Rethinking Partnerships for Affordable Housing: Planning Policy + Design Nexus

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Abstract: A growing affordability problem in Canadian cities has prompted a renewed commitment of the federal government, complemented with provincial and municipal programs, to increase the supply of affordable rental housing. Consensus has been building across Canada that an effective response requires multi-sectoral partnerships to meet growing local needs within limited resources and capacity. Recently large Canadian cities have joined their efforts with non-profit and private organisations to provide affordable rental housing in mixed-income experimental projects.

In this context, the research addresses a significant gap in the evaluation of partnerships, focusing on the nature of multi-agency collaborations in the provision process (design, build, finance, operate). Partnerships capitalise on the effective role of the public sector in the mobilization of resources, the efficiencies of private agencies in the development process (design, build) and the hybridity of the non-profit institutions (management, service delivery). The research develops a conceptual framework, based on the political market model to explain adoption of planning and housing policies by municipalities. The alignment of policy instruments—regulatory, fiscal and financial—is an important determinant of the ability of partnerships to deliver adequate, affordable and sustainable housing. The framework presents a typology of affordable housing partnerships using highlights from case studies in the large Canadian cities—Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. The methodology is based on review of the literature and analysis of innovative developments of mixed-income affordable rental housing projects.

Findings suggest that economies of scale and sustained funding are critical for efficient partnerships (design, build and operate). However, their effectiveness often depends on institutional capacity, coalition building/inclusive governance and neighbourhood integration. We argue that a shift from the traditional 'public-private' model to multi-sectoral partnerships is required to address the housing crisis in Canadian cities.

Keywords: partnerships, affordable housing, evaluation, cities

Introduction

A growing affordability problem affecting over 5 million people in Canada (1.7 million households in core housing need) has prompted a renewed commitment of the federal government, complemented with provincial and municipal programs, to end homelessness and increase the supply of affordable rental housing (Government of Canada, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2017). Nearly a quarter of all Canadians are experiencing housing insecurity, defined as spending more than 30% of their income on shelter costs. In Calgary, around 17,000 households are at risk of homelessness because they earn less than $30,000 and spend more than half on rent. Housing affordability is under further threat due to skyrocketing home prices and rising interest rates. Finding solutions to increase the share of affordable/social housing (6% on average) is important in Canada's big cities. Given the devolution of government involvement in housing (CMHC, 1998), consensus has been building across Canada that an effective response requires a multi-sectoral approach, including all levels of government, the private for-profit and non-profit sectors, as well as local communities (Moore and Skaburski, 2004; Wolfe, 1998). This is perceived as the most effective way of producing affordable housing to meet growing local needs within limited resources and capacity (Angel, 2000; Scanlon, Whitehead & Arrigoitia, 2014). The last few years have seen large Canadian cities join their efforts with non-profit and private organisations to provide affordable rental housing in mixed-income, mixed-tenure projects (CMHC, 2014). While these projects are experimental, they have demonstrated a viable alternative to address vulnerabilities in the housing market as well as make Canadian cities more inclusive and competitive (Conference Board of Canada, 2010). In this context, empirical studies show that despite the significance of partnerships for affordable rental housing, important gaps remain in the capacity to implement them in practice (Moore and Skaburski, 2004; Tsenkova and Witwer, 2011).

Conceptual Framework and Approach

The 'market failure' in affordable housing has been typified by Berry (2014) as lack of stable and consistent policies, absence of planning mechanisms that regulate affordable housing and provide infrastructure funding, and a failure in governance to coordinate and strategize. The theoretical framework for evaluation of housing partnerships is based on collaborative planning (Healey, 1997; Booher and Innes, 2002; Forester, 2013) and institutional interaction, communication and empowerment (Boase, 2000). Multi-sectoral partnerships have mainly been studied as 'public-private' partnerships advantageous for economies of scale and scope (Brown, 1999). The conceptual approach taken in this research is to understand how partnerships can be effective in planning, building and delivery (Bovaird 2004; Innes and Booher, 2010). Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2011) articulate such partnerships as those that maximize democratic processes to ensure sustainability through jointly determined goals, collaborative and consensus-based decision making, non-hierarchical and horizontal structures and processes, informal, as well as formalized relationships, synergistic interactions among partners, and shared accountability for outcomes and results. Partnerships address the impasse in the delivery of affordable, adequate and secure housing focusing on solutions—policy alternatives, planning and design strategies (Kemeny, Kersloot and Thalmann, 2005; Tsenkova, 2019).

