small sample size and methodology, this project has

been interested in learning deeply from individual stories rather than identifying a representative sample.

Finally, as the author, I do not have lived experience with homelessness or the criminal justice system. I have continually approached the project with this limitation in mind, committing to learn from and center the expertise, experiences, and ideas of participants as much as possible. That said, the findings and analysis were shaped by my own interpretation and positionality.

Findings:

What was heard

Who participated?

The women who participated in the focus groups ranged from 21 to 66 years of age, with an average age of 38. Participants brought a wide array of life experiences to the discussions: some had spent most of their lives in Metro Vancouver and others had moved to the region within the past month as refugees. While some had spent time in many different shelters and transition houses, for others, this program or shelter was their first. The four women at Columbia Place all had experience within the criminal justice system. Participants were not explicitly asked about their ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, although several women shared this information openly, and the diversity of these complex positionalities and identities surfaced throughout the discussions as important factors shaping housing experiences and needs. Of the 15 participants, nine had at least one child staying with them, and five had three or more children (see [Appendix C](#) for more details about the focus groups).

Each of the women started by introducing themselves and sharing one activity or pastime that they would like to be able to do in their home.

My name is Helen,² I am 40 years, I have four kids, and they are all here. Came to New West one month ago. I want to learn English, this is important. After two years, I can't explain everything in my language to my kids and they forget my home language.

I'm Avery, I'm 27 and from BC. I like my home to be somewhere where I feel comfortable, where I can disconnect from people. I'm introverted, so having a lot of personalities around me can be a little tough sometimes.

What Makes a Space Welcoming?

We began each conversation by talking about welcoming and inclusive spaces: What does it mean to enter a new space and feel safe? What makes you feel like you belong? Echoing previous research, participants expressed that physical design and the social environment work together to create inclusive spaces. Yet it was the human elements of a space that were often raised first - that is, whether other people are friendly, if staff are welcoming and outgoing, or as one participant put it: 'the vibes' or first impressions. Feeling safe, especially for those with children, was also central.

When I come here, I'm new. I don't know no one here. And then when I come here, I feel like my home. Because they help me everything. When I ask them where is the bus station, they tell me. I ask them freely. [If] no one asks, it's hard for me. When I ask them, I feel like my sister or my family - like that. - Helen

For me, it's safety. When you come into a place the first thing that comes into your mind is, am I going to be safe here? Especially when you have kids. - Prosper

At the same time, participants agreed that physical elements can have a big impact on initial perceptions. Cleanliness, light, and plants were mentioned several times, as



My name is Bic, I'm 64 years old and I love plants. So I would like a place where you could grow or take care of plants.

2. Participating women were asked whether they wanted their real names used in the report or to be referred to by a pseudonym of their choice. As a result, some of the names used in this section are real and some are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.



It's always nice when you have some decor in the house, even if it's simple little paintings. Something bright and nice. - Tasha

was the importance of a welcoming, open lobby. One participant spoke of 'warm spaces,' and we talked in depth about what this meant, with others suggesting that it could mean warm colours and details like plants or art on the walls. Almost every woman emphasized the importance of green spaces, access to a garden, or plants when talking about desirable spaces and entrances. These features were compared to clinical or industrial elements and fluorescent lights, which women identified as a features of less welcoming spaces.

Inclusive Housing: Six Themes

Striking a balance between privacy and security and sense of community is a challenge in shared housing environments. Comments related to this tension were shared in all of the conversations. The remainder of this section outlines themes related to three overarching aims: *building community, preserving privacy and security, and allowing for flexibility to accommodate difference*. The six points below explore the comments and suggestions that were raised most often across the four discussions, while noting differences between and within the focus groups and participants wherever possible. Although some learnings connect more strongly to social environment and others to physical design, they are presented together to emphasize their close interconnectedness.

1. Kitchens and cooking spaces offer great potential as shared spaces - but they are hard to get right.

Kitchens and eating areas are spaces that can make or break a communal living space. Several women commented that the most challenging house rules in places they had lived were related to the regulation of kitchen or cooking spaces. This issue is clearly complex: as others noted, kitchens and cooking appliances can be dangerous hazards or feel chaotic when designed ineffectively or shared between too many people.

I have lived in two transition houses other than this shelter. All of them had rules around cooking. - Rashmi

Rashmi and others shared that rules related to cooking in shelters and transition homes often restrict when residents can use the kitchen (i.e. that you cannot cook past a certain time) or do not allow older children to use these spaces with less supervision (typically due to concerns about safety). Yet women related that these rules - especially those around cooking times - make coming together challenging and do not always reflect cultural practices that have later eating times.

When asked which rooms in a house should be private versus those that should be shared, most women indicated that kitchens can work well as shared spaces (two women strongly preferred fully self-contained units). A number of women emphasized how important shared cooking and eating spaces are for building community across experiences. Helen, a recent newcomer, shared that because she didn't know anyone when she arrived in



Food brings people together, to be able to communicate, to say 'hey my day was bad, how was your day?'
- Naheria

the region, a shared kitchen gives her the chance to exchange knowledge with other residents and helps with social isolation. She explained:

I like to cook. When they like my food, I'm happy. When they want to learn, I like it. I want to share. [...] I know something that [another resident] don't know. And some things she knows that I don't know. And then I don't feel alone.

The act of eating together is also important to participants and was closely connected to healthy and positive resident interactions more broadly. When asked what creates an inclusive space, many mentioned food. Some spoke of the informal conversations that arise when sharing meals (see left).

