Nishnawbe Aski Nation
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Designing for communities: The need for housing diversity across the NAN territory and the well-being impacts of forced homogenization

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The role of design in housing is to create alignment between form and function. To ensure that the physical space is aligned with its occupants needs, while considering the climatic and geographic context. As a result, housing forms have often historically become symbols of a specific culture or demographic group. Homes can, and should, become representative of a place and the people who live there.

In modern cities, it is assumed that the market ensures that a diversity of housing types are available to suit the different residents who will select the form best suited to their needs. However, for individuals being housed outside of market housing another mechanism is needed to ensure appropriate units are available. The design and mix of non-market housing requires a greater understanding of the people, the place and the needs of those who will occupy the homes.

Within NAN territory more than three quarters of all housing units are "band housing"[1] with nearly all homes either built, operated or managed by the First Nation. A housing market, as it is understood in southern Canada, is nearly nonexistent. Government programs have played an oversized role in the construction of housing and, as a result through program guidelines, in the types of homes built and materials used. The result of decades of one-size-fits-all intervention has been a replication of a southern, suburban style of housing across the territory that has led to the misalignment between occupants and their homes.

An Overview of the NAN Context

For decades, the shortage and inadequacy of housing in NAN territory has been documented. The shortage of homes has led to significantly higher rates of crowding and family doubling. As a result, a focus has been placed on the building of family-sized units. Houses with three or more bedrooms make up 74% of the stock in NAN territory compared to only 64% in the whole of Ontario, whereas one-bedrooms only account for 6% of housing in NAN territory[2] compared to 14% in Ontario.[3] The lack of housing diversity, coupled with the overall shortage of homes leaves specific demographic groups –Elders, singles and youth– without appropriate housing types creating inequitably high levels of housing insecurity.

At the same time as this homogenization of the housing stock has taken place, NAN's population has become disproportionately young and continues to grow at a higher rate than the rest of Ontario. 34% of NAN's on-reserve population is between 0 and 14 years old[4] which is more than double the Ontario-wide percentage of this population.[5] As this population comes of age, the existing housing shortage will be exacerbated.

The Youth Housing Problem

"The goal is to see the young people in a house of their own (…) we all won't be over crowded if they have their own space"

– Community member, Fort Severn First Nation

At engagement sessions held over the last year for the development of the NAN Housing Strategy, many community members identified housing for youth and singles as their community's greatest need. The scenario most commonly described was of young people looking for a space of their own being put on housing waitlists, but because of persistently long waitlists and nearly all units being family-sized, they are consistently moved to the bottom of the list. As a result, young people are unable to secure housing of their own in their community and are forced into long-term housing precarity or must move away from their communities.

Connecting Policy and Homogenization

While some of the push towards larger units can be explained by the large numbers of people in need of housing, it can also be connected to funding programs. Of the First Nations that have participated in the NAN Housing Strategy development a large majority have indicated that their most recent housing development was funded either through Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada's Budget 2016 On-Reserve Housing Immediate Needs Fund or Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's On-Reserve Non-Profit Housing Program (also called Section 95 housing).

Both programs are application-based, and require a demonstration of housing need with awards based on an allotment of housing units. The total value of the award is based on the Maximum Unit Price for the number of bedrooms being constructed. As a result, an applicant First Nation gets a larger total award if they elect to build larger, family-sized units. Smaller, less expensive units are then disadvantaged.

Without a mechanism for capturing the maximum possible allocation and spreading it over additional smaller units there is no reason to expect that the housing stock will diversify. First Nations are simply maximizing their possible allocation by building the greatest amount of housing possible within existing programs. The impact of existing program design is segments of community members, living both on- and off-reserve, are left feeling hopeless in search of a home of their own in their communities.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation Housing Strategy

The NAN Housing Strategy is a three-year project creating occupant-focused housing need assessments, determining localized housing need, and developing housing solutions at the community and regional level. The NAN Housing Strategy will centre First Nations knowledge and lived experience to support the creation of local institutions responsible for the planning, governance and design of their housing systems.

NAN represents 49 First Nations within northern Ontario with the total population of membership (on- and off-reserve) estimated around 45,000 people. NAN encompasses James Bay Treaty No. 9 and Ontario's portion of Treaty No. 5, and has a total land-mass covering two-thirds of the province of Ontario spanning 210,000 square miles. The people traditionally speak four languages: OjiCree in the west, Ojibway in the central-south area, and Cree and Algonquin in the east.