A central question in the literature refers to implementation of new partnership models in the development process. Over time, the compositions of actors and agencies involved have shifted drastically from public provision towards multi-actor/ agency collaboration (Berry, 2014). What are the models of these collaborations? While there is a common mandate to provide housing that is affordable, the definitions and criteria for allocation and eligibility of recipients, governance and management policies, and typologies of housing forms vary widely (Carmona, Carmona and Gallent 2003). Socially owned housing managed by non-profit, private and community-based organizations in 'hybrid' forms, has replaced public housing to address the needs of targeted groups (i.e., the homeless; seniors; vulnerable households), but is under threat of funding cuts, despite a well-documented increasing affordability gap in many cities (Hoard, 2012; Oxley, 2000).

A second question relates to the design of adequate policy to develop partnerships for affordable rental housing. Public authorities employ various policy instruments to implement transformation (Gilbert, 2016; Tsenkova, 2009). Public expenditure cutbacks have contributed to the decline in federal and provincial provision of socially-owned housing in Canadian cities (Dalton, 2009; Schembri, 2014). In its place has come a wide range of innovations in public/private approaches to funding and planning instruments with varying capacities to address the affordability gap (Allan, 2001; Tsenkova and Witwer, 2011). Further, the need to mobilize the network of public, private and non-profit organizations, as well as the local communities, to support reforms for affordable housing partnerships is essential as is the capacity to effectively manage the interdependence between organizations (Tsenkova, 2014) and adapt to risks (Gilbert, 2016). Practitioners identify this as a challenging area, with municipalities often taking a strategic leadership role, particularly in large Canadian cities. Finally, the outcome of such partnerships is often mixed-income affordable housing (Whitehead, 2007; Tsenkova, 2019). Research highlights that historically public housing has played a significant role in shaping communities, but in the era of neo-liberal reforms, its future is challenged by declining investment, aging infrastructure and design that is less conducive to social integration (Bacher, 1993; Oxley, 2000). The built form and spatial patterns of new affordable housing use planning and design strategies to facilitate social mix and integration of projects in communities.

Defining a Partnership

According to the Canadian Council on Private Public Partnerships (CCPPP), a PPP is “a cooperative venture between the public and private sectors, built on the expertise of each partner, that best meets clearly defined public needs through appropriate allocation of resources, risks, and rewards” (2017). Although this can be considered the standard, several other definitions exist throughout the literature which allude to the complexity of the partnership (Kernaghan, 1993, Armstrong, 1997, Rodal & Mudler, 1992). The overall sentiment defines a cooperative pursuit that is predicated on shared, compatible objectives. In return for the need of shared mutual benefits is a shared risk and therefore authority on the project. The definitions tend to outline the idealised form of partnership amongst private and public entities, but in different forms.

Figure 1 situates the variety of partnership types on a continuum, depicting the transfer of liability and therefore risk from the public to the private sector (IPSASB, 2008). A project can be defined as any combination of the following operational elements; Design, Build, Finance, Operate, Maintain, Own, Transfer, Lease, Develop, Buy (Allan, 1999). The location of a project on the spectrum is dictated by the nature of the project in conjunction with the entity performing key tasks. The following definitions of partnership types have been adapted from the International Public Sector Accounting Standards Board’s (IPSASB) consultation paper on concession arrangements (2008).

1. Service and Management Contracts – services that would otherwise be performed by a public sector entity are contracted out to a private sector entity, but risk and responsibility for the delivery of the service remains with the public entity. Contract arrangements are short term, renewed only if the private sector entity delivers the service in accordance with requirements set by the public sector.

