

Public Housing Regeneration

Occasional Paper No. 6

by Laurie Lithgow
1984

The Institute of Urban Studies





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INTRODUCTION

Since about 1949, Canada's public housing programs have resulted in the provision of well over 200,000 housing units for Canadians who have required assistance in obtaining affordable shelter for themselves and their families. This housing was provided and is still maintained under various Federal/Provincial cost sharing agreements. Provision for the modernization and improvement of this housing was included in these agreements.

When this housing was relatively new, improvements and modernization needs were modest and easily accommodated within annual operating budgets of the Federal/Provincial partnership. As this housing ages, however, the earliest of which is approaching 35 years of age, there is increasing evidence that some aspects of this housing can no longer adequately meet current tenant needs and rapidly increasing maintenance and operating costs cannot be appropriately addressed unless major improvements are undertaken -- major improvements with costs ten or fifteen times the costs of previous modernization and improvement budgets.

Such improvements are not only costly but are complex to undertake as they often involve the temporary dislocation of the existing tenant group and/or undertaking major construction activities on occupied housing sites. This raises new issues for the Federal/Provincial partnership for which there is little precedence in Canada, or even in the United States, who are just now beginning themselves to identify the nature and extent of the impact of the aging process on their assisted housing stock.

As for most other activities, government financial resources are constrained and it is critical that the dollars made available to address issues associated with aging process, are used to achieve the most benefits to both the occupants and the Federal/Provincial partnership at

the most reasonable costs. There is, however, little information available with respect to cost/benefit analysis which blends the economic and social objectives of undertaking major improvements to existing public housing.

The following paper was presented to the CAHRO Conference in Saint John in June of 1984, and highlights some of the Federal concerns with respect to these issues and how they were addressed in one public housing project in Regina, Saskatchewan, one of the first Federal/Provincial initiatives to comprehensively address the impact of the aging process on Canada's public housing stock.

* * *

Housing specialists have had to grapple with housing restoration, conservation, rehabilitation, revitalization, modernization, white-washing, retrofit, housing renewal and now regeneration. This plethora of terminology that is used to try and communicate various courses of action dealing with the impact of the aging process of housing often leaves many grasping for a common understanding of the objectives, intent, and meaning of this terminology when these issues are discussed.

The public housing referred to here is assisted housing managed by local housing authorities on behalf of the Federal/Provincial partnership and for which the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) shares with the Provinces annual operating and maintenance costs. Regeneration, is the process whereby the issues associated with the impact of the aging process on housing are most prudently addressed, a decision making process that will ensure that the kind of improvements that are made to the older housing projects will result in maximum benefits to both the tenants and the Partnership at the most reasonable costs.

The following is an analogy of the decision making process for regeneration.

Suppose you are driving an older car that for the past few years has produced repair estimates of \$150/200 each visit to your garage. You probably grumble a bit, but you continue to pay to keep your car continuing to function. One day a repair estimate is given to you for \$2,500, and you automatically start to ask yourself some new and fundamental questions about the car:

- is the car worth spending this amount of money on -- and if you do, how long will it continue to meet yours and family needs.

or

- assuming that all the work specified is legitimately required and assuming you've got all sorts of demands for that \$2,500, you start to look for the best option to meet yours and your family's transportation needs, recognizing with some trepidation, that one option may have to be spending even more than the \$2,500 to ensure the most prudent expenditure of your transportation dollars.

The public housing regeneration process is very similar to this kind of problem assessment. What really triggers this regeneration process? Like the old car, it is the need to commit major financial resources to conserve a needed resource. And the issue is not whether dollars should be committed to this endeavour -- the need to maintain this asset and housing resource is obvious. The issue is this: given the scale of the regeneration activities (and there are now over 20,000 units in this portfolio); and given our experience to date which suggests that \$15/20,000 per unit may not be an unreasonable regeneration estimate for some of our older stock; and given our times of high demands for limited government dollar resources; and given many aspects of our society have legitimate 'high' priority needs -- the issue is how are the available financial resources committed in the most prudent and equitable way to maintain this housing asset. Prudent refers to the regeneration activities that will provide the most benefits to the occupants of the housing as well as to the partnership who must continue to operate and maintain this housing.

Later in this paper a project in Regina will be briefly described where CMHC, the Province of Saskatchewan and the city of Regina undertook the first comprehensive initiative in exploring this issue and how the regeneration process worked in this project.

First though, it is useful to step back from the process and briefly review the problems that the regeneration of the public housing stock is aimed at addressing, because there are some housing problems which come to the fore suddenly and unexpectedly which also must be

addressed often on a priority basis, such as the design and material failures. Regeneration on the otherhand, deals with housing problems which by and large are inevitable -- problems which are associated with the aging of the public housing stock. What then are the problems that are identified with the aging process?

