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# Characteristics of Home: Perspectives of Women Who Are Homeless

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## Characteristics of Home: Perspectives of Women Who Are Homeless

### Abstract

We employed participatory, community-based research methods to explore the perceptions of home among women who are homeless. Twenty women engaged in one or more techniques including qualitative interviews, digital story telling, creative writing, photovoice, and design charrette to characterize their perceptions of home. Analysis of the data revealed themes related to the physical, affective, and external environment. By understanding how participants perceive home and the qualities they deem necessary for home, we can begin to construct home from both a service and design perspective that meets womens needs for stable, safe housing and home, and also gain a better understanding of what is needed to assist women in exiting homelessness and building more sustainable futures for themselves and their families.

### Keywords

Women, Homelessness, Shelter, and Community-based Research

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## **Characteristics of Home: Perspectives of Women Who Are Homeless**

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### **Introduction**

While there has been a steady decline in academic and media attention devoted to homelessness since the mid-1980s (Buck, Toro, & Ramos, 2004), the issues related to homelessness are now garnering increased attention. Today an estimated 25 percent of the homeless population is women, a rather new phenomenon that has sparked a resurgence of interest in academic circles, if not among the media and policymakers (Coryn & Borshuk, 2006). Previous research indicates that women experiencing homelessness have significantly different needs than homeless men. The literature shows that only a small number of women who are homeless use shelters, and those who do are less comfortable in shelters than men (Rahder, 2006; Whitzman, 2006). In addition to the stigma associated with staying in shelters, women avoid shelters for various reasons.

Many women prefer to stay with relatives or friends when they cannot find suitable housing, while others will remain in abusive relationships to avoid shelters (Acosto & Toro, 2001; Evans & Forsyth, 2003; Rahder, 2006). The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (UNCESCR; 2006) noted that women in Canada are often prevented from leaving abusive relationships due to the lack of affordable housing and inadequate assistance. Furthermore, women with children do not want to disrupt the lives of their children by changing their environments (Whitzman, 2006), and women who are homeless (with or without children) strongly prefer to avoid shelters for abused women. Women have concerns for their safety due to the perceived and actual dangerous, criminal elements in shelters. They are also fearful of their susceptibility to physical and sexual abuse by men (Evans & Forsyth; Novac, Brown, & Bourbonnais, 1996; Scott, 2007; Whitzman). While transition shelters can be an effective

short-term solution to the housing crisis, it is not tenable in the long term. Although the goal should be aiding people to exit homelessness, appropriate temporary shelters may still be required as a stop-gap until longer-term housing solutions can be found.

This research project was conducted in Calgary, Alberta, Canada between May and August 2007 under the auspices of the Downtown Community Initiative, a partnership between The Salvation Army (TSA), a large inner-city homeless shelter, and the University of Calgary Faculties of Nursing and Social Work. The Downtown Community Initiative is an on-going project with the goal of building a foundation for co-learning between the inner-city population and TSA staff with students and faculty from the university for the purpose of improving the health and well-being of all involved (Rutherford, Walsh, & Rook, in press). This project arose from the previous work conducted within the DCI and the findings from this study informed work that followed.

Calgary in this period has experienced unprecedented economic growth due to its burgeoning oil and gas sector. While many have benefited from this substantial growth, many others have suffered from the lack of infrastructure, inadequate social planning, and available affordable housing: In fact, the rate of homelessness has increased 650 percent in the last decade (Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, 2008). This study attempts to fill a gap in current research by focusing on women's experience of homelessness and, in particular, what they perceive to be necessary for "home." The primary goal of the research project was to better understand the nature of home according to women who are homeless. A secondary objective was to document and use innovative community-based participatory research methods to enable and empower participants to share their concerns and advocate for their needs.

In this paper the focus is on an exploration of the characteristics of home as described by women who are, have been, or are at risk of being homeless. By understanding how this target group perceives home and the qualities they deem necessary for home, we can begin to construct home from both a service and design perspective that meets women's needs for stable and safe housing. Information from this project is being used to inform services and programming for this population and to provide recommendations for women's housing shelters in Calgary, and also contribute to a better understanding of what is needed to assist women in exiting homelessness and building more sustainable futures for themselves and their families.

## **Literature Review**

The negative personal qualities attributed to people who are homeless form the core of the published literature and "as less attention is focused on the problem, and on those experiencing homelessness, the easier it may be to neglect the reality of homelessness itself" (Coryn & Borshuk, 2006, p. 588). Along these lines, a recent study further recognizes that current social sciences literature pays too little attention to the dangers to homeless women in particular of "the streets" and how "in the pursuit of safety and security in frequently violent and chaotic social spaces" women develop "complex survival strategies [...] to prevent criminal victimization" (Huey & Berndt, 2008, p. 177).