At the same time, women spoke of challenges such as inadequate kitchen space to accommodate multiple meals being prepared at once and different standards of cleanliness or food storage practices. To ensure there is a sense of order, Bic and Rosetta suggested that around four people to a kitchen is an appropriate amount. Others said that while they don't mind sharing a kitchen, having a small space in their room to store food (e.g. for allergies or dietary restrictions) or a mini fridge would be very helpful. Adequate and efficient storage was mentioned by many participants as a top priority and was often reflected in their proposed housing designs.

I buy special things for my kids because they have allergies. Even though you put your name on it, someone finds a way to use it still.

So I would prefer even a little space, even in our room - Naheria

In terms of layout, most women placed their kitchens in close proximity to at least one of the common spaces (see excerpted examples from activities, below). One participant suggested that having the kitchen and common spaces separate from the bedrooms would be a good idea for noise and privacy. Interestingly, five women across three of the focus groups explicitly said they preferred these spaces to be open concept, both making the area feel more spacious and allowing those with kids to watch over them in the other room.

You enter, then there's a common room, play room, and kitchen all close to each other. So you can be in the kitchen and watch your kids in the common area or playing - Christine



Sample activities showing proximity of kitchen to common spaces. Source: Focus group discussions.

2. Onsite activities provide valuable opportunities for community-building and skill-development.

Several participants suggested that a combination of more serious and recreational activities would help them get to know other residents and learn new things. A couple of women newer to the region or to the country expressed that English classes, or classes about common household practices in Canada (e.g. cleaning products or recipes) could be valuable. Sacha, who has a young toddler, spoke about the challenges of navigating government bureaucracy and making ends meet on a fixed income. She suggested that drop-in classes on topics such as budgeting tips for single moms would be immensely helpful. Rashmi emphasized that living in poverty and finding housing is extremely stressful and can take a toll on mental health. She suggested drop-in counseling sessions. It was emphasized that these activities should be optional, as required programming can be restrictive rather than something people look forward to.

Others suggested scheduling a set block of time for residents to get together and have (potentially facilitated) conversations over tea. Prosper suggested:

[a] program or time where we could voice our differences/feelings. When you talk to people it makes things easier for you. A program where we could come together and talk to ourselves: "this is what I'm going through, how can I get help." [...] Maybe once, twice a week we talk to [each other], we laugh, laugh

it out. I don't know if there is any class like that. Even tea time or something.

Many of the women also indicated they would enjoy activities that would allow them to explore an interest or hobby. Common suggestions for fun activities included barbecues, creative classes such as music or art, or spa days (massages, getting your nails done, etc.). Those with children emphasized how valuable it would be to have a weekly activity for their children to partake in, especially during the summer when school is out.

On-site classes or events were especially important for those with children. A number of the women with kids stated that having to take their young ones with them is a significant barrier to pursuing these kinds of classes or activities outside of the home. Having the opportunity to participate in a weekly class or events without having to go far would allow them to build life skills, engage in hobbies, and spend time with other residents.

How do these suggestions affect design? Spaces need to be created that allow these activities to occur. One idea was to have a flexible room to host these events, which could double as a room for an in-house counselor or social worker. Many women, such as Nikki (below), spoke about the importance of outdoor spaces and backyards as an area where residents can gather and facilitate events like barbecues. Finally, those with children spoke highly of outdoor play areas for kids, allowing for informal creative play and giving moms a

bit of a break.

Yeah a yard area would be nice. [...] Outdoor space acts as another space for people to hang out - Nikki

3. Bedrooms & bathrooms are important personal spaces.

Women emphasized that bedrooms are important personal spaces, and there was consensus from all focus group participants that they should be private as much as possible. They spoke about the need for these spaces to feel like their own and the desire to have the flexibility to decide what to do with them. A number of women also mentioned the difference that seemingly smaller design details make, such as having a lockable door.

There was an approximately even split among women between those who said that having their own bathroom was a top priority and those who didn't mind sharing a bathroom with one other person. Regardless, the ratio of bedrooms to bathrooms was agreed to be crucial. Concerns about bathroom cleanliness was also raised by a number of women, highlighting the importance of accountability around household chores.

As long as the washroom is clean and everyone has a chore to clean it then there is no problem sharing it. - Rashmi

The bathroom for me that's difficult. It's difficult to share a bathroom. Because I want to always clean up, even before you use it. - Prosper

Turning to the layout of spaces, a significant number of women suggested in the activity that bathrooms be placed in-between bedrooms (i.e. 2 bedrooms sharing one bathroom) to give the bedrooms more privacy and reduce noise pollution (see below for an example).

I've got it so that bedrooms are separated by bathrooms, so that not so much noise goes through the walls. So the bedrooms are all laid out around the building, not so close to each other. - Tasha



Sample activities showing bedroom and bathroom arrangements Source: Focus group discussions.

Allowing space for small, optional features like desks, mini fridges or room storage gives residents the opportunity to personalize their space and be alone when desired. Nikki (see left) suggested that some of these features could even be designed so that they could go up when not in use to maximize space (e.g. Murphy bed or fold-up desk).

What I found at [previous residence], you had your little desk in your room. Desk was - I realize now, what an important part it was because you could sit down, you could write, you could do your thinking. [...] The most important thing I find, the best laid out spaces I've been efficient. It's not big, but it's really efficiently designed. You know, your bed can go up or even your desk if you're not using it, it can go up. - Rosetta



If I had just a bedroom, I would want like a bunk bed so I could have a couch in there too. So I could mount a TV on the wall or whatever. - Nikki

4. There are a maximum number of people who can comfortably live together and share common spaces.

Although many women spoke positively about living with others, participants emphasized that they should also have clear spaces to be alone. There was consensus that too many people contributes to a chaotic environment. It is worth noting that there were a range of perspectives on sharing living spaces: some, like Nikki, said that they instead would prefer a fully self-contained unit.

