

PLANNER AS CONVENER

BY MARINA JOZIPOVIC, BRENDA MADRAZO, AND MATT THOMSON

SUMMARY

Wicked problems such as the housing crisis are increasing the complexity of the environment within which planners are working. Old ways of engaging are becoming inadequate. Because of our role as planners in imagining our collective futures, we are uniquely positioned to convene actors across sectors to learn, co-create, and experiment together. We can draw on tools from complementary disciplines such as social innovation and human-centred design to work differently than we have in the past. This article uses the example of the YWCA Metro Vancouver Social Innovation Lab for deeply affordable housing for single parents as an example of addressing a complex planning issue. Despite the opportunities for planners to play a more active convening role, work is needed to connect planners with the skills and tools they need to feel confident in this role.

SOMMAIRE

Les grands enjeux tels que la crise du logement complexifient l'environnement dans lequel évoluent les urbanistes. Les anciennes méthodes de mobilisation sont de moins en moins adéquates. Notre rôle d'urbanistes nous amène à imaginer notre avenir collectif. Nous sommes donc particulièrement bien positionnés pour réunir des acteurs de tous les secteurs afin d'apprendre, de créer et d'expérimenter dans un contexte collaboratif. Nous pouvons recourir à des outils issus de disciplines connexes, comme l'innovation sociale et le design centré sur l'humain, et ainsi modifier notre façon de travailler. Cet article s'appuie sur l'exemple du laboratoire d'innovation sociale du YWCA du Grand Vancouver visant à créer des logements très abordables pour les familles monoparentales afin de s'attaquer à un enjeu urbanistique complexe. Malgré les moyens dont disposent les urbanistes pour jouer un rôle de rassembleur plus actif, il importe de les doter des compétences et des outils nécessaires pour qu'ils s'acquittent de ce rôle avec confiance.

PLANNING WITH COMPLEXITY

The role of planning is to enable the conditions for communities to thrive socially, environmentally, and economically. This work has always been complicated and involved negotiating trade-offs among various actors. However, expectations for planning are expanding in response to growing crises facing contemporary communities – including climate change, the drug poisoning crisis, and the housing crisis – all of them wicked problems that offer little middle ground and garner little agreement on solutions.

Given the complexity of these challenges, old ways of engaging stakeholders are inadequate to the task at hand: we must imagine new ways of doing things – and then do them. These challenges are too big and complex to be addressed by any single actor and demand collaboration (Haskamp 2021, Diderich 2020). We need creativity and experimentation to develop new ways of solving problems (Plattner et. al., 2014; Raynor and Doyon, 2018).

Planners of various stripes are stepping up. Our roles – whether in government, the non-profit sector, or the private sector – put us in a unique position to bring people together for the shared purpose of planning our collective future and we must not squander this opportunity. However, more can be done to better equip planners with the skills and tools to step confidently into this role.



THE HOUSING CRISIS

The housing crisis in British Columbia, like many other parts of Canada, offers a prime example and has all the hallmarks of a complex, wicked problem that lacks an easy solution. In many parts of BC, runaway housing costs have strained communities and few families have been hit as hard as single parent households, which are predominantly led by women. Thirty two percent of lone-parent households in BC are in core housing need¹ compared to 9% of couples with children.² Many of these households require a far deeper level of affordability than the private market can provide.

Some promising initiatives are emerging. The National Housing Strategy and the Homes for BC: A 30-Point Plan for Housing Affordability in BC show greater commitment to investing in housing. Local governments are increasingly willing to support the development of affordable housing through planning policies and regulations (such as inclusionary zoning, density bonusing,

incentives, etc.). Housing providers are eager to find new opportunities to build housing.

On the ground, however, change has been slow. While greater funding resources are no doubt needed, it is also true that no single measure or actor can adequately address the housing crisis alone. In practice, getting units built at the affordability level needed requires a combination of land, financial resources, regulatory savvy, and community care that can only result from collaborative partnerships involving non-profit housing providers, private developers, senior government, and, potentially, others.

CASE STUDY: YWCA SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB ON DEEPLY AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR SINGLE PARENTS

Recognizing the need to work across sectors, the YWCA Metro Vancouver launched a social innovation lab supported by CMHC in November 2020. The purpose: to search for new solutions to address the need for more deeply affordable housing for single parents

earning very low wages or accessing Income Assistance. Despite the key role of non-profit housing providers in creating truly affordable housing, these organizations continually face barriers, from funding shortfalls and unfavourable regulatory environments, to ever-escalating land and construction costs.

Led by a team of planner-facilitators, the purpose of this work was to bring together actors from five key sectors – provincial government, local government, private developers, financial partners, and non-profit housing providers – to develop and test new ways of understanding and addressing the challenge. Over the past year, a group of approximately 30 participants across these sectors met through a series of virtual workshops to work together to: 1) define the challenge; 2) build a shared understanding of the challenge; 3) co-create potential solutions; 4) analyze, test, and refine potential solutions; and 5) create a roadmap for implementation. These sessions drew on the disciplines of social innovation, planning,

¹ CMHC defines core housing need as a household whose housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability, or suitability standards and who would have to spend 30% or more of its before-tax income to afford the median rent of an alternative unit that is acceptable.

² CMHC, Housing Market Information Portal, 2021. (Census-based and NHS-based housing indicators and data.)



Figure 1.

and human-centred design, using a variety of facilitation techniques. Participants brought their creativity, insight, experience, and ideas to have conversations that are rarely had.

WHAT DID THIS MEAN?

