The Reinvention of Sunnyhill

A housing co-op imagines a much bigger future, thanks to a student design team

By Dr. Noel Keough and Brad Braun

The Sunnyhill Housing Co-operative (SHC) comprises 66 townhomes located on prime and visible real estate at the eastern edge of the inner city community of Sunnyside (population 3,800), just north of downtown Calgary. Founded around the turn of the 20th century, Sunnyside is one of the oldest and most walkable of Calgary's neighbourhoods with a reputation of being among the most engaged and progressive in the city. The community has a vibrant retail and commercial district and a Light Rail Transit station. While over the past century Sunnyside's economic fortunes have ebbed and flowed, it currently is in a period of significant gentrification. The average price of a house is about $650,000.

Established in 1975, SHC is one of the many Canadian housing co-operatives now taking stock and making plans via the Vision 2020 process of the Canadian Housing Federation. Vision 2020 asks its members: "What kind of a co-op do you want to be in the year 2020?" To help members with this process and receive Vision 2020

certification, CHF Canada has established a series of challenging benchmarks.

For example, a co-op should have a mission and vision that reflects the values of its members. It must uphold international co-operative principles. It must keep its operations nonprofit and offer housing which is as affordable as possible. It must demonstrate strong financial planning, sound management and property maintenance, good governance and principled leadership. It must also commit itself to a sustainable future, both for the co-op itself and for the global community.

Like so many of Canada's housing co-ops, SHC's housing stock is aging. Mortgage retirement (20 years) and expiration of its land-lease (30 years) are on the horizon. It faces a growing need to retrofit and modernize at a time when federal housing policy is far less supportive than the regime under which housing co-ops once flourished. In other ways, nevertheless, SHC finds itself singularly well-positioned to demonstrate leadership to Canada's co-op housing movement.

This is a story about the first steps SHC has taken to reinvigorate and promote Canadian housing co-operatives as examples of socially, ecologically, and fiscally sustainable community. The co-op has made its move

through the use of an innovative approach to participatory, action-oriented design.

Sunnyhill Futures

In the fall of 2009, with financial support from the BC-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance (BALTA), a team of graduate students from the University of Calgary's Faculty of Environmental Design course in Advanced Environmental Design Practice undertook a 3-month project to assist SHC's Vision 2020 process. The team incorporated skills in architecture, urban design, planning, and industrial design. This "Sunnyhill Futures Project" required that the students develop proposals for renovating and reconfiguring SHC. They had to present and package their findings in the form of a conceptual physical design.

SHC members charged the Project to generate a design that would allow the co-op to demonstrate leadership in the reinvention of Canadian housing co-operatives for the 21st Century.

(above) Crucial to the success of the project was the opportunity it gave co-op members to physically manipulate the built environment. (right) Sunnyhill townhomes. All photography in this article courtesy of Phil Cox.
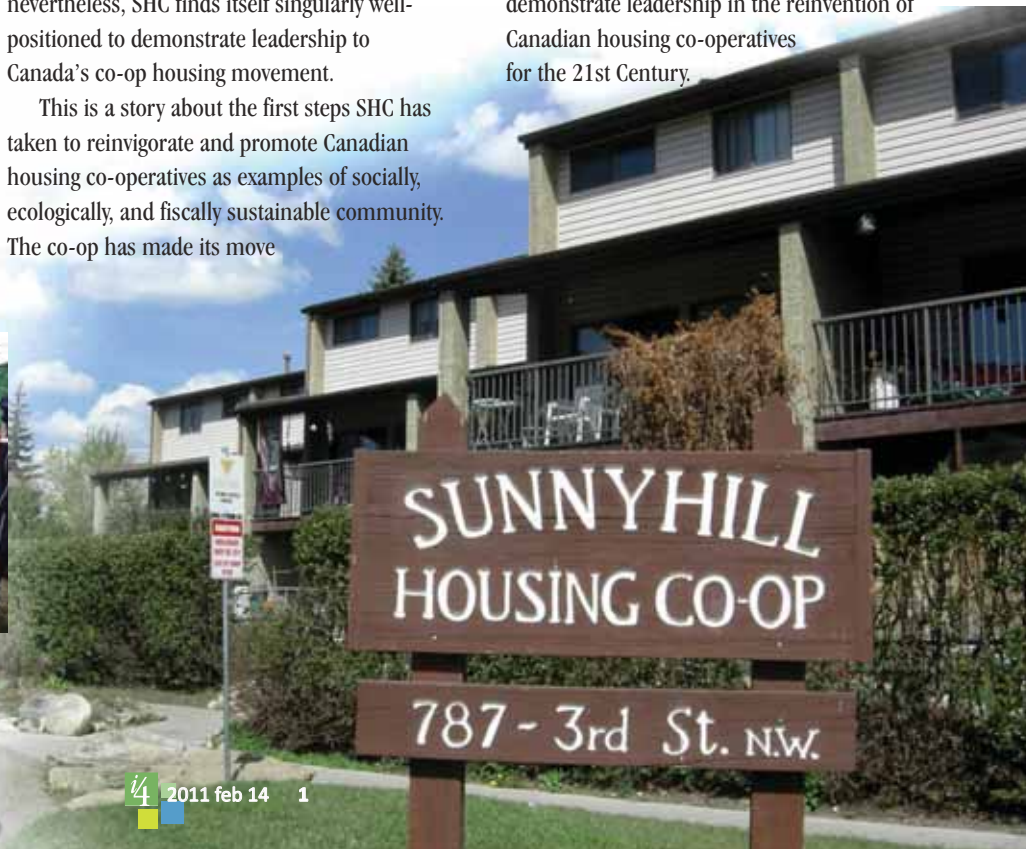
(photo and inset) Sunnyhill Housing Co-operative, just across the Bow River from the skyscrapers of downtown Calgary.