Before relocating to Metro Vancouver, Prosper spent some time in a building with 40 apartments. The number of units and different lifestyles of residents made the experience challenging and did not feel safe.

The place, it had like 40 apartments. Lots of people, different people with different attitudes, some smoking and drinking. Too many people with different characters, different ways of life. And you don't have the right to tell them what not to do because they are paying for the rent too. - Prosper

Sacha drew on a previous experience where she lived with 22 others with what she described as poorly organized operators. She reflected upon this housing experience being both good and bad: her room was spacious, but part of the reason she ended up spending so much of her time in there was because “the other stuff that was going on was too chaotic.”

Women's comments suggest that there is no magic number for how many people can live together while maintaining a positive living environment, with the appropriate number depending on the size and layout of the space. That being said, the most common suggestion was around 6 or 7 bedrooms and a maximum of 10 to 12 people per floor or contained space, including children. The latter was important: several women emphasized the importance of counting children in the number of residents, recognizing that they play a big role in shaping the housing dynamics. These suggestions are interestingly somewhat comparable to Happy City's recommendations in their research for sociability in multi-family residences, i.e. that no more than 12 families share a semi-private space and 8 families share an entrance. Finally, a number of women suggested that it is important for peoples' lifestyles to be taken into account, generally expressing openness for difference as long as safety remains a core priority.

Not too many people. Maximum 10 to 15 people, including kids. Depends on the people but could be just people with kids or a mixture or those with and those without. People using drugs or with different problems, they need housing too. So I think they could live together but it depends. - Julie

5. Common space(s) should be flexible and allow for multiple uses.

Participants also emphasized that each person needs different amounts of alone time versus time with others. When talking

about common areas, such as living rooms, outdoor areas, or flexible spaces, it is clear that they should be designed to accommodate a range of uses and personality types.

As indicated above, most women said that they don't mind sharing living rooms or outdoor spaces: in fact, these spaces can support positive and important social interactions. That said, a number of women commented that it is challenging when there is a single common space for everyone, and this space is dominated by certain activities that make it hard to use for other purposes.

Many women said that common spaces often have a TV, which can overpower the space even when not everyone wants to watch the same thing or perhaps watch at all. In response, several participants suggested that two smaller common rooms with different purposes would better meet diverse residents' needs. Further, it is likely that these rooms should at least somewhat serve different purposes. Tasha noted that one of the things she enjoys about her current place is exactly that:

I like how they have the setup, like separate two little living areas, that works out really nice.

Across the focus groups, a number of women mapped out similar visions in the design activity:

There are two common areas/kids areas so that people can do different things in each. One could be hanging out and watching

TV, and one for studying or going on the computer or doing something quieter. - Christine

Maybe one [common room] is a living room, maybe one is like a games room if people are into that, maybe a library or split it into two - a quiet study area, a work out area or something. - Nikki

Avery, who earlier mentioned that she was introverted, likewise emphasized the value of smaller quiet rooms or 'nooks' in addition to a larger, main space. Prosper added:

Nice to have some space to read or sit outside of your bedroom. A big room, that can be a lot of distraction.

If building up, she proposed that each floor have a couple of smaller common areas with a big one on the lobby floor. For those with children, a second common space could be used as a study space and offer the chance for learning together. Naheria explains:

Space for kids to study.[...] It'd be nice to have a study area for them to sit down, possibly with other kids in the house to learn how to do certain kinds of things. One kid could be learning to do math, one English. They could help each other.

These comments connect to the need for a flex room in general. Julie suggested that one of the common rooms could be designed with flexibility in mind and be booked as a private prayer space, for meetings with in-house counselors or therapy sessions, or to host visitors.

Layout-wise, a few women suggested

proximity to the kitchen, dining room, or outdoor spaces would allow for more organic interactions between residents and make it easier to watch over kids. There was a sense that the common space should be at the center or heart of the house, and similarly to the kitchen, open-concept spaces were generally seen as desirable. Women suggested that with ample seating, an outdoor garden, yard or patio could act as another common space. Finally, a few participants emphasized that for common spaces, simplicity is key. Ideally, they should have ample seating and furniture that can be moved to accommodate different uses.

But that's just like - circle. Everything's around. So that while you are cooking, you can still talk and watch TV. Open concept. - Bic

6. Determining house expectations and guidelines as a community contributes to ownership and sense of belonging.

Finally, we talked about the role that expectations and rules play in shared housing environments with diverse residents. While some emphasized safety, some cleanliness, and others order, all women spoke about the importance of having rules in a shared housing environment. There was an understanding that some structure is needed to make sure everyone feels comfortable and knows their responsibilities in the space. Some, like Helen, noted that even if there are some rules she likes and others don't, that is part of sharing a space and that's alright with her.

Some rules I like, other people don't like. Some they like, I don't like. That's ok. - Helen

Curfews, expectations around noise and visitors, and chores were all generally regarded as welcome, especially for those with children. Women suggested that ensuring there is a set chore structure ensures common spaces are cleaned and everyone takes responsibility for the space. Meanwhile, a couple of women spoke about the challenges of rules, particularly those related to children, for parents' relationships with their kids. (see left) A few women expressed that they want to teach the kids independence, but rules can sometimes get in the way.

In terms of process, participants recognized the challenges of making rules for a co-housing spaces, given the range of residents and that some tenants will inevitably always be moving in and out. That being said, a number of women suggested that in a permanent housing space, they would like to be involved in the conversations about determining rules, or at the very least, that the members of the house have conversations about agreeing to the rules and some input. Presenting a bit of a different perspective, another participant suggested there is some need for people who have experience with the process to help dictate it.

