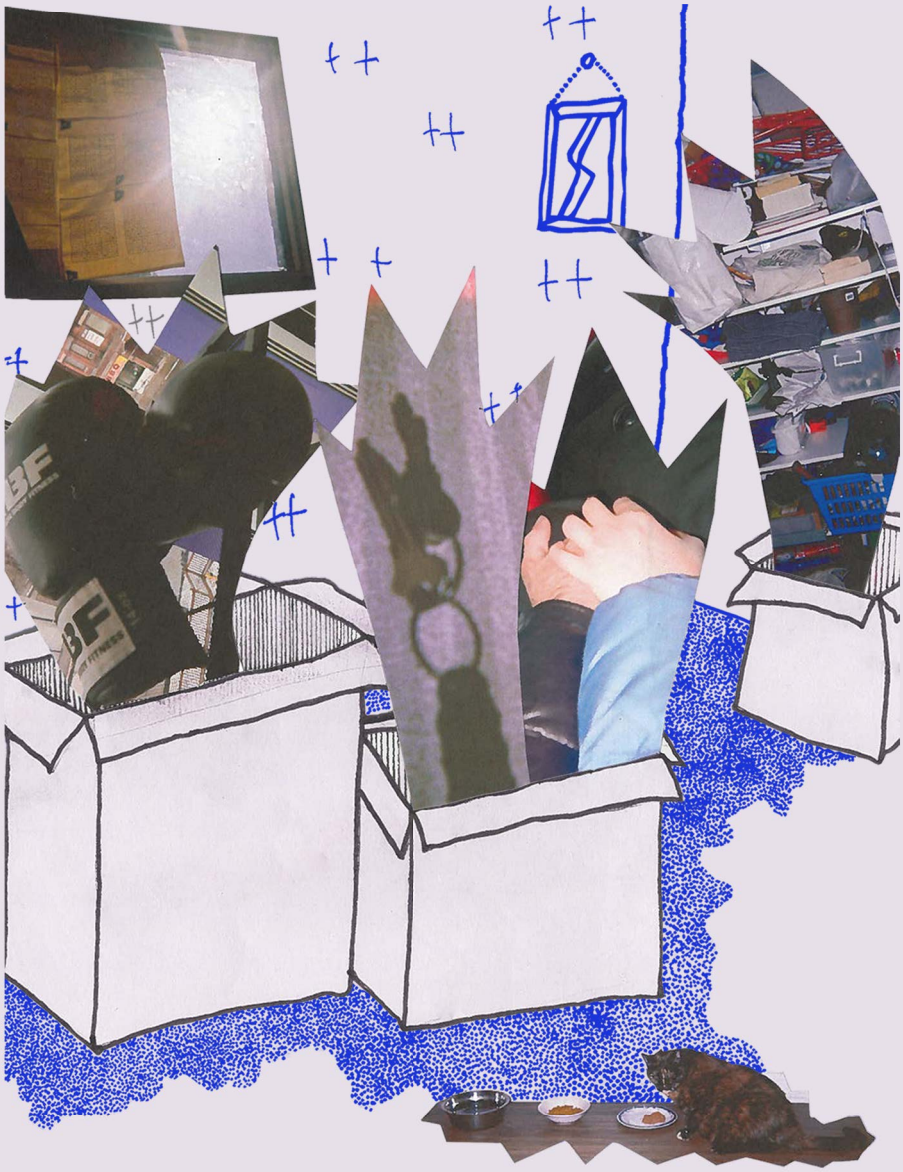
Architecture + Homelessness

Research on Living Environments and Their Design



Design catalogue

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ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT BORDERS QUEBEC

Land acknowledgment

The research and writing for this publication were carried out in Tio'tià:ke/Montreal, the ancestral territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation of Kahnawà:ke and Kanehsatà:ke.

Tiohtià:ke has long been a gathering place, a site of encounters and exchanges between First Nations. ASFQ acknowledges these nations, who have never ceded their rights to the land.

We recognize that architecture and planning are mobilized in the ongoing processes of colonization, both on Turtle Island and elsewhere. We also wish to highlight the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in situations of homelessness, and to recognize colonization as its root cause.

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Financial partner

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About us

Architecture Without Borders Quebec (AWBQ) is a community organization based in Montreal that supports populations affected by crises, natural disasters, or social inequalities, in order to promote access to a quality built environment for all.

It works with communities to strengthen their capacities by engaging the field of architecture. Founded in 2008 by the Ordre des architectes du Québec (OAQ), ASFQ promotes the social responsibility of architects through its activities.

Urban solidarity

The **Architecture + Homelessness** research project is part of AWBQ's Urban Solidarity program. In addition to its research component, this program includes a design support service where architectural expertise is mobilized to assist communities experiencing precarity, including people experiencing homelessness.

AWBQ maintains that the architecture of our living environments has an important role to play in improving living conditions and reducing social inequalities.

ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT BORDERS QUEBEC

Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the invaluable contribution of Élène Levasseur, Research Director at AWBQ, who played a key role in shaping and developing the project.

The team also wishes to express its deep gratitude to all those who took part in this research — partner organizations, project managers, architects, and residents — for their generosity, their time, their experiences, and their knowledge.

For more information :

Website: **https://www.asf-quebec.org/a-propos/**

Programs: **https://www.asf-quebec.org/nos-programmes/solidarite-urbaine**

Research partners

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Preface

Introduction

Goal

This guide compiles insights from a research program conducted by the Urban Solidarity team at Architecture Without Borders Quebec (AWBQ) and the School of Social Work at Université de Montréal between 2023 and 2025. Titled Inclusive and Supportive Design Practices for People Experiencing Homelessness, this research program aims to deepen knowledge related to the needs and aspirations of people with lived experience of homelessness in relation to their environment. It builds upon the 2022 catalogue Architecture + Homelessness: Inclusive Practices for a Supportive City, which presented an initial overview of architectural approaches addressing homelessness. This report presents:

- A nuanced understanding of the needs and aspirations of people living in transitional or permanent housing with community support in Canada.
- An overview of social intervention practices related to these environments.
- An evaluation of the impacts and successes of architectural practices—at the neighbourhood, building, and housing unit scale—on residents' well-being.
- A critical perspective on design and architectural processes, informed by the lived experience of planning professionals, social workers, and people with lived experience of homelessness.
- Key design strategies, illustrated with diagrams, to create living environments better adapted to the realities of those affected.

Context

A Portrait of Homelessness in Canada

According to data from the Canadian Housing Survey (2022), 12.1% of households reported having experienced homelessness, in one form or another, at some point in their lives (Espinoza & Randle, 2025). In Ontario, more than 80,000 people were experiencing homelessness in 2024, marking an increase of over 25% compared to 2022 (AMO, 2025). Following the most recent Quebec homelessness count conducted in the fall of 2022, it was revealed that visible homelessness increased by 44% over a four-year period in Quebec (MSSS, 2023). Added to this is invisible homelessness—such as living with friends or family, in a car, or in unsanitary housing—which remains difficult to calculate (MacDonald, 2024; Gravel, 2020). Homelessness encompasses a variety of situations and lived experiences of individuals whose vulnerability is heightened by current political and economic contexts. This alarming picture is partly explained by the cascading effects of the housing, financial, climate, health, and migration crises, which have become much more visible since the COVID-19 pandemic (MSSS, 2022; Bellot, 2020).

Housing instability is a key factor in most paths to homelessness; however, homelessness is not just about a lack of housing. Our first catalogue, Architecture + Homelessness, showcased the diverse experiences, timelines, and manifestations of homelessness. These complexities are often not fully captured by current institutional and academic definitions (Grimard et al., 2023, pp. 6–10). The social, structural, institutional, and interpersonal challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness (PEH) are numerous, overlapping, and not limited to the loss of a domicile (Grimard 2018; Rose & Hurtubise 2018; Parazelli 2021). In this second publication, we have chosen to approach homelessness through the lens of the relationship to dwelling, a concept as diverse as the experience itself—considering both its structural and experiential dimensions.

Housing crisis

Despite the adoption of the first National Housing Strategy (NHS) in 2017, the loss of affordable housing in Canada continues at a faster pace than its production (FRAPRU, 2024; National Housing Council, 2023). Public disinvestment in social housing, combined with growing real estate speculation and gentrification, has led to a surge in evictions and a marked rise in rents, exacerbating the precarity of many households (Reiser, 2020; Gaudreau, 2022).

One of the aggravating factors is the "Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY) attitude adopted by various actors, which constitutes a significant barrier to the establishment of services and social housing for PEH. According to a study by Loison-Leruste (2014), residents living near shelters often express feelings of insecurity, citing visual, olfactory, and noise-related nuisances, as well as concerns about neighbourhood reputation and property values.

Montreal is not exempt from this phenomenon, with citizens filing legal complaints to close or prevent the opening of shelters in central neighbourhoods (Teisceira-Lessard, 2024; Plante, 2024). NIMBY pressures have also contributed to the introduction of a new bill in Ontario, which now restricts the establishment of supervised injection sites within 200 metres of a school (Bill 223, Safer Streets, Stronger Communities Act, 2024). These urban planning principles embody a type of residential exclusivity.

Residential exclusivity refers to a form of spatial segregation driven by the desire of wealthier classes to live only among themselves. It stands in tension with policies promoting social mix (Tendil, 2023; Teller, 2010). These dynamics all contribute to urban gentrification, often pushing the poorest populations out of desirable neighbourhoods and areas. Whether through gentrification, NIMBYism, or residential exclusivity, the effect is usually the same: a discriminatory process that seeks to distance so-called undesirable populations.

Inhabiting public space

Space—whether private or public, indoors or outdoors—is often difficult to access for people experiencing homelessness. Their presence in outdoor spaces is frequently perceived as undesirable, generating tension and prompting coercive interventions. PEH are often displaced or criminalized under the pretext of health and public safety concerns (Herring, 2019; Margier, 2021). In Montreal, incidents related to "social problems" such as homelessness, substance use, and mental health in public spaces have been reported nearly 25 times more frequently this year compared to the period before the pandemic, according to calls to the 311 service (Lebel and Cambron Goulet, 2024). Parazelli (2021) argues that current economic pressures are disrupting our relationships with people experiencing homelessness, whose ways of occupying public space are increasingly viewed as unacceptable, inappropriate, threatening or potentially dangerous.

PEH adapt public spaces to meet their needs by reproducing domestic practices (such as sleeping, washing, urinating and cooking) and moving across various urban scales to fulfill their daily subsistence needs (Parker, 2021; Bergamaschi et al., 2014; Langegger and Koester, 2016). Several intersecting factors are pushing people to live in public spaces or urban encampments, including the housing crisis, lack of resources in the community and public sectors, difficulties in establishing services, and services that are poorly adapted to the needs of those they aim to support. Changes to dwelling forms are often met with criticism, leading to fines (Bellot et al., 2021) or, in worst cases, resulting in displacement, harassment, assault, and criminalization.Even when

Housing is not enough

individuals experiencing homelessness are accepted and supported within indoor environments, their presence frequently generates opposition from community members.

As a result, shelters and services aimed at addressing their needs often encounter significant challenges in establishing and maintaining operations. A cyclical pattern has emerged over many years: due to the lack of suitable indoor spaces, people are forced into public spaces; once expelled from there, they are confined again to the very same places. As a result, many individuals with lived experience of homelessness testify that they get "kicked out of outside," illustrating the denial of their right to housing, to the city and to public space (Collectif Dehors de Dehors, 2025).

The growing visibility of people experiencing homelessness and the exacerbation of their vulnerability in public spaces are putting pressure on various levels of government to find solutions. In response, governments are seeking quick strategies to address the situation, both in terms of social intervention and design practices.

One example is the over-representation of the Housing First program among a range of intervention strategies aimed at getting people off the streets. While this approach has helped improve housing stability for some individuals, it has proven less effective for others, particularly due to a housing supply that remains largely inaccessible and unsuitable, especially for people experiencing chronic homelessness (Gaudreau, 2022).

In cities where housing crises have persisted for decades, it is even more crucial to develop a diverse range of services, along with a broad spectrum of housing types tailored to different profiles and needs.

Community support is vital for effectively implementing housing solutions for individuals with lived experience of homelessness, regardless of the program's name or funding sources. While it helps ensure housing stability and prevent future homelessness, it may not be enough to tackle all difficult situations (Gaetz and Dej, 2017).

Quality and Well-Adapted Environments

This research was carried out to understand the needs of people experiencing homelessness in relation to their living environments. By considering the needs expressed by these individuals and conducting a critical analysis of design and planning practices, we were able to gain a clearer understanding of how people inhabit spaces. This approach helped us recognize how a sense of well-being can develop among communities that often lack access to adequate environments and whose voices are seldom heard in these discussions.

To define these needs, we examined the relationship between the environments in which people live and the potential for a sense of well-being to emerge within them. Individual well-being is expressed not only through the satisfaction of various needs—such as health, interpersonal relationships, and engagement in meaningful activities (including work, leisure, and daily routines)—but also in relation to different aspects of the physical environment (Poortinga, Steg & Vlek, 2004). These needs vary from one country to another, as they are socially and culturally constructed (Moser, 2009).

Historically, the discipline of architecture has often been mobilized as a tool of control and surveillance, contributing to the institutionalization of PEH. This is particularly evident in the design of public spaces according to the principles of "defensible space" (Newman, 1972), as well as in the construction of institutions such as prisons, shelters, youth centres or psychiatric hospitals. Conversely, architecture is rarely called upon in the creation of less oppressive environments, such as emergency shelters, day centres or certain types of supervised housing. However, the literature review that led to our first catalogue suggests that architecture can play a role in designing quality environments for people experiencing homelessness, with the potential to positively impact their well-being (Grimard et al., 2023).

In response to the urgency of the current situation and political pressures, projects such as tiny homes, modular housing or hotel conversions are being promoted as solutions to homelessness and the housing crisis in Canada. Presented as innovative initiatives, these large-scale, standardized and fast-tracked strategies are positioned as the primary response to the growing visibility of homelessness. But are these living environments truly adapted and sustainable? Do they allow individuals to improve their living conditions? Should speed and quantity be prioritized over quality? In this research, we argue for a diverse range of housing types. Our analysis is divided into three main sections, conducted with careful consideration of our social, political, and economic context:

- Post-Occupancy Evaluations (PART A)
- Design Process and Research-Creation (PART B)
- Recommendations (PART C)

Research statement

A+H Design Catalogue

In 2022, the interdisciplinary team from AWBQ and Université de Montréal's School of Social Work conducted a literature review on homelessness and the built environment. As mentioned earlier, the findings were published in the Architecture + Homelessness catalogue (Grimard et al., 2023), which compiles over sixty design practices illustrated through a variety of inspiring projects. The practices in the catalogue are organized into five action areas, covering scales from urban to object.

- Recognize the right to public space
- Facilitate social cohabitation
- Design inclusive spaces
- Set up a safe haven
- Support self-determination

The limitations encountered in the available academic literature underscore the need to develop specific research themes—for example, the unique needs of certain populations, the design of public spaces and rapid construction methods (such as modular or prefabricated). These blind spots helped shape the development of the subsequent research program, presented in the following sections of this report.

Definitions

Well-being
Well-being for an individual relates to the alignment between their satisfaction and aspirations, as well as the objective conditions of their environment (Moser, 2009). Individual satisfaction depends on the specific needs and desires of each person or community. To better understand well-being in light of this definition, we drew on Max-Neef's categorization of fundamental needs, which we explain in **Classification of Needs - PART B**.

Design Practices
Design practices, according to the Architecture + Homelessness catalogue (Grimard et al., 2023), include all actions taken to modify the built environment, whether through a consultation process, legislation, programming, creation, construction or informal appropriation.

Objectives

Between 2023 and 2025, the team carried out a three-part research program: (1) post-occupancy evaluations; (2) experience-based feedback; and (3) research-creation.

The overarching goal was to improve and share knowledge about design practices that promote the well-being of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Specific objectives

- Develop a better understanding of the unique needs and aspirations of residents living in emergency, transitional or permanent housing in relation to their environment.
- Evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of architectural practices on residents, focusing on three projects designed for PEH.
- Document the successes and challenges of the design process for these projects.
- Identify key design practices and strategies to meet the needs and aspirations of residents.
- Raise awareness and inform diverse audiences about the multiple experiences of people living through or at risk of homelessness.
- Value the knowledge that comes from lived experience of homelessness, social work practice and architectural practice.

Method : Post-occupancy Evaluation

Methods

To better understand residents' needs in relation to their built environment, the research team conducted a series of post-occupancy evaluations of transitional and permanent housing in Canada. In the design and planning disciplines, the post-occupancy evaluation (POE) method is defined as a process for assessing the quality of a space's design and construction after it has been built and occupied for a certain period (Hay et al., 2018). This approach enables the examination of various aspects, including space planning, energy consumption, indoor environmental quality, maintenance and occupancy costs, as well as the comfort and satisfaction of residents with their environment.

There are several ways to conduct a POE. In our approach, we specifically chose to treat POEs as case studies. A case study is a qualitative research method that allows for an in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon within its real-world context (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2021). When applied to a post-occupancy evaluation, it offers a detailed perspective on how a building is used and perceived after its construction and occupation. POEs contribute not only to the improvement of the services provided but also to influencing future practices. They also serve to demonstrate the benefits of investing in high-quality design that is adapted to residents' needs. Although the literature widely recognizes their tangible value for residents, clients and architects (Preiser, 1988), POEs remain relatively rare in practice. In this report, the term "POE" refers to the methodology, while "case study" refers more specifically to the buildings examined.

As part of the POE process, the research team collected data through experience-based feedback (EBF), field observations and analysis of architectural drawings, as described below. A certificate from the Université de Montréal confirms ethical standards were upheld throughout this research.

Spatial Analysis and Observations

The team utilized architectural drawings to examine the physical characteristics of the buildings, including their dimensions, openings and materials. They gathered information related to the buildings' programming, which involves the functions and organization of different spaces, and analyzed the site context, considering historical transformations, the relationship to the city, and nearby services. Additionally, the team recorded observations made on-site to assess signs of use and appropriation of space, aiming to gain a better understanding of how these spaces were being utilized (Zeisel, 1984). The team also documented elements such as furniture placement, signs of personalization and the physical condition (worn, damaged) of certain features.

Experience-based feedback (EBF)

- Residents and/or Occupants

To gather residents' testimonies about their experiences of space and the meanings they attribute to it, the photovoice technique was used. Photovoice is a method in which the interview is centred around photographs taken by participants to facilitate the expression of their lived experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants used this exercise to document their residential needs and aspirations (in a broad sense), as well as the extent to which their environment aligns with those needs and aspirations.

Twenty research participants received a disposable camera along with a question guide to help structure the process. The photos were developed and then used to support and illustrate participants' reflections during individual interviews. The interviews were conducted in French and English—only one interview was conducted in another language (Farsi), with the assistance of a translator.

- Staff Members and Design Professionals

In addition to the twenty interviews conducted with residents, approximately ten semi-structured interviews were carried out with staff members working within the housing projects, as well as design professionals who contributed to their development. For staff, these interviews helped identify how the built environment either facilitates or hinders their daily tasks and how it contributes to—or helps prevent—conflicts among different residents in the building. For architects and planners, the conversations served to document the successes and challenges of the design process, as well as to identify key design practices and strategies to prioritize.

Data Analysis

Based on the data collected through the post-occupancy evaluations, two types of analysis were conducted to make sense of the large volume of information gathered:

- Spatial Analysis:

Architectural drawings and observation grids informed a spatial analysis of the sites, focusing on the coherence between programming and use of space, integration into the urban context, spatial quality, presence of informal uses, post-occupancy modifications and more.

- Thematic Analysis:

Interview transcripts with residents, architects and social work professionals were coded using the qualitative software NVivo to identify themes related to the needs and aspirations of residents, based on the lived experiences of the different groups involved.

The two analytical approaches were cross-referenced to identify lessons learned for each case study. A subsequent discussion highlights connections across the different cases, leading to the emergence of key design strategies, social intervention practices and insights into design processes.

Complementary activites

While this research largely followed a conventional fieldwork framework (based on the methods described above), it was also shaped by a variety of complementary activities: AWBQ's design and planning service, the launch of a community of practice and a research-creation component. The lessons learned from these various activities will be discussed in **PART B** of this report.

Co-creation processes

- Design and Planning Service

Between 2021 and 2024, the Urban Solidarity team undertook several design and co-creation projects in collaboration with various community organizations that support individuals experiencing homelessness or precarity. These field experiences helped develop practices and tools specifically tailored to the realities of the grassroots and community organization sector. The team observed that working with communities that have limited access to design services impacts how projects are presented, how clients are mobilized and how concepts are translated.

- Community of Practice

The team also established an intersectoral and inter-organizational community of practice to document and exchange ideas about the design processes involved in such projects (2024). People from diverse backgrounds (design, architecture, community work, research and lived experience of homelessness) met monthly for a year to reflect collectively on ways to include PEH in design processes and approaches.

FIGURE A | WORK DAY, TLACHIUAK ART COOP
© ASFQ, 2025

Research-creation

As part of the research program, a research-creation component was implemented to make visible and value the knowledge that arises from the lived experience of homelessness, extending beyond academic settings. Research-creation is a methodological approach that combines academic research with artistic or creative practice. It is often used in fields such as the arts, architecture, design and the humanities to explore theoretical and practical issues through creative processes (Poissant, 2000).

Activities in this component led to the creation of an exhibition titled (In) visible: Design through the Prism of Homelessness, presented at the UQAM Design Centre in May—June 2024. As part of the exhibition, participatory design workshops were conducted in collaboration with several partner collectives and organizations. Under the theme of "inhabiting," participants' reflections were expressed through artifacts combining collages, drawings, models, photos and installations. An exhibition catalogue documents the artifacts and processes that led to (In) visible: Design through the Prism of Homelessness.

FIGURE B | EXHIBITION (IN)VISIBLE POSTER
© LUIS TREPANIER, 2024

PART A

Post-Occupancy Evaluations

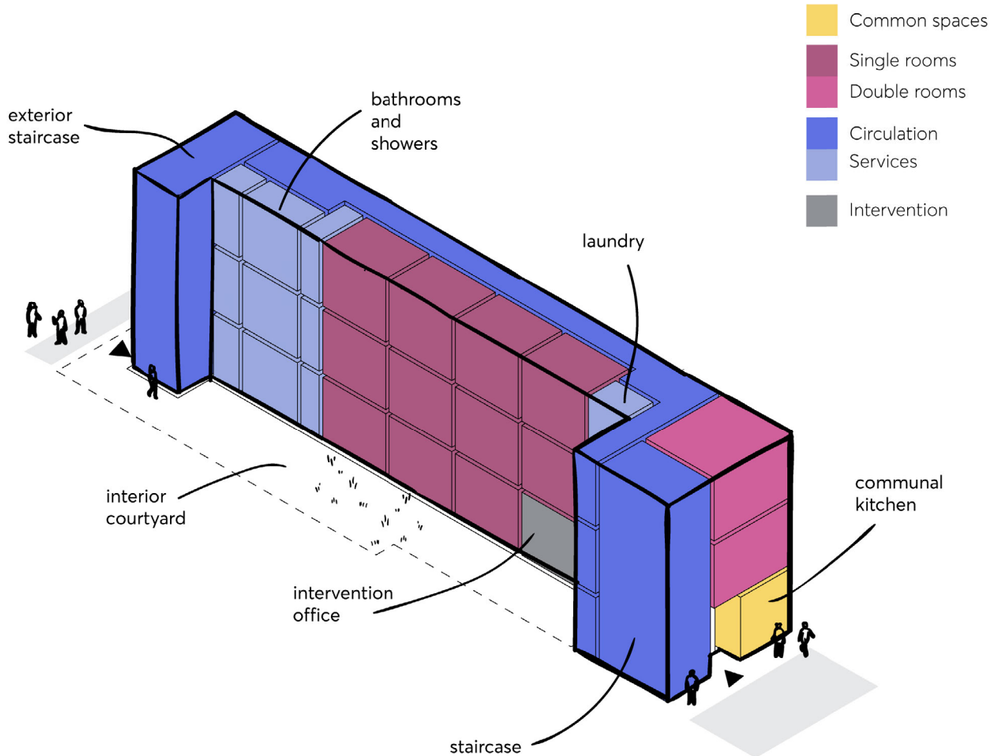
Case Study Description

Selection Criteria

The selected projects were pre-identified following an in-depth review of the literature (see Architecture + Homelessness: Inclusive Practices for a Supportive City, Grimard et al., 2023). These projects illustrate practices considered to be supportive, both socio-economically and spatially, due to their potential to foster, among other things, recognition in public space, social cohabitation, the physical and psychological well-being of residents and their self-determination.

For ethical reasons, the study sites are identified by number (Case Study #1; Case Study #2 A-B; Case Study #3). However, they are briefly described to provide readers sufficient context to understand the analysis while maintaining a degree of anonymity. To ensure data accessibility and availability, all selected case studies are located in Canada. Project selection was guided by the identification of gaps in the literature (for example, underrepresented communities, lesser-explored architectural typologies or innovative models) and the desire to study living environments considered "unique"—that is, contexts so specific that they warrant particular attention (Barlartier, 2018). The case studies adopt an intrinsic approach, focusing on a deep understanding of the observed phenomena rather than aiming to produce generalizations (Stake, 1995).

