Developing Socially Inclusive Affordable Housing

INTRODUCTION

There are many ways in which housing providers could better design housing to aid social inclusion. *Design* is critical, since it can provide ways to improve social participation and thus social inclusion. Work in this field has covered many disciplines and fields of study. Studies from other countries and from a wide range of fields were examined in this review, including architecture, design, planning, social sciences, health and other areas.

Apart from ensuring housing is accessible for those with physical disabilities, little is known about ways to design housing to aid social inclusion for many specific vulnerable groups such as those identified by the National Housing Strategy. Broadly, these groups are defined as including seniors, persons with physical disabilities, people with mental health and addiction issues, persons with developmental difficulties, veterans, youth, women and children fleeing domestic violence, Indigenous people, homeless persons and others. The needs of these groups are substantial, as they go beyond shelter and affordability. Faced with many limitations, these populations often experience multiple vulnerabilities that limit their ability to fully participate in society.

OVERVIEW

Considering the importance of social inclusion under the National Housing Strategy, in 2018, CMHC commissioned SPR Associates Inc. to conduct research to identify, at each of the planning, design, construction, operation and renewal stages, the key factors, guiding principles or criteria that help to foster social inclusiveness in affordable housing. Research work involved a literature review to identify, from a building life-cycle framework, socially inclusive measures across a spectrum of housing needs and housing types for NHS vulnerable populations. Supplementary assessments were sought through an online poll of experts.

> The 2018 *NHS Glossary of Common Terms* defines **social inclusion** as follows:
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> *"Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society—improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity. It is a situation in which individuals have the resources and opportunities to be involved in society to an extent that is satisfactory to them. Working towards social inclusion means findings and using measures to reduce barriers that restrict the resources and opportunities of disadvantaged groups."* (*NHS Glossary of Common Terms*, 2018, page 6)

FINDINGS

Based on the literature review, there are opportunities to examine inclusion at five stages: planning, design, construction, operation and renewal.

Planning for inclusive housing includes practices that are flexible and encourage participatory and co-operative approaches, such as defining the housing in terms of shared spaces, universal design principles, etc. Learning local processes from people with lived experience and person-centred planning should be considered. Socially inclusive measures in the project's definition include diversity in tenure mix and housing types and measures that are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable populations.

- Consultation with or involvement of residents is a key part of the planning stage and can follow through to the detailed design stage. In redevelopments, the processes involve both existing residents and people in the surrounding area. Involving some vulnerable groups can be more challenging and require different approaches (such as input from family members or service providers).

- A diversity of unit sizes and flexibility in housing to meet varied needs over time are key features in many examples. Universal design is widely promoted as being more inclusive.

- Planning for connectivity within a site and with surrounding areas requires a variety of common spaces.

- No "one size fits all" models can match the varied needs, and creativity for specific sites and groups can enhance inclusion.

Designing for inclusive housing typically deals with the physical infrastructure of space and the built environment, such as features that make the space accessible for all. However, designing for inclusion has added dimensions. Some of the key emerging themes included the following:

- Incorporating inclusiveness in the use of space requires combinations of public (common) and private spaces with connections that encourage (rather than discourage) social interaction.

- Control of access and spaces relate to safety and privacy concerns. These issues can be more significant in mixed or diverse developments. Design of common spaces is an important theme for inclusive housing.

- Use of nature, landscaping, natural light and innovative designs are promoted in some designs for the built environment. Creativity may be even more important in housing for some vulnerable groups. For example, creating familiar surroundings or a home-like setting may help seniors to feel more comfortable. Incorporating elements of cultural backgrounds can help improve well-being for people with different backgrounds.

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Constructing for inclusive housing includes principles, practices and technologies in the built environment that respond to the planning and design stages. For example, on a building scale, these may be related to housing structure, sub-cluster, gathering/private spaces or shared spaces, environmental suitability, accessibility to community services and other facilities that are aligned with residents' needs, easy access in and out of buildings, security and safety features, elements that celebrate identity and cultural values, and comfort of physical and social tools in common spaces.

- On a community scale, they may concern pathways that provide connectivity to the neighbourhood (schools, services, parks, gardens) and other physical features that allow for meeting experiences at various scales.

- Occasionally, changes or modifications were made during construction that may have affected the achievement of initial designs and objectives.

Building for accessibility and building in the right location were noted. Ensuring that the new buildings "fit" with surrounding buildings may help create more integrated communities.

- Working with experienced developers who have completed inclusive developments is an asset.

- The quality and appearance of the buildings along with the best possible building materials can promote the fit and acceptance of buildings within surrounding communities.

- Ensuring flexibility of spaces and guarding against creating barriers need to be maintained during the building process to the extent permitted under codes and regulations.

Operating for inclusive housing includes initiatives and practices that encourage social inclusion measures at various levels. At a building level, these should foster a mix of incomes and social mix as well as develop a sense of belonging that reflects the needs of vulnerable populations. Community-level initiatives to welcome guests or meet with the community should be considered.

