

Rising from the ruins

NORTH POINT DOUGLAS BLOCK FINDS NEW LIFE AS AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

By: Ben Waldman

Posted: 3:00 AM CDT Monday, Apr. 12, 2021

Last Modified: 6:25 AM CDT Monday, Apr. 12, 2021



Shawenim Abinoojii executive director Jason Whitford and Brandy Kowal-Funk, program manager of Shawenim's Memengoo program, outside Noble Court, which will be turned into affordable housing for youth and young adults. (Mikaela MacKenzie / Winnipeg Free Press)

It doesn't look like much, the dilapidated apartment building at the end of Alfred Avenue east of Main Street. Many of its windows are boarded up, shattered into sharp shards, or surrounded by a charred halo. Across most of its century-old red brick walls is a stream of graffiti befitting a building that's been somewhat neglected and forgotten since a fire tore through it five years ago.

But neglected and forgotten it won't be anymore. Soon, people will live there again.

Soon, this building that doesn't look like much will once again have a purpose.



The four-storey building has been purchased by local organization Shawenim Abinoojii Inc., and after a major renovation, it will house 18 apartments for Indigenous youth and young adults in and from the child welfare system, and youth from southeast First Nations, addressing a need for affordable housing and support in the city.

"Right now, the inside is completely gutted. When we walked in, it was dark and scary. Windows all boarded up," said Brandy Kowal-Funk, the program manager of Shawenim's Memengoo program. "It'll be amazing to see it become something beautiful."

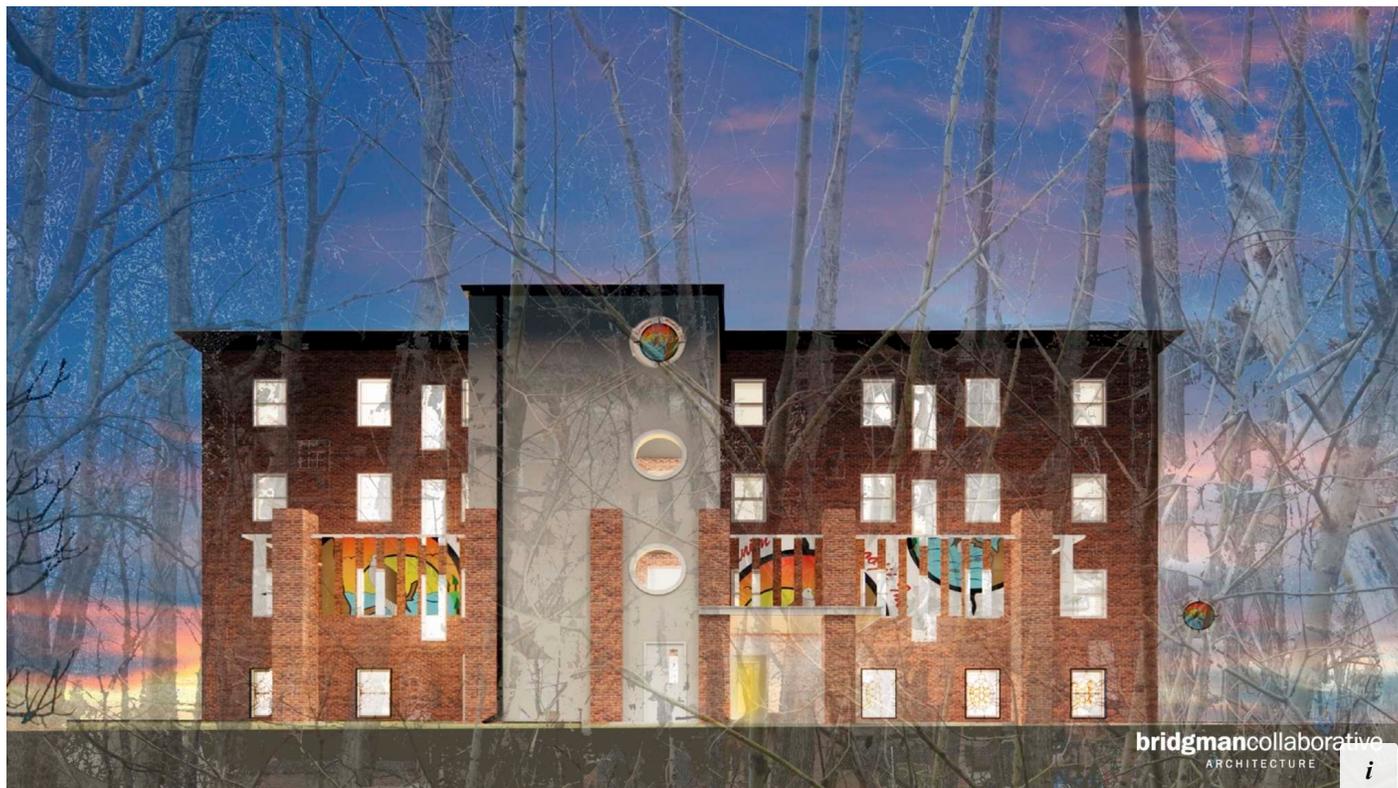
For a few years, Kowal-Funk said the organization, whose name means "Nurture the Child" in Anishinaabe, was looking into options for a large-scale residential project, targeting vacant buildings as possible sites. The need was pressing: youth in care, especially Indigenous youth, face significant barriers to housing after they age out, and are at high risk of experiencing homelessness, she said.

