Project Overview

The Gerontology Research Centre and The City of Richmond, funded by The Vancouver Foundation explored the housing transitions, design, and sustainability of a seniors’ affordable housing redevelopment project. To enhance engagement and participation with community and professional stakeholders, our partners identified the need for knowledge and information exchange with a broad network of housing providers. A Collaborative Café was conducted with representatives from various housing sectors, including independent living, supported living, and campus of care.

The Collaboration Café began with a brief presentation of the project followed by facilitated small group discussions based on a set of guiding questions that were subsequently summarized and explored within the larger group. Themes that emerged for each discussion questions were identified and are captured here.

*All photos presented in this document were captured by seniors during photo-voice sessions*
In an ideal world, what would affordable housing look like for seniors?

We explored what ideal affordable seniors housing could look like. Key characteristics emphasized that housing should be adaptable, well-appointed, affordable, and centrally-located.

**Adaptable:** Housing needs of seniors are wide-ranging. Universal design and accessibility features should support the adaptations needed with age.

>“Original and sustainable design is about living one’s life in one home.”

**Well-appointed:** Housing is ideally aesthetically pleasing and includes amenities such as shared spaces for events, an events coordinator, sufficient parking for residents and visitors, covered drop-off areas, and charging ports and parking for scooters.

**Affordable:** Housing should not exhaust all of a person’s fixed income. Affordable housing should not mean that “the senior has to sacrifice their privacy, their freedom, their respect, their dignity, or connectivity to the community, to friends and events.”

**Centrally-located:** Housing should be in “centralized” areas to enable access to the community and its resources. Ideally, homes are situated in safe and secure environments within close proximity to transportation or places where seniors can easily access services and amenities (e.g., grocery stores, hospitals, doctor’s offices, government services).
Who should be designing and providing affordable housing models for seniors?

We explored who should be involved in the design and provision of affordable housing models for seniors. The primary theme is the need to engage multiple stakeholders and experts to ensure the building is designed for the way seniors live, incorporates expertise in affordability and sustainability, and supports aging-in-place.

**Seniors:** It was emphasized that seniors must be involved in the design process. It is important to get seniors’ perspectives on how they live without making assumptions through tokenistic representation. This includes engaging multiple seniors, from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and abilities.

“You’re going to get individual preferences but I don’t think you’re going to run with individual preferences, you’re going to run with themes.”

**Staff and administrators:** There is a need for input from people who run the building. Property managers, maintenance, and kitchen staff can all contribute expertise on best options for cost-saving measures. Other persons who work with seniors (e.g., nurses and administrators) can offer input on how seniors can most successfully age-in-place.

“There are a number of specific things to a given building that will complicate it, and if you have got somebody who has got hands on experience working there, in that kind of environment, it helps a lot.”

**Designers and builders:** The design process needs to include architects, developers, contractors, engineers, financers, and Hydro; particularly experts familiar with the cultural, physical, and design context of the building.

“It’s bringing a team of people together to do your design work, design your buildings; and then your team, your staff, those who are going to be working in the building.”

Research Team: Mei Lan Fang, Sarah Canham, Lupin Battersby, Judith Sixsmith, Ryan Woolyeh, Tori Ren & Andrew Sixsmith
“You should also look at somebody who knows and understands how to design a building—where there’s interaction, where there are natural points of connection.”

It is important that affordable design elements are integrated at the outset. For example, Hydro personnel can conduct an energy study and determine whether air conditioning is required. Contractors can help suggest affordable and durable materials (e.g., flooring that is easy to clean and maintain).

**Funders and backers:** Include funders at the table from the start of a project so they are able to maintain costs from the beginning. Other financing roles might include a person who knows what grants and resources are available and where additional supports might be found.

**Decision makers:** Health authorities, unions, and all levels of government should be included in designing and providing affordable housing for seniors. If the government funds projects, “they’re gonna want to control them.” Inclusion of these groups would allow for transparency of ideas during decision-making processes.

“The health authorities should be there because if the health authorities got involved in seniors’ lives earlier and senior’s housing earlier, some of the costly situations that they have to absorb later could be prevented by much earlier intervention in senior’s lives with getting seniors appropriate housing with the appropriate supports at an earlier stage. And it would save a lot of money in the system.”

**Mechanisms for inclusion:** Meaningful integration of diverse perspectives requires careful consideration of the individual’s role, available time / time invested, and expertise. For instance, inviting seniors to join tabled discussions with funders, developers, and engineers may not be the most effective way for their voice to be heard. One-on-one or small group dialogues with seniors may provide a better platform to forefront conversations throughout the project development process.
We explored the supports and resources that enable seniors to age-in-place, which vary across contexts in which a person lives, from independent living to complex care residences. Key themes that emerged included: models of service provision in independent living; walkability and transit; innovative programs; and awareness and advocacy.

**Independent living resource models:**
Among seniors who are well enough to engage in activities, there were three models described of where and how activities can be provided:

The first model requires a common area for interaction between residents. There is a large on-site amenity space, senior-specific programs, and staffing to organize and coordinate activities (i.e., similar to a cruise ship director).

“The challenge is you need some sort of ongoing staff-supported process...you need that catalyst to get it started. You also need the staff person to sometimes smooth the waters because there inevitably will be friction as people have different world visions about what needs to happen.”

Shared amenity spaces should have capacity for a range of activities, including social activities and cultural events (e.g., Chinese New Year celebration), fitness activities, wellness activities (e.g., peer-to-peer support), and cooking classes where possible. Services and supports should be flexible over time and reflect the changing interests, abilities, and needs of residents of various ages and cultural backgrounds.

Smaller on-site spaces could provide nutritional (e.g., Meals on Wheels) and health care (e.g., a community health nurse, medication services, physiotherapy, massage therapy, home care, hair) support, though these should be responsive to needs across the spectrum of residents.