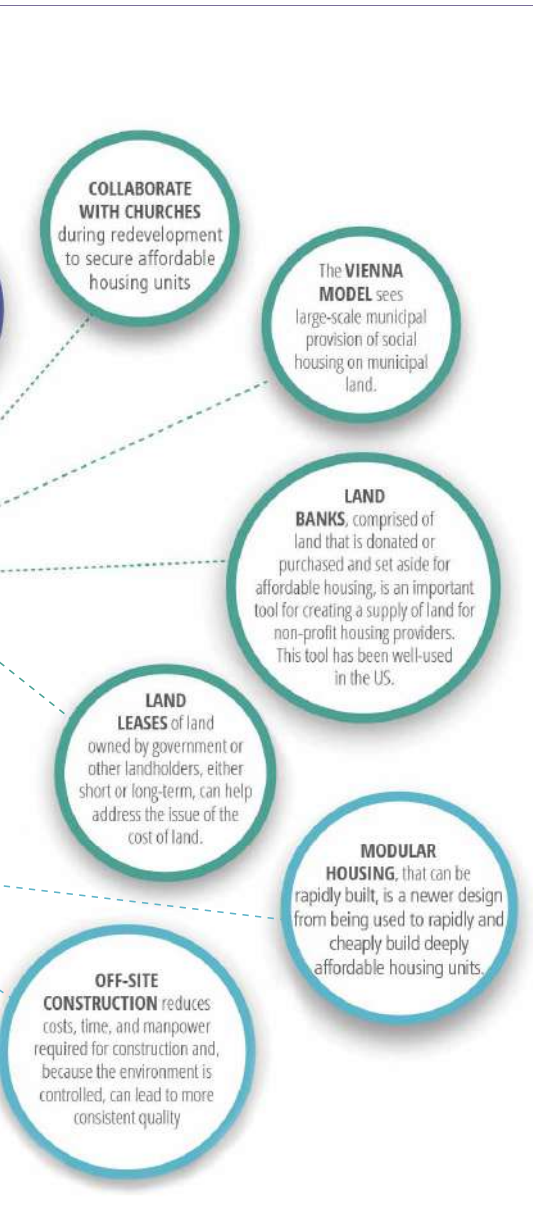
- **Really understanding the problem before developing the solution:** Often, we work in silos or rush to solutions without truly understanding the challenge we face, the system in which we are working, and what has already been tried (see **Figure 1**). When we fail to recognize the many factors and actors contributing to a problem, our solutions tend to be partial or superficial at best. Through our

process, we spent a significant amount of time defining the problem and in turn increased our collective awareness of the contributing factors.

- **Challenging assumptions and learning together:** The process revealed that there is very limited understanding among local government staff and private developers of the true cost of providing deeply affordable housing, especially when it comes to operating costs. This means that policy decisions on density bonusing and inclusionary zoning are being made without understanding the implications for non-profit housing providers. In response,

we shared non-profit operating cost information to build that understanding and also to invite feedback on ways of reducing potential costs.

- **Having hard, honest conversations:** Addressing this challenge at the scale necessary is inherently difficult. The lack of silver bullets was visibly frustrating. However, when we recognized this together, the conversation shifted from hopelessness to imagining what those at the table could do to help each other, and who else needed to be involved. This moved us from blaming to imagining. We generated ideas together, including honestly critiquing what has been tried



and what is unlikely to make an impact. This meant that a participant from one sector could propose a solution and immediately get feedback from a participant in another sector on how this might affect them.

We are now developing and testing three prototypes, or preliminary models, for improving the financial feasibility of deeply affordable housing, including improving cost efficiencies in operating deeply affordable housing, expanding fundraising tools, and increasing inter-governmental coordination on housing. Our work now is to operationalize our learnings through a roadmap for implementation and set up

systems to continue the work long past the life of the lab itself.

Convening multi-stakeholder processes such as labs can be powerful for building shared understanding and generating new ideas. These processes can catalyze new relationships and ways of working that last far beyond the initial process. However, this type of work also faces limitations. Turning ideas into action can be a slow process due to time and funding constraints, and the friction due to organizational silos that persist because of different mandates, funding sources, staff capacities, and priorities. Those at the table need to be willing and able to move ideas forward. Most importantly, when it comes to government action, labs cannot substitute for broader democratic processes, however imperfect.

THE PLANNER-CONVENOR

Planners today are required to use an evolving set of tools and skills to navigate the complex relationships that exist within actors in a system: between residents, sectors, and different levels of government. The challenges our communities are facing often seem intractable, and community tensions over these issues are often high. Trust between stakeholders is often missing, making collaboration difficult or impossible. Yet we have an opportunity as planners to continue to critically examine our role and leverage our opportunity to convene in service of the communities within which we work.

This is an uncomfortable space to occupy and many planners lack the confidence to wade into it. Worse, we limit our understanding of planning to a regulatory or policy role alone, missing potential levers for furthering community goals and stopping short of innovation, experimentation, and transformative practices (Othengrafen and Levin-Keitel, 2019). As the YWCA Social Innovation Lab case study shows, learning from the fields of social innovation and human-centred design can complement our planning practice.

Planners at all stages in their careers would benefit from training in systems thinking and facilitation. Working towards thriving communities requires the work of multiple sectors and actors; it is high time we get comfortable with our role as convenors and look past simple engagement to something deeper and more transformative. ■

Marina Jozipovic is a planner and facilitator with Urban Matters and her work focuses on equity and housing. She is based in Vancouver, BC.

Brenda Madrazo is an urban planner specialized in housing and her work at YWCA Metro Vancouver focuses on developing affordable housing projects. She is based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Matt Thomson is the Community Housing Lead for Urban Matters and his work focuses on supporting sound policy decisions at all levels of government that will lead to more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable housing solutions. He is based in Gibsons, BC.

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