As the population ages, affordable housing in Metro Vancouver is needed to support low income, vulnerable seniors. Affordable housing that meets the needs of seniors is crucial. Solutions and strategies must involve tenants in their design, maintenance and sustainability. To illustrate we present findings from a community-based participatory study with older adults living in affordable housing.

The research explored housing transitions of older adults who were relocated from a 2-storey low rental housing accommodation, Kiwanis Court, in the City of Richmond, into two 16-storey Kiwanis Tower Condos, on the same land. The original building had become run down with significant water damage, which initiated the redevelopment process. Through guaranteed affordable homes in the new building, tenants of the original building were required to relocate for three years while the new building was being constructed.

To learn from these experiences, 25 interviews and 16 photo-voice sessions were conducted to understand how: (i) sense-of-place is experienced by older people relocating into an affordable housing development; (ii) lived experiences can be translated into formal and informal supports; and (iii) to involve older people and other community members as active ‘place-makers’ in community planning and development. We conceptualize sense-of-place as the social, psychological, and emotional bonds that people have with their environment.

*All photos presented in this document were captured by seniors during the photo-voice sessions*
What did we learn from tenants about sense of place?

Tenants emphasized what they want in their communities and the challenges experienced in obtaining a desirable sense-of-place. We heard that a strong sense-of-place is experienced through 1) access to supports for active social, physical, and mental participation; 2) opportunities to build and sustain social networks that enable feelings of familiarity and safety; 3) convenience and proximity to resources in the community; and 4) the ability to maintain control over their lives.

We go on to describe key challenges that tenants face including 1) financial considerations, 2) coordination support requirements, 3) re-building a social network, 4) culture and language.

The findings and lessons learned are summarized in the key messages that conclude this document.
Active participation was emphasized as a preventative health strategy to help seniors maintain their health and wellbeing and ultimately their independence. According to the seniors, to prevent social isolation and facilitate participation and engagement, it is important that social activities are: held in convenient locations, made accessible for a range of people, frequent, and offered at different times.

i) Accessing age-friendly services, amenities, activities, and gatherings
Older adults require age friendly services and amenities to be convenient and accessible. This could be through locating seniors’ housing developments in resourced areas, as are the Kiwanis Towers, as well as through providing or coordinating services in buildings where seniors live. Services suggested by tenants ranged from ones that facilitate everyday functionality and independence to ones that promote health and wellbeing.

Equally important is the accessibility and availability of social activities and gatherings. It was emphasized that many older people in Kiwanis Towers live alone and most “of them don’t have family here. They are out of town.” The desire for activities was echoed by several seniors; some felt that if “older people can get together here, it might make them feel less lonely. For example, [management] could set up a weekly event to bring people together to either sing, dance or just chat. They need to bring in a piano.”

ii) Facilitating independence
Independence can be supported through grocery delivery, cleaning services, adequate storage space, parking for guests, laundry services, and internet access. Some tenants hoped “to have free Internet in the new place [because] almost everyone in society now uses the Internet.” Providing free cable or Internet access could keep seniors engaged and/or connected when in their homes.

iii) Keeping seniors physically, mentally, and socially engaged
Health and wellbeing were reported to be high priorities. Examples of ways to maintain health and wellbeing include: healthy living environments, for example smoke-free buildings, “I have got a little asthma and usually cough when I smell smoke so I was pleased when I learned that smoking was not allowed in the building”; and physically (e.g. tai chi and ping pong) and mentally (e.g. chess and pottery) stimulating activities: “If the weather is good, we would like to do exercise in the park. However, we also hope that there is an activity room in the building where we can do walking and play Tai Chi when it is rainy. We just need a space where we can do exercise.”
Home was referred to not just as a physical space where a person would come home to in the evening, but also as places of comfort and familiarity.

i) Creating familiarity, safety, and security – “look after each other”
Familiarity was linked to the relationships people formulated over the years at their previous residence, Kiwanis Court. These relationships created a sense of safety and security for tenants “because most of us are single and we always help each other when someone is sick.” And, “we come from different areas of China and cook different foods in different areas. We really enjoy getting together. This is also one of my concerns of moving back. Our relationships here are so good. We look after each other. If I move back, there won’t be a warm family-like environment.”

