



Women-Centered Long-Term Housing Design Solutions

A Practical Response to the National Occupancy Standards Barriers

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Image source: Flexible Housing, Pinterest



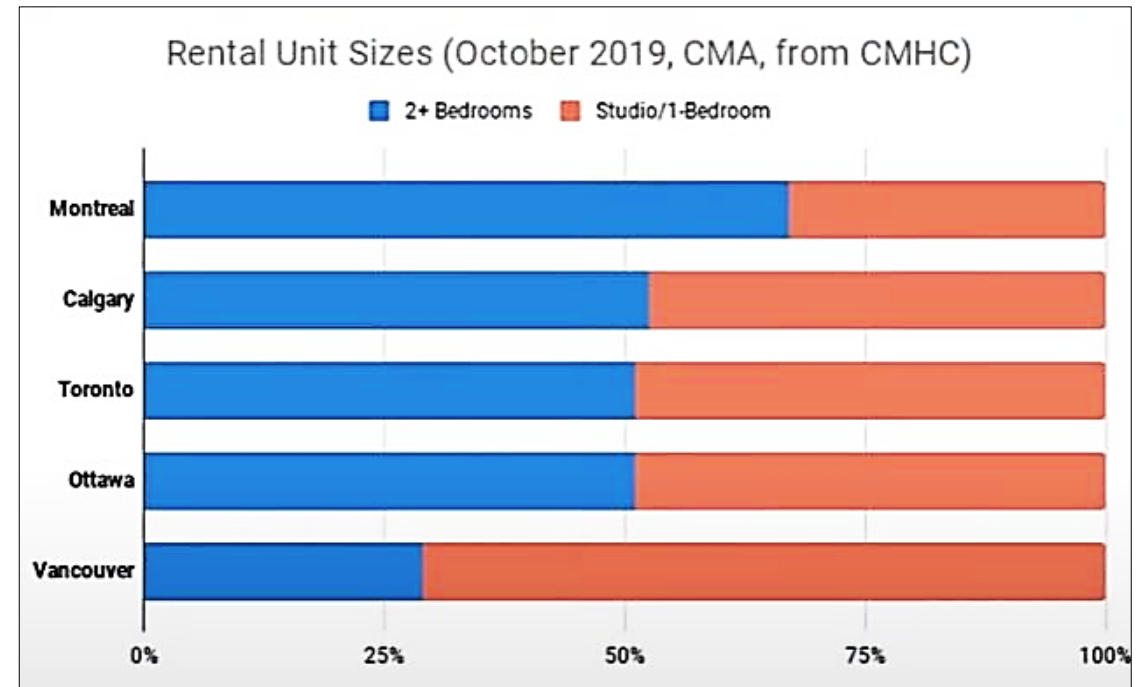
What is the problem?

- 50% of the transition house residents in BC are children. Women and their families need access to multi-bedroom long-term homes to be able to leave transition houses.
- National Occupancy Standards (NOS) a significant barrier for women with children, particularly with larger families to find affordable suitable housing.
(BCSTH Community Needs Assessment, 2019)



What is the problem?

- Data shows that in private and public rental housing stock in BC, the number of 3+ units are significantly fewer than 1- or 2-bedroom apartments (Canadian Rental Housing Index, 2018; City of Vancouver, 2017).
- The graph shows the rental unit sizes supply in large cities of Canada.





One solution would be to increase the supply of 2+ rental units, as well as their affordability. However, it does not seem a very feasible solution. So, we want to focus on a more actionable and feasible response with less challenges.

Possible solutions

NOS barriers relate to **family size**, **age** and **gender** of occupants (privacy, overcrowding). The approach that we are taking in this project focuses on the spatial aspects of long-term housing rather than number of bedrooms required in NOS and conventional models of housing units that are based on fixed number of bedrooms.

- **Flexibility:** It is achieved by modifying the physical form of the building (different physical space arrangements).
- **Adaptability:** Refers to using a space in a variety of ways (different social uses) without making physical changes.

(Steven Groak definitions of flexibility and adaptability)

Examples



Plan of unit with a lock-off suite

Source: plan diagram based on SFU Community Trust accessory apartment

Image source: CMHC (2019)



Customizable living spaces (built-in furniture, sliding doors): Under construction development in Mt Pleasant. Image Source: <https://www.urbanyvr.com/the-saint-george-presales/>

Examples



Image source: Schneider & Till (2005)

Benefits

- Affordability and sustainability are important aspects of this type of housing. This approach leads to more efficient use of space and increases lifetime of buildings due to the potential for adjustability to future changes with minimum costs.
- Different family compositions and the evolving needs of occupants will be met through adjustable space design solutions.
- It will promote a feeling of security of tenure, as displacement due to changes in family composition will be a less frequent issue. Also, it incorporate not only the design of unit, but the building as a whole by providing a mix of housing types for women to be able to move in if their household changed. Similarly, creating usable community spaces for different functions (e.g., meeting room, library, gathering area) enables family members use them for daily purposes and less pressure on the in-unit spaces and crowding.



What are the gaps in the current research and guidelines?

- Little research and evidence on the design of long-term housing for women and their children leaving violence situations.
- A quick review of the guidelines and housing standards in BC showed that while there are some general recommendations available about the importance of providing flexible, and expandable spaces; these are whether kept minimal, or limited to accessibility considerations for seniors, people with disabilities, and do not incorporate other forms of adaptability in response to a women and child-centered approach.

Some of the challenges and how we will address them

- **Financial challenges**

We need to estimate the costs of retrofitting/developing new spaces as well as the costs of maintenance based on our proposed model and compare how these will be financially viable. To do so, we will do consultation with development and housing design sectors while creating the toolkit and the principles.

- **Compatibility with the building codes and standards and other current policies**

- We need to make sure that our proposed solutions will be aligned with the updated building standards such as enough square footage, number of washrooms, enough parking spaces/unit as a result of increased density etc.
- How to address the current rent allocation (e.g., BC Housing) which is based on the number of bedrooms.

What are other aspects that you can think of?



How we plan to do this work?

- We will bring together an advisory committee of housing experts and women with lived experience to produce preliminary designs, principles and practices that allow for increased flexibility and adaptability in affordable housing design to meet the needs of women fleeing violence with children.
- Creating an online toolkit with principles, strategies and actions, targeted at community and social housing providers who are engaged in new building and/or retrofitting projects.
- We have invited BC Housing, AHMA, YWCA to get engaged and promote the work by mobilizing the knowledge.