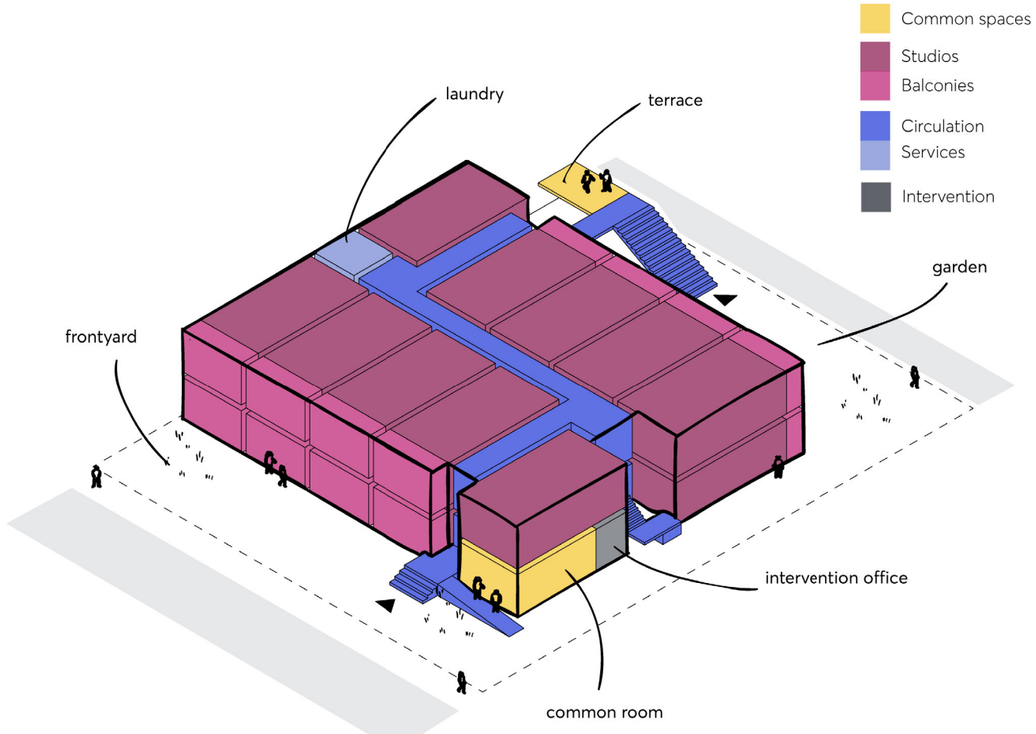
The research focused on three community organizations which operate four transitional, permanent, and/or supportive housing projects located in major Canadian cities. In this section, each case study is briefly described. Below each case study, key concepts in design (DE) and social work (SW) relevant to the analysis are indicated **Summary of Findings**.



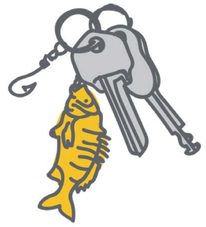
Case Study #1

The first case study is a **rooming house** with community support located in a central neighbourhood adjacent to the downtown area of a large Canadian city. The house has 14 rooms intended for people who have experienced chronic homelessness. The building was designed to accommodate couples, single individuals and pets. The facility deals with issues related to the use of inhaled and injected drugs, mental health and hoarding. The layout of the rooming house in the triplex was revised to accommodate more residents.

- DE 1: Rooming house
- DE 3: Repurposing existing buildings
- DE 4: Trauma-informed design
- SW 1: Community support
- SW 2: Harm reduction
- SW 4: Outreach intervention
- SW 6: High tolerance threshold

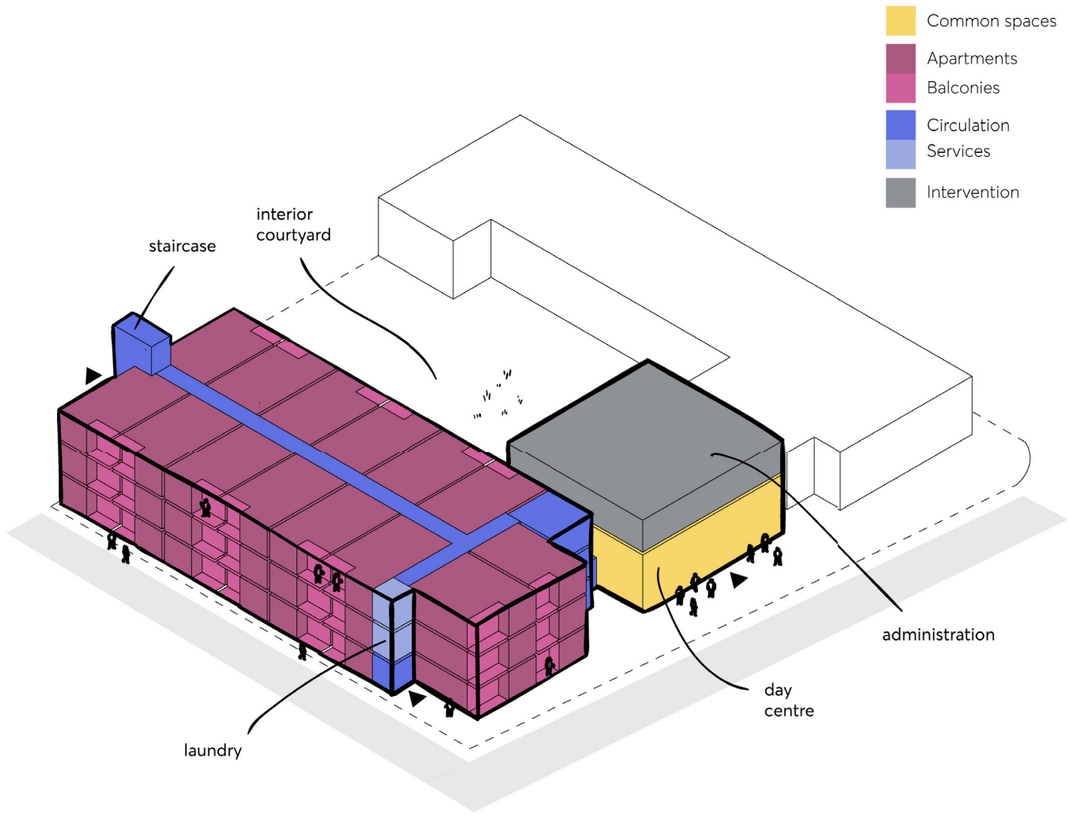


Case Study #2 — A

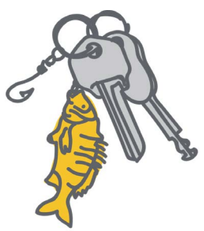


This building features 19 studios spread across two floors and is designed for older adults who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity. It is a **rapid (18 months), modular and prefabricated construction** located in an outlying neighbourhood of a large city, in an area where the managing organization already provides services, notably through a nearby day centre. This is a long-term housing building with leases and support services.

- DE 2: Modular construction
- SW 1: Community support
- SW 4: Outreach intervention
- SW 5: Fiduciary/Trust services

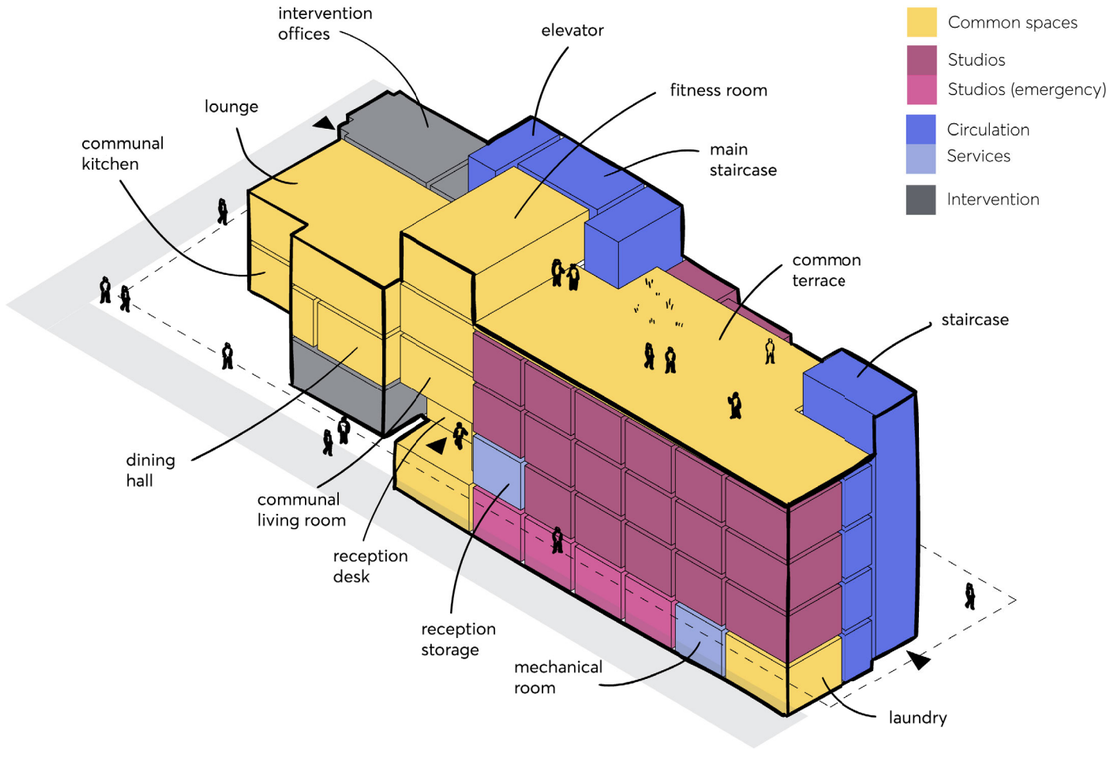


Case Study #2—B



This building contains 40 apartments (one-bedroom units) for older adults who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity. These apartments are attached to a day centre located in a historic building. It is a **long-term housing facility with community support**, managed by the same community organization as the project described in the previous paragraph.

- DE 3: Repurposing existing buildings
- SW 1: Community support
- SW 2: Harm Reduction
- SW 4: Outreach intervention
- SW 5: Fiduciary/Trust services



Case Study #3

This project includes 29 rooms considered as **supervised transitional housing** and four rooms in a short- to medium-term emergency shelter. The house is intended for youth (ages 14–29) belonging to 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. There are few housing options for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth experiencing homelessness in Canada, despite their significant over-representation among young PEH. Incorporating trauma-informed design principles, the house is a requalification of a historic home dating from 1870 and an apartment building from the 1970s. The design process was carried out in co-creation with future residents.

- DE 3: Repurposing existing buildings
- DE 4: Trauma-informed design
- DE 5: Queer architecture
- SW 1: Community support
- SW 3: Trauma-informed care
- SW 4: Outreach intervention
- SW 5: Fiduciary/Trust services

Residents' Needs and Aspirations: Key Findings

Conceptual framework

According to Moser's (2009) definition, well-being corresponds to the alignment between individual satisfaction and reported aspirations related to the environment, as well as the objective conditions of that environment. Satisfaction depends on the specific needs and aspirations of each individual or community.

The case studies carried out initially made it possible to identify the residents' specific needs and aspirations through spatial observations, photovoice workshops, and interviews.

These findings provided a foundation for examining design and intervention practices to determine how well they aligned with the identified needs. To classify these needs, we utilized the theoretical model developed by Max-Neef (1991). This model proposes a non-hierarchical approach to social needs, emphasizing that each need is interconnected and works in synergy with the others. It highlights the relational dynamics between needs and considers them as drivers of action and transformation. The model distinguishes nine categories:

Classification of needs

- Subsistence: Refers to physical and mental health and includes everything related to the satisfaction of basic needs, comfort, accessibility, and the reduction of environmental stressors.
- Protection: Encompasses elements that contribute to a sense of safety, whether related to the physical space or the social environment.
- Affection: Includes elements that foster individuals' attachment to the places they live in, at various scales (housing unit, building, neighbourhood). This attachment is based on both physical aspects (the layout of spaces) and social dimensions (relationships with those who use the space).
- Identity: Refers to how a place contributes to individuals' social identity, whether through a sense of belonging to a group or through the social recognition associated with the spaces they frequent.
- Understanding: Denotes access to information and knowledge that enables individuals to orient themselves, understand their material and social environments, and interact with them in an informed manner.
- Participation: Encompasses factors that influence individuals' ability to engage in collective life, play an active role in their community and contribute to decisions that affect them.
- Leisure: Includes opportunities and designated areas for rest, relaxation, and recreational activities, which are essential to physical and mental well-being.
- Creation: Refers to the possibility of expressing one's creativity, shaping the environment and developing new ideas or initiatives.
- Freedom (Self-determination): Relates to everything that influences individuals' ability to make choices, exercise control over their lives, and act according to their values and aspirations.

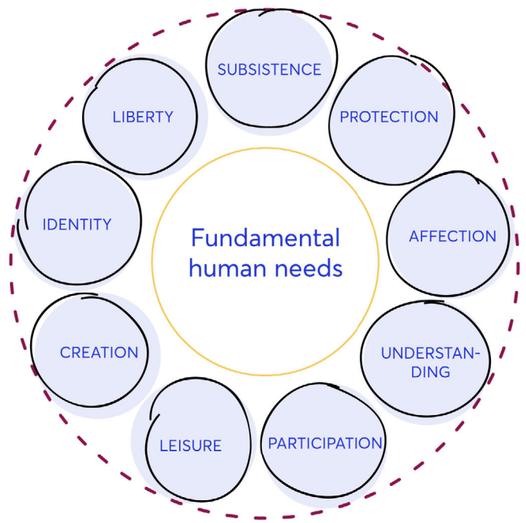


FIGURE C | MAX-NEEF'S FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS

Considering our initial research question, the needs that emerged most prominently throughout the study were those related to subsistence, protection, affection and freedom (understood as self-determination). In contrast, the needs related to understanding, participation and creation were expressed more subtly. This could be partly due to the research methods used, but it might also indicate existing tensions or hierarchies among different needs.

Notably, identity-related needs were seldom mentioned and may have been entirely overlooked, which raises questions about their implicit or marginalized role in the participants' lived experiences. Some hypotheses regarding this issue will be proposed in the **Summary of Findings** section.

Case Study #1

The first case is a rooming house with community support located in a central neighbourhood adjacent to the downtown core. The house contains 14 rooms intended for individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness. The building was designed to accommodate couples, single individuals and pets. The facility addresses issues related to the use of inhaled and injected drugs, mental health and hoarding. The rooming house typology, located in a triplex with a commercial ground floor, was adapted to accommodate more residents.

1. Subsistence

The three main sub-themes characterizing the need for subsistence are accessibility, methods for meeting basic needs, and environmental stressors.

Accessibility

This project is one of Canada's housing resources with the highest threshold of tolerance regarding issues related to injectable and inhalable drug use, as well as other challenges such as hoarding and mental health. It offers housing access with community support for individuals who are typically excluded from different types of accommodation. The term "low-barrier services" is sometimes used interchangeably with "high threshold of acceptability," referring to the practice of welcoming individuals whose lifestyles may not align with expected norms, which can hinder their access to other housing options. In this case study, access to housing is not conditional on adopting a life plan or setting short-, medium-, or long-term goals. Social and community service workers are present on site, and each resident is free to choose the level of support they wish to receive. The facility also accepts couples and pets. Only three rules govern the space to minimize barriers to housing: paying rent, respecting roommates, and maintaining a clean room.

Meeting Basic Needs

Residents meet their needs (food, rent, substance use) in various ways. It is therefore essential that they can work safely, regardless of the type of employment they have. Residents appreciate the option to work on-site daily as an opportunity to earn money without the commitment required by regular salaried employment. For example, intervention workers delegate tasks such as cleaning and maintenance of buildings. It is also possible for residents to entrust their money to the support workers, which facilitates rent payment for many.

« In a way, we start from a basis of voluntariness for the residents who come into the rooming house. If you want to keep living your life the way you were before, but with a roof over your head, that's fine with us. Our role is to try to make sure it happens as safely as possible. Now, if you want to try changing certain things in your life, the support workers are on-site and can step in to help if you need them » —Intervention Worker

Environmental Stressors

Mental and physical health partly depend on access to a clean and functional living space where environmental stressors are minimized as much as possible. First, since the notion of cleanliness is subjective, we will emphasize the practicality and functionality of the facilities. For example, the toilets are often unusable because they are overused, poorly maintained and frequently occupied. Many people experiencing homelessness in the neighbourhood use the sanitary facilities located in Case Study #1. However, these facilities are not designed for such heavy use, and the high traffic causes significant tensions within the house. For various reasons, maintenance is a major issue. Beyond making better choices of materials and equipment, maintenance strategies should also be considered, such as providing daily job opportunities and an annual budget for repairs.

Environmental stressors are elements that can disrupt residents' well-being, such as thermal comfort, acoustic comfort, and the layout and sharing of common spaces. These common areas are often sources of conflict and places where power dynamics play out. This is notably why residents mention that they do not want more common spaces. The common areas provided are limited and utilitarian (kitchen and bathroom), but sufficient. Small meeting rooms had been planned on each floor with a specific intention, but these spaces never materialized and are now difficult to use due to the hoarding habits of several residents. Nonetheless, social and community service workers note the lack of common gathering spaces and believe that an additional lounge would allow for activities and social encounters involving several people, outside of bedrooms or hallways. Several suggest the creation of a supervised multipurpose room.

Soundproofing was also mentioned by many as an important aspect that limits the anxiety of feeling overheard and brings calm in a very high-activity environment where animals can make noise. Irritants change with the seasons. One support worker mentions that during winter, the most common irritant for tenants is the presence of non-residents seeking shelter from the cold. In summer, they note that strong odours are the most disturbing factor in the rooming house.

No storage was intentionally planned in the rooms to leave more space and freedom for residents to arrange their belongings as they see fit, thereby avoiding hoarding issues. There is no built-in furniture to prevent the accumulation of drug consumption materials. However, there is not enough space in the single rooms to store personal belongings.

There is a tension between the need for storage space and the severe hoarding problems faced by several people in the rooming house—more space often means more accumulation.

FIGURE 1.1 | BATHROOM PICTURES
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FIGURE 1.2 | PICTURES OF A ROOM
© ANONYMOUS, 2024

2. Protection

The need for protection was expressed through residents' desire for personal space, harm reduction measures, and a feeling of safety in the neighbourhood.

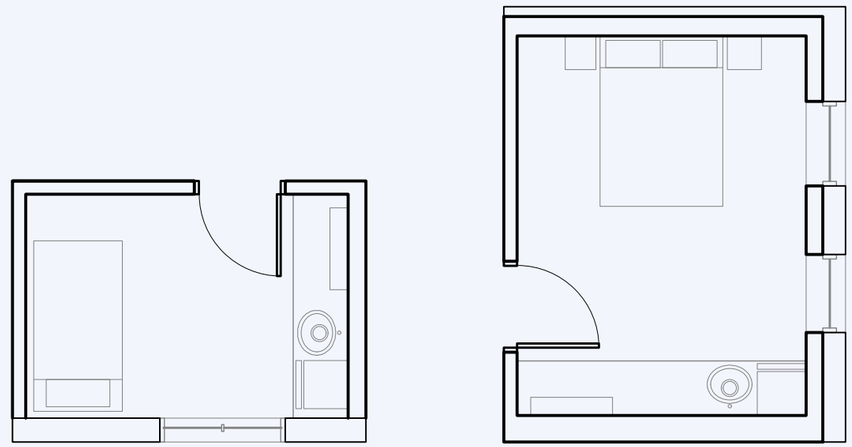
« Yeah, but I pay my own rent. It's not someone else paying my way or anything like that. I'm the one who pays, and that's that. So when I want to be alone, I can kick everyone out—and that's that (laughs). » —Resident

Personal Space

One resident mentioned that the feeling of being at home and feeling good in that space comes from having a personal area that belongs to them (because they pay rent), where they can decide who is allowed in, who must leave, and when. They have control over this environment, unlike the common and circulation areas in the rooming house. Residents' sense of safety is also influenced by interpersonal dynamics (between tenants, with non-residents and with support workers).

Instances of harassment, theft and physical violence have been reported. Some residents would like visits to be more regulated and wish that non-residents could not enter freely. A better access system at the back entrance could help prevent people without keys from coming in. Residents also emphasized the importance of securing the windows that face the backyard on the ground floor to prevent theft. Surveillance cameras are generally seen as contributing to a sense of safety, particularly during incidents involving non-residents. One resident noted that consistent rule enforcement is an important organizational factor, and that too much flexibility in applying the rules leads to feelings of injustice and mistrust.

On several occasions, the activities of certain *houses where people gather to use substances* have shifted into the rooming house. These houses are informal spaces where drug sellers and users gather to carry out transactions or consume substances out of public view. The systematic closure of these spaces in the neighbourhood puts heavy pressure on community organizations that support people using drugs, creates conflicts over the use of space, and forces together individuals who do not necessarily want to interact. A more proactive strategy to managing the impacts of these informal consumption spaces and their closures could better protect all individuals affected, including those within the rooming house.



case study #1 (simple room)

case study #1 (double room)

FIGURE 1.3 | ROOM PLANS

Two room sizes are available at the rooming house. Twelve 9m² single rooms, and two 14m² double rooms.

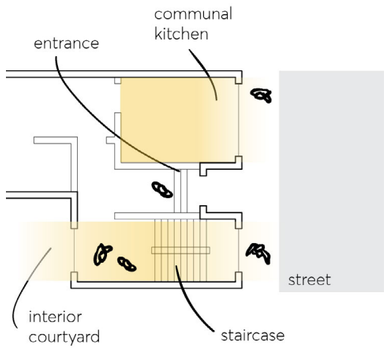
Harm Reduction

Methods that create a supportive environment for substance use can help minimize the risks associated with injectable and inhalable drug use. In this context, a clean and safe space promotes safer consumption practices. While "cleanliness" does not necessarily mean a sterile environment, having access to medical follow-up is essential for preventing and addressing health issues. Many individuals, however, are hesitant to seek help at hospitals due to experiences of discrimination and violence in those settings.

The weekly presence of nurses and social workers directly in the living environment allows residents to receive care and follow-up from health professionals.

Disposal bins for used consumption materials are available on each floor, and portable bins are distributed to residents. Social workers continue to raise awareness among people who use drugs about the importance of disposing of consumption equipment safely. Special attention has been given to ensuring that spaces are adapted for overdose interventions. For example, bathroom doors open outward to prevent them from being blocked by an unconscious person. Transparent windows in the kitchen and stairwell (areas that also face the courtyard) allow visibility in case someone is lying down and may need assistance. Residents and intervention workers are considering setting up a semi-supervised consumption room. However, there are already several tensions related to the rooming house being both a protected living environment for tenants and a space where many non-residents come to use substances. It is essential to evaluate the organization's ability to support such a space, taking into account the existing concerns raised by residents regarding the presence of non-residents in the house.

« So it opened to change things for people who use drugs—to make it so you don't have to be outside trying to do your hit, where you can get bacteria from anything. If you miss a hit, it can get to the point where you lose part of your body. There was someone who used to live here who now only has one leg. That happened since I got here. But just because we're indoors doesn't mean it's clean or sterile. » —Resident



On the street side of the rooming house, visibility extends through both the staircase and the shared kitchen. The upper part of the window is frosted to enhance privacy. This setup allows for peer monitoring of individuals who use substances.

FIGURE 1.4 | GROUND FLOOR PLAN

Feeling of Safety in the Neighbourhood

The project was initially conceived as a neighbourhood-based initiative embedded within a local ecosystem. According to this, the managers involved from the beginning were nearby organizations, health and social services, local police, business owners, and housed neighbours. They carried out awareness-raising efforts with the local police station to encourage more humane intervention practices, and the relationships built are appreciated by the support workers. The relationship with the fire department, particularly with the fire prevention officer, led to modifications in the alarm system to ensure fire safety without having to manage false alarms that would otherwise require firefighters to be dispatched. The organization also engaged with residents from the neighbourhood through exploratory walks and door-to-door outreach even before construction began. Time was taken to explain the project's goals transparently. The concerns of neighbours were taken into consideration during the project's implementation, and a direct line of communication was maintained throughout every stage.

Community outreach work aims to make the neighbourhood safer for everyone, whether people are housed or not. This type of intervention helps, among other things, with the disposal of used equipment, distribution of safe supplies, awareness-raising, conflict mediation, and more. Outreach workers emphasize the importance of providing bins for the disposal of used equipment in public spaces. Already present in several locations, such as behind pharmacies, in some metro stations, and at park pavilions, their setup and maintenance could be expanded.

Many residents interviewed believe that the safety of people experiencing homelessness and those who use drugs is often overlooked. They report facing stigma and discrimination from passersby and housed neighbours. They also report experiencing harassment and profiling by police officers. Residents believe that people who use drugs need protection from violence directed at them due to prejudices surrounding their substance use or economic situation.

« No, that's it. I'd say there's work to be done with them [the neighbours] and with citizens, to really show them that there's a communication channel that exists, one that's different from 911. We have specialized cohabitation workers who can come see them, talk with them, always validate their feelings, and then find ways to improve things, to improve the situation. (…) So right from the start, it's not about educating them, but about transparency. There's an exchange of information happening. We don't leave them in the dark. We don't just put a flyer on their door or in their mailbox and wait for them to call us if they need something. It's really us who go out to meet them and take the time to explain things. Taking the time, above all…» —Intervention worker

FIGURE 1.5 | NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK
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This brief overview highlights the characteristics of the neighborhood where the resource is located, as well as the partnerships with services or organizations that form a support network.

3. Affection

Building/Housing Unit

The data concerning the need for attachment to place was categorized into two aspects: those related to the buildings and housing where residents live, and those associated with their attachment to the neighbourhood.

Several people mentioned a lack of resources in the city that accepts couples and pets. The presence of animals and the possibility of living as a couple in the rooming house are viewed positively by residents. Even if their relationship status changes, residents living in a double room are allowed to keep their space. In general, double rooms are more appreciated, as they offer more space, additional storage options, and greater flexibility for modification or personalization. For example, one person mentioned turning the space intended for a double bed into a living area to socialize with others in their room. This also allows them to host other people regularly.

Relationships between residents are often marked by conflict. There are many power dynamics and disputes involving verbal and physical violence. Interviewees reported that it is difficult to share space with a dozen people who are used to fighting for survival and who face significant substance use challenges. Several residents mentioned that both social and organizational dynamics tend to develop by location and building floor.

Residents generally appreciate the presence of social workers. They provide protection and opportunities for conflict mediation. They are available to socialize and assist residents with referrals to other services and various types of support. The support workers have diverse personalities and strengths, which residents appreciate, as it allows for different kinds of relationships to form. Some residents prefer to contact the social and community service workers directly.