NAN continues to work to improve the quality of life for the NAN territory. Through existing partnerships and agreements with Treaty partners (governments of Canada and Ontario), NAN continues to advocate on behalf of the communities it represents for self-determination with functioning self-government.

Continuing their ongoing partnership with NAN, and providing technical, training and community engagement support on this project, is Together Design Lab at Ryerson University. A team of students, staff and faculty with training in planning and architecture, Together Design Lab has extensive experience partnering with First Nations to create change in housing systems within northern Ontario.

Visioning the Future

> *"What happens to the housing now will impact the youth of tomorrow and [we] can only hope that they won't be in a housing crisis too."*
>
> *– Oshkaatisak Youth Council*

Without many examples of housing typologies on-reserve it is difficult to point to successful models of housing for singles and youth. While in southern, urban contexts these units are often grouped together in larger, multi-unit buildings this form has been described by many participants as inappropriate for most of NAN territory. Instead, through design-focused activities with housing professionals and potential occupants, including youth, new designs are being identified featuring spatial arrangements and layouts which are better suited to the lifestyles and needs of NAN community members.

To meet the housing needs of all NAN members a more diverse housing mix is required. Given the young and growing population it is expected that the current lack of smaller housing units will be exacerbated as more youth will need spaces of their own. While appropriate typologies are being identified through the NAN Housing Strategy, co-created with NAN youth and housing professionals, funding program changes are required to encourage building a diversity of units. First Nations' housing funding should be predictable year-over-year, not require annual proposals and the maximum contribution should be provided regardless of housing form. As a result, First Nations would have the ability to build the forms and mix of units required to meet the needs of their populations. Until such changes are made, on-reserve housing systems will continue to privilege certain family structures and leave some individuals facing permanent housing insecurity.

[1] Statistics Canada. (2017). 2016 Census of population: Census Profiles for Mattagami 71, Chapleau 74A , Duck Lake 76B, Chapleau 75, Matachewan 72, Abitibi 70, Fort Albany, Factory Island 1, Constance Lake 92, Moose Factory 68, Flying Post 73, New Post 69A, Ginoogaming First Nation, Long Lake 58, Aroland 83, Osnaburgh 63A, Fort Albany, Attawapiskat 91A, Marten Falls 65, Fort Hope 64, Cat Lake 63C, Osnaburgh 63B, Lac Seul 28, Weagamow Lake 87, Poplar Hill, Deer Lake, Sandy Lake 88, Sachigo Lake 1, Pikangikum 14, Fort Severn 89, Webequie, North Spirit Lake, Wunnumin 1, Wapekeka 2, Neskantaga, Bearskin Lake, Kasabonika Lake, Muskrat Dam Lake, Kingfisher Lake 1, Wawakapewin, Kee-Way-Win .Retrieved from: http://dc.chass.utoronto.ca.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/cgi-bin/census/2016/displayCensus.cgi?year=2016&geo=cs-d#vars

[2] IBID.

[3] Statistics Canada. (2017). Ontario [Province] and Ontario [Province] (table). Census Pro-file. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Re-leased November 29, 2017. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E (accessed January 10, 2020)

[4] Statistics Canada. (2017). 2016 Census of population: Census Profiles for Mattagami 71, Chapleau 74A , Duck Lake 76B, Chapleau 75, Matachewan 72, Abitibi 70, Fort Albany, Factory Island 1, Constance Lake 92, Moose Factory 68, Flying Post 73, New Post 69A, Ginoogaming First Nation, Long Lake 58, Aroland 83, Osnaburgh 63A, Fort Albany, Attawapiskat 91A, Marten Falls 65, Fort Hope 64, Cat Lake 63C, Osnaburgh 63B, Lac Seul 28, Weagamow Lake 87, Poplar Hill, Deer Lake, Sandy Lake 88, Sachigo Lake 1, Pikangikum 14, Fort Severn 89, Webequie, North Spirit Lake, Wunnumin 1, Wapekeka 2, Neskantaga, Bearskin Lake, Kasabonika Lake, Muskrat Dam Lake, Kingfisher Lake 1, Wawakapewin, Kee-Way-Win .Retrieved from: http://dc.chass.utoronto.ca.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/cgi-bin/census/2016/displayCensus.cgi?year=2016&geo=cs-d#vars

[5] Statistics Canada. (2017). Ontario [Province] and Ontario [Province] (table). Census Pro-file. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Re-leased November 29, 2017. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E (accessed January 10, 2020)