The design was to

- honour the principals upon which SHC was founded.
- respond to the need for post-carbon urban living in socio-culturally, ecologically, and economically sustainable and resilient communities.
- be consistent with existing city policy, especially regarding long-range land use and transportation, affordable housing, air and water quality, greenhouse gas emissions and waste reduction.

Three terms of reference are of particular note. First, the Project was to incorporate Low Impact Design (LID) and environmentally sustainable building design and retrofit. Located on what was originally a bog, SHC has long had problems with surface water and drainage. In addition to upgrading the housing stock, co-op members wanted to know how LID could address this issue. Second, the Project was to consider how additional housing might be provided within the co-op's existing footprint. Co-op housing (and affordable and social housing in general) are in high demand and short supply in Calgary. Third, the Project was to explore ways to include a retail, commercial, and light industrial component. This could provide jobs and revenue for SHC itself and support co-ops, community economic development, and the social economy more generally.

The design process involved the following:

- development of a systems framework to guide the design (see diagram, next page)
- drafting a values statement that reflected Sunnyhill's values
- conducting a workshop or "charette" to explore design opportunities and challenges with SHC residents
- feedback from Sunnyhill members on draft design proposals
- presentation of a final conceptual design to SHC members

Outcomes

The product of this design exercise was a compelling vision of a mixed urban community – an eastern gateway to the Sunnyside community anchored by SHC and organized on co-operative and social economy principles.

The concept involves an increase in housing units and an option to partner with social housing or co-housing initiatives of the City of Calgary. There are spaces that could house a variety of social and co-operative enterprises, such as a bakery, childcare centre, school, elder-care facility, and event rental. Other potential tenants are credit unions, and consulting co-operatives.

The proposed new units are modular to enhance flexibility, diversity, and choice. SHC is reconfigured to connect two rather isolated north and south housing clusters. The design proposal consolidates and improves outdoor community gathering spaces, child play areas, and a community mandala garden around a water feature that doubles as water management infrastructure. The introduction of a dedicated car share system reduces the need for parking lots and driveways. As a result, the design was able to increase both housing and green space.

The evolution of municipal planning in Canada over the last 20-30 years is an important backdrop to this proposal. The imagineCALGARY 100-year vision and the new Municipal Development and Calgary Transportation Plans reflect changes that are happening in cities across the country:

- integration of land use and transportation planning
- increased role of cities in the provision of affordable housing
- desire for reduced automobile dependence
- identification of redevelopment opportunities within the established districts and communities of the city
- creation of a more compact urban form with intensification and greater mix of land uses along transportation nodes and corridors
- greater attention to energy and water conservation
- reduced ecological footprint and greenhouse gas emissions

