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'Inspiring' Shipping Container Housing Set to Multiply

Five months after launching its prototype, Atria aims for a seven-storey recycled tower
By [David P. Ball](#), Today, Tyee Solutions Society



Five months after doors opened, tenants from a variety of backgrounds fill Atria Women's Resource Society's 12 shipping container dwellings at 502 Alexander Street. Photo: David P. Ball.

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[Editor's note: Four years ago, [three stories](#) by Tyee Solutions Society reporter Monte

Paulson put the spotlight on an offbeat idea: repurposing surplus shipping containers: as shells for affordable housing. Those reports helped catalyze a change in municipal attitudes towards both shelter and steel boxes. And as Tyee Solutions Society reporter David P. Ball found out, Vancouver's first container-built community is spurring ambitions for more.]

Two women chop vegetables at a large central table in a tight common kitchen, chatting as they gently drop celery and red peppers into a central bowl, destined for snacks during upcoming community programs. A stream of younger women move in and out of the space from the other rooms at Imouto Housing for Young Women, talking happily with each other.

"What a beautiful place it is!" Gayle, one of the snack-preparers tells me. "I love the opportunity for community with the other women, because we have so much in common."

Mostly, however, Gayle (who only provided her first name) loves having her own home. She says she had been "traveling around a lot," staying with friends or nannying her granddaughter. In late November, she moved into a corrugated metal shipping container on the adjacent city-owned property.

Operated by Atira Women's Resource Society, the 12 shipping containers stacked three-storey high at 502 Alexander Street in Vancouver are finally full of tenants five months after opening their doors on Sept. 1. At 280 to 290 square feet, each suite is a self-contained home with wood laminate flooring, a separate entrance, and its own bathroom and -- best of all, three tenants told me -- a European-style combined washer-dryer machine. In each unit, a full container wall has been replaced by a giant window, many with perfect views of the harbour or the complex's central courtyard garden.

"I love that it's my own space," Gayle says, laughing heartily. "Just walking in through your door [your neighbours] invite you over for tea."

Across the Imouto kitchen table, Ahjahla Nelson chimes in. She used to live in co-operative housing, but gave up her apartment for a friend and moved here in October.

"When I saw the container home, I'd been thinking of a trailer or treehouse or something," she recalls. "It was like a dream come true. Being able to enter your place from the outside has a real home-feeling to it. It just felt like it was built for me."

Media attention may have dropped away since Atira did a flurry of interviews about the then-empty containers last August. But as they've filled with tenants -- six units for older women who serve as "intergenerational mentors" to six younger women -- the windows have become cluttered with knick-knacks and personal decorations, and the common kitchen at neighbouring Imouto is getting busier, even though each container has its own kitchen space.

Community, it seems, is forming.

"It's really in its infancy," says Atira CEO Janice Abbott over coffee in a nearby Downtown Eastside café. "It's been interesting to see this little community of women come together around this new, unique kind of construction. They feel really proud to live there. It'll be interesting in a year from now to see how that community develops, but it's inspiring to watch it."

Abbott always had faith the exquisitely-staged, architecturally-repurposed containers would prove "how liveable small spaces can be," she says.

"Even though I was a believer in the beginning, the containers look a hundred times better than I ever imagined they could," she says. "They're really beautiful."

In addition to the 12 container suites, the \$3.3-million construction paid for 19 other non-market rental units as well as a heritage restoration of the Imouto building. The project was built on a city-owned lot in partnership with Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation and BC Hydro.

With the suites quickly filled, Atira intends to submit a rezoning application by the end of January for a property it already owns in Strathcona. But the organization plans to go a step further: a seven-storey-high shipping container housing complex, with its requisite elevator at a new design.

The site at the corner of Hawks and Hastings streets has the same square-footage as the one where the pilot project sits, but it's a different shape and the new structure aims for twice the height of the first, all requiring a new architectural plan. Unlike the bachelor-suite prototypes at Imouto, the new family-oriented project will transform shipping containers into a mix of one and two-bedroom units.

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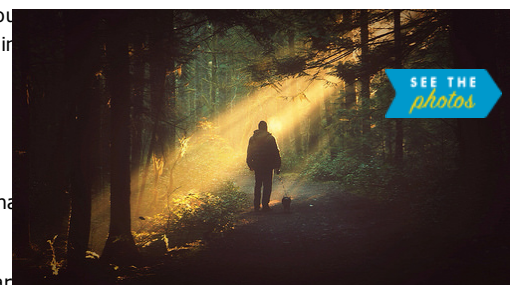
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One challenge will be securing the necessary land rezoning from light-industrial to residential, for which Atira will submit its application by "the end of the month," Abbott says. Another will be to try to scale down the \$82,500 per-unit costs. Abbott says the pilot version spared no expense with some of its "premium elements" -- the fixtures, countertops and so on -- because she wanted the units "to show well" as the first container housing in Canada.