« Fourteen people you don't know at all. You walk in there, and you don't know a single person. We're all pretty heavy users; that's why we ended up here. That's it. And we're all treated like shit, like outcasts everywhere else, because we're not like everyone else. But all together, of course, we've all got our own ways of thinking. Put all that in one building, all of us usually high. And sometimes we're all in withdrawal. You never know, people from outside are coming and going. It used to be a here, so you can feel that vibe. The way we're treated by outsiders, the neighbours who don't want us here, stuff like that. The cops and firefighters do things to us they'd never do to anyone else. You throw all these people who've been treated like that for too long into the same building—it's obvious we're not all gonna get along. So, we defend ourselves. It's hard for all of us to get along—we're too used to needing to fight to survive. It's fucking hard to live like this. » —Resident

Neighbourhood

A support worker mentioned prioritizing people who already live in the neighbourhood when a room becomes available to allow someone to remain in a familiar area they know and have chosen. This approach focuses on the importance of establishing a long-term presence in a neighbourhood where a sense of belonging is fostered. However, many residents originate from different neighbourhoods or even other provinces, highlighting a significant shortage of high-tolerance housing options that provide community support.

This rooming house used to be a well-known space where people gather to use substances among residents of the neighbourhood and the police. The reputation of the location precedes the current assistance program. For many people who use drugs, this history can create a sense of comfort, as substance consumption has always taken place there. However, both the site's past and the neighbourhood's negative perceptions of people who use drugs contribute to the stigma faced by residents. Residents of the rooming house feel this stigma, and it affects them.

« Some people think it has a bad reputation, and others are more respectful or try to understand better what we're going through, because that's what it was, too. It isn't a bad place; it keeps people from using in the street in front of kids. » —Resident

4. Leisure

Leisure needs are met both within housing units and at the neighbourhood level.

Building/Housing Unit

Some residents appear to appreciate the opportunity to share resources or leisure activities. For example, one resident has set up a desk in their room, which they occasionally share with other residents. This is possible because they live in a double room. The support workers are considering converting cluttered rooms into art rooms that would be locked and supervised by staff. The level of appreciation for this idea has yet to be assessed.

As mentioned, substance use is a daily practice among the residents of this facility. They may appreciate being able to use outside, away from public view or in the sun. People who use substances are aware of the discomfort that public use can cause and are very mindful not to use in front of children.

Neighbourhood

Support workers mention noticing a need for more intimate spaces in the city, whether to relax or to use substances away from public view.

FIGURE 1.6 | COMMUNAL KITCHEN
© ANONYMOUS, 2024

5. Participation

The need to participate involves contributing to community life, as well as being involved in the design and consultation of living spaces.

Participation in Community Life

Participation in communal life within the rooming house is rather limited. Some residents have taken the initiative to set up a shared office space in the hallway. Another person modified a vacant space to introduce an activity they enjoy. One resident took responsibility for cleaning all the bathrooms in the rooming house because they did not meet their cleanliness standards.

The possibility of being paid for maintenance tasks that benefit all residents encourages participation. Tenants expressed a desire to be consulted in the selection of future residents. A residents' committee was created, but few people attended the first meeting.

Design and Consultation

A social worker from the support team contacted the individuals who previously lived in the informal consumption house so they could review the design plans. These individuals therefore participated in the decision-making process regarding the design of the rooming house.

FIGURE 1.7 | EXTERIOR STAIRCASE
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6. Understanding

Concerning the need for understanding, the issues raised by the interviewees focused on educating residents and increasing awareness among those living near the rooming house.

Education of Residents

A resident reported educational needs related to specific issues at the rooming house. They stressed that people using opioids should be educated on managing their bowel movements to prevent toilet clogs and enhance their overall experience.

The ventilation and drainage systems are often poorly understood by residents, and as a result, they are frequently misused.

Among the staff, the priority reported is to explain to residents the responsibilities of living in a shared apartment.

« And then, these are people who have been on the street for such a long time that they forget some of the priorities we have when we have housing and many rights, but also duties—such as paying rent and keeping the place as clean and sanitary as possible. So, there is a whole process of relearning to be done with these people as well. We have to give ourselves the time to do it. » —Intervention worker

Raising Awareness Among the Neighbourhood

The staff noticed that using diverse approaches with residents encouraged social acceptance of the project through strategies such as door-to-door activities, exploratory walks, spontaneous contact with shopkeepers, and organizing events like barbecues in the alleyway. The person responsible for the project also introduced themselves personally to neighbours and shop owners.

They noted that providing their personal phone number facilitated direct contact, allowing them to receive information from the source. This made people feel acknowledged as they communicated with the project leader. Building trust takes time.

7. Autodétermination

The need for self-determination was expressed in terms of housing possibilities and a feeling of freedom.

Housing Possibilities

Some residents wish to leave the shelter for various reasons. However, there are very few, if any, resources that meet their needs. One resident considers living in their vehicle in a green, quiet space. They mention a place tolerated by a municipality where their vehicle could be left during the day while they ride an electric bike. Other residents have been on waiting lists for subsidized housing for years.

Feeling of Freedom

A network of alleyways and side streets is often mentioned as a space offering more freedom. People consume substances there, work, and engage in sexual activity. Alleyways form a parallel network to the streets, offering less surveillance and more intimate outdoor spaces, free from the stigmatizing gaze of passersby.

Unused or vacant spaces within the city, without formal arrangements or official programs, are important to the people interviewed.

Case Study #1

Summary Chart

The intervention practices underpinning the shelter are found to influence all the needs mentioned below in a transversal way. First, the shelter operates with a low-threshold approach. In this space, this means welcoming the person as they present themselves, without conditions of sobriety or the requirement to adopt a life plan. The only three rules are as follows: pay your rent, keep your room clean, and respect the other tenants. In case of non-payment of rent, the tenant has a three-month period to work with the Administrative Housing Tribunal to regularize their situation. Cleanliness and respect are subjective concepts defined in agreement with the residents. This approach allows people who are typically excluded from homelessness resources to have access to a roof and community support. This support is another essential aspect of the project. Staff members are present in the house. At the residents' request, their presence has increased, although their integration has been gradual, according to the needs they have expressed. The organization also employs outreach workers who work in several neighbourhoods in the same city.

Subsistence

Intervention practices

- Trust service: Staff handle the tenants' money management upon their request. For example, they can set aside rent payments directly from social assistance or their pay cheques.
- Rent: The rent amount is fixed and does not vary according to the residents' income. The lease is for one month and is renewable.
- Day-paid work: Cleaning and maintenance tasks are offered to residents in exchange for payment if they wish. This option provides additional income and benefits the maintenance of the house.
- Pest management: The accumulation and spread of insects and vermin in the house is regularly taken care of. Actively monitoring accumulation situations helps reduce or prevent pest infestations. Preventive treatments can be applied, along with regular visits from pest control professionals. Residents may be surprised to see professionals wearing protective suits during cleaning in their living spaces.
- Hoarding issues: Intervention practices must be adapted for people dealing with hoarding issues; specific training should be provided for staff. It is important to respect the pace of individuals who accumulate belongings. Clearing rooms by bringing in a waste removal truck is often traumatic.

Subsistence (continued)

Design practices

- Individual support: An appropriate, accessible, and confidential space for one-on-one meetings with staff is essential. In this location, a single room on the ground floor was converted into a staff office because they initially lacked an accessible and private meeting space.
- Furnished rooms: The rooms are furnished and equipped with basic appliances (fridge, microwave, sink).
- Sanitary facilities: It is vital to assess the use of sanitary facilities based on the number of residents and considering that non-residents will also use them. Funnel-shaped toilets should be avoided, as objects are often thrown into them and easily clog the toilets. Industrial-flow toilets are more efficient and better suited to daily life in this house.
- Pest management: To prevent and manage their spread, the following design choices are implemented: avoiding wooden furniture, using vinyl flooring that extends a few inches up the walls, and selecting pest-resistant furniture made of plastic or metal. Diatomaceous earth inside wall cavities has also been identified as a good practice by the organization.
- Sinks: Taller faucets or ones with removable spouts in the kitchenettes of rooms are preferred to allow for a variety of tasks.
- Exterior stairs: The open metal of the exterior stairs is slippery and allows objects and liquids to pass through.
- Mechanical systems: A better ventilation system, air conditioning, and sunshades could improve thermal comfort in the rooms.
- Drains: Drains exist in the rooms to prevent water damage. A bucket of water must be regularly poured into them to prevent odours.
- Windows: The windows open inward for safety reasons. However, this inconveniences residents who have difficulty installing blinds or curtains and often bump into them.
- Public toilets: The use of toilets by many non-residents indicates a lack of public toilets in the city, particularly in this area. Installing accessible public toilets would address this need.

1

Protection

Intervention practices

- 24/7 cycle: The presence of night staff helps support tenants' nighttime lifestyles, limit traffic, and prevent the displacement of informal consumption spaces activities into the rooming house.
- Non-residents: Clear policies regarding the presence of non-residents, created in collaboration with current tenants, are helpful to protect residents while respecting their self-determination.
- Local police: Staff collaborate with police when houses where people gather to use substancess shift into the rooming house. The installation of surveillance cameras has affected police intervention in the building (officers are now less comfortable).
- Keys and locks: Key loss is a recurring issue among tenants. Neighbouring organizations which are open at night, or mobile night services, hold spare keys.
- Community partnerships: Partnerships with other community organizations, especially those involved in harm reduction and active in the neighbourhood, strengthen the capacity of the organization managing the rooming house.
- Health and social services: Partnerships have been established with a public institution to address health and social service needs. This includes weekly visits from a nurse and a social worker.
- Outreach work: Outreach supports conflict mediation between different groups in the neighbourhood.
- Social acceptability of the project: To build stronger relationships with the broader community, the project manager provides a direct phone line for the public.

Design practices

- Surveillance cameras: The cameras were installed at the request of residents, after construction, in common areas and circulation spaces.
- Wear and damage: The presence of many non-residents and ongoing conflicts in the rooming house led to unexpected wear and material damage. In some cases, the most appropriate design strategy is to use inexpensive, easily replaceable elements. It is therefore helpful to build with standard components that are easy to find/replace. A secure storage space allows for quick repairs. In other cases, it is important to choose installations that are better suited to the users, even if they are more expensive and complex to implement.

Protection (continued)

- Doors and locks: U-locks or magnetic locks appear to be the most suitable. Fire-resistant metal doors, although often found in institutional settings, can contribute to a sense of security.
- Fire safety: Clutter in circulation areas poses a fire safety risk. A fire alarm system with a higher threshold (4% instead of 2.3%) reduces the number of false alarms and unnecessary fire department visits.
- Secure access: Rooms on the ground floor are the least appreciated due to high traffic. If rooms are located on this floor, it is essential to ensure secure access. For example, windows facing the courtyard should be secured to prevent break-ins. Both staff and residents want a better rear entry system that limits access to non-residents. Doorbells that can be silenced help prevent harassment.
- Sanitary facilities: All residents have keys to the bathrooms, but they can be unlocked from the outside. Residents using the toilets and showers do not feel safe, as someone can enter at any time. The wire mesh at the bottom of the bathroom doors also contributes to a sense of insecurity and lack of privacy. Some residents suggest that bathrooms be shared by floor to promote self-management and limit the number of people accessing them. On the other hand, the doors can be unlocked from the outside in case of an overdose. For the same reason, bathroom doors open outward.
- Circulation layout: A layout without dead ends, with easily accessible exits, helps avoid a feeling of confinement and facilitates self-defence in case of altercations.
- Health care: There is a need for a clean space on-site to receive health care.
- Harm reduction: The use of bins for used materials and the distribution of portable containers to each tenant helps reduce risks related to substance use. Naloxone is available on every floor in a brown bag, facilitating intervention in case of an overdose. At the neighbourhood scale, installing secure public bins for used materials helps mitigate risks (universally accessible, metal, and locked).
- Awareness raising: Design tools can help raise awareness among residents about the importance of harm reduction resources and push back against hostile furniture and regulations (e.g., anti-homeless benches in parks, tamper-proof garbage bins, closed park pavilions, and closed metro stations). Urban planners must also be aware of and sensitive to issues related to homelessness. Proper training would enable them to assess the impact of design decisions on people experiencing housing insecurity and take action to avoid further marginalization.

Affection

Intervention practices

- Welcome: Attention to welcoming new residents is important. When a new resident arrives, tidying the room, as if it were a hotel room, and ensuring everything is clean and fresh, helps start their stay on a positive note.
- Ability to remain in the neighbourhood long-term: The organization prioritizes people who already live in and are familiar with the neighbourhood.
- Outreach work: Outreach efforts help maintain relationships with the surrounding community. Staff raise awareness among residents about the project, reducing stigma and strengthening direct channels of communication.

Design practices

- Support work: An accessible and confidential office for staff enables effective one-on-one follow-ups and allows for private, informal conversations.
- Backyard: The backyard is unused and not particularly appreciated by tenants, as it is too narrow. Staff suggest creating an enclosed courtyard to establish a shared outdoor space that would be more difficult for non-residents to access. This space could also benefit the animals living in the residence.
- Room location: Ground-floor rooms are less appreciated and often unoccupied. The presence of the kitchen on this floor and its direct connection to the street means that many non-residents tend to occupy the space. When the informal drug consumption house closed, the influx of people into the rooming house made life more difficult for tenants. When possible, it appears preferable to avoid placing rooms on the ground floor.
- Room size: Prioritize double rooms or rooms spacious enough to accommodate a double bed, storage, and space for another function (e.g., a desk or small sitting area). The ability to host one or more people in one's room is viewed positively.
- Use of amenities: Consider organizing shared amenities by floor, as it may be easier to coordinate usage among a smaller number of residents.
- History of space: Every location has a history that can influence how the space is perceived. As a former house where people gather to use substances, the rooming house is viewed and experienced in a particular way. It is therefore important to reflect on the spirit of the place and how it may shape future use.

Leisure

Intervention practices

- Organized activities: The staff at the rooming house organize activities in the shared kitchen.

Design practices

- Room size: Double rooms are more appreciated, as they allow for the creation of other spaces within the room (to practise hobbies, for example). Single rooms can only fit a single bed and a countertop.
- Common space: Common areas are the only places where group activities can take place. Staff suggest creating a supervised indoor shared lounge.
- Outdoor spaces: Intimate outdoor spaces where residents can enjoy the sun are appreciated.
- Hostile design: At the neighbourhood level, hostile architecture hinders free occupation of public spaces. Outreach workers would like to see more seating in parks, drinking fountains, and accessible public toilets throughout the city.

Participation

Intervention practices

- Governance: Residents express the need to be consulted on certain decisions that affect the rooming house, such as the selection of new tenants. Holding a residents' committee facilitated by staff can help meet this need.
- Participatory design: The project manager reached out in the neighbourhood to find former occupants of the site. They participated in a meeting to review the plans and provide input on certain design decisions.

Design practices

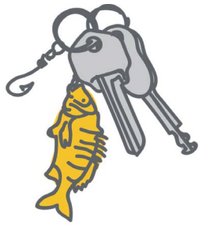
- Spatial flexibility: Open spaces allow for spontaneous arrangements. However, there is a tension between the potential for configuring an open space and issues related to hoarding.
- Participatory design: For the design of future projects, the people who will live in the house are best able to express their needs regarding the use of space.

Understanding

Intervention practices
▶ Peer-led training: Residents note that many people who use substances, particularly opioids, could benefit from peer-led training on managing bowel movements. ▶ Outreach work: Outreach workers play an important role in raising awareness among neighbourhood residents regarding issues related to homelessness and substance use.
Design practices
▶ Training: Tenants could benefit from training to better understand how the ventilation and drainage systems work. ▶ Meeting spaces: Spaces that allow neighbours to gather, whether in the outdoor areas around the building or in public spaces, help facilitate sharing and connection.

Self-determination

Intervention practices
▶ Governance: Avoid intervening in areas valued for their freedom.
Design practices
▶ Informal urban spaces: Vacant or undefined spaces, without formal design or official programming, are important within the city. It is essential to recognize the value of unsupervised, interstitial spaces that can offer a certain degree of privacy outdoors. ▶ Diversity of spaces: A variety of housing options helps meet diverse needs. ▶ Hostile design: Hostile and defensive design in alleyways, such as the removal of shrubs, may increase surveillance but comes at the expense of many people's need for privacy in public spaces.



Case Study #2

The second case concerns a community organization whose two housing sites (2A and 2B) were studied. It serves exclusively older adults who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity. They are allowed to move in with their pets and receive visitors.

In both projects, residents have access to community support and subsidized rents that correspond to their ability to pay.

1. Subsistence

The three main sub-themes characterizing the need for subsistence are accessibility, methods for meeting basic needs, and environmental stressors.

Accessibility

Since many residents have reduced mobility or significant physical health conditions, accessibility has emerged as an important concern in this case study. Resource 2A, a two-story modular building, includes universally accessible studios as well as adaptable studios. This refers to features such as ground-level entrances or ramps, hallways wide enough for wheelchair passage and automated door-opening systems. The absence of elevators to access the second floor is a significant problem for many residents who choose to live there, despite the mobility difficulties they face. Some mentioned preferring to live on the second floor anyway due to past traumas, notably fear of break-ins (see section protection).

Interviewees consistently noted specific design elements of the studios. One significant issue is the height of the kitchen cabinets, which creates storage challenges. Several cabinets are positioned too high, making them difficult for individuals with reduced mobility to access. Additionally, some participants mentioned that the provided furniture is not suitable for those with limited mobility. Specifically, the plastic chairs are deemed unstable and too deep, and there are concerns about the beds as well. Several people preferred to replace their furniture when they had the opportunity.

These universal accessibility issues did not arise in resource 2B, notably because elevators are integrated. Instead, residents emphasize accessibility to local shops at the neighbourhood level. Many say they find reasonably priced grocery stores too far away and that transportation to reach them is inefficient. Nearby shops are reportedly very expensive, and many residents lament the closure or absence of certain services. Located in a remote neighbourhood, several also say public transportation is neither reliable nor convenient.

« There are many difficulties related to movement and reduced mobility. In the apartments, nothing is designed with height in mind, especially in the kitchen. When suffering from arthritis or chronic pain, every movement is painful. The cabinets are too high. » —Resident

FIGURE 2.1 | VIEW INSIDE THE STUDIO
© ANONYMOUS, 2025

FIGURE 2.2 | VIEW INSIDE THE STUDIO
© ANONYMOUS, 2025

Meeting Basic Needs

The majority of the residents in these housing facilities are retired or no longer able to hold salaried jobs. In general, many reported having had difficulty finding adequate, clean and affordable housing in the years leading up to their move. As such, many residents emphasize the importance of the Rent Supplement Program, which brings them stability and enhances their appreciation of their living environment. This is a subsidy intended for low-income individuals who are at risk of losing their housing or who are experiencing homelessness. It ensures that rent costs no more than 25% of a tenant's income. The subsidy is managed by organizations and directed to a landlord (either a non-profit or a private owner), so participants do not need to manage the subsidy themselves. It can be combined with other government benefits, such as a public retirement pension plan, the Old Age Security (OAS), or social assistance. For residents facing financial difficulties, a fiduciary/trust management program is also offered to help with budgeting and rent payments.

Most residents in housing site 2B, which is attached to a day centre, benefit from a cafeteria that provides free breakfast and lunch. Interviewees mentioned that having access to two quality meals significantly helps them meet their nutritional needs. In contrast, residents of the other housing site (2A), just a few minutes' walk from the day centre, do not utilize the cafeteria as frequently for their meals. Some mentioned receiving food baskets provided by the organization.

The organization has implemented several measures to ease residents' transition into housing. First, for those moving indoors from homelessness, assistance is offered for truck rental and transporting personal belongings. For individuals with few or no possessions, a partnership with another organization provides furniture and appliances for future residents. Upon move-in, staff conduct weekly visits. Later, the team conducts quarterly check-ins to assess needs related to housing, damages and the overall condition of the unit.

Some residents engage in informal work to supplement their income, often through arrangements with neighbours. This includes collecting recyclable cans and performing small manual tasks, such as painting or repairs. Several residents expressed frustration over the closure of a local automatic teller machine, which was vital for those relying on it for banking transactions.

« It's often in the neighbourhood. In the wintertime, there are people who are in a tough spot, but sometimes I do a bit of trading and bartering. I shovel, clear the snow off their car. Sometimes they give me food, sometimes it's money. » —Resident

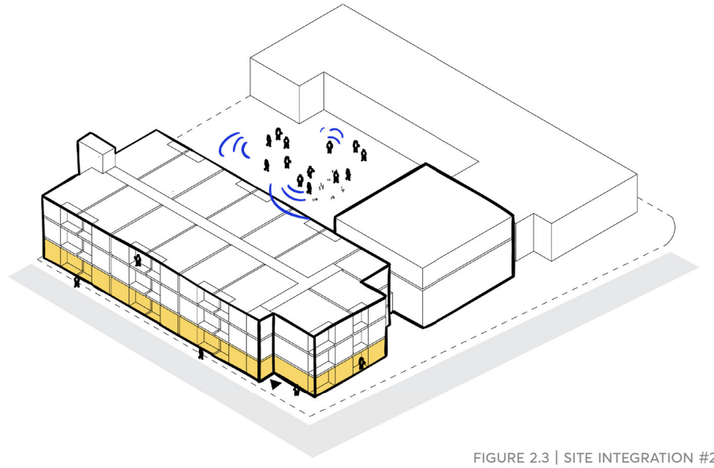


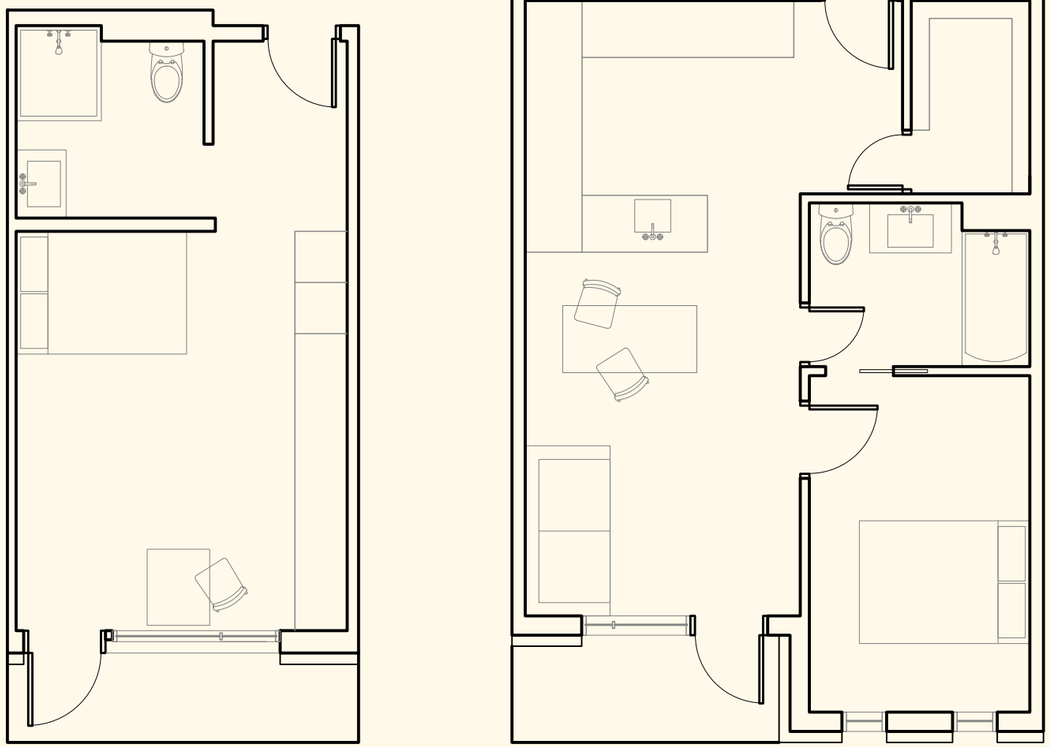
FIGURE 2.3 | SITE INTEGRATION #2-B

Environmental Stressors

Residents' well-being is partly ensured by a comfortable and functional living space where environmental stressors are minimized (natural light, heating, ventilation, soundproofing, cleanliness, etc.). In housing site 2B, residents' opinions on natural light vary depending on the building orientation and the location of their unit. Some say it is too dark and that they receive little natural light. They always keep their lights on and struggle to maintain their plants. Others mention being satisfied with the amount of light and especially appreciate it in the wintertime (they rarely need heating). In the summer, however, overheating is an issue inside the units and on the balconies; several residents have had to install air conditioners or sunshades to remain comfortable during heatwaves. Considering that this housing is intended for older adults, many wonder why air conditioning was not integrated into their units from the start.

Most residents feel that the size of the unit (a one-bedroom apartment) is generous, including the bathroom and storage area. Recognizing the importance of access to a large storage space, a spacious closet with shelves was incorporated into the unit design. This allows for storing large items such as bicycles or a mobility scooter. One resident even converted the closet into a library with books, records, and DVDs. Quietness, both within the building and in the surrounding neighbourhood, is another key point mentioned by interviewees. Many residents say it is a very important, if not the most important, factor in their appreciation of the housing. Generally, the soundproofing within the building is considered good, which helps reduce stress from noise disturbances.

However, some residents find the noise in the inner courtyard bothersome due to foot traffic on the centre's terrace and the presence of children living nearby. Two residents requested to be moved to units facing the street to avoid the noise. One resident suggested that the U-shape of the courtyard may be the cause, as it creates much echo. Another resident, living next to the day centre's terrace, said this affected their sense of privacy, as users of the terrace could see into their unit. A privacy screen set up on the side of the terrace helped improve the situation, but nothing could be done on the resident's balcony due to fire safety regulations.



case study #2-A (studios)

case study #2-B (1-bedroom apartments)

FIGURE 2.3 | APARTMENT PLANS
© ASFQ, 2025

The studios (left) and the 1-bedroom units (right). Having two rooms is appreciated by many residents, who often repurpose their use.

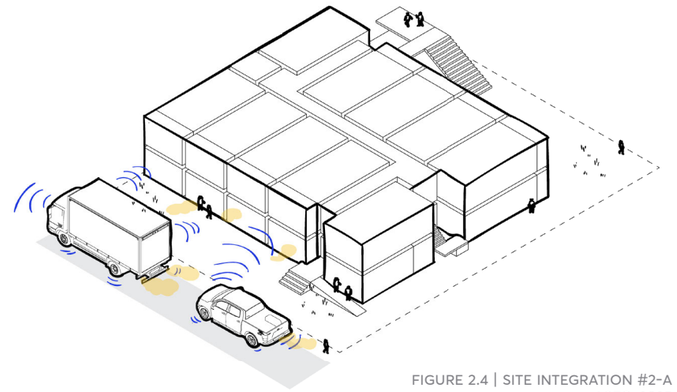


FIGURE 2.4 | SITE INTEGRATION #2-A
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Environmental Stressors (continued)

In housing site 2A, natural light and sunlight exposure were unanimously considered adequate and even regarded as one of the apartment's strong points. The presence of central air conditioning and built-in heating was also identified as a major contributor to comfort. However, the small size of the studios (30 m^2) limits available storage space and creates other challenges for people with reduced mobility, as outlined in the first section of this case study. Other sources of irritation include hanging lights that are too low (residents bump into them) and shower curtains that are too short, causing water spills. Since the curtains are not a standard size, staff had to improvise by adding extra shower rings to fix the issue.

