



Architects and University of Minnesota students teamed up last winter to tackle a series of affordable housing-oriented projects, part of the annual Search for Shelter initiative that provides pro bono design to nonprofits and cash-strapped developers. Submitted photo: AIA Minnesota

Pro bono housing design event plans big splash in 30th year

By: Karlee Weinmann January 2, 2016 7:00 am 0

A Twin Cities program that brings together local architects and students for pro bono design work on affordable housing projects is among the last of its kind in the nation, but organizers are looking to reinvigorate interest and maximize its impact.

Search for Shelter started in 1987 alongside about two dozen similar programs nationwide. Hundreds of architects and University of Minnesota architecture students have participated over the years, tackling new assignments each year aimed at bolstering low-income housing options in Minnesota.

For a weekend each winter, participants convene to answer nonprofits' calls for help on projects ranging from redone entryways to facilities that cover entire city blocks. Designs developed during the process don't always translate to project plans, but they give nonprofits a springboard for talks with funders and other groups.

"Our goal is really to provide design services that may not otherwise be available," said Rosemary Dolata, who started Concentric Architecture LLC, a firm that focuses on affordable housing. Dolata got involved in Search for Shelter as a student in the early 1990s and now helps organize the yearly effort.

Historically, the event — spearheaded by trade group AIA Minnesota — has drawn enough volunteers to accommodate between six and eight projects. Split into teams blending students and practitioners, the designers meet with nonprofits then map out early-stage design solutions in just a few days.

"People often think that success means something that gets drawn in a weekend gets built and that isn't really the way the journey works," Dolata said. "A great building is going to take more than a design in a weekend by volunteers. It's really about helping nonprofits and projects move their vision forward."

Around 170 nonprofits received invitations to participate this year. In order to qualify, they need to have a project in mind but no architect hired — and little money to spend on design help. Applications are due Jan. 29 and organizers will select projects before the event Feb. 19-21.

Over the years, the affordable housing industry has shifted away from emergency shelter projects meant to provide a stopgap for homeless people and broadened to include a range of supportive and subsidized housing types. Search for Shelter mirrors that change with a focus on longer-term solutions.

The local program has helped a range of nonprofit developers and other organizations find ways to maximize space

in overnight shelters, build out accommodations for homeless youth and better design low-income housing complexes.

That process deviates from standard design. There's more to it, Alan Arthur, who heads Minneapolis-based nonprofit developer Aeon, said at a discussion on the Search for Shelter program last month. Aeon is a repeat participant in the program.

"It's not about creating an iconic place," Arthur said. "It's, how do we create a place that works in the community?"

Neighbors' skepticism consistently complicates affordable housing projects, housing advocates say. Without community support, it's more difficult to jump-start policy talks to beef up funding.

Since Search for Shelter launched, the affordable housing funding landscape has also changed. More resources are available, and funders have better-settled expectations for project proposals — and that's where the program can provide a significant leg up in a highly competitive search for cash.

"There are probably more formal processes today, whereas in the '80s it was a lot more making it up as you go in terms of how you fund affordable housing," Dolata said. "Today we have those channels, though they're insufficient."

Minnesota's spin on Search for Shelter has evolved over the past three decades to match market trends, while other flagship programs faltered. Organizers hope to make the 2016 Twin Cities program a model for other cities, but they expect some challenges in galvanizing interest elsewhere.

When Search for Shelter started, there was a stronger belief that policymakers and nonprofits could erase homelessness. But chronic — and steep — demand for housing across the U.S. has dulled the sense of urgency that fired up program participants early on.

"In one way, the message has gotten muted," Dolata said.

Still, in Minnesota, repeat participants reinforce the program's potential impact.

Along with Aeon, Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army and affordable housing developer Aeon have each sought design help multiple times through the initiative's 30-year history. For them, Search for Shelter is a pathway to results despite resources trimmed back by federal and state policymakers.

As part of a focused effort this year to revive Search for Shelter in other cities, organizers plan to develop a how-to guide that outlines costs, potential partners and recruitment tactics, said Claire Lonsbury, an architect at Kodet Architectural Group who helps plan Search for Shelter.

"We're putting a lot more energy into that," she said. "In the past, we wanted to make those connections but we haven't had the organization or even the manpower behind it to do that."

Going forward, Search for Shelter organizers in Minnesota also envision a wider-reaching program on their home turf.

A newer offshoot in Colorado brought in bankers to develop pro forma plans alongside design. At an affordable housing design presentation in Minneapolis earlier this year, some pushed for a cross-disciplinary approach that ropes in policy graduate students.

"Especially with this being the thirtieth year and wanting to have a bigger impact, we can do some additional things," Dolata said.

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