A key study by investigative journalist, Laird (2007), emphasized along with much of the recent literature the key role that all levels of government must play in

combating the rising homeless crisis, which is a national concern and necessitates a multi-dimensional approach that extends beyond the housing sector. Laird advances that the government's response to the influx of the Canadian homeless population has been to build short-term solutions and crisis based services, largely ignoring the core of the issue, and that Canada requires a national policy to address the key issues of income security and housing affordability.

Canadian researchers Patterson, Somers, McIntosh, Shiel, and Frankish (2008), estimate that an absolute homeless person in British Columbia with a severe addiction and/or a mental illness costs taxpayers \$55,000 per year for an annual total of \$644.3 million in social service spending. The authors estimate that the provision of adequate housing and supports would reduce this cost to \$37,000 per year, resulting in an overall "cost avoidance" of about \$211 million per year.

In the city of Calgary, where although the minimum wage of \$8.00 per hour is the third highest in the country, the Community and Neighbourhood Services Social Policy and Planning Division has determined that in order to earn a living wage, defined as the amount of income an individual or family needs to meet their basic needs, maintain a decent standard of living, and save for future needs, an individual must earn a minimum of \$12 per hour, or \$13.25 per hour in lieu of benefits in order to reach the poverty line or LICO – Low Income Cut-Off (Cook, 2008). Further, Canada is one of the only countries in the Western world that does not have a comprehensive national housing strategy or policy (Golden, Currie, Greaves, & Latimer, 1999). With respect to homeless women in particular, according to the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, women and children make up a substantial proportion of Canada's minimum wage workers, thus putting them at a high risk for homelessness ("Putting a face on poverty," 2005). Susan Scott (2007), the author of *All our Sisters*, maintains that there are systemic barriers faced by economically disadvantaged women, suggesting that "the system is stacked against women in poverty at every turn" (p. 17). Because women comprise only a small portion of formal homeless statistics, they remain largely invisible compared to homeless men, even though many more women are living on insufficient funds, with fewer employment prospects, and in fear for their safety for themselves and their children. The most recent biennial homeless count conducted in 2008 by the City of Calgary (2008a) found 22 percent of the 4,060 of absolutely homeless people enumerated in Calgary in 2008 were female. An analysis of data from the 2006 biennial count found that female clients of the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter had to make a choice between their personal safety and obtaining or retaining suitable housing (City of Calgary, 2008b).

### **The Research Process and Methodology**

Ethics approval for the research study was obtained from the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board. All participants were volunteers and were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participation, whenever possible, was confidential and participants were able to withdraw from the study without affecting any services they received. All participants completed informed consents and were given a copy of the completed form.

Twenty women participated in the study ranging in age from 22 to 64, and identified as either Canadian-Caucasian (15 participants) or Canadian-Aboriginal (five

participants). The majority of the women were homeless at the time of the study; one woman was homeless prior to the study and was at the risk of becoming homeless during the study and two participants were previously homeless. Several of the participants have been homeless on more than one occasion. Women were invited into the study by recruitment posters posted in agencies serving the homeless population, suggestions by staff and other participants, and by invitation of the research assistants. In the latter case, a major component of the process of recruiting and retaining participants was learning to effectively and respectfully engage the clients in order to build a rapport and develop collaborative and trusting relationships with them. The researchers were on-site at TSA for the duration of the four month study. Immersion in the environment facilitated the development of the types of relationships, interactions, and comfort levels necessary to support the work.

Although careful not to take on the role of counselors, the researchers were nonetheless in a position to act as a sounding board for many clients, and could thus refer them to the appropriate services as needed. Taking the time to listen helped the researchers to gain the trust of the women who would eventually participate in formal aspects of the study. This, while important in ensuring the women were interested in participating in the study, was also potentially coercive and may have led some of the participants to view the researchers as confidantes or friends (Paradis, 2000). Indeed, some of the women expressed interest in maintaining or further developing relationships with certain researchers. Other areas of potential coerciveness occurred in the research process during consent, participation, and in receiving honoraria. The consent form stated unequivocally that participation was voluntary, and that engaging in the activities and voicing their opinions would not affect the level or type of services the women would receive. Possibly, however, some of the women may have believed that participating in the study could be one way to extend their length of stay or enhance the services they received. Another concern of the researchers was developing inappropriate relationships with the women: The researchers did not want the women to confuse their relationships with the researchers acting as friends or counsellors.

Each participant was given an honorarium (a \$50 gift certificate from local retailers) upon completing the research. Study researchers fully recognized the complicated ethical dilemma posed by providing honoraria (Paradis, 2000) and were aware it could be construed as inducement. At the same time, the researchers felt it was appropriate to honour the time and effort as well as the value and expertise the women lent to the study. Furthermore, some of the women gave up other sources of casual labour to participate.

