

A photograph of a man in a green jacket and black cap looking at brooms in a store. The brooms are hanging on a rack, and there are bags of broom heads nearby. The man is holding one of the broom handles. The background shows a window with a view of a city street.

Rooms & Brooms

An ethnographic dive into what life is like for tenants living in TCH Rooming Houses, Toronto East End, Canada.

Research by:



Supported by:



Population Health
Solutions Lab

context

Admittance into TCH rooming houses is on a first come first serve basis. As such, many residents have little in common with their housemates, they hold different interests, and live opposing lifestyles. Many feel constrained in an environment not of their choosing, and by the types of relationships the rooming house context engenders. We wondered what informs residents' sense of belonging, agency and aspirations for the future?

A rooming house is defined by it's congregated living - people not related to each other occupying a building subdivided into individual rooms with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. In 2016, 455 licensed rooming houses were operating in Toronto as well as hundreds of unlicensed rooming houses.

Our research explored the lived experience of tenants living in, or recently moved from, TCH operated rooming houses in Toronto's east end. Tennancy duration ranged from a couple of days to 23 years. Acute and chronic health conditions, long term unemployment, and rising cost of living are major reasons why people live in subsidized housing. Recent TCH efforts to relocate tenants to perform building maintenance has led to a split reaction. Some of the tenants we spent time with are embracing this opportunity for change. Folks like Mr. John and

**Annually,
TCH spends
\$225,000
for superintendents
& cleaners to service
its rooming houses.**

Ronnie acknowledge that a change in living context might lead to other changes - interaction with new and different kinds of people, opportunity for work, space to bring family over. They are hopeful and curious about living a different kind of life. For others, like Dennis and Marco, change of location is scary. They have carefully curated a world for themselves, one which they can control, and fear what change might bring. They choose to continue a life that is tolerable, rather than risk everything even- if change could lead to something more nourishing.

This research isn't a comprehensive or generalizable account. Our aim is to spark novel conversations between people and organizations. How might we reframe challenges and generate 'what could be?' In this leaflet, we share our process & learnings.

research



Sat morning coffee + sock consultancy stand at the "Purples."



Sat night getting to know people in their own context



Tues afternoon witnessing a move into a new apartment.



Thurs afternoon joining people in their favourite locations.

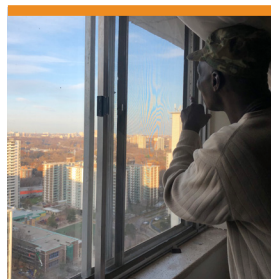


Fri night On patrol with Rooming House security.

In 9 days, we met 50 people and engaged 16 of them in longer conversations with tools. 14 males, 2 females (1 couple).



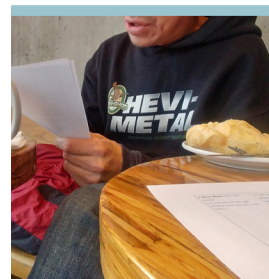
Dennis (65) Self consciousness about his appearance Dennis rarely leaves his house. But he's not lonely - he's built a network of people who call and visit often. They're his entertainemnt. He contemplates a different life, but not for long - he doesn't want to take any risks. That's what got him here in the first place.



Mr. John (57) A business owner, husband, father. That seems like a life-time ago. For 12 years Mr. John has been stuck in a rooming house surrounded by people he doesn't trust nor relate to. He wants to learn, work, meet interesting people not see violence and drugs everyday. Relocation to the penthouse is positive, but Mr. John is deeply lonely and unsure how to fix it.



Stephen (61) The Rooming House is better than being on the streets, but still, Stephen's not sure about sharing facilities. "I can't take care of myself" is his running mantra and he's afraid what others will say about him. PSW's, housing workers, social workers fill his fridge, buy him clothes and give him showers. He's ambivalent, and pan handles to purchase food he doesn't have to heat up.

