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Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador
// Housing Meeting at Laviolette Complex, Trois-Rivières, Qc

Innovation

by Wendy Pollar,

Kwei, Bonjour, Hello

Thanks to the organizers of this event for allowing me to come and speak today. I feel honored to have been given a place around your circle of dialogue.

Hopefully I can contribute with some inspiration to guide your thoughts in today's reflection.

Who am I :

I am an architect that was in private practice for 10 years

I worked at CMHC in knowledge transfer and outreach for another 10 years. I was privileged to follow the research into innovation, data, demonstration, and best practices, including sustainable building practices, ageing in place, community design, and much more.

I decided to take that knowledge and apply it to a practical purpose. So now, I am an Aboriginal housing consultant at CMHC, working primarily with Cree, Mohawk, Maliseet, and Innu communities

Let us define innovation :

Innovation means to introduce something new

Innovation therefore stems from a need, combined with a knowledge of the different choices available

Good innovation, however, must have grass roots support to really be effective.

So how do you know what's best for your community?

I don't think the answer lies in the most technologically advanced gadget, nor in what is trendy, It isn't whatever got the most votes either.

The power of community engagement :

Sometimes that answer is clear, but sometimes there is need for dialogue and the establishment of consensus – that way the answer responds to all needs, not just that of the majority.

I am glad that the beautiful project developed by the Innu at Uashat in partnership with the University of Laval was presented before me because it is one of the best examples I can think of of true community engagement.

Let me illustrate this idea further with a few stories.

Aruviat :

I would like to start by telling you the story of Aruviat's journey to redefine housing that suited the technological and cultural needs of their community.

A CMHC research consultant, and one of my life mentors, was invited to visit this community situated high in the Northwest Territories, and to work with them to define a new energy efficient and culturally relevant housing prototype.

While meeting with the group, he noticed that the only people talking were the housing technical staff. He asked the elders and the women why they did not speak, and they said that the housing department knows how to build the buildings, not them.

He managed to convince the women and elders to meet separately. The next day, they talked about the traditional way they lived – having summer homes, or teepees, and winter homes, or igloos. They described how in the igloos they would spend time cleaning the skins of their catches and that the temperature inside the building was ideal for this practice.

The idea was proposed to create such a space inside their new home. The area was insulated from the rest of the home so that the temperature could be kept at 5 degrees. Floor drains, hard flooring, and a sink area complemented the space.

At the end of the day, he noticed that one of the women in the corner of the room was crying. When asked why, she simply stated 'None has ever asked me before what I wanted in my home'.

Whapmagoostui :

Armed with case studies such as the one I just mentioned, I had the recent opportunity to spend some time talking about housing aspirations with the Whapmagoostui First Nation

here in Quebec. Thank you to Brian Wynne in the audience today for his vision and initiative with his community.

Throughout the 3 day session, people were given time to express themselves on the situation of housing in the community and where they wanted to be.

We divided up into 4 groups and I sat with about 15 women from the community. They began talking about the Aruviat home and the idea of having a place to do their cultural activities. Quickly, however, they mentioned that they were not sure about doing that messy work directly in the home. They said that this was traditionally done in teepees. One lady asked why there was teepees in Chisasibi, but there were very few in Whapmagoostui. They concluded that the reason was that dogs were getting into the teepees and causing problems.

The answer proposed by the group – install fences around the teepees!

So here we see two different communities with similar problems, but where the solution was rooted in the unique cultural practices and climatic constraints of their homeland.

Words of caution :

I have deliberately hesitated to give you a shopping list of specific technical domahickeys today. Not because it isn't important to know what is out there, but because it is necessary to think carefully before accepting any miracle solution proposed by vendors – as well meaning as they may be.

I find it alarming how many times the leadership of different communities have come to me to show me the solar panel, or modular home that will revolutionize housing construction in their communities. Time and time again, the companies try to bid for exclusivity, circumventing due tender process, the use of local labour, and forcing the community to accept their limited range of house plans.

Fortunately, though, most communities quickly see the limitations of these products, and proceed to carefully analyse their situation moving forward.

Don't get me wrong. Many of these products could offer the answers you need. I am just saying that it is good to establish what your community needs and wants before jumping into solutions.

So what options could you consider?

To help animate the discussions today, I would like to list some techniques, tools, and approaches that you could put some thought towards. All of these suggestions have individuals in this very room that can give you more insight into what they are doing.

Finance and funding :

Homeownership allows individuals to self-finance their housing. This in turn, helps create space within the existing social housing stock. Potential advantage – everyone is better housed.

Recuperating the value of off-agreement band owned homes. One of the ways that this is done is by properly evaluating the value of your existing housing stock and requesting that value when the homes are sold. Potential advantage – Let's say you have 10 homes going off agreement, and you can sell them for \$100 000 each - that makes \$1 million dollars that you can reinvest into your housing program!

Revolving loan funds allow capital investment from Aboriginal people to be used by other Aboriginal people. Potential advantage - a strong economic model that keeps the money within the community.

Cost reduction :

Can you enhance the power of the available financing by getting a better bang for your buck? Here are some ideas:

Volunteer labour. Potential advantage – reduced costs for paid labour, increased awareness of how to upkeep the new homes, pride in the housing stock.

Working with non-profit organizations and academic institutions. Potential advantage – capitalizing on their funding sources and expertise.

Calculating cost by task instead of by tender price. Potential advantage – helps control skyrocketing tender prices in communities where there are only a few construction companies.

Looking at affordable housing types such as bachelor and 2 bedroom homes, semi-detached and row housing. Potential advantage – smaller square footage means lower cost per home. Connected housing has lower infrastructure costs, and uses less land.

Governance :

There are representatives from the Cree Nation Government in this room today. They have experience in running Aboriginally led health boards, school boards and so on. I invite you to learn about their experiences and speak to members of the Cree communities that they serve that are here today.

Skills and Capacity :

Provincially certified education programs. This was done for the administration side, but what about technical? Potential advantage – Graduates can work on and off-reserve. The content can be delivered at any time to new hires. The programs are more comprehensive than one-off workshops.

Adopting external standards and certifications. Examples could include quality control programs, green building certification programs and so on. Potential advantages – third party neutrality. These systems have been tested.

Leveraging Tribal Councils to create hubs for expertise. Potential advantage – Economical use of expertise on an as-needed client centric basis. Cross pollination of ideas across different communities

Technical :

Low environmental Impact technologies such as increased insulation and air sealing, water conservation, site sensitive design, etc. Potential advantage – preservation of habitat, reduced dependence on resources, lower operating costs, reduced waste, connection with cultural values.

Durable construction techniques and materials. Potential advantages – resource conservation, lower operating costs, better health outcomes.

Handicapped accessible, adaptable, and visitable housing. Accessible housing is useable by a wide range of people right from the start. Adaptable housing allows for easy future adaptations as people's needs change. Visitable housing refers to homes that have at least one living space and one bathroom that are accessible with the objective of welcoming anyone to your home regardless of their abilities. Potential advantages – lower costs for renovations, allows for ageing in place, values the needs of all community members, reduces isolation of handicapped people and elders.

Community planning and community wide solutions :

Housing does not happen in isolation and the best solutions leverage community resources and household resources together. Here are some ideas:

District energy systems. Potential advantages – reduced cost for renewable energy technologies, centralized maintenance

Work at home solutions – Wouldn't it be interesting to consider allowing space for home businesses and daycares directly within the homes? Potential advantages – economic opportunities, reduced need for commercial space.

Cohousing and Cooperative housing. The idea of sharing resources and common areas has been explored elsewhere. Each family has a private space, but there is separate space for communal cooking, communal equipment, etc. Potential advantage – cultural gatherings are made possible without the need for large spaces in each home. Sharing of resources and equipment such as vehicles and tools could keep costs down.

Transitional housing and shelters. Transitional housing can be supportive to individuals experiencing difficult life situations. Potential advantages – individuals in difficulty are not forced to be homeless or to move to dense urban area shelters.

Aligning housing types with housing need. That means there is an appropriate balance of 1, 2, 3, 4, and more bedroom homes to match the demographics of the community. Potential advantage – less over and under housing.

What is the place for CMHC moving forward :

Establishing need is the responsibility of the First Nations. However, CMHC does have a vast network of on-reserve and off-reserve partners to provide you with the knowledge of your options. This network is vast as is demonstrated by the stories I mentioned earlier. I am in regular contact with 10 different communities, and my 30 colleagues across the country each have 10-20 additional clients that they work with. Also, CMHC's other business lines connect us to a multitude of off-reserve partners that provide us with wisdom and ideas. It is the sharing of this information that is our unique resource that we can offer you. Together we can work on finding ways to improve the housing for your community members.

Meegwitch, Merci, Thank you