

# Building Together: Culturally appropriate housing evaluation for sustainable communities



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## Executive Summary

Poor housing and related health, education and social outcomes are the result of perpetual interventions of the colonial state. Cyclical marginalization of First Nations peoples through housing is reflective of an inadequate and contextually inappropriate system –evaluations, policies, designs and built form- exported from the Southern Canadian centres of power to First Nations within the Mid-Canada Corridor. The language of *modernization* and *development*, critical in the place-making disciplines within the colonial project, have been used as justification for the “series of ad-hoc, short-term, crisis oriented initiatives” (Carter, 1993, p.6) that are the legacy of Canada’s First Nations housing policy.

This report focuses on housing evaluation frameworks, recognizing that policies and programs are being directed by the specific metrics being used to evaluate housing. While Canadian policy focuses on structural issues relating to the provision of adequate, suitable and affordable shelter, Indigenous understandings of the role of housing are understood to be more holistic (Canada, 2015a; RCAP, 1996). These differences have made housing an ongoing site of struggle in the colonial project. From mould to morality, successive Canadian governments have used *measures* of housing to identify *crises* they deemed First Nations unsuitable to solve (Perry, 2003; McCartney, 2016). Redefining evaluation metrics therefore creates an opportunity for an assertion of self-determination within Mid-Canada Corridor First Nations, shifting the housing system towards their own values, goals and aspirations.

This report, a synthesis of existing housing evaluation literature documents:

1. The existing system for evaluating First Nations housing in the Mid-Canada Corridor- its historical roots and associated outcomes;
2. Alternative housing evaluation techniques used globally, their objectives, methodologies, tools and results;
3. Indigenous understandings of housing and their related congruence with housing evaluation literature; and
4. Creates a framework allowing housing evaluation tools to be matched with specific evaluation objectives- specifically focused toward First Nations on-reserve housing within the Mid-Canada Corridor.

### Colonial Roots of On-Reserve Housing in the Mid-Canada Corridor

The Mid-Canada Corridor- within which the majority of Indigenous peoples live- forms the geographic base of this report. It is an east-west band stretching across the country, beginning above Canada’s most densely settled southern area and ending at the northern limit of the boreal forest and remains a uniquely Indigenous space within Canada. The Corridor presents a modern iteration of the concept of *frontier*; visualized as a vast, undeveloped wilderness which invites the settler to colonize and develop- a state sanctioned form of violence (Blomley, 2003; Razack, 2015).

As a means of establishing sovereignty, the settler state sought to “subdue and control indigenous populations by herding and corralling them into reservations” and undertook projects of *civilization* and *assimilation* (Hibbard et al., 2008; Perry, 2003). The Canadian federal government’s unique jurisdiction in on-reserve housing derives from the Crown installing itself as “protector of Indian people, particularly in matters involving land” (Canada, 1978, p. 5). It was, “only by isolating Indians on reserves, could the resident school teacher, agent and missionary achieve success in preparing Indians for integration” (Canada, 1978, p. 16). Forced from living on traditional family lands, First Nations peoples would now be required to live permanently in bounded communities in order to access schooling and social assistance programs (Carter, 1993; Ross, 2006). The houses built on-reserve during the post-war period were created as a quick and cheap response to this radical change in the Mid-Canada Corridor.

### History of Housing Evaluation in Canada

Canadian housing policy and related measures have maintained a consistent focus on market-orientation. Despite this economic focus, federal housing programs have always maintained a commitment to social causes. While terms

have changed, policies have maintained a pursuit of ubiquitously *decent* or *standard* housing for all Canadians. The difficulty has come in the conceptualization, and measurement, of *decent* or *standard* housing (Cullingworth, 1980; Carter, 1993). The modern definition of minimally acceptable Canadian housing is measured through the multivariable concept of 'core housing need' (CMHC, 1991). This standard, reflecting modern Western norms of housing, continues to be applied nationally, and continues to demonstrate that on-reserve households are three times more likely to fall below its standard (CMHC, 2016b). Despite a recognition that additional subjective, or culturally relevant indicators would give a better indication of the quality of life impacts of housing development, these remain "elusive" (Clatworthy, 2009; Cullingworth, 1980, p. 35; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

Canada has entered a period of truth and reconciliation with the aim of establishing nation-to-nation relations with Indigenous peoples. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Principles for Reconciliation and Calls to Action (2016), Canada's adoption of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the federal government's promise of a "new relationship", set the stage for a national conversation about what this new relationship will look like. Despite this *new period* Canada has entered into, it is important to note that focusing on reconciliation centres the state and a settler future in this process. UNDRIP however, emphasizes Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination and self-governance (UN General Assembly, 2007). Reconciliation acknowledges and "rescues settler normalcy" whereas decolonization is about Indigenous sovereignty over land, ideas and epistemologies and the rearticulation of power (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Desai et al., 2012).

### **Implications: The Role of Housing Evaluation in Decolonization**

Housing evaluations, shape our understanding of need and deficiency in lived environments, directly impacting policy. Framing the *crisis* of on-reserve housing, and subsequently the related policy goals, in relation to a nationally mandated Canadian standard erases the agency of First Nations peoples in the housing process. Deconstruction of evaluation methodology reveals that the focus on technocratic objective understandings of housing, underpinning Western evaluations, presumed non controversial, are in fact the product of a number of biases and assumptions. Shifting the power in the establishment of these methodologies will therefore result in an altered housing system, impacting built form and lived experience.

### **Methodology**

This project conducted a systematic review of academic and grey literature of global housing evaluations to understand the breadth of approaches currently utilized. Types of evaluations included, but were not limited to: housing quality indicators, post-occupancy evaluations, residential satisfaction surveys, impact evaluation studies, housing policy reviews and other institutional checklists, surveys, interviews, audits and questionnaires. Evaluations were coded for: definition of housing, scale and scope of application of findings, who collects data, type of data collection, scale of evaluation, unit of evaluation, and population being evaluated. This allowed for specific metrics within each evaluation to be categorized within a methodological framework forming a framework from which future evaluations can be assembled. Case studies reviewed and the academic literature present examples of alternative methodological constructions centering a diversity of worldviews.

Developing out of radical and anti-colonial planning theories is a literature of Indigenous Planning- committed to community-developed solutions rather than state-based interventions- which is used as a framework for this project (Hibbard & Lane, 2004). Theorists have committed to a decolonization of place-making disciplines through a focus on processes rather than outcomes, involving a, "complex renegotiation of values, knowledge, meaning, agency and power between planning and Indigenous peoples" (Porter, 2010, p. 153). Power, and agency for self-determination are inherently held by Indigenous peoples, rather than resulting from state recognition or external accreditation (Coulthard, 2007; Dorries, 2012). Validity in community planning therefore results from its basis in Indigenous knowledge and local control meaning, requiring that "a community plan cannot be developed from the outside looking in" (Mannell et al., 2013).

## Findings: Deconstructing Housing Evaluation

A review of housing theory, and institutionally developed evaluations demonstrate the diversity of approaches used in the measurement of housing experiences. Numerous epistemologies, worldviews and theoretical frameworks underpin methodological choices and metric design, shaping our understanding of lived experience. Six primary methodological questions are posed to deconstruct housing evaluation and reveal decision making processes (What is housing? Why evaluate housing? Who evaluates housing? How is housing evaluated? Which scale is housing evaluated at? Which unit of analysis is used?). The six broad questions demonstrate the importance of each stage of methodological construction. Through case studies, and review of academic literature are used to create a decision-making framework through which a community-focused evaluation strategy can be formed.

A number of key considerations derived from deconstruction of housing methodologies include:

1. Understandings of housing are impacted by cultural values and worldviews;
2. To be useful, evaluation findings and results must be utilized and applied;
3. Evaluation can be applied to two timeframes: feedback and feedforward;
4. Housing evaluation can be conducted by theorists, practitioners and other stakeholders with a variety of different backgrounds;
5. There needs to be congruence between the methodology and indicators selected with the stakeholder responsible for evaluation;
6. The evaluator, or evaluating agency, bring assumptions that will shape the tool selected;
7. There are three broad scales of housing: individual unit, neighbourhood, and region. Occupants inhabit all scales simultaneously; and
8. The relationship between occupant and living environment is multi-dimensional analyses of evaluations can focus on physical, psychological and social elements of housing.

## Creating and Testing Locally Developed Evaluation Strategies

Breaking the feedback loop of standardized objective housing measures, and the reproduction of housing systems in the Mid-Canada Corridor requires a shifting of priorities and power in the housing system, a rejection of assumptions currently made. Equity is created through centering the study population's goals, values and aspirations in the six core concepts. Focusing on methodological decisions, recognizes housing as a site of conflict in the colonial struggle emphasizing erasure of Indigenous understandings. The result should not be one ubiquitous evaluation tool or set of metrics, but instead a new focus on the process and measurement development, selection, collection which is locally controlled.

The creation of a unique housing evaluation framework for Mid-Canada Corridor First Nations must:

1. Recognize the implications of colonialism in the existing housing system and housing evaluation;
2. Shift control in the methodological process towards community self-determination;
3. Allow communities to answer the six primary methodological questions;
4. Centre community goals, values and aspirations in the evaluation process;
5. Situate evaluation within a broader well-being conversation, recognizing the complex interactions between home, occupant and environment;
6. Develop local capacity in methodological development, data collection and analysis to reduce evaluator bias and reliance on translation; and
7. Support evaluation with sufficient resources to apply results in creating community-generated housing solutions.

Implementing the framework proposed in this project within Mid-Canada Corridor First Nation requires significant shifts of power within the existing housing system. In shifting the focus of housing evaluation from overt assimilation, or the benevolence of bringing all homes to a *Canadian standard*, to community defined objectives of occupant-environment satisfaction we may unlock designs of housing and meanings of place currently unforeseen.