

Finding Home

Policy Options for Addressing
Homelessness in Canada

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J. David Hulchanski
Philippa Campsie
Shirley B.Y. Chau
Stephen W. Hwang
Emily Paradis
General Editors

 E-book

Chapter 3.7

The Peel Youth Village: Designing Transitional Housing for Suburban Homeless Youth

RAE BRIDGMAN

This case study presents findings from research about the preliminary design and development of Peel Youth Village, a transitional housing project designed for suburban homeless youth in the Region of Peel, a suburb of Toronto. Of particular interest are how planning and design processes and decisions come to be negotiated and re-negotiated on the part of all players, according to a complex mix of user needs, service providers' needs, funding mandates, budgetary constraints, site conditions, building code regulations, social values, and political will, among many other issues. Projects evolve within a complex of all these complementary and at times potentially conflicting elements.

In this article, I concentrate on insights arising from several focus groups with homeless youth, as well as the impact of political processes, building codes and planning approval processes on the design of the facility. The article closes with recommendations for design interventions to address homeless young people's needs, and highlights the value of youth participation in any project designed for their needs. Also highlighted is the value of project documentation and dissemination to offer

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concrete guidance about the strengths and weaknesses inherent in various design approaches.

Background

While youth homelessness in the United States has become the subject of a growing body of literature, especially in the fields of social work, psychology, and medical health, and homeless young people have also been the focus of a great deal of work in Britain, particularly by Susan Hutson and Suzanne Fitzpatrick (see, for example, Fitzpatrick, 2000; Liddiard and Hutson, 1991), the literature on youth homelessness in Canada is comparatively recent. (See Kraus et al., 2001 for a national overview and annotated bibliography.) Emphasized in the Canadian literature on best practices for alleviating homelessness is the degree to which homeless persons, as well as front-line workers, are involved in developing solutions, together with the empowerment of homeless persons to access stable housing and services, develop skills and actively pursue the goal of independence (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1999).

My ethnographic research has revolved around documenting innovative projects for alleviating chronic homelessness among single women and men in Toronto (e.g., see Bridgman, 1998, 2003, 2006). This work involves an extended commitment to follow a project through its development over several years. The researcher in effect becomes “anchored” to innovative housing projects to document their development, to expose the common objectives yet different perspectives involved in bringing a project to fruition, and to consider how what has been learned “here” may potentially be applied “there” (Bridgman, 1998: 12).

Such research contributes to knowledge-building around what has been called “utopian pragmatics.” “Utopian pragmatics” refers to the study of how initiatives meant to disrupt and redress existing (oppressive) social conditions – in this instance, youth homelessness – actually get implemented (Bridgman, 1998). How are such alternative visions made real?

My research has also involved documenting a housing and employment training program for homeless youth in downtown Toronto.

One of the articles arising from this work explores several challenges to an organization’s capacity to develop an innovative project for

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homeless youth, and the degree to which homeless youth are able to be involved in decision-making (Bridgman, 2001).

A second article (Bridgman, 2004) theorizes public-private partnership processes and offers a theoretical framework for charting the complexities of coordinating responsibilities, decision-making, and accountability in developing housing for homeless young people. This article explores the degrees of youth participation during early development processes for Peel Youth Village, based on a participatory model developed by Roger Hart (1997).

Research Methods

My research involved extended participant observation from January 2000 to June 2002 to document discussions among architects, development consultants, local social service providers, municipal officials and homeless youth. Meetings of the Peel Region Homeless Youth Task Force (subsequently renamed the Homeless Youth Network for the Region of Peel) involved representatives from approximately 45 youth-serving agencies – including mental health services, advocates, boards of education, drop-in centres, sexual health clinics, drug abuse counselling, criminal justice counselling, police services and faith-based organizations. The Homeless Youth Network Working Group (with approximately 12 members) also took place each month.

While drawing in part on discussions from these large group meetings, this article concentrates on insights arising from a housing design charrette (November 2000), three focus groups held with homeless youth (March/April 2001), and a series of design meetings held between January and June 2002, as well as an in-depth interview with one of the project's architects. Excerpts from the field notes and minutes of meetings have been cited. Care has been taken to change names and identifying details in order to maintain confidentiality for those involved in developing the Peel Youth Village.

Peel Youth Village

The report of the Peel Regional Task Force on Homelessness to Regional Council in May 1999 identified a need for a task force on homeless

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youth. The Task Force on Youth Homelessness started meeting in January 2000, and plans for a transitional housing project for homeless youth began to coalesce.

The Region of Peel, just northwest of Toronto, is the second-largest municipality in Ontario, and in 2000, its population was about 1 million. At the time of writing this article, the Region had 18 shelter beds for youth. Of these, six were designated long-term, and young people could stay for up to a year and develop their life skills. The remaining 12 provided emergency shelter, with a three-week limit. (In contrast, the City of Toronto with a then population of 2.5 million had more than 400 hostel beds for youth, with a stay limit of three months.)

With funding of approx. \$4 million (Canadian) from multiple levels of government, Peel Youth Village was attempting to address the needs of the suburban homeless, who had only recently been recognized in the literature (see Crane & Takahashi, 1998).

Key components of Peel Youth Village were to include housing to accommodate approximately 64 young people, assistance with employment opportunities involving a range of private and public partnerships, and involvement of homeless youth in the development, construction, and management of the project. At the time of my research, design drawings had almost been completed, working drawings were to start soon, and construction was slated for the summer of 2003.

The metaphor of a “village” suggests not just a housing project physically bounded within its own community; rather it suggests a concept beyond the mere walls of one building, one inclusive of the surrounding neighbourhood community. The concept of “villaging” is meant to create “an environment that allows and encourages a health community to evolve,” according to discussions during a retreat in January 2002 with representatives from approximately 20 youth-serving agencies in the Peel region.

The Peel Youth Village model was developed in parallel with consultations with youth, and after network agencies participated in a self-reflection process to discuss with other agencies the areas in which they were able to help at-risk youth, and the areas in which they were not as effective. All the agency reports highlighted the lack of resources to offer badly needed services. Overall, service providers in the Peel Region were

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becoming increasingly concerned that young people were migrating to the City of Toronto because they were unable to access supportive services in their own home communities. Not only did the Peel Region have an acute shortage of beds for homeless youth, but youth with histories of criminal behaviour, addictions, and mental illness were often excluded from local services. And those youth who secured one of the few beds available were expected to move on quickly.

Once youth left the Peel Region, “going back” became more difficult due to distance and transportation issues, and youth could lose their social networks of support (family and friends).

Design Decisions

Insights from Youth

During March and April 2001, three youth discussion forums were held at local drop-ins and youth centres in malls and elsewhere, with pizza and pop served. Approximately fifteen attended the first group, and six to eight youth attended the other two. The youth talked about physical design issues as well as program design (e.g., expectations and rules).

The richest insights were gained from the third discussion group, in which the youth had all experienced or were presently experiencing homelessness. Youth in the other two groups held at different agencies had not experienced homelessness to the same degree. Many seemed to hang out at the youth centres, but had a home to go to when the centres closed. Following are just a few of the many ideas gathered, particularly from the third discussion group. While these excerpts from field notes are ordered under topic headings, the words of the youth themselves offer powerful testimonies.

Lack of Shelters

One young woman named Moira spoke up right away at the beginning of the meeting: “There are not enough shelters in Brampton. Most of the time you have to travel to Toronto or Mississauga. And if you are not old enough to get to Toronto on your own then you have nowhere to go.

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There is OPP [Our Place Peel] but the waiting list there is forever just to get in.”

Greg added, “I have a whole list of shelters in the Toronto area right here [he pulled out three or four pages] and they are either full, or they want to know if you have a criminal record, or you can’t stay there because of your age or something.”

Shawn said, “I’m not allowed to stay at the shelter with my Dad because it’s a men’s shelter, and I’m still under 16, so I had to sneak in so that I could stay with him.”

Greg added, “Or there will only be two beds for five people, and you have to do rock-paper-scissors to see who gets the bed and who sleeps on the floor.”

Time Frames

Almost all those consulted agree that people staying at Peel Youth Village should move on. Peel Youth Village should be a place to help youth get going; it should not be a place where people would be living forever, or even for a great length of time. At the same time, however, the youth emphasized the stress created by having strict time limits for moving on. The length of stay should be determined on an individual basis. It was important not to have strict time limits because as one person noted, “That can really freak people out, if they are always counting the days until they will have to move again.”

The Drop-In Community Centre and Residences

The architects asked the youth about how the drop-in community centre and residential area should be connected – whether they should be physically separate or in the same building.

Two of youth spoke simultaneously: “They should be separate so that people from the community centre can’t get upstairs to the bedrooms. Have separate entrances.”

As Greg said, “You might want to have friends in the recreation room who you don’t necessarily want to know that you are living there. It’s a privacy thing.”

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The need to keep homeless youth safe from others in the community turns on its head the usual concerns of the public-at-large to keep the community safe from homeless people.

Accommodating Couples

Moira suggested, “You should have special rooms for couples so that they can have their own room. I think this is a big problem right now, because most couples are not allowed in shelters. They are either all males or all females. And even if they are, both of you are not allowed to share a room.”

Sue chimed in: “It can be really bad. Like you are not even allowed to show affection. There is absolutely no touching...You could have separate units maybe with five other people or so. But no more than five because they might not get along, or someone might not take care of themselves in terms of hygiene, and that would create some problems. Plus if you have more than five people waiting to use the bathroom, that could be a problem.” Later she explained: “Me and Greg are a couple and it is hard because I am pregnant and I get really tired and moody and stuff, and at times like that I don’t want to be alone. I want him to be there for me, you know. You want to be with your partner.”

Some of the insights from the youth consultation, as one of the architects suggested during an interview in July 2002, actually changed the entire project. “It really would have been a straight housing project if it hadn’t been for [those meetings in the malls]. We sort of threw out the whole idea we started from and said, ‘Okay, so what has everyone told us?’ And everyone was saying it wasn’t about housing. They need play space, places to be and to do things in.... It is a community project – the whole community centre was really what everybody wanted and it still is. The housing is great for street youth and all the homeless kids at risk – all of that is fantastic, but I think it is the combination of the two projects that is the most interesting.”

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Impact of Political Processes, Building Codes, and Planning Regulations

There are many interconnected levels of negotiation involved in design and development processes.

The original plans for Peel Youth Village included several components – a clubhouse/drop-in, an emergency shelter (15-30 youth), an entry-level shelter (25-30 youth), and transitional shelter (25 youth) targeted to youth. Permanent housing (25 youth) was also part of original plans. Federal funding mandates precluded supporting the category “permanent housing,” however. As is often the case, funding mandates can have a profound impact on the nature of what is considered “fundable.” A Network member put it bluntly: “We cannot call this piece of the project ‘permanent housing.’ We have to call it ‘transitional housing’ to qualify for HRDC money, but ideally we would want it to be a place where kids can stay. Our private aspiration is to have the people living here making it a different thing. But for expediency, permanency will not be part of our language.”

As plans developed, the project became a four-storey building with a fully developed basement below grade. The basement was given over to a youth development centre, or community centre (with gymnasium and recreational games). The second, third, and fourth floors were for residential use (total of 12 four-bedroom units) – with the second floor functioning in a short-stay capacity much like a dormitory (16 rooms, with two people per room), and the top two floors for longer-term residents (16 rooms on each floor). The ground floor was to function as a lounge or town hall to the youth development centre, and would act as a mediating space between the basement and the upper residential floors. Each floor would be seen and heard from any other floor as a result of the common stairs.

When it came time to seek municipal approvals from the planning department, the project had to be presented, however, not as a shelter, and not as transitional or supportive housing. Supportive housing, as one Network member clarified at a design meeting, carries connotations in the Peel Region of mental health services and institutionalization. Discussion at design meetings centred on the apparent contradiction that as

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far as the municipal planners were concerned, the project did not require any staff, and was for housing only. Yet requests for funding from Regional Council would be made for operational staff funding.

One Network member tried to clarify her concerns during one of the design meetings: “On the one hand we are saying this housing – but not supportive housing. What will happen when after it opens the Mayor drops in to see what is going on, and sees all these programs in place, and learns that, in fact, it is supportive housing?” This member continued with a quip about the “honesty angel that was sitting on her right shoulder.” Another member responded: “Honesty is important, but so is serving the needs of these young people. So what’s more important?”

Discussion continued at length with some suggesting that there were different stories for different people, and others insisting that they were the same stories just with different highlights. In a subsequent design meeting, one of the members present addressed the same subject: “Architects have different sets of drawings for different purposes. Maybe this is audiences, and we use different words for different audiences.”

Another member emphasized: “We must avoid terminology like ‘support’ and ‘care’ because it implies mental health in too many quarters. We can’t call it a gymnasium, but rather a recreation space. And we have to avoid the word ‘counselling’ or any terminology that smacks of business. This has to come off as a housing project. Anything that smacks of a ‘care’ facility means they will go back to zoning and argue that this is not, in fact, housing.”

With regional concerns over rising taxes and fiscal constraints, the Mayor of Mississauga had stated publicly early in the spring 2002 that Mississauga would not be participating in any provincial or federal housing initiatives. As a result, the Peel Youth Village presentation to City Council was an important site of negotiation. The strategy developed for presenting the Peel Youth Village proposal was to first present less contentious local housing projects, such as a project for seniors, to smooth the way for Peel Youth Village’s approval.

The Regional housing department, having agreed to subsidize operating costs of \$700,000, had a great deal of input into the design as a result. The department was particularly concerned that costs be kept as

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low as possible, so there would be no air conditioning, and no extra expenses that could be perceived as extravagant.

According to fire codes, individual bedrooms could not be locked. The suites themselves could have a lockable door, but the individual bedrooms could not. People could put a latch on their door, and lock it when they were in the rooms, but they were not to lock the door when they left the room. Consultations with youth, however, had pointed to the importance of being able to lock up possessions. Lockable cupboards were proposed at design meetings as one way of addressing the issue. One of the project architects reflected: “Whenever we have talked to people in the past, being able to lock up stuff is pretty important. So now what are we saying? You can lock some of their stuff but not all of their stuff – do you lock your sleeping bag, or do you lock your clothes, or your food? What don’t you lock up? I don’t know.”

Regional fire code officials also were concerned about all the open-concept common spaces on each floor and the main stairs running straight through the middle of the building (for ease of sight lines and auditory cues). They had not reviewed a housing model designed with so much open space before, and were more comfortable with an apartment- or condominium-styled double-loaded corridor (units on either side of a corridor). The officials wanted these spaces to be treated like corridors, or alternatively they wanted the open spaces enclosed (e.g., in glass). These strictures resulted in some of the common areas being divided off into rooms.

The architect expressed frustration with the approvals process: “It is forcing us to make the decision about where the rooms go. ... We always thought that if one day they need to close off one whole floor for program space or if they wanted it for more residential, there would be incredible flexibility. What they’re making us do is to make those decisions now and we don’t know how to make them. Because we don’t know what those rooms should be like. So the area that we were leaving for future development, we’re having to pre-determine that, and I think that is a mistake.”

At the time of writing the article, it was not yet clear whether the Region or one agency (or group of agencies) would take over the actual operation of Peel Youth Village once it opened. This uncertainty also had

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its impact on design-related questions, as different agencies with different mandates and interests attempted to come to consensus.

The site for the Peel Youth Village sat in the midst of a cluster of four high-rise non-profit apartment buildings (528 units, 1,500 residents). The majority of the families were single-parent families led by women. Approximately 700 children and youth lived in the apartments. At the time, there were no green spaces or parks nearby for the children and youth to play, and it was anticipated that Peel Youth Village would provide badly needed recreational space. Within this broader neighbourhood context, Peel Youth Village would offer much more than housing. It had a much larger mandate to extend its presence to the community-at-large through the proposed public recreation space.

Importantly, the Peel Youth Village model was premised upon a continuum of housing and support options that youth would move through at their own pace. In other words, the stages proposed by the model were needs-based and not time-based.

Conclusion

Directions for Future Research

Systematic project documentation, evaluation, and dissemination are of tremendous value for offering concrete guidance about the strengths and weaknesses inherent in various design development approaches. Analysis of housing development processes over extended “real-time” leads to an appreciation of the “shifting sands” nature of participation – dependent upon funding pressures, political will, mandates of partners participating in the development, municipal plans inspection and review processes, and other such externalities.