In terms of the specific research techniques used, this study was significant because of the variety of qualitative research methods utilized to engage women who were previously, at the risk of, or homeless at the time of the study. Qualitative methods are more subjective and flexible and are structured in such a way to allow for novel themes and findings to emerge (Barbour, 2001). Researchers, including students from the Faculties of Environmental Design, Nursing, and Social Work at the University of Calgary, working in conjunction with TSA, Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS) and other agencies serving homeless women, considered the participants in the research to be a vulnerable population. Thus, by engaging the women in participative methods of

qualitative research, the women were more likely to gain a sense of control and to have increased ability to voice their hopes and concerns.

Twenty women recruited through agencies serving homeless women participated in one or more of five qualitative research data collection activities. Data collection occurred sequentially throughout the four months of the data collection period as time and resources became available, as described below. Women became involved in the activities as they became aware of them and as the activities fit with the women's interest or demands in their lives at that time. First, digital storytelling is an emerging participatory research method that allows people to express their experiences, needs, and hopes through an amalgamation of a variety of visual elements. Photos, movie clips, and video techniques, with text, music, and first person narration act as a vehicle for participants to tell a story of personal significance (Tucker, 2006).

Second, project researchers conducted qualitative interviews, which are commonly used to develop a deeper and more dynamic view of the research subject (Padgett, Hawkins, Abrams, & Davis, 2006). Student researchers in teams of two spent 30-60 minutes with nine women and structured the interviews around the following five questions: (a) What does home mean to you? (b) What does home look and feel like? (c) What is it like to be a woman experiencing homelessness? (d) What do you want people to know about your experiences with homelessness? (e) What advice would you give to planners and designers of long-term housing? Additional probes were used to encourage participants to expand upon areas of interest to the research.

The photovoice process, the third sequential method, was originally derived from health promotion principles, literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and community-based approach to documentary photography (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). It is the combination of photographs with descriptions of each written by the photographer, allowing for a personal description of one's life or experiences. This medium provides individuals the opportunity to lend significance to their lived experiences (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005).

The creative writing exercise was the fourth method used and there is still discussion of the validity of this method when used as data. However, Campo (2003) claims that in fact poetry may be an investigation of meaning and therefore gives a deeper understanding of subjective experiences, which are a primary focus of qualitative research. A benefit of using poetry as data is that the researcher explicitly considers the frame of reference of the informant or participant (Ventres & Frankel, 1996). This is important to consider in subjective research.

Finally, a design charrette promotes joint ownership of solutions and attempts to defuse typical confrontational attitudes between multiple stakeholders. The charrette is frequently associated with an intensive and immersive process of problem solving and creative design. As a qualitative method, no formal recognition of the charrette as a research tool has been put forth. However, given that design charrettes aim to gather meaningful input from diverse groups of interested parties through collaborative and consultative processes, the researchers consider these activities as legitimate methods for gathering qualitative data.

These qualitative and participatory methods were specifically chosen to empower and generate a sense of ownership over the project for and by the participants. The concept of participatory research originated in the developing world (Hall, 1981), and "is

about respecting and understanding the people with and for whom researchers work. It is about developing a realization that local people are knowledgeable and that they together with researchers can work towards analyses and solutions” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1674).

Many criticise qualitative research for a lack of detailed information about the methodology (Zaruba, Toma, & Stark, 1996). To ensure rigour in qualitative research, it is important to explain all aspects of the research. Therefore, authoritative qualitative research requires an audit trail, triangulation, theoretical saturation, and the involvement of more than one researcher in order to develop trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and utility of authorial conclusions (Shapiro, 2004). Site selection should be considered and discussed to ensure transparency about participant recruitment and identification (Drisko, 1997; Padgett, 1998; Zaruba, Toma, & Stark). The quality of the data collection relates to how the study generates, makes use of, and reports the data (Anastas, 2004). Multiple data sources should be utilised to increase the value of data and are a characteristic defining qualitative research technique (Creswall, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study multiple data collection methods increased the breadth and depth of the data, contributed to the saturation of themes, and facilitated the participation of women who might be less likely to participate in more traditional qualitative data collection methods (for example, qualitative interviews). Several approaches were used to increase validity in the study. Multiple researchers (four) were used to collect and analyse data providing independent checks. Researchers kept field notes, which were used to support the discussion of weekly meetings, frame the analysis, and increase validity. Multiple methods were used to provide triangulation sources between methods and the literature. In addition, some women had the opportunity of telling their story in more than one way through the use of different methodologies, increasing the richness and the rigour of the findings. While member checking was not used explicitly, the women had the chance to develop and reframe “their story” through the process of the photovoice, digital story telling, and creative writing methods. Also, many of the participants were involved in study dissemination activities and had a chance to share the study findings from their own perspective.