I think everybody should [make the guidelines]. Staff and residents should work together. It's almost like a townhouse structure. Like if you're in a strata, you're in a board and they're the ones that oversee but other residents have input too. - Rosetta



It's hard because you're the parent and you want to make the rules and teach them to your kids, but in shelters often you are the one that feels like the kid. - Christine

Case Studies

What is being done elsewhere?

This section highlights three housing developments with promising practices related to this project: that is, housing that has been developed with social inclusion and community in mind. The selected cases are intentionally different from each other to draw attention to the range of ways that housing with shared spaces can take shape.

Austin Family Commons

At a Glance

Location	Winnipeg, MB
Building type	Three-story new build
Date completed	Construction began in 2016; building opened in 2017
Size	19 units (mostly 3-4 bedroom; two fully accessible; one small elder suite)
Funding and cost	Government-funded; \$7.5 million total cost; ½ of units are RGI
Target audience	Families

Overview

Austin Family Commons, also called North Point Douglas Gateway Cohousing Project, was designed by architect Hijab Mitra. Mitra's firm, Mistecture, specializes in socially-oriented buildings and has designed a number of housing and community spaces in Winnipeg, including Marie Rose Place, a 40-unit development for immigrant or refugee women with or without children. The building is managed



Building's exterior facade. Source: Winnipeg Housing Rehabilitation Corporation

and tenanted by non-profit Winnipeg Housing Rehabilitation Corporation (WHRC).

There was a strong focus on consultation throughout the building development process. Recognizing that the development of affordable housing can be connected to other economic development opportunities, 10 percent of the labour construction hours were completed by social enterprise employees (the project brought in a total of 32 people who had not previously held full-time jobs). Residents of the community were also involved and consulted on the design and colour.



It's the first time the architects and contractors worked together to ensure we used local labour – Mitra, interview in the Winnipeg Free press.

The residences are self-contained with a kitchen and a bathroom. Half of the units are designated to be rented at affordable housing rates for Winnipeg, while the other half are rent-geared-to-income (RGI) for lower-income tenants.

Key takeaways: what can be learned?

- **Inclusive process:** This project had an intentional focus on consultation and community involvement, from the beginning of the design process. This process included nearby residents with the aim of addressing opposition before it developed.
- **Range of unit types:** Austin Family Commons includes a combination of larger units to meet the extreme lack of housing for larger families, and accessible units and elder suites to allow a range of ages and aging in place, or for an older family member to live near the rest of the family.
- **Simple design features:** The building includes small design features (e.g. bright colours) both inside and outside.
- **Strong partnerships and connection to employment:** Government, builders, architect, and community worked together to make the project a success. This process included partnering with a local social enterprise to hire inner city residents for construction and trades training.

Austin Family Commons – References:

CBC News. (2017). Doors open at new affordable housing complex in North Point Douglas. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-housing-point-douglas-winnipeg-1.3936581/>

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Sanders, C. (2017). New Lease on Life. Winnipeg Free Press. January 1. Retrieved from <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/point-douglas-project-builds-new-place-new-skills-to-live-410672565.html>

Ambrose Place

At a Glance

Location	Edmonton, AB
Building type	Four-story new build with a combination of affordable and supportive housing units; building covers six vacant lots
Date completed	Tenancing began late 2014
Size	42 units (mostly bachelor, with a handful of one- and two-bedroom units)
Funding and cost	\$12 million to build, \$2.6 million annually to operate. Combination of provincial and municipal funding.
Target audience	Indigenous individuals and couples experiencing homelessness

Overview

Ambrose Place is a 42-unit building operated by not-for-profit group NiGiNan Housing Ventures. The building follows a Housing First approach and is targeted at Indigenous individuals and couples that have experienced chronic homelessness.

Shared, community facilities are located on the ground floor, including a dining room, exercise room, TV and recreation rooms, quiet room, and a ceremonial smudge room (see following page for main floor plan). The rest of the building is a mixture of affordable and supportive housing, with 14 units of affordable housing on the second floor and

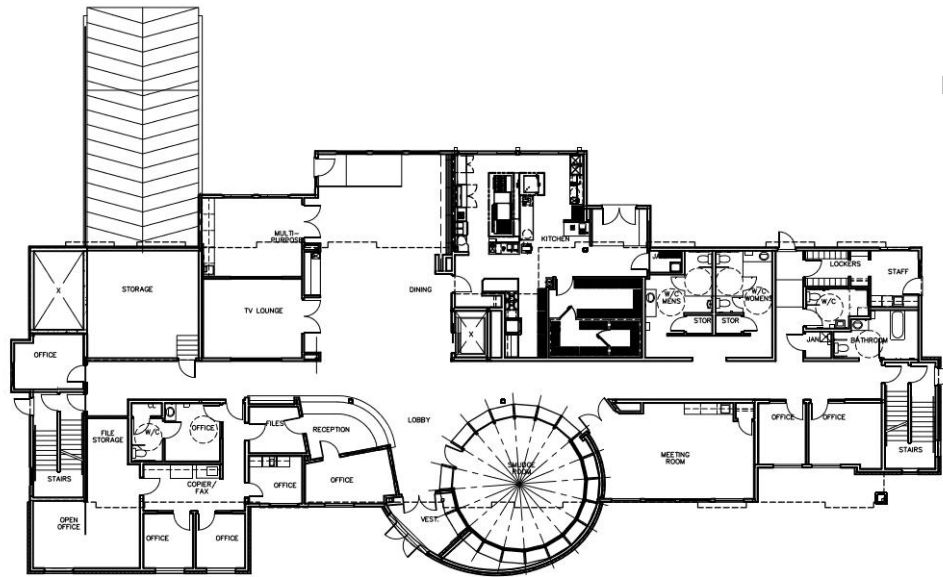


Entrance to Ambrose Place. Source: Ron Wickman Architecture

housing between the third and fourth floors. Each unit is self-contained with its own small kitchen and private bathroom, and the building has 24-hour care and surveillance staff. The building is located in central Edmonton, close to social, health, and commercial amenities. Almost five years after opening, Ambrose Place is widely considered a success story.