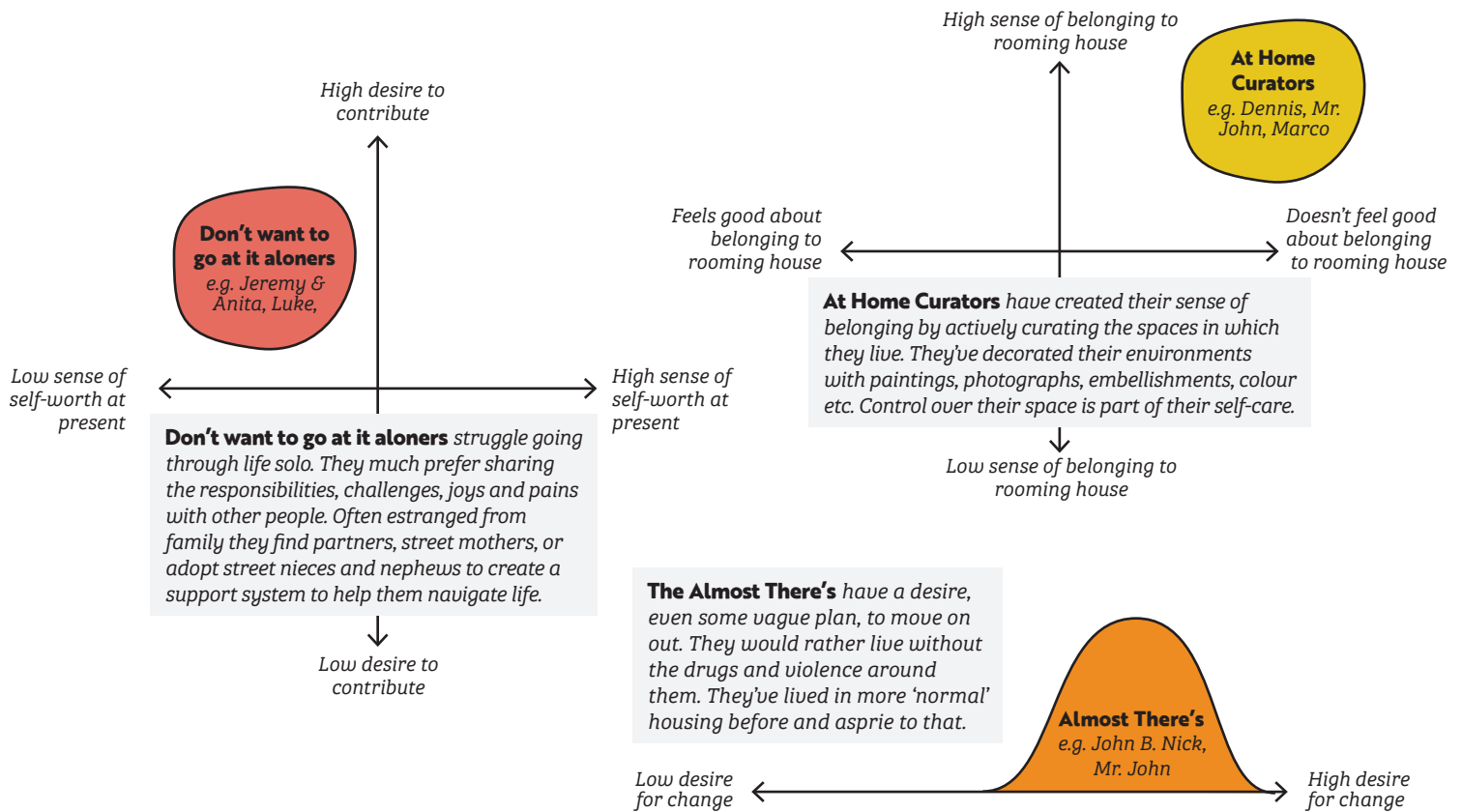


Ronnie (44) likes his neighbourhood, he's social and passes his time with the other guys on the block having a drink. He's accepted relocation with his girlfriend - an apartment away from here. He's unsure whether this is a "fresh start", but hasn't given the guys his new address. He knows that finding work is a good idea - he'll drink less and stick to a schedule.



Jason & Anita (43,46) Life is on the up and up. They met a year ago and have been each other's biggest support and champion since. Relocation to a new apartment, away from the Rooming Houses and their "friends" is going to futher help them kick addictions. They've got a plan. New people, more family, getting off welfare and starting a furniture repair business.

We segment people in different ways to find compelling groupings to design with & for. What do Dennis and Mr. John have in common? They both seek relationships, but ones of their choosing.



The limits of case management models, especially the focus on the individual not the collective, was one of many themes in this research. How might the collectivity by legitimized, prioritized and serviced in addition to the indivudal?