Located on a street with heavy and constant truck traffic, the site's location poses challenges related to noise pollution. Several residents reported that on the street-facing side, the noise and vibrations from trucks negatively impact their quality of life and limit their daily activities. This even forces them to increase the television volume or use headphones to be able to read. Dust generated by the traffic is another major concern for residents on that side of the building, as it prevents them from opening their doors and windows.

Additionally, due to the large windows and proximity to the sidewalk, some tenants feel as though they are being watched in their homes. This lack of privacy leads them to keep their curtains closed and the lights off, reducing their overall comfort.

The organization's speed in responding to problems can cause frustrations. A staff member was hired to manage building maintenance and minor repairs, which both residents and staff appreciate.

Sanitation-related stress also stems from the presence of pests or vermin. Staff reported having had issues with bedbugs in both housing sites. In 2A, the furniture in the studios was specifically selected to prevent infestations, and quarterly maintenance visits are scheduled to ensure cleanliness. Additionally, a local community organization offers housekeeping support to assist with home maintenance, a task that can be challenging for individuals with reduced mobility. Many residents expressed appreciation for the fact that regular pest control is provided.

2. Protection

The need for protection was expressed through residents' desire for personal space, harm reduction measures, and a feeling of safety in the neighbourhood.

Personal Space

Residents appreciate having their own private space. In both housing sites 2A and 2B, the units include a kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom, and a balcony or a terrace on the ground floor. In housing site 2A, residents use keypad locks to enter their apartments. If they forget the code and wish to avoid travelling to get assistance, they can contact staff by phone to have access to their apartment.

Since many residents are connected to street communities or have friends in housing precarity, there is a fair number of coming and going in the buildings. The installation of surveillance cameras, requested by residents, is often mentioned as one of the most reassuring measures to prevent theft or break-ins and protect personal space. One person noted that the cameras are especially appreciated because non-residents sometimes frequent the buildings.

Ground-floor units are generally less appreciated by residents, mainly due to a lack of privacy. One mitigation measure has been to provide curtains to these residents to shield them from public/passerby view.

For staff offices, which were originally fully glazed, frosted film was applied to the glass to improve privacy. Additionally, at housing site 2A, a few minutes' walk from the day centre, the communal room is kept locked and only opened when a staff member is present to prevent theft.

Harm Reduction

In both housing sites, the studios and apartments are designed for long-term, autonomous living, with the option of using shared spaces. These settings bring together people who use substances and those who do not, requiring them to learn to live together. Harm reduction practices are thus essential for cohabitation, but they also extend to physical health issues.

Due to the age and life experiences of the residents, several serious health issues were reported (cardiopulmonary problems, cancer, mobility difficulties, etc.). For some individuals, living with others in an apartment increases their sense of safety concerning their health, as they benefit from peer oversight. In terms of design, the 2A studio units feature rounded wall edges to help prevent injuries related to falls.

Feeling of Safety

Despite a few incidents, most participants indicated that the neighbourhood is generally safe and quiet. Its tranquility was often contrasted with the chaos downtown and in nearby, more bustling neighbourhoods.

A similar feeling is echoed within the two housing resources (2A and 2B). While some people expressed concerns about substance use, behaviours, or the mental health of certain tenants, others emphasized that this older population tends to be much calmer than in other housing settings. Wide and well-lit hallways contribute to the overall sense of safety.

It was noted that, generally, people respect one another, mind their own business, and communicate when problems arise. According to the staff, a sense of solidarity exists among residents: few conflicts are visible, and reporting others is rare.

However, some tensions were reported, including disputes over money lending, disagreements about maintenance or theft. These situations can cause some stress, but residents did not report feeling unsafe. Some choose to avoid others and retreat to their own units to steer clear of conflict.

The presence of on-site staff helps strengthen the sense of safety, as they know how to intervene to manage conflicts and act quickly in cases of crisis or disorganization. House rules have been implemented, but they remain flexible—for example, concerning guests or pets. Nonetheless, some people voiced concerns about particular residents. One person felt that some individuals were not being held properly accountable for their behaviour, while another expressed frustration with the lack of transparency around the housing admission process.

3. Affection

The data concerning the need for attachment to place was categorized into two aspects: those related to the buildings and housing where residents live, and those associated with their attachment to the neighbourhood.

Building/Housing Unit

Case Study #2-A: The housing project has been established for a relatively short period. Some residents have lived there since it opened, while others have moved in more recently. Despite some inconveniences, such as the restriction on living with a partner, many residents express their intention to remain there for the rest of their lives. This desire is explained by a sense of well-being, having rent that matches their ability to pay (see section subsistence), and feeling free to stay or leave, based on a non-term lease.

Several residents have modified the layout of their studio (or wish to do so) to suit their needs and tastes better. For instance, one person created a partition between the kitchen and the bedroom. Another tenant wishes to replace their bed with a sofa bed to transform the space into a living room during the day. These forms of spatial appropriation reflect a mismatch between the studio design, which is a single open space, and the desire to have two distinct rooms—a bedroom and a living room. Also, because the shared space on the ground floor is often closed, some residents suggested creating a common room that does not require staff presence. For example, the laundry room could be adapted as a place to socialize or spend time while doing laundry. These spaces are especially important in wintertime, when it is harder to socialize outdoors due to the cold, and because not all residents feel comfortable inviting neighbours into their homes. While there is a shared terrace, people mostly report using it alone.

Many residents expressed concerns about the durability of the modular construction, believing it was built quickly with low-quality materials. In the modular studios, the complexity of certain elements, such as doors and windows, has caused maintenance issues. Several residents commented that the space feels dull and uniform, and that they would prefer a more vibrant colour scheme. One interviewee even reported feeling ashamed of the building's exterior and landscaping.

Case Study #2-B: Opinions about the units in this housing complex are mixed among participants, which may be explained by individual factors (ability to personalize the unit, comparison with previous apartment, etc.). Regarding layout, appreciation varies based on the apartment's location (courtyard vs. street side, ground floor vs. upper floors), as these factors affect quietness, privacy, use of the balcony and natural light. Units on upper floors are more appreciated overall, although the preference for courtyard or street view depends on individual needs. Having options contributes to a stronger sense of attachment to one's home.

Several people expressed happiness at living in this permanent housing facility and feel privileged to have access to it. In general, participants find the space to be large enough and well designed. The balcony is highlighted as a positive feature by most, with some having added flowers or furniture. Some prefer to use the second room (bedroom) for other purposes (e.g., a pet room or a painting studio), but overall appreciate having two rooms. The availability of integrated services, such as pest control and intervention, fosters a sense of attachment to the space

« Because this building was constructed two years ago, it's new. It was built indoors, by a company that makes houses. These here are blocks. They built the blocks indoors and then brought them here. They brought them here, bang. They built the second floor like that too. It was done quickly. There are problems, I mean, with the windows and the door. They all have screws, screws all around on the inside. It's full of screws. Sometimes they have to come back and adjust it by a quarter inch, half an inch. Otherwise, the door ends up crooked. Like here—I was having trouble closing this window, and they had to come and fix it. That's the issue. » —Resident

Case Study #2-A et 2-B: The diverse groups who use the space (neighbours, day centre users, staff, etc.) also contribute to developing a sense of belonging. Many participants report having friendly, friction-free relationships with the staff and sincerely appreciate the support provided. Residents are described as respectful of each other (live and let live). Beyond cohabitation, several residents have formed lasting friendships, resulting in mutual support and regular visits.

The day centre, situated near the housing projects, plays a crucial role in the daily lives of many participants, who report visiting it several times a day. This large, open, and bright space includes a kitchen, bathrooms, computers, and a spacious dining area with flexible furniture arrangements (tables for two, group tables, armchairs, etc.). It is also appreciated for its heritage features, which reflect the site's history, and the landscaped grounds, which are described as welcoming. While a few people mentioned occasional conflicts in this space, it is primarily seen as a place to eat meals, play games, use the computer, socialize with friends on the terrace or seek help when needed.

Grief emerges as an essential theme in the research. Several residents mention the death of friends and express fears around their own mortality. Someone shared a sense of particular attachment to individuals who have since passed away. Staff note that for some, accessing stable housing after years of homelessness or instability can bring emotional shock and even accelerate aging. Given the frequency of deaths, staff have begun conducting occasional check-ins with residents they see less often to ensure their well-being. Staff also mention needing storage space for the belongings of deceased residents and training to help them cope with these experiences.

Neighbourhood

The neighbourhood is described as peaceful, green and pleasant. The tranquility of the area is cited by many participants as a central element in their attachment to it—often in contrast to previous neighbourhoods perceived as less calm. Green spaces are frequently mentioned, including the large linear park nearby, as well as green alleyways, birds, and numerous gardens. Several participants also notice the aesthetic features of the neighbourhood, such as the "beautiful houses" or the "colourful murals."

In general, research participants report that neighbours are welcoming and greet them. Some feel recognized and respected by residents, notably through exchanges of services such as repairing children's bikes, collecting cans, painting fences or shovelling snow from driveways. One participant mentioned that there is a lot of mutual aid in the neighbourhood and shared that they have reached out and sometimes let others sleep on their couch.

On the other hand, the neighbourhood is considered by many to be isolated from several necessary services and the most practical mode of public transportation: the metro (see section subsistence). Several people also commented on the distance from neighbourhoods where they previously lived and had emotional connections. Some regret that they lack the energy or means to return to those areas regularly.

Staff emphasize that community outreach and support work are essential to fostering better cohabitation both within the building and with the broader neighbourhood. The ability to contact certain staff or managers directly encourages conflict resolution without involving the local police.

« It's a bit isolated because, well, there's a small grocery store nearby. Otherwise, you have to take the bus or walk—maybe about fifteen blocks. Otherwise, it's the bus to the metro. That's it. And other than that, there's not much, not much around here. » —Resident

FIGURE 2.5 | NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK
© ASFQ, 2025

This illustration highlights the characteristics of the neighborhood where the resource is located, as well as the partnerships with services or organizations that form a support network.

4. Leisure

Leisure needs are met both within housing units and at the neighbourhood level.

Building/Housing Unit

Several interviewees report seeing their home as a place where they can relax, withdraw and find calm. In their apartments, these individuals engage in hobbies like reading, listening to music, watching movies, painting, playing chess on the computer, doing puzzles or enjoying the view from their balcony.

Some residents say they feel bored since retiring. Some mention going to the day centre to use the computer or play games like bingo, but also to socialize with others, including non-residents. The organization conducts a monthly program of activities at the day centre, such as gardening and movie screenings. Participation in these activities is optional and is appreciated by some attendees. Residents have suggested adding individual activities to the program and including events in the afternoon, as the current schedule only offers activities in the morning.

« Well, I lived for a long time in a really tiny place, so for me, I think… look, I like it. At least it allows me to have a little painting studio in my room where I keep all my painting stuff, you know?» —Resident

Neighbourhood

Residents mention several activities they enjoy in the neighbourhood, such as walking, participating in sports like rollerblading or biking, watching baseball games, playing bocce ball, having a beer in the park across the street and going to the mall. In both housing facilities, it was noted that having a space to store one's bicycle is essential.

FIGURE 2.6 | PAINTING STUDIO

Having two rooms allows a resident to use the bedroom as a painting studio. Their living space is used for eating, relaxing, and sleeping.

5. Participation

The need to participate involves contributing to community life, as well as being involved in the design and consultation of living spaces.

Participation in Community Life

Participation in community life mostly takes place at the day centre. Within housing facility 2A, there is only one indoor common area, which is not widely used because it requires the presence of a staff member. Additionally, it still hasn't been furnished, even though the facilities opened several years ago. However, there are many outdoor areas designed for residents to use, particularly at the back of the building near the alleyway. The organization installed raised garden beds to make plant access easier for people with reduced mobility.

However, some residents expressed a preference for a traditional vegetable garden directly in the ground.

Residents came together to request changes to the back area, including the possibility of adding a bocce ball court. Some mentioned that most collective requests are denied, which leads to a feeling that making such requests isn't worthwhile. However, there is currently no formal mechanism for residents to meet, discuss these matters or plan activities collectively.

Design and Consultation

The organization states that it consulted many of its service users to better understand the barriers to accessing subsidized housing, as well as their needs regarding apartment design, before implementing these projects.

6. Understanding

Concerning the need for understanding, the issues raised by the interviewees focused on educating residents and increasing awareness among those living near the rooming house.

Education of Residents

Residents are informed about various aspects of daily life through community support, including budgeting, maintenance and pest control, and issues related to sharing their door codes. A list provided by the day centre, which includes various affordable resources, contributes to one resident feeling that the service is more accessible and that they have a good understanding of the service network.

Raising Awareness Among the Neighbourhood

Before the first housing resource was established in the neighbourhood, an outreach worker met with residents to present the project, hear their concerns, and invite them to get in touch if any issues arose. This helped ease the implementation of the second housing site, as the neighbourhood no longer had concerns, having had a positive experience with the first and having encountered very few issues.

FIGURE 2.7 | PET
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7. Self-determination

The need for self-determination was expressed in terms of housing possibilities and a feeling of freedom.

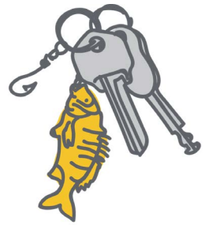
Housing Possibilities

As previously mentioned, many tenants feel privileged to have access to this housing complex and plan to live there for the rest of their lives (see section affection). Having had the choice of housing location is vital to many, whether for a sense of safety or the feeling of having had a say in deciding where to settle. Since the location of a housing unit significantly influences the lived experience, participants who were consulted about their preferences from the start or who were able to change units later on greatly appreciated it. One person mentioned that receiving home care and cleaning support helps them maintain the ability to stay at home.

Feeling of Freedom

Feeling free to stay or to leave contributes to a sense of self-determination, and the ability to invite someone over reinforces this as well. However, some residents would prefer not to have to notify staff when someone stays overnight. Existing restrictions—such as limited possibilities for owning a pet and the prohibition on shared living or cohabiting with a partner—do not appear to be a significant concern for the study participants.

« No, it's me who decides. It's really up to me. If I want to move out next year, I just tell them. You know, it's like any regular apartment. Before renewing your lease, you let your landlord know—it's the same thing. But no, I see myself staying here, because honestly, with my current health, I have issues too, but let's not get into that… I'm just tired of moving, let's say. And I'm not going back to living alone in an apartment. » —Resident



Case Study #2

Summary Chart

Community support is a central pillar in the second case study. It takes the form of direct access to psychosocial and administrative assistance, as well as budget management ensured through a trust. Social workers provide valuable assistance with daily tasks, such as retrieving items that are out of reach. They also play a crucial role in mediating conflicts and fostering a sense of safety within the living environment. Over time, the number of social workers on site has increased in response to the needs expressed by residents. Residents are informed upon arrival of the rules of conduct in the housing (e.g., prohibition of smoking inside the units, decoration of corridors, notifying when receiving guests for a stay, etc.). However, many rules are applied with some flexibility, particularly regarding the presence of animals or visitors. Specifically concerning animals, their integration is gradual, adapting to the pace of the environment and the residents.

Subsistence

Intervention practices

- Services: A variety of services are offered either within the housing facility or within walking distance—including a day centre, fiduciary services, psychosocial support, and accompaniment—and are appreciated by residents.
- Rent: Access to the rent supplement program allows residents to pay rent equivalent to 25% of their income.
- Administrative support: Assistance is provided for updating files and accessing the rent supplement program, as well as for facilitating the income tax process.
- Food security: Access to free, quality meals mitigates the lack of affordable food options in the neighbourhood. Food baskets are delivered to the day centre for pick-up, and nearby restaurants sometimes donate their surplus.
- Transition: The organization helps with moving by renting a truck and transporting personal belongings.
- Pest management: Quarterly visits are scheduled to maintain the housing units, and staff raise awareness among tenants regarding issues related to insects or vermin.
- Maintenance: Quick and effective repair services help reduce stress related to broken or malfunctioning equipment. A home maintenance support service, offered by a community organization for people with low autonomy, is also cited by interviewees as a positive point.

Subsistence (continued)

Design practices

- Universal accessibility: It is essential to include elevators, ground-level entrances, automated door-opening systems, wide corridors, and ramps in the building. In the housing units, in addition to having adaptable bathrooms, storage spaces should be accessible for people with reduced mobility. One area for improvement is ensuring that rods and shower/bath heads are positioned at a height that is accessible.
- Adaptability: Studios that can be easily adapted to changing abilities and mobility are preferable for aging individuals or those experiencing a loss of autonomy.
- Intersectionality: The concept of accessibility should be viewed through an intersectional lens. For example, women who have experienced homelessness may have past trauma that makes them feel unsafe to live on the ground floor. Therefore, accessible housing located on upper floors could improve their sense of safety.
- Furniture: Furnished apartments with appliances included are more accessible. This also allows the organization to choose metal and plastic furniture to avoid bedbugs. Residents want to be consulted about fixed furnishings, which may not be suitable for some (light fixtures, shower curtains, etc.).
- Pest management: Preventive pest control measures, such as using dogs trained to detect bedbugs, along with appropriate furniture like metal bed frames and bedbug-proof covers, help limit the spread of infestations.
- Privacy: Proximity to the sidewalk and large windows raises privacy concerns for ground-floor residents. Privacy features, distance from the street, and units facing the street are all elements to consider for greater comfort.
- Mechanical systems: Central air conditioning, good soundproofing, and included heating are positive features. Air conditioning is vital due to the age of the residents.
- Traffic: Being located on a high-traffic street causes discomfort related to noise and maintenance for residents.
- Storage: Large storage areas in the units are appreciated as they allow for storing bulky items like bikes, scooters and suitcases.
- Nearby services: When choosing the site location, make sure there is access to health care, social services, public transportation and affordable food options.

Protection

Intervention practices

- Peer support: Community support and peer surveillance provide peace of mind for individuals dealing with serious physical health issues.
- Presence of support workers: This helps to reduce tensions between residents during conflicts.
- Access to housing: Residents appreciate being informed about the selection process for other incoming residents.
- Harm reduction: Safe consumption supplies are provided for people who use substances.
- Community support: Through accompaniment, referrals, partnerships with health care services, and the possibility of accessing home care.

Design practices

- Privacy: Ground-floor units are generally less appreciated. Tenants report a lack of privacy.
- Intervention work: Confidential offices for support workers are essential. Fully glazed walls are inadequate both visually and acoustically.
- Surveillance: Residents have requested the installation of security cameras in the hallways and outside the facility.
- Locks: Code locks are preferred over keys, which are often lost.
- Injury prevention: Rounded wall corners help prevent injuries from falls or collisions.
- Space organization: Wide, well-lit hallways contribute to a sense of safety.
- Location: The resource being in a quiet, peaceful, and outlying neighbourhood, despite the limited access to services, is seen as an essential factor contributing to residents' well-being.

Affection

Intervention practices

- Diversify opportunities for socialization: Organizing activities and discussion groups provides opportunities for residents to gather, with or without support workers.
- Integrated services: Access to a range of centralized services in one location fosters a sense of belonging. Proximity to the day centre is an important factor for social interaction.
- Occasional visits: Ensure the well-being of all residents through targeted and occasional visits, especially for those who do not attend the day centre or regularly use available services.
- Grief: Provide grief-related training for support workers to help them manage their emotional responses and better guide residents affected by a death.
- Conflicts: Building strong relationships with managers and support workers helps to resolve conflicts without the need to involve local police.

Design practices

- Rooms: Units with a closed bedroom are preferred over studio apartments. In studios, residents often modify their spaces to create distinct areas for living and sleeping. In one-bedroom units, some residents reverse or adapt the use of the closed room.
- Common areas: Provide a communal room accessible at all times and that does not require the presence of support workers. In housing 2A, the existing common room is rarely used because it requires a staff member to be present.
- Deaths and prolonged absences: Given the relative frequency of deaths (about 3 to 4 per year) and extended absences for medical reasons, it is essential to plan for appropriate storage space to keep the personal belongings of the affected residents. The sorting or disposal process may take time due to legal, ethical or emotional reasons.
- Appearance of outdoor spaces: The façade and outdoor layout of the housing represent the living environment of the residents. They wish for these elements to be visually appealing and reflective of their sense of attachment to the place.
- Modular construction: Some residents express concerns about durability due to the hasty, modular construction. Doors and windows are particularly complex to install and repair.

2

Affection (continued)

- Colours: Incorporate colours in the building to move away from the institutional, white aesthetic.
- Diversity of options: Offering units with diverse orientations and varying floor levels is a beneficial approach that enhances the appeal and livability of the space.
- Presence of green spaces: When planning the project, it is important to consider proximity to public green spaces, as they play a key role in residents' well-being. They offer places to relax, promote calm, and enhance quality of life in urban settings.

Leisure

Intervention practices

- Programming: A monthly schedule with a variety of morning activities is appreciated by many residents. Including activities at other times (e.g., in the afternoon) would help accommodate the lifestyles of some individuals.

Design practices

- Equipment: Provide computers with internet access in common areas.
- Balcony: A private outdoor space is considered important for relaxing, enjoying the view, and getting sunlight.
- Storage: Plan for bike racks or a designated place for bicycle storage.

Participation

Intervention practices

- Governance: Establish a residents' committee to discuss outdoor layout and landscaping.

Design practices

- Consultations: Consult residents to understand their needs regarding layout and the challenges they have previously faced in accessing housing.
- Outdoor spaces: Offering a variety of ways to furnish outdoor areas, such as raised garden beds, in-ground gardens and bocce ball courts, provides flexibility that residents appreciate.

Understanding

Intervention practices

- Proximity-based intervention: Conduct community outreach (e.g., door-to-door visits, attending neighbourhood meetings) in the surrounding area before the housing complex opens. This helps neighbours understand the reasons behind the facility's establishment and provides them with a contact person in case of conflict.
- Education: Provide educational tools for residents, such as pamphlets listing all the food resources available in the neighbourhood.

Design practices

- Location: Choose a site in a neighbourhood that is welcoming to people experiencing homelessness, to facilitate access to services and reduce stigma.

Self-determination

Intervention practices

- Consultation: Consult future residents about their choice of unit or, if possible, allow them to switch afterward, as this enhances their sense of self-determination.
- Flexibility: Flexibility regarding existing restrictions—especially those related to visitors and pets—is requested by some residents.
- Partnerships: Develop partnerships to offer additional home care services or housekeeping support.

Design practices

- N/A

Case Study #3

The third case is a building with 29 rooms offering transitional housing, along with four rooms for emergency shelter, located in the centre of a large city. All residents receive social support. This transitional resource is intended for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and welcomes migrants with precarious status as well as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) individuals. It is a queer-only shelter that accepts pets and is universally accessible, featuring both a ramp and an elevator.

1. Subsistence

The three main sub-themes characterizing the need for subsistence are accessibility, methods for meeting basic needs, and environmental stressors.

Accessibility

Youth who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ and are experiencing homelessness are often overrepresented in this situation, yet they have limited housing options that are tailored to their needs. By addressing the needs of this community, the organization studied fills an essential gap in service provision. The fact that this housing is "queer non-mixed" (exclusively for queer individuals) is fundamental. For people who have experienced homophobic and transphobic violence, being in a space shared only with peers provides real relief. Far more than just a roof, this transitional housing offers residents a range of services integrated within the building, based on a comprehensive community support approach. Each person has a private studio while also having access to a shared kitchen, laundry facilities, psychosocial intervention and support services, a study space, a training room, a multipurpose room and a rooftop terrace. It is also noted that a higher ratio of living spaces to clinical spaces has been maintained to preserve a sense of "home." The ability to offer a variety of services within the building is beneficial in that it reduces access barriers that 2SLGBTQ+ people may face, notably trans and non-binary individuals in gender-segregated housing. However, participants may feel confined if all these services are concentrated in a single space. In this perspective, accompaniment and referral practices are also deployed from the resource at the neighbourhood scale, with nearby partner organizations that are complementary or alternative.

« If, for instance, the relationship with the case worker or me or any one of the other staff sours with a participant, we don't want them to feel isolated all over again by having everything centralized in one space. So, I think that being able to expand and have a network is a lot more helpful than being able to centralize everything in one particular organization or area. » —Intervention worker

The organization accommodates many refugees in the process of seeking asylum. Connections had to be strengthened with immigration consultants, lawyers, and other organizations to provide adequate support for these residents. Intersectionality is therefore essential to understand and address the challenges that 2SLGBTQ+, refugee, and BIPOC individuals in precarious situations may face daily. This supportive housing also allows pets, enabling people to access accommodation without having to be separated from their animals.

Beyond housing, the organization runs a nearby day centre for 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Referrals for future residents come primarily from this space. Furthermore, psychosocial follow-up is open to everyone: whether they are housed in the building, if they are on the waiting list, or supported by another organization (often experiencing homelessness, since shelters are typically very unsafe for 2SLGBTQ+ people; see concept DE-5). Another significant external program is the clinic, which provides easy access to gender-affirming care.

« [The people who work here] are very nice and treat you very well. I feel like you're a well-supported baby. » —Resident

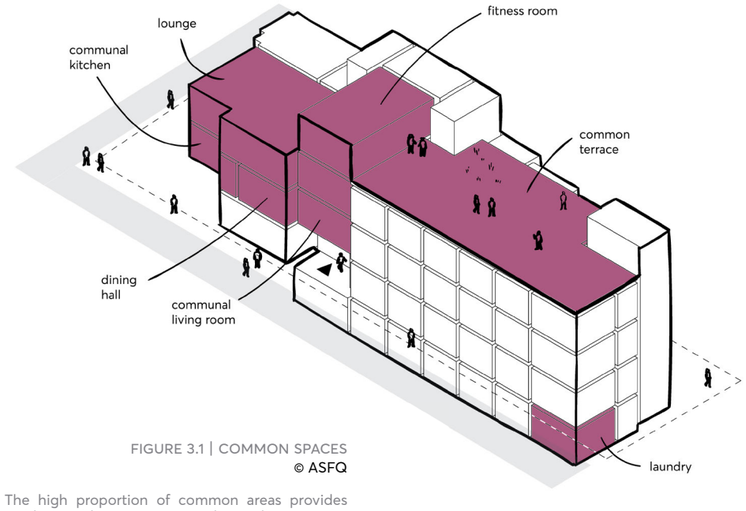


FIGURE 3.1 | COMMON SPACES
© ASFQ

The high proportion of common areas provides residents with more space, as the studios are quite small. The number of shared spaces was made possible thanks to funding from various private foundations that supported the project.

