



Community-led Neighbourhood Revitalization in Social Housing

A CHRA Congress Session Summary



BC Housing

With thanks to BC Housing for
their generous support of this initiative

January 2014

Speakers:

Brian Gilligan, *Executive Director of Community Development, Ottawa Community Housing*, Danielle Juteau, *General Manager, Corporation d'habitation Jeanne-Mance*, Jim Silver, *Chair, Department of Urban and Inner City Studies, University of Winnipeg*

Moderator:

François Vermette, *Vice President, Société d'habitation Chambrelle and CHRA Treasurer*

Date:

Thursday, May 2, 2013

A significant portion of the social housing in Canada's urban centres is large in scale and designed for a homogenous tenant base in terms of income level. While led by the belief that larger numbers of households could be supported by designing housing in this way, unintended consequences that sometimes resulted including decreased community safety and increased isolation, served to exacerbate rather than help residents overcome the economic and social barriers they faced. The three projects featured in this session have undergone substantive transformations in recent years, with considerable improvements in community safety, social cohesion and other social and economic outcomes. Though the projects are different in terms of tenant make-up and geography, each of the revitalization efforts in these communities took the approach that changes must be developed and led by the residents in order to be successful.

Jim Silver

The Lord Selkirk Park public housing project in Winnipeg was beset with major problems: high poverty levels, low levels of educational attainment, and a significant amount of street gang activity. Two thirds of the residents are people of Aboriginal descent. The median household income was half that of the rest of the inner city. Stereotypes were rampant and people generally did not want to live there. Of the roughly 300 units, dozens were vacant or boarded up.

In 2005, Jim Silver began his research and work with Lord Selkirk Park, working closely with community organizers to build on the strengths that existed in community. Key to the success was the use of the oral tradition to draw experiences and advice from residents and use that to develop solutions to pull people out of poverty.

Education emerged as a major focus. They established a resource centre, as well as an adult learning centre to help adults obtain Grade 12. In January 2012, the community opened a child care centre with 47 spaces, 16 of which are for infants, trying to hire locally as much as possible. Recognizing that pulling people out of poverty requires many solutions and not just one, Lord Selkirk Park also developed community gardens, a drop-in literacy program, safety patrols, better recreation programs and a neighbourhood advisory group.

Shortly after the recent recession, the Manitoba government used provincial stimulus money to renovate every unit in Lord Selkirk Park. Now, after a \$17-million overhaul based on the input of

residents, all 300 apartments and townhomes were renovated, including new kitchens, floors and low-flow toilets and high-efficiency furnaces. The construction work was done almost entirely by local people who received training and job skills in addition to payment for their work.

For the first time ever, there is a waiting list to get into Lord Selkirk Park and turnover has been significantly reduced. A higher proportion of people are working and/or in formal education now than was the case a decade ago. A more positive mood exists among residents. While far from perfect, Lord Selkirk Park is now a good place to live.

Danielle Juteau

The *Habitations Jeanne-Mance* is a downtown Montreal housing complex with 788 units that spans two city blocks, almost 8 hectares, with only one road traversing the complex. The complex contains residential towers, townhomes and low rises. The revitalization is focused on three components: sustainable development which underlies all activities, building renovation which began in 2004 (common areas, mechanical systems and architectural elements) and external improvements launched in 2009.

The demographic composition is noteworthy. Jeanne-Mance has 1,770 residents from 70 countries, with roughly one-third seniors, one-third adults and one-third under age 18. The buildings are 100% RGI, with only 12% declaring employment income and the remainder relying on some form of government assistance. The average length of tenure is 15 years.

Community involvement was essential to the success of the revitalization. Through extensive consultation, the shared strategic plan was built around the concept that improving the physical conditions and management capacity would be undertaken within the context of social and community development to allow individuals and families to develop to their full potential.

Danielle Juteau cited a number of barriers they overcame for community engagement: isolation, cultural diversity, ostracism and social exclusion, integration difficulties, social and mental health challenges, and residents not seeing themselves as agents of change. To lower the barriers, Jeanne-Mance brought together over 20 community groups and created a network that has built understanding, reduced isolation, created a sense of community and empowered residents to address community challenges.

Visible, collective projects have changed the community. Two examples stand out. In 2008, Jeanne-Mance began an urban art program in partnership with MU, a public arts organization in Montreal and have produced five large outdoor murals and a 200 foot long mosaic that involved over 1,500 members of the Jeanne-Mance community including residents, employees, contract workers and others. The second is the Eco-Quartier St-Jacques, a partnership with many providers such as horticulturalists, waste management, recycling, gardens and even an orchard. Begun in 2009, the project has involved residents in every step in the process, from conception through to realization.

Brian Gilligan

Ottawa Community Housing (OCH) Corporation is the largest housing provider in Ottawa and the second largest provider in Ontario. It provides 15,000 safe and affordable homes to approximately 32,000 tenants in 160+ communities across the city. OCH houses a diverse tenant population including 10,000 children and youth, 5,000 seniors, and 3,000 households receiving disability support. 93% of households have a combined income of less than \$35,000. Like most social housing providers, OCH has an aging housing stock and limited capital funding. Also, changes in housing policy have resulted in an increasing number of tenants with complex histories and needs coming from various provincial and municipal priority lists.

While OCH had always been involved in community development, it did not establish a department and designate specific staff until 2009. This decision was made, in part, because of recognition that the work of engaging tenants and strengthening partnerships with community agencies was critical but required a longer-term perspective and investment, free from the daily problem solving that characterises much of social housing work.

As a department, the Community Development team has three broad mandates: engage tenants in the OCH decisions that affect them, support tenants to envision and build healthy safe communities, and strengthen and sustain the agency partnerships that support OCH tenants and communities. Two specific initiatives that have played a role in a great tenant involvement in their communities are the Community Capital Fund and the ongoing redesign of tenant group structures. The Community Capital Fund (CCF) is an annual competitive grant program where tenant communities are allowed to compete for a portion of a \$100,000 capital budget. This funding is for the purchase or construction of community amenities, such as vegetable gardens, lounge or community kitchen upgrades, or benches and picnic tables. Tenants are expected to raise a portion of the required funds and/or provide “sweat equity”. The CCF is a very popular program with tenants and generates a lot of interest.

The redesign of tenant group structures is an ongoing evolution in OCH’s thinking about how tenants organise themselves and how OCH should fund and support these groups. While we are still on this journey together, a couple of key principles have revealed themselves including allowing tenants to define their group structures and how they wish to work together and providing additional supports to communities with a high number of vulnerable tenants. This work has also focussed on more intentionally engaging community agencies in this work.

The “key to success” is not innovative but it is difficult to sustain in a busy working environment. The building of genuine partnerships with both tenants and community agencies is hard work and often made complicated by difficult histories. However, it is only through true partnerships that the principle of shared accountability can be explored and tenants empowered to dream and build the types of communities they wish to live in. Strong partnerships are based upon strong relationships and to have these relationships, staff need to be present in the communities: during both happy events and times of tension and loss. We have had to learn to not arrive with solutions but to sit and listen; to encourage people who have often felt they have no power, to create their own solutions.



*The **Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA)** is the national voice for the full range of affordable housing and homelessness issues and solutions across Canada. We have over 275 members who collectively house and shelter hundreds of thousands of Canadians, and provide housing support to many more. CHRA provides a home for the housing sector and for all who believe that every Canadian should have a decent, adequate and affordable place to call home.*

75 Albert Street, Suite 902
Ottawa, ON, K1P 5E7

📞 (613) 594-3007
📠 (613) 594-9596

www.chra-achru.ca
info@chra-achru.ca