

Transferring vacant land and buildings to unhoused people in Winnipeg

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Introduction

As of 2018, there were approximately 9,865 unhoused people in Winnipeg (Brandon and Nino, 2018; University of Winnipeg, 2012).¹ Housing is a human right, according to several United Nations covenants and declarations, and it is a critical component of any basic standard of living. In Winnipeg, the majority of unhoused people are Indigenous peoples, which makes addressing homelessness an issue of Indigenous rights, honouring treaties, and resisting colonialism (Brandon and Nino, 2018). Unhoused people around the world have brought attention to the key role of vacant lots and buildings in allowing homelessness to continue. Taking our lead from homeless people's organizations such as Picture the Homeless, as a class we researched vacant buildings and land in Winnipeg and came up with a plan for how they could be used to house the 9,865 unhoused people in the city as soon as possible in dignified, permanent, affordable homes.

Vacant lots and buildings by the numbers

- There are at least 551 vacant buildings in Winnipeg (the majority are likely residential buildings) (Santin, 2018).
- There are at least 7,121 vacant residential lots in Winnipeg (City of Winnipeg, 2019).
- There are approximately 140 vacant buildings in Winnipeg's inner city (Champion-Taylor, Leigh, and Poirier, 2013; Aasland, Hall, and Rempel, 2013; Spence Neighbourhood Association, 2015).
- There are approximately 310 vacant lots in Winnipeg's inner city (Champion-Taylor, Leigh, and Poirier, 2013; Aasland, Hall, and Rempel, 2013; Spence Neighbourhood Association, 2015).²

What's going on?

- There is evidence of extensive "warehousing" of vacant properties in Winnipeg, of property owners who are allowing often very large residential buildings to sit empty for

¹ The 2018 Winnipeg Street Census, while "not an attempt to count the total number of people experiencing homelessness," counted 1,519 unhoused people in a two-day survey. These findings are consistent with University of Winnipeg estimates, published in 2012, that in Winnipeg there were 350 people living on the streets, 1,195 people living in temporary shelters, and 7,600 people experiencing "hidden homelessness" (e.g. sleeping on friends' couches, etc.), for a total of 9,865 unhoused people.

² Actual numbers of vacant buildings and lots are likely far higher: These numbers do not include publicly owned properties or new residential developments that are sitting empty.

years on end, undeterred by the City's current vacant buildings bylaw (Champion-Taylor, Leigh, and Poirier, 2013; Santin, 2019; Israel, 2019; Grabish, 2019; Coubrough, 2017)

- The City of Winnipeg's management of vacant land and buildings is not oriented toward getting these properties back into the city's housing stock. Instead, the current bylaw aims merely to reduce the cosmetic impacts and immediate safety risks posed by vacant properties.
- The City is not adequately taking advantage of the stipulation in its current By-Law No. 89, Taking Title to Vacant and Derelict Buildings, that enables the City to transfer vacant properties to community groups or First Nations.
- The opportunity for the City to take title to a vacant property is not automatic and requires significant follow through from designated municipal employees, a government function that is severely underfunded.
- The City requires an agreeable redevelopment plan to be provided *before* the city may take title to a property, creating a barrier to the swift redevelopment of such properties.
- The City's structure for providing the public with access to data on vacant buildings and lots is entirely inadequate – it is too lengthy and too convoluted, especially in contrast to other Canadian cities that clearly present such data online to the public.

Inner-city communities have demanded action for years

There are clear and resounding calls from grassroots organizations to see meaningful action taken on converting vacant lots into affordable housing. Inner-city residents' organizations have already made detailed plans for vacant buildings and lots in their neighbourhoods and many have long track records of redeveloping vacant properties. Inner-city residents' organizations want vacant lots used for affordable infill housing wherever possible, and for children's playgrounds and community gardens if land is not suitable for housing (Dufferin Residents' Association, 2012; William Whyte Residents Association, 2012; Spence Neighbourhood Association, 2016; Aasland, Hall, and Rempel, 2013). They also want:

- The City to meaningfully enforce vacancy bylaws.
- The City to take possession of vacant buildings and land in the inner city and give residents' organizations the right to purchase them for \$1.
- Increased funding for community-led redevelopment of these properties.
- Community power to accept or reject developers' plans for vacant lots and buildings.

What should be done?