"There's been a drastic increase of young people in the homeless population who've been involved with child welfare," says Jason Whitford, Shawenim Abinoojii's executive director, also a chairperson with End Homelessness Winnipeg.

At any given point, hundreds of buildings in Winnipeg are classified as vacant, many becoming targets for arson or significant property damage. Meanwhile, rental costs in the city rise and the waiting list for social housing units grows; the City of Winnipeg estimates at least 300 social housing and rent-geared-to-income units will be needed each year for the next decade to meet demand.

"I drive by multiple vacant buildings (every week)," Kowal-Funk said. "There's a housing need, and we have these vacant buildings. Can't we do something?"

Renovating a vacant apartment building is expensive, and for a while, Kowal-Funk and Whitford say it didn't seem attainable. But the federal government's Rapid Housing Initiative allocated \$12.5 million to the City of Winnipeg to administer for affordable



A rendering shows the outside design planned for the Noble Court building. (Bridgman Collaborative)

and social housing, and Shawenim was granted \$2.83 million earlier this year.

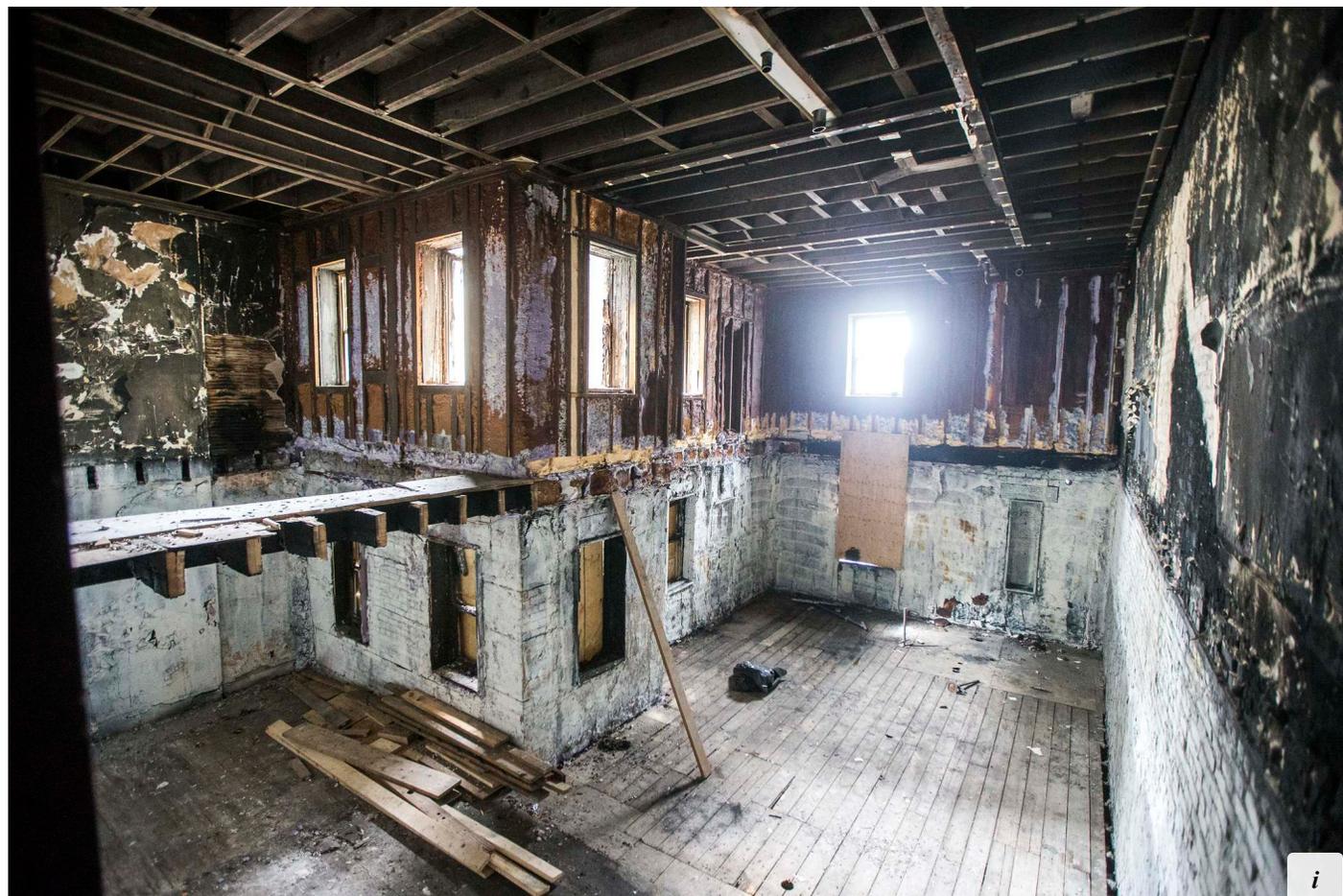
About half of the grant was used to purchase the Alfred Avenue building, constructed in 1914 and known as the Noble Court apartments, along with an adjacent lot. The remainder, Whitford said, will go toward renovation costs. Those costs are estimated to be in the area of \$5 million, so the organization is pursuing other grants through the federal Reaching Home program, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's seed funding, and End Homelessness Winnipeg, along with their own fundraising initiatives.

