

Islander



**Thinking outside the box:
A rare tour of a tiny town**

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Cover



COVER PHOTO:

Resident Jay Leggatt tidies up his 100-square-foot micro-home, which has a bed, small dresser, wardrobe and small refrigerator — but no stove. There are communal washroom facilities, as well as a place where he can heat up food.

ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

Victoria's Tiny Town

How a collection of shipping containers became a community



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For a community that allows no visitors, the Tiny Homes Village looks welcoming on the outside, with colourful murals adorning the sides of shipping containers arranged in a square, which also serve as the perimeter.

But the entrance to the compound adjacent to Royal Athletic Park is more businesslike, with a controlled door bereft of ornamentation and a security guard keeping an eye on who is coming in.

The Times Colonist was invited for a rare tour as the shipping-container village for those without homes prepares to celebrate its one-year anniversary in May.

Visitors enter a courtyard where a pair of picnic tables is arranged under a shelter, interspersed with raised planters and deck chairs. This is the de-facto gathering place for the village's 30 residents. Except for three women, the community is made up entirely of men, ranging in age from 22 to 70.

On a sunny spring day, a resident could be seen sitting in the greenhouse that serves as the community's inhalation station — it's behind glass so if someone suffers from an opioid overdose, those walking by can see and quickly administer Naloxone or call for help.

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Tiny Town nears one-year anniversary



Grant McKenzie of Our Place and site supervisor Beck Carlow explain how the community's residents look after each other, helping newcomers adapt to their new life.

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Tiny Town

'I have become a minimalist these days,



The Tiny Homes Village's courtyard, with the greenhouse that serves as the community's inhalation station in the background. Residents are not allowed to smoke or ingest inhalants in their suites — they are encouraged to do so in the inhalation station so if someone suffers from an opioid overdose, those walking by can see the person in distress and quickly administer Naloxone or call for help.

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Others chatted outside their units. Jay Leggatt, who we found out later is 60, ambled over, curious about why we were there. Typically, residents are not allowed to invite visitors to the compound, so our visit was a novelty.

Leggatt, like all the other residents of the community, was homeless before he secured a berth here. He says he's been on and off the streets for the last 15 years, after first becoming homeless when he had a falling out with his partner. "We had an argument. She told me to get out — so I did."

But Leggatt doesn't want to discuss his troubled past, which includes drug problems. He would rather talk about how his life has turned around since he became a resident at the Tiny Homes Village.

He recounts how, since he's been here, he has been able to "get over the urge" to hoard whatever he could find or scrounge on the street.

"I have become a minimalist these

days, because I have no place to put stuff," he said.

He invites us into his home, one half of a 40-foot shipping container. It's about 100 square feet and equipped with a bed, nightstand/dresser, wardrobe and small refrigerator. The units are insulated, with their own electric heater, but no cooking capacity.

Two meals a day are delivered, breakfast and dinner, and residents have access to a common area to reheat food. Showers and washrooms are communal, with four shower/toilet rooms and one separate toilet room.

But as warm and welcoming as the Tiny Homes Village is, the reality is that it is a pilot project — an experiment that's set to expire sometime in November, although that date could be extended.

"It was always meant as a temporary solution," says Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps. "It was meant as a winter respite. While it is not a permanent home, it's still better than a tent in the park."

The community sprang up as a quick

solution to house some of Victoria's burgeoning homeless population, many of them living in tents in parks or in doorways of businesses throughout the city, in part as a result of restrictions on capacity at temporary shelters stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness partnered with Aryze Developments on the project. Together, they launched a crowdfunding campaign that raised \$550,000 from the public and businesses in three months.

The village was assembled on the parking lot of the adjacent Royal Athletic Park, which is owned by the City of Victoria.

Grant McKenzie, director of communications for Our Place Society, which operates the facility, says the Tiny Homes Village is intended to be transitional housing, a place where people who have lived on the streets get stabilized and ready to move to permanent housing. "It's the first step to break the cycle of homelessness that many of them face."

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because I have no place to put stuff'

Tiny Town



Above left:
Some units in the community of micro homes beside Royal Athletic Park feature small, manicured gardens that add a touch of colour to the residences.

Above right:
The Tiny Homes Village's courtyard, which is adjacent to the communal washroom facilities, features picnic tables and benches as well as raised planter boxes to bring a bit of nature to the site, which sits atop an asphalt parking lot beside Royal Athletic Park.

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So far, it seems to have worked. In fact, it's been so successful, it has attracted attention from other social agencies in Canada and as far away as Germany, hoping to emulate the program.

"It has been a great success," says Sylvia Ceacero, executive director for the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness. "Residents have found a sense of belonging and a sense of stability at the Tiny Homes Village."

The original plan was for the village to house people temporarily — perhaps for a few months — before B.C. Housing could place them in more permanent facilities. "We had the best of intentions in that regard," says McKenzie.

The reality, however, is that few new permanent vacancies have opened up elsewhere. Of the original group of residents who moved in, only three have left. Of those, one died from an accidental overdose and one had mental-health problems that required more complex care than the operators could provide. Only one found alternate living arrangements.