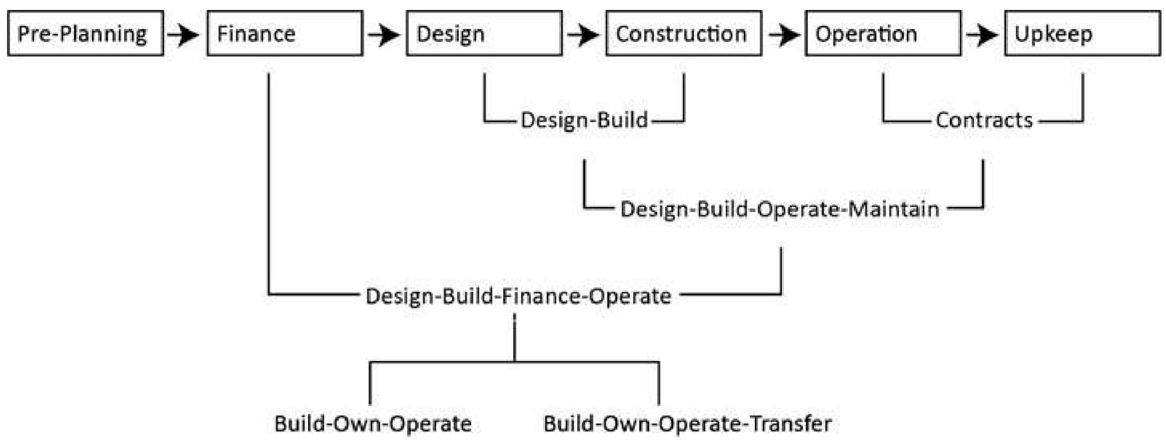

Figure 1: Partnership Typologies & the Housing Provision Process

2. Design-Build – private sector entity assumes full construction risk and is responsible for the liability associated with the construction process. Upon completion, the public sector entity assumes responsibility for both the operation and maintenance of the project, leaving the private sector with little to no residual project risks.

3. Design-Build-Operate-Maintain – construction, operation, and maintenance risks are assumed by the private sector entity. Public sector involvement is typically limited to financing, characterising the typology of the project, oversight of operations/outcomes.

4. Design-Build-Finance-Operate – private sector entity designs, builds, and finances associated construction costs. In addition to being heavily involved in the construction of the project, the private sector is also responsible for the delivery of services through long term concession agreements.

Affordable Housing Partnerships

The designing, building, financing, and operation of affordable housing through public private partnerships (PPPs) is further complicated with the inclusion of a third entity; the non-profit sector. The above definition is rendered incomplete when viewing affordable housing partnerships because of the strong role non-profits have in catalysing investment (Moskalyk, 2008). To compensate for the lack of non-profit inclusion in the CCPPP definition cited above, CMHC offers the following adapted definition: PPPs are defined to included agreements where development is undertaken with a combination of not-for-profit, private, and public participants of programs, however, PPPs are not undertaken within the context of a single mainstream program. They represent a more dynamic involvement of public sector, and not-for-profit interests in which each contributes and shares some sort of the risk (Wallace et. al., 1998:2).

This research proposes a new term that will capture the essence of such collaborations, particularly in the development process of new affordable housing. A PPNP (*public private and non-profit partnership*) does have a strong involvement and leadership of non-profit organisations that often Operate-Own affordable housing. They can also act as developers with the goal of engaging private companies in the Design-Build phase, while mobilising public sector financial and fiscal support to ensure financial viability. The construction and operation of affordable rental housing is typically dependent on the inclusion of the three sectors listed above (public, private, and non-profit). The following will detail the different types of agencies that represent the three sectors and the responsibilities that they may have in the partnership.

Public Sector

No level of government accepts full responsibility for developing affordable housing. Certain aspects are federally regulated (CMHC and the National Housing Act), but provincial governments have key responsibilities. This creates a diversity of partnership types, with fundamental characteristics differing from province to province, and in cases between municipalities.

Federal Government – The Federal government's involvement in affordable housing is through national funding strategies. Historically, these have fluctuated in value and are heavily dependent on the political party in power. Since 2011, funding for affordable housing has been provided through the Investment in Affordable Housing (IAH) (CMHC, 2017). The IAH is the most recent national funding strategy, with 2016 marking the end of a 5 year, $1.9 billion plan. The 2017 federal budget announced the first National Housing Strategy with $11.2 billion investment in affordable housing over the next 11 years (Young, 2017). Direct federal involvement is limited to capital investment targeted almost exclusively at the supply side of the housing equation. Funds are allocated to encourage the construction of more rental units.

Provincial Government – Under bilateral agreements with CMHC, provinces and territories match their respective federal funds and are responsible for allocating money to specifically designed provincial programs (CMHC, 2017). Although the programs vary province to province, an average of roughly half of the total IAH fund was spent on increasing supply of affordable housing through new construction. The rest of the funds were allocated to the improve the quality of existing housing stock and to foster safe, independent living (CMHC, 2017). In addition to investment, provincial governments can influence affordable housing feasibility through regulatory means (e.g. provincial policy statements define the context for inclusionary housing policies and plans).

Municipal Government – The responsibility of municipal governments varies across the country, however a generalised overview of their role in the affordable housing spectrum includes research-oriented, policy, regulatory, financial, and administrative approaches (Starr, 2001). Since policy devolution, municipalities have resorted to incentives to stimulate the construction of housing. These can include, but are not limited to waiving development charges, selling municipal lands at discounted rates, lower property taxes, or start-up grants/loans. In addition, municipalities can expedite the planning process through planning approvals and encouraging private developers to join partnerships to construct new developments.

Private Sector

The private sector represents the agency typically tasked with the design and construction of affordable housing developments. Private developers bring the skills, labour force, an expertise in the construction process into the partnership and have proven to be an effective means of getting projects built. In addition to construction, private capital investment firms/banks can be involved in the project to assist with the funding of large scale projects, but public support is required to incentivize the investment made by a private equity firm or developer to reduce the risk and help to guarantee a suitable return on investment.

Affordable Housing Partnerships in Action

A successful affordable housing development addresses and closes the ‘affordability gap’. The gap is characterised by the difference between the break-even cost of the development and the income generated through affordable rent levels. As argued above, in order for a project to be both affordable and sustainable, the traditional construction process (private capital finance, developer, purchaser) needs to be offset. Traditionally, this was done through public subsidy typically in the form of capital investment and/or land holdings. The introduction of PPNPs as an alternative for fiscally constrained governments has resulted in a more complex framework of financing, construction, and operation of affordable rental developments. The case studies below illustrate different ways of approaching affordable housing and the important role of the non-profit sector.

Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) – Ontario

TCHC is a city-owned corporation that operates in a non-profit manner. It is the largest social housing provider in Canada, and the second largest in North America, managing 2100 buildings and 110,000 residents. 55 per cent of operating funding comes from rent, 39 per cent from subsidies provided by the City of Toronto, and the remaining 6 per cent from the rental of commercial spaces, parking, laundry, cable fees, and investments (TCHC, 2017).

Figure 2: Toronto Regent Park Redevelopment

Regent Park Community Redevelopment in Figure 2 is synonymous with public housing. It is the largest, and oldest publicly funded housing development in Canada, representing the postwar strategy of slum clearance and the application of Garden City design principles. In 2003, Regent Park joined other infamous post-war social housing projects, when a redevelopment plan was approved to demolish and replace existing public housing Rent Geared to Income (RGI) units. In addition to modernising the housing stock, the 12-to-15 year, six phase redevelopment includes an overall masterplan (new roads, amenities, park space, public buildings) to integrate the once physically segregated site back into the city (Moskalyk, 2012). The budget for the redevelopment stands at $1 billion, boasting a multilayered funding structure constituting of government funds (federal, provincial, and municipal), private sector, savings generated on site, and TCHC equity contributions and loans.

The completion of the project is predicated on a three-sector partnership between the public, non-profit, and private sectors (PPNP). In addition to approving the project, the City of Toronto waved development and realty taxes on all new RGI units for the duration of the development, and absorbed the infrastructure costs with assistance from senior level of governments (Landau, 2016). Under the Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Agreement, $1.61 million funding from the federal and provincial governments was allocated to stimulate construction. The TCHC owned and operated the 2,087 RGI units at Regent Park and conducted several feasibility studies to determine how to best accomplish the 69 acre revitalization. The Daniels Corporation represents the private sector aspect of the partnership, and will oversee the design and construction of the entire project. In addition to the physical infrastructure, the Daniels Corporation is also offering qualified purchasers of the market and below-market housing options an additional 5 per cent loan under its Downpayment Assistance Program (Moskalyk, 2012).

Both the risks and rewards of the project are shared between the TCHC and the Daniels Corporation. The scale of the project helped to mitigate the risks associated with the rollout of the development, making Regent Park are unique case study in the theorised benefits of mixed-market housing (Rowe & Dunn, 2015). For example, in an effort to erase the stigma associated with Regent Park, the partnership decided to front-load phase 1 with the financing and construction of market units, holding off on the RGI units. The influx of higher income tenants is expected to have a higher, positive impact on the social and economic fabric of the community (Moskalyk, 2008). Ensuring the market units will be desirable, and attracting commercial activity are both means to bolstering the overall economic status of the partnership and offer continual funding for the RGI units that have a much lower return on investment.

Societe D'Habitation Et De Developmet De Montreal (SDHM) – Quebec

SDHM was created in 1988 as a municipal non-profit corporation and a social housing provider with the capacity to undertake independent land acquisition and development roles on behalf of the municipal government (HPC, 2015). Understanding the spectrum of housing types and users, SDHM openly establishes itself as a provider of 'gap' housing, leaving very low income social housing to the public housing agency and luxury housing to the private market. 2,082 units are currently owned by SDHM, but throughout the corporation's history, they have assumed a variety of roles within the design-build-maintain matrix of affordable housing. This has materialised in the form of buying, renovating, and selling properties to co-operatives or non-profits, entrusting the management of properties to organizations once they are constructed, or acquiring and rehabilitating existing rental housing units (HPC, 2015). As of 2015, SDHM became one of the only affordable housing agencies in the country to be able to maintain a significant (4,700 units) with no ongoing operational subsidies. This is partly due to the fact that nearly all of the units (except for roughly 230) are rented at 80% of market value which enables operating costs to be covered by tenants (HPC, 2015). Innovative business strategies have also given SDHM the ability to thrive independently of government subsidies, best characterised by their initiative Access Condos. The program partners directly with private sector developers, offering prospective homeowners a 10% purchase credit to lower the down payment to as low as $1,000. The SDHM holds a second mortgage for their share of the equity, recovering this through a share of appreciation on future resales (HPC, 2015).

City-Led Partnership in the Olympic Village – Vancouver, British Columbia

Figure 3: Olympic Village

The Olympic Village (Figure 3) was built to house athletes during Vancouver's 2010 Olympics under the ambitious planning goal of creating a model of a sustainable community. Bidding for city owned land, the Millennium Development Group—a Vancouver-based private company—paid 193-million-dollars the highest price per square foot of land in Canadian history (Taylor & Callihoo, 2011) and set to achieve LEED Platinum status and make this one of the greenest developments in the world. The vision included new water management tools, green roofs and Neighbourhood Energy Utility (drawing heat from sewage system) and access to a new rapid transit station built for the Olympics. The initial plan for the Olympic Village was to have "one-third social housing, one-third below market housing and one-third market housing" (Taylor & Callihoo, 2011, pg.34). The 570 units would be a huge push forward in Vancouver's plan to tackle the housing crisis. As the developer was caught up in the global financial crisis and went bankrupt, the city had to assume the costs (costing taxpayers over \$100 million), so the share of social housing was reduced to 20% and market-modest rentals were replaced by luxury condominiums.

Following the 2010 Games, the Olympic Village retained 252 units of social housing and 119 units of "modest market housing" (City of Vancouver, 2014, p.3), built at an average cost of \$436,500 per unit (not including land value), which would likely make these the most expensive social housing units ever constructed (McCarthy, 2012). The framework implemented by the City to help ensure the success of the project is based on a revenue sharing model, where land is leased to non-profit organizations for 60 years at "nominal prepaid rent" to provide social housing.

Concluding Comments

A growing affordability problem affecting over 5 million people in Canada (1.7 million households in core housing need) has prompted a renewed commitment of the federal government, complemented with provincial and municipal programs, to end homelessness and increase the supply of affordable rental housing. Given the devolution of government involvement in housing, consensus has been building across Canada that an effective response requires a multi-sectoral approach, including all levels of government, the private for-profit and non-profit sectors, as well as local communities. This is perceived as the most effective way of producing affordable housing to meet growing local needs within limited resources and capacity. The last decade has seen large Canadian cities join their efforts with non-profit and private organisations to provide affordable rental housing in mixed-income, mixed-tenure projects. While these projects are experimental, they have demonstrated a viable alternative to address vulnerabilities in the housing market as well as make Canadian cities more inclusive and competitive.

This paper profiled some of the key characteristics of such partnerships and delineated risks and opportunities associated with effective implementation. Notwithstanding the diversity of such arrangements in Canadian cities, it is important that they are nurtured by stable and consistent housing policies, robust planning mechanisms that regulate affordable housing and provide infrastructure funding, and a coherent system of governance to coordinate and strategize.

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