The operative word of the housing initiative is 'rapid': the federal government required the project to get underway fast, with occupancy possible by December 2021. There was plenty to do. Fortunately, the organization had a slight head start.

Over the last two years, prior to the sale to Shawenim, local architect Wins Bridgman worked with the building's former owner to bring the building up to code for permitting purposes. When the building was sold to Shawenim Abinoojii, the organization approached Bridgman to see if there was any interest in restoring the

property, with the permits already having been prepared.

"We were tremendously excited," he said. "The stars essentially lined up to allow this project to happen. And how often do they do that?"



The apartment building at the end of Alfred Avenue had been somewhat neglected and forgotten since a fire tore through it five years ago. (Mikaela MacKenzie / Winnipeg Free Press)

Bridgman said the city recognized the year-old permit and allowed the project to move forward unhindered, helping with variances and reducing red tape.

Though the 20,400 square-foot building had significant fire damage, Bridgman said the masonry walls between units were solid, as were the exterior walls, floor, and roof. The upper three floors will feature the residential units, 12 with one bedroom and six with two, aimed at siblings, relatives and young parents. The lower level will be repurposed as a hub with on-site case workers and support staff, a circular room for cultural activities, an employment program, and space for life-skills programs like rental information, goal-setting and basic needs, open to the organization's non-

resident participants. The building will also have overnight security.

"We're trying to come at this from a holistic perspective," said Kowal-Funk, who experienced homelessness and addiction in her youth. "Hopefully in the long run, this will really help prevent our young people from exiting care and experiencing homelessness."

Finding housing for youth has been one of the most "frustrating" elements of Kowal-Funk's work since starting work with Shawenim and starting Memengoo, which means butterfly in Anishinaabe. Constant barriers such as discrimination and a lack of co-signers or reference letters from previous landlords often make it difficult, she says.

Many youth are also on EIA, which for youth without disabilities pays \$771 per month, a sum expected to cover everything from groceries, to child care, to rent. Average one-bedroom units in Winnipeg cost \$957 per month, with bachelor suites costing an average of \$733 per month, according to the CMHC's 2020 rental market report for the city.

Once the building on Alfred is complete, rents will be geared to income, meaning they will be adjusted to suit individual tenants' financial security and need. When the building opened in 1914, rents ranged from \$30 to \$40 per month, equivalent to a range of \$694 to \$926 per month in 2021 dollars.

Construction crews have been on site since the beginning of April. Friday morning, they were removing rotten wood from the river-facing balconies.

"We've put everything into fast forward," said Whitford, who before working in the homeless sector worked in home renovations with his brothers and father, who renovated houses and rented them at affordable prices "before flipping was a TV show."

The pace, Kowal-Funk says, has been hard to believe and slightly overwhelming. Another thing that's been hard to believe is the community response, which has been more "yes, in my backyard" than "no."

When Kowal-Funk shared the news that her organization purchased the building in a few Point Douglas area Facebook groups, she didn't know what to expect.

"I was mentally prepared to have to advocate for this project and for the youth. There can be a lot of stigma," she said. "But I have received nothing but positive feedback. It's been so amazing, and it makes me so happy." The local residents' associations and neighbours were highly supportive, Whitford said.

Whitford said there's a lot of work to do in a short period of time, but both he and Kowal-Funk are confident that by December, youth will be able to move into a beautifully retrofitted building that a short time ago was crumbling away.

"We are very determined to get this done," Kowal-Funk said. "Our young people are struggling, and we have an opportunity to do something about it."

ben.waldman@freepress.mb.ca

If you have a story idea to diversify our journalism, please contact us at:
readerbridge@freepress.mb.ca

Ben Waldman

Reporter

Ben Waldman covers a little bit of everything for the Free Press.

 [Read full biography](#)

The Winnipeg Free Press invites you to share your opinion on this story in a letter to the editor. A selection of letters to the editor are **published daily**.

To submit a letter:

- fill out the form [on this page](#), or
- email letters@freepress.mb.ca, or
- mail *Letters to the Editor*, 1355 Mountain Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R2X 3B6.

Letters must include the writer's full name, address, and a daytime phone number. Letters are edited for length and clarity.