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ACT Solutions

Building Code Options Reduce Renovation Costs for Inner-City Housing

New Life Ministries, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Issue

A large portion of Winnipeg's inner city housing was built between 1890 and 1950. By the late 1990s, many inner city houses had been boarded up or had deteriorated badly. Homeowners were turning over their keys because they could not afford to renovate their homes to building code requirements. The average cost of inner city houses had fallen to between \$15,000 and \$25,000, and the cost of renovating them exceeded the resale value.

Plan

New Life Ministries received an ACT grant in 1999 to develop, with the City, building code options and renovation guidelines, and renovate an inner city house. The intent was to create alternative guidelines that would allow affordable renovation while preserving basic health and safety requirements. The project team planned to test the code options by renovating an abandoned but physically sound inner city house.

Project team

The project team included Lazarus Housing, a non-profit community-based renovation company, with Ralph Mueller as project manager and Tim Krahn as principal researcher; New Life Ministries' Rev. Harry Lehotsky; the City of Winnipeg; housing interest groups; the University of Manitoba; and the Manitoba Home Builders' Association. The team also consulted with the Province of Manitoba and other stakeholders.

Results

The outcome of the project is well detailed in the project's final report which includes a technical section, a section on the permit process and a case study.

The technical section contains the set of code compliance alternatives that were developed for renovating pre-1945 dwellings and which still met the life saving intentions of the building code. The process section presents recommendations on improving



**The two houses before renovation:
alternative code guidelines were used
to renovate the house on the left**

Source: Harry Lehotsky

the building permit application process, and the case study documents the successful application and the economic feasibility of the alternative code guidelines.

Two inner-city houses, both built in 1905 to the same floor plan, were renovated, one to code and the other using the alternatives.

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Alternative guidelines were used for 10 elements at 448 Maryland, while strict code compliance was followed for the same elements at 450 Maryland. Renovating to code cost \$17,582; the same elements at 448 Maryland cost only \$7,335, a savings of 58 per cent. Alternative renovation elements included:

- use of reclaimed lumber wherever possible;
- doubling of headers and trimmers only where there were signs of distress;
- reinforcing and repairing, rather than replacing, interior wall systems;
- insulating the attic to R12 and R20 where space allowed, rather than R40 throughout;
- reconstructing stairs to original layout and dimensions, rather than replacing with a code-compliant set; and
- retaining existing roof system.

Despite the apparent benefits of alternative guidelines, there has been little movement towards instituting them.

The City's bylaws are required to follow the National Building Code, says Terry Aseltine, Corporate Communications with the City of Winnipeg. Without the provincial building code or the national one being changed, the City is not in a position to permit use of the alternative guidelines for other renovation projects.

"We can't arbitrarily give exemptions to those bylaws that are based on the national standard," Aseltine says. "Safety is our primary concern."

Rev. Harry Lehotsky said the biggest disappointment has been the lack of enthusiasm for change. Even though the Mayor, some



Renovation of 10 elements in the house on the right cost \$17,582. Using safe yet less expensive alternatives in the house on the left cost only \$7,335.

Source: Harry Lehotsky

members of Council and the general public were positive about making changes, others have had reservations about proceeding further.

"What we have is still not a cost-effective way to do renovations," Lehotsky said. "Yet the demand for affordable housing remains and, I think, will continue to grow."

Related reports

Developing Building Code Alternatives and Guidelines for Renovations (New Life Ministries, Winnipeg, 2003)

This report is available from the ACT website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

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