“I think one of the biggest things we’ve found with affordable rental is having big enough amenity space to allow for community to be created.”

The second model involves housing situations where there is no amenity space, and residents are, instead, taken out into the community (e.g., to a community or seniors center). Costs would be funneled toward costs of transportation (e.g., specialized bus services or buses and drivers) to transport residents to places where they want to go, as opposed to amenity space and staffing expenses.
Bringing people into the community to extend their opportunities is prioritized in this model, recognizing that having activities within the residence could isolate people from their greater communities.

“We’ve tried really hard in ours to create resources, to bring resources into the complex, but it’s important you don’t provide everything there cause they have to interact and leave their homes.”

The third model focuses on creating a virtual (online) community. In this model, there are no physical barriers to participation; people from the community can join and take part in online activities and join workshops or seminars without having to live in a particular building.

Regardless of model, informal or peer-to-peer supports are needed to help create a sense of community and safety. For example, resident check-ins (either in-person, electronic, or via signage on individual suite doors) was cited as an important feature that enables seniors to age-in-place.

Walkability and transit: Housing for seniors that is centrally located, close to service and resource needs (e.g., community centers, libraries, banks, doctors, restaurants) which can be accessed on foot or through public transit is optimal for quality of life.

“Fitness areas are key, pools, parks, etc...in walking distance...wish we had a flat surface so residents could be more mobile. Libraries are great... having a park nearby, [seniors] can watch kids play; [it’s] great for entertainment and get there safely.”

The affordability of transportation is a key factor to enable seniors to age-in-place. The availability of services becomes a non-issue if seniors are unable to get to where services are provided. Co-op cars offer seniors who drive access to transportation without the cost of maintenance, while buddy systems match residents who drive with non-driving residents to get them to doctor’s appointments or the grocery store.

Innovative Community Programming: There is a need to develop innovative programs to support seniors to age-in-place. For example, The Free Pee program is where “shops and stores throughout London have a little sticker so seniors know that they can use the bathroom in that store for free...they found that that’s created a lot of confidence for seniors to get out in their community because they know they’re not going to stuck somewhere not knowing where to go to the bathroom.”

Awareness and advocacy: Communication and awareness of available supports and resources is needed, as well as the need to teach seniors how to access what supports are available to age-in-place.

“It’s just a matter of being aware of what resources you have and how to use them.”

People with mild cognitive impairment or dementia might need formal advocates to ensure they are getting the services they need, particularly those with no family. Ultimately, we should prioritize the provision of the right information, affordable transportation, and encourage motivation.
We explored the affordable housing options available for seniors in British Columbia (BC). Amidst a spectrum of financial and health needs of seniors, there is also a spectrum of housing options. Themes discussed included funding structures, provider challenges, systemic issues, and housing options.

**Funding structures**: Affordable housing is supported in two primary ways:
1. through subsidies, such as the Shelter Aid For Elderly Renters (SAFER) program, which provides a rent supplement; or
2. through organizations that provide low rental rates in not-for-profit housing developments.

**Provider challenges**: If BC Housing turns housing stock over to the non-profit sector, how are not-for-profit housing organizations expected to maintain replacement reserves without adequate third-party support?

**Systemic issues**: There is need for enhanced and supportive living arrangements that offer choice for in-home nursing care once a person’s independence is compromised.

“One of the biggest challenges for housing providers is the need to maintain buildings over long periods of time. Retrofitting older buildings is not an affordable solution, nor is it sustainable. Smaller housing societies must merge with larger ones because they are unable to provide replacement reserves.”

British Columbia needs an overarching affordable housing plan. Canada has been criticized for being the only G7 country without a national housing act.

“The elephant in the room is that there is a need for a national strategy and dollars to build affordable, stable, safe, and supportive housing. It has to come from the federal level and it’s great if municipalities do build a strategy, but this is new and they don’t have budget or provincial support, which has more of a place, and the province has built some affordable housing, but has no long-term strategy.”

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Housing Options

- Older, out-dated rental units that are more affordable (market rate)
- Society run, independent affordable housing buildings (e.g., Kiwanis, Lion’s Society, BC Housing Foundation)
- BC Housing subsidized seniors housing
- Independent Living BC
- Single Room Occupancy suites (SROs) range between 200-300 square feet; include a toilet, sink, bed, and stove
- Carriage / laneway homes
- Co-ops self-contained, independent units similar to rental housing
- Co-housing or communal living
- Flex housing (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation model; stacked houses, bottom floor for seniors)
- SAFER program
- Habitat for Humanity mortgage helper program
- Living with adult children or other family
- Supportive housing (e.g., activities, food, laundry but not medical)
- Assisted living (e.g., personal care, daily medication support)
- Long-term care facilities

Iterative Feedback Reporting Process

Prior to dissemination, a version of this briefing note was shared with participants to facilitate an iterative feedback process. Additional suggestions and comments from stakeholders include:

- ‘Age-friendly’ as opposed to universal design features: Design features must consider the everyday needs of seniors, including enhanced lighting in homes for older adults with diminishing eyesight; bathrooms that support older adults with bathing (e.g., offer adequate space and physical supports for the individual and person assisting with bathing); and an accessible front-entry drop-off / pick-up zone.

- Enhanced independent living resource models: Current independent living housing models generally focus on affordability and the built environment, while not adequately addressing the psycho-social needs of seniors. However, as this report identifies, more expansive and inclusive social programming should inform the development of enhanced independent housing.

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Finally, we would like to thank the housing providers for sharing their opinions on affordable housing, which were foundational for this briefing note and vital for the development of future affordable housing for seniors in BC.

* All photos featured in this document were captured by seniors during the photo-voice session.