

USER SATISFACTION STUDY OF HOUSING OPTIONS FOR OLDER CANADIANS

Introduction

Right now about six million Canadians are 55 years old or more. By 2021, that number will grow by more than 66 per cent to almost 10 million people. The rapid aging of the Canadian population could result in increasing opportunities for both the private and non-profit sectors to respond to the housing needs and preferences of older Canadians.

Over the past few years Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has been working with other government agencies and members of the private and non-private sectors to gain a better understanding of current and future housing markets, to explore promising combinations of housing and support service options, and to identify the kinds of actions that may be necessary to make these options widely available to older Canadians.

This work has contributed to many new and innovative options being made available across Canada. These options include:

- garden suites,
- bi-family units,
- accessory apartments,
- Abbeyfield housing,
- several forms of congregate housing,
- a variety of lifestyle retirement communities, and
- some types of supportive housing.

A number of new financial and tenure options have also emerged, including many variations of the life-lease concept, equity cooperatives, land leases and mixed use and tenure options.

The range and types of housing options is likely to expand and diversify as the housing industry attempts to respond to continuing demographic and socio-economic changes. It is, therefore, very apparent that information about how well current options are meeting a variety of housing and support service needs of older Canadians could be useful to the industry.

Objectives

The main objectives of this research were to carry out user satisfaction studies of some of the newer and most innovative housing options that are available to Canadians 55 years old or more, and to report on the results of the research. It is hoped that this information will be useful to a number of audiences, including housing planners, designers and builders, housing and support service providers, and housing owners, administrators and managers.

The research

The research consisted of conducting user satisfaction studies of six different categories of housing options. A total of 24 case studies, spread among the six categories and all regions of Canada, were conducted. Case studies ranged in size from single family detached dwellings, through projects containing a small number of self-contained dwellings, to large projects containing low- and high-rise apartment buildings. They featured a variety of tenure types ranging from freehold ownership, through rental and condominium, to land leases and life leases.



Particular emphasis was placed on identifying the types of accommodation and the kinds of features, facilities and support services they offered, and on determining the levels of resident satisfaction with them. Emphasis was also placed on collecting information, feedback and advice on a variety of issues dealing with the planning, design, financing, development and management of the case studies. The six categories examined are:

- A. housing options that allow older persons to live in close proximity to their family, such as accessory apartments, garden suites and bi-family units;
- B. housing options that comprise a large house shared by 7-10 unrelated persons, each with their own private living quarters, such as Abbeyfield housing, group homes, and other types of shared housing;
- C. planned retirement communities, such as retirement subdivisions, retirement residences, mobile home communities, and university-linked retirement communities;
- D. housing options that emphasize lifestyle by providing a wide range of social and recreational activities to persons living in low density housing;
- E. housing options that provide support services, such as congregate housing, sheltered housing and assisted living; and
- F. housing options that guarantee increasing levels of health services, such as continuing care and life-care retirement communities.

Methodology

The sample of case studies for this research resulted from a comprehensive nomination and selection process. A nomination form seeking exemplary and innovative housing projects was mailed to 1,000 key informants across Canada. Additional nominations were requested over the telephone. Once 100 nomination forms were received, they were screened using pre-established criteria.

To qualify, projects had to have been in operation for at least one year, and intended to offer some form of innovation in such areas as project planning and design, financing and tenure, and management and programming. One hundred and thirty-two housing projects were initially identified. Following additional information and a last review, the final sample of 24 case studies was established.

The researchers developed standard data collection tools to gather information from all case studies. This enabled them to collect and organize the data in an orderly fashion and to make comparisons among case studies. Data collection tools included a mail-out information request, a follow-up telephone interview form, an architectural checklist, a project history and management survey questionnaire, a focus group guide, a resident satisfaction survey questionnaire and a walk-and-talk survey form.

Most of the data relating to this research were collected through site visits. The researchers carried out a two-day visit at each of the 24 case study sites. These visits included site observations, and interviews with project personnel and residents. Five hundred and forty-four residents from all the 24 case studies completed a resident satisfaction survey. Researchers also conducted focus group sessions with project stakeholders, which included project administrators and managers, planners, developers, architects, and senior representatives of resident committees.

Findings

The following are the main results of the research. They are grouped in three sets. The first relates to the resident satisfaction survey, the second to the case studies and the third to the housing option categories.

Resident satisfaction survey:

The resident satisfaction survey gathered information from a sample of residents at each of the case study sites, including the location of their previous home, their reasons for moving from their previous home, their reasons for moving into their current home and their level of satisfaction with their current housing.

Forty-four per cent of the respondents had previously lived in the same town or city as their current residence, 21 per cent had lived in the surrounding area, 27 per cent had come from elsewhere in the province, seven per cent from another province, and only one per cent had come from another country.

The most common reasons respondents had for leaving their previous home were:

1. change in health or physical strength (28 per cent);
2. difficulty looking after residence (20 per cent); and
3. wish to be with others of the same age (21 per cent).

