



RETHINKING HOUSING

Designing and Building Affordable, Sustainable Housing throughout the Twin Cities Region

FEBRUARY 10, 2009 WORKSHOP SUMMARY REPORT

Facilitated by architect, designer, and educator William R. Morrish

Presented by the Family Housing Fund in partnership with the Metropolitan Council,
Minnesota Housing, Twin Cities LISC, and The McKnight Foundation



INTRODUCTION

FORTY LOCAL LEADERS GATHERED ON FEBRUARY 10 to participate in a workshop, *Rethinking Housing: Designing and Building Affordable, Sustainable Housing Throughout the Twin Cities Region*. Participants were a cross-section of housing practitioners and leaders, including private and nonprofit developers, funders, local officials and staff, architects, urban designers, university, foundation and community representatives.

This summary of the day's discussion, ideas and action steps for rethinking housing is being shared with workshop attendees and with those who were invited but could not attend.

The workshop was facilitated by **William R Morrish**, architect, designer and educator. Morrish is the Elwood R. Quesada Professor of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia. He was invited to lead the workshop because of his strong experience and skills crossing these disciplines. Morrish was the founding director of the Design Center for American Urban Landscape (now the Metropolitan Design Center) at the University of Minnesota from 1988 to 2001.

A TIMELY TOPIC

The diverse group of workshop participants clearly believed that **rethinking housing is an important and timely topic**. The energy in the room and the interest expressed by attendees to keep the group connected was a clear signal of this.

Workshop organizers received many positive and enthusiastic comments about the day from participants. I think you will agree that this summary report indicates both **interest and potential for useful local synergies and products as a follow-up to the workshop**.

NEXT STEPS

As the group desired, individuals receiving this summary will be able to **keep connected** through a website. We're working on it and will notify you when we have a website location up and running, and how you can participate.

We're exploring other **ways to continue rethinking housing** through periodic events and follow-up activities, working with the network of workshop participants, the partners who co-sponsored this event and other interested partners.

A SUMMARY

Bill Morrish's Presentation on Urban Design and Development Principles

To start the day, Morrish reviewed key ideas from a book he co-authored, *Growing Urban Habitats: Seeking a New Housing Development Model* (available through William Stout). *Growing Urban Habitats* is about using design to improve affordable housing and our cities' neighborhoods. It presents a multifamily housing approach that embraces expanded economic, social, physical and ecological considerations.

Morrish said **rethinking housing starts with language**. We're using outdated—and loaded—language that often doesn't convey what we really mean. For example, 'multifamily' is not a helpful term. Our approach to multifamily housing has been limited. It is the "big house" approach of several apartments or condominiums in one structure that looks like a large single-family home. **Expanding the terms we use can open up our thinking in new ways.**

His presentation covered design and construction, regulation and development, and learning from experience.

Housing Design and Construction

- Look beyond classic housing types; not all of the traditional types hold up, they can be improved.
- Changes in housing construction in the last 15 years include higher-than-standard 8 ft' ceilings for more light, eliminating double-loaded corridors to achieve passive cooling.
- Explore new assembly systems. Interest in and building of manufactured housing and components is exploding in the U.S. and Europe.
- Look at prototypes: Onion Flats, Philadelphia, PA; Folsam and Dore single-room occupancy housing SRO, by David Baker, San Francisco, CA; Colorado Court, in Santa Monica, CA., an example of affordable housing that achieved complete energy independence, and received energy credits for reducing urban impacts on water.
- The residential market presents one of the largest opportunities for energy savings at scale.
- Every project needs multiple returns.

Housing Regulation and Development

- It's important to rethink what a deal looks like so that it accomplishes what we want to do, rather than tweak the current system, which doesn't yield what we're looking for.
- Go from regulation to performance-based criteria that become standard; set a new threshold.
- New financial models for multifamily housing are needed.
- Casa Familiar, a San Diego, CA., community services organization, is working with the city of San Diego to develop a zoning overlay district within which all infill development would be managed by the local nonprofit agency.

Morrish said we don't know how to get to scale with the lessons we've learned. We don't take the time to go back and say what worked, what didn't, what did we learn, build on it and set a new standard based on our learning. He said this is something we could do in the Twin Cities, because we've done a lot of good work here.

