

English Research Summary:

The Emergence of Social Economy Initiatives in Québec to Address the Housing Needs of Seniors

Original Article in French:

Émergence d'initiatives de l'économie sociale pour l'hébergement des aînés

Yvan Comeau

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<https://www.sommetinter.coop/en/virtual-library/scientific-articles/emergence-social-economy-initiatives-senior-housing>

This study looks at factors involved in the development of housing in Québec by third sector organizations such as non-profits and co-operatives, that is targeted to seniors with assisted living needs; that is, seniors who are relatively healthy and independent but still require assistance with outings, housekeeping, and meal preparation.

In Québec, for various reasons (mostly related to the historic policy environment), most assisted-living residences for seniors are privately run. The cost of being in a private seniors' home is very high—for example in Québec City, at the time this study was completed, the annual monthly cost, on average, was \$1,475 (CMHC data), while the median income for a senior aged 65-74 in the province was only \$1,685. It is thought that collectively owned or other social-purpose housing can offer similar or even better quality housing for seniors than private providers, for a more affordable price.

This study employed a case study approach, in which the development path of five social-purpose, assisted-living residences for seniors was studied—four were non-profits and one was a multi-stakeholder cooperative with resident-, supporter- and employee-members. (It is worth noting that even the non-co-operative residences featured prescribed engagement for residents on the Board and at the AGM). The facilities were situated in a variety of urban and rural locations, and varied in size from 14 to 71 units—all were built between 2003 and 2012.

SUMMARY OF SELECTED FINDINGS:

1. Development Context-

A. what opportunities coalesced to make this housing happen?

- In all cases, elected officials acted as strong proponents of the developments.
- In all cases, the developments were subsidized by a provincial housing program.
- In all cases fundraising efforts were undertaken (raising between \$70 and \$400K); in three cases the local credit union made a contribution; in two cases the municipality contributed.
- In 3 cases, public health organizations contributed professional expertise, and in one case agreements were put in place with a community organization to provide health services to residents once the building was completed.
- Land was often donated - one organization allowed the development to be built on land being rented for \$1 per year, a religious congregation sold a building at half-price, and a factory donated land.

B. What challenges presented themselves?

- In several cases there was some community opposition to the projects, such as residents who did not want the municipality to lend financial support to the development, or did not want the development close to their own property; in other cases there were physical issues such as delays from contractors or disagreements with contractors.

2. What type of individuals were involved, and why?

- The individuals leading these projects tended to have previous experience with volunteering and civically-oriented projects in their communities, and had extended social networks in their communities.
- The overall education level of the project leaders was high: in 4 of the 5 cases the majority of the project leaders were elected officials, professionals and teachers. Many of those involved had previous experience in areas relevant to the development process (e.g. construction, product sales, public administration).
- Some seniors worked on the project because they were motivated to secure affordable local housing for themselves. Other younger folks saw it as a place they or their parents would be able to benefit from in the future.
- Many of the project leaders claimed to be involved simply because they saw it as an important social cause, and they knew they would feel good about the end-result —they derived a sense of pride and accomplishment in knowing that they helped out their community.

3. What got the project rolling?

- In all cases the project leaders were responding to a perceived lack of appropriate seniors' housing in their communities, and a recognition that seniors in their communities were systemically disadvantaged (higher unemployment, housing in disrepair, more likely to be living alone).
- In 4 of the 5 cases, the communities in which the housing complex was built had a higher-than-average proportion of seniors age 65+ within their population.
- In 3 of the 5 cases, the project actors were concerned by the idea that seniors were actually leaving the communities in favour of other towns where housing could be more easily secured, thereby separating families from their loved ones and also contributing to the overall depopulation and economic degeneration of these towns.

4. Why was the co-op model chosen in only one case?

- With respect to the community who chose to incorporate their development as a multi-stakeholder co-op, the project organizers cited the fact that there is a strong co-op tradition in the town, with a credit union, a co-op hardware and co-op grocery already in operation, and various local services providers also organized as co-operatives.
- In addition, the project team were advised by the professional developers who were helping them with the project, to explore the multistakeholder co-op model. It is interesting to note that this project, once underway, received more significant support from the local credit union and the hardware co-op than did the other projects, because of its co-operative orientation.

5. What were some benefits of the projects?

- In all the cases, the residences are managed through a democratic process that includes resident involvement. This has helped residents become more connected with each other.
- Because key players in the life of the town are also on the board (e.g. municipal representatives, credit union reps, non-profit association reps), connections are being made and strengthened between the residents and the wider community. For instance, in 3 cases, local social economy organizations take care of cleaning and meals, allowing for further connections between residents and local service providers. In 2 cases, the residences have joined federations of seniors housing facilities to further connect themselves to the wider community.

6. What factors should be considered when developing similar projects in the future?

1. The location of the building is key. It should be close to businesses, social opportunities and health services, to combat the negative health effects of isolation which so often plague seniors, and to mitigate the more limited mobility of seniors.
2. Establish agreements with public service providers to ensure on-site health services.
3. Establish agreements with community organizations to provide leisure activities that promote social contact.
4. Information-sharing is a key factor during the development phase. By holding public information events, more local people will become involved. Fundraising activities and public meetings present opportunities for educating and informing the community about the project. (In one interesting case, a school got involved and encouraged students to educate their parents about the project.)
5. Consider the potential for burn-out among project leaders and how to mitigate it. Developing such a facility is a long and involved process; after a while, it can be difficult for the principal actors to be replaced, because they hold so much information and have made so many community connections. In one case, the organizers tried to mitigate volunteer burnout by ensuring that the steering committee included individuals representing local organizations whose mission is related to wellbeing of seniors or social services more generally. That way these organizations were involved from the beginning, and when the residence comes into operation, they already know exactly how their organization can contribute.

Please note that a **book** is now available, elaborating upon the findings of this paper:

Yvan Comeau, Michel Desrosiers et Laurence Martin-Caron (2015), *Intervention collective, mobilisation locale et hébergement des aînés*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, Collection « Initiatives », 202 pages.

<http://www.puq.ca/catalogue/livres/intervention-collective-mobilisation-locale-hebergement-des-2882.html>