Tennants believe rules meant for all social housing properties aren't being enforced. Case management models, pervasive across social services, tend to take the individual as the unit of behaviour change, leaving small groups to self-organize or

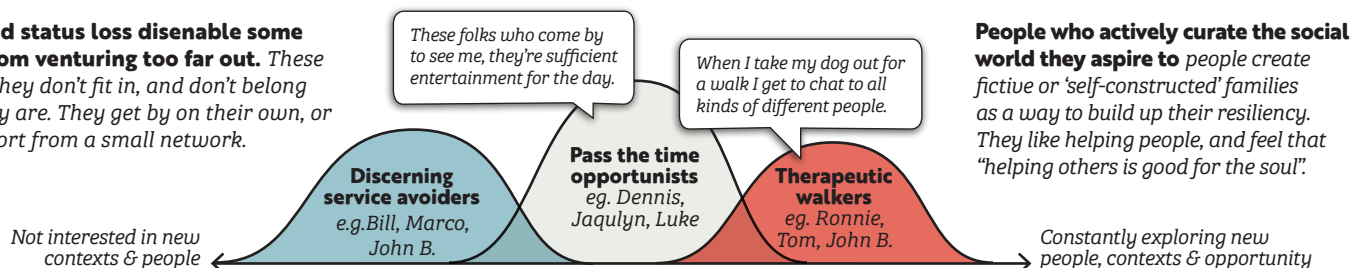
flounder. The rooming house is defined through its common area, yet there is no commons. How might we leverage the collectivity that makes rooming hosues different from other forms of living?

Many rooming house tennants spend hours walking each day - a form of therapeutic practice



People walk for different therapeutic reasons- physical relief (to keep the muscles from seizing up), mental relief (to quiet the mind), exploration (through engagement with their neighbourhood they construct their sense of belonging. Through engagement with other neighbourhoods they open themselves for new opportunities).

Shame and status loss disenable some people from venturing too far out. These folks feel they don't fit in, and don't belong where they are. They get by on their own, or with support from a small network.



We generated 11 ideas across 6 opportunity areas, all to spark dialogue & debate. Here are three:

Intentional Environments

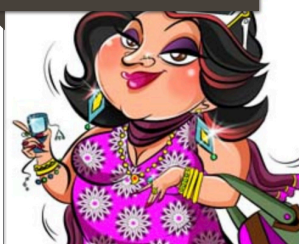
for: At Home Curators, the Love/Hate neighbours, Don't want to go at it aloners

What if supports intervened at the level of the neighbourhood or household, not just the individual? To develop social and physical environments that are conducive to the values of a group of roommates or a row of houses.

This might look like grouping roommates by shared values, outcomes, hobbies, or stage of change, matching them to locations with amenities that support those priorities, or assisting them to develop their own amenities.

featured idea

House Aunties

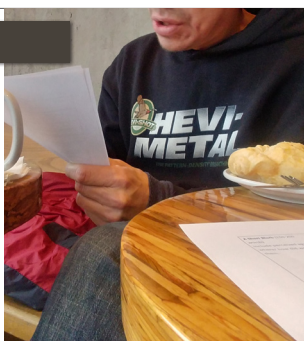


What if there were homes with Aunties - someone who visits frequently, makes meals with people, listens well, mediates tensions, all with the tone of a beloved family member?

featured idea

Come on in

What if we could bring community into the rooming house - in the form of guest chefs to cook with you, volunteer book club leaders from local bookstores and libraries, dog owners who could use a hand with pet care and walking etc.



Bridge Builders

for: Get me outta here's, Purposeful Workers, Almost There's

Rooming houses bring together people who "all have the same problem". This can make it hard for individuals to imagine life beyond that problem, or to find opportunities to build a life of their choosing.

"Bridging relationships" describes the relationship people engage in that are different from their own networks and resource base. In essence, "bridging relationships" help bridge people to new opportunities. What if we build more bridges in and out of rooming houses?

Supported Agency

for: Lemonade Makers, DIY helpers, The Service Bingers

Surviving on the streets and heavy service use require a different mindset and skill base than thriving in housing. In social housing there are lots of elements over which one has little control, and the opportunities to build and develop one's agency aren't always clear.

What if there were a temporary form of supportive housing that focused entirely on building the context for people to develop agency through decision-making and relationships?

featured idea

Day in review



What if folks in a rooming house could participate in a daily debrief, perhaps with a near peer. They use narrative therapy techniques to help new tenants understand their decision making processes.

other ideas



visit www.inwithforward.com to see all segmentations, opportunity areas, emerging insights and ideas.

This Quick Dive was in partnership with Population Health Solutions Lab & Dixon Hall. Quick Dives are 2 week periods of ethnographic research, synthesis, reflection and playback.

Our research team draws out insights and opportunities, all with the intent of gaining momentum for longer-term change.