BILL MORRISH'S PRESENTATION *continued*

More About Growing Urban Habits: Seeking a New Development Model

Growing Urban Habitats: Seeking A New Housing Development Model grew out of a design competition conducted for Sunrise, a 2.3 acre mobile home redevelopment site in Charlottesville, VA. The competition called for designs of 1200–1500 square foot homes, at 12 to 28 u/acre. Reviewing competition entries caused the organizers to ask: **What is it we like about these and why?** One of the conclusions was that it wasn't just one idea, one submission that was exceptionally impressive: it was **how the ideas added up.**

Growing Urban Habitats aggregates selected competition proposals and built examples from Philadelphia to Denver, San Diego to Chicago, and other places. The examples depict compact homes that add social, physical and ecological diversity, organized in a matrix around four goals: affordable, dense, compact and sustainable housing. Goals, strategies and opportunities are summarized in the matrix, which serves as the book's table of contents. For example, the Sustainable chapter discusses how the “two greens”—ecological and economic—are inextricably linked, and outlines design opportunities for achieving the two greens.

The book is a collection of ways to rethink recurring challenges in housing design. For example, “Expand options: share boundaries” in the Compact chapter explores how the walls, fences, and thresholds between households, if intelligently designed, can give each family more space and privacy, not less, even in tight conditions. “Build change: harness seasons”, an example from the Sustainable chapter, looks at how buildings can move beyond their status as energy guzzlers and start generating their own power.

The matrix was a focus of discussion at the workshop. Morrish suggested that the group could take local ownership of the matrix methodology. **How would we fill in the boxes in the matrix?**

A SUMMARY

Workshop Discussion Themes

The workshop topics included housing design, finance, policy and tools, and implementation. Group discussion and smaller “table discussions” generated comments, suggestions and action ideas. From this rich source of information, six themes emerged, around which this report is organized.

The six themes are listed below. Comments and action ideas for each theme are included in the next section.

- 1. Think and act very differently about the way we build housing in the future to fit new economic and demographic realities.**
- 2. Improve the ways we can make existing and new housing more green and sustainable.**
- 3. Improve the housing regulation and production process to be clearer and more efficient.**
- 4. Form stronger alliances and build new alliances.**
- 5. Educate the public and decision makers.**
- 6. Research, gather and share good information.**

THEMES, COMMENTS, and ACTION IDEAS

THEME ONE

Think and act very differently about the kind of housing we provide in the future to fit new economic and demographic realities. Economic and demographic changes *have and will continue to dramatically affect housing finance, affordability and markets.*

GETTING READY

- There is time to get ready for the next set of decisions before the pressure of development when the market is stronger.
- What kinds of decisions do we have to be ready for? We should do some scenario planning as a region.
- Development should be more grounded in future demographics and worker choice. Demographic changes include aging, cultural diversity, more diverse family sizes and lifestyles than traditional housing types were designed for.
- Make a connection between developers and deciders to get ready for change and for development based on new needs, demographic change and realities.
- We need a new prism with which to look at these issues—they're multidimensional.
- We'll only change if we push the envelope.

OPPORTUNITIES and ACTION IDEAS

- Government funders and a few others will be the only game in town in the short term—market this housing for its sustainability features.
- Foreclosures represent an opportunity to transform communities; address this and move a model for large-scale redevelopment to the private sector.
- A funding source coalition should put dollars into developing innovation.
- Change funding schemes to allow up-front design-build to take place. The result can be innovation based on choices rather than saying no.
- Incent local innovation through competition. Current circumstances present us with an opportunity to be creative locally; funders, regulators, developers, designers and others have a role to play in fostering innovation.
- What to do until markets come back? Use temporary models.
- Think about how you can bundle components together, sharing ideas and tapping into the energy of the shared boundary. This can have an impact on both capital and operating costs.
- Think about the flow and movement of people, not just traffic counts. Density is mobile, it changes during the day and day to day. For example, Grand Avenue may be very quiet on a Monday night but very busy on Friday and Saturday night.

Theme One includes three subthemes:

SUB-THEME Build Smaller, More Affordable Housing

- COMMENTS**
- Family incomes are decreasing. How will this influence family spending choices in housing, education, cars? What will we be faced with in the next 10 years?
 - Fit housing structures to new realities. Will we become more like Europeans in our use of space, amount of possessions?
 - Housing needs community rooms or other shared spaces so people can downsize their private space.
 - Multifamily housing should not be treated as transitional, a buffer.
 - Our toolbox needs good quality (not luxury) affordable housing.
 - Density can have positive economic and development impacts; yet there is fear about density, traffic, public safety.
- ACTION IDEAS**
- Focus on design and quality of spaces, not density.
 - New financial models for multifamily housing are needed.
 - Hold an awards competition to activate local architects and ideas.
 - Foundations, intermediaries and governments can test new ways that the private sector can scale up.
 - Bank land to gain control of land at today's lower values.

