



NICHIHA CASE STUDY

Trauma-Informed Design

Brendan Sanchez is Principal with Access Architecture, a new firm in Vancouver that specializes in outcome-based design for its clients. Outcome and trauma-based design are becoming more popular and readily used approaches in order to better service the needs of clients and customers who have experienced some sort of trauma and provide them with a sense of empowerment in their physical environment.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a trauma-informed approach takes into account signs and symptoms of those affected and strives to give them a perceived sense of trustworthiness, transparency and peer support. In a world where we are so often confronted with negative emotions, of ourselves and others, it's becoming more important to proactively consider the emotional responses adverse stimuli can elicit and design with well-being in mind.

Access was recently brought on for an affordable housing project in Vancouver: The Elwood. The project was launched by the Council for

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PROJECT DETAILS

ARCHITECT

Brendan Sanchez,
Access Architecture

LOCATION

Vancouver, Washington

PRODUCT

VintageWood

COMPLETION

2021

CHALLENGE

The Council for the Homeless nonprofit wanted an affordable housing complex solution in Vancouver. The build would need to be budget-friendly, but also consider the principles of trauma-informed design — like how cool colors, natural light and spatial layout can contribute to someone's positive emotional state. Most important was providing a long-term solution for the exterior's durability and comfort for the residents.

SOLUTION

Access Architecture chose Nichiha's VintageWood fiber cement cladding for the Elwood project. The wood aesthetic of Nichiha offered a warm texture and inviting appeal to the exterior. The fiber cement cladding offered a strong, long-lasting solution for the 46-unit affordable housing complex.

RESULTS

The Elwood project features affordable housing for Vancouver's homeless population, along with a trauma-informed design that offers safety and health benefits to the residents staying there. Because of its success, the Council for the Homeless will include Nichiha in its next housing design project.

“Everyone has loved it,” says Brendan. “It’s all hypothetical until it gets built; now they can see it and the ‘extra’ that it brings. The residents love it, too.”

BRENDAN SANCHEZ, PRINCIPAL, ACCESS ARCHITECTURE

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the Homeless nonprofit, an advocacy organization dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness in the area. The project’s mission was to develop and operate rental properties with the needs of the vulnerable populations they serve in mind, allowing their clