Dwelling and Belonging
Government Housing Rooted in Place

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how a strong sense of identity can be woven into the current government housing model in Halifax, Nova Scotia. By drawing on studies of affordable housing and theories of place and belonging the thesis asserts that place driven design can combat the uniformity, lack of specificity, and lack of key services and amenities that plague government housing practices. A design rooted in place and identity is suggested for the housing project of Demetreous Lane in Halifax’s Dartmouth North. The housing development is critically adapted through a combination of interventions in existing units and additions and improvements on the site. This thesis asserts that through small scale interventions a greater level of connection to site and place can be achieved that will enrich the lives of its residents.

Keywords

Government Housing
Dartmouth
Halifax
Identity
Critical Regionalism
Critical Adaptation
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PREFACE

When I was seven years old my single mother, older brother and I became homeless when the rent was raised on the home we lived in. Months earlier when my mother had us put on the waiting list for government subsidized housing the woman on the phone told her that being homeless with children was the quickest way to shoot to the top of the waiting list. So for that summer the three of us bounced from friends’ basements to sleepovers with school mates waiting for a unit to become available. When we were finally placed in a suburban government project we were all thrilled to have our own rooms again. We were so grateful (and still are) for an affordable place to live.

As time went on and the initial thrill wore off my mother knew she had to work to get us out of government housing and we joined the seven year wait list at a co-op, where my mother still lives to this day. One of her biggest complaints about government housing was the parking lot we parked in. Not only did it feel dehumanizing to have to park and carry your groceries an unnecessary distance from our door, but it did not feel like a safe place for children to be playing despite being the only place to play visible from the units. There was also no sense of community and no sharing between neighbors. There was nowhere to chat with other adults and she felt isolated. She felt no sense of ownership of the place and it was clear the other residents didn’t either. Moving in to the co-op didn’t magically fix all her gripes but the sense of community and the attitude towards sharing were so well established they were jarring at first. She now gladly sits at the playground on Halloween to eat a hotdog and pass out candy despite having no children at home.¹

¹ In conversation with my mother, Elizabeth Craig, November 2021.
My complaints with government housing were simple (being only seven years old at the time): I wasn’t allowed to paint my room, and there was nowhere for me to have a teddy bear picnic with my friends. I should also note, on more than one occasion, especially in the early days, I went to the wrong front door mistaking it as my own.

Most important to note is my privilege. I am not a person of colour. I went to private school paid for by the generosity of our church. We had a strong support network and I lacked nothing growing up. My household was not plagued by addiction or mental or physical health struggles. My mother was employed at decent jobs. I did not face many of the challenges those in government housing often do. My experience is limited and overall positive. Yet that limited experience has allowed me to see some areas where government housing projects like the one I lived in could be improved.
INTRODUCTION

One of the basic human requirements is the need to dwell, and one of the central human acts is the act of inhabiting, of connecting ourselves, however temporarily, with a place on the planet which belongs to us, and to which we belong.

– Charles Moore, “Forward” of In Praise of Shadows

Thesis Question

How can the current model of low-density government housing projects in Halifax, Nova Scotia be improved by the implementation of design that focuses on personal, community, and regional identity?

Methodology

This thesis stems from the belief that dwelling is a basic human requirement and that the need to belong is central to our existence. Place is not just a space, it is our connection to the unique aspects of that space that leads us to a deeper sense of belonging. The arrangement of built forms and the details of a space are often aspects of government housing projects that are neglected, taking away from residents’ connection to a place.

This thesis examines the government housing project of Demetreous Lane in the context of government housing in Halifax and Canada at large, identifying the issues that plague such projects. Case studies from around the world are analysed to distill best practices that will inform the design of a place-driven government housing. This approach will be tested using the site of Demetreous Lane in Dartmouth North, Nova Scotia, which embodies many of the shortcomings of traditional government

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housing projects.

The study is framed using the idea of place and the role it plays in dwelling through research of existing theory, in particular Aldo Van Eyck’s ideas of place and occasion, Kenneth Frampton’s critical regionalism, David Leatherbarrow’s building time, and Doreen Massey’s global sense of place. These theories speak specifically to how people identify with place as well as the identities that places themselves have. The study will be defined by the constraints of the existing government housing model in Nova Scotia, including: the temporary nature of residency, the desire for cost efficacy, and current processes used by Housing Nova Scotia.

A site design and unit scale interventions presented as a catalogue of options are presented for Demetreous Lane with the intention that these ideas could be extrapolated to other housing projects and adapted for other cities.
Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more.

– Aldo Van Eyck, “Place and Occasion” ²

Government housing is often characterized by uniformity. Units that look the same as each other are repeated across the site in listless ways. Methods and materials for construction are selected based on cost effectiveness and get repeated not only in each unit but across developments as well. Developments across the country begin to look the same. One unit in a housing project in Halifax, Nova Scotia can look and feel the same as one in Victoria, British Columbia. There is no individual identity expressed in the unit, no community identity expressed in the project, and no regional identity expressed in the architecture. This uniformity strips the area of personality and disconnects people from place.

Placemaking and Its Role in Identity

If a sense of identity and belonging were woven into housing it would mark a shift towards treating people as real human beings rather than problems to be solved. Human beings need to belong. Architect and writer Charles Moore wrote that “one of the basic human requirements is the need to dwell, and one of the central human acts is the act of inhabiting.”³ It is central to the human experience to dwell. The word home implies a sense of belonging; to feel at home means to feel as if I belong. We make our homes so that we may feel at home. Moore continues and defines inhabiting as “connecting ourselves, however temporarily, with a

³ Tanizaki and Moore, “Foreword,” i.
place on the planet which belongs to us, and to which we belong.”

This connection to a place is our home. Many architects point to the philosophies of Martin Heidegger, a 20th century German philosopher known for his contributions to phenomenology, who noted that the German word for building is etymologically linked to dwelling and being. Inherently architects know that our homes can create our sense of being. When belonging is missing so is one of the essential human needs.

Unfortunately, government housing often fails to provide anything more than the most basic needs. Human needs are popularly visualized as a pyramid with the physiological and safety needs at the bottom. Physiological needs such as food,

Figure 2.1 Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

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4 Ibid.


water, and shelter make up the foundation of the pyramid with safety needs on top of that. The third layer moves beyond basic needs into the psychological needs of love and belonging. The tendency for government housing projects to only address the needs of adequate shelter and safety has been acknowledged by many, including Sam Davis, an architectural educator whose work is focused on affordable housing. In his book *The Architecture of Affordable Housing* he writes:

[One] misconception is that affordable housing should not exceed a minimum standard. It should be basic, safe, and clean— but no more. That it should meet the cultural and psychological needs of its residents or have the quality of amenities of market-rate housing is often seen as a misguided use of money, particularly if the housing is subsidized.  

This common misconception demonstrates why the need to belong often goes unaddressed in government housing.

A space to live is not enough. In his poem “Place and Occasion” 20th century architect Aldo Van Eyck writes “space in the image of man is place, and time in the image of man is occasion.” A place is not just a space, but rather a space that engages the human experience and need to belong.

The human experience is not static, however; our identity shifts and changes over time, never fully shedding our past selves but layering on new experiences and identity. The places we live should reflect this element of change. Architectural educator, David Leatherbarrow, in his book *Building Time*, writes, “architecture, it is said, results from the thoughtful making of space. But time is the dimension in which buildings actually come to life.” When people begin to occupy a building it comes to life and is no longer the exact building that was designed or built. It begins to be layered with its own new identities. The architecture

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8 Van Eyck, “Place and Occasion,” 155.
should acknowledge these shifts and changes.

Just as identity is not static, neither is it one dimensional. Many factors and pieces are stitched together to create the tapestry of self. So it is for place: many influences build a place’s identity. Social scientist and geographer, Doreen Massey writes in her essay *A Global Sense of Place*, “What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.”\(^\text{10}\) It is the complex web that makes a place unique. A space becomes a place when activated by a tapestry of unique people, and time becomes an occasion when those people collide in time.

One approach to engaging time and history in architecture is architect, historian, and theorist, Kenneth Frampton’s ideas of critical regionalism. Penned as a reaction against the placelessness of universal style which rose to popularity in the early-to-mid twentieth century, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance” lays out how modern practices critically used in the geographical context of a site gives a place specificity.\(^\text{11}\) Frampton is careful to warn against “simpleminded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular”\(^\text{12}\) as a place’s history is not merely anthropologic, it is tectonic. Value is, therefore, placed on topography, context, climate, light, and form.\(^\text{13}\) The emphasis is on the tactile over the visual. The history of a place can then be felt and engaged with connecting us to the place in which we dwell.

It is important to note that a place’s anthropogenic history should not be erased. Human beings are an integral aspect of place. To design for people is also to design for their histories.

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 26.
GOVERNMENT HOUSING

Beware of the glove that fits all hands and therefore becomes no hand. Beware of false neutrality.

– Aldo van Eyck, “Steps Towards a Configurative Discipline”14

Government Housing in Halifax

In Halifax, and the province at large, the primary housing delivery agency is Housing Nova Scotia (HNS) whose mandate states that “it is responsible for ensuring access to safe, suitable, and affordable housing for all Nova Scotians.”15 It delivers housing through various means, one of which is housing projects owned and operated by the agency. As of 2019 HNS reported owning 11,300 public housing units with the age of the housing stock averaging 40 years.16 On the Halifax peninsula and surrounding area the majority of the government housing projects use row housing (Figure 3.1) because it is a cost effective approach and matches the scale of the city of Halifax and province as a whole.

When examining government housing projects across Canada it becomes evident that row housing is often implemented in a uniform and uninspiring way. A study of the facades of government row housing in Halifax reveals a formulaic approach, with units from different projects interchangeable with one another (Figure 3.2). They lack individuality and all look the same: three windows and a door with overhead cover. The projects as a whole are not distinct from each other and use the same materials and designs, aimed at being neutral, resulting in a placelessness that

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makes them feel like they could be from anywhere. Looking at government row housing facades across Canada this becomes clear (Figure 3.3). Flat and repetitive facades create unengaging rows of homes with a sameness that is disorienting.17

Despite these flaws row housing should not be discounted as a useful typology; it is an economical way to build and fits into the vernacular of Halifax. These are important factors that warrant row housing a place in the future of government housing in Nova Scotia and point to the possibility of revitalizing existing housing stock rather than succumbing to the high density ‘tower in the park’ approach to improvement proven to be a poor design choice for low-income housing.

17 This is evidenced by my own experience growing up in government housing and approaching my neighbour’s door mistaking it for my own.
Figure 3.1. Map of government family housing projects in Halifax. They are generally outside of the urban core in neighborhoods with a lot of single family housing.
Figure 3.2. Exquisite Corpse of Halifax government housing unit facades
Figure 3.3. Exquisite Corpse of government housing unit facades across Canada
[T]he poetic involves the efforts to enrich the experience of the inhabitants through the engagement of local climate, context, and culture, understanding that architecture is where life quite literally takes place.

– Robert McCarter, “Constructing and Caring for Place”

Case Studies

Below are a series of case studies ranging from social housing to an orphanage to privately owned land. They represent an array of ideas pertinent to the design of affordable housing. Each project has a unique way of creating identity. It is by no means an exhaustive list of relevant projects as this list may indeed be infinitely long.

The selected case studies demonstrate ways in which places create identity. Whether bringing people together around a central activity, connecting to the history of a town, allowing orphaned children to feel at home, trying to fashion a new identity, or meeting in shared space they all aim to create community through connecting people to place. Though some are more successful than others they each offer an important lesson in how people find belonging in their physical environments. The sampling of projects looked at include:

Wohnprojekt Wien
By Einszueins Architektur in Vienna, Austria, 2013

Shobac
By Mackay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects in Upper Kingsburg, Nova Scotia, 1988-Present (ongoing project)

Amsterdam Orphanage
By Aldo Van Eyck in Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1960

Centre Village
By 5468796 Architecture + Cohlmeyer Architecture Limited in Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2010

Heron Gate
By Minto Group in Ottawa, Ontario, 1966

Peggy’s Cove Viewing Platform
By Omar Gandhi Architect in Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia, 2021
This collaborative housing project in Vienna incorporates community spaces, and trade and commerce with 40 residential units. The project includes a community kitchen, a children’s playroom, an event room, an assembly hall, a library, and a roof garden with a sauna in its 500 square meters of common area. Amenities that are usually only included in market rentals are included here, allowing residents access to amenities that may otherwise be beyond their means. A strong community identity is built by focusing the amenities around food. Emphasis is placed on growing and sharing local food on site as a practical approach to sustainability.

Aspect of Case Study Relevant to Thesis

The thesis is exploring ideas of community, sustainability and affordability and how each can lead to another. The Wohnprojekt seeks to build community and affordability through the sharing of resources. The project creates social housing that encourages a sense of community by sharing resources. Opportunities for fun, relaxation, recreation and commerce lead to
opportunities for connection. There is a strong community identity tied to growing and preparing food together while individual identity is maintained by vertically zoning the space.

Shared spaces buffer public spaces from private areas. The mid rise buildings keep trade and commerce at the ground level, accessible to both residents and the public. Moving upward, social spaces like a shared kitchen and children’s play areas transition uses towards the private dwellings. On the roof are quiet and reflective functions, furthest from the street level with the highest level of privacy. This gradation buffers noise, activity, and privacy levels.

Common spaces support community while flexible residential units allow for individuality. Ample space for the community to come together around various activities create ample opportunities for connections. This strengthens community identity while personalizable floor plans in the residential units mean that no two residents are treated the same. In this way residents find “individuality in community.”

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Location: Upper Kingsburg, Nova Scotia  
Year: 1988 - present (ongoing project)  
Architect: MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects

This collection of structures on historically significant land in Nova Scotia is an ongoing project intended to illustrate the idea of the ‘village architect’ who organizes the spatial relationship of everything on the site “with emphasis on issues of landscape, material culture, and community.” Used as classrooms, meeting rooms, vacation rentals, and gathering spaces, Shobac uses both revitalized existing structures and newly built buildings to create a dynamic space that is ever shifting yet remains steadfast in its identity.

**SHOBAC**

The thesis seeks to form a sense of place and identity for a rotating user group rather than a specific group of people. It acknowledges that new people will move in as others move out and thus needs to suit the needs and tastes of many different people. Shobac creates a sense of place and identity rooted in the site’s history while still appealing to a variety of users and visitors who are ever changing by providing a range of spaces for different uses. By drawing inspiration from vernacular structures, using widely available local materials and conventional building

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**Design Principles:**  
- energy efficient  
- streets and nodes  
- varied units

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methods, and having the settlement designed by ‘the village architect’ over time, Shobac is able to root deeply in its history and place.

The mix of old and new gives visual and tactile interest and also represents the history of the site over time. Saving existing structures also saves energy and building materials, contributing to a more environmentally friendly building approach. New buildings are added in such a way as to preserve shared courtyard space which creates a focal point for the site.

The principles of critical regionalism – sensitivity to environmental factors, siting, culture, and history while building in a modernist approach – are demonstrated across the site and in the structures.
AMSTERDAM ORPHANAGE

The Amsterdam orphanage was built to house 125 children and 12 live-in staff. Spaces are given hierarchy by being organized as a system of streets and nodes. Van Eyck gave special attention to thresholds and intermediary spaces embodying his focus on liminal spaces. It has been considered by critics to be one of the most significant buildings of its time.¹

Aspect of Case Study Relevant to Thesis

“In the design of the building, Van Eyck attempted to reconcile the positive qualities of both a centralized scheme and a decentralized one (“twinphenomenon of the collective and the individual”) […] he also made an attempt at reconciling the idea unity with the idea diversity and to achieve one by means of the other.”² In much the same way this thesis aims to create a sense of identity for both the individual and the community and believes that one enhances the other. The articulation of the inbetween sets each space apart while connecting them together.

Each of the eight different age groups were separated into different areas allowing smaller units within the larger building.

Design Principles:
- zones of privacy
- streets and nodes
- personalizables
- built-ins
- accessibility

¹ Ibid., 159.
² Ibid., 155.
All the spaces have built-in ledges, benches, bookshelves, and alcoves so that the architecture itself becomes a playground for the children, versatile in its use for endless play possibilities. They are also scaled to the child which breaks up a large area into smaller spaces. Small gestures – such as a divot in the concrete of a knee wall forming a puddle when it rains – add special moments and give each area a unique identity.

The material palette of concrete and brick could easily feel cold and clinical, especially in the context of an orphanage, but small playful moves allow the architecture to come to life without flashy materials or added furniture. Thoughtful details that acknowledge the users enrich the character of the place.
Location: Winnipeg, Manitoba
Year: 2010
Architect: 5468796 Architecture + Cohlmeyer Architecture Limited

CENTRE VILLAGE

Located in an underprivileged neighborhood of Winnipeg’s downtown core, Centre Village was built on an empty lot zoned for six single family dwellings. Twelve foot wide modules are arranged into three-storey blocks of 25 dwellings; the “micro village” uses the remaining area for “two public spaces - a through-street and a shared courtyard.” The design intended to create areas for residents to mingle and children to play but, “with no direct sightlines through Centre Village, that communal inner courtyard has turned into a convenient spot for locals to drink and use drugs, hidden from the eyes of police.”

Aspect of Case Study Relevant to Thesis

While Centre Village improves on some other affordable housing options with more and larger windows, operable windows on at least two sides for a cross breeze, and a distinct community identity, “a failure to understand the needs of the community took

Design Principles:
• varied units
• zones of privacy
• streets and nodes

Missing:
• no dead ends
• built-ins
• accessibility
• personalizable

References:
2 Ibid.
a considerable toll on the project.\textsuperscript{4}

Units are significantly smaller than market units. Some of them are also spread out over three levels leading to stairs using up a lot of the square footage and creating poor living conditions where the kitchen is on a different level than the dining space. Closets are open, lacking the proper storage necessary for such small units. There is a lack of individual identity; bright orange ceilings force everyone into a similar and bold aesthetic.

The paved shared spaces are a poor surface for children to play on and what the architects describe as a through-street is broken into two misaligned halves effectively creating two dead ends that block sightlines and have become laden with crime. This projects shows us that fashionable aesthetics are not enough.

Location: Ottawa, Ontario
Year: 1966
Developer: Minto Group

HERONGATE

The Herongate neighborhood of Ottawa is a racially diverse area containing affordable row housing. Built in the 1960s, the land was bought by a developer in 2012 beginning a series of ‘demovictions.’ The plan is to replace the existing housing with a mix of high-rise and mid-rise buildings. Many of the current tenants oppose these plans and have formed a coalition to defend their neighborhood and fight for affordable low-rise housing.1 Enjoying shared spaces where children play and neighbors mingle is a key reason they want to keep the existing housing.2

Aspect of Case Study Relevant to Thesis

Though Herongate’s row housing may not be considered desirable by some, many current tenants have expressed love for their neighborhood and feel at home there. The blocks of housing create shared courtyards that afford residents large but contained space for children to play together in. Parents are able to keep an eye on their children from inside the home and don’t have to worry

Design Principles:
• streets and nodes
• shared resources
• zones of privacy

about their safety. High-rise towers would remove that connection
to shared space. Although ample shared green space is planned for
the remodel of the area, the shared space would feel more public
because units would be less directly connected. Individual yards
would also be removed, further disconnecting residents from the
shared spaces and removing a sense of ownership. In the current
layout of Herongate residents have individual yards and also
shared spaces to meet neighbors which has created both individual
and community identities.
Location: Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia
Year: 2021
Architect: Omar Gandhi

PEGGY’S COVE VIEWING PLATFORM

The newly added viewing platform at Peggy’s Cove provides an accessible and safe boardwalk over the rocky Nova Scotia shores to a view of the iconic lighthouse. Built in a small fishing village, the lighthouse attracts visitors from all over the world. Special attention was paid to the placement of the boardwalk in order to avoid crashing waves and rising sea levels. Local plants and materials were used to protect the local ecology and educate visitors.¹ The project reflects a strong community identity that welcomes others.

Aspect of Case Study Relevant to Thesis

In order to respect the local context, materials were chosen carefully to reflect both the local fishing shacks and the barren rocky landscape. The cool tones of white cedar give a nod to each while also being locally available and familiar to the community.² The level surface of the boardwalk along with added seating provide an accessible way for everyone to enjoy the shoreline safely. Small-town Nova Scotia is represented in a modern way.

Design Principles:
• accessibility
• streets and nodes

² Ibid.
Design Principles

When looking at affordable housing in Canada and the above case studies a number of design principles were distilled. The importance of walkable and included amenities is clear. To be affordable housing should not require the use of a car. Amenities like grocery stores, schools, and recreation should be nearby and accessible for residents. Furthermore, necessities like work and childcare shouldn’t have the added costs of travel associated with them. Coffee shops, restaurants, shops and libraries nearby help activate a neighborhood. Walkable neighborhoods are more lively neighborhoods that lead to social connections and when everyday necessities are nearby we are able to feel more connected to the place.

Zones of public and shared space is an asset but private spaces should be buffered so as to remain private. Community identity is strengthened by public functions but individual identity is likewise important. Private yards should remain protected from public access and the inside of homes should not be easily viewable from public areas. Shared zones act as an inbetween where the community can gather.

A structure of streets and nodes provides destinations and activates the inbetween routes. Parks or more public functions act as nodes and concentrate communal uses. The routes along, between, and connecting these nodes help frame them and provide a procession and liminal space to occupy.

Through streets are preferable to dead end streets and alleys which harbor crime should be avoided. Used to limit traffic into (and out of) an area, dead ends become an area out of view providing a place for people to avoid police. Ironically, they are also a way for police to block an exit and trap residents in. Social housing should not be sequestered onto dead end streets but connected to surrounding areas.
Passive house principles provide energy efficiency saving both money and environmental impact. Low-tech systems are cheaper to implement and maintain, lowering operating costs for the agency building and maintaining the homes but also lowering the cost of living in the unit. Systems like operable windows on more than one facade allow for natural ventilation that residents can control themselves – allowing the space to fit the needs of the residents individually.

Varied units similarly allows for varied usership. More or larger bedrooms may be a better fit for a family with more people while larger or more living space may function better for someone who works from home. A larger backyard may be more important to someone with small children but a balcony may provide easier access to the outdoors for older residents. Individual identity is also strengthened when units are varied, providing visual distinction between each unit.

Personalizable elements in a unit take the idea of individual identity even further and offer a sense of ownership and belonging to the residents of each unit.

Shared resources allow residents amenities that may be beyond their means as well as a sense of ownership in the larger community. Shared spaces allow the community to come together and become social spaces as well.

Built-in storage removes the need for additional pieces of furniture that can be costly for residents to purchase. Often it is also difficult to find space for additional furniture in what are already small units. By building practical storage in both space and money are saved.

Finally, accessibility ensures that the units and the community function well for everyone and at various stages of life and should be considered in each aspect of a design.
Halifax’s Regional Identity

Halifax is a harbour town on Canada’s east coast with a layered identity. The land is Mi’kma’ki territory\(^\text{19}\) with a colonial history of ship building. It is the easternmost point of the continent and thus also has a robust history of immigration from all over the world. Despite being such a major entrance into Canada, Halifax is not in Canada’s top ten most populous cities with a population of roughly 450,000 people\(^\text{20}\) and maintains a small-town feel. It is, however, the major economic centre of Atlantic Canada and is considered the ‘big city’ by many Atlantic Canadians. The municipality is home to both urban centres and rural land.

The city has had a strong connection to the Atlantic Ocean throughout its history. The salty waters that delivered people there by boat, today, provide a place to play and scenery the people take pride in. Those same waters are also responsible for the storms and erosion Halifax sees. Strong winds habitually flatten trees and blow debris. The salty air ages buildings quickly and houses are painted not only for aesthetic reasons but to protect the wood siding. Lighthouses, while a necessity for nautical travel, are a symbol for the area. Lobster and other seafood are harvested from the ocean and characterize a local cuisine. The steep slopes of the downtown core all lead you into ‘the waterfront:’ a three kilometre boardwalk that is the heart of the city.

\(^{19}\) For a more in depth look at the history of the colonization of Mi’kma’ki territory refer to Daniel N. Paul’s *We Were Not The Savages: Collision between European and Native American Civilizations* which details centuries of Mi’kmaq history in Canada’s Atlantic provinces.

Dartmouth North’s Demographics

Across the harbour from Halifax’s peninsula and downtown core is the once independent city of Dartmouth. The two have since amalgamated into the Halifax Regional Municipality. The Dartmouth side of the harbour, however, still faces more challenges than Halifax as a whole. Dartmouth North in particular is a more racialized neighborhood with more single parent households, lower incomes, and a greater ‘house-poor’ population for whom housing costs more than thirty percent of their household’s income. Double the percentage of homes are rentals with many of those dwellings in need of major repair (Figures 5.3a-f). Dartmouth North also reports the highest percentage of daily public transportation users in all of Halifax.\textsuperscript{21, 22, 23} The area is also less developed than Halifax proper. This underserved neighborhood is rife with opportunity.

Demetreous Lane

Demetreous Lane is a government funded family housing project in the heart of Dartmouth North. There are grocery stores, schools, a bus station, a sportsplex, and many other amenities within walking distance of the site (figure 5.5), however, the streets in the area are scaled for the car with large streets and parking lots cutting up the neighborhood. The area has a history and reputation as being a hotbed of crime\textsuperscript{24}, rundown, overly uniform in appearance, and uninviting despite the vibrant community of people that live there.

\textsuperscript{21} Dennis Pilkey, \textit{Housing Quality and Affordability In Dartmouth North Between the Bridges} (D W Pilkey Consulting, 2018) 2-6.

\textsuperscript{22} Dennis Pilkey, \textit{Housing that Works: In Search of the Gap} (The Public Good Society of Dartmouth, 2012), 8-10.

\textsuperscript{23} Capital Health Community Clinical Services/Health System Planning Group, \textit{Community Profile: Dartmouth/Southeastern - Community Health Network 1} (2014), 17.

\textsuperscript{24} This idea is perpetuated by the media.
The project, built in the 1950s, was renamed in 2008 after a young black teen who fought to have a basketball hoop put up in the neighbourhood. Fourteen year old Demetreous Beal drowned in Lake Banook in June 2007 and was honoured for his contribution to the neighborhood.\(^\text{25}\)

Greater than fifty percent of residents are under thirty-five years old and more than half the children are under the age of ten. Two thirds of the residents are single, separated, divorced, or widowed with only one third married or in a common law relationship,\(^\text{26}\) painting a picture of the community that is largely young, has young children, is culturally diverse, single, and has a low income.

### Current Conditions

Currently Demetreous Lane is made up of 11 buildings each consisting of six row houses, all clad in a generic beige siding with white doors and white trim. The buildings are laid out transversely across the site in a series of nodes consisting of a parking lot, a foot path, and two rows of housing facing each other. Four of these are stamped along the site with the remaining three buildings of row houses facing the road: a dead end street that butts up against another dead end street. The units each have an overly ample front yard that generally is unused, a space for an individual backyard with very few of the yards defined, and even more space between the backyards shared by a cluster of units. The inbetween space also generally remains unused and many of the yards and shared spaces are left entirely empty and lifeless.

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At the entrance of Demetreous Lane, set back deeply into the site, is a lone play structure next to a unit that has been turned into a police ‘community office.’ Other units have been converted into a community centre and food bank run by local volunteers and the communal space near these units was developed into a community garden in 2018 as an outreach project in the area\textsuperscript{27}. Apart from this one intervention, the uniformity reads as clinical.

\textsuperscript{27} This project was led by local architects Rayleen Hill Architecture and Design and Dalhousie’s school of architecture.
Figure 5.4 Demetreous Lane’s existing conditions
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Figure 5.11 Typical unit plan 1F drawn from memory of my own experience in government housing
Figure 5.12 Typical unit plan 2F drawn from memory of my own experience in government housing
[H]uman beings actually need very little to stay alive, to live well, and to be happy. A good life does not come from having more—more property, more money, more stuff—but from having meaning, which comes from community, collaboration, and coexistence.


**Site Strategy**

In order to better connect the site to the surrounding area the two dead end streets have been connected to form one through road. A second through road has been added on the other side of the site along the park and neighbouring cemetery. This new street is traffic slowed but allows for through traffic from the units. What were once footpaths to the units have been turned into woonerf style shared roads (Figure 6.1) with trees, street furniture, and

![Figure 6.1 Woonerf concept drawing](image_url)

pavers allowing residents to park in front of their homes while minimizing car traffic and speeds.

The existing housing on the site has been retained where possible except where the new road would be added. The units are in decent condition apart from possible minor repairs. Additional units have been added to the ends of the current rows of housing, increasing the capacity of the site and filling in the urban fabric. Additions on the north and south edges of the site have also been added to accommodate public or shared uses and frame the site, buffering private dwellings from the main road to the north and the commercial development to the south. These buildings house the various functions of the existing community centre: a food bank, health centre, job centre, community kitchen, and child and parent programs. The increase in square footage will allow these uses to have dedicated spaces and operate simultaneously. The additional space in these community buildings is then able to accommodate new uses such as a daycare, coffee shop, housing resources, and
an indoor common space for residents’ use. Public functions will draw new users to the site, activating the streets and creating a more vibrant community.

Figure 6.3 Gazebo and reflecting pond concept drawing

Figure 6.4 Boardwalk concept drawing
Figure 6.5 Plan showing site interventions
Figure 6.6 Plan of the centre block with gazebo and reflecting pond
On the interior of the site, defining the edges of each block creates shared courtyards. Each of these courtyards are activated by a series of shared amenities. In the south most, behind the apartment building and new community centre, a splash pad has been added next to the existing play structures (Figure 6.2). The next has a community garden mimicking the one recently added. The centre block has a gazebo and reflecting pond for quiet contemplation. Finally, the north most is the existing community garden plots. Connecting the four courtyards and entire site is a boardwalk, reflecting the Halifax boardwalk, that allows residents to easily move between all the shared amenities.

**Interventions**

Though larger interventions create big impact on the site and in the way residents live, small interventions demonstrate how thoughtful design choices can create meaningful belonging. A series of unit interventions derived from the design principles have been conceived as a catalogue. Some interventions are applied wherever possible and others are implemented based on the individual needs of residents. The interventions fall into four categories: facade improvements, outdoor living, interior adjustments, and additional space. Conventional light wood frame construction allows for economical additions to the existing housing units while fitting into the vernacular building culture. Clad in cedar, the material palette mimics the rocky Nova Scotia landscape and pays homage to fishing shacks found in the area. Constructing out of wood uses renewable resources that do not require specialized labour. The interventions focus on being low cost and effective rather than fashionable. Layering new interventions onto the existing housing saves materials, labour, time, and money, making it an efficient way to tie people to a place.
DIVIDED FACADE

“My house is the yellow one.”

By adding a single piece of trim vertically on the facade the distinction between units is made clear. This definition allows the cladding of each unit to be treated separately. Residents can then choose the colour of their home, giving them an agency and sense of ownership over their unit. Being able to identify your home by its colour is a simple way of setting it apart from the neighbours.

This low cost, high impact intervention demonstrates how weaving belonging into government housing can, in some cases, be achieved very easily and with limited resources. While some interventions require more labour and materials and alter the use of a unit, even small changes can contribute to a shift towards treating residents as individuals.

Design Principles:
- personalizable
- varied units
ENTRY HOOP

“Where’d I put my keys?”

The use of entry shelters is well established in the local vernacular because it provides practical protection from the East Coast’s heavy snow, rain, and wind throughout the year. A place to pause before opening the door creates a more pleasant procession into the home. Protection both at the sides and top of the door is more practical in a city as windy as Halifax but also a simple gesture that defines the entry in a more meaningful way than tacked on awnings typically found in government housing. Unique entry conditions also break up a repetitive facade and help distinguish one front door from the next.

Design Principles:
• varied units
Larger fenestration at the rear of the houses brings more light into the home, brightening the space and creating a more pleasant atmosphere. It is easier to feel connected to a space when you are able to enjoy spending time in it.

Increased visibility of the courtyard provides better connection to the shared space while also making it safer for users. Looking onto the shared courtyard deepens a sense of ownership of the space which in turn also makes it safer as residents show care and the area looks less abandoned.

This increase in glazing is most impactful when applied to south- or east-facing facades as it allows the home to be heated passively, saving on energy costs. The intervention then benefits residents as well as the environment.

*Design Principles:*

- energy efficient
Permanent outdoor furniture lends more use to the yard space. Reducing the need for purchased furniture allows residents to use their yard and feel more at home while avoiding spending additional funds. Having more furniture also increases residents’ ability to host friends or neighbours, building relationships and deepening connections.

Occupied outdoor areas also create a more engaging space, activating the courtyards and supporting opportunity for spontaneous social interaction.

Although an understated intervention when compared to other potential built forms, simple gestures like this and other street furniture contributes to populating a space and minimizes the risk that these interstitial spaces remaining lifeless and unused, as is currently the case in Demetreous Lane.

**Design Principles:**
- built-ins
- zones of privacy
“Let’s take our drinks on the patio.”

The introduction of a simple form that creates a patio and a fence delineates private space and distinguishes it from the shared courtyards. Adding cover on top makes the outdoor space more useful, sheltering users from the elements. The slatted fence adds privacy as well as a clear boundary that maintains visual connection to spaces beyond. The use of a new material such as local cedar boards breaks up the monotony of the existing courtyards.

This simple intervention extends the livable space of the home in an economical way.

Design Principles:
- zones of privacy
- varied units
BUILT IN FURNITURE

“Put your toys away.”

Built in furniture reduces the need to move with costly or bulky furniture. Benches lining the living room and dining room walls replace dining chairs, a sideboard, a TV stand, a bookcase, and other storage solutions that would otherwise be required to make small spaces more livable. This has the potential to save young families starting out a great deal of money that would otherwise be spent on furnishings. The flexibility of a ledge also makes a space more personalizable as residents can use it for seating, as a display, a bookshelf, table, or more. This is another small change with the potential for a big impact.

Design Principles:

• built-ins
• personalizable
OPEN PLAN

“Can you bring the salt with you when you come to the table?”

Opening the plan connects the living spaces together. This allows members of the family in each room to see each other and remain together even while performing tasks or chores in different rooms: parents of young children are able to keep an eye on playing toddlers while preparing meals or doing dishes.

An open space also feels larger and allows more flexibility in the use or layout of the home. Open plan living is more in line with contemporary housing trends and would go a long way towards bringing an aging housing stock up to date to market rental homes with minimal material costs.

*Design Principles:*
  * personalizable
A first floor rear addition adds space to the ground floor living areas, providing an extra room to be used as residents desire. It could be used as a home daycare space, a home-schooling room, home office, or simply more living space. The roof of this addition serves as a balcony attached to one of the bedrooms on the second floor and overlooks the courtyard.