More systematic documentation of project development processes is badly needed. This kind of research is not promoted enough. Lessons learned during implementation may have application elsewhere. Documentation and dissemination can offer concrete guidance about the strengths and weaknesses inherent in various approaches.

Unfortunately, non-profit organizations can rarely commission such research. As Novac et al. (1999, 3) point out, “widespread funding constraints, which necessitate the development of small local projects and

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low-cost solutions, diminish opportunities for documentation and information exchange regarding the strengths and weaknesses of new projects, service innovations, and integration of multiple services.” Furthermore, most process-oriented or evaluative housing research occurs at post-occupancy stages, and therefore misses key insights about decision-making processes or barriers experienced from the very beginning of a project. Researchers themselves have to take responsibility for securing multi-year funding for this kind of research. Often funding mandates or research timelines do not dovetail neatly with design and development processes.

Some of the recommendations for design interventions to address homeless young people’s needs arising-from this research include the following.

Recommendations for Design Interventions

Consultation with youth is essential: Findings from this research highlight the obvious – the importance of youth participation in any project designed for their needs. Without youth consultations, Peel Youth Village would have embarked on very different design directions.

Design must be flexible: Potential flexibility in design for ease of retrofitting or renovating will accommodate changing needs on the part of youth over the long-term, as any project once opened grows and matures. Shifts in programming may require spaces to be re-configured.

Housing must be linked to community-building: Shared so-called amenity space is intended to enhance safety and security (visual sight lines) for both residents and staff, and to facilitate a sense of collective well-being. Conventional models of apartment living with double-loaded corridors and private units do not offer the same potential for community-building.

The relation to the larger community must be considered: Within the larger community and site context, Peel Youth Village offers not only housing for homeless youth, but also recreational space to youth living in the broader Peel community.

A range of needs must be accommodated: Homeless youth have a range of social service and housing needs, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, long-term housing, educational training, employ-

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ment training, among others. Youth-serving agencies and organizations often address these needs in an uncoordinated fashion. Peel Youth Village acted as a catalyst to encourage discussion about gaps in existing services, and to point to ways of cooperating among sometimes competing interests.

A time-based model has limits: Peel Youth Village was envisioned as offering a continuum of housing options and supportive programming that youth would move through at their own pace, and not according to dictated time limitations.

Emphases shift during the approvals processes: The way in which a room is described can affect the way those reviewing plans, political decision-makers, or even the general public judge the feasibility or worth of a project. Creativity in presenting design ideas and an acute awareness of who the audience is can smooth approvals processes. In the case of Peel Youth Village, during municipal approvals processes, for instance, the supportive or community-building aspects of the project were downplayed in favour of housing provision.

Demonstration projects are important: Demonstration or pilot projects may inspire other constituencies to build upon lessons learned and develop new projects addressing similar or related social conditions. The designation “demonstration project” provides an exploratory framework for developing any project so that lessons, whether positive or negative, can inform future initiatives elsewhere. As one Network member explained during a design meeting, “By referring to this as a demonstration project or pilot project or experimental project, we move from the exact to something with a little more latitude.”

Every demonstration project surely arises from that primordial utopian impulse to disrupt, as James Holston proposes, “the imagery of what...society [understands] as the real and the natural...[and] defamiliarize[s] the normative, moral, aesthetic, and familiar categories of social life.” Holston asks: “Without a utopian factor are not plans likely to reproduce the oppressive status quo?” He answers his own question: “Without a utopian factor, plans remain locked in the prison-house of existing conditions” (Holston, 1989:315-317).

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Epilogue

The Peel Youth Village community centre opened its doors to the community in the autumn of 2005, and its housing became operational the following summer. For more information about Peel Youth Village, visit <http://www.peelregion.ca/ow/ourservices/community-program/housing/pyv/>.

See also the Eva's Initiatives Tool Kit, which profiles Eva's Phoenix in Toronto, Peel Youth Village, and other innovative projects for homeless youth across Canada: <http://www.evasinitiatives.com/EVAsToolKit/>.

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Rae Bridgman is Professor, Department of City Planning, Faculty of Architecture, University of Manitoba, and a founding member of the architectural design and planning firm BridgmanCollaborative Architecture.

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