ATLAS.ti 5.0 was used to complete data analysis on all of the obtained texts from each research activity, such as digital story text, interviews, recorded discussion in photovoice, photovoice texts, creative writing discussion, creative writing texts, and recorded discussion during the design charrette. Coding is primarily used to analyse qualitative data, though there must be distinction between low and high inference coding of the data. Low-inference coding is defined as literal coding, whereas high-inference coding utilises more inference, which may be susceptible to inaccurate interpretation of the data. However, Anastas (2004) stated that by using multiple coders, this problem may be alleviated. Two researchers coded each of the texts independently, compared their coding, and then organized the codes into families or categories. We used an iterative process of discussion, reflection, and negotiation whilst coding the texts for codes and themes to increase the quality and accuracy of the analysis (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Millstein, 1998) and to determine necessary perspectives to enrich the research (Anastas). After completing the initial data analysis, we reviewed and revised the code list and developed a common coding system as has been done in previous studies (Rhodes et al., 2007). Data collection stopped when theoretical saturation was reached.



That is when no new information is revealed and the developed model or body of information does not change, then theoretical saturation has been achieved (Taber, 2000).

### **“Making the Invisible Visible”: Results of the Study**

Although the participants were united in their experience of homelessness, each woman’s story was unique. Each entered into a state of homelessness for a variety of reasons and faced struggles when attempting to leave it. Common themes emerged in the analysis. Poverty, abuse, addictions, poor mental health, and traumatic experiences were all factors that led the women into states of homelessness and these issues were further magnified by the daily struggles they faced while homeless. Themes are presented with illustrative quotes. A photobook illustrating the study can be found at this link <http://homeperspectives.shutterfly.com/>. One woman encapsulated the challenges posed by her homeless state,

I don’t gamble, I don’t drink, I don’t do drugs, I don’t even go out and do any luxury things, you know like what I call luxury like going to a movie, going out and having a rest, I haven’t gone out in a year and a half. I haven’t even rested at my daughter’s house, because it’s not fair to my daughter. I don’t go to no motel rooms, I don’t stay there. I don’t go out and do all that stuff. I don’t go out to restaurants to eat. I don’t have the money to do that stuff. It’s just save, save, save, save, save, it takes a long time to save anything.

Several barriers to exiting homelessness were identified by participants, the most frequent of which was the lack of affordable housing. Additional barriers included the stigma women faced from landlords, a low minimum wage, and lack of access to resources for services in general, and specifically addictions treatment. Social isolation and lack of social support were also identified, as was the incongruence between the requirements of the shelter system and the welfare system. While these pathways and barriers are essential to understanding the issues and addressing them at the individual and societal levels, the present study focuses on what the women required in appropriate temporary shelters, how they perceived home, and the qualities they saw as necessary for a meaningful home.

In developing recommendations for housing, the participants noted the gender inequality in existing services and programs in shelters. Women described the need for “normal living conditions” within shelters and the importance of flexibility and a range of on-site programs and services. The most important aspect of the physical requirements of shelters was the need for individual rooms to ensure privacy. The women noted that shelters currently available lack the necessary requirements of basic accommodation, let alone some of the required elements characteristic of home. In the case of a person with a developmental or physical disability, physical adaptations, such as a ramp for a wheelchair, may be required to ensure accessibility. One participant’s viewpoint was that “they don’t have anything for [the] disabled.” Individuals with childcare roles to fulfill either as parents or grandparents emphasized the need for other more specialized needs such as yard space, and access to a park, a school, and medical care. Women shared

concerns about the negative stigma and stereotyping they experienced both at the individual level and in terms of urban planning policies.

### Characteristics of Home

As Susan Scott (2007) describes, “[f]or most of us, home is a word loaded with emotional, spiritual, and heartfelt emotions, which run deep [...] Home is where we can be ourselves” (p. 15). Just as each woman’s story was unique, so too was her contribution to the concept of “home.” Each participant in the study contributed what was important to her at the time, based on her own current and past experiences and her dreams for the future. The characteristics of home, as described by the women, were provided within the themes that arose through the data analysis. While many participants focused primarily on their current living conditions, it is clear that they regarded the concept of home as a combination of physical, affective, and external attributes that extended beyond the obvious need for an adequate physical dwelling. As Figure A demonstrates, these affective attributes, which are more closely associated with emotional and social well-being, account for the majority of key characteristics of home.

Figure 1. *Characteristic of home.*

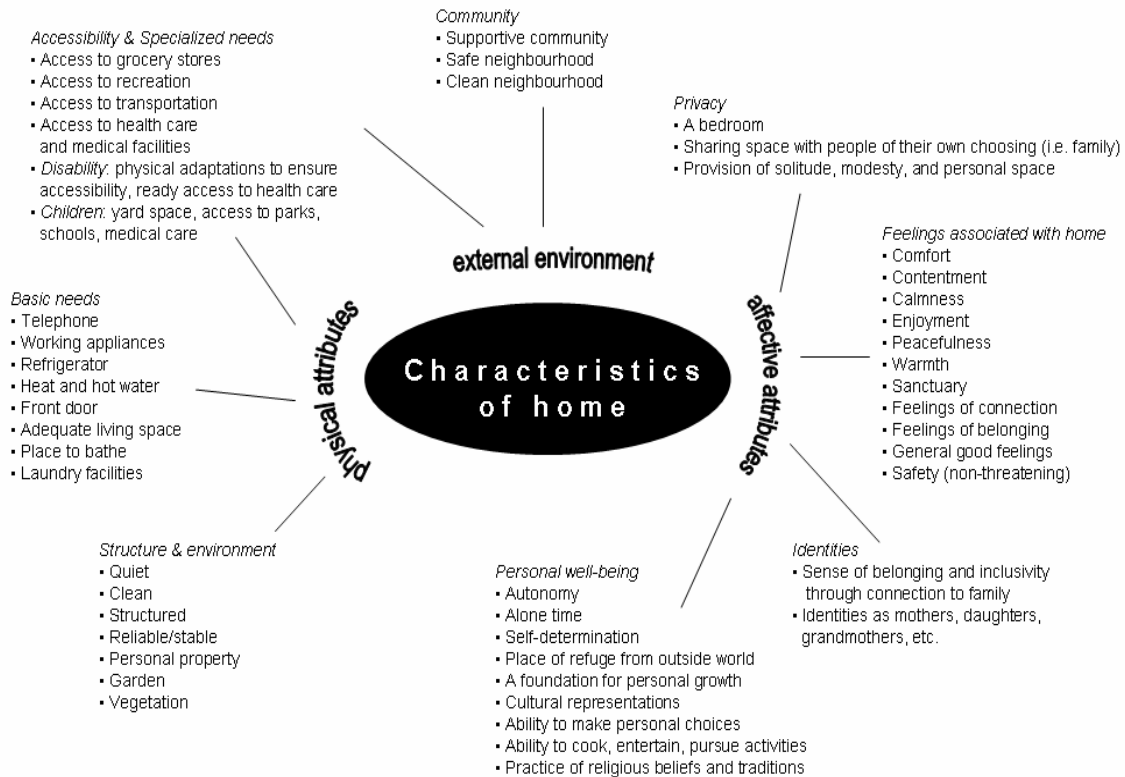


Figure A: Characteristics of home

All of the research activities provided significant insight into each participant's perception of home and of what was needed in a physical and affective sense to be considered a home. Each method of data collection contributed to the representation of different pieces of the larger picture. The interviews allowed insight into the socio-economic context of home, which was not as readily apparent using the other methods. The design charrette was useful particularly with respect to shelters in that it propounded a collection of pragmatic ideas about what current models of transitional housing lacked, and how they could be improved to better meet the needs of women and their children. The digital storytelling exercise was interesting in that it was clear that the women recognized there are preconceived notions of "home" that may or may not coincide with their own perceptions, but that were nonetheless a possible factor in their own stories. Upon hearing a poem written by Atef Ayadi entitled, *Coming Back to My Little Home*, the women involved in the creative writing workshop were asked to reflect on it, and on their own experiences, and write their own poem. Simply titled *Home*, the only poem submitted to the researchers on the one hand reflected this woman's reality, which was filled with pain and loneliness for her children. She was unequivocal that her current circumstance "doesn't feel like home. It will never be home to me." On the other hand, the poem was hopeful, focusing on feeling safe and calm, a place filled with laughter with space to run and play in, and where "you start believing in better things." Also very revealing in the study were the images submitted in a series of photovoice workshops. While many of the photographs and related commentary submitted by the participants were of their current state; the inclement weather they encountered while on the street or the shelter they were currently living in. Others allowed a glimpse into how they perceived home and what they would need to feel "at home."

## **Physical Attributes of Home**

### *Basic Needs*

Physically, home is quiet, clean, and structured. Amenities such as a telephone, working appliances, a refrigerator, heat and hot water, a front door, and adequate living space were all identified by the participants as basic needs that are critical for a place to even begin to feel like home. In particular, it was important to the women to have a door to be able to close to contain themselves in their own space and to open to include those of their own choosing. They indicated that the space should provide facilities to do laundry and keep themselves clean. According to one woman the qualities of importance to the characterization of home are, as one woman described, "reliable, comfortable, living conditions... where I'm not necessarily going to be rooted out of it in the next month or [be] worrying about it."

### *Structure, Personalization of Home, and Accessibility*

Women also described the need for cultural representations and individual property to satisfy the requirements for home because they contribute to the meaningfulness and personalization of a space. According to one participant,

I have a pretty normal house, like, it's nothing special, but... everything in it means something to me. Everything is something I've worked really hard for, or its pictures... I bought a new bed and that's huge to me... I saved for that, myself.

The women also identified needs beyond the physical dwelling such as a garden and vegetation, and access to grocery stores, recreation, medical facilities, and transportation.

### **Affective Attributes of Home**

#### *Feelings Associated with Home*

In addition to the physical features and locality of home women identified a number of non-physical, more intangible characteristics essential to their definition of home. Comfort and safety are feelings strongly associated with the characteristics of home. As one woman explained, "home feels warm. You just feel safe again, like away from everybody, you don't feel threatened." Other feelings that were related to the concept of home included contentment, calmness, enjoyment, peacefulness, warmth, sanctuary, feelings of connection, feelings of belonging, and general good feelings. Another added,

It doesn't have to be nothing great, nothing rich, that's not what home is. Home is where you're comfortable and where your heart is. And you feel you can stay there for a long period of time... Home has to make you feel comfortable and wanted, to me anyhow.

#### *Privacy and Personal Well-being*

Many women stressed that home is a place of refuge from the outside world, a sanctuary that functions as a foundation allowing for fulfilling potential. As one participant shared,

I've lived in housing for four years now. And I am just starting to feel like I have a home. Home is like a base... you get secure enough in your base or your foundation... the things that can happen are limitless.

Of primary importance is the need for privacy, a bedroom where they can be alone. The participants described their preference for sharing their living space with people of their own choosing, people they want to be with, often children and extended family members. In support of their personal growth and well-being, the women emphasized the need for autonomy and self-determination as necessary to their psychosocial well-being. Autonomy for these women includes the capacity to make their own decisions and choices, to practice individual religious beliefs and traditions, and the ability to take alone time for oneself if and when it is needed. Furthermore, the ability to cook, entertain, and pursue leisure activities were identified by study participants as freedoms that help make a place feel like home.

### *Identity*

For many women, connection to family constituted the primary sense of belonging, and thus fulfilling an important requirement of home. As one woman stated, “[t]hey make me feel like... that you’re not alone in the world... they comfort you and support you and help you out when you need it...” Many participants identified with the traditional nurturing role ascribed to women and concern for family permeated the lives of the women, regardless of whether they were currently living with family or not. The roles that women perform within families were also very important considerations; mother, daughter, grandmother, and partner were essential to the women’s identities. Illustrating this point one woman stated, “I have children and grandchildren and that’s my life; that will always be my life.” Another identified the function of home in creating a sense of belonging and inclusivity. “My home is just me and my family and my kids, and there’s that line between us and the rest of the world, you know? You let them in when you want to.” This need for belonging and family was often expressed by the women as a requirement for shelters. It is essential for families to remain intact, so as not to disrupt the family functioning and their role in the family as they progress towards a more permanent living situation.

### **Designing Home**

Because of the complexity of social, economic, housing, and health concerns associated with homelessness (Community Action Committee, 2002), an interprofessional lens with direct input from service providers, community members affected by homelessness and poverty, and those in a state of homelessness is critical to address, and even to comprehend, the issues. This is because the traditional collective perception of homelessness typically conjures images of a relatively homogenous group “largely composed of older, alcoholic and vaguely crazy men” (Begin, Casavant, Chenier, & Dupuis, 1999, p. 3). However, there is no one profile of homelessness and today, children, youth, individuals with mental illness, recent immigrants and refugees, casual labourers, and the working poor all form the many subgroups of the overall homeless population. Women, with or without children, comprise one such subgroup: The number of women who are homeless is the fastest growing demographic of shelter users (Moore & Skaburskis, 2004). Furthermore, the causes and risk factors for homelessness among women are increasingly varied. Regardless of these differences, homeless shelters are the primary means of service delivery for women and indeed homeless people of all backgrounds.

### **“Home” in Transitional Housing Environments**

Three key ideas provided necessary theoretical context for addressing how women perceive home and how this can influence optimal shelter design. First, homeless shelters (and similar institutions) have been the primary means of service delivery for homeless people. Any improvement in the way that this type of service is offered will have a considerable positive impact on homeless people in general and women consumers in particular. Second, the spatial form and urban context of homeless shelters

and the type and quality of their service models are inextricably linked. A shelter's management, programming, clients, and methods of service delivery are decidedly influenced by the physical space that makes up both their immediate site and city at large. Third, the spatial and contextual reality of shelters has both explicit and implicit consequences. While these facilities make basic needs like shelter, food and support services accessible to homeless populations, they can also inadvertently segregate a proportion of those experiencing homelessness due to perceived issues of safety or stigmatization tied to their physical structures (Bridgman, 2006). With this in mind, it is important to take into account the characteristics of home the study participants identified. This will ensure that the shelter design and the services it provides are relevant to women consumers, and that they are effectively working to assist women in exiting homelessness.

### **Improving Homeless Shelters for Women**

Participants in the home study suggested there is a disparity of service provision between men and women, and they consistently stressed the need for addictions treatment, anger management, and coping skills as well as the availability of general learning opportunities, to enable them to more quickly and successfully exit homelessness. In order to improve the environment of shelters for women and create a situation that enables women to get the support they need to exit homelessness, it is important to take into account the characteristics of home they deem necessary. This will provide dignity and strength to each individual, thus providing a foundation for greater strength and optimism to meet the challenges posed by overcoming homelessness.

Many things are important when considering a shelter geared specifically towards meeting the needs of women. First is the geographical spatiality of homeless shelters for women that will identify the area of the city within which the shelter exists. Shelters are typically built in urban neighbourhoods that already house many individuals of a lower socio-economic status and are located in places that are within walking or transit range of other services. While accessibility is indeed important, as the women indicated, a further result is that interaction with other communities is often significantly reduced (Marcuse, 1988), and the spatial location of homeless shelters reinforces the exclusionary processes that exist for this population (Sibley, 1995).

This leads to the second consideration, which is the physical relationship the shelter has with the surrounding neighbourhood. Isolating homeless people from the larger communities within which they reside is directly connected to the socially held perspective that homeless people are deviant and feared members of society (Kennett, 1994; Pleace, 1998). A positive and supportive relationship to the external environment is important for women's psychosocial well-being and for mitigating the deleterious effects that stereotyping has on homeless people. For example, one woman relayed her experience, "...but this lady, she was, ugh, she was disgusted when [a homeless man] walked by. And she said, "I don't know how the Calgary police let people like that walk around". The relationship between the shelter and the community it resides in is fundamental to providing a place of support and optimism.

Third, a key concern is to develop a model of optimal shelter design not only within the urban environment it resides, but that also focuses on promising practices of

service delivery by addressing the unique needs of women consumers within its walls. Thus, many of the characteristics women deem necessary for home are also applicable to transitional shelters, such as privacy, autonomy, reliability, and cleanliness. Furthermore, traditional service delivery is based on a framework in which clients are ultimately responsible for their re-entry into the population of housed and employed. This framework assumes that employment is fundamental to becoming housed; once an individual is integrated in the labour market there should be little need for further intervention. While some cases may reveal these assumptions to be accurate, in reality traditional approaches deny the complex experience of homelessness, leaving little room for the recognition of clients' experiences. In turn, this limits the effectiveness of service delivery. Furthermore, many homeless people are employed in part- and full-time positions. However, as discussed earlier, the minimum wage in Calgary is four dollars per hour below the poverty line: This is insufficient for an individual to support herself, let alone any children.

### **Physical Requirements of Shelters**

Participants in the study suggested there is a disparity of service provision between men and women, and they consistently stressed the need for addictions treatment, anger management, and coping skills as well as the availability of general learning opportunities, to enable them to more quickly and successfully exit homelessness. They also described the essentiality of "normal living conditions" within transitional shelters, including certain physical requirements to ensure privacy and accessibility to a range of on-site programs and services, and recognition that there is a limit to the numbers of clients that can effectively co-exist and utilize facilities. However, interestingly some of the women stated it is unnecessary for shelters to be really comfortable, as they recognize the temporary nature of the facility.

The physical and non-physical attributes of home identified by the women can inform and inspire shelter design and can provide a framework for the potential capacity and layouts of shelters. For example, many expressed discomfort with having to share sleeping space with a large number of women. There was unanimity among participants to reduce the number of beds per room in shelters, as shared sleeping space prevented them from having any sense of privacy or personal space. As one participant noted, "[y]ou have no privacy. Lots of people don't want to undress themselves, especially if you've been abused. You don't want to undress in front of other people."

Some participants advocated for private rooms, even if they only have basic amenities and are small. One woman proposed that,

...if you have small cubicles, like the nuns had with a bed and a little night table and a lamp or something, that you could dress by, and, and ... I think that would be fine. Cause they're not here for a holiday are they?

Women were in agreement for the need for privacy as described by one study participant.