"There were a bunch of cost premiums associated with building the first," she said. "The square-foot costs are really high, they really are, but what costs money in any unit are the kitchen cabinets, the plumbing, the fixtures, the bathrooms... it's going to take a few projects to figure out."

Happily contained

Climbing the stairs beside the current three-storey container complex at Imouto, the blue and orange corrugated metal is icy to the touch. A bitter wind sweeps in from the port to the north.

A smiling woman with curly white hair and round blue glasses opens her door, and I'm greeted by an enveloping warmth and a slight scent of roses. Susan Edwards beckons me to sit at her small kitchen table as the CBC hourly news jingle chimes in the background, where a mattress is pushed neatly against the wall-length window.

The radio is always on, she tells me, harkening back to her work years ago as co-host of CBC Radio's morning show in Saint John, New Brunswick. She misses the excitement of broadcasting, but not the anxiety.

In
the
four



years since she moved to Vancouver, where her daughter lives, Edwards has moved five times for a variety of reasons all-too-common among the city's renters.

"It's been just incredibly difficult to find a place to live," she said. "I went through the experience of renoviction, I saw it happen to a lot of neighbours too... then I saw a TV item about [Atira's container project], and thought, 'Oh my gosh, look at that!'"

Edwards was the first tenant to move into the pilot project in September. Her unit looks out over Burrard Inlet and the North Shore mountains. She has mingled photos of her family with goalie Robert Luongo on the wall beside her entrance. A quiet, rhythmic churning sound emanates from the corner of the home.

"Listen to that magic washing machine!" she says excitedly. "You put your clothes in and they come out dry. How could anything be more efficient?! The space is amazing."

Although Edwards doesn't consider herself a "mentor" to the younger women in the enclave, she attends communal gatherings and has formed a bond with some of the other tenants.

During the holidays, she painted a portrait of the block and had Christmas cards printed with the image. One card is addressed to the young women in the Imouto community, and sits in the main building across the courtyard.

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From steel box to home: former CBC Radio host Susan Edwards was the first to move into the completed shipping container project. Now she's seen as a mentor to younger women in the complex. Photo: David P. Ball.

"You have much to teach all of us," Edwards wrote them, "and beautiful spirits that I sense in your presence. May the year ahead be one of blossoms and sunshine, so your music will be heard."

Joining us in the unit is the manager of Atira's intergeneration mentorship program, Jennifer Kleinsteuber, who argues that Edwards is plays a vital role in the community. Many of the younger residents have struggled with addiction, mental health and poverty, but are seeking a new life.

"One woman told me, 'I get to have a safe place to be so I can make some positive changes in my life,' Kleinsteuber says. "She came here, and it was like a fresh start in life. She's just flourishing, she's blooming."

As
an



artist, Edwards is fascinated by architecture and design and believes this kind of housing -- using recycled containers as the structure to lower costs -- could be replicated "everywhere."

"It's amazing to do housing of this kind," she said. "I wish I could promote that angle of things. The program is developing here, it will take time. It's a really interesting work-in-progress."

'A sort of protection'

With its ever-expanding collection of properties in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Atira is not without its detractors. So it's no surprise some people scoffed at the optics of the project.

"There was a lot of hesitation about housing women in shipping crates," Kleinsteuber admits. "But I didn't have the same kind of emotional reaction as a lot of people. I read about how they are doing student residences in the Netherlands, and in the U.S. people are making studios out of shipping containers. In the end, there was amazement at how beautiful these looked on the outside *and* on the inside."

Other tenants like Gayle developed a keen interest in the raised-bed gardens in the courtyard between the containers, which were the source of herbs and seasonings for the community's turkey suppers over the holidays.

"I have ideas in my head about things to do," she says. "The mentoring really interests me."

But even more so the gardening, she adds with a broad smile. "I'm really a foodie; I'm into food security and food sovereignty. [There are] so many things we could do right at this location."

Describing herself as a poet who likes "to look deeper into things," Ahjahla Nelson pauses from chopping vegetables across the table to philosophize about container living.

"What does it mean to be contained?" she muses. "Will it contain who you are, your emotions? I see [this project] as a sort of protection."

When she was accepted into the new Imouto container suites, her "heart was really happy" to

Atira's intergeneration mentorship program coordinator Jennifer Kleinsteuber inside a soon-to-be-occupied suite. Misgivings about housing women in 'crates' evaporated amid 'amazement at how beautiful these looked on the outside and on the inside,' she says. Photo: David P. Ball.

finally live "someplace I could call my home, that surrounded me."

"I've been in 16 different foster homes; you learn to get along with each other and help each other out. I felt like I really fit in here," she adds. "It's a little contained community." 🐦

Read more: [Housing](#)

David P. Ball reports on affordable housing for The Tyee Solutions Society.

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