

DTES container homes provide a new start for needy



By Jeremy Nuttall, 24 hours Vancouver
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BC NDP MLA Jenny Kwan tours a shipping container home in East Van Thursday morning. The 12 new homes are to be rented out to women in need. (JEREMY NUTTALL/ 24 HOURS)

It's the first housing project of its kind in Canada — and as the sun bounced off yellow flowers, basil and rosemary planted in the courtyard of the new shipping container apartment complex in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, it was easy to forget why the project is needed.

On Thursday morning, politicians, media and well-dressed community organizers toured the three-story facility on Alexander St., many complimenting the sleek design of the units meant to provide affordable housing for women in need.

But there will undoubtedly be a lot of pain, nightmares and tears worked through in the studio units as women battle through poverty and personal demons while trying to keep their lives on a positive track.

Janice Abbott, CEO of Atira Women's Resource Society, the organization responsible for building the project, said a chief component will be the sense of community created by residents who move in Sept. 1.

"It's profoundly important. It's our relationships together that move us forward," she said. "Having healthy, positive role models, being able to count on each other knowing someone cares about you and is looking out for you at the end of the day, is what I think really makes a difference in women's lives."

The women who will live in the 12 units, up to 290 sq. feet in size, have not been selected yet but applications will be reviewed shortly, Abbott said.

B.C. NDP MLA Jenny Kwan who attended the opening, however, was cautious about complimenting the project, calling it “intriguing.” She pointed out the province still lacks a housing strategy.

“This particular site, had there been a provincial housing program, this would have actually had 57 units on the site. Instead we’ve got 12 units,” said the representative for Vancouver-Mt. Pleasant. “That said it’s better having 12 units than an empty site, that’s the base we’ve got to work from.”

Kwan said she’s inquiring about the cost, size and durability of such housing units, which have been popular in Europe for years.

Abbott said each of the 12 units cost \$82,500. It was part of a larger \$3.3-million project that covered the land, building and restoration of the 18-unit Imouto Housing for Young Women building next door to the container housing.

Much of the funding for the project came from donors across the board, but there will also be mortgage of about \$600,000.

Abbott said the society is looking at a second project that will include more than 40 similar units.

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