A fast-tracked new facility on Albina Street that's set to open in August will create more than 50 spaces, but the region needs 10 — even 20 — more, with different forms of housing to address the need, says McKenzie.

Ceacero says the group is in talks with the City of Victoria and neighbours in hopes of continuing the Tiny Homes Village until next March while more permanent facilities are built.

Village residents are clients of B.C. Housing and 'triaged for need'

All of the Tiny Homes Village residents are clients of B.C. Housing, which develops, manages and administers a range of subsidized housing options in the province.

Matthew Borghese, acting manager of media relations at B.C. Housing, which contracts Our Place Society to operate the site, said clients are "triaged for need."

"There are a lot of different factors in the determination," he said. "We like to keep people in their community as well. Typically the residents for something like Tiny Homes Village would have been successful at living at a shelter. They may even have been at the shelter for months and are now ready to move up the ladder."

In rare cases, people can also jump the queue and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, exceptions were made, he said.

Residents are visited by various social agencies to assess their progress and evaluate them for assistance. When they're deemed ready — and when space becomes available — they progress to becoming candidates for permanent housing.

Beck Carlow, the Tiny Homes Village's site supervisor, keeps her finger on the pulse of the community. She knows all the residents by their first names and is protective of her charges.

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She knows who is new and who needs what services, and she often engages with residents one-on-one or with outreach staff. “For some of these folk, this has been the longest time they have had housing,” said Carlow. “It offers the best of both worlds for them and some thrive here.”

While she looks after everybody, residents also look out for each other, she said. “They know to keep an eye out for the new residents and are usually the first to notice a resident struggling.”

While some in the neighbourhood were initially wary of the Tiny Homes Village, Sarah Murray, executive director of the North Park Neighbourhood Association, says residents have largely integrated into the neighbourhood over the past 11 months. “As far as transitional housing, this model has been successful and it would be great to see it repeated.”

The North Park neighbourhood went out of its way to make the new residents feel at home, with “Welcome to the Neighbourhood” signs visible in windows across the street from the facility.

Most still feel the same way almost a year later.

“I feel very safe in the neighbourhood,” said Hannah Rabinovitch, who lives on Caledonia Avenue with her partner and her two children, an eight-month-old and a three-year-old. “It’s been a happy co-existence.”

Not only has there been no increase in garbage, Rabinovitch says she’s impressed with the speed at which empties are picked up in the neighbourhood.

She credits the North Park Neighbourhood Association and neighbouring residents for keeping an open mind when the idea was proposed. A pop-up free craft supply kiosk nearby, an initiative of the association, gave neighbours the opportunity to engage with the village’s residents, Rabinovitch said.

Victoria police, whose headquarters are located in the next block, says it’s seen few calls for service in the area.



Beck Carlow, site supervisor of Tiny Town, serves as the go-to person for residents. With only 30 residents to keep track of, Carlow knows them all by their first names and how their lives led them to this community.

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“VicPD has seen very few issues related to crime and disorder in that area,” said Insp. Kerrilee Jones, officer in charge of the Community Services Division. “We work closely with the team at Our Place, and the success of the Tiny Town community is a great example of the positive work they are doing in our community.”

Jones said the village is well-designed, contained within the Royal Athletic Park parking lot, and provides residents with on-site wrap-around services that are critical to maintaining a healthy and stable community.

Those supports are key — while shipping containers have been repurposed to serve as housing before, McKenzie heard of one project where the homeless were given access to the units with little to no follow-up.

“It fell apart because there was

no support for the residents,” said McKenzie. “You need a support team to address their challenges, keep out the drug dealers and others who prey on the vulnerable.”

According to B.C. Housing, a person experiencing homelessness with addictions and/or mental illness uses an average of \$55,000 in health care or corrections services every year. By comparison, someone in supportive housing uses an average of \$37,000.

Part of that reduction in cost can be attributed to supportive-housing residents being 64 per cent less likely to require ambulance services, since they have better access to medical care and supports. Should they require hospitalization, their stay is typically half that of an emergency-shelter client.

Next step in a resident’s journey could lie in a supportive-housing project

Back in Leggatt’s micro-home, he proudly shows off a set of decorative metal figurines — an elk and some Douglas fir trees — that he found one day. The collection enjoys centre stage in his modest home, and is one of the

few things he has chosen to keep after purging his belongings.

“I would stash some of my stuff in the bush and, sure enough, somebody will come along and rip it off. Here, my stuff is safe.”

Carlow, the community’s site supervisor who is accompanying us on the tour, smiles, but says nothing. It’s something she has hoped to hear, and a good sign when it comes time to determine if Leggatt would be a suitable candidate to transition to permanent housing.

The next step in Leggatt’s journey could lie in the supportive-housing project on Albina Street, set to open in late summer. The project, which will be operated by Our Place Society, features 52 self-contained studio apartments with support services on-site, life-skills training, employment assistance, referral to community services and support groups.

The project is one of six initiated by B.C. Housing that will add a total of about 280 supportive housing units for people experiencing homelessness in the capital region.

After 15 years, Leggatt’s time on the streets may finally be coming to an end. parrais@timescolonist.com