



# Taking the Pulse...

## Planning Practice: Case-in-Point

### Planning [E]mergence: The Convergence of Theory and Practice Through the Collaborative Efforts of the Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance

By  
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[An MPPI-UMCP Collaborative Initiative]

**Summary** - An evaluation of an innovative collaborative urban research organization that builds partnerships between academics, researchers, and communities.

**Keywords** - Action-Oriented Research, Collaborative Practice, Inner-city, Participatory Practice..

**Timeline** - 1998 - present.

#### Outline

- Context
- The Beginnings
- Organizational Structure and Process
- Indicators of Success
- Successes
- Limitations and Challenges
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- The Future of WIRA
- Relevance to Planning

A prevalent theme in planning literature is the relationship between knowledge and action; theory and practice. Theorists and practitioners alike face the challenge of how to bridge these two seemingly divergent entities.

This case study investigates the Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance (WIRA). While focusing on inner-city issues, WIRA also aims to enhance and increase theory - practice discourse. In this, WIRA strives to connect and develop innovative partnerships between communities, researchers, academics, and practitioners.

WIRA pairs community groups with established researchers to undertake action-oriented research that meets community needs. The initiative draws on the resources and expertise of the local communities, community-based organizations, academics, researchers and policy makers. Under the program, all community stakeholders work together to build partnerships, develop ideas, strengthen community capacity, and identify and address key issues in the inner-city. The initiative funds a number of community-based research projects that foster innovative research, skill training and development, and community building with a goal of ultimately improving the quality of life of inner-city residents.

WIRA is not only interested in the *product* of their research, but is particularly interested in the *process* through which their research is conducted. Although the products of WIRA's collaborative work may be classified as examples of 'best practice', the action-oriented research process through which their research is conducted is quite 'cutting-edge'.

This case study summarizes WIRA's context, beginnings, organizational structure, successes, limitations, lessons learned, and forecasts projections for the future.



## Context

Winnipeg has long been considered the 'Gateway to the West'. Originating as a centre for agricultural services, a distribution point for goods, and a node of commerce and business, Winnipeg grew rapidly as a destination point for waves of new immigrants from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The business sector of Winnipeg concentrated around the renowned downtown intersection of Portage and Main, while residential development grew in surrounding neighbourhoods.

Sparked by the increase in automobile usage, and the desire to claim land for a dream home in a 'natural' setting, many Winnipeg residents migrated from the inner-city to new suburban developments during the 1940s and 1950s. This North American-wide trend in residential development drained the old neighbourhoods of their residents, and with it their vibrancy and life.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, inner-city neighbourhoods of Winnipeg suffered from neglect and blight both physically and socially. In recent years, this condition has been of primary concern for the City of Winnipeg and the Province of Manitoba who have both devoted large amounts of energy and funding to reverse this trend.

## The Beginnings

In the 1960s, the University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies (IUS) began to focus attention on how to revitalize the declining inner-city neighbourhoods of Winnipeg. The beginnings of an inner-city research group in Winnipeg began in the 1980s as a loosely based research coalition. However, this group was not fully satisfied with the direction of the organization. This founding group felt that there was a need for: a) a specific direction for research on the inner-city of Winnipeg, and b) moving the focus of the group from the research interests of the academics to community needs. These new priorities initiated the development of WIRA.

Since 1998, the Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance (WIRA) has strove to build a collaborative environment between academics, community organizations, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations. The intention behind WIRA is to not only increase the body of knowledge related to inner-city research, but also create lasting partnerships with communities in conducting relevant and integral studies. Acknowledging the prevalent gap between academia and community that exists in many research studies, WIRA provides a venue through

which to address real *community* needs through a *community* driven process with *community*-based outcomes.

The development of WIRA is based on a number of successful initiatives and 'best practice' precedents in Canada. Both the University of Waterloo and the Centre for Urban and Community Research at the University of Toronto have engaged in similar academic and community alliances.

With a redefined focus, the Winnipeg Inner-city Research Alliance applied for funding. This first attempt for resources did not prove successful for the group. However, it did not thwart their efforts. In 2001, WIRA applied a second time and was successful in securing funding.

The funds for WIRA are provided through a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC) Community University Research Alliance (CURA) program. SSHRC is interested in the funding of community-based, community-driven, and partnership-based research. WIRA is one of twenty-two CURA programs in Canada, and according to Tom Carter, Research Liaison Director for WIRA, is the most community-based of these research coalitions. These funds were augmented by a top-up grant from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), upping the total available funds for WIRA to \$1 million.

