



A Home for All Northerners:
Towards a Northern Housing
Ecosystem Approach – Report
Summary

At Home in the North

At Home in the North (AHIN) is a SSHRC-CMHC research partnership that creates, shares and mobilizes knowledge on homelessness and housing insecurity across the Canadian North. AHIN is directed by Dr. Julia Christensen (Queens University) and is led by team including Dr. Shelagh McCartney (Metropolitan University), Dr. Mylène Riva (McGill University), Dr. Rebecca Schiff (University of Lethbridge) and an Executive Committee comprised of numerous northern-based agencies, organizations, and governments.

By working in partnership with communities across the provincial and territorial Norths to advance a northern housing continuum, this Partnership project informs the development and implementation of context-based, culturally safe programs, services and models for housing and homelessness, developed by and centered in northern communities. Our pan-northern, multi-scalar and interdisciplinary approach is critical to effectively bridging the gaps between research outcomes and impact on northern housing by facilitating the translation and implementation of research into policy and practice.

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Key Points

- The CMHC housing continuum fails to reflect the landscape of housing in northern Canada yet is used to inform northern housing policy. Thus, an alternative, northern-specific framework is needed for understanding and reflecting the unique and diverse cultures, contexts, needs and housing priorities of the North.
- A Northern Housing Ecosystem offers this alternative framework, capturing housing as home and the broader network of elements and systems implicated in the sustainability of housing in northern Canada.

Introduction

The governance of housing in northern Canada – through policies, budgets, and standardized regulations – repeatedly fails to recognize the North’s unique, place-based housing needs and social, cultural and economic contexts that have been shaped by colonial state relationships. This failure shapes a housing landscape that is characterized by insecurity, unaffordability, inconsistency, and inadequacy.

This decontextualized approach to northern housing governance is driven in large part by the one-size-fits-all Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) housing continuum model that informs federal housing policy through its aspirations for housing options and an end goal of progression through these options towards market home ownership. Yet the CMHC housing continuum fails to reflect the real housing options, landscapes, goals, needs, and realities in northern Canada, or consider the broader housing system and connections that enable the delivery of and access to housing. Some regions and communities in the North have responded to this lack of representation by developing their own frameworks for housing, seeking to be more contextual in reflecting the housing available and needed in their places.

Northern and Indigenous communities and housing providers repeatedly push back against the mismanagement of housing in the North, calling for direct and stable funding, place-based and community-led programs, and northern and Indigenous-specific standards that recognize the unique needs, resources, possibilities, and values in northern Canada. At the center of this necessary shift in northern housing governance is a recognition of housing as home, and conceptualizations of home that extend the role of housing beyond just shelter to encompass all aspects of community wellness. To this end, partners of At Home in the North (AHIN) representing Indigenous communities and self-governments, northern community-based advocacy groups and service providers, as well as municipal, provincial and territorial governments, have repeatedly articulated the foundational need for a northern-specific framework for housing that serves as an alternative to the CMHC housing continuum and reflects the unique and diverse cultures, contexts, needs and priorities of the North.

From May 1st – 3rd a group of AHIN members gathered on Chief Drygeese territory at the Tree of Peace Friendship Centre in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (NWT). The group included Indigenous housing providers and advocates, northern policymakers and government personnel, service providers, funders, architects, and scholars all with experiences in and knowledge of northern housing. The purpose of the gathering was discussion, learning, and

collaboration, oriented around a key objective - to workshop an alternative continuum for northern housing.

Emerging from three days of participant discussions was a clear directive that a one-size-fits-all approach to northern housing does not work. As our conversations took shape, and were reflected back at us through the thoughtful graphic facilitation provided by Melaw Nakehk'o, a northern alternative to the CMHC housing continuum began to take shape: the linear notion of a continuum, separate from all the cultural, ideological, environmental, logistical, political and economic elements of housing, was instead replaced with a core orientation around home for all housing types, nested within a northern housing ecosystem to capture the various relationships that intersect around the development, governance and maintenance of housing. A northern housing ecosystem approach to understanding both the current northern housing landscape as well as culturally- and contextually-informed housing needs and priorities not only captures northern-specific housing options and end goals for housing, but also brings into view the elements and systems that are integral to the delivery of housing in the North as well as the relationships between them that need to be considered in order to realize the sustainability of northern housing. This allows for a much greater appreciation for the ways in which policy gaps, stop-gap funding measures, environmental crises (i.e. climate change-induced threats to infrastructure) and the siloed nature of housing governance erodes the sustainability of the northern housing ecosystem. At the same time, a northern housing ecosystem approach underscores the need for Indigenous self-determination, community-led housing strategies, infrastructural development, the promotion of a northern housing industry, and intergovernmental and interdepartmental collaboration around housing-as-home.

This report outlines the foundations for a northern housing ecosystem, illustrates the value of thinking about housing within an ecosystem, and considers a template for this ecosystem that northern communities and regions can adapt and use for themselves. Ultimately, a northern housing ecosystem will highlight the nodes that are integral to the sustainability of housing in the North and the sustainability of housing as home – nodes such as climate, food, and economic development that are currently not being considered in concert with housing policy.

Emergence of a Northern Housing Ecosystem

The foundations for a northern housing ecosystem emerged over the course of the knowledge gathering as discussions between participants identified northern-informed end goals of housing, located housing in the North in constellations of community relationships, and illuminated the conceptualisation of housing as home that has been the key to success in some northern housing programs and initiatives.