Meeting Basic Needs

The residents did not mention any issues related to the payment of rent. Several spoke about being students, handling administrative procedures, or being in an employment process. One interviewee highlighted how a supportive environment helps them focus on important areas of life, such as relationships and studies. This support is essential for their success. Additionally, residents have access to meals provided directly at the housing facility, which reduces food insecurity.

In an urban context where rents are incredibly high, the organization's staff actively work to find sustainable housing solutions for youth. Even for people with decent incomes, market rents can represent between 60 and 70% of their earnings. Many people receiving social assistance get stuck at an income threshold because they must reach a certain amount to continue receiving benefits. However, even after losing this assistance, their income remains insufficient to cover rent, creating a vicious cycle of housing precarity.

When individuals access social housing, which costs 30% of their income, they encounter an income ceiling. This limitation can compel them to vacate their housing if their income rises. The organization emphasizes the need to work on alternative housing strategies beyond social housing to allow greater mobility for youth (changing jobs, moving, etc.).

People transitioning to new housing can still receive follow-up support from this organization. The workers recognize the importance of continuing to support individuals even after they leave, to prevent them from feeling isolated, neglected, or forgotten. Beyond providing services, the organization aims to strengthen the community.

« There are a lot of things that changed during the pandemic that have made it very difficult, almost feeling impossible for our participants to feel that they can find housing that's affordable. I mean, we went from being able to find apartments that are in a $1,200/month range, and, now, finding a private room for that price is nearly impossible. So, seeing that, in 2022, the rental market went up by 40% or 44%, I think it is, I think it really contributed to the realities that people need to experience as a result of just the limited number of affordable housing options that have been created in the last four decades. So it's made me very cynical and a little bit disheartened by the direction that the housing market has taken in the last couple of decades. » —Intervention worker

FIGURE 2.2 | BIOPHILIA
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Environmental Stressors

The people accessing the organization have diverse backgrounds but generally share difficult experiences related to their sexual or gender identity and housing precarity. Consequently, particular attention was given to the environment, applying trauma-informed design principles to reduce the risk of re-traumatization. Residents who participated in the research had few negative comments about the layout and expressed satisfaction with their studios in terms of comfort and overall functionality. They appreciate the view outside and the presence of plants in the space, which helps create a connection with nature in a highly urban environment. In their studios, it was mentioned that having more space to move around and additional storage for personal belongings would be beneficial.

However, sharing common areas in the building can be a source of stress for some individuals. Individual studios are equipped with basic kitchen amenities, including a microwave, sink, and countertop, allowing residents two options for preparing their meals. The shared kitchen, however, receives mixed reviews from residents. It is a spacious, bright, and well-equipped area, featuring four refrigerators, four ovens, multiple burners, and secured shelves, all organized around a central island. Some consider the space well designed, clean, and functional, and use it daily. Others find sharing this space with other residents challenging, notably due to maintenance issues and food theft, which leads them to limit their use of it.

Additionally, it was reported that the "kitchen space" can be associated with trauma for some people who experienced judgment in this space within their family environment. This relationship to common spaces also extends to other types of shared areas, where there is a generalized feeling of difficulty in sharing goods and available resources.

2. Protection

The need for protection was expressed through residents' desire for personal space, harm reduction measures, and a feeling of safety in the neighbourhood.

« Yeah, so the biggest thing, obviously, is having my own room. Just having access to a door feels like a big thing. » —Resident

Personal Space

All participants mentioned that having access to their own room with a lockable door was an important factor in making them feel safe within the housing complex. This private space allows individuals to experience their emotions and physical discomfort in privacy, without being under the gaze of others. Residents noted that staff respect their privacy and do not enter the rooms without permission, which is highly appreciated.

Visits from family, friends, or non-residents are not permitted to protect residents' private space and ensure their safety. The surveillance cameras installed on the front of the building are perceived as necessary, even though they may create a sense of discomfort. These devices provide records in the event of incidents, which is important given the site's nature (a transitional home for queer individuals) and the surrounding neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood, situated just outside the downtown core, is characterized by a high concentration of social housing, rooming houses, vacant buildings, and various community services. Visible homelessness, such as the presence of urban encampments and public substance use, is part of the local reality. The area has historically been home to a diverse population, including many 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC individuals. Now facing intense real estate speculation and accelerated gentrification, the neighbourhood is undergoing rapid transformation.

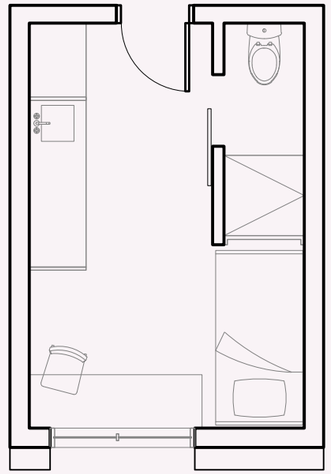

FIGURE 3.3 | PLAN OF THE STUDIO
© ASFQ, 2025

Each individual studio includes a desk, a single bed, a bathroom with an accessible shower, as well as a large built-in storage unit with a sink. The windows can be opened, and the heating can be adjusted independently in each unit.

Harm Reduction

According to interviewees, substance use is an integral part of queer culture and the reality of the neighbourhood. As such, some individuals emphasize the importance of having spaces for harm reduction as well as access to necessary support when facing substance use-related challenges. The transitional home, for its part, enforces a strict no-drug policy.

Feeling of Safety

Several residents express feelings of fear and insecurity in the neighbourhood, especially at night. Some avoid certain streets in favour of wider, more populated streets. The urban landscape is marked by numerous fences and barriers on surrounding properties (hostile design), which creates a sense of confinement and limits mobility. Additionally, several residents report having witnessed violent incidents in nearby streets or having experienced street harassment.

Many residents report feeling a state of hypervigilance when in public spaces and do not feel comfortable expressing their identity due to uncertainty about how others might react. The presence of visible homelessness in the neighbourhood affects residents differently depending on their experiences (e.g., assault or harassment): some fear people experiencing homelessness, while others feel comfortable interacting with them daily.

These experiences lead some residents to travel outside the neighbourhood to access spaces perceived as safer and more pleasant, such as parks located in other parts of the city or the homes of friends living in more distant neighbourhoods. Public transportation is generally considered safe and well suited for newcomers and non-English speakers. The above-ground transit network, with views of the city and clear signage, aids in orientation. Since residents do not always feel comfortable moving around the neighbourhood, the availability of protected (semi-private) outdoor spaces within the housing resource is considered essential. For example, the rooftop terrace allows smokers to smoke outside without being exposed to harassment from passersby. At the same time, the organization's integration into its surroundings contributes to the residents' sense of safety. Designed from two existing buildings and featuring a colourful (rainbow) façade, the transitional shelter is often mistaken for a school and goes unnoticed by passersby. This discretion helps reduce safety risks while making the site identifiable and accessible to the community it serves. Inside the building, multiple points of entry and exit were planned to ensure residents can leave uncomfortable or unsafe situations freely. In the areas designated for social intervention, there are always two exits to allow individuals to leave the space at any time. In addition, to meet the needs of young people, the organization has ensured that the reception process is welcoming and trauma-informed. Unlike what is often seen in emergency shelters, the front desk is not enclosed. Upon arrival, individuals are given access to a quiet and private double room in the basement equipped with a small lounge, shower, washer dryer, and refrigerator. This allows them to settle in peacefully, wash their clothes, and care for their appearance before moving into their own studio or entering the common areas.

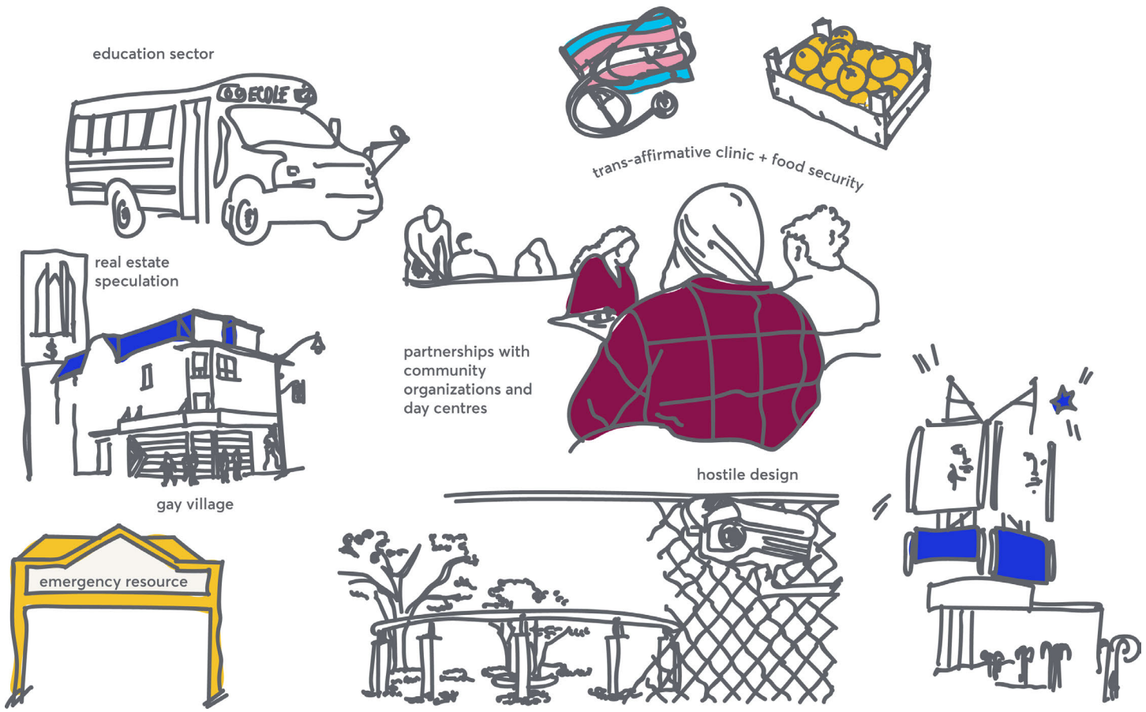

FIGURE 3.4 | NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK
© ASFQ, 2025

« I can't feel safe to just express myself out there. I'm more just observing the community that there is, because there are so many things that I'm unsure of. Especially as a queer individual, it's hard to know where you're going to be safe.» —Resident

3. Affection

The data concerning the need for attachment to place was categorized into two aspects: those related to the buildings and housing where residents live, and those associated with their attachment to the neighbourhood.

Building/Housing Unit

The sense of attachment to the housing organization varies from person to person. Due to its transitional nature (12 months) and the ongoing community support, some residents perceive the housing complex as a clinical space, despite efforts to make it feel like a home.

Some individuals speak of difficulties socializing, forming connections, and building a sense of community within the space. This is partly because they do not always feel comfortable socializing in the existing common areas, which do not guarantee visual or acoustic privacy. Most of these spaces are organized around an open stairwell spanning several floors. With people constantly coming and going, conversations can be easily overheard. The same issue arises at the reception desk: the space has too much echo to ensure confidentiality. As for the multipurpose room, it is entirely glazed, which prevents any privacy for one-on-one or small-group conversations. Finally, there are no confidential meeting spaces beyond individual rooms where people can process emotions and confide in peers, which could otherwise help strengthen bonds between residents.

The prohibition against inviting non-residents or even other residents into one's studio, while justified by safety concerns, is difficult for young people to live with. First, they need to be able to show their loved ones (family, friends, close contacts, etc.) that they have a safe home, especially after experiencing instability or homelessness. This restriction can also create a sense of isolation and limit their ability to build meaningful relationships in a comfortable and intimate space. Given the limited availability of public spaces where 2SLGBTQ+ individuals can express intimacy safely, access to protected spaces for socialization becomes even more critical. Not being allowed to use common areas with guests may also compromise important cultural rituals shared among close ones (e.g., iftar during Ramadan, which marks the breaking of the fast observed by Muslim residents). Attachment to one's living environment is also closely tied to the ability to have pets. However, the inaccessibility of the front yard limits available space to take pets outside or go for walks.

Personalizing and taking ownership of one's living space also reflects an emotional attachment to the place. Some residents mentioned decorating their rooms with meaningful objects, such as their paintings or pictures received as gifts. One person shared that they were finally able to put up decorations they had been carrying with them for two years throughout constant moves. For them, this act symbolized reaching a certain level of stability and safety.

FIGURE 3.5 | COMMUNITY ROOM
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Neighbourhood/City

The project is located near an area already frequented by the 2SLGBTQ+ community, where there is an existing diversity of sexual and gender identities. For the organization, being rooted in a neighbourhood with complementary services within walking distance contributes to a strong sense of attachment and solidarity. The organization actively works to build relationships with the local community, supporting local businesses, redirecting individuals to appropriate services and engaging with neighbourhood residents. Some members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community who are not housed occasionally come to rest near the organization. According to one person, this attachment to the shelter may be linked to its colourful façade, which suggests a non-judgmental and welcoming environment. Being close to downtown is also appreciated by residents who enjoy spending time in lively streets and shopping centres. These spaces can serve as semi-public third places that feel safer than outdoor public areas.

This sense of community is shared among the network of organizations that support one another, but not necessarily among residents themselves. As mentioned earlier (see section protection), many residents report not feeling safe in the neighbourhood and not experiencing a sense of community there. Some attribute this to the presence of hostile design, perceived as dehumanizing, or to a lack of comfortable spaces nearby. Among the elements that foster attachment, some residents mentioned frequenting other community spaces to meet people and enjoying a large park just a few minutes away. For others, especially newcomers, school is an important place for socialization. Extracurricular activities that are highly valued include sharing meals to celebrate special occasions.

FIGURE 3.6 | CITY CENTRE
© ANONYMOUS, 2025

« The public space is, for example, downtown. There are some nights when I miss my family. I feel very emotional. I would be very sad. I wear the hands-free, listen to music, and walk in the city. The streets are full of light. I like it very much. I walk, I see the beauties. I see the buildings. I open my heart. Then my sadness will disappear. I like the atmosphere of the downtown very much.. » —Resident

4. Leisure

Leisure activities are related to needs both within buildings and at the neighbourhood level.

Building/Housing Unit

The diversity of spaces within the building allows residents to spend their time engaging in various leisure activities such as playing video games, creating art and working out. The fitness room, which was not part of the original design, is especially appreciated by residents. This highlights the importance of maintaining some flexibility in programming to adapt to residents' needs and requests.

The organization holds weekly feedback meetings and bases its programming on the input of residents. Those who have participated reported feeling heard and acknowledged, as their suggestions were implemented. The furnished outdoor terrace is also used and appreciated by residents. However, they mention that having access to a green space adjacent to the shelter for socializing, relaxing, or enjoying activities like picnics in the summer would be seen positively. One resident also suggested that having access to dedicated study spaces outside of their studio would be appreciated.

The transitional home currently organizes most activities. Some activities also take place off-site, at the nearby day centre, to foster connections with others. For some, it can be challenging to socialize through structured activities that follow a set schedule. Activities that allow residents, particularly newcomers, to discover the city and its surroundings are especially valued.

5. Participation

The need to participate involves contributing to community life, as well as being involved in the design and consultation of living spaces.

Participation in Community Life

Some residents mentioned the importance of recognizing that many societal norms do not align with queer ideals. For more profound and more meaningful engagement, they believe it is necessary to maintain a critical perspective on current practices and to encourage shared responsibility for what does and does not work within the organization. In general, rules are applied strictly in the shelter to maintain consistency; however, some individuals have expressed confusion about the basis on which these rules are enforced.

Design and Consultation

The organization operates a day centre located in the same neighbourhood. During the building's design phase, architects involved users of the day centre in co-creation workshops. Key elements related to needs for attachment and self-determination were decided in these sessions. In the private rooms, operable windows, adjustable heating, and bulletin boards were included based on participant feedback. The use of colourful elements on the façade to signal the community's identity also emerged from this participatory design process.

6. Understanding

Regarding the need for understanding, interviewees emphasized the importance of educating residents and raising awareness among those living near the rooming house.

Education of Residents

Because more than 30 people share this housing complex, residents are encouraged to work on conflict management.

Neighbourhood awareness

The architects mention having participated in door-to-door outreach to raise awareness in the neighbourhood when the organization started. Overall, they report that the reception was positive, as most residents are supportive of the work done by community organizations.

7. Self-determination

The need for self-determination was expressed in terms of housing possibilities and a feeling of freedom.

Housing Possibilities

The research conducted shows that 2SLGBTQ+ individuals experiencing housing precarity often have few accommodation options or a low capacity to find alternative living arrangements. The challenges they face are intensified by the overlapping nature of their oppressions, such as limited mobility, ethnic background, and physical or mental health issues. Consequently, they often experience stressful or unstable living conditions for extended periods and are forced to adapt in ways that compromise their well-being.

Residents living in this housing complex have twelve months to transition to permanent housing. However, some difficulties were raised regarding preparation for this transition, particularly concerning access to storage space. The rooms are too small to accommodate a "starter kit" that includes dishes, clothing, or larger items like furniture, and the lack of space presents an obstacle in the process. Moreover, external storage solutions such as lockers are costly in metropolitan areas. To better support this transition, the creation of accessible storage spaces within the building was proposed as a solution.

FIGURE 3.7 | SPACE DEDICATED TO SELF-DEFENSE
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Feeling of Freedom and Cultural Recognition

Despite appreciating the place, some individuals mention the challenges of living in a supervised transitional shelter, particularly due to imposed rules and a feeling of having little control over their lives. However, these views are nuanced by others who say that a structured living environment strengthens their sense of freedom.

Within 2SLGBTQ+ communities, the ability to defend oneself and protect loved ones emerged as an important element. This is expressed through enrollment in self-defence classes or use of the fitness room. These activities, which help improve physical fitness and overcome fear, contribute to strengthening residents' sense of safety and self-determination. Self-defence practices such as using a punching bag also provide an outlet for releasing negative emotions. For a more comfortable and secure experience, these training spaces should not be located in high-traffic areas.

Another aspect of self-determination is the opportunity to reconnect with one's cultural heritage. One individual noted that reintegrating Indigenous spiritual practices, like smudging, has given them a sense of well-being. Smudging, or smoke purification, involves the burning of medicinal or sacred plants and is practised by many Indigenous peoples, though not all. Beliefs, ceremonies, and protocols associated with this practice vary from culture to culture. In this study, it was observed that an outdoor space located adjacent to the housing complex, and adequately sheltered from wind and inclement weather, would be advantageous for facilitating this nature-related cultural practice.

The organization's central location also facilitates mobility. For individuals developing connections in other neighbourhoods, this is very important. Easy access to these spaces is essential to their well-being.

« I can bring my boyfriend to my house, my friends can come over… I go to my friends' house, they come over. But it's not like that here. Only people who are inside are allowed to see me inside. We're not allowed to invite anyone. That's my only restriction. If it were my house, I could invite my friends over. » —Resident

« Yeah, we can do what we want to do as long as it doesn't compromise anyone's well-being, as long as it doesn't compromise another person's well-being.. » —Resident

Case Study #3

Summary Chart

This transitional home provides 24/7 clinical support, social assistance, and crisis intervention for young 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. The staff, trained in harm reduction, CPR, and trauma-informed practices, are present on site. Stays, which last up to one year, are designed for young people who wish to participate in processes that lead to permanent housing. In this context, staff actively assist residents in finding housing and income opportunities. Support does not end at the time of transition: post-housing follow-up is provided to prevent individuals from becoming isolated after their departure. Respect for privacy is a core value of the organization. Staff members are never allowed to enter studios without prior notice and consent. Pets are welcome. However, the facility enforces a strict policy prohibiting substance use on-site, as well as the presence of other residents or visitors in the private rooms.

Subsistence

Intervention practices

- Queer-only shelter: Living in a space shared exclusively with peers provides relief and protection against homophobia and transphobia, which are omnipresent in mixed-gender and mixed-population homelessness organizations.
- Partnerships: The organization values partnerships with various neighbourhood services and associations, including others supporting 2SLGBTQ+ communities, emergency homelessness resources, and a trans-health clinic.
- Immigration support: Partnerships have been strengthened with immigration consultants, lawyers, and organizations to adequately support 2SLGBTQ+ refugees experiencing precarity.
- Housing transition: Housing access strategies are developed collaboratively with residents, based on their incomes, benefits, and aspirations. A dedicated housing coordinator is specifically tasked with finding options in both the private and non-market sectors.
- Post-housing support: The organization believes in continuing to support individuals even after they move into permanent housing to prevent isolation and to help build a stronger community.
- Hoarding: Staff conduct regular room checks to ensure residents do not accumulate excessive belongings.

Subsistence (continued)

Design practices

- Integrated services: Establishing a suitable balance between services provided directly in the shelter and those available throughout the neighbourhood.
- Design strategies: Maintaining a higher ratio of living spaces compared to clinical offices helps preserve the feeling of a "home" rather than an institutional resource. Additionally, favouring the reuse of existing buildings while respecting their original function (in this case, housing) helps reinforce domestic qualities.
- Pets: Animal-friendly features within the facility include, for example, a dog shower in the laundry room and dedicated outdoor spaces.
- Trauma-informed design: Several conceptual choices were made in accordance with trauma-informed design principles: the use of materials like wood and textiles, an intuitive spatial organization that is easy to navigate, diverse common spaces, a double reception room, studios equipped with a variety of storage options, and a minimal kitchen. See Design Practices: Key Findings for detailed choices and the Appendix for additional information on trauma-informed design.
- Rooms: Rooms must be large enough to move around comfortably and store personal belongings. The rooms are currently rather small.
- Shared kitchen: For those less comfortable using the shared kitchen, a minimal kitchen setup is provided in individual rooms. It was reported that a functional kitchen in the studio would benefit these residents. Within the shared kitchen, secure spaces for food storage should be provided.

Protection

Intervention practices

- Visitor regulations: Some individuals feel that policies restricting visits from non-residents help maintain an organized and safe environment. For others, these restrictions limit their freedom and hinder the development of interpersonal relationships (see sections on affection and self-determination).
- Harm reduction: Tobacco and marijuana use are permitted on the organization's terrace. The shelter enforces a strict policy prohibiting drug use (other than marijuana), but the day centre provides harm reduction supplies.
- Reception: Entering a transitional home can be a highly anxiety-inducing experience for many people. Alongside welcoming reception spaces, staff emphasize support tailored to the individual's pace.

Protection (continued)

Design practices

- Individual rooms: Ensure that each resident has a private room with a lockable door.
- Surveillance: The installation of surveillance cameras outside the shelter contributes to a sense of safety.
- Hostile design: Hostile design elements, often used to delimit private property boundaries, generate a sense of insecurity among many residents.
- Urban integration: The building's integration into its surroundings and the design of its façade contribute to the overall sense of safety. The use of rainbow colours on the façade was done subtly, so that only 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and allies would recognize it. Many people who do not identify with the community mistakenly assume the building is a school.
- Outdoor spaces: Outdoor areas that are shielded from public view provide a safe haven for residents who may feel uneasy in public spaces, allowing them to enjoy the yard or terraces.
- Reception area: Special attention should be given to the reception space in the home. It includes a washer and dryer, a large washroom, and a lounge area. The reception desk is in an open area, which helps to avoid feelings of confinement. Staff highlight that this open layout facilitates better interaction and helps de-escalate conflicts more easily.
- Entry/exit points: Wherever possible, rooms should have multiple access points to help prevent feelings of entrapment.

Affection

Intervention practices

- Trauma sensitivity: A trauma-informed approach to intervention is recommended to avoid emotional triggers. See Appendix A—Key Concepts.
- Animals: Restrictions on animals in certain common areas create a sense of injustice among some residents. Some individuals rely on their animals to socialize more easily.
- Visitor policies: The prohibition of inviting visitors is experienced as difficult by residents. While the rule is understood (see section protection), it hinders their ability to form relationships and compromises cultural rituals or community-based activities.

Affection (continued)

Design practices

- Gathering spaces: Residents appreciate the variety of common rooms: spaces to be alone outside of their studio, rooms of various sizes, and the option to gather in large or small groups.
- Animals: Incorporate areas where animals can move freely to support the bond between residents and their pets. The wooden rooftop terrace is not necessarily suitable for allowing cats and dogs to relieve themselves.
- Sense of home: A true "home" also means having space to welcome loved ones and host members of one's community. For 2SLGBTQ+ youth in precarious situations, hospitality, mutual aid and solidarity are core values.
- Proximity to downtown: Easy access to lively streets and shopping centres is appreciated by some residents.

Leisure

Intervention practices

- Diverse activity formats: Make room for spontaneous social activities as well as activities that take place outside the shelter (e.g., in the city, at the day centre, or with other neighbourhood organizations).
- Feedback & engagement: Weekly feedback meetings and programming based on residents' input are received positively.

Design practices

- Training Room: The training room is appreciated by residents. Traditional gyms are typically not safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals.
- Common Areas: A variety of common and multifunctional spaces support a diversity of hobbies and activities.
- Study Spaces: Quiet and intimate study areas, such as cubicles, outside individual studios, are recommended. This addresses the need to study without feeling isolated, especially given the limited size of the studios.
- Flexibility: Adapting spaces to the evolving needs of residents is important. It is therefore essential to include multifunctional rooms in the initial design.

Participation

Intervention practices

- Alignment with community values: Encourage dialogue and flexible, evolving practices that reflect residents' aspirations. For example, the strict enforcement of rules and norms is sometimes at odds with residents' lived realities, which are often misunderstood.

Design practices

- Consultation: Engaging community members, such as those already attending the day centre, in the design of the shelter helped identify and integrate key elements (operable windows, adjustable heating, bulletin boards, and a colourful façade) that contribute to residents' sense of attachment, safety, and self-determination.

