

INPUT

LAND AND REAL ESTATE
ISSUES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Building Community with Partnerships



258

Union Street

RI
The
Real Estate
Institute of
British Columbia

BUILDING FOR COMMUNITY NEEDS

Graham Wood, RI

There is a “Skid Row” in many towns and cities, historically named after the skids that were placed on city streets to help drive lumber to mills. Disadvantaged people often lived near these skids in hopes of earning employment, and the name took on the connotation within cities that had similar poor populations, often without permanent housing, looking for work.

Unfortunately, Vancouver has its own contemporary community analogous to Skid Row—the Downtown Eastside—a community that has grown organically out of its conditions, near to the Canadian Pacific Railway lands that served as the Pacific Terminus, built to spur economic growth and prosperity for all by connecting Vancouver to the industrial hubs of Toronto and Montreal.

The Bloom Group Community Services Society (Bloom) is a nondenominational organization that grew out of St. James Community Services Society, which has served the Downtown Eastside (DTES) community for almost 60 years. Bloom operates a number of facilities in the DTES and throughout Vancouver, providing people with housing options. We also offer services that provide support for people with mental health issues, shelters for women and their families who are fleeing violence, and hospice services.

One of our facilities is Somerville Place, a 31-unit affordable housing facility that also contains our central administrative office. Somerville Place was named after Archbishop David Somerville who, in 1955, wrote about the needs in the DTES, now captured on a plaque:

When a grownup man struggles to keep back tears as he tells of his disappointment and humiliation—when the broken shoes and worn dirty clothes tell their story of sleeping in box cars, you can’t refuse to help him. You can only keep on giving until there is nothing left.

The words on this plaque are a plea for more help, and more support. They capture, poignantly, the urgency of the situation that was apparent in 1955—the loss of dignity and the suffering—not unlike the challenges we face today.

RESULTS, NOT CAUSES

John Steinbeck, in his seminal novel *The Grapes of Wrath*,¹ emphasizes that social frustration, loneliness, unemployment, and homelessness are not caused by areas like Skid Row





The View (250 Powell Street)

The View opened in the fall of 2015 after the building was transformed from a former remand centre into 96 units of affordable housing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, of which:

- 42 units have been designed to meet the affordable housing needs of people with low to moderate incomes, with a priority given to those already working and/or living in the Downtown Eastside
- 38 units, including eight rented at the shelter rate, are designated for Indigenous youth participating in the BladeRunners trades training program
- 16 units, also priced at the shelter rate, are designated for women transitioning out of emergency or transitional housing facilities operated by The Bloom Group and YWCA Crabtree Corner



**Powell Place / Santiago Lodge –
Shared Courtyard
(329/333 Powell Street)**

Powell Place provides emergency shelter for women in crisis while supporting them to foster their independence, enhance their skills, and find and remain in permanent housing. The facility allows for integrated community services on site, offering accessible and individualized supports for women in crisis. In 2015 it doubled its occupancy from 26 beds to 52.

In addition to funding from all three levels of government, the 2015 Capital Campaign, led by Cindy Beedie, raised over \$1.2 million to assist with the renovation.

At Santiago Lodge, 25 residents live more independently with access to an on-site licensed practical nurse and a variety of community supports that promote health, recovery, social inclusion, and independence. The programming in Santiago includes:

- one-bedrooms or studios with kitchenettes and bathrooms
- common lounge areas and common laundry facilities
- full-time licensed practical nurse (LPN)
- organized group activities
- “worker program” that provides monthly allowance for residents that choose to assist with building upkeep or help lead group activities



- 1 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York: The Viking Press, 1939.
- 2 Baxter, E. and Harper, K., *Private Lives/Public Spaces: Homeless Adults on the Streets of New York City*, New York: Community Service Society of New York, 1981.



or the DTES, but rather are a result of past policies, actions and inactions, and a great lack of awareness of impact. People, at their core, have a need to create, a need to work, a need to be active participants in their communities and to be able to utilize homes as a form of security, as a base to grow and to prosper. Steinbeck writes:

Results, not causes; results, not causes. The causes lie deep and simply—the causes are a hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for joy and some security, multiplied a million times; muscles and mind aching to grow, to work, to create, multiplied a million times. The last clear definite function of man—muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need—this is man.

Every day I walk around the community where I work, by Oppenheimer Park, through our alleys, over needles and beside soup lines. Every day I see the people of this community, here as a result of fundamental flaws, complex and symptomatic, and I think, “Muscles aching to work, minds aching to create,” to a point where it has become a mantra. I can’t speak for everyone in this industry, but I imagine most come to work wanting to help facilitate that change.

BEYOND THE STATUS QUO

When it comes time to support this community through development efforts, the needs of the community, which are without doubt complex, need to be understood. Past efforts and current housing have, until very recently, been reactive and, as demonstrated in countless news items and bylines, not entirely effective.

