

Best Practice 04 Urban Planning



Montreal's "Grow Home": A Pioneering Model For Affordable, Flexible And Sustainable Housing

"Bridging the affordable housing gap in North America and Europe"

Addressing housing affordability in Montreal

During the late 1980s, Montreal experienced rapid suburban expansion, rising land prices, and a shortage of affordable housing options for young families and first-time buyers. Average house prices had nearly doubled over the previous decade, while urban policies at the time encouraged low-density development that consumed large amounts of land and infrastructure.

The Grow Home emerged as an innovative option that challenged conventional planning norms and was designed to reintroduce compact, cost-effective housing within the city fabric. It offered families with low or moderate incomes the opportunity to enter the property ladder at a low cost, while gradually building equity and adapting the home to their needs over time.

Unlike conventional suburban homes, the Grow Home stood out because of its flexible design, modular pricing, and incremental approach to construction. These features resonate strongly today, as cities across Canada, the United States, and Europe struggle with rising housing shortages, construction costs, and land-use constraints.

Affordable housing in the transatlantic context

The Grow Home's philosophy aligns closely with current international efforts to rethink housing affordability, sustainability, and density.

- **European Union:** The [Affordable Housing Initiative \(AHI\)](#) launched under the [EU's Renovation Wave](#), and the [New European Bauhaus \(NEB\)](#), support innovative, modular and community-driven housing—a philosophy at the heart of the Grow Home model. The [Renovation Wave Strategy](#) seeks to double renovation rates by 2030, focusing on energy-efficient and affordable housing stock, while the [Affordable Housing Dialogue](#) aims to create a comprehensive [EU Affordable Housing Plan](#) by 2026.

- **United States:** Incremental housing strategies consider initiatives such as [Habitat for Humanity's](#) "sweat equity" model (Habitat for Humanity), where families contribute labour to reduce construction costs, and with efforts to promote Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) in cities like Portland or Los Angeles to expand affordable stock ([Urban Institute](#)).
- **Canada:** Current strategies under the [National Housing Strategy](#) echo the Grow Home approach by combining low-cost ownership models, community partnerships, and sustainable design.

The Grow Home initiative

Launched in the late 1980s by [McGill University's School of Architecture in Montreal](#), this pioneering housing programme emerged as a response to rising urban sprawl and the shortage of affordable housing for low- to moderate-income households. Over time, it has proven to be a cheap, adaptable, and eco-friendly replicable housing solution. With more than 6,000 homes built in Montreal and thousands more across North America, the model has become a landmark in making affordable housing a reality.

The design, originally conceived as a prototype, consisted of a narrow-fronted row house measuring approximately 14 feet (4.3 metres) in width and 36 feet (11 metres) in depth. This approach made it possible to construct homes at half the typical cost of suburban houses. A key innovation was delivering the property partially finished—most often the upper floor or basement—so residents could expand and personalize the space according to their budget and evolving needs.

The model also pushed the boundaries of Montreal's building code, which at the time required wider house frontages. After securing an exception for narrower plots (less than 18 feet, 5.48 metres), developers were able to increase the number of homes per site, significantly reducing land consumption and infrastructure costs. This translated into an impressive 60% reduction in street and utility expenses compared to standard housing developments.

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Affordability through design and co-creation

According to McGill University, the first prototype, completed in June 1990, cost around €30,600 (approximately US \$36,000 at the time). In contrast, the average price of a suburban house in Montreal was €140,000. The reduced cost was largely achieved by limiting the overall floor area and delivering part of the dwelling—often the upper level—unfinished, leaving residents free to complete it at their own pace.

Another measure to keep expenses low was the introduction of a “base model plus options” approach. Purchasers could select from a catalogue of 33 optional features, ranging from exterior balconies and decorative elements to kitchen upgrades, each priced between €170 and €460. This system enabled gradual investment in upgrades and finishing works, with many households carrying out improvements themselves or relying on support from relatives and neighbours.

Environmental and social benefits

The compact, high-density layout of the Grow Home created an accessible pathway to homeownership for lower-income households while minimizing land consumption. The shared-wall construction not only allowed more units to be built in urban areas but also improved energy efficiency. Heating costs, for example, fell dramatically—from about €1,100 to just €400 per year—making the homes more affordable to operate as well as to purchase. The smaller urban footprint also reduced pressure on infrastructure and contributed to more sustainable patterns of land use compared to detached suburban housing.

Beyond environmental advantages, the initiative had important social outcomes. Approximately 70% of purchasers were young couples, many starting families, and the incremental nature of the design encouraged a sense of participation. Homeowners often undertook finishing works themselves or with the support of relatives and neighbours, which fostered stronger community ties. This hands-on approach promoted both individual pride of ownership and collective identity within new neighbourhoods.

In addition, the concentration of Grow Homes within specific districts created opportunities for denser, mixed-income communities, reducing the isolation often associated with suburban developments. This combination of affordability, ecological efficiency, and participatory construction helped position the model as not only a housing solution but also a tool for social integration and resilience.

Replicability and scaling up the model across the Atlantic

Since the first prototype in 1980, approximately 6,000 Grow Homes have been built in Montreal, with an additional 4,000 units developed elsewhere in Canada and across North America. The concept also inspired variations such as the [Green Grow Home](#) and the Next Home, designed to address diverse demographic and environmental needs.

The [Affordable Homes Program \(AHP\)](#), created in 1989 at McGill's School of Architecture, supported the model through research, design studios, and knowledge transfer. Active until 2009, this postgraduate initiative trained a generation of architects in affordable housing design and embedded the Grow Home philosophy into wider debates on sustainable urban development.

Comparable initiatives have since emerged across the globe highlighting how Grow Home is not an isolated experiment but part of a broader global movement towards affordable, flexible, and sustainable housing models.

- **In the United States**, the [Katrina Cottages](#) were introduced after Hurricane Katrina as small, expandable, and affordable alternatives to mobile homes, reflecting similar principles of incremental growth and resilience. In parallel, cities such as Portland and Los Angeles have encouraged the use of [Accessory Dwelling Units \(ADUs\)](#), compact and flexible extensions to existing properties that expand affordable housing options.
- **Across Europe**, Vienna's long-standing [cooperative housing system](#) provides high-quality, affordable apartments with strong community involvement, while Germany's [Baugruppen \(building groups\)](#) allow households to co-develop housing projects, lowering costs through collective design and construction.
- **In Canada**, principles of adaptability and sustainability continue to shape national policy through the [National Housing Strategy](#), which supports affordable, energy-efficient, and inclusive housing developments across the country.

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Outcomes and impact

- **Over 6,000 units** were built in Montreal between 1990 and 2005, and an additional 4,000+ units across Canada and the United States during the same period, with adaptations later trialled in Latin America and Europe.
- **Construction costs were reduced** by up to 50% compared to conventional single-family dwellings, making homeownership accessible to low- and middle-income families.
- **Infrastructure costs decreased** by approximately 60%, thanks to compact lots, efficient land use, and shared-wall designs that required less road, sewage, and utility extension.
- **The Grow Home received** international recognition, including the prestigious **World Habitat Award in 1999**. The award cited the project's innovative affordability strategy, energy efficiency, adaptability to family growth, and contribution to sustainable urban development.

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