At the same time, the value of understanding northern housing within an ecosystem was demonstrated during discussions around the barriers to sustainable northern housing and home. An ecosystem framework provides the visuals and language needed to shed light on the different scales and significance of challenges to northern housing, including the direct challenges within the delivery process, the barriers to homemaking relationships, and the systemic stressors that exacerbate the ecosystem's vulnerabilities and affect its ability to function sustainably. In this way an ecosystem approach forces us to consider these threats to the system of northern housing and their management in a holistic and interrelated way rather than in isolation.

Template for a Northern Housing Ecosystem

Having established the value of engaging with northern housing as an ecosystem rather than a continuum, we present a template for a northern housing ecosystem that situates northern housing and home amongst a constellation of relations. What we are not proposing is a one-size-fits-all model of the northern housing ecosystem that flattens the nuanced needs, cultures, governance landscapes, geographies, and understandings of home in different places across the North. Indeed, it is because no one version of the ecosystem can be specific and accurate to every community or region that this template uses core elements that are transferable, and intends to prompt rather than prescribe.

At the heart of this template for a northern housing ecosystem is the graphic produced by Melaw Nakehk'o during the gathering (Figure 6), which captures the ways participants were making sense of northern housing, articulating challenges, and projecting futures of home and self-determination. As such, this template is a broad framework for understanding housing in northern Canada - that centers home and northern-informed end goals of housing, nested in the community relations that shape these elements, and the interconnected and multi-scalar nodes of the systems and governance that support these relationships and are thus integral to the sustainability of housing and home in the North. In this way this template is a tool that communities can take up and apply, through reflection on a set of questions, to their place-specific sense of home, housing landscape, supply chain, and governance network.

Core: Home and self-determination

At the core of the ecosystem in this graphic is home - as a site for peace, safety, rest, wellbeing, and family - and a sense of autonomy, independence and self-determination as the end goal of Indigenous housing. A northern housing ecosystem challenges the proposal of the CMHC housing continuum that the one form of housing success is ownership over private property, instead centering home, ownership, agency and other core values that can be achieved in all housing forms. Promoting values and feelings as the end goal of the housing ecosystem rather than a tangible output makes it a more flexible, contextualized and realistic framework. As such, this part of the template asks what provides a sense of home in this place? What is the end-goal that housing is meant to provide? What does self-determination of home mean to people in this place?



Figure 5. A northern housing ecosystem (by Melaw Nakehk'o, graphic facilitator during At Home in the North knowledge gathering May 1st-3rd).

Inner ring: Constellation of homemaking relationships

Surrounding this core is the constellation of community relationships that shape homemaking and wellbeing in the North, in which home and self-determination are embedded. These relations locate housing within a web of community wellbeing connected to education, culture, economic development, health, children and families, land, and governance. The discussions had by participants at the gathering indicated how these relationships are currently supporting a sense of home in northern Canada and how they are eroding it. Engaging with the notion of critical linking strategies, utilized by the Yunešit'in Housing Ecosystem Strategy¹, could be an effective way to address housing alongside other community goals and explicitly support the relationships that produce a sense of home. Subsequently this template asks, how can these relationships be nurtured in order to promote rather than hinder the safety, wellbeing, and independence of home? How can efforts to meet housing and home needs be combined or united with the aspirations and work required for improved community wellbeing?

¹ Ecotrust Canada. (2020). Yunešit'in Housing Ecosystem Overview and Strategy Development. [online]. Available at: [Yunesit-in-Housing-Ecosystem-Report_November2020_Final_WEB.pdf \(ecotrust.ca\)](https://www.ecotrust.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Yunesit-in-Housing-Ecosystem-Report_November2020_Final_WEB.pdf).

Outer ring: Governing, building, and delivering home

The outer ring that surrounds both the ecosystem core/end goal of home and self-determination, and the inner ring of relations within which home is nested, addresses the elements, processes, and considerations that are needed for building home in the North. Crucially, these pieces are not isolated nodes but together form an interconnected network supporting northern housing and home, presenting the flow of information, resources, and materials, between different areas of governments, different areas of expertise, and different places. This part of the template asks for consideration of the practices and components of housing governance and how they play out in this place - what are the different types of housing available and needed? What is needed to build housing? Who is involved? What systems and structures support housing delivery? Finally, this outer ring also considers what is needed for sustainability of the overall ecosystem that supports the relationships of community wellbeing and the core values of ownership and home - including land, long-term and flexible funding and consideration of and reaction to the impacts of climate change.

Next Steps

This template for a Northern Housing Ecosystem is both material and ideological in that it illustrates current landscapes whilst also harboring aspirations for what housing success looks like and what is needed for a healthy, functioning housing ecosystem. While it shares this intention with the housing continuum, the ecosystem template projects these aspirations in a more contextualized and realistic way, with home and housing surrounded by the relationships, elements, and systems that are integral to the delivery and sustainability of northern housing. Having said this, we recognize that this template is grounded in the specific contributions of participants and context of this gathering in Yellowknife and Denendeh, a setting that grounded many of the conversations had and necessarily informs our articulation of the northern housing ecosystem in this report. It is our intention then that this report not be taken as an end product, but rather as a living, moveable document, illustrating a mapping process that could be undertaken in other places as an adaptable template that is responsive to unique needs across different northern regions.

Ultimately then, this document is a starting point. While the housing continuum and associated structures of housing funding and governance demand siloes, this template and the very notion of considering northern housing as an ecosystem has made it possible for us to think and talk about variables that significantly impact home in the North such as climate change, energy security, and food security in the context of housing. We hope this report will spark conversation with the people that represent the various areas of this ecosystem, and dialogue around how this approach could be implemented and supported through policy, funding, and governance. Further workshopping of this idea across different regions would enable the development of housing ecosystem models for use by people involved in northern housing that speak to specific contexts, constraints, and opportunities for addressing housing need in the North.