Developments like Kiwanis Towers have the potential to facilitate a sense of familiarity and safety, with seniors anticipating and looking forward to being part of a community. “That’s one of the reasons I’d want to move is because I want more connection with the community that I live in.”

ii) Gathering places and green spaces
Meaningful and engaging spaces facilitate social connectedness. Investing time, money, and energy in creating a place that people can enjoy, such as a garden, was suggested as valuable. Participants emphasized that green space has restorative properties, flowers and trees create a welcoming place for people to gather.

“Oh, I hope they have a place where, you know, we can gather around and do whatever. I hope they have some kind of a gathering place. That’s what I’d like to see. A gathering place where you can just come downstairs and have things to do because not everyone can walk long distances.”
Being close to the centre of Richmond made it convenient for many tenants to maintain their everyday activities, for example, getting the daily newspaper, going to the gym or to work on the SkyTrain, and keeping in touch with loved ones.

i) Being close to public transit

Some seniors living in Kiwanis Towers continue to work. For one man, being within walking distance to the SkyTrain improved his sense-of-place: "My work place is in Vancouver, so it is quite convenient because we are close to the SkyTrain."

Living in a location convenient to transit provided a similar sense of autonomy to having a car since it enables access to services, supports, and amenities without the financial burden of owning, maintaining, and finding a secure place to store a car. In general, it was emphasized by several seniors that Kiwanis “have taken everything into consideration; Kiwanis meets all the requirements in the sense that it is close to the mall and close to everything that is needed.”

ii) Navigating the neighbourhood with confidence

One of the most attractive features of living in Kiwanis Towers is its centrality to services (e.g. doctor’s office, dentist, optometrist, shopping centre, library, community centre and restaurants). The freedom and ability to get to different places enables independence. One senior revealed, “The main reason I chose here is because it’s close to places that I always go. With the location, you have a library, community centre, a man-made garden and a pond.”

Essentially, ‘walkability’ was identified as a crucial factor for aging well. This was particularly apparent in some seniors’ descriptions of their daily activities and routines. For example, the confidence of being able to wake up in the morning, “have breakfast, then walk to the stadium and the park, and then go grocery shopping” appeared to be a crucial component to wellbeing for the tenants as this enabled them to leave their home and enjoy activities in different places and spaces. Being in close vicinity to the urban centre, removes travel barriers for social participation and helps improve self-determination through the ability to get to essential places.
Having choice and control was voiced as an important aspect of home because for the tenants a space was only a place of dwelling if they could not call it “my home.” This meant having the freedom and ability to have it “set up the way I wanted it” and keeping it “nice and clean because I am able to look after it to make it homey and comfortable.”

i) Keeping one’s homes the way they want
For some, freedom in the home meant having the autonomy and ability to keep their home the way they wanted. This gave tenants a sense of ownership, which distinguished between “a home” and “my home.”

“What makes it homey is because I got the place set up the way that I want it. I didn’t have to ask anyone how to do it.”

“The next four months, I’ll be going around looking at the things, and searching for cheaper and new stuff, good stuff, that is comfortable for me. My new sofa! I’m looking forward to having this. I’m looking forward to moving in with my new things with me. My new furniture.”

ii) Providing new living accommodations
“I’m going to be the first person to move in to a brand new suite, which is nice.” Moving into a brand new apartment, as many emphasized, was “a privilege.” Despite having limited income, transitioning into a new place provided a special occasion for tenants to get new furniture despite challenges in finding affordable, quality items.