The most common reasons respondents gave for moving into their current home were:

1. quality of the dwelling unit (40 per cent);
2. attractiveness of the project (39 per cent);
3. closeness to facilities and services (36 per cent);
4. services available on the premises (36 per cent);
5. recreational facilities and activities (31 per cent);
6. friends or relatives live there (27 per cent); and
7. children or relatives live nearby (27 per cent).

The results of the survey also indicated that the vast majority of the respondents were satisfied with their current housing. Seventy per cent said that they were very happy living there, and 88 per cent that they would repeat the move if they had to do it over.

Case studies:

The case studies varied widely in terms of geographic location. Twenty-nine per cent were located in urban areas, 38 per cent in suburban areas, 25 per cent in small towns and eight per cent in rural areas. Over 70 per cent were located in neighbourhoods where the number of single-family dwellings predominated; the rest were located in neighbourhoods with a mixture of dwelling types.

All of the 24 case studies had a residential character, as opposed to institutional, and many had a particularly distinctive character that reflected the cultural background of their residents. The researchers also found that in 74 per cent of the case studies, the projects blended in with the character of their neighbourhood.

Most of the case studies offered plenty of outdoor space, including gardens and patio space with seating areas; and many offered other amenities, such as hot tubs and shuffleboard courts. The majority also offered parking, which in most cases (63 per cent) was located outdoors.

The types and amounts of interior amenities provided varied from case to case. Nevertheless, 68 per cent of the case studies had a common lounge, 53 per cent a common dining room, 74 per cent a central kitchen, 53 per cent offered common games, 58 per cent had an exercise room, 47 per cent a common laundry room, 32 per cent a clubhouse, 32 per cent a library, 37 per cent an arts-and-crafts area, and 26 per cent a beauty parlour.

The types and sizes of accommodation varied across the six housing option categories and often within the case studies:

- 62 per cent of the case studies had 2-bedroom units;
- 62 per cent of the case studies had 1-bedroom units;
- 29 per cent had one-bedroom-plus-den units;
- 31 per cent had studios or bed sitting rooms; and
- 24 per cent had 2-bedroom-plus-den units.

The amounts and types of special design features also varied broadly. The following were found in at least some of the units:

- separate shower stalls in bathrooms, in 24 per cent of the case studies;
- lever faucet handles in bathrooms, in 54 per cent of the case studies, and in kitchens in 74 per cent;
- grab bars in bathrooms, in 62 per cent of the case studies;
- adjustable shelves in kitchens, in 82 per cent of the case studies; and
- full-height pantries in kitchens, in 62 per cent of the case studies.

Housing option categories:

The six categories of housing options included a wide variety in terms of size, types and forms of housing provided, kinds of support services and amenities offered and methods to deliver them, resident characteristics, and types of management.

Category A (see description on page 2):

The first category included three case studies: an accessory apartment in New Westminster, B.C.; a garden suite in Sackville, N.B.; and a bi-family unit in Québec City, Que. In all three cases, residents expressed a high level of overall satisfaction with their housing. None of the residents was receiving formal support, but all exchanged informal support with their families. Residents and their families provided the following advice for those considering these types of options.

- Make sure that participants are compatible with each other; and formalize arrangements in advance, for example, agree on the portion of the utility bills the senior resident will pay.
- Make sure that participants are going to enjoy privacy, adequate lighting and storage areas, and that the senior residents are going to have control over the thermostat and water heater for their unit.

Category B:

This second category included three case study sites: Vancouver, B.C., Toronto, Ont., and St-Nazaire, Que. Residents at all three sites were generally satisfied with their tenure arrangements. Small unit size was a concern for many, plus less than optimal soundproofing, ventilation, and lighting. Location in terms of convenience and neighbourhood was also a concern, as was a lack of involvement in decision making. Residents provided the following advice.

- Seek knowledgeable Board members and consult with seniors.
- Hire staff with good “people skills.”
- Screen potential residents for compatibility with group living.
- Ensure the site is close to shops and services, rooms are large enough for residents’ furniture, office space is ample, and residents have input to such details as decor.

Category C:

The third category included four case study sites: Salt Spring Island, B.C.; Vineland, Ont.; Airdrie, Alta.; and Saanich, B.C. The majority of residents expressed a high level of overall satisfaction with the project and their tenure arrangement. Residents had the following advice.

- Do not skimp on quality.
- Provide detailed project information, and complete communal areas, for example, the clubhouse, before showing any units.
- Commit to long-term maintenance and 24-hour security.
- Have a tenure “exit agreement” that reflects residents’ needs.
- Provide a protected front “drop-off” area.
- Design indoor common areas to absorb noise, and have natural light and an attractive view.
- Design individual units with full-height kitchen pantry cupboards and deep drawers (not shelves); low-sill tubs or walk-in showers, large medicine cabinets and bathroom grab bars; and wide hallways that accommodate the use of mobility aids.