Understanding

Intervention practices

- Conflict management: Staff members feel that training on emotional regulation and conflict resolution is an essential tool.

Design practices

- Involvement of architects: The architects contributed to the social acceptability efforts related to the implementation of the new shelter by conducting door-to-door outreach in the neighbourhood.

Self-determination

Intervention practices

- Rules: Some rules can undermine residents' sense of self-determination, such as having to ask permission to spend consecutive days outside under threat of losing their housing, restrictions on drug and alcohol use, prohibition from occupying outdoor areas of the facility, and the inability to invite non-residents.
- Self-defence and sports: Physical empowerment and self-defence are considered autonomous, alternative, and therapeutic intervention methods.

Design practices

- Storage: For transitional housing, provide a storage space within the facility for a starter kit.
- Self-defence: Include a training room equipped with a punching bag and workout equipment adapted to diverse body types.
- Cultural practices: An outdoor space protected from wind and weather allows for smudging practices within the living environment.
- Mobility: Locating the facility in a central neighbourhood enables residents to easily travel to other areas where they already have established landmarks.

Design Practices: Key Findings

Conceptual Framework

This section examines the lessons learned from the methods used by planning professionals when designing transitional or permanent housing for individuals experiencing homelessness or those at risk of becoming homeless. Post-occupancy studies, which include spatial analyses, observations, and interviews, have shown that a balance of various factors influences architects' design and construction decisions (this list is not exhaustive):

- The needs of the occupants
- The needs of the project's organizations
- Social intervention approaches
- Feasibility related to site implementation
- Procedures for Technical Resource Groups (TRGs)
- Building code requirements
- Technical and construction aspects
- Available funding
- Funders' requirements
- Municipal regulations (notably regarding permits, zoning, and heritage conservation)

It is clear that the built environment cannot simultaneously satisfy all the imposed requirements. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a clear and focused vision based on the project's specific needs. For example, architects' intentions may sometimes conflict with users' expectations and realities. Studies indicate that standardized or uniform approaches fail to meet occupants' needs and aspirations effectively. A participatory and locally grounded approach is essential for designing living environments that genuinely meet the needs of communities.

While much of what is reported below has already been mentioned in the analyses above (see section **see Appendix A - Design concepts**), different suggestions emerged from the interviews. The practices are classified in this chapter by central themes derived from planning practices rather than by the specific sites studied.

Site Integration

In an architectural project, site integration refers to how a building is situated within its site, as well as its immediate and broader surroundings. This involves several key aspects:

- Physical location (site scale): How the project is situated and oriented on the plot of land in relation to adjacent streets, neighbouring buildings, and nearby public spaces.
- Urban and landscape integration (neighbourhood and city scale): How the building interacts with the urban fabric, green spaces, infrastructure and major circulation axes.
- Site constraints and opportunities: Sun exposure, topography, accessibility, proximity to services, potential nuisances, and more.
- Impact on the built and social environment: How the project is shaped by and contributes to the surrounding living environment, everyday uses, social diversity, and broader community, sociological, and economic dynamics.

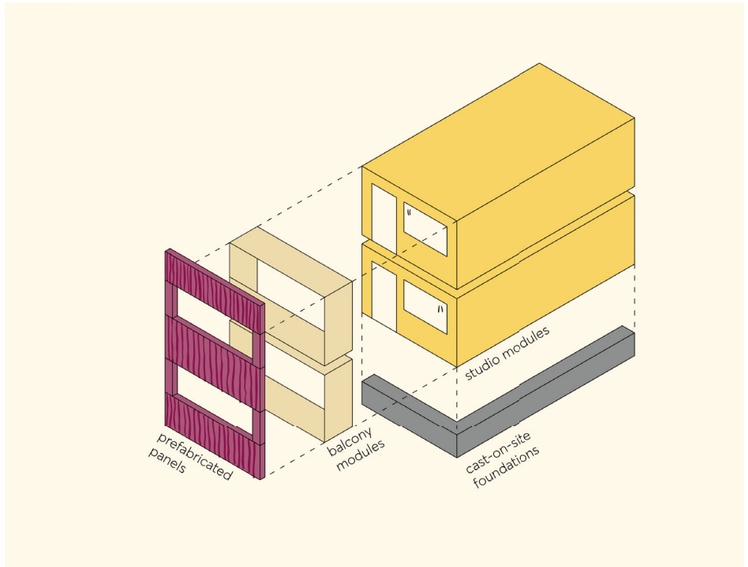


FIGURE D | MODULAR CONSTRUCTION

In case study #2-A, studio modules were assembled on foundations poured on-site. A second module for balconies was added on the exterior side. Prefabricated masonry panels were then installed on the façade.

Construction Method Adapted to the Site

To address the organization's time and resource constraints, modular construction was selected for Case Study 2A (see section: Appendix A –Key Concepts, DE-2). However, this method proved challenging to implement, primarily due to the site conditions. In urban environments, modular construction can pose challenges due to high density and heavy traffic on roads. The installation of modules requires construction conditions that accommodate the use of a crane, a piece of equipment that may necessitate temporary street closures and the relocation of electrical networks. These constraints can have impacts on the surrounding neighbourhood as well as on overall construction costs.

Thus, it is essential to consult with architects, suppliers, and contractors to determine whether modular construction is suitable for the site and its surrounding environment. A hybrid approach can be considered by selecting modular construction for certain parts of the building or specific elements. For example, factory-prefabricated façade modules can help reduce costs associated with winter conditions that complicate masonry work, while also facilitating implementation.

« But with boxes like that, there's definitely a challenge when it comes to transport and installation. […] It still had to be 'fitted' together like a puzzle… in a very tight space. » —Architect

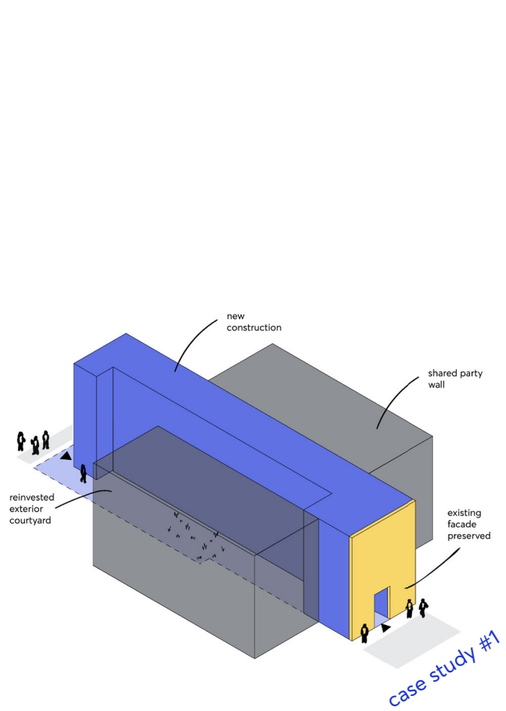
Soil Contamination

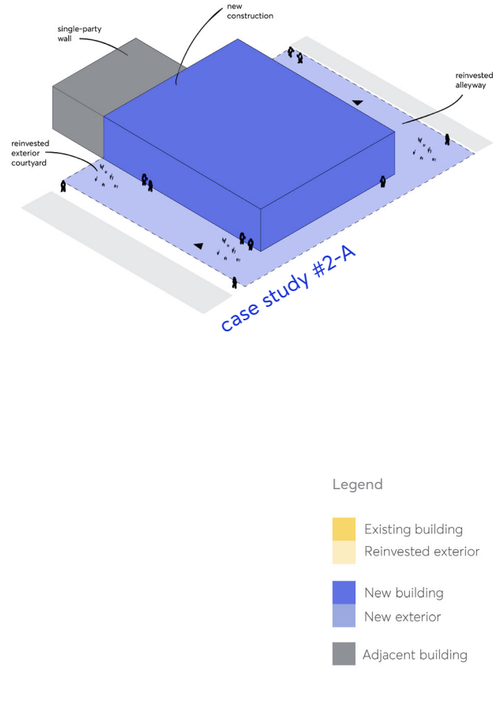
Contaminated sites represent significant financial challenges for community organizations. While such land may be more affordable to purchase, the costs of decontamination are often very high. In Case Study 2B, the cost of decontamination turned out to be approximately ten times higher than initially estimated during the project planning phase.

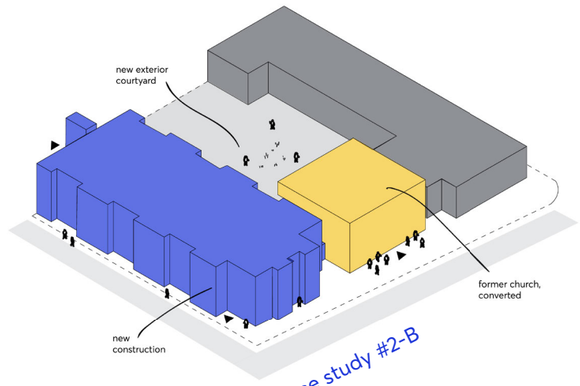
The use of contaminated land for building new community housing also raises environmental concerns. These sites are often located in industrial areas, where residents are more exposed to pollution-related risks. It is therefore essential to prioritize clean land, or, where this is not possible, to implement rigorous remediation strategies to ensure a healthy environment for future residents.

Impact of Road Infrastructures

One of the housing projects (2A) was constructed on a busy street with heavy traffic resulting from nearby industrial park activities. The constant vibrations from trucks and cars accelerated the deterioration of the masonry façade. After only a few years, the panels on the façade have already started to crumble.







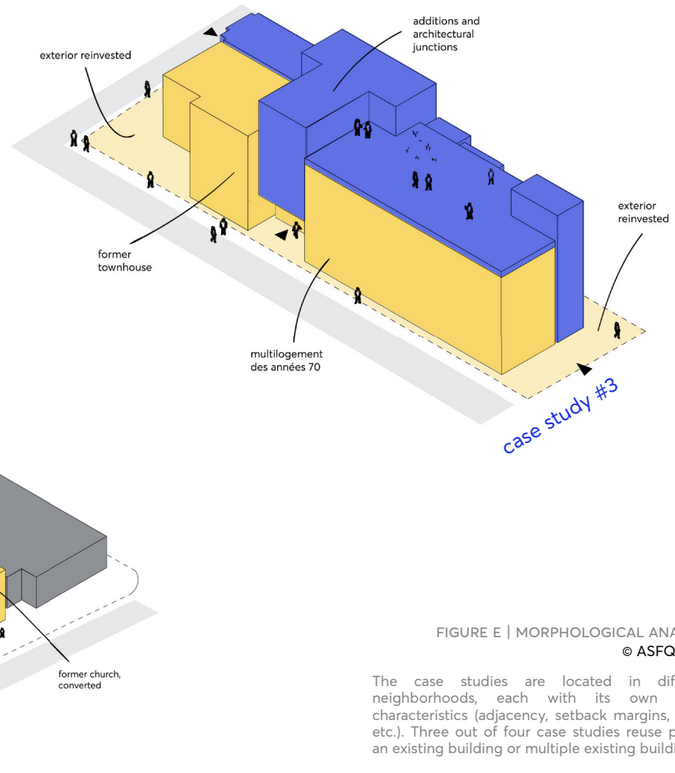


FIGURE E | MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The case studies are located in different neighborhoods, each with its own urban characteristics (adjacency, setback margins, yards, etc.). Three out of four case studies reuse part of an existing building or multiple existing buildings.

Integration Into the Built Environment

To successfully integrate a project into its built environment, it is essential to consider the site's history, including both the neighbourhood context and the specific history of the building. A strong awareness of this historical background can greatly enhance heritage revitalization projects. By acknowledging past uses, we can enhance social acceptability and more effectively address the current needs of the community.

Transforming an existing building requires acknowledging its previous use and the perceptions associated with it. In one case (Case Study #1), a former house for informal sale and use of drugs, was converted into supervised permanent housing through a rooming house typology. This conversion had a dual impact: on one hand, the community's familiarity with the space facilitated acceptance of the project. On the other hand, the stigma associated with the site's past raised issues around the project's image and the social perceptions of residents.

The repurposing of vacant buildings (see **see Appendix A - DE-3**) can also play a positive role in the social acceptability of community-based housing. For instance, transforming a dilapidated townhouse and a 1970s low-rise apartment building (Case Study #3) was seen as a positive contribution to the neighbourhood. In an area marked by a high concentration of abandoned and poorly maintained buildings, this intervention was well received by residents.

The neighbourhood where this facility is located (Case Study #3) includes many social housing units, emergency shelters, and services for people experiencing homelessness. However, its central location makes it particularly vulnerable to real estate speculation and gentrification. Maintaining community initiatives in this area is a key strategy for preserving spaces for long-term residents and resisting market pressures.

FIGURE F | HALLWAY MATERIALS
© ASFQ, 2025

« The base of the wall is like in old hotels: with wood panelling. This is for wheelchairs that bump into the walls, so that the drywall doesn't get damaged all the time. The corners of walls, door entrances, were made of wood to ensure that this building ages well.» —Architect

Sustainability

Modesty Criteria

Public funders who support housing construction projects enforce strict "modesty" or "affordable" standards regarding material selection, regulating the cost, durability, and efficiency of the projects. These requirements can limit the ability to adapt buildings to the specific needs of residents. Their application can also impact resident well-being and the operational sustainability of managing organizations.

For example, lower-quality equipment prone to frequent breakdowns can quickly become a source of frustration, leading to high maintenance and repair costs for community organizations. Projects funded by private sources generally have more flexibility in material choices, as illustrated in Case Study #3.

« It was a bit of a contradiction for us, like: 'We want durable furniture, but it has to be made of melamine.. » —Architect

Plumbing and Drainage Systems

In certain types of housing (Case Study #1), the habits and specific needs of residents directly influence the design of plumbing systems. Among these needs, substance use can lead to unconventional use of facilities, requiring technical adjustments to prevent potential damage and ensure building durability. In Case Study #1, floor drains were installed in the rooms to reduce risks related to falls and water damage. However, several issues were reported concerning toilet use, including frequent clogging. The adoption of assisted-flush toilets and reinforced piping is therefore recommended to reduce these blockages and improve the resilience of the sanitary installations.

« So we decided to go with vinyl cladding in rolls. There are fewer joints, which makes it more waterproof, a feature that is particularly interesting for a building with a wooden structure. If there are any burns or whatever, it can be easily cut and the seams redone. » —Architect

Maintenance and Materials

The use of materials adapted to the needs of users and maintenance constraints is essential to ensure greater durability of community buildings. This involves targeting specific locations to install robust materials and selecting them carefully, anticipating maintenance needs and associated costs, and favouring standardized and local solutions.

- Identify strategic locations for the installation of durable materials, taking into account user contact. For façades, consider using masonry on the ground floor. This approach will help minimize wear and tear from frequent foot traffic, ensuring the longevity and appearance of the building. A lighter cladding, such as aluminum, could be used on the upper floors where the impact is less. Indoors, it was recommended to favour wooden panelling and door frames to prevent damage caused by wheelchair bumps or impacts.
- Opt for materials that enhance resistance to damage and pests. Architects have chosen high-impact-resistant drywall, plywood, preformed stainless steel, and ceramic for bathrooms, as well as linoleum for flooring. These selections not only prioritize durability but also simplify maintenance through features like waterproofing and low porosity. To ensure these materials are installed effectively, it is essential to engage skilled labour for the best results. Architects mentioned that research related to materials, suppliers, and construction systems were a significant part of their mandate.
- Anticiper les besoins de Anticipate maintenance needs by storing replacement materials when storage space permits. If possible, include an annual maintenance budget in funding requests to ensure building longevity and avoid accumulating costly repairs. This includes having dedicated maintenance staff, which community organizations particularly appreciate. Generally, grants allocated for community building construction should include anticipated and dedicated maintenance costs.
- Favour standardized and local materials to facilitate replacements. Architects often specify materials from specialized suppliers, complicating the supply of replacement parts (e.g., hinges, lighting fixtures, non-standard doors, and curtains). For example, choosing non-standardized doors and windows often entails longer delays and higher costs, which can lead to security and well-being issues for residents.

Standards and Regulations

Municipal Regulations

Studies conducted show that there were no significant issues related to zoning regulations. These rules determine the types of permitted activities (such as residential, commercial, and industrial), maximum building heights, setbacks, density, minimum lot sizes, and the number of housing units allowed. This is partly because cities can amend their requirements for public health reasons, such as allowing emergency shelters and housing.

However, research shows that real obstacles lie in the administrative processes at the borough level (permit applications, Urban Planning Advisory Committee, heritage requirements), which can be very costly for organizations. Thus, despite the project team's efforts to reduce costs, adapting to municipal requirements often results in budget overruns. For example, in Case Study #1, only the building's façade was preserved, representing about 10% of the original structure. Despite retaining this element, the applicable regulations were still those for new construction. This regulatory ambiguity, combined with the back and forth administrative processes, negatively impacted the project's progress, complicating communication and exchanges and resulting in delays and additional costs.

In the modular construction project, a major constraint was the requirement for a masonry façade, such as stone or brick. Faced with a tight timeline, the architects collaborated with suppliers abroad to develop an innovative solution that would meet these requirements while respecting the project schedule. They implemented an assembly method based on the installation of prefabricated masonry panels, whose rapid installation allowed them to avoid the challenges of winter site conditions (such as scaffolding and heating). The city accepted this alternative to a traditional brick façade.

Universal Accessibility

Time constraints related to construction, such as a fast 18-month timeline or site limitations (e.g., required number of units), can impact the accessibility of a building. For example, in two of the case studies, universal accessibility could not be achieved due to limited space or budget constraints.

Nevertheless, the participating architects expressed appreciation for having received project assessment services from Société Logique, consultants who specialize in universal accessibility.

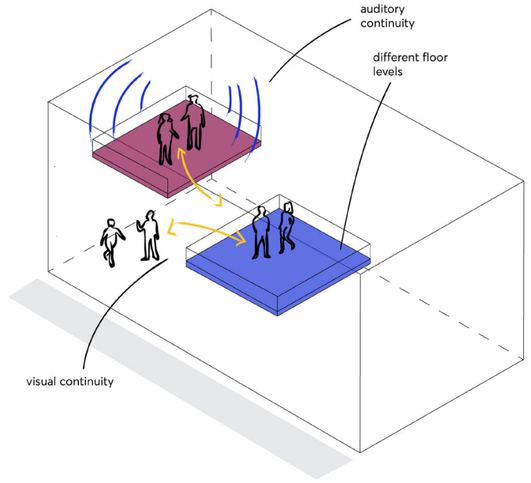


FIGURE G | INTERCONNECTED FLOORS

National Building Code (NBC)

Architects are responsible for ensuring fire safety in buildings, taking into account their use and occupancy. The National Building Code of Canada (NBC) establishes the national standards, but each province and territory can adapt these requirements to meet their specific needs. It may be necessary to work with code consultants to identify innovative strategies or to request equivalent or alternative compliance measures.

In one project, the architects proposed the inclusion of interconnected floor spaces (see NBC, Section 3.2.8), which are defined as areas where several floors are open to one another, without traditional fire separation. This conceptual choice was based on principles of peer monitoring, intended to promote residents' safety through sound connectivity between floors. However, interconnected floor spaces are typically prohibited in residential or care facilities due to the increased risk of fire and smoke spreading.

To justify this design approach, the architects argued that the social safety of residents took precedence over a strict application of fire safety codes. To comply with regulatory requirements, the building was designed to meet enhanced institutional safety standards, including the installation of sprinklers, adapted signage, fire-rated doors, and other safety features to offset the absence of traditional separations. This example demonstrates the potential to reconcile code compliance, physical safety, and the social safety needs of residents.

In Case Study #1, a dual-signal fire alarm system was installed in collaboration with the local fire department. Though less common, this system helps reduce nuisance alarms triggered by frequent resident activities (e.g., smoke or steam), thereby minimizing disruptions for residents, neighbours, and emergency services.

Processus and Collaborative Design

Expanding the Mandate of Architects

In standard contracts, architects' mandates are typically limited to design and construction. However, several practices can enrich their role and impact throughout the project. Professional orders (architecture, engineering, etc.) could be mobilized to propose the integration of these practices into regular mandates.

- Pre-project feasibility studies: It is rare for feasibility studies to be conducted early on to explore various site layout options. The lack of available or suitable land can affect the overall quality of the final project. As spatial planning experts, architects should play a more active role in the early stages of projects. This includes functional and technical programming, site analysis, and co-creation. By getting involved upstream, architects can offer valuable guidance to the sponsoring organization about the potential and risks associated with a specific site.

- Post-occupancy evaluations: Many architects who participated in the research mentioned not having had the opportunity to visit or assess the project after it was occupied. Yet, this post-occupancy evaluation phase is essential for improving the architectural impact and practice. It allows for the collection of direct feedback and the adaptation of methodologies for future projects. These evaluations could take various forms and be conducted at different strategic moments over time, with varying degrees of hindsight on implementation, occupancy, and user appropriation.

Alignment Between Architects and Community Organization

The architects and the organizations involved emphasized the importance of a project team sharing a common vision and values. The sponsoring organizations preferred architectural firms whose values were aligned with their own. Some architecture firms even chose to offer reduced rates or make donations to support the organizations. Beyond a traditional mandate, this can be seen as a true collaboration or partnership.

In one of the projects (Case Study #3), the architects demonstrated strong commitment from the early stages by conducting consultations with future residents and going door-to-door in the neighbourhood. This community-based approach helped ensure the project was better aligned with the specific needs of the residents. The architecture firm continues to visit the site regularly to assess its functionality and maintain a connection with the community. Finally, the architects mentioned that having a dedicated, knowledgeable, and engaged person within the lead organization who followed the project from design to completion greatly facilitated its implementation.

Involving Residents

Residents play a crucial role in articulating their needs and aspirations for an ideal living environment. Their insights are invaluable in shaping communities that truly reflect their desires. However, co-designing housing with residents can be complex –particularly when future residents are not yet known. In transitional housing, resident turnover also means that individual needs may change over time.

- Co-creation and participation in consultations: Architects are often in contact with residents only through intermediary organizations. However, research shows that there are significant differences between those who work in the space (managers, support staff, maintenance personnel, cooks, etc.) and those who live there, such as the residents. Some architects emphasize that it is essential not to limit consultations to intermediaries, but to involve residents directly in the design process to better understand their specific needs.

« For them, it was important that beyond price or experience, there was a genuine fit. Since we would be working together over a long period, the human and social dimensions really mattered. They wanted to be sure they could truly trust their partners.» —Architect

- Self-build (directly managing the construction): Although self-build approaches are rarely encouraged, they hold real potential: they allow residents to participate directly in creating their "home" while also developing new skills. Involving residents in the construction process can strengthen their sense of self-determination and validate their investment in a space they inhabit daily. Such an approach, however, requires a specific kind of architectural design. For example, one that favours simplified assemblies to enable unskilled workers to collaborate with contractors and a range of tradespeople (e.g., carpenters, plumbers, electricians).

Trauma-informed Approaches

The project architects, in collaboration with the community organization, employed various trauma-informed design strategies (see **see Appendix A - Design concepts**), described in the following paragraphs.

Case Study #1

A design approach that intentionally moved away from institutional language (e.g., hospitals, prisons, youth centres) was prioritized to create a more welcoming and safer environment for residents. Window sizes were increased beyond minimum standards to ensure greater access to natural light. A lightweight aluminum cladding was chosen for the exterior to avoid an institutional look. A landscaped inner courtyard was incorporated into the project, designed to provide a visual opening through the rooming house and enhance a sense of openness and connection with the outdoors. A rear exterior staircase was incorporated to enhance safety and improve circulation. To maintain an open and inviting atmosphere, a perforated screen was used in place of an opaque fence. Efforts were made to incorporate wood into the furnishings and to use colourful signage, avoiding a monochrome, austere palette. Finally, material choices were carefully balanced between durability and comfort. Rather than opting for commercial-grade ceramic tiles, the team chose rolled vinyl flooring, more suited to residential use, which offers better water resistance, easier maintenance, and a warmer atmosphere.

Case Study #3

This case demonstrates the promising potential of trauma-informed design principles. Many design decisions were thoughtfully co-constructed with the user community, a key aspect of this approach. The following points summarize the conceptual choices made by the architectural team:

Non-institutional materials, including wood and fabric, were used at strategic points throughout the building. Particular attention was given to lighting, with a focus on using varied light sources, avoiding fluorescent lighting, and integrating dimmers to control light intensity. Round, diffused, or perimeter lighting fixtures were prioritized.

A key feature of the design is its clear and intuitive layout: a central corridor divides the building into two wings [one for intervention services and common areas, the other for residential studios. In addition to being fully accessible by ramp and elevator, the layout makes it easy for residents to orient themselves within the building. This spatial clarity reinforces the distinction between living and support spaces, contributing to a sense of privacy. Two points of access are always provided, ensuring residents are not forced to remain in spaces where they feel unsafe.

A diverse range of shared spaces was included, such as a lounge, a multipurpose room, a study area, a gym and fitness room and an outdoor terrace. A large open-concept kitchen with multiple appliances (two refrigerators, secured shelves with locks, two microwaves, four ovens, etc.) is visually connected to the dining area, which features two large tables. It was noted that additional seating options, such as smaller tables for one or two people, would have been ideal, as large communal tables can feel intimidating. The dining room also features a bulletin board that displays the programming, ongoing and upcoming activities and shared announcements.

A large laundry room was planned in the basement. One of the four washer/dryer sets is reserved for pet items, and a dedicated dog-washing station is also included.

Individual studios feature a single bed, private bathroom, and desk. A mix of open shelving and closed storage options, such as closets and drawers, has been integrated. Each studio includes a kitchenette with a microwave and countertop. In the bathroom, indirect lighting is provided by a frosted glass panel between the shower and the bedroom. A bulletin board was also added near the bed for displaying art, photographs, or decorations. Each studio has adjustable heating.

