



ACADEMIC

Transitional housing: A sustainable planning approach

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Ontario is in the midst of a major housing crisis driven by a lack of affordability and inadequate supply to meet demand. A growing homeless population in urban centres poses a significant challenge to city governments and planners. Those tasked with providing innovative solutions to address this critical municipal issue are not alone; they join others around the world who struggle to create quality communities for populations displaced from their homes due to famine, conflict, climate change, and other circumstances.

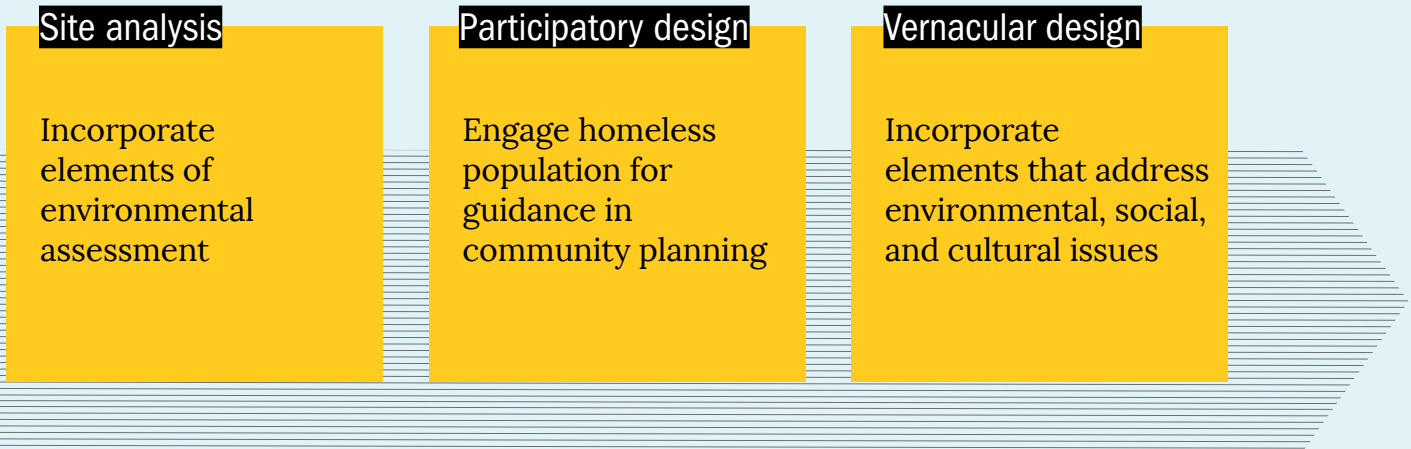


Figure 1: The three-step approach to sustainable transitional housing design © Authors' creation

Researchers at Queen's University in Kingston recently looked at ways in which displaced persons are housed in the Middle East and uncovered insights which may be applicable to addressing the twin crises of housing and homelessness here in Ontario. The study's aim was to introduce sustainable planning and design practices for transitional living conditions that could better address the needs and concerns of displaced populations while reducing environmental impacts and successfully create vibrant, dynamic communities that can thrive independently.

"...sustainable planning and design practices for transitional living conditions..."

The findings of this study offer new solutions that may be considered here in Ontario. Cities across the province have seen rapid growth of tent encampments and makeshift shelters in public parks, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These camps are characteristic of a homeless population which views traditional shelters – usually communal spaces with little privacy and strongly enforced rules – as undesirable. Inhabitants of these camps increasingly look to each other to create community and find support.

Encampments in Toronto and elsewhere, however, have been plagued by concerns over safety, both for the inhabitants of these camps and for members of the broader public. The flimsy tents and shelters do not have the ability to provide sufficient protection from harsh weather conditions. As seen across Ontario, encampments have become a flashpoint for conflict, with supporters of homeless

rights clashing with members of the public who resent the loss of open public space or who are concerned over the chaotic environment that often characterizes these places.

CHANGING NEEDS FOR DISPLACED POPULATIONS

The study found that a substantive change is underway regarding the design of settlements for displaced populations internationally. This can be seen in the Middle East, where hastily implemented encampments using tents or temporary housing are increasingly being replaced by semi-permanent communities with more substantive shelters and facilities, including schools and clinics. This shift recognizes the fundamental rights of displaced persons and attempts to address the social and cultural voids so often prevalent in a transitional environment.

In Ontario and around the world, experiences in developing transitional housing have shown that neither spontaneous nor standardized approaches to providing basic needs are sufficient or satisfactory. These approaches do not recognize the diverse needs of individuals, nor the additional requirements for psychological and physical well-being. Importantly, it is increasingly recognized that temporary shelters are only truly effective in responding to immediate humanitarian concerns. The persistence of homeless or displaced populations suggests that design principles focused on temporary, time-limited solutions will not be successful. There is, unfortunately, little guidance for planners who are seeking more robust solutions.

The study proposes a new phase in transitional shelter housing, which recognizes the changing problem – away from temporary housing for transient groups and towards solutions designed to

support more persistent displaced populations. The design of this housing is strongly informed by principles of sustainable design to better address social and cultural needs, while also addressing environmental concerns to alleviate the impact of these settlements on both natural and social systems in the vicinity of these communities.

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MOVING FORWARD

While the Queen's study was focused on displaced populations in the Middle East, the findings of this work can easily be applied to the challenges of homelessness in Ontario. Indeed, small steps are being made in communities across the province that indicate acceptance that homeless populations are persistent and housing solutions need to be innovative.

The City of Kingston, for example, has introduced sleeping cabins, similar to transitional shelters provided for humanitarian aid internationally. These structures provide far more protection than the rough shelters seen in encampments, although they still lack adequate living space, bathrooms, running water, or electricity. The scale of this experiment has also been very small, with only 10 cabins built – a far cry from a transitional community.

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Cities and neighbourhoods wrestling with homelessness might consider the pros and cons of establishing more permanent communities – either as a collection of buildings or within the context of a single building – to take the place of encampments and provide better housing for those experiencing homelessness. A three-step process of design is proposed (see Figure 1).

First, a site analysis can help balance various issues to identify the best places for communities. The site analysis should include elements of environmental assessment, including identification of valued ecosystem components.

Second, a participatory design process needs to be implemented. Homeless populations are rejecting “traditional” shelter or housing options. There needs to be recognition that their solutions might look different than past ideas.

Third, elements of vernacular design can be incorporated, which means the settlements can be designed to “fit in” to established areas and the communities can be optimized to deal with environmental, social, and cultural issues.

The solutions proposed here will not be cheap. However, the costs of continuing to address homelessness in the current fashion are high; significant savings may be achieved with a more holistic approach.

It should also be noted that opportunities for skill sharing and vocational training provided by the local community could also support the rehabilitation of those experiencing homelessness or unemployment in order to support the development and transition to new livelihoods, which ultimately would provide benefits to all of society. Providing opportunities to contribute and collaborate on planning and sustaining a thriving community stimulate social connectivity, acceptance, and reconstruction of a “home,” where people feel safe and comfortable to re-establish their lives. 



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