Private space. It could be the size of a bathroom cubicle, it honestly could. If it had four walls with no one else in there and a door that closes. That

would make all the difference. ...you never feel like you can go to your bed and cry or go to your bed and punch your pillow or even go to your bed with your cell phone and have a private conversation. ... for me ... that would be the big thing, just to make sure everybody has their own little space.

Privacy, personal space, and a sense of dignity in transitional shelters would provide a healthier environment better equipping women to overcome their personal problems.

Other physical requirements of shelters and a variety of on-site facilities for child care and other child amenities, recreational centres, learning centres, activity rooms, laundry rooms, disability facilities, and rooms in which to practice one's spiritual beliefs. In designing their shelter one participant offered the following.

I called mine the circle of hope based on the shape of it. Mine comprises of four different types of buildings. A main building that has got a resource center... offices, a preschool and a daycare. There's a rec[reation] centre with a pool and a gym and weight room. And there's single person housing... And in the middle is a park where there's like a park for kids to play in and the place is secure by everybody being able to watch and there's no roads that they [children] can run out on.

### **Public Awareness and Urban Policy**

Stigma associated with homelessness is very prevalent and directly affects people who are homeless by making them feel disrespected, unequal as humans, and undeserving of basic necessities and normal living. One woman describes the stigma, which many believe adversely affects their ability to find housing, as "...once you are quote 'on the street,' you'll never get up. You're just a vagabond." Another woman offered,

...when people go by, you know, and people don't really understand, you know, why people don't look like they're having a shower or are wearing dirty clothes, that, you know, don't look at them differently. You know, I, I hate that. And I find that very, very rude and ... Don't look at us differently. They're just other people.

While the negative stigmas associated with homelessness may have a detrimental impact on policy development at the community, municipal, provincial, or federal level, it is important to note that in the City of Calgary, for example, concrete steps have recently been taken to address the rapidly growing problem of homelessness in that city. The Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, comprised of a leadership board of key political figures at the municipal level, members of the corporate sector, and community organizations, in partnership with the service agencies struggling to meet the demands of the burgeoning homeless population, laid out a "10-Year Plan" in January 2008 to end homelessness in Calgary by 2018 (Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, 2008). The



focus appears, on paper at least, to respond to many of the concerns the women in this study highlighted. For example, the 10-Year Plan identifies access to affordable housing as a key component to exiting homelessness, while recognizing that “housing alone won’t end homelessness and we will need to address the root causes including poverty, addictions, mental illness and domestic violence” (Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, *The 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, Requirements for Success*, para. 2). The Committee promotes a “housing first” approach, which seeks to provide people with permanent housing, and then focus on treatment for the many challenges people may face including mental illness and addictions through intensive and individualized programs. Furthermore, the Committee intends to break the bureaucratic stranglehold that currently hinders many individuals and families from exiting a state of homelessness, and suggests that “traditional models place requirements on the homeless that limit their ability to establish a more stable, and sustainable lifestyle” (Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, *The 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, Requirements for Success*, para. 4).

### **Discussion**

This study focuses on women’s experience of homelessness, and in particular what they perceive to be necessary for “home.” The knowledge of the physical and affective attributes required to meet women’s needs is critical to inform the design of shelter and provision of services that will meet the women’s needs for stable and safe temporary living environments for women currently homeless or on their way to becoming homeless, and will provide greater understanding and insight as they pursue permanent and meaningful housing. Project leaders continue to engage with study participants and others who are faced with similar challenges to disseminate the knowledge that has been generated by this process. This article is one such product, and the purpose, through the voices of the women involved in the study, is to extrapolate from the process and results of the study how the target group views home so that practitioners, policymakers, academics, and the general public can better address their needs.

Building upon the relationships established in the home study, researchers are in the process of further examination to determine best practices with respect to homeless shelter site development (the geographical spatiality of shelters for women in particular areas of the city within which the shelter exists), the physical relationship the shelter has with the surrounding neighbourhood, and promising delivery practices that address the unique needs of women consumers and lead to the development of a model of optimal shelter design within the urban environment. This future study intends to move beyond typical research programs that highlight the structural and individualized causes of homelessness, subsequently leading to service delivery models that are exclusive and stigmatizing for people experiencing homelessness, and to focus on how the present mode of service delivery within homeless shelters can be improved to reflect both the needs of the community generally and the unique needs of women consumers particularly.

While support for front-line crisis based services is essential in the short term, and the home study and its products will go a long way to improving those services, some

argue that band aid solutions such as homeless shelters actually contribute to the growth of the homeless population rather than managing the issue (Laird, 2007). While this is not the venue for this debate, indeed, the ultimate goal should be to ensure that home, as described by the women in this study, is accessible to all individuals.

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