## Organizational Structure and Process

Contrary to its 'cutting-edge' view on practice, the organizational structure of WIRA is relatively formal in nature. Managing the administrative responsibilities, leading the direction, and providing continuous support to WIRA are two key individuals, Tom Carter and Anita Friesen. Carter,



as Research Liaison Director, contributes to the academic component of WIRA, while Friesen is involved in orchestrating the community as the Community Liaison Director.

The vehicle providing WIRA with vision and direction is its Executive Steering Committee. This committee, consisting of twelve community members and two academics, meets about seven times a year and is responsible adjudicating the research applications.

The large and diverse list of partners involved with WIRA is an essential component of its broad-based organizational structure. WIRA's partners include academics from various disciplines, community organizations, all three levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector. WIRA prides itself as a 'grassroots', bottom-up initiative regarding its broad base of partners as its most significant asset. Like a physical structure, without a solid foundation the upper levels would not only lack support, they would also be stripped of relevance.

WIRA strives to assure that its research originates from *within* the community. Through public outreach, community groups and organizations are encouraged to submit project and research proposals for funding. WIRA's objective is to create an environment and application structure that is not intimidating to the community. The liaison directors accommodate groups requiring assistance in the application process, providing step-by step guidance and advice on potential research partners. Research is to be community-driven, with research partners acting primarily as a resource.

The Executive Steering Committee evaluates research proposals on a competitive basis based on the strength of the proposal and its fit with the research themes established by WIRA. These themes include:

- Community Economic Development,
- Health,
- Education/Training,
- Employment Development,
- Organizational/Governance Models,
- Arts and Culture,
- Social Development,
- Youth,
- Housing, and
- Community Development.

Successful applications proceed to research the area of inquiry within the community. Once complete, the gathered data and knowledge produced is disseminated to the community

through public meetings. This is a crucial step as it not only increases knowledge in the community and exhibits the work of WIRA to others who may wish to tap into its resources, but methodologically it brings the process full circle, back to its origins.

## Indicators of Success

There are a number of both *product* and *process* based outcomes WIRA aspires to achieve through its efforts. The knowledge gained through the research is the most apparent outcome from these partnerships. Outcomes just as significant include the involvement of the community, research skill development for the community and students, community empowerment, and the ability to influence policy.

A number of indicators of success have been developed to evaluate the performance of WIRA. These indicators of success can be divided into both quantitative and qualitative categories.

### Quantitative

- 1) Number of Academic Articles Published
- 2) Number of Academic Presentations on Research Findings
- 3) Attendance and Engagement at Consultations with Community Based Organizations
- 4) Number of Public Meetings and Attendance for Dissemination of Information and Findings
- 5) Secondary Research Initiatives Spawned by WIRA
- 6) WIRA Citations in Other Research Projects
- 7) Media Coverage



## Qualitative

- 1) Education and Skill Training
- 2) Employment
- 3) Policy Change
- 4) Community Empowerment
- 5) Long Term Relationships
- 6) Continuation of Academic/Community Partnerships Beyond the Scope of WIRA
- 7) Level of Public Knowledge
- 8) Development of Community Resources
- 9) Level of Public Knowledge about WIRA

## Successes

Though WIRA is a relatively young organization, there are a number of successes to which it can claim with pride.

### Narrowing the Divide

The research process through which WIRA conducts its projects has contributed to narrowing the divide between academia and community. As Ken McCluskey, member of the Executive Steering Committee states, in the process “the university becomes less of an ‘ivory tower’” that lacks community relevance. This is a significant success for WIRA that serves as a precedent for closing the gap between research and practice in other disciplines and professions.

### Being Noticed

Increasingly, the work in which WIRA has been involved is being recognized. The media has latched on to many of the WIRA projects due to their practical nature and public relevance. As well, academics are beginning to recognize the credibility of this research, not only for its intent, but also for its process and rigour.

### Lessons for Everybody

Everybody leaves the WIRA research process gaining valuable lessons from the experience. Academics who are involved in WIRA gain experience working ‘in the field’ with individuals whose lives will actually be affected by the project. This kind of action-oriented research provides opportunities and experience not available in other forms of research.

The community also gains from participating in the research projects. As Friesen lists, involved residents have the opportunity to acquire skills, learn about research, earn money, gain confidence, and be recognized for the value of their unique knowledge.

### Summer Institute

Last year WIRA developed a Summer Institute for students, academics, and communities. As

indicated from its attendance and feedback, the first Summer Institute was a success. This year, plans are already underway for a second go at this popular event.

### Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance Summer Institute

For the past two years WIRA has conducted a Summer Institute. Through lectures, seminars, field trips, and sessions with community groups, students and community practitioners gain knowledge in community revitalization, development, and neighbourhood sustainability.