SUB-THEME Provide Housing That is Adaptable for People from Other Cultures

- COMMENT**
- In our region, 15 percent of people are foreign-born, yet we are producing mostly Euro-centric housing.
- ACTION IDEA**
- Design (or redesign) housing to be more easily adaptable to the needs and lifestyles of cultural groups new to the region.

SUB-THEME Provide Housing in Locations Connected to Transit and the Community

- COMMENTS**
- Housing on corridors for convenience to transit is important, but not everyone who wants to live in multifamily housing wants to live on a busy corridor or in a mixed-use environment.
 - As new projects are developed on corridors, how can the housing stock of the surrounding area be improved?
 - How do we work in the areas that we share? As the corridors blend into neighborhoods, how do we work in these in-between spaces?
- ACTION IDEA**
- Expanding housing options in neighborhoods within walking distance to transit, in addition to housing on corridors, is a good idea.

THEME TWO

Improve the ways we can make existing and new housing more green and sustainable.

Produce housing that is more *energy-efficient, affordable to operate and environmentally responsible.*

COMMENTS

- Reducing vehicle miles traveled affects climate and affordability of homes.
- Deal with the ground itself—think of our agrarian roots.
- Go beyond rain gardens.
- Green has been opened up to in new ways, for example on walls. One example of this is the Zero Energy House by Zoka Zola Architecture + Design in Chicago.
- We need sustainable cities, not buildings in isolation.
- Design whole communities to be resilient—mixed-use and mixed-economy. Think about how a community can survive catastrophic events. Building resilient communities takes place over time but should be considered as part of the initial community design process.
- How can the desired amenities be brought to neighborhoods that are already mixed economically? How can we invest in these communities to ensure their long-term sustainability?

ACTION IDEAS

- Site and build new housing to use less energy and make it more affordable.
- Retrofit existing housing and align financing for new housing to ensure that all housing addresses and helps climate change.
- Use geothermal energy.
- Ask more of the landscape—grow food, self-sustaining ecosystems (permaculture), value and preserve mature trees for cooling.
- Design communities to be resilient over time; think about how they can be diverse and sustainable to survive economic collapse, other calamities.

THEME THREE

Improve the housing regulation and development process to be clearer and more efficient.

Use proactive approaches that can transform the process.

COMMENTS

- One of the keys to making changes in the housing development system is to make shifts in the up-front process and recognize that the process isn't linear, it's cyclical. Think about multiple returns, making choices versus consensus; look across all the systems—natural, mobility, access, etc. How does this look different from how we do things now?
- Move from land use terms to transactional thinking, by focusing on exchanging things to get the product you want. Thinking about short-term and long-term aspects of a development is part of this approach.
- Pull apart the design process in every aspect of the system—architectural, finance, regulatory.
- Why do we have to reinvent “the table” each time? Is there a way to think about and package acceptable information that people can work with?
- Learn how to talk, by first defining the terms everyone is using. We have meetings but are not listening.
- Use a proscriptive approach: here are the key things that must be included (stay out of these ditches) but the rest is open, versus a prescriptive approach that says “this is what we want.” Need new funding streams around proscription.
- Build flexibility into the zoning and public process, use incentives to get what we want.
- Form codes make a block but don't say how it functions.

ACTION IDEAS

- Use performance codes that say what they should do, not what they shouldn't do.
- Develop local zoning models that streamline the process; try a by-right process.
- Make zoning consistent with plans for transit corridors.
- Incent place-making to address the “places-in-between”; to make livable places.
- Incent private sector innovation to build the public realm, instead of being a gate-keeper.
- Identify communities with good models of different kinds. This can create a competitive environment to replicate the ideas or go beyond them.
- Revisit I-35 W project tools developed in the 1990s.
- Share government expertise for efficiency, and to add capacity for governments without specialized staff.

THEME FOUR

Form stronger alliances and build new alliances. *Link and connect our work to avoid duplication and achieve the most effective results.*

COMMENTS/ACTION IDEAS

- Replicate peer groups like the ULI/MN Regional Council of Mayors.
- Keep people in the room connected and updated on who's doing what in housing design, finance, policy, implementation.
- Broaden alliances beyond housing groups to get better opportunities along transit corridors.
- Business community can be champions for affordable housing for their workers.

THEME FIVE

Educate the public and decision makers. Create and support *learning communities*.