Key takeaways: what can be learned?

- **Serves a spectrum of needs:** One thing that makes this project unique is the combination of affordable and supportive housing. Each floor serves a different purpose depending on the level of support that residents require. This means that residents have the opportunity to move from supported to independent living when or if appropriate while maintaining connections to their neighbours and the community.
- **Focus on accessibility:** Accessibility is a guiding feature of Ambrose Place's design, which supports aging in place and residents with limited mobility.



Main Floor, Floor Plan. Source: Ron Wickman Architecture

There are 10 fully adaptable suites with adaptable, accessible kitchens.

- **Participatory design & operators' involvement in the building process:** A building committee led by the operator was closely involved through the project, meeting with the architect and builder approximately every two weeks during the building process to provide feedback (Wickman, 2019). The full design team also met with potential residents.
- **Private bathrooms:** Each self-contained unit has a private bathroom. Architect Ron Wickman noted that this feature is often what residents comment on first.
- **Colour and small details:** Colours and visual elements are used for wayfinding throughout the building. Ambrose Place's external colours are based on the medicine wheel.
- **Flexible common spaces:** There are a number of common spaces with different purposes on the first floor. Some of these ideas came out of meetings with building committee.
- **Nimbyism:** Like many supportive and affordable housing developments, this building faced considerable opposition at its outset. With concerns unfounded, many

neighbours are now supporters of the project.

Ambrose Place – References:

Wickman, R. (2019). Architect of Ambrose Place. Personal Correspondence.

Niginan Housing Ventures. (n.d.) Welcome to Ambrose Place. Retrieved from <http://www.niginan.ca/welcome-to-ambrose-place>.

Ron Wickman Architect. (2017). Ambrose Place: A Healing Home. Retrieved from <https://www.ronwickmanarchitect.ca/projects-blog/ambrose-place/>.



We were so focused on making it a home. Like it wasn't a super expensive building and we were very aware we had to work within budget but compared to a lot of projects like it that I've seen, we put a lot less emphasis on finicky little architectural details. We put our money into having really solid walls, soundproofing... we put a lot of money into making it super functional.
- Ron Wickman,

Petaluma Avenue Homes

At a Glance

Location	Sebastopol, CA
Building type	Rental co-housing; mixture of townhouses and apartments
Date completed	February 2009
Size	45 units (1, 2, and 3 bedroom)
Funding and cost	\$17 million; combination of government, private funding (different funding context due to United States' tax credit programs)
Target audience	Low-income families and seniors

Overview

While cohousing communities are typically restricted to those with higher incomes, Petaluma Avenue Homes is a cohousing-inspired development designed to be affordable for low-income households. The development was carried out through a partnership between Affordable Housing Associates and McCamant & Durrett Architects, a firm that has designed cohousing communities across North America, including Vancouver Cohousing and Langley's WindSong Cohousing.

This 45-unit housing development is built across 2.5 acres and includes 2 courtyards,



Petaluma common room. Source: Satellite Affordable Housing Associates.

a common garden, a terrace, and a 3000 square-foot common house. Although modified to fit the regulatory requirements of affordable housing, cohousing principles informed the development process in several ways, including creating a design advisory committee, and holding community-building workshops to acquaint incoming residents with cohousing. The project was funded in part through the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program (unique to the United States' context). To be an eligible tenant, household income must fall within 30 to 50 percent of the area median income (AMI).

Key takeaways: What can be learned?

- **Design advisory committee:** While a full co-housing participatory design approach was not possible (due to timeline challenges with resident selection through the required income certification process), a steering committee was created as a compromise. The committee included a potential resident, a local housing activist, a resident of another nearby cohousing community, seniors from



Petaluma inner courtyard and community garden Source: Satellite Affordable Housing Associates.



The resident manager has made it a priority to involve residents whenever possible and to allow customization and personalization of the common space and living units. For example, a community-wide ceramic tiling project added a personal touch to the décor of the common house and gave a sense of ownership to the community. – Garciano, 2011.

- the community, and neighbours of the site.
- **Community building workshops:** Workshops were held to train new residents in consensus-based decision making and developing community guidelines and responsibilities. These facilitated workshops were embedded in the first two years of the project's operations budget. This process resulted in informal child care arrangements and residents sharing services in the common areas (haircuts, cooking, etc.). Participation in meals and other communal activities is always voluntary.
- **Onsite manager:** The property manager lives onsite, and involves residents as much as feasible in the management of the community, while ensuring that the development remains compliant with management requirements attached to the government funding.
- **Large number of units:** At 45 units, Petaluma is larger than most cohousing communities (~18 to 36 units) as it is more cost-efficient to create larger affordable housing developments. At times, this has made it more challenging to build community.
- **Limited resident familiarity with cohousing:** A central feature of cohousing is a strong commitment from residents to living in an intentional community. Yet only about a quarter of

initial residents were familiar with and interested in the community-oriented aspects of cohousing. Low-income residents also often have less time or energy to invest in cohousing community-building, with other stresses that accompany living with limited incomes (e.g. working multiple jobs). At Petaluma, cohousing information sessions were held as part of the tenant selection process to ensure prospective residents were aware of the community involvement responsibilities that come with this type of housing. That this process has been quite successful suggests that the social environment of cohousing can be developed over time.