Vacant property policies should be intentionally revised and redirected toward the goal of housing unhoused people. With the amount of vacant land and buildings in Winnipeg, it is reasonable to believe that the city's entire unhoused population would be able to be housed on these properties. To do so, the city would need to take control of vacant properties, then those properties would need to be handed over to community grassroots organizations, not-for-profit organizations, cooperative housing organizations or community land trusts. Existing vacant public land provides ample opportunities for the development of community land trusts (CLTs) and housing co-operatives which are an effective tool for creating long term financially independent affordable housing. The City should:

- Establish a clear line of communication for residents to report vacant lots and buildings to the City.
- Make data about vacant properties more accessible. (At the very least, create an outline of terms used throughout the City of Winnipeg Open Data portal. Increase the comprehensiveness of existing information, especially around the number of vacant lots, buildings, new developments, and ongoing re-developments. Data on the amount of tax arrears, housing units, and the size of the lots should be made available.)
- Standardize data on vacant properties with other municipal governments, to compare the effects of different vacant-property policies and hold cities accountable.
- Increase fees and fines around vacant and boarded buildings, including a sliding scale whereby fees and fines increase based on either the actual or potential number of units present within a property.
- Increase funding for vacant property by-law enforcement.
- Establish community control over which buildings are inspected and redeveloped first.
- Establish a mandatory taking title process that would occur once a building is found out of compliance with the Vacant Buildings By-Law 79.
- Establish pre-emptive formal agreements with community development organizations for the redevelopment of derelict properties obtained by the City.
- Transfer leadership over vacant land and buildings to Indigenous communities. Treaty Land Entitlement First Nations should be given priority in acquiring urban surplus property through the City's current By-law No. 89, Taking Title to Vacant and Derelict Buildings. Indigenous housing co-operatives – such as Winnipeg's Payuk Inter-Tribal Co-operative Ltd., a rent-geared-to-income housing co-op with government subsidies - offer a good model.
- Transfer CentreVenture's right of first refusal to vacant properties to Indigenous-led tenant and community organizations. Since the late 1990s, Winnipeg has often provided

opportunities for investors to purchase land for an extremely low cost and provide high-value loans and grants through its CentreVenture Development Corporation. It is not unreasonable to assume that this could be done for social housing initiatives within the city as well.

- Establish a tenants' right to first refusal. When transference of ownership of property occurs, those presently residing within should be given ample time to organize and meet the best offer being provided. This creates a preventative measure against warehousing.
- Train and employ unhoused people to build and renovate housing, drawing on models such as BUILD Inc. in Winnipeg, Train for Trades in St. John's, Newfoundland, and the 1973 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act in the US.

Inspiring examples from other cities

- Through public funding and local private funders, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative Land Trust in Boston, Massachusetts was given eminent domain over 1300 parcels of abandoned land (Dwyer, 2015). Within Canada, community land trusts are not as prominent in comparison to the United States but they are beginning to take hold in parts of Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia. Friends of Kensington Market and the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust are both Toronto-based land trusts, Vancouver's Hogan's Alley Community Land Trust and Montreal's Milton-Parc Community are each prominent examples that could provide a starting point for a Winnipeg community land trust (Pedrero, 2019). In 2012, SEED Winnipeg along with the Province of Manitoba Cooperative Community Strategy funded a research project to determine the viability of a community land trust being formed in Winnipeg (O'Neill, 2014). Community land trusts have the ability to maintain affordability for residents based on local incomes rather than market value. They have shown the ability to transform communities with a high number of vacant lots and buildings into affordable housing communities that are independent of the speculative market. The fact that land trusts are run by a collection of residents within the community itself ensures, in theory, that the residents are in charge of deciding the best action plan for the community (Dwyer, 2015; Pedrero, 2019; O'Neill, 2014).
- The City of Denver's Revolving Affordable Housing Loan Fund used a property tax increase and development fees to turn vacant housing into affordable housing (Martin and Raabe, 2015).
- North Carolina has repurposed nineteen vacant public buildings, mostly schools and hospitals, into affordable housing units funded by state and federal tax credits (McInturff and Jones, 2013).
- Baltimore used tax credits and state funds to transform vacant schools into affordable housing (Tooten, 2014).

- Occupy Madison Inc. in Madison, WI converted an abandoned auto shop into a housing co-operative of tiny homes, where monthly rent is 10 hours of labour for the co-op (Occupy Madison Inc., 2017).
- With government funding, Phoenix Community Housing Co-operative, operating in East London, England, provides long-term affordable housing to formerly unhoused people in formerly vacant buildings (Phoenix Community Housing Co-operative, 2020).

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