

Changing the rules to do the right thing for the homeless

Non-profit developer has to get doubly innovative to cut through the Toronto bureaucracy's red tape



St. Clare's operations manager Andrea Adams, left, and physical assets manager Mohammad Anvari pose at 25 Leonard Ave., where excavation has begun for a three-storey building that will provide purpose-built rentals for homeless people.

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How do you provide housing for the chronically homeless? One small Toronto non-profit has found a way – but it's harder than it ought to be.

Earlier this month, St. Clare's Multifaith Housing Society started work on a new social housing development: a skinny three-storey building that contains 22 bachelor units. Designed by LGA Architectural Partners, it's going alongside a building St. Clare's owns on Leonard Avenue in the neighbourhood of Kensington Market, turning what used to be a parking lot into desperately needed housing.

This modest intervention in the city reflects well on its non-profit developers and the architects. And in a political context where governments aren't funding the social housing that our city and our country desperately needs, it suggests that local government could help by getting out of the way.

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"Without meaning to, we've become specialists in dealing with really difficult projects," says Dean Goodman, and architect and partner in LGA. "There are a lot of technical issues here, with zoning and building code, that took a while to resolve."

St. Clare's is an innovative non-profit developer and landlord, which currently has 413 housing units in five buildings across the city. At Leonard Avenue, it partnered with 18 referring agencies in the city to provide support to their tenants. It's a model called "community first," explains Andrea Adams, St. Clare's operations manager. The building's community is deliberately diverse – tenants vary in age and in their particular needs.

St. Clare's took over the Leonard site, erected in 1960 as a medical building, more than a decade ago. It worked with LGA to convert the structure into housing units, then in 2006 completed an addition, adding two floors of units onto the roof.



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HANDOUT

Those 26 units were largely prefabricated off-site and craned into place; that technical achievement won the architects an award. It saved time, and as Ms. Adams points out, minimized the disruptions to the existing tenants. The apartments are very compact, barely more than 200 square feet, but they're decent: Each features a bath, full kitchen and generously sized window. As a bonus, the rooftop units are organized around a courtyard that provides amazing views of the city.

The benefits of being here, for St. Clare's tenants, are many. "The location is crucial," Ms. Adams says. "Housing for chronically homeless populations has to be situated close to services, like the hospital; near affordable food; and transit; and then all the drop-in centres that provide the needed supports." In today's increasingly unaffordable city, that is a difficult ask.

So the project, as an addition to the existing facility, makes sense. The side parking lot of the building wasn't being used; Mr. Goodman and his team designed a three-storey walkup building to occupy about half of the lot, with apartments connected by exterior walkways that provide outdoor space for the tenants. A quiet garden on the ground, designed by the landscape architects Vertecks, will link the new wing to the existing building, and a new side door and new laundry room will serve the current residents.

"It's very important working with an architect and design who understands our model and understands our population," says Mohammad Anvari, the organization's physical assets manager. "Dean and his team have worked with us for a decade and they have that open mind to understand. They communicate directly with our tenants; that is important to our model." Goodman agrees: "We see the residents, really, as our clients."

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Building on the existing facilities allows St. Clare's to keep costs down. The capital funding is modest; it includes a \$1-million donation from Residential Construction Council of Ontario and \$500,000 from the City of Toronto through its Open Door Affordable Housing program, along with \$2.5-million in financing.

The building demonstrates a point, Ms. Adams says: "There are solutions to chronic homelessness," she says emphatically. "They're not that expensive; they're not that complicated." The key is small units, which are affordable to tenants on social assistance, and enough of them to support the landlord's costs.



The living area (above) and kitchen (below) in one of the current units at 25 Leonard Ave.

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"The problem," she explains, "is that they don't fit planning's notions of what good buildings are."

St. Clare's spent more than \$500,000 in planning and design costs even before they got city approval, risking their time and scarce funds to try and make the building work. In the end, the project required an official plan amendment, the same kind of complex regulatory change that major commercial developments require. It took two years. "We had to go through the same process as a billion-dollar corporation has to go through," Mr. Anvari says.

St. Clare's and Mr. Goodman have kind words for the city planning staff who worked with – and supported – their application. The problem was with the restrictive nature of the city's planning rules, which categorize the area as "Neighbourhoods." Effectively, this means only single-family houses and small apartment buildings are allowed, with many further restrictions – despite the fact that a hospital lies across the street and a parking garage next door. More generally, these regulations are preposterous in the context of Kensington Market, where the current zoning and official plan were imposed on a neighbourhood full of old buildings that break all the rules.

Happily, St. Clare's is getting away with changing the rules, thanks in part to the support of Friends of Kensington Market and local councillor Joe Cressy. "This was a YIMBY experience," Ms. Adams says.

"The city as a whole absolutely should speed up the approval process when it comes to building affordable housing," Mr. Cressy says. "We have a long way to go." He cites the fact that homeless shelters are only allowed, in the city's current zoning by-law, on arterial roads; and the fact that the city's Open Door program provides funding only after a project has gotten planning approval.

In short, there's a lot of bureaucracy standing in the way of a building such as this – even when it's clearly serving a social need. "I think the city should be waiting for our call," Ms. Adams says, "and asking, 'How can we help?'" Exactly.