There is first, and the most obvious, the deterioration of major physical components of the housing, such as plumbing and heating systems, roofs, windows and exterior doors, components which despite often valiant efforts to maintain are gradually reaching the end of their useful life span. To continue to repair and maintain these components becomes increasingly costly and the components themselves increasingly inefficient in performing their functions successfully. These are major cost items, items that in the past have never been identified in the planned improvements under the modernization and improvement portion of the public housing operating budgets and whose costs may be ten or fifteen times those of past modernization and improvement budgets.

There are other physical problems of aging, of equal concern, which are less apparent. The older public housing was designed to provide a form of liveability which accommodated tenant needs in ways which generally reflected liveability norms of the period. These norms have changed.

For example, 60 AMP service was not uncommon 35 years ago in modest housing, whereas today, where we are so dependent on electrical appliances and conveniences, 100 AMP service is now the norm for modest housing. As well, showers were seldom provided in earlier public housing; often no closet doors were provided; vinyl tile or linoleum were the common floor finish in living rooms and bedrooms; and walls were often painted concrete block. In the hierarchy of shelter components, some of these items could be considered less

essential housing components, but these aspects of liveability, where they occur, now distinguish the quality of the public housing stock from the norms and, as such, impact on tenant attitudes and their quality of life.

During the aging of the housing stock, of course, other factors are changing which impact on the suitability of our older housing stock to continue to meet tenant needs or facilitate efficient management. For example, the major increase in single parent families in public housing, together with the increasing violence of our times, is putting much greater emphasis on the nature and extent of the security provided by our housing -- not only with respect to the shelter component itself, but also with respect to aspects of the site environment. Many of our older public housing projects were built at relatively low densities and often the large open spaces that resulted, now have poorly planned uses, and are poorly lit at night with the result that in some cases they represent a threatening environment to residents rather than attractive open space liveability as was originally intended.

In other cases, the neighbourhood in which the housing is located has changed significantly over 30/35 years and now may no longer provide the community services and amenities needed to support the residential population of the public housing, thus affecting the liveability of the housing regardless of its physical condition.

These and other aspects are signs or impacts of the aging process. With some skill and effort, however, the housing where the aging has taken its greatest toll can be identified. However, having identified the problems, the housing in need and all the aspects of that housing which should be addressed, the key issue must be considered -- the issue of the high repair bill for the old car -- what is the most prudent way to spend available resources in addressing the circumstances of that

project in order that the most benefits will accrue to the users of the housing as well as those who must continue to maintain and operate it.

While major rehabilitation may be the most prevalent activity for regenerating older public housing, there must be an assurance that the regeneration process allows for the examination of other major improvement options. In some cases this might include redevelopment, land consolidation, increased density with new housing infill on underutilized land instead of, or in combination with rehabilitating existing housing. This kind of process will ensure that the major dollars required for public housing regeneration are committed in ways which ensure both long and short term maximum benefits to the tenants and the partnership.

The constraints that CMHC, as the federal partner in public housing, are now attempting to understand should be briefly identified. First, the present condition of the older public housing across Canada is not clear at this time, with respect to the nature and extent of improvements which may be required to address the aging process. It is the Provinces and their Housing Authorities who, on behalf of the Partnership have maintained this housing and who have this pertinent information on their own respective housing units. To better define public housing regeneration need on a national scale, there is a growing need to work more closely with CMHC Partners in consolidating this data.

Secondly, a comprehensive assessment of a housing project including the exploration of broad options for its regeneration is not common in the public housing sector -- there are neither resources nor expertise easily available in the present operational framework to undertake such efforts. The private sector has some expertise to offer in this regard, but their endeavours are largely based on economic

determinants -- profit and loss, whereas the public sector, while obviously recognizing the importance of economic considerations, must blend into the decision making process, social considerations which the Partnership, as landlords and owners, have a mandate to fulfill. And this issue strongly permeates many of the decisions to be made in public housing regeneration. There are some new paths to trod and issues to be identified for which at present there are few proven answers.

Other countries have made efforts in this direction and some of CMHC's provincial partners have also begun significant initiatives. There is a great need to now consolidate this experience and knowledge.

Thirdly, whatever actions are taken to rejuvenate the housing will impact heavily on the existing tenants and there are many issues involved with undertaking improvements to occupied housing which are not yet fully resolved, issues such as:

- the temporary relocation of occupants during improvements;
- the sequencing of improvements with respect to minimizing both costs and tenant inconvenience;
- tenant expectation levels;
- insurance and safety requirements during on-site improvements.