Petaluma Avenue Homes – References:

Garciano, J.L.(2011). Affordable Cohousing: Challenges and Opportunities for Supportive Relational Networks in Mixed-Income Housing. *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law* 20(2), 169-192.

Gunkel Architecture. (n.d.). Petaluma Avenue Homes. Retrieved from <https://www.gunkelarchitecture.com/multi-family-mixed-use-projects/petaluma-avenue-homes/>.

Satellite Affordable Housing Associates. (n.d.). Petaluma Avenue Homes. Retrieved from <https://www.sahahomes.org/properties/petaluma-avenue-homes>.

Recommendations

What should community-oriented shared housing **look like?**

In learning from the women who participated in the focus groups, it is clear that inclusive spaces are often associated with a feeling rather than specific design or structural factors. But what helps create this feeling? This report has considered how design and social environment work together to influence feelings of safety, inclusivity, and community in shared living spaces.

The recommendations in this section are informed by three sources. Most importantly, they are shaped by the perspectives and insights of the focus group participants. They also draw from the literature review and case studies, particularly for the recommendations related to the development and consultation process for shared housing. Each section begins by highlighting the actor(s) to whom the recommendations would most likely apply.

Physical Spaces & Design

*These recommendations apply predominantly to **architects or designers**, in close consultation with a building **steering committee** made up of operators, potential residents, or those with deep familiarity with the target resident population.*

- **Use small details to make entrances and initial impressions welcoming.** A bright, open lobby, colourful paint and decorations on the walls contribute to

welcoming spaces. Clinical or industrial elements (e.g. fluorescent lights) do not make people feel at home.

- **Kitchens can work well as shared spaces, provided that they have enough space and adequate storage.** Mini fridges or small spaces to store food within individual units also allow for residents' flexible lifestyles and accommodate those with dietary restrictions.
- **Kitchens and common rooms should be close together and open concept.** These common spaces should be far enough from the bedrooms to keep those personal spaces quiet and allow privacy.
- **Designate at least one flexible room to be available for multiple uses.** Women suggested that this room could be used for drop-in counseling or health services, weekly activities, or serve as a bookable space for residents to host visitors or guests.
- **As much as possible, maintain bedrooms and bathrooms as private spaces.** Women recommended locating bathrooms between bedrooms to give sleeping spaces as much privacy as possible.
- **Bedrooms should have design features that allow personalization and flexibility.** Suggestions include fold-up desk space, raised beds to allow a sitting space below, and customizable room storage.
- **Two or more smaller common rooms with different purposes are preferred**

over one large space (though this could potentially be achieved through room dividers or partitions). More specifically, one area could be for quieter activities with the other for larger group activities. All should have movable furniture and ample seating.

- **Create spaces for greenery, plants, and gardens.** The value of outdoor space and greenery was emphasized by almost all of the focus group participants. Creating physical spaces that connect with the natural environment, even in small ways, plays a significant role in supporting emotional well-being. Looking back to Ambrose Place as an example of intentional Indigenous-centred design, there are likely opportunities for Indigenous design principles to be used to shape these outdoor environments as well and support broader health and social outcomes.

Community & Social Environment

*These recommendations are for **building operators and staff**, with ongoing input from **residents** and subject to flexibility as appropriate to fit the situation.*

- **Identify opportunities for classes or activities to support community-building between residents.** These activities should be voluntary rather than a condition of residency. As one possibility, a biweekly meal could be included in the cost of rent to provide a more structured time for resident interactions. Onsite activities are preferred to reduce transportation barriers for women with children and

foster interactions between residents.

- **Buildings should aim for a maximum of approximately 10 to 12 people per communal space.** In developing these numbers, it is important to think about how children affect residential dynamics and account for them.
- **Developing strong relationships between residents and staff should be a priority.** Although this is perhaps a given, it was mentioned repeatedly by focus group participants as a critical piece of a positive housing environment, and is also part of what has made Ambrose Place such a success.
- **Expectations around curfews, noise, visitors, and chores (e.g. keeping common spaces in order) are generally welcome.** Previous research and focus group participants suggest that these rules make residents feel safe and can help navigate different lifestyles.
- **Develop a structured process for determining house rules and expectations.** While recognizing that resident turnover can make this challenging in practice, residents should have a meaningful and ongoing way of providing input into rules and community guidelines.

Process

*The recommendations in this section relate to the broader building development process. They are considerations for those pursuing the development of permanent, shared housing, such as **organizations**, like Elizabeth Fry, but also **municipal social planning departments**. They would likely be undertaken in **partnership***

with other supporting actors, such as architects, operating partners, or other non-profit organizations (e.g. employment organizations) as appropriate.

- **Seek resident input on an ongoing basis.** Hold participatory design workshops if there is a permanent building confirmed and under development (it would also be good to hold one with architects, building staff, etc.). There was considerable interest in the focus group discussions, and a number of participants welcomed the fact that Efry was seeking their input on this topic.
- **Strike and facilitate a design advisory committee.** Possible membership could include the operators, community services professionals, housing organizations, community members, and potential residents. This committee can liaise with the architect and builder on an ongoing basis throughout the design process.
- **Involve neighbours and community stakeholders wherever possible.** Open and inclusive processes can help address broader issues of NIMBYism and resistance to affordable and/or supportive housing developments. Providing small windows of input (e.g. about outside landscaping or paint colours) has been used in other cases to increase broader community ownership.
- **Affordable housing developments offer unique possibilities to build in employment opportunities.** Examples like Austin Family Commons speak to the importance of partnerships with other community organizations and looking

to opportunities for overlap between housing and employment.