At a time when citizen resistance to municipal policies like these often makes them difficult to implement, co-ops that propose redevelopment consistent with them should find an ally in municipal governments.
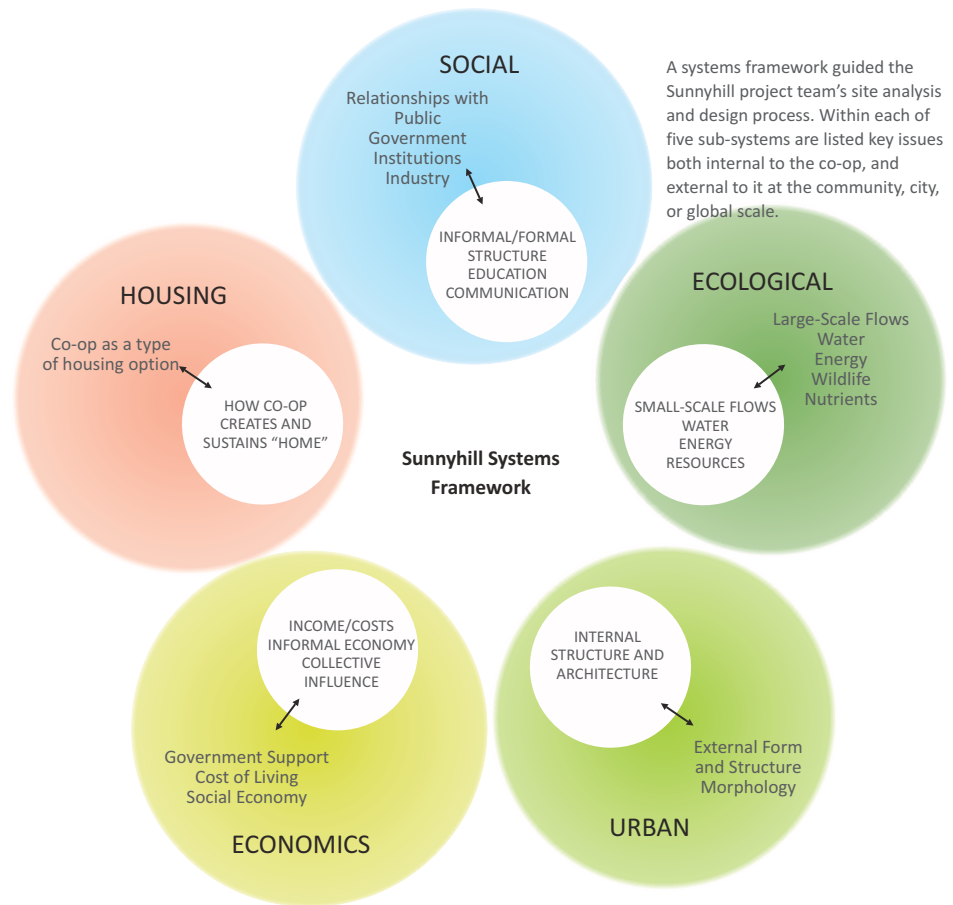
The conceptual design fostered a new energy and excitement among SHC members. Co-op members came to see themselves challenged not simply to survive in a hostile political and economic environment. They perceived an opportunity to present the co-op as a solution to affordable housing, and more generally for creating socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable community.

One member remarked that the design had "… given us a new sense of the extent to which we can dream." Another exclaimed that the design team "… did an absolutely brilliant job for getting people talking," and then added "the visionary aspect of it I think is amazing. It opened my eyes and rejuvenated my enthusiasm." One ambitious aspect of SHC's vision was to expand the project study area beyond Sunnyhill's 3.3 acres to encompass approximately 4 acres of adjacent, underutilized city land.

And the design process itself –- what impact did it have? Clearly, the design process was a catalyst for change. The process changed attitudes of SHC members, changed perceptions of the problem, and expanded perceptions of the potential solutions. As one member stated,"… it was hard to engage with the community during the time of the charette …. [because we] did not have a very big view of ourselves and so we did not have a basis to talk to the community."

The design process also attuned SHC to the importance and potential of context – one of the fundamental principles of any design process. The systems framework proposed by the design team required that consideration be given to the ecology of the co-op's immediate surroundings. It also invited consideration of the political, social, and cultural context locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

A key motivation for creating the co-op 37 years ago was to house the families whose children would keep Sunnyside Community School viable. Through the design process, members realized that SHC remains a vital component of the Sunnyside community. The co-op's current configuration,

Sunnyhill Systems Framework

SOCIAL
Relationships with
Public
Government
Institutions
Industry

INFORMAL/FORMAL STRUCTURE EDUCATION COMMUNICATION

HOUSING
Co-op as a type of housing option

HOW CO-OP CREATES AND SUSTAINS "HOME"

ECOLOGICAL
Large-Scale Flows
Water
Energy
Wildlife
Nutrients

SMALL-SCALE FLOWS WATER ENERGY RESOURCES

A systems framework guided the Sunnyhill project team's site analysis and design process. Within each of five sub-systems are listed key issues both internal to the co-op, and external to it at the community, city, or global scale.

INCOME/COSTS INFORMAL ECONOMY COLLECTIVE INFLUENCE

ECONOMICS
Government Support
Cost of Living
Social Economy

INTERNAL STRUCTURE AND ARCHITECTURE

URBAN
External Form and Structure Morphology

however, actually turns its back to the adjacent neighbourhoods. As a result of the design process, co-op members resolved to redefine and re-establish SHC's place in Sunnyhill. In the words of one coop member, "The challenge is to consider that we have a role to play as the east gate of Sunnyside [and] the welcoming portal that connects downtown with NW Calgary. I don't know whether any of us ever had that in our heads before."

The project also began to shift SHC's defensive, inward-looking posture to a confident and inspired outward orientation. Members began to define the co-op not by its own internal challenges but by its opportunity to solve problems in the larger world – whether in the community, the city, or globally. Members remarked that among SHC's strengths is its "sense of belonging." Members described SHC as "a thriving part of the community." It could be "a gateway to the community but also a gateway to co-op housing" and might "put Calgary on the map" for "making co-op housing a thing of the future."

What's Next

On a more cautious note, SHC members also identified the pieces that they are currently missing. To achieve the sustainable future they desire they require skills in land development, change-management, financial planning, and political advocacy. As one member soberly admitted, at present "I am not sure we have the wherewithal inside the co-op to help us break new ground." There was a recognition that member selection should be attuned to the skills that will be needed for this transition and that co-op resources should be assigned to capacity-building.

Members fully appreciated how heavily they would rely on allies to bring this design concept to fruition. As one remarked, "I think we will have to cross our fingers that the city sees this as we do and that we can get a majority of the members to do the work … to move us forward." Members also recognized the need for advocacy even closer to home: "At this point, we don't really have a good reputation in the

The Sunnyhill Futures Project "Block Party"

Résumé : La réinvention de Sunnyhill

La coopérative de logement Sunnyhill Housing Co-operative (SHC) fait face à un futur très incertain. Située dans une partie de Calgary où les maisons coûtent en moyenne 650 000 $, SHC doit rénover ses maisons en rangée vieillissantes au moment même où l'appui fédéral arrive à sa fin. À la fin de 2009, avec de l'appui de la BC-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance [alliance de recherche en économie sociale C.-B. — Alberta], les étudiants de la faculté de conception de l'environnement de l'université de Calgary ont entrepris le projet « Sunnyhill Futures Project » pour aider à la SHC à faire des plans pour 2020. Les membres de la coopérative leur ont demandé de non seulement tenir compte de l'impasse de SHC, mais d'aider les coopératives de logement à travers le Canada à établir de nouvelles normes pour des communautés socialement, écologiquement et économiquement viables.

Un cadre a été développé pour guider la conception et pour clarifier son contexte politique, social et culturel. Il y eut par la suite un énoncé des valeurs de Sunnyhill. Lors d'une charrette de conception, les résidents ont exploré des façons de rénover et de réaménager la coopérative. Les étudiants ont produit des ébauches de soumissions, recueilli la rétroaction et ont par la suite présenté un concept final.

Le résultat était une vision convaincante d'un quartier de ville dans lequel la coopérative était une ancre, et non une annexe. Des normes environnementales élevées étaient appliquées à des rénovations et de nouveaux édifices. Il y avait plus de logements ainsi que de l'espace de vente au détail, commercial et d'industrie légère. Toutefois, l'espace vert était aussi plus grand, grâce à la consolidation de l'utilisation du terrain et au partage d'autos.

Cette expérience a changé les participants. La confiance et la solidarité ont crû entre les membres de la SHC et les étudiants. Les résidents se sont développés en ayant l'occasion d'expérimenter avec les édifices et les tracés de circulation, ainsi qu'avec l'orientation de la coopérative vers son environnement naturel et le reste de la ville. Leur regard a commencé à changer de l'introversion défensive vers une extroversion confiante et inspirée.

Le projet Sunnyhill Futures Project a démontré comment des communautés peuvent en arriver à des stratégies qui tiennent compte de logement local, d'efficacité énergétique, de responsabilité environne-mentale et d'économie. Il a aussi démontré à combien de capital financier, intellectuel et social ces solutions donnent lieu. ∎

neighbourhood. People walk past old broken down decrepit townhouses with broken bikes to [the] very lovely homes they take very good care of." They identified the need to "find a way to have leverage. Show that co-op living is the only way of the future" and to "have a plan and present it … proactively."

Members were also aware of their need to attract partners and advocates for green building, for example, eco-retrofit and renewable energy businesses. In this regard the co-op is a potential client of substantial size. Moreover, it represents a significant marketing opportunity, given its very visible location and its membership in a national co-op housing federation.

Why Participatory Design Works

In post-project discussions, SHC members and the team identified three things that were vital to the success of the project: the empathy of the design team toward the membership, their values, and the co-operative vision; the trust fostered between the members and the design team by the participatory design approach; and the sense of legitimacy wrought by the process and the quality conceptual design. In short, the values of the student design team and SHC members converged.

This project also demonstrated how catalytic a participatory design approach can be. It made room for people to change their perceptions and imagine principles of ecological, economic, and social sustainability as the basis for the future of co-operative housing in Canada.

But what is it about the design method that contributed to the project's success? What unique aspect did design itself bring to the table?

Design is inherently interdisciplinary. It brings together a host of skills to a single task. Design also makes a problem take up physical space. SHC members were used to an analytical process of debate and planning that emphasized community building, policy, and financial management. The design process invited participants to exercise other faculties, like visualization and spatial manipulation. Participants got the chance to analyze their co-op in its spatial context. They could look at the location of buildings and their relationship to one another. They could imagine how people circulate in and through the co-op, and its physical orientation with respect to the community, to the natural environment, and to the rest of the city. Participants were given license to explore how each of these spatial elements might change over time.

One member stated emphatically that the design process "absolutely helps, it gives you something concrete to talk about." Reflecting on conversations people had over aspects of the design, another reflected, "they completely awakened us to our environment, not just our buildings. 'Oh, we have a bluff,' and 'Oh, we have a river on the other side,' and 'We are part of Sunnyside community,' and now that gives us a completely different perspective."

The participatory process combined the design skills of the students with the tacit and experiential knowledge of SHC members. The members have an intuitive understanding of

the context within which they live. The spatial analysis that defines the design process allowed that knowledge to emerge. The student design team brought to the process skills in spatial thinking. Some SHC members remembered how discussions usually didn't move beyond unit upgrades and maintenance. They had found it hard to imagine how the physical character of the co-op could evolve and enhance its relationship to the rest of the community.

Co-op members were particularly enthusiastic about the charette process. It created a spectacle that provoked the participation and the imaginations of people of every age. It was held on a Saturday on the co-op's grounds in rented event tents – in temperatures that hovered around -10°C.

A "Block Party" announced the event. Coloured wooden blocks ("your little piece of the co-op") wrapped in charette invitations were delivered to the mailbox of every household. Members were invited to bring their block to the charette and contribute to building a vision for the co-op on a topographical map of the property. Members were heard to remark on how much fun this was: "What do I do with my blocks? Where does this fit?" The exercise enticed members to show up to the charette and to engage in the process. (See photo array, previous page.) Once there they could take part in several other hands-on activities. There was a values identification brainstorming exercise. In

an activity called "Eye Spy" some SHC members roamed the co-op with cameras and brought back images they deemed significant. Another activity, "Architexture," encouraged people to select their favourite building facades.

Conclusion

There are currently about 2,220 housing coops in Canada with approximately 91,846 units and about 200,000 residents. The Vision 2020 project recognizes that the co-op housing movement in Canada is at a crossroads. "The co-ops we live in are getting older. The needs of co-op members are changing. With very few exceptions, we are not adding new co-ops to our sector," says CHF Canada. By 2020, 50,000 co-operative housing units will no longer be subject to the original CMHC agreements. To maintain existing co-ops and build new co-op housing will be a daunting task.

The Sunnyhill Futures Project demonstrated that participatory design processes have something unique to offer a co-operative housing renaissance in Canada. The project also highlights what a challenge it will be to eco-retrofit existing stock, build new housing stock, as well as integrate the mixed-use model with retail, commercial, and light industrial opportunities in future co-op housing. Such an ambitious agenda will require capacity-building and mobilization of financial, intellectual, and social capital.

The design profession is not a magic bullet, but it can play a role every bit as vital as finance does. The social economy, and the co-operative sector in particular, should develop the capacity to imagine, design, and build the social economy – literally. These capacities are now almost exclusively in the domain of the private and government sectors whose forte, generally speaking, is not participatory process and co-operative principles. Inspired by the Sunnyhill experience, Sustainable Calgary Society's Participatory Design Initiative is embarking on such a project. Stay tuned! i4

BALTA
B.C.-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada   Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada   Canada

(photo) Sunnyhill, reinvented. The final report to SHC included this exciting perspective by project team members Matt Knapik, Deeter Shurig, Kira Adams, Krista Robertson, and Maha AbuHafeetha.