Many of the seniors also reported that the idea of moving into a new place made them see themselves differently. It helped elevate their social status, especially in an area like Vancouver’s Lower Mainland where housing costs are extremely high. Several individuals described some of the poor living conditions where they had previously lived; places with rodents, bedbugs and bad neighbours. It was evident that limited financial situations prevented tenants from living in comfortable and safe environments. The opportunity to move into a new home made many seniors feel that they “weren’t poor.”
Challenges tenants faced

While challenges will be different for different groups of tenants, participants in this research were lower income, primarily of Chinese heritage, and residents of an urban area in Western Canada. Four key challenges we heard:

1. Financial concerns: Affordability of accessible activities

Overall, key challenges were cost-related and encompassed fulfilling basic needs, such as affordable rent, transportation, and food.

“We are always happy when we are able to spend less money. It would be easier to adjust the convenience and comfort of the environment if we ignored the cost, but this is the society we live in. The more you pay, the more enjoyable your living environment.”

Many of the tenants indicated that living in Kiwanis Towers enabled them to live within their means. All of the residents have limited financial resources, many on fixed incomes, and thus must find ways to be creative with their money.

Most of the tenant reported that they are “more happy” when they are able to reduce costs and spend less money. After rent and bills, the majority of tenants had less than five hundred dollars per month for food and other expenses (including clothes, medications, and entertainment). Free or low cost services and activities for mental and physical fitness were stressed as “good for older adults” and that it was something that the decision-makers “needed to consider.”

Even with a community centre with age friendly activities nearby, the challenge of getting to some locations was seen as a barrier for some seniors, as some tenants are less mobile than others. Therefore, to facilitate social connectedness with seniors of different ability levels, there need to be “activities in the building itself where people can get together.”

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The design and implementation of age-friendly activities for seniors requires time, appropriate space, and organization. One of the main challenges is accessing human resources to organize and implement programs that “involve our hands and minds.”

The redevelopment process meant that tenants needed to move twice—once from Kiwanis Court and once into Kiwanis Towers. Transient dwellings impinge older peoples’ ability to firmly adjust and re-establish themselves in a new community. According to some seniors, this has had an impact on their ability to establish new social networks and relationships. Making new friends, finding useful service locations (e.g., grocery stores, pharmacies, family doctor), and establishing social supports takes time and effort, which is rewarding but can be a stressful process.

“But I’m not settled. I’m just on the run. I’m not settled here. It’s homey and it’s a place where I love to come in at night. I do a lot of walking and it’s a nice place to come to. I mean I’m not dreading coming back to the house, but I have to get out into the community. That takes work, you know? And I don’t want to have to do it twice.”

“...“I would like to see management that has sympathy and an understanding of different cultures and what seniors are going through.”

Currently, at least seventy percent of Kiwanis Towers’ tenants are of Chinese ancestry and a large proportion of this group have little or no English communication skills. There was a general concern over differences in cultural norms, behaviours, and expectations. Nevertheless, several seniors stressed “I don’t want to isolate myself from the English speaking or European people.” Similarly, many English-speaking residents expressed the desire to actively engage with and befriend non-English speaking persons.

Key recommendations included hiring “management that has sympathy and an understanding of different cultures and what seniors are going through,” as well as, organizing various activities that showcase or are rooted in different cultural values, beliefs and practices. “Have an activity for example for the moon festival or something and encourage all people that are from different ethnic groups to join.”

Additionally, bringing in Chinese interpreters during activities such as workshops, seminars, and other craft and learning events was recommended as one method of encouraging and facilitating participation of non-English speaking Chinese tenants.
Key Messages

When planning redevelopments or new projects for older adults the needs and challenges that the tenants might face need to be prioritized. The stories of the tenants we spoke to can be summarized into three key messages:

1. A strong sense-of-place is experienced through access to supports for active social, physical, and mental participation; opportunities to build and sustain social networks that enable feelings of familiarity and safety; convenience and proximity to resources in the community; and the ability to maintain control over their lives.

2. Key challenges experiencing a sense-of-place were cost-related and encompassed fulfilling basic needs, such as affordable rent, transportation, and food.

3. Other challenges include needing human resources to organize and implement on site activities; multiple relocations disrupt support networks and knowledge of local resources; culture and language differences, that produces a multicultural community with nuanced cultural norms, behaviours, and expectations.

References


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