Concluding Thoughts

The economic reality of building affordable housing in a place like Metro Vancouver means there are often tradeoffs between deeper affordability or more units, and some of the features that women suggested make a living space comfortable or feel like a home. Compounding this challenge is the fact that the most desirable places for affordable housing - i.e. locations in close proximity to transit, services, and employment - are simultaneously those where land prices are typically highest. Given its limited scope, this report did not thoroughly discuss these constraints or tradeoffs and this is a limitation worth noting. This project was instead about envisioning 'what could be', imagining what more inclusive housing could look and feel like from the perspectives of women with experiences in all different affordable and/or social housing and institutional environments.

With the rise of unaffordability, homelessness and social isolation, greater attention is being paid to the potential of communal living environments. Women's experiences with homelessness, housing insecurity and criminalization are complex and diverse, and the reality that no two experiences are alike makes developing shared living environments that work for everyone challenging. Yet there are a number of factors and practices that clearly support community within these spaces - from the design process itself, to onsite

classes and activities, to versatile spaces that can be used for prayer on one day, and to host a service or health provider on another.

As one of the participants, commented while explaining her design vision, most of these asks are not overly complicated: “that’s all we want: simple.” Yet the continuing lack of affordable, permanent housing - and more specifically - housing designed to address social isolation and build community, suggests that much more remains to be done in achieving this vision. Strong organizational partnerships, meaningful community engagement, and certainly, increased government funding are all necessary to move the needle in the right direction.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Guide

Introductions and information about the study

a. Purpose/Overview:

- This focus group will last approximately 90 minutes.
- The purpose of this discussion is to understand how communal housing could be designed and organized to better meet the needs of women who have experienced homelessness or spent time in institutional settings like jails or halfway houses. Elizabeth Fry is interested in what would make housing feel more inclusive, safe and comfortable, and allow people to live there at different stages of their lives.
- In this discussion, I'll be asking everyone to draw on any and all past experiences with different kinds of housing or shelter (not only Elizabeth Fry Programs), and think about what worked well or what could be improved.

b. Consent:

- Everyone has had a chance to go over the consent form. As explained, your participation is completely voluntary. Personal information you provide about yourself will not be passed on to anyone. We will not use your real name in the final report unless you would like to be identified. Participation will also not affect your use of services in any way.
- You can choose not to answer any of the questions and can leave the focus group at any time.
- I will be recording this discussion so that I do not miss any important comments. The recording will be typed out and if you choose, you will have the chance to review what you said and decide whether you want it included. If you no longer want your input included, that is completely fine. Once the final report is done I will share it. It will be publicly available and free for people to access.
- Are there any other questions about the consent process?

c. Guidelines for engagement:

- Input from all: This will be an informal discussion, so I won't be going around the table but instead people can contribute when they feel like it. I'd ask that if you are someone who is talkative, to make sure and leave space for others to contribute. If you are providing a lot of comments that's great, but I might jump in and ask if there's anyone who hasn't spoken yet. Important that we listen to each other and everyone has the chance to participate.
- Your experience: Please answer from your own perspective only and respect that others may have different experiences. Different perspectives will strengthen this conversation and I am hoping people will feel comfortable expressing them.
- Facilitator doesn't live here and doesn't have the same life experiences. If any questions are uncomfortable or not relevant - feel free to tell me.

d. Ice breaker: about the participants

- Please share your name and tell us a bit about yourself. How long have you been in Metro Vancouver?
- Is there anything you need to contribute to this conversation?

2. Part One: Discussion

a. General

We are first going to talk about what inclusive housing means to you. I'll start by asking for your thoughts and ideas on what makes you feel welcome, safe, and included in a space, and about social structures in places you've lived. Then we'll talk about preferences about how housing is physically laid out or designed.

b. Welcoming & Inclusive Spaces

- Today we're talking about inclusive spaces. When we talk about inclusion, what does it mean to enter a space and feel like it is for you?
- Follow up: What kinds of specific things make it welcoming? (Reminder: these can be concrete/tangible things or things that are not as easy to put a finger on – like give you a certain feeling) What things make it less welcoming?
- Similarly, what kinds of things make a space feel safe for you?
- Follow up: Are there specific examples that anyone would like to share?

c. Community-Building and Social Activities

- Thinking back on places that you've lived with other people, what kinds of communal activities were held that anyone who lived there could participate in? (E.g. meals, activities?)
- Follow up: What have you liked? What didn't you like?
- Do you have any ideas of social or community building activities that you would like to see?
- Are there any skills or interests you have that you would like to share with people that you might live with in the future?
- What kinds of guidelines or protocols have been in place in housing that you've lived in before? (Give examples if participants are stuck – e.g. visitors, noise, regular resident meetings, etc.).
- Thinking about your own experiences, what kind of community guidelines are important to you and make you feel safer or more comfortable? What guidelines don't you like – e.g. make you feel restricted or controlled?
- Who do you think should make those guidelines?

d. Physical Design

- Thinking back to housing you have lived in before, which spaces do you like to share with the other people you live with? What spaces do you prefer to have for yourself?
- Prompts (if they have not been raised): Kitchen? Bathroom?
- Thinking about common areas, what kinds of things do you like common spaces to include?
- Do you have any other comments you would like to share on the physical layout or design of spaces you've lived in that we haven't already talked about?

After the break we will do an activity to brainstorm what more inclusive housing could look like.

3. Part Two: Visioning Activity

a. Activity: What would your ideal housing design look like?

- Each person will be given the materials below. Over the next 15-20 minutes, you will be asked to consider how you would design your ideal communal living space. Please draw and write as much as you would like on the paper. Please be sure that your housing includes the basic elements of a living space (kitchen, bathroom, etc.). You can use the paper cutouts if you want.
- At the end, we will go around and share our process.

b. Sharing with the group:

- Why did you arrange your housing in this way?
- Approximately how many people would live there? Who would they be? (e.g. age, lifestyle)
- How big would the building be? (e.g. How many floors?)
- What kinds of guidelines would you have for people who live there?
- What kinds of social activities would you have?

