

A first-rate take on housing of last resort

Downtown Eastside hoteliers have joined forces to use private-sector money to house the poor

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VANCOUVER -- On a recent morning at the Dodson Hotel, workers were replacing a plate-glass window that shattered the night before when someone pushed a woman into it.

That's not the first time such a thing has happened, said two residents who sat drinking coffee in the lobby as a cold breeze blew in off the street.

"I've seen it a few times," said one woman, who said her name was Cathy and that she'd lived in the Dodson - on Hastings Street in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside - for about three years.

"Every time, it costs a couple of thousand dollars to fix."

Those costs are part of the package for the Dodson's owner, David Ash, a private-sector investor who bought the rundown hotel in 2004. He teamed up with Hart Molthagen, a former hotelier who'd bought two rooming houses on Main Street in 2000 and turned them into the Jubilee Rooms.

The Dodson and the Jubilee, along with another hotel on nearby Powell Street purchased by a third investor, operate under the banner of the Community Builders Benevolence Group, a Vancouver-based charity that blends do-gooder capitalism with concepts such as emergence theory, the analysis of how complex systems can result from simple interactions.

In the rooming-house context, that plays out in various ways, such as free toast and coffee in the morning, which encourages residents to socialize.

The three buildings provide 175 rooms without significant public funding (a federal program has kicked in \$150,000 for tenant support programs over the past year) and they show how private-sector money can help house the poor.

"If you made it more accessible to the private sector, you could buy up 100 per cent of the SRO [single-room occupancy] stock and have it in better hands," says Gordon Wiebe, a retired minister and Community Builders director.

Single-room occupancy hotels accounted for 42 per cent of the 14,000 low-income housing units in the downtown core, a 2007 Vancouver survey found.

As housing of last resort, they are known for overflowing toilets, bedbugs and crime. Mr. Wiebe, now 51, had done community work in Africa and was living in the Fraser Valley when he grew troubled by the pain he saw in the Downtown Eastside.

So he moved there, renting a room in the Jubilee Rooms in 2002 and spending several months getting his bearings.

"And in my four months of being quiet in the Jubilee, I realized that there were a lot of things that I'd done in 25 years that weren't helpful," says Mr. Wiebe, who now lives in the Dodson between regular stays at a family home in Hope.

He connected with Mr. Molthagen, who had good intentions but no clue of how to run an inner-city rooming house.

Mr. Wiebe and Mr. Molthagen come from a Christian background, but don't take a conventional faith-based approach, which in housing terms typically means residents should be off drugs and booze.

"Clean to us is a clean building," Mr. Wiebe says. "We say, 'Come as you are.' "

The group bases its approach on best practices for safety, affordability and support. Powell Rooms are breaking even, but both the Jubilee Rooms and the Dodson are being subsidized by their respective owners.

But a lean approach that involves residents can provide safe, supportive housing and allow owners to break even or better, Mr. Wiebe maintains.

The break-even point for the Dodson, based on the purchase price of \$1.5-million, is about \$25,000 per room. By contrast, the Pennsylvania Hotel, recently opened after a \$14-million renovation that included substantial government contributions, will provide 44 rooms at a cost of nearly \$330,000 per room.

The Dodson is not perfect. The hallways and bathrooms are clean and there are surveillance cameras and decent lighting. But the lobby - formerly a bar - is an echo chamber of stripped walls and peeling floors. The elevator doesn't work, partly because service companies are reluctant to send their staff to the building. The sidewalk in front of the hotel is humming with drunks and dealers.

But to some degree, the stripped-down approach is working. A federally funded survey in 2005 found less than 2 per cent of people who lived in the Dodson or Jubilee rooms for a minimum of 10 weeks returned to homelessness.

One of the people who might stay off the street is Janet Poorman. Now 45, Ms. Poorman had been living rough for months before she landed at the Dodson in 2007. Since moving in, she's sought medical help for her failing vision - it turned out she had a cataract - and had a visit from her oldest son. In her room, she has colourful shawls draped over the windows and shelves lined

with books and photographs. When her son came, she recalls, she had a place for him to visit and belongings she could share.

"I told him, 'take whatever you want,' " she says, waving expansively around the room as she sits on the bed she's angled between the bookcases and the door. "Whatever you see, if you like it, it's yours."

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