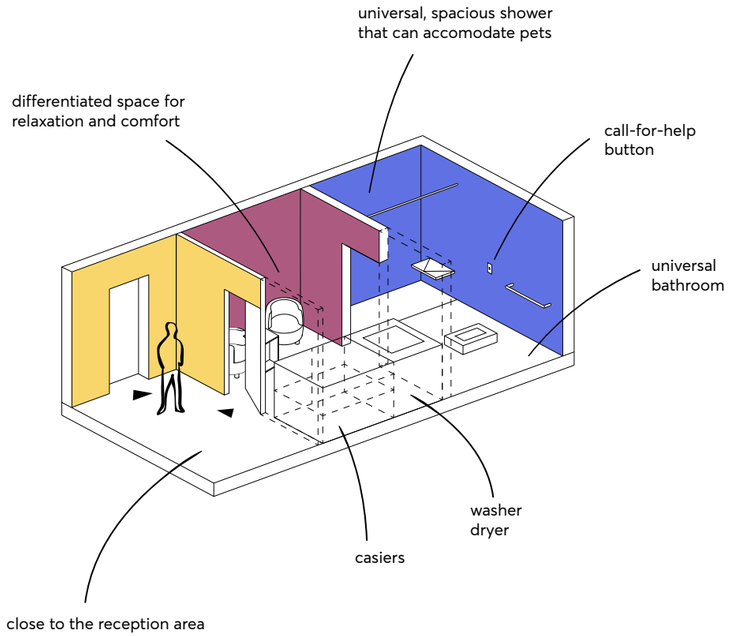


FIGURE H | RESIDENTS' RECEPTION AREA

The main reception desk is open and visible upon entry into the building. A secondary reception area is located in the basement to support the arrival of new residents. This space includes a washer/dryer, shower, toilet, eating area, and a lounge. This welcoming environment helps reduce stress for new residents transitioning into the space, allowing them to gradually move into their studio.

Four studios in the basement are designated for urgent housing needs, allowing individuals to stay for a maximum of three months.

These design choices clearly aim to incorporate the perspectives of those directly affected while exploring and suggesting possible solutions. However, these approaches may not be suitable for all facilities and are not exhaustive.

Needs-Based Funding

Real Construction Costs

Our interviews with architects reveal a gap between the expectations and needs of community organizations and the actual costs of construction. Public funding envelopes do not keep pace with market rates and are not updated quickly enough. For example, in 2023, estimates as low as $180 per square metre were found, while actual market costs were closer to $300 per square metre.

Funding Through Grants and Subsidies

The budget is often one of the main constraints shaping design choices. Some housing funding programs, such as the Programme d'Habitation Abordable Québec (PHAQ)/the Quebec Affordable Housing Program, do not include budgets for community support (see Appendix A –Key Concepts in Social work) or for the creation of shared spaces within the housing project. Among the research case studies, the only project that was able to incorporate a significant proportion of shared spaces (Case Study #3) was largely financed by private foundations. In contrast, in case studies primarily funded through public programs, the proportion of common spaces was significantly reduced.

This poses important challenges for both architects and community organizations. Moreover, the budgets allocated for project professionals (architects, consultants, engineers, etc.) are far from sufficient to meet the actual needs of these organizations.

Summary of Findings

After presenting the findings derived from the expressed needs and observed design practices in detail through descriptive texts, summary tables, charts and visual illustrations (drawings and photographs), this section offers a cross-sectional reading of these materials. The goal is to identify common themes, shared tensions, and reveal complementarities across the various experiences analyzed.
A first look at the case studies shows that in the context of designing spaces for people with diverse needs, no universal solution can be imposed. The complexity of constraints—whether physical, institutional, financial, or human—requires instead a diversity of options, significant flexibility, and thoughtful discernment. Indeed, the cases have shown that the high number of constraints and sometimes contradictory needs make it impossible to design spaces that suit everyone (residents and staff alike). Project managers must therefore demonstrate foresight and take responsibility for the compromises made. The findings highlight the impact of compromises on residents' well-being and strategies to support their adoption. Additionally, we present several areas of research that remain underexplored.

FIGURE I | COLLECTIVE GARDEN, #2-A
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Community Support Plays a Crucial Role in the Case Studies

If residential instability is a common vulnerability among the interviewees, it is crucial to acknowledge the varied identities and life experiences of all residents who contributed to this research. In this regard, the selected case studies helped us better understand the specific needs of various communities, such as 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, people who use substances, older adults, youth, and migrants. Most interviewees experience multiple intersecting vulnerabilities. As such, diverse and adaptable spatial responses grounded in an intersectional approach are essential.

In terms of spatial design, this translates into consulting and co-creating living environments with the people directly affected (see PART B). It is essential to reach out directly to the people who will occupy the space: future residents and staff. These individuals, who will inhabit the space on a daily basis, are best positioned to inform designers and planners. Because there is often a disconnect between the experience of living in a space and that of working in it, residents must be placed at the heart of consultations, without intermediaries. On the intervention side, taking these vulnerabilities into account means offering tailored community support within the housing resources themselves. The range of services differs across the organizations studied and reflects the needs of the residents. In some cases, community support would benefit from being more adaptable and evolving in response to the changing needs and aspirations of residents. This support can be informed and inspired by the values and capacities of the users themselves.

In all the case studies, community support emerged as essential for helping with daily life, navigating systems, and managing major transitions. This support is best delivered in intimate and confidential spaces designed for one-on-one meetings. Shared common areas also act as spaces where support from staff or peers can be fostered. For example, residents of Case Study #2B benefit from an adjacent day centre, whereas those in Case Study #2A lack this type of space; their only shared interior room is small and only accessible when a staff member is present.

« Because we hear a lot of talk like 'We're going to build social housing, we're going to do this, we're going to do that.' Okay—but that's not going to solve homelessness. If you take someone who has lived on the street for ten years and put them in housing, I can tell you: they're not necessarily going to thank you, and everything won't magically fall into place. (…) The goal is for people to have choices. But we can't just say, 'We'll put someone in a unit and that will fix everything,' because that's not true. There are things that need to be put in place. For people who are experiencing homelessness, I believe there also needs to be support—there needs to be flexibility in how things are done » —Intervention worker

FIGURE J | APARTEMENT, #2-B
© ANONYMOUS, 2024

Personal Space: A Fundamental Starting Point, Not Just an Endpoint

Unanimously, having a space of one's own is experienced as a relief. The privacy of this space contributes to a sense of safety: residents can be alone without intrusion from staff or non-residents. It is a space they can personalize to reflect their identity. The importance placed on private space also extends to the immediate outdoor environment: balconies are widely appreciated, revealing a broader need for accessible, intimate, and safe outdoor spaces directly connected to the living space. Among people who use substances or identify as 2SLGBTQ+, this need often stems from the lack of safe public spaces where they can carry out everyday activities such as using substances, building relationships, expressing their identity and so forth.
Across all cases, it also became clear that residents' needs cannot be met solely within the housing complex itself. A living environment is not just an apartment one can lock: it also refers to spaces and social ties built within the neighbourhood. Outreach programs, along with networks of solidarity that connect local affinity spaces and community groups to nearby drop-in centres, play a vital role in enhancing the daily lives of participants. These resources foster a supportive environment that empowers individuals and encourages a sense of community. Nightlife is an integral part of certain communities for whom the typical 9-to-5 schedule of support workers is inadequate. The presence of night staff appears beneficial in environments where the need for protection is stronger. This support can also be relayed by peers, neighbours, mobile night teams, or nearby overnight services. Similarly, planners and designers must understand neighbourhood dynamics and intervene in a complementary manner, as previously mentioned.

Living in the Long Term

Design and spatial layout are key factors in residents' desire and ability to remain in a space over the long term. Research clearly shows that people with access to a double room or a 3½-type apartment (which typically consists of one bedroom, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom) experience greater comfort, compared to single rooms or studio units, making their space more conducive to stable, long-term occupancy. Conversely, although some projects succeeded in maximizing the number of units, the limited size of these spaces often undermines residential stability and restricts the ability to transition into permanent housing. For example, in Case Study #3, residents are unable to prepare for their next housing step due to the lack of storage space. In Case Study #1, only the residents living in double rooms expressed a desire to stay in the long term. The quality and sufficient size of living spaces are crucial for residential stability and well-being, as reported by participants. The maximization of unit numbers is often achieved at the expense of attractive shared spaces. Access to common areas also depends on the type of funding (see Design Practices: Key Findings).

Generally, residents do not value ground-floor units due to privacy and safety concerns. Fear of break-ins and being visible to passersby are significant concerns for many. As a result, residents tend to keep windows closed or curtains drawn, which reduces comfort. Ground-floor units are often reserved for people with reduced mobility or autonomy—especially in buildings without elevators due to site or budget constraints. Many people with lived experience of homelessness would prefer to live on upper floors rather than at street level. In one case study, the ground-floor units were often left vacant.

Research confirms that applying trauma-informed design principles increases the likelihood that living spaces will meet the needs of people who have experienced homelessness. However, this approach must go beyond aesthetic or technical considerations, such as using calming colours or soft lighting. To be truly transformative, it must be grounded in a co-design process with future residents, informing both the spatial layout and the support practices. Case Study #3 illustrates the limitations of this approach: while residents generally appreciated the physical environment, some continued to experience stress related to organizational dynamics, such as a lack of control over their daily lives, constant surveillance or restrictive rules.

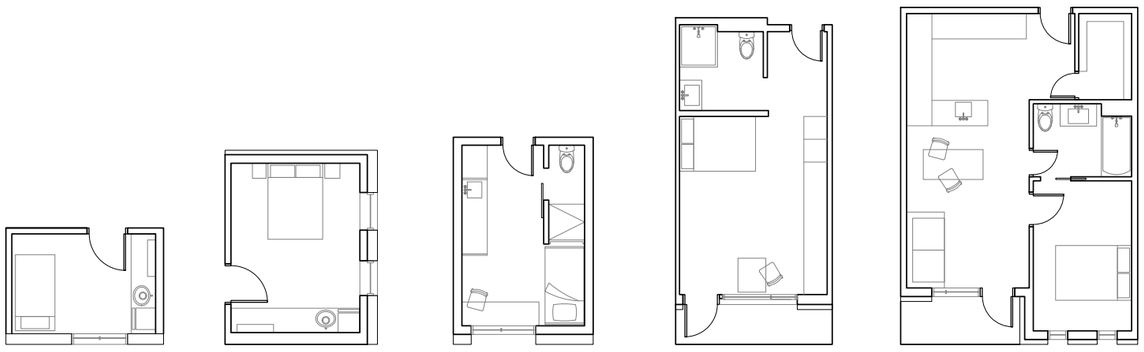

FIGURE K | PLANS OF HOUSING UNITS #1, 2 ET 3

The floor plans of the housing units are shown here in ascending order, from the smallest to the largest area.

Identifying and Prioritizing Needs in an Intervention Framework

One of the key contributions of this research is documenting the needs expressed by individuals living in the four studied projects. Tensions in shared spaces or conflicts in cohabitation often arise when specific needs go unmet. When efforts are made to meet those needs, tensions tend to decrease. Manfred Max-Neef argues that the needs he identifies in his Human Scale Development model are non-hierarchical, meaning all needs are equally important.

However, having been influenced by Maslow's (1943) hierarchical model of needs, we tend to reproduce this hierarchy and impose it on ourselves and in our society. Yet, for people experiencing homelessness, a different framework often informs which needs are prioritized: those they choose to pursue are the ones they can reasonably hope to meet, regardless of their status in conventional hierarchies. Needs may change daily, for example, people living outdoors might sometimes prioritize their personal safety over their sleep.

In this context, it is not helpful to insist on prioritizing so-called basic needs (food, water, sleep, safety) over "secondary" or "tertiary" needs such as relationships, self-esteem and self-actualization. A person may choose to stay on the street with their partner, rather than be separated from them, just to secure housing. From a Max-Neef perspective, their need for connection is just as important as their need for housing; in that moment, they prioritize the one that is currently attainable (staying with their partner) since the other cannot be realized. If we had remained anchored in a hierarchical model, we might conclude that the individual made a "poor" decision, prioritizing a "secondary" need (the relationship) over a "primary" one (housing). By rejecting this hierarchy, we instead recognize that the needs individuals highlight are those they either can or choose to meet. This model has helped us perceive a significant disconnect between the needs these individuals express and act upon and the needs that others, such as service providers, administrators, and funders, assume are most important.

Max-Neef also identifies nine fundamental human needs, emphasizing their interrelatedness. Our analysis reflects this interconnectivity, which is frequently manifested as porous boundaries between categories of needs.

Discrepancies arise when one group projects its assumptions onto another. For example, service providers may define the needs of resource users without their input. Porosity, in turn, is experienced by individuals when a strategy adopted to meet one need simultaneously engages others. For example, someone who uses substances safely may be meeting needs related to subsistence through consumption, protection through safety, and relational aspects such as affection or understanding by seeking non-judgment from others. In this case, multiple needs are at play, and various strategies are mobilized to meet them.

This interconnectivity and porosity between needs also led to certain needs being underrepresented in our analysis. Because our research focused specifically on the experience of "inhabiting" in relation to the built environment, it likely contains blind spots in terms of how people experiencing homelessness articulate and navigate their full range of needs. As with any ideal-type model, the categories we used are imperfect and sometimes forced—but they nonetheless provide a helpful framework for grasping broader patterns amidst the complexity of human experience.

Research Avenues

Certain specific needs emerged during the research and deserve more focused attention.

First, **hoarding** appeared as a significant issue in two of the case studies. However, staff members are not trained to address hoarding behaviours. Existing practices such as forced "clean-outs" are traumatic for individuals who hoard.

Harm reduction, although well established as an intervention practice in many communities, is often only vaguely reflected in the design of spaces. For example, safety in the layout for people who use inhalable and injectable drugs requires more careful consideration. A deeper investigation into consumption practices could help identify safer and more comfortable spatial configurations for users.

The **presence of animals** in living environments influences cohabitation. However, there is still little information available on design and intervention practices that account for animal presence. In one housing facility, a dog shower was specifically installed in the laundry room. Residents also proposed green spaces adjacent to or integrated into the site to allow animals to go outdoors.

Conflicts between residents and support workers reflect the tension between "home" and "intervention space." For some individuals, the workers' approach is reassuring and validating; for others, it feels clinical or inappropriate. Similarly, surveillance cameras create a sense of safety for some, but for others, they evoke discomfort and a lack of real privacy. These differences in perceptions of care and surveillance deserve greater consideration.

There are also **contradictions** between the intention to create a domestic, homelike space and the need to choose robust, durable materials that may evoke institutional or even carceral environments. These choices can limit residents' ability to feel genuinely at home and to develop a personal, emotional, and secure relationship with the space. At the same time, some residents are the ones who advocate for these choices. For instance, some prefer plastic or metal furniture over wood to prevent bed bug infestations. Some may favour metal doors for the sense of security they provide. Again, consultation allows for tailored compromises that reflect the realities of residents.

FIGURE L | STORAGE #2-B

The **reuse of existing buildings** is generally perceived, both in the design process and in the occupancy experience, as an asset in residential settings. In contrast, perceptions of modular construction are more ambivalent and merit further exploration. For example, several individuals noted that modular units feel small and are perceived as "cheap" or "rushed." The long-term durability of modular buildings is frequently questioned.

Municipal regulations and building codes act as normative frameworks that complicate and burden the design process. Research into flexible mechanisms tailored to the realities of community organizations—mechanisms that could accelerate project timelines without compromising safety—would be especially valuable.

Finally, **death**, which is often violent, is a constant presence in these living environments and communities. The need for end-of-life care and grief support appears important for both residents and staff members.

PART B

Design Processes and Research-Creation

Additional Findings

Complementary Activities

In PART B of this research, which focuses on post-occupancy studies, a traditional fieldwork approach was primarily used, in line with the methods outlined in the **Research Statement**. However, this section was also shaped by various activities conducted over the past three years, including the design services offered by Architecture Without Borders Quebec, the establishment of a community of practice, and a research-creation component.

Findings from the design support service and the community of practice are briefly described and illustrated in the following section. They emphasize co-creation methods, as well as interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration.

Then, findings from the participatory project Ideal Space: Rethinking Urban Living are summarized in the Research-Creation section. Several approaches and workshops conducted as part of this component are detailed in the exhibition catalogue (In)visible: Design Through the Prism of Homelessness.

Design Processes: Key Findings

Design and Planning Service

Between 2021 and 2024, the Urban Solidarity team carried out several design and co-creation projects with various community organizations that support individuals experiencing homelessness or precarious living conditions. These field experiences contributed to the development of practices and tools adapted to this context. Working with a community that has little access to design services impacted how the project was presented, how clients were engaged, and how concepts were communicated.

- 30 completed design projects.
- Furniture design, minor renovations, interior transformations, exterior design, ideation, and advocacy.
- Areas of focus included food security, homelessness, workforce integration, social and circular economy, and support for migrants with precarious status.

The Particularity of a Built Project

The participatory methods employed in the design service draw from social ethnography, participatory action research, and cultural mediation. However, what distinguishes the service is the goal of delivering a built outcome—such as a renovation, space transformation, or reconfiguration. As such, participatory processes are shaped by the project's budgetary, regulatory and technical constraints. These methods also require more time than a conventional approach, which can impact project timelines and necessitate careful scheduling. This focus on delivering a tangible outcome may limit the full deployment of participatory approaches, but it also enhances their impact by providing a clear and meaningful goal for participants to work towards.

Due to the many constraints involved in implementing a design project, embedding a transversal co-creation process often remains aspirational or ideal rather than fully integrated into a project structure. The contribution of participatory approaches varies depending on the project's nature, organizational culture and the parameters mentioned earlier.

Nonetheless, gathering around participatory methods with a shared goal of delivering a concrete project brings added value to these processes. For participants, the results are tangible and delivered in the short to medium term, offering a more direct impact than research projects, which often yield longer-term or indirect effects.

Continuous Participatory Approaches

Participatory methods within the design support service go beyond consultations or co-creation sessions. The approach integrates multiple strategies across the project phases, including participant observation while volunteering for a day, consultation, co-creation, solidarity worksite or participatory workdays, and space appropriation.

The Urban Solidarity team also emphasizes learning about the partner organization's day-to-day work, while minimizing demands on their time to avoid unjustified over-solicitation.

Strategies include subscribing to newsletters, following on social media, attending public events, and reviewing annual reports. Spending more time on-site was found to be one of the most effective ways to strengthen participation and realize its full potential. It deepens understanding of needs and aspirations, allowing for an iterative process and gradual expansion of interventions.

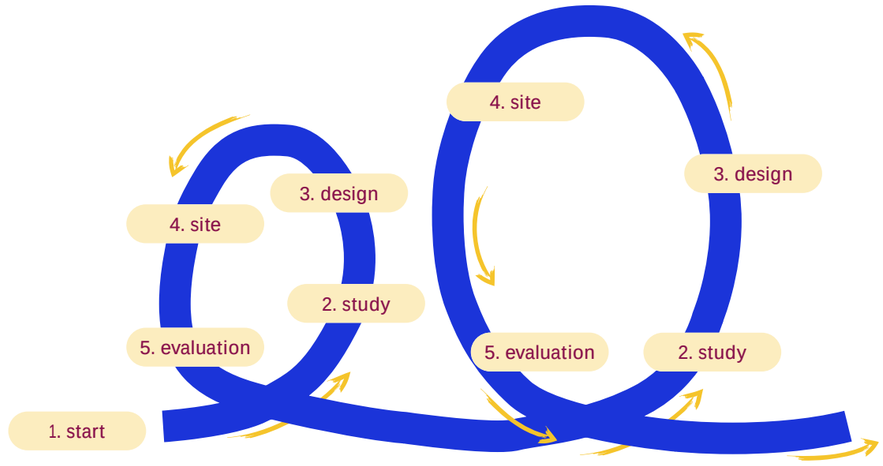

FIGURE B1 | ITERATIVE AND EXPANSIVE PROCESS

This diagram illustrates the iterative and expansive process through ongoing participatory approaches within the framework of a design project.

Decision-Making

Participatory processes in community design projects face a structural reality: although space or service users are consulted and involved, final decision-making does not usually rest with them. These projects are structured as services, with agreements between the designers (AWBQ) and the client, which is the community organization. Representatives are typically operational staff members, such as directors or administrative personnel. This reinforces existing hierarchical relationships and limits the project's democratic reach. Even if projects focus on the needs and aspirations of the people directly affected (thanks to participatory methods), this does not necessarily lead to a redistribution of decision-making power.

Workdays as Integrative Tools

Solidarity worksites or participatory workdays are a powerful tool for integrating collaborative processes in community design projects. Originally introduced as a cost-saving strategy for simple tasks, they draw from reuse approaches and DIY practices. Workdays can bring together a mix of people: volunteer architects (recruited by AWBQ), community volunteers, people who use the organization's services, team members and even professional tradespeople (carpenters, painters, etc.). The project phases—need identification, co-design, co-building, animation, and appropriation—are seamlessly integrated to enhance collaboration. This approach prioritizes the contributions of all participants, promotes mutual understanding, and advances collective ownership throughout the process.

For instance, workdays at Tlachiuak Art Coop—a project by and for Indigenous artists experiencing housing precarity—brought together artists, muralists, and designers for tasks such as cleaning, painting and small-scale work. These events demonstrated how food, art, and even pets created a warm, convivial atmosphere, making the process enjoyable for everyone.

FIGURE B2 | PARTICIPATORY WORK DAY AT ART COOP TLACHIUAK

Some design projects lend themselves better to participatory methods than others

Projects involving changes to living spaces are ideal for consultation, co-creation, and co-construction. People feel invested in shaping their environment, and interest is high. Interior design projects often work well with these types of workdays. For example, two transformations of shared spaces at Le Chaînon (a women's shelter) succeeded thanks to strong participation. Art workshops led to the creation of a gallery wall, and furniture and finishes were selected collaboratively.

Projects that require an in-depth understanding of a specific use or reality also benefit from participatory methods. This was also true for the new sorting centre of Les Valoristes (a cooperative focused on bottle deposit collection), where the layout was co-developed with its members. Their input was essential due to the site's operational complexity.

Conversely, projects with significant technical or regulatory constraints that require the involvement of several building professionals are less conducive to participatory approaches. For example, in the kitchen renovation at the Comité d'Éducation aux Adultes de la Petite-Bourgogne et de Saint-Henri (CÉDA), installing a commercial kitchen hood limited opportunities for co-creation. However, consultations were still held to assess circulation and layout. Even in such cases, collaborative moments can serve to share knowledge and explain technical constraints to participants.

In certain first-line service settings that assist people facing extreme precariousness, participatory methods were intentionally minimized to prevent overburdening already stretched staff or individuals in survival mode. This was the case at La Porte Ouverte emergency shelter, where the goal was to deliver a new infirmary quickly.

Some Key Strategies for Meaningful Participation:

- Share meals or snacks to build relationships and spark discussion
- Offer financial compensation for participants with expertise gained from their lived experience
- Include a range of tasks requiring various skills and levels of complexity
- Co-organize and mutualize resources and tools
- Create a welcoming atmosphere with music, photos and videos
- Allow children and pets (with a safe zone)
- Intentionally challenge biases and hierarchies, while acknowledging this requires continuous effort
- Use inclusive language and make multilingual communication possible when needed, according to participants' backgrounds

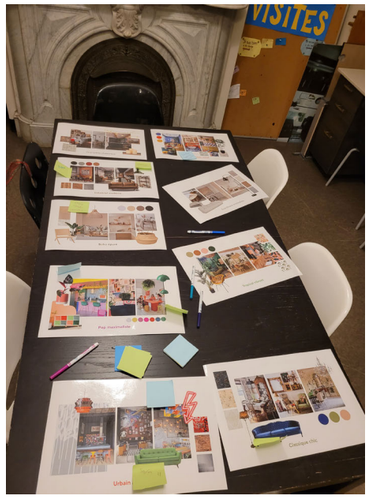

FIGURE B3 | CO-CREATION SESSION

These two photos illustrate consultation sessions with the youth from the organization En Marge 12-17, in Montreal.

Community of Practice

Beginning in early 2024, the Urban Solidarity team launched a community of practice titled Fostering Participation: Toward Inclusive Design Projects. The community of practice convenes monthly, bringing together participants from research, design, cultural mediation, and community outreach. They exchange ideas about participatory methods—both their potential and their challenges, limitations, and risks.

- 14 meetings
- 12 regular participants
- 1 urban walk
- 2 community organization visits
- 6 presentations by participants showcasing their work

Coordination Hub for Horizontal Management

After experimenting with different structures and governance models, we concluded that designating a coordinating entity (organization or group of individuals) was key to fostering and maintaining engagement. Coordination tasks may include managing communication channels, scheduling and organizing sessions (dates and locations), and documenting discussions. This structure enables the group to maintain horizontal dynamics in decisions regarding recruitment, themes, topics and formats, while also facilitating easier organization and management.

Knowledge Transfer, Practice Sharing and Learning From Experience

The community of practice model is particularly relevant in contexts that aim to develop participatory approaches and foster collaboration among actors seeking to connect, share learning, generate knowledge, and improve practice. For its members, the community of practice provides a space to explore ideas and methods with peers working on similar issues, sharing ethical dilemmas, doubts, best practices, and lessons learned. It also helps reduce "disciplinary silos," which refers to the lack of collaboration between different fields of knowledge, and it can inspire new initiatives within the community itself. By collaborating with peers, a practitioner can broaden their perspective, challenge assumptions, and draw inspiration from innovative, evidence-based methods in other fields. The community of practice supports a shared objective by creating a space where participants can listen, observe, adapt, and collaboratively develop new ways of doing things.

Blending Formal and Informal Structures for Richer Exchanges

Structured activities such as presentations, urban walks, or themed workshops can help mobilize members and foster reflection. However, to make the most of the community of practice, it is also essential to create space for informal and spontaneous exchanges. The most successful sessions were those held outdoors or in public spaces, using a looser format. While some sessions offered rich content, overly rigid formats (like formal presentations with visual aids) left little room for discussion beyond scheduled breaks.

To achieve a balance between formality and informality, we implemented several straightforward strategies. These include :

- Allowing members to suggest themes, locations, and formats that work best for them;
- Minimizing the use of instructional tools;
- Incorporating shared meals;
- Occasionally changing venues; and
- Poviding user-friendly materials for facilitation and collaboration, such as whiteboards, sticky notes, and sketches.

This combination of formal and informal elements makes the community of practice more inclusive, dynamic, and effective, allowing everyone to contribute in their own way while ensuring the continuity of shared knowledge.

FIGURE B4 | URBAN WALK
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As part of this community of practice session, an urban walk was conducted.