COMMENTS

- Local decision makers could greatly benefit from a better understanding of how the world is changing and what that means for future residential and other development in their communities.
- Educate and engage residents, business and other community members, elected officials. Help people get to “yes” by making sure they have the information they need to more clearly state the case for creating a full range of housing choices. Be sure to consider the unlikely champions.
- Cultivate new language, communicate what works or is needed in communities.
- Emphasize “places and faces.” All people, all faces are assets, not liabilities.
- Address the perception that renters can't be good neighbors.
- If we affordable housing developers spend additional funds on marketing the housing we produce, it may mean doing fewer units but the reallocation of resources would likely pay for itself.
- Affordable housing is an underappreciated product. Since the state is a funder of a significant amount of affordable housing, perhaps there's a way for state-funded affordable housing to be branded and promoted.

ACTION IDEAS

- Take public officials out to see projects that are working as intended.
- Conduct a campaign on the benefits of a full range of housing choices to individuals and the community (like Housing Minnesota and Chaska Faces and Places). A consistent, sustained message will help make the ideas systemic.
- Market the sustainability advantages of affordable housing.

THEME SIX

Research, gather and share good information.

COMMENTS/ACTION IDEAS

- Document good project examples; identify what was learned from projects funded through Livable Communities and share results.
 - Share and use University of Minnesota analysis of change impacting development.
 - Contribute initiatives and best practices to the Minnesota site of www.HousingPolicy.org (under construction). Send items to Cathy Bennett at cathycbennett@frontiernet.net.
 - Work through the Urban Habitats matrix and see what can spin off.
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PARTICIPANT UPDATES

Workshop participants shared the following information on initiatives of their organizations as they related to the conversation.

Aeon (formerly Central Community Housing Trust) is a nonprofit housing developer that:

- Addresses housing preservation, substantial rehab, and new construction.
- Works on sustainable preservation of the housing stock—how can we do it better?
- Is collaborating on a project with Center for Sustainable Building Research, University of Minnesota, in the sustainability of different housing types.

Central Corridor Funders Collaborative is exploring funding to acquire development sites in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Central Corridor. The collaborative is looking at:

- Who benefits from investment in the corridor.
- Re-envisioning the community.

Community Growth Options project, an initiative of 1000 Friends of Minnesota, delivers financial and other assistance for community planning, ordinance development and implementation to small, outlying fast-growing metro-area communities that:

- Helps people and communities “right size” their expectations.
- Helps apply lessons learned.

LISC (Local Initiative Support Corporation) supports nonprofit community development organizations with grants, loans and expertise, and focuses on building sustainable communities and:

- Brings a variety of tool sets together to support comprehensive community development.
 - Engages the community in conversations around—how do you want to live?
 - Thinks holistically and works on linkages between housing, business, education, jobs, health, arts and culture.
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PARTICIPANT UPDATES *continued*

Citizens League and Stacy Becker, Becker Consulting, have developed a project for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy to:

- Produce findings that can be used to develop a shared understanding of the costs and benefits of development projects for the purposes of improving citizen involvement.

University of Minnesota

- Bill Conway, School of Architecture, is working on a studio project that addresses the future of neighborhoods in 2035—the building, the block, designing for foreclosure areas.
- Billy Weber, Center for Sustainable Building Research, is developing case studies of exemplary sustainable affordable housing in the region.
- Ignatio San Martin, new director of the Metropolitan Design Center, has offered to assist with following up on workshop ideas.

Urban Land Institute Minnesota's Regional Council of Mayors, represents Minneapolis, St. Paul and 36 developed and developing suburbs in a partnership that provides a nonpartisan platform engaging mayors in candid dialogue and peer to peer support with a commitment toward building awareness and action focused on a full range of housing choices, sustainability and connecting transportation and land use. Their work includes:

- Networks of support and ongoing peer to peer dialogues on regional issues.
- Community data and trends that help local leaders provide direction on future policies, tools and strategies.
- Web-based tool box through a Minnesota specific HousingPolicy.org framework that provides a resource for local leaders, staff and developers in support of a full range of housing choices.
- Opportunity City process that identifies tools and strategies at the local level in support of a full range of housing choices to serve as a model to be expanded at the regional level.

A FINAL NOTE

The Rethinking Housing workshop generated a high level of energy that we, the event organizers, pledge to keep alive.

Here's what's coming:

- A website location for participants to keep connected. Look for more on this soon.
- Additional workshops, forums, guest speakers.
- Project updates from individuals and groups represented at the workshop and other partners.

If you have suggestions for workshop follow-up activities, send them to **Elizabeth Ryan**, Vice-President, Regional Housing Initiatives, Family Housing Fund, at Elizabeth@fhfund.org.