Shifting the back of the house creates variation in the courtyard, making the space more dynamic. The more generous glazing and balcony space increase visibility to the courtyard, lending eyes to the space and making it safer.

The simple addition of flex space supports residents’ unique family dynamics and provides space that is less prescriptive than the traditional layout. Giving residents more than one option of how to use a space recognizes their identities as individuals.

Design Principles:
- personalizable
- varied units
SECOND FLOOR ADDITION

“Beautiful day, neighbour!”

This iteration of a second floor addition extends one of the bedrooms, creating a clearly defined master bedroom and giving hierarchy to the bedrooms. A small balcony is added to the front of the home providing connection with neighbors as they walk by on the shared street. This additional outdoor space extends the connection to place beyond the interior of the home. The protrusion shelters the front door on the storey below and provides a clearer and more comfortable entry condition.

Adding to the front of the house varies the relationship between facades, while providing variety in unit size allows different units to meet the needs of different families.

*Design Principles:*
- varied units
- zones of privacy
Third Floor Addition

“Can we read stories in your room, Grandma?”

Adding a third floor creates an additional, larger bedroom as well as an additional bathroom. This defines a master suite and gives hierarchy to the bedrooms. Alternatively, this room could be used as additional living space separated from the main living space: a playroom for young children, a home-school room, or a quiet space for a home office.

When used as an additional bedroom, the third floor allows for expanded families to live together. Elderly parents, a sibling, or an adult child, among many other family configurations, are then able to live together under one roof.

Compositionally, the massing of the third floor breaks up an otherwise boring roofline and creates a more identifiable unit.

Design Principles:
- varied units
- personalizable
Implementation

These interventions could be extrapolated and implemented in other housing projects in Halifax, while the concept of small scale interventions as a tool to improve government housing is applicable in other cities across Canada and around the world. Individual developments could adapt the catalogue to fit the area and needs of its residents; likewise, construction methods could be adapted to suit other climates.

The nature of the interventions allows for the possibility of prefabrication; they could be shipped to site either as a kit of parts to be assembled or fully constructed, ready for installation. Prefabrication allows for year round construction in areas that see heavy snow and offers more controlled conditions while saving on labour costs and time. Despite these benefits, the interventions don’t require specialized construction methods and can be built in place by local tradespeople with readily available materials. Either way the interventions are affordable, sustainable, and accessible.

As different interventions are applied across the site repetitive facades are brought to life. Each unit begins to look and function distinctively, supporting residents individual identities and weaving a unique tapestry as beautifully diverse as the community that dwells there.
Figure 6.7 Composite of front elevations with interventions

Figure 6.8 Composite of rear elevations with interventions
Figure 6.9 Composite of 1F plans with interventions
Figure 6.10 Composite of 2F plans with interventions
CONCLUSION

Places are processes, too.

– Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place”

This thesis explored how connecting meaningfully to site and place can enrich resident’s lives. Creating belonging for a diverse group of people is a challenge, but this proposal sought to find a better solution than neutral designs that cater to everyone in the same way. This was approached by fostering unique identities at the scale of the unit, the community, and the region. Homes with varied units and unique elements would begin to recognize people as individuals. As communities become less cookie-cutter, incorporating distinctive features into the development, they become more identifiable.

Finally, designing within a region’s context would create variation across different locales. The goal was to demonstrate how housing that reflects the people that live there allows people to feel as though they belong.

People and places, however, are not singular or easily definable. They are layered and ever shifting. As they change and evolve new identities and complexity build upon each other. Were government housing projects to do the same – adding where new need occurs and removing as requirements change – they would become better able to adapt to meet the needs of residents and reflect the identity of the community as it grows. Existing housing deserves to be reevaluated to see if the needs of the community are being met. Likewise, the ideas proposed in this thesis may function at one point in time but not forever. The catalogue was conceived as to allow for new interventions to be proposed and

30 Sam Davis, The Architecture of Affordable Housing, 4.
never remain static. Interventions may even begin to layer on each other over time, building on the designs proposed here.

Demetreous Lane, like every site, has a history so layered and complex a thesis of this scale simply could not address it in entirety. From indigenous histories and genocide to the displacement of black Nova Scotians to the systematic perpetuation of cycles of poverty, the land and the people that live there have endless stories to tell. I hope those stories begin to be told as the architecture becomes personalized in ways I am unable to imagine.

It was a particular challenge of the thesis to design for a people and a place while on the other side of the country. I am familiar with the place yet I’m sure that many aspects of the site have been lost with distance. To be physically in the site would have allowed me to engage with it in a way a computer screen will never afford me. It was also challenging to balance designing for a specific group of people in a way that could be extrapolated to others. Even Demetereous Lane will change residency over time and embrace new identities.

This thesis has taught me that the homes in which we dwell should be places we feel we belong. As individual, community, and regional identity are woven into dwellings, housing projects, and neighborhoods I believe that our sense of belonging can be strengthened. Combatting the placelessness and uniformity of existing government housing projects with small scale interventions could allow these three levels of identity to be personalized. I have seen the potential of even the smallest of interventions to lead to or enhancing a sense of belonging. Dwellings that reflect who we are as people become the threads that weave communities into rich and beautiful tapestries.
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