The topic for Summer Institute 2002 was *Building and Re-building our Communities*. This year the focus is *Greening the Inner-city: Eco-Friendly Community Development*.

## Limitations and Challenges

Although the WIRA program has had a number of achievements, as well as numerous direct and indirect benefits to all its stakeholders, there are some limitations and challenges faced by the coalition.

### Limited Funds

Although WIRA has had the fortune of being generously funded through both SSHRC and CMHC, the funds are limited. The scope to which WIRA approaches research initiatives is completely dependent on the funds received. Further, the funds of today may not necessarily be there tomorrow. WIRA will need to continually reapply for future funding and, as with all grant funding, there are no guarantees.



## **Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance Research Projects**

*Building Community Capacity in Winnipeg's Inner City:  
An Exploration of Learning and Resource Needs of  
Volunteer Boards of Directors in Non-Profit  
Organizations*

- E. Ferguson, P. Wege, J. Lussier

*Evaluative Research: Co-operative Business  
Development Pilot Project*

- J. MacMillan, R. Rothney

*Mentoring Inner City Youth in Transition to  
Independent Living*

- K. McCluskey, L. Doyle, J. Franklin, W. Josephson,  
E. Peel, M. Weinrath

*Aboriginal Educational Attainment in Winnipeg School  
Division No. 1*

- J. Silver, L. Spillett, A. Wilson

*Pawnshops and Community Development: A Study of  
Existing and Prospective Financial Services in  
Winnipeg's North End*

- J. Buckland, T. Martin, K. Bremmer

*The Impact of a Career Exploration Intervention on  
School Motivation and Self Esteem*

- D. Sutherland, K. Levine, D. Cole

*Community Welfare Rights Training Initiative*

- B. Sheldrick, D. Northcott, S. Frankel

*Finding a Way Home: Housing Options in Inner-City  
Winnipeg for People with Disabilities who are Dying*

- D. Stienstra, D. Van Ettinger, D. Scribe

*Heritage Art and Community: Building Pride and  
Identity in Winnipeg's West End*

- J.C. Lehr, T. Turner

*Giving Voice to Marginalized Youth: Exploration of  
Health and Well-being*

- N.C. Higgitt, J. Ristock, M. Church

*Developing Sustainable Home Ownership Programs  
for Low Income Households*

- T. Carter, P. Chorney

*Citizen Participation in the Development of Inner City  
Revitalization Policies/Inner City Revitalization  
Priorities*

- J. Silver, T. Simms

*Rooming Houses in Winnipeg: Best Practices for a  
Viable Low-Cost Housing Alternative*

- J. Distasio, M. Dudley, M. Maunder

*Guide to Better Building Management for Pro Active  
Managers*

- S. Grande, L. Williams, V. Sansregret

*Winnipeg Quality of Life Project*

- L. L. Roos, Jr., K. Leigh Frohlich, D. Pachal, S.  
Forsyth,

## **Research and Advocacy – Where Do you Draw the Line?**

There is a fine line between traditional research and advocacy particularly in the sphere of work in the inner-city. WIRA faces this issue with SSHRC, an organization that urges research-based work. SSHRC's mandate contrasts the opinions of communities involved with WIRA who see more benefit in advocacy towards policy and program change in their communities.

## **Time is Always an Issue**

Because of the process through which WIRA undertakes research projects, the initiation of a project is completely dependent on the accessibility of academic researchers and interested communities. Unfortunately, the interest by communities often outweighs the availability of researchers to take on projects. Already busy academics and researchers may not have the time to take on even more work. Finding interested academics continues to be a major challenge for WIRA.

## **The Perfect Match**

The commencement of a project is not dependent solely on if both a community and researcher are willing and able to take on a research project. There must also be a congruency between the needs of the community and the interests of the researcher. This demands that there be a 'perfect match' between community and researcher before a project can be actualized.

## **It is Never Enough**

Although dramatic changes have occurred over the last number of years in Winnipeg's inner-city neighbourhoods, there are still not enough resources to address its most pressing dilemmas. Though it tries, WIRA is simply not capable of addressing every challenge faced in the inner-city and many community needs continue to go unmet.



### **Politics, politics**

As with any planning process, politics can be both a vehicle and an obstacle. A question for WIRA has been how much of a role should 'big P' and 'little p' politics play in the process. Politics is layered at the funding, community, and academic levels. The multi-layered political environment creates a challenging situation placing WIRA in a delicate situation. As Friesen states, "it could potentially be as damaging to ignore this as to consider it".

### **Committee Empowerment Needed**

As previously mentioned, one of the most important goals of WIRA is to work *with* and not *for* the communities involved. The intention behind this mandate is to empower and build capacity within the communities participating. This objective, according to Carter, has been quite successful. Unfortunately, however, building empowerment with the Executive Steering Committee has not experienced the same level of success. The committee looks primarily to Carter and Friesen to lead the process; a process originally intended to be 'bottom-up' and not 'top-down'.