- Overall, the operation and addition of new common features and facilities were found to aid social interaction of residents and thus social inclusion. This was particularly seen in older projects or projects undergoing renewal (projects where complete retrofits might be uneconomical).

- Developing the community has to continue after the built environment is in place, with resources to support community activities. Some communities focus on information-sharing and building skills in the new communities. Some suggest the use of art, culture and nature as tools for promoting community activities.

- For vulnerable groups, inclusion depends on the support services within the housing and from the broader community. Inclusion, participation and well-being can vary with mix ratios.

- A recurring theme was that good design is not enough for some groups or mixes of groups. In essence, a good social infrastructure is equally important.

Renewing the housing stock for inclusive housing includes assessment and evaluation of actions in relation to outputs and desired outcomes of social inclusion and well-being. From lessons learned, consider what programs, initiatives and practices should be modified, eliminated or encouraged to achieve desired outcomes (such as social inclusion and well-being).

- Key principles for social inclusion relate to the adoption of clear processes for the renewal and use of expertise on tenant relations. As well, many sources stressed the need to integrate varied units throughout a complex, rather than have "separate" buildings for different groups.

- Well-designed plans are required to integrate tenure mixes in these complexes and mediate differing interests. Conflicts over the use of common spaces often arise and create security or safety concerns.

- Well-planned community engagement strategies are essential throughout a renewal process and remain so after construction is completed.

Promising practices with respect to social inclusion and possible implications for vulnerable groups include:

- Numerous challenges arise at all stages of the building lifecycle. For example, planning for vulnerable groups may be more challenging and require coordination with service providers and also has to accommodate varying ability levels.

- Designing for some vulnerable groups may require more attention to safety and privacy issues, but without creating barriers to social interaction and participation.

- Operationally, for some vulnerable groups, inclusion depends on the support services available within the building and/or from the surrounding community.

- Some promising practices were identified, including flexibility in mix ratios, designing for changing levels of abilities and ideally for all ability levels, designing for inclusion at the outset rather than adding on features to standard designs, and building in flexible spaces to be more adaptable to needs.

Overall, the findings suggest that creating socially inclusive environments is an ongoing process and that more work is required to develop guidelines for the management of socially mixed developments, particularly where the "integration" of vulnerable people is involved.

Additionally, expert panel members indicated a need for "deeper" education to transform the mindsets of developers, whom a number of panel members characterized as "stuck in the ways of the past" or "building with too strong an emphasis on economy."

A number of experts polled expressed particular concern for the development of social inclusion in the older housing stock, noting that much of this housing was built to less stringent accessibility requirements. As well, they noted that greater costs were expected for retrofits for older projects (they emphasized, however, that such retrofits promised great savings to the public, for example, in health care). The researchers noted that such upgrades of common facilities would be a highly economical way to improve social inclusion. Key findings from the expert panel included the following:

- **Need for information for developers:** Concerns were expressed regarding more effective education and information for housing developers on how to maximize social inclusion at the building phase.

- **Learning from projects that are exemplary in social inclusion:** Building on past successes and good practices is seen as key to reaching goals for improved social inclusion in housing.

"...developers should be informed by conversations and feedback from individuals with lived experience of being vulnerable or needing accessibility, occupational therapists, accessibility consultants; other builders who specialize in certain types of inclusive designing; and other organizations or stakeholders that promote inclusion and accessibility."

A housing manager

"...training or resources on common barriers faced by vulnerable populations. For example, training from women's shelters about the barriers and realities faced by survivors of domestic violence for housing providers may help them integrate best practices and design principles. Also, resources on how housing providers can partner with local agencies that support these populations so that they can work together to provide housing and supports."

A staff member of a transition house society

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR HOUSING

The literature review pointed at a number of valuable conclusions, for example, that:

- consultation with expected or actual residents is valuable to ensure social inclusion at every stage of the building life cycle;

- common facilities are a key feature to bring residents together, thus ensuring participation (child care facilities, community gardens, cooking facilities);

- tenure or social "mix" does not by itself ensure social inclusion; and

- limited information or evidence of success was found concerning social inclusion for many of the specific vulnerable groups identified in the National Housing Strategy.

Looking to the future, close examination of social inclusion promises to be a good focus for raising the quality of Canada's affordable housing and meeting the housing needs of vulnerable populations. This effort can go beyond the excellent efforts that Canada's non-profit housing providers have made to maximize the supply of affordable housing over the past few decades. In the future, by making housing more socially inclusive, the quality of Canada's existing and new affordable housing and the quality of life for those who use such housing will almost certainly be significantly enhanced.

FURTHER READING

Full report – *Developing Socially Inclusive Affordable Housing* (https://eppdscrmssa01.blob.core.windows.net/cmhcprodcontainer/ sf/project/archive/research_5/hrr_developing_socially_inclusive_ affordable_housing.pdf)

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