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Vancouver is set to be the first city in Canada to use stacked refurbished shipping containers for affordable housing.

While the idea has been met with mixed reaction, city council has agreed after a lengthy study that it makes sense. The 12-unit project to be located in the city's eastside was to be approved Tuesday.

"It's the first of its kind in Canada but definitely not the first in the world," Janice Abbott, executive director of the Atira Women's Resource Society, told the *Star*. "We work with a lot of women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness."

The project stems from two demonstration units B.C. Hydro displayed on its front lawn during the 2010 Winter Olympics showing how a recycled container could be turned into livable space.

Atira decided the containers — which are 40-foot long and 8-foot wide — seemed a perfect option for a small plot of land it owns in the east end in a city considered to be one of Canada's most expensive. The three-storey project, complete with balconies, received a start-up grant of \$92,000 from the city, plus \$90,000 from B.C. Hydro.

Plans call for six of the 12 units to be rented at the welfare rental subsidy rate of \$375 per month, while the others will be classified as affordable units but not available to those on social assistance.

The cost of turning a container into 320 sq. ft. of livable space, complete with washroom, laundry facilities, doors, windows, insulation, wallboard and flooring is about \$85,000, compared to about \$270,000 in a traditional highrise.

"The interiors will be no different than any traditionally built studio apartment," Abbott said. "They will be side by side and we will cut them in half. Basically one unit will be facing the front and one unit will be facing the back."

At first blush the idea of housing people in recycled shipping containers didn't grab city councillors or many Vancouver residents.

"We wanted make sure that these container houses are livable ... and it couldn't look like stacked trailers," said City Councillor Kerry Jang, a professor of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia.

"Originally a lot of people were against them because it felt it was just like warehousing human beings," he said. "Hopefully we will be leading the way, certainly on the west coast, at looking at this."

Because of the glut of containers in the U.S., several cities in the U.S., including Portland, Oregon, are turning to them as a sturdy, relatively cheap form of housing.



This architect's rendering shows what recycled shipping containers will look like on a Vancouver street once they have been refurbished. The goal is to provide affordable housing.

COURTESY ATIRA WOMEN'S RESOURCE SOCIETY