### **Lessons Learned**

From its relatively short history, WIRA has learned a number of valuable lessons. These are useful not only to WIRA, but are applicable to any organization.

#### **It's a Slow Process**

A major lesson learned by WIRA is that building this kind of program is an extremely slow process. With the large number of stakeholders and partners involved in WIRA, time is needed for all members to get on board. As with all partnership building, it is a time-intensive process of give and take. This slow process is not specific only to WIRA. In fact, two other CURA programs are not applying for funding renewal because academics have become disenchanted with the slow moving process and are no longer interested in participating. WIRA intends to learn from this and work to avoid a similar situation.

#### **Ensure Clarity at Beginning of Process**

In the initial stages of WIRA, ambiguity in mandate made it difficult to create clear and solid objectives. Carter believes that they should have acted more quickly on developing strategies and themes for WIRA research. The risk of not having a clear mandate, Carter explains, is that people will "peck at the edges" of a program in which any research project may potentially qualify. Unfortunately, as Carter states, "you can't be everything to everybody".

### **Action-Oriented Research Is Not Easy**

Action-oriented research generally requires a greater amount of energy. This does not necessarily mean energy during the research process, but more so up front in selling the idea of action-based research. WIRA has experienced the hurdles of initiating an action-based research environment from suspicious funding agencies, ethics review boards, and various stakeholders. The most supportive have been the participating communities who view action-based research as one of the most efficient ways in which to promote fast and lasting change.

### **Flexibility**

In the initiation and maintenance of an organization such as WIRA, flexibility is an attribute required by all involved. Many variables change in time, demanding unique solutions for every problem. Communities change, stakeholders change, and organizations change, requiring that those involved be accommodating, cooperative, and innovative.

### **The Future of WIRA**

The future of WIRA is promising in concept but, as with all organizations with grant funding, is unknown financially. In order for WIRA to guarantee a long-term commitment to the community it needs a longer term horizon.

The next step for WIRA is to once again apply for a two year funding renewal. Carter predicts that WIRA has a good shot at success. WIRA has been successful in producing a vast amount of information and delivering its message through community outreach. The interest is still strong within communities, community organizations, and academia. It is essential that this energy and desire to maintain WIRA continues as the demand for inner-city research will not diminish in Winnipeg's foreseeable future.



## Relevance to Planning

WIRA is breaking new ground and expanding the territory of the planning profession. It has made this its prerogative to experiment in the new frontiers of communicative action, community participation, and action-oriented research.

But WIRA is doing even more than this for the planning profession. It is attempting something that in many cases is only talked about; the convergence of theory and practice. Through this merging of academia and community is a simultaneous emerging of new ways to practice planning with new goals and objectives. Something new is being created out of the combination of a number of old patterns of practice. As Steven Johnson defines emergence in his book aptly titled *Emergence*, it is "a higher-level pattern arising out of parallel complex interactions between local agents" (Johnson 2001, 19). This description is most fitting to describe the process and efforts of the Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance.

### A Reflection on the Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance by Tom Carter

The Community University Research Alliance (CURA) experience is a real education for academics. It provides academics with a much better sense of community priorities, what really matters in the real world. It is also an education in consensus building and participatory research. Although the experience can be frustrating, it is also enriching and provides a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be passed on to students.

**Tom Carter** is Research Chair in Urban Change and Adaptation and Professor of Geography at the University of Winnipeg. Since joining the University in 1985 he has also been Director of The Institute of Urban Studies. Prior to joining the University, he worked in the planning field in Canada and Australia and spent ten years as Director of Research and Policy Development with Saskatchewan Housing Corporation. Carter's research interests focus on housing, urban development, urban decline and revitalization issues.

**Anita Friesen** acts as both Community Liaison Director for WIRA and is the Community Research Coordinator for the Winnipeg Site of the Centre for Excellence for Children and Youth Centred Prairie Communities. Her role at WIRA is as a link between the involved communities and academic researchers. Prior to these roles, Friesen worked with the International Centre in Winnipeg. Friesen's research interests include inner-city revitalization, housing, community economic development, and developing world housing.

Tom Carter and Anita Friesen work as a team resource to the Executive Steering Committee, academics, and the community.

**Jason Granger** holds a Bachelor of General Studies from Brandon University and a Bachelor of Environmental Design from the University of Manitoba. He is presently completing his studies in the Master of City Planning program in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba. The focus of his Masters research is the participation of older adults in decision-making processes that are influential in shaping their built environments.

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