In Regent Court in Regina these, and other issues were addressed by the Federal/Provincial Partnership and some lessons were learned during the process. CMHC is attempting to learn more by undertaking an evaluation of a number of aspects of that regeneration process to assist future similar initiatives. The experience in Regent Court will be briefly described.

Regent Court is a section 40 public housing project built in Regina

in 1959, consisting of 17 structures which contained 109 units in row housing and walk-up apartment housing forms. The project is located on about 9 acres (3.6H) of land in north central Regina. Generally, its design could be described as a court yard project of relatively low density and with clusters of parking areas on the fringes of the site -- typical of a number of Section 40 projects built around that time.

It was selected for regeneration almost inadvertently in that CMHC was responding to a request which had originated from the tenants, for improved tenant facilities. It was only when the investigation team produced a report which identified many problems which are now associated with the aging of the housing stock that regeneration issues surfaced. It was agreed by the Partnership, that while improved tenant facilities were needed, the request from the tenants was really symptomatic of other more fundamental problems. Following considerable discussion between the partners, it was agreed that a more detailed examination of the project would be undertaken with a view to identifying these issues in more detail. This led ultimately to the regeneration of the project.

In examining Regent Court, the following working criteria were used to help determine the general nature and extent of the regeneration that might be required:

- all housing, when improved, should meet all applicable housing codes and standards related to health and safety;
- other improvements not necessarily related to codes/standards should meet tenants needs on a qualitative level generally comparable to local standards for modest housing;
- as a result of improvements, future operating costs to the partnership should be reduced, or at least contained; and
- where possible, regeneration proposals should take advantage of the economic potential of the site.

It is obvious that in pursuing these criteria, conflicts will arise between the criteria -- and it is the resolution of these conflicts to the mutual satisfaction of all partners and the tenant group wherein lies the essence of successful public housing regeneration.

The process that was followed in Regent Court was briefly as follows:

1. A joint Federal/Provincial Steering Committee was established to direct the full process. It was a decision making committee and included:

General Manager	-	Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
Provincial Director	-	Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
General Manager	-	Saskatchewan Housing Corporation
City Manager	-	City of Regina
Tenant Representative	-	Regent Court Project

This committee was maintained throughout the planning and implementation phases and was vital to the entire regeneration process.

2. A detailed assessment was made of the existing project, identifying the nature and extent of the improvements that were required with respect to 4 aspects.

Standards/Codes - CMHC Inspectors

Unit/Site Liveability - Architectural Consultant

Site Engineering - Engineering Consultant

Energy Considerations - NRC Multiple Housing Energy Audit

Preliminary costs were estimated for the improvements which were identified.

3. A CMHC design team consolidated this data and developed broad regeneration options which could be explored -- including:
 - major rehabilitation of existing units and site, retaining the existing characteristics of the project;
 - a phased rehabilitation program, also retaining the existing characteristics of the project;
 - redevelopment or phased redevelopment to increase the density of housing on the site, to bring the total project closer to its density potential;
 - rehabilitation with housing infill on existing open space;combinations of the above activities.
4. Options were presented to the steering committee and an option selected.
5. Approval by the funding partners was sought and secured.
6. Detailed architectural drawings/specifications were prepared and tendered.
7. Contracts awarded and implementation activities begun.

In essence, the findings of Regent Court assessment indicated that while major improvements to the housing were required, the housing was,

with a few exceptions, still structurally sound and therefore consideration of options which included major redevelopment were inappropriate. The regeneration therefore was based largely on a comprehensive rehabilitation program of existing units together with other regeneration activities which resulted in a total cost of approximately \$4 million.

The following regeneration activities were undertaken:

1. Comprehensive rehabilitation of 99 of the existing 109 units.
 - approximately 40% of the total cost.
2. Demolition of 10 units because of high rehabilitation costs associated with functional obsolescence aspects and the construction of 16 new housing units and a social recreational facility.
 - approximately 25% of total cost.
3. Major rehabilitation of the site including a new internal project road, full regrading of the site, new storm draining system and new parking provisions, and landscaping.
 - approximately 25% of total cost.
4. Soft costs - including architectural and engineering fees, site supervision, temporary relocation of tenants, insurance.
 - approximately 10% of total costs.

While a great deal was learned from the on-site experience in

Regent Court, CMHC hopes to learn more by undertaking an evaluation of aspects of the regeneration process such as the general cost benefits of the improvements that were made and the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the process. In addition, the Corporation is now exploring various detailed strategies which, with the assistance of CMHC's partners, will help better define and ultimately address the key issues associated with the aging of the public housing stock across Canada.