In 1981, two anthropologists, Ellen Baxter and Kia Harper, captured the plight of the homeless population living in New York City in *Private Lives/Public Spaces: Homeless Adults on the Streets of New York City*,² calling then for comprehensive policy change:

The problem of homelessness has reached such extraordinary proportions in recent years that it can no longer be dealt with in piecemeal fashion. A comprehensive, well-integrated policy is desperately needed, one that will insist upon the joint responsibilities of city, state, and voluntary agencies and recognize that coordinated action by mental health and social service departments is essential. For mentally disabled individuals on the street, the distinction between clinical and survival needs has long lost any meaning.

What was true for New York City in 1981 is echoed in Vancouver in 2019. We still have homeless individuals living in the tents of Oppenheimer Park, looking for food in dumpsters in our alleys and sleeping over commercial exhaust outlets simply trying to stay warm. The loss of dignity that was sensed by Somerville in 1955 in Vancouver had already been identified by Steinbeck in 1939, in his fictional representation of migrant workers in the Great Depression—and it continues today. I can see why some people think that this issue will be too hard to solve, but these are the challenges that should unite people in our industry and in our communities. The status quo is not enough.

Fortunately, we are in a time when all levels of government—municipal, provincial, and federal—have come to the table to help. We have seen joint provincial and municipal projects like temporary modular housing for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The Province (through BC Housing) has committed to help build supportive housing, Indigenous housing (both on- and off-reserve) and increase the number of units for other targeted populations, such as women fleeing violence, while increasing the supply of affordable units in the market through partnerships with non-profits and private sector developers alike. At the federal level, CMHC



is aiming to create housing options for all by 2030—an ambitious goal.

While all of these plans are welcome, I worry about the lack of capacity within our industry to deliver on these promises. I worry that housing problems that have, for decades, been left more or less unattended—but for the grace of community organizations—can now be rapidly changed and solved overnight. Homeless communities like those at Skid Row in Los Angeles, or in and around Oppenheimer Park and the DTES, did not occur rapidly. Like any community, they grew out of the results of policy, the results of industrial growth, and, far more often than not, the results of personal and historical traumas, leading in many cases to self-medication, harm, addictions, educational and developmental challenges, and low employment. These are not easy problems. Bold ambitions will require equally bold and understandable policies.

I have looked at attempts to address these issues, and one of the plans that struck me and may have played a role in leading me into the community service industry was the Kettle-Boffo project in East Vancouver. At its core, this was a partnership between a non-profit community group, The Kettle Society, and Boffo Properties. While the concept wasn't successful and did not move beyond the planning stages for a number of reasons, the fact that the groups were able to work together, for so long, under a common goal to provide additional supported housing units within a privately built development, is amazing. Far too often the real value provided by non-profits and charities—such as Kettle, or groups like ours, among countless others in communities throughout BC—is never fully recognized.

DEVELOPMENT AS INTERVENTION

Community groups like The Bloom Group grew out of recognizing that there is an absolute gap in our system where people need support. Without this support, the costs are enormous for those suffering and for society at large. Vancouver has its ever-present first responders being called out for overdoses, police tasked with cleaning up parks, hospital beds utilized as ad-hoc housing, all at exorbitant rates because there are simply not enough spaces and supports.

Speaking of economics, Bloom is beginning to look at housing and services as an intervention and tying the costs saved by the creation of a development as line items in proformas. Some calculations have been done to evaluate the “social return on investment” (SROI), which is a general metric trying to show how investment in community has ratios of returns, but its methodology hasn't necessarily been transparent nor has it been

adopted by the decision-makers or funding bodies it was targeted to affect. When properly implemented and supported, social service organizations can and do reduce the burden on cities: We reduce call-outs to first responders, we reduce stays in hospital beds, and we even facilitate training and employment and see successes, however small at first, of individuals rising beyond their conditions. When properly supported, we reduce some of the financial burden that would otherwise be borne across the system. In effect, we are the community amenity contribution (CAC) and I will welcome any partner who wants to make that argument with us and effect positive change.

Real estate developers must understand that the housing we create will help enable people to meet their core needs—to facilitate their need to work, nurture the sense of creation, and support those efforts. This could and should include looking closely at the planning and policies from over a long period of time and learning from them. Cities are slowly moving toward recognizing the enabling nature of housing, but the process is long, arduous, and sometimes doesn't even involve consulting with the community groups that, through their years of knowledge and application, can best deliver those services.

Development projects from social service organizations like Bloom aren't dissimilar from for-profit development and should rely on similar fundamentals. Where a for-profit market relies on absorption rates, construction costs, and returns on equity, non-profits are driven by service delivery, support, and impact. Our economic returns have not traditionally been measured at their source, and more often than not, the greatest social returns are not in what we produce, but what we prevent. Traditional social service metrics have been qualitative, and Bloom is reaching to better quantify these positive impacts. Impacts to communities and to individuals by offering stability, dignity, and meeting core needs. Impacts to the economy by reducing costs and facilitating employment and training. Again, we are the community amenity contribution.

Understanding the needs of the community creates a clear and necessary path to creating change. When embarking on projects that acknowledge community needs, changing and clarifying policies and quantifying the value of these projects is critical to ensure that the right change and right approaches are taken. While non-profits do not see development projects as products, a social development project should, fundamentally, define the positive effects it produces for communities.

Photos by The Bloom Group.