Mobilization: Having a Common Goal

The most successful sessions were those with clearly defined themes that aligned with participants' interests and expertise, encouraging targeted engagement.

Several members noted that having access to session topics in advance allowed them to reflect on the topics in the context of their own daily practices and bring concrete examples to enrich the discussion. While some topics resonate more with specific members, they often spark fruitful and wide-ranging conversations.

That said, diverging expectations regarding the community's outputs sometimes hindered mobilization. For instance, some members hoped for the development of a best-practice guide, while others felt that many topics were not suited to a standardized toolkit.

As a result, the group collectively chose not to pursue that path, opting instead to respond on a case-by-case basis depending on the context, location and communities involved. It is thus crucial to democratically define both the topics to be addressed and the intended outcomes of the community of practice, its short- and medium-term goals, as well as its future evolution in terms of organization and documentation to ensure its sustainability.

Structures of Experience: Embracing On-the-Ground Realities

In planning and design, research offers various avenues to share knowledge, including conferences and publications, as well as to engage in peer learning through seminars and roundtables. For practitioners, opportunities for exchange are fewer, and the formats for disseminating their work often limit them to being represented by others, without the possibility of articulating critical feedback or highlighting their questions.

However, practitioners across fields have much to share in advancing knowledge, and their experience holds great value for collective projects. The community of practice provides an ideal format to mobilize the expertise of practitioners and people on the ground. It has the potential to become a space rich for dialogue and a catalyst for socially engaged, innovative projects. Bringing together people from research, design and community-based sectors, the community of practice fosters the discovery of new vocabularies, a deeper understanding of key concepts and opportunities to reuse this language in ways that enhance communication among diverse partners involved in our practices.

FIGURE B5 | MEETING NOTES
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Traces of a community of practice meeting.

Research-Creation: Key Findings

Ideal Space: Rethinking Urban Living

As part of the research-creation component, AWBQ developed collaborative design activities. Collaborative design is a participatory research method aimed at democratizing access to the architectural design process for those most directly affected.

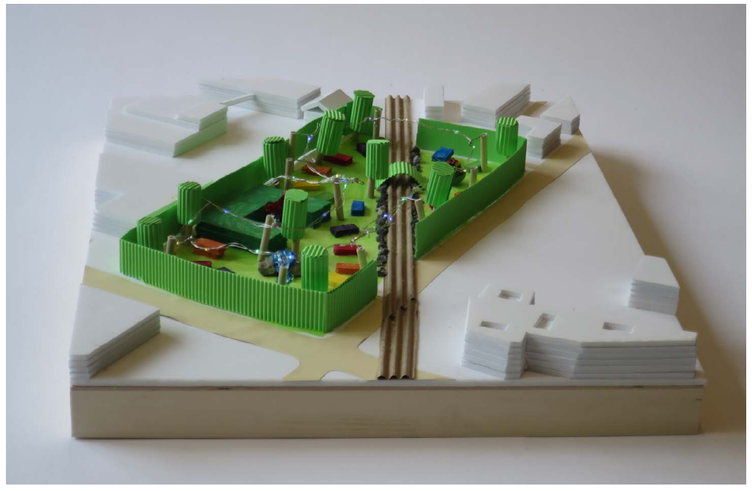

FIGURE B6 | MODEL BY MAFALDA, PROJECT LEGO-ECO-LOCO

This collaborative design project sought to envision alternative spaces of solidarity that address the needs and aspirations of individuals who inhabit the city in diverse ways. The Dehors de Dehors Collective comprises engaged individuals with lived experience of homelessness and expertise in collaborative research, originating from the F.A.C.E. research team (Force. Action. Change. Equity) at Université de Sherbrooke. This project, created by, for, and with people living on the street, was co-developed with researcher Caroline Leblanc.

Through a series of creative workshops held over several months (2023–2024), which combined discussion, collage, drawing, and model-making, each member designed their ideal space, selecting the site, scale, and design process. These individual proposals stemmed from a shared definition of "inhabiting" and "home," rooted in a collective vision of a more inclusive and supportive city. The process enabled the identification of needs and aspirations, while highlighting the diverse lived experiences of homelessness.

Developing Adapted Programming

The projects developed by the Collective include a wide range of housing types, including tiny houses, tent platforms, parking lots, shipping containers, self-built trailers, as well as transitional and permanent housing. They also emphasize a diversity of spaces, where various atmospheres and uses can coexist. These various services should be accessible in public spaces, emergency shelters, community spaces, and housing environments:

- Parking lots:

Secure areas where people can sleep in their vehicles. Ideally equipped with electricity and drinking water (similar to campgrounds). Regulations permit day/night stays, as well as longer-term occupation, to avoid repression and municipal fines.

- Sanitary services:

Toilets, laundry and showers. Each facility must have lockable doors. These spaces should include hygiene and cleaning products, bins for consumption supplies, as well as naloxone and first aid kits.

- Food services:

Solidarity cafés or food spaces where people can "pay it forward." Emphasis on high-quality food. Also includes food basket distribution and places to cook indoors, such as a communal kitchen or outdoors with picnic tables and BBQs.

- Support services:

On-site workers or social support staff to assist with conflict de-escalation between residents and offer psychosocial support. Other services may include health care, medication, or fiduciary services for rent payments, depending on the resident's needs.

- Utilities:

Wi-Fi, electrical outlets, lockers, mailing addresses.

- Safe-consumption services:

Safe spaces for drug use (injectable, inhalable, etc.), including "trip settings" to avoid using alone, with peer surveillance.

- Social spaces:

Street cafés or community cafés with a TV, internet, computers, workshops and a library. Outdoor spaces may include a lit path or a communal fire pit.

- Workspaces:

Paid day-labour opportunities for residents and non-residents, on—or off-site: cleaning, café work, gardening, snow shovelling or art hive mediation.
Cooling shelters: Shade structures, greenery, or water basins during summer and heatwaves.

- Warming shelters:

Welcoming indoor public spaces to warm up in cold seasons, with cozy ambiance, music and rest areas. These spaces should allow people to lie down, unlike current facilities, where sitting upright is often the only option.

- Animal services:

To improve access to health, employment, or routine activities, include pet care and support services, such as pet daycare, social veterinary clinics or dog parks.

Several factors guided the choice of intervention sites:

- Anchoring in a familiar sector (functional landmarks)
- Emotional and community connections
- Identifying service gaps in the area

The projects emphasized the architectural qualities, urban aspects such as heritage rehabilitation and existing infrastructure, and natural features including vegetation, woodlands, water elements, views and terrain levels of the selected sites.

Encouraging Exchange with the Neighbourhood

Members of the group propose shared and gathering spaces to foster interaction between residents, service users and neighbourhood residents:

- Plan for community gardens, shared kitchens or art hives to build local relationships.
- Propose forming local committees composed of residents, staff, and neighbourhood members when implementing housing or service resources.

These committees could meet on a regular schedule (weekly, monthly, quarterly) to collectively resolve issues. The focus is on creative and concrete collective action, not slow-moving administrative processes that delay decision-making.

Designing at an Appropriate Scale

The projects are designed as micro-communities, with a maximum of 15 housing units. This number strikes a balance between intimacy and social interaction. Many members included container-type prefabricated units, but their layout differs significantly from conventional practice, which often involves stacking or dense alignment. Instead, units are dispersed on-site, with green buffer zones between them.

Emphasizing the Involvement of Everyone Concerned

Whether through consultation, co-design, self-build, or self-management, people who inhabit the street or in encampments want to participate in shaping adapted living environments. Even after moving in, residents want to continue participating in the process of shaping and improving their living spaces. Flexibility, adaptability and personalization of space are key elements in many proposals.

Prioritizing Community and Peer-Led Support

The presence of security staff, institutional representatives or police can trigger trauma or feelings of insecurity for people with experiences of homelessness. Several projects emphasize the importance of community-based workers and peer support.

The complete projects from the workshop are collected in the exhibition catalogue (In)visible: Design through the prism of homelessness, available on the Architecture Sans Frontières Québec website.

PART C Conclusion

Recommandations

This research project has highlighted key findings on the needs and aspirations of residents, the design practices implemented (PART A), and on design and research-creation processes related to spatial planning (PART B).

The following section presents a series of **ten** key recommendations aimed at community organizations, funders, design professionals, the housing sector, municipalities and researchers.

01

Enhance accessible and integrated support within the community

- Ensure the availability of health, food security, support, and harm reduction services directly within transitional and permanent housing settings.
- Extend this support beyond the walls of housing by developing mutual aid networks across neighbourhoods and public spaces.
- Guarantee 24/7 access to support services to better respond to residents' lived realities.
- Promote sharing and interaction with neighbours through the development of shared spaces (e.g., collective gardens, community kitchens, art hives).

02

Involve individuals with lived experience in the design, construction and management of residential environments

- Implement consultations with future residents and people with lived experience to define their current and specific needs.
- Integrate experiential knowledge, alongside professional expertise (design, social work, management, etc.), into planning and evaluation processes.
- Experiment with self-build approaches tailored to residents' capacities, in collaboration with skilled contractors and artisans. This can apply to the entire project or take place through targeted collaborative construction tasks or participatory workdays.
- Develop participation models that are sensitive to the realities of the people involved (see PART B—Design Service).

03

Create more housing adapted to diverse profiles and ways of living

- Develop living environments tailored to the specific needs of people who use substances, 2SLGBTQ+ people and aging populations, using an approach that is sensitive to intersecting forms of oppression and vulnerability. All case studies had long waiting lists.
- Promote a plurality of housing types—tiny houses, tent platforms, serviced parking lots, trailers, transitional units—that respond to a range of needs, contexts, and preferences. These solutions must be paired with utilities, such as sanitary installations, food access and supervised consumption spaces.

04

Reassess livability standards to ensure sustainable environments

- Adapt current housing standards to reflect residents' actual needs, particularly in terms of space and functionality.
- Prioritize design approaches that promote residential stability and allow people to envision long-term life in a space (e.g., including two-room layouts).
- Facilitate the transition to permanent housing through design and community support strategies such as adequate storage, staff support from move-in and beyond.

05

Optimize site development and construction methods

- Before opting for modular construction, conduct a detailed analysis of site constraints (e.g., road access, overhead infrastructure, manoeuvring space) to anticipate logistical and financial challenges.
- Evaluate how surrounding infrastructure affects the building's durability, such as vibrations from traffic and exposure to pollutants, and adjust material selections accordingly.
- Prioritize non-contaminated sites or allocate a realistic decontamination budget to avoid unforeseen costs.

06

Prioritize durable materials suited to community use

- Choose robust materials for high-impact areas, for example, wood baseboards and shock- and wear-resistant flooring.
- Prioritize locally sourced and standardized materials that are easy to find and replace to minimize delays and costs for maintenance.
- Integrate a dedicated maintenance budget and plan from the design phase, including material storage and staff training on facilities upkeep.
- Design plumbing systems that are resistant to specific uses (e.g., assisted-flush toilets, reinforced pipes, in-room floor drains).

07

Clarify and adapt municipal regulations for housing projects

- Simplify permit and approval processes to reduce administrative delays and costs for community organizations.
- Establish mechanisms to allow for more flexible application of zoning and urban planning bylaws for projects addressing urgent social needs.
- Promote a contextual and nuanced reading of fire safety standards, when architectural decisions are justified by specific needs for social safety, and consider alternative designs that still meet National Building Code (NBC) requirements.

08

Integrate trauma-informed design principles

- Develop specific design guidelines for housing environments that promote safety and a non-institutional atmosphere.
- Consult future residents during the design phase to better meet their needs and reduce barriers to space appropriation.
- Build to a scale appropriate to the neighbourhood to protect individuals' sense of privacy and home (e.g., number of units relative to services, setback from streets).
- Develop design approaches informed by cultural differences and collective experiences of trauma, such as colonial violence affecting BIPOC communities or the systemic discrimination lived by people experiencing homelessness.

09

Rethink funding and ownership mechanisms

- Adjust public program budgets to reflect rising construction costs and professional fees.
- Include dedicated funds for shared spaces and community support services in the financing of social and transitional housing.
- Safeguard community-led initiatives from real estate speculation, particularly through collective ownership models or partnerships with public and community actors.
- Shift funding criteria from “modesty” or “affordable” toward durability and adaptability.

10

Promote interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration in both research and practice

- Encourage interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaborations in both research and applied projects to address the complexity of housing-related issues better.
- Develop diverse communities of practice involving a wide range of actors (e.g., frontline workers, architects, managers, people with lived experience) to foster knowledge sharing, resource pooling, and to break down disciplinary silos.
- Systematically integrate experiential knowledge, alongside professional expertise, in the planning, design, and evaluation of living environments.
- Allocate budgets to engage specialized consultants (e.g., building code, universal accessibility, social/cultural mediation, participatory methods) to ensure inclusive, compliant, and context-sensitive design.
- Integrate feasibility studies and post-occupancy evaluations into design mandates, in close collaboration with social workers and residents, to ground projects in lived experience and ensure ongoing improvement.

FIGURE C1 | NO TITLE
© ANONYMOUS, 2024

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Appendix A—Key Concepts

This appendix defines and describes key concepts in design and social intervention to support the understanding of the post-occupancy studies presented.

Design Concepts

- Maisons de chambre
- Construction modulaire
- Requalification de bâtiments existants
- Design informé par les traumatismes
- Architecture Queer

Concepts en travail social

- Soutien communautaire
- Réduction des risques
- Trauma-informed Care
- Intervention de proximité
- Fiducies
- Haut seuil de tolérance

FIGURE C2 | KEYS
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Rooming Houses

Definition

A rooming house is a building where individual rooms are rented, and some facilities, such as kitchens, bathrooms and toilets, may be shared (RAPSIM, 2019). Rooming houses can be formal or informal. Official rooming houses, which have four or more rental rooms, are required to have a certificate of occupancy that confirms compliance with zoning regulations. The issuance of this certificate does not imply an inspection, except in cases where there is a change of use. Registered rooming houses must comply with municipal and borough housing regulations, including maintenance and sanitation, building construction and alteration, as well as provincial laws and codes, including the Construction Code, the Land Use Planning and Development Act, and the Fire Safety Act (City of Montréal, 2007). These houses can be part of either the private or social housing market. Private rooming houses operate based on market principles and are an important component of the housing stock. However, they pose several challenges, including a decline in availability, non-compliance with sanitation and safety standards, violations of tenants' rights, issues with cohabitation, and a lack of tenant support (SHQ, 2017). A significant portion of the private rooming house stock is informal, where these issues are even more pronounced. Outside the market, non-profit organizations (NPOs) own some houses and rent out rooms as social housing—often at 25% of tenants' income—and provide community support. Another category differentiates general rooming houses for diverse populations from specialized ones designed for specific groups.

Brief History

This housing typology spread in Quebec at the end of the 19th century to house workers migrating from rural areas to urban centres. The rental stock developed in central neighbourhoods near industrial zones. In the 1960s, following the deinstitutionalization and deindustrialization of the period, the profile of rooming house residents shifted. The rooms were increasingly occupied by non-salaried men formerly housed in institutions and living in poverty (DRSP, 2017). Since the 1970s, the number of private rooming houses has steadily declined, with the sharpest drop in the 1980s (City of Montréal, 2007), while demand continues to rise. For many community organizations, rooming houses are an essential common good: a housing option that prevents homelessness or helps people exit it, and a typology that suits various ways of living, whether temporarily or permanently (RAPSIM, 2019).

Modular Construction

Definition

Modular construction involves using prefabricated three-dimensional volumetric units that are mostly completed in a factory and then assembled on-site to form entire buildings or major parts of them (Lawson et al., 2014). It is generally used to create "cellular" buildings composed of similarly sized units corresponding to rooms and adapted for transport. Modular architecture projects can vary in density, from tiny house villages to multi-storey buildings.

Modular architecture is gaining attention as an efficient and sustainable strategy due to its quick construction time, cost reduction, potential use of recycled and local materials (Ansarisamani & Davoodi, 2024), reduced construction waste (Lawson et al., 2014), and enhanced quality control. Standardized modules enable design flexibility and offer strong adaptability and customization potential. To achieve financial viability, modular construction needs economies of scale and an efficient process from design to site installation (Lawson et al., 2014).

Brief History

Modular construction has gained prominence across the building industry since the early 2000s. It was originally used for mobile or temporary structures, but prefabricated construction technology is now employed for a wide range of buildings—from schools and hospitals to offices and high-rise residential buildings. Its growing demand is driven by the off-site nature of construction, which offers measurable economic and environmental benefits (Lawson et al., 2014).

There is growing interest in the media and grey literature in repurposed shipping containers and prefabricated modular homes for people experiencing homelessness. Examples of such projects exist in Los Angeles (USA), Toronto and Scarborough (Canada), and Cambridge (UK) (Adler, 2020; Karampour & Burgess, 2022).

Reconversion of Existing Buildings

Definition

Heritage repurposing, or adaptive reuse, is defined as "adapting a site or heritage building to favour its conservation, whether by assigning a new function different from the original or by modifying it to maintain its current use" (Parks Canada, 2010). A repurposing project may involve the transformation, restoration or renovation of a building (parts or entire building) to preserve its form and integrity while addressing new needs. Rehabilitation is defined as "an action or process intended to enable continued or contemporary use compatible with the heritage place or one of its components, while protecting its heritage value" (MCC, 2024).

Brief History

Initially, heritage preservation was limited to restoring or maintaining buildings in their original state. The modernist movement of the 1960s–70s led to the demolition of many buildings in favour of towers and large complexes, prompting significant community backlash.

In the 1980s, rehabilitation emerged as an alternative to both demolition and "museumification". Although sometimes critiqued for contributing to gentrification, heritage rehabilitation has served as a tool for economic and tourism development, often leading to the displacement and erasing of people experiencing homelessness. Recent research, in the context of climate and housing crises, emphasizes the need to integrate social and environmental values into built heritage practices (Lixinski & Morisset, 2024).

Working with existing buildings presents various challenges, including regulatory adjustments such as fire safety, programmatic changes like adding windows to living spaces, and addressing structural neglect, which can lead to dangerous damage, including mould, water infiltration, and compromised structural integrity.

Yet, this approach also offers many opportunities, such as reducing environmental impact through the reuse of materials and minimizing construction waste. Socially, integrating into the existing urban fabric and reusing vacant buildings can promote project acceptability. Preserving the history of a site can strengthen community ties and reinforce collective memory and identity.

Trauma-Informed Design (TID)

Definition

Trauma-informed design (TID) is a design methodology rooted in trauma-informed care (TIC), a care framework that recognizes and responds to trauma. Trauma is defined as "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening, with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (SAMHSA, 2014).

TID is based on four core principles: trauma sensitivity, safety, self-determination and a focus on individual strengths. Trauma-informed care recognizes that the built environment can contribute to healing or exacerbating trauma, and thus it plays a critical role in reducing re-traumatization risks (Pable & Ellis, 2017).

Bref historique

Developed in the 1990s by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), TIC is based on six fundamental principles: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural sensitivity. Initially applied in social services, mental health care and education, this approach has been extended to physical environments since 2010, particularly in projects related to homelessness, domestic violence, and mental health. TID is now increasingly implemented in hospitals, schools, social housing and public space design.

Queer Architecture

Definition

Queer youth are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness (Abramovich, 2012) due to the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination—sexism, transphobia, homophobia, biphobia—often compounded by colonialism and racism. These systemic oppressions manifest as persistent violence and stigma, both in domestic and public spaces, exposing queer youth to increased risks of harassment, intimidation, and physical and sexual violence (Côté et al., 2023).

This exclusion often extends beyond the loss of housing into emergency shelters and supervised housing, which are frequently designed around strict gender binaries. These environments are often unsafe and unwelcoming for 2SLGBTQ+ people. Despite alarmingly high rates of depression, suicidal ideation, suicide, and violence experienced by 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness (Abramovich, 2012, p. 37), safe and appropriate resources remain extremely limited and, in many cities, entirely unavailable.

Principles

Research on queer architecture is still limited. However, both academic and community-based studies offer some guidance on creating safer, more inclusive environments for queer communities:

- Ensure that shelters provide non-gendered spaces, such as bathrooms, sleeping areas, and common areas
- Guarantee access to private bathrooms and showers
- Allow individuals to choose their floor or room based on comfort levels (Boyle, 2006)
- Clearly communicate that the space is safe, using signage and symbols in multiple languages (AGIR, 2023)
- Ensure welcoming processes prioritize privacy and confidentiality (AGIR, 2023)
- Apply universal accessibility principles to ensure mobility access (Conseil québécois LGBT+, 2024)

These spatial adaptations not only benefit queer individuals but also improve safety and accessibility for everyone.

Social Work Concepts

Community Support
SW-1

This term refers to the various social intervention practices deployed within living environments to support both residents and community life. Developed initially to ensure housing stability outside of hospitals for individuals with mental health issues, this model has been extended to people experiencing homelessness (PEH) to promote residential stability as well. A wide range of interventions can fall under the umbrella of community support, including counselling relationships, accompaniment in administrative procedures, informal social moments with residents and raising awareness among the broader public on social issues.

Harm Reduction
SW-2

Harm reduction refers to a set of strategies, practices and approaches aimed at minimizing the negative consequences of risky behaviours, especially in public health and social work contexts. This approach does not necessarily seek to eliminate risks entirely, but rather to manage and reduce their impacts. In the context of substance use, harm reduction involves providing sterile injection or inhalation supplies and educating users about safer practices to prevent infections, such as abscesses, and sexually or blood-transmissible infections like HIV and hepatitis.

Harm reduction is guided by several key principles, such as rejecting the ideal of drug eradication, emphasizing proximity-based intervention (meeting people where they are –in their living environment and on their journey), avoiding moral judgment of substance use practices and promoting user responsibility and participation (Jauffret-Routside & Chappard, 2020).

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)
SW-3

Trauma-informed care is an approach that prioritizes the lived experiences of service users, especially regarding the potential for trauma triggers in therapeutic or care environments. Although intended to heal, care environments may inadvertently contribute to re-traumatization.

TIC focuses on creating safe spaces, empowering individuals by allowing them to make decisions, fostering collaborative therapeutic relationships where patients are partners and utilizing a strengths-based approach.

Outreach and Community-Based Intervention
SW-4

Outreach work involves connecting with service users in their living environments, even if they live in public spaces, as well as reaching people who may not be accessing services but are in the same geographic area. In this context, outreach refers to engaging with people experiencing homelessness in the neighbourhood, as well as nearby business owners and residents.

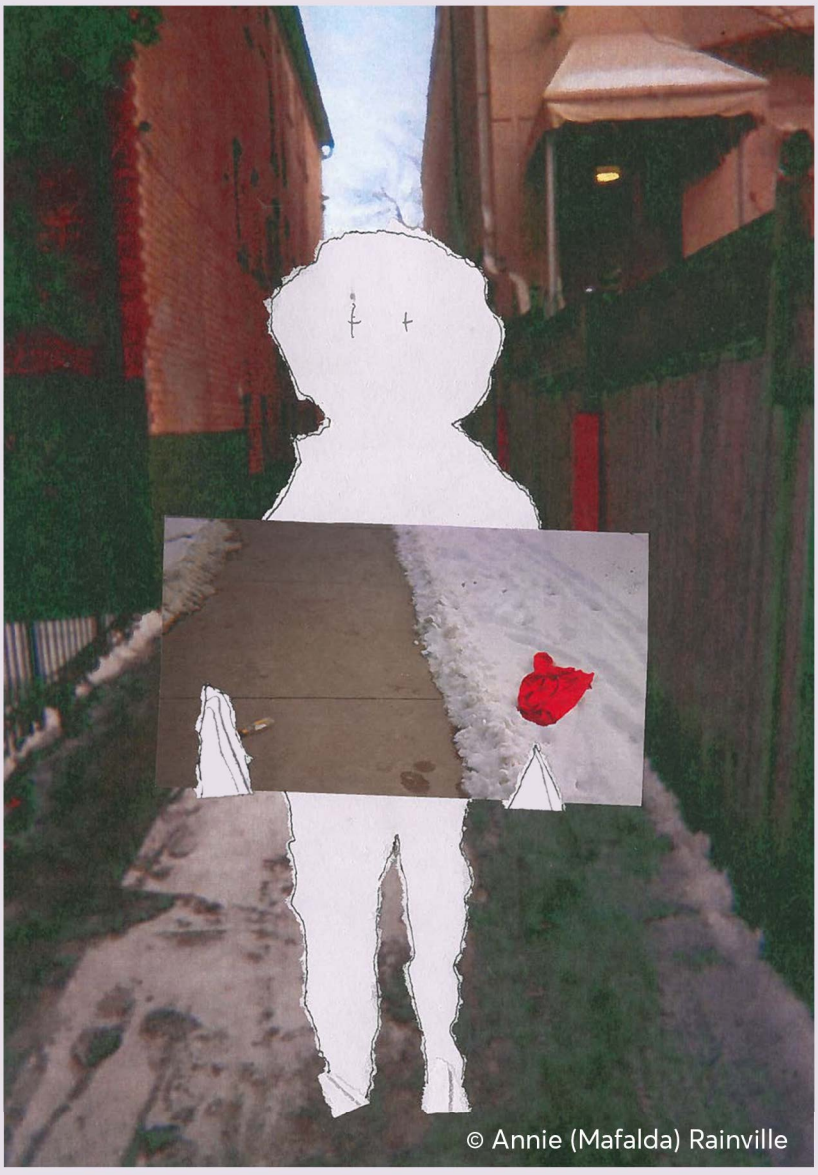
Outreach workers respond to the needs of users and can mediate conflicts related to cohabitation. Examples include picking up discarded drug paraphernalia, mediating the presence of harm reduction equipment such as safe disposal bins, and facilitating conversations with neighbours and local businesses.

Fiduciary/Trust Services
SW-5

Trust services are financial management practices designed to support people experiencing socio-economic vulnerability in managing their finances. Various types of fiduciary arrangements exist, ranging from partial control to complete control over a person's finances. These arrangements are often implemented with the beneficiary's consent but can also result from legal decisions.

High-Tolerance Approach
SW-6

High-tolerance intervention models are designed to include populations typically excluded from other support systems. Also referred to as low-threshold or low-barrier housing, these environments have minimal admission requirements, thereby reducing access barriers for marginalized or vulnerable groups.



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