Category D:

The fourth category included three case study sites: New Glasgow, N.S.; Rae-Edzo, N.W.T.; and Kelowna, B.C. Residents in all three sites were highly positive about the design and location of their project. They provided the following advice.

- Know your market regarding local climate, demographics, service needs and political/planning parameters.
- Have an on-site manager.
- Support aging-in-place through good design (e.g. no stairs or “crawl space” storage).
- Include design features to facilitate social interaction, for example, a front porch, a clubhouse or a walking path.
- Provide overhead lights as well as wall outlets, a freezer outlet, two bedrooms, ample insulation between units; and avoid cross-drafts in cold climates.

Category E:

The fifth category included seven locations: Winnipeg, Man.; Toronto, Nepean and Fenelon Falls, Ont.; Québec City and Montréal, Que.; and Edmonton, Alta. Project size was not a negative factor, as both the largest and the smallest projects received good ratings. Residents’ dissatisfaction centred on small unit size and the quality of soundproofing, ventilation and/or lighting. Residents offered the following advice.

- Recognize this is also a service business not a “housing only” business.
- Seek staff in the hospitality, not the health care field.
- Remember you are selling to seniors’ children, not just to seniors.
- Involve community associations, government agencies, local politicians, and health-care providers.
- Consider renting space to commercial interests.
- Keep detailed records to retain a “corporate memory.”
- Be aware that tenants are covered by landlord-tenant acts.
- Locate close to downtown at “the centre of things.”
- Cluster administration and amenity spaces for cohesiveness.
- Provide parking for service providers as well as residents.
- Minimize corridor lengths, provide an elevator and hallways large enough for a rigid stretcher.

Category F:

The sixth category of housing options included four locales: Yellowknife, N.W.T.; Brampton and Guelph, Ont.; and Sherwood, P.E.I. At all four sites, at least 88 per cent of the residents would still move there again. Residents—

the vast majority (92 per cent) being renters—provided the following advice.

- Research housing and support solutions worldwide.
- Select a multi-disciplinary Board with financial expertise, and involve the community in grass-roots consultation/planning.
- Purchase more ground space than appears necessary to allow for future expansion.
- Provide plenty of interior amenity space. In the common dining room, provide a separate “dish room” so dishes are not stacked in the dining room.
- Provide plenty of food storage space in climates where it is difficult to get out in winter; individually-controlled hot water valves, and non-gas stoves (leaks are a worry).
- Provide emergency call touch-strips in baseboards rather than call bells on walls since help is usually needed when a senior has fallen.
- Design units to accommodate “a lifetime of collecting possessions,” including china and curio cabinets.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the wide range of housing options included in this research, the following common recommendations emerged from the feedback received from residents and other stakeholders.

Overall:

- Housing options for older Canadians should be varied and supportive of the wide range of needs and preferences of potential residents from the very active to the very frail.
- Housing should blend in with the character of its neighbourhood and allow older people to remain in familiar environments. Remember that moving from the family home can be traumatic and can threaten their autonomy, so ease the transition into a new home of which they can be proud.
- Create varied and flexible space with ample amenities, storage, office space and support services where older people can maintain continuity and independence.
- Make services as flexible as possible so residents can customize support packages as needs wax and wane.
- Older people want to have a say in the choices and features of their living environments and they can contribute valuable input. Therefore, allow them to participate in the creation as well as the management of their environment.

Development:

- Create a strong, multi-disciplinary Board/team, prepared to work hard and commit over the long term. Include legal, financial, health, real estate, hospitality and housing expertise.
- Involve the community to ensure their support and your credibility. This means local seniors, agencies, government, business and politicians.
- Do your homework, such as data gathering on target user groups, climate, planning/regulatory environment, real estate situation, health care services and housing projects similar to yours.

Management:

- Hire staff with “people skills” and treat them with flexibility and respect. Personality and staff continuity are important.
- Formalize the nature and expectations of all relationships, for example, among business and government partners, between residents and management.
- Prepare for the time when residents may not be able to continue living safely in your project by developing “exit policies.”
- Understand the emotional aspect of a senior’s decision to move to a more supportive living environment.

Social:

- Screen potential residents carefully if a “community atmosphere” is essential to the residence.
- Facilitate, but do not regulate, support and surveillance among neighbours.
- Develop and maintain good relationships with your neighbours in the larger community.

Design:

- Know for whom you are designing and have a clear vision of the type of community you want to create.
- Design for beyond the immediate market needs, taking into consideration the varied and changing needs and preferences of older people. To achieve this, ensure that your project offers the necessary physical accessibility, mobility and adaptability design features right from the start.

- Remember that older people want security and support without sacrificing self-determination and privacy, and that they want to live in home-like, not institution-like, environments, no matter how frail they may become.
- Provide outside gathering places that are protected from inclement weather conditions, and inside common spaces that have attractive views and abundant natural light.

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

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