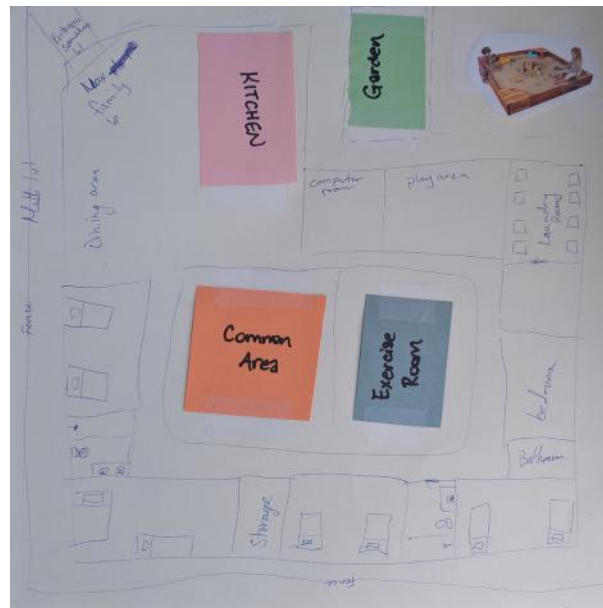
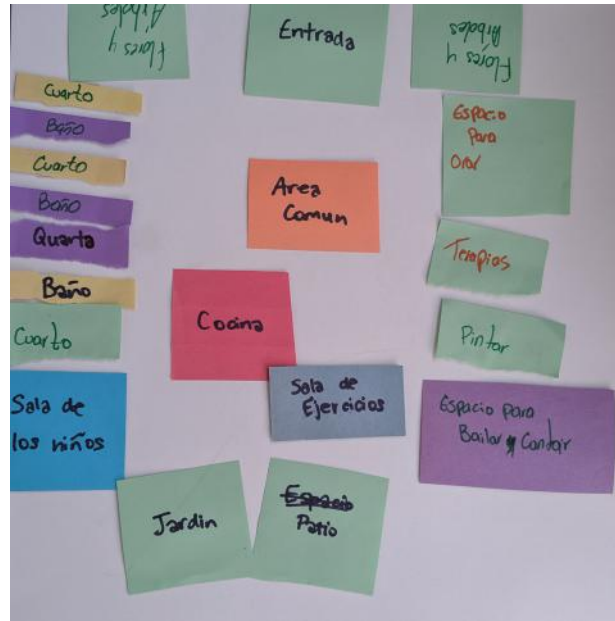
Materials: flip chart paper on tables for each group; markers; construction paper cut-outs of housing elements (kitchen, bathroom, common area, bedroom).

4. Closing:

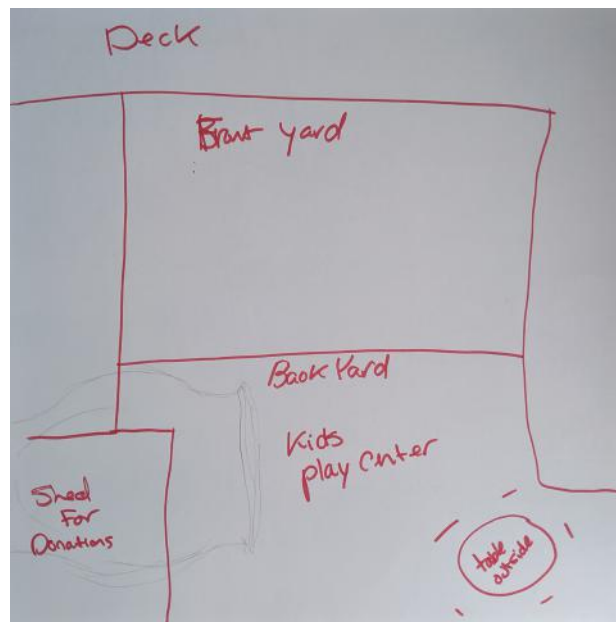
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with shared housing?
- Thank you to participants and next steps/follow up

Appendix B: Activity Photographs

The photographs below were taken of the activity in Part 2 of the focus group discussion. Each person was given a blank piece of paper and asked to envision and depict a communal housing environment that would feel comfortable, safe and provide opportunities for community-building. Markers, magazine cutouts, and coloured squares of paper listing rooms in a typical home were provided, to be used however participants wished.







(continuation of the sheet to the left)

Appendix C: Focus Group Details

Elizabeth Gurney House

Location: New Westminster

Number of beds: 12

Accepts children: Yes

Description: Low-barrier, short-term 24-hour emergency housing. Families are provided with their own shared bedroom, and single women share rooms. Many women who stay at Gurney's are newcomers or those with refugee status.

Number of Participants: 2

Ages: 21, 40

2. Columbia Place

Location: New Westminster

Number of beds: 12

Accepts children: No

Description: Residential facility for women on parole

Number of Participants: 4

Ages: 27, 35, 64, 66

3. Cynthia's Place

Location: Surrey

Number of beds: 10

Accepts children: Yes (up to age 13)

Description: Low-barrier, short term 24-hour emergency housing

Number of Participants: 6

Ages: 24, 25, 30, 34, 36, 42

4. Sheena's Place

Location: Surrey

Number of beds: 12

Accepts children: Yes

Description: Low-barrier, 24-hour emergency housing. Families are provided with their own shared bedroom, and single women share rooms. Accepts one refugee woman at a time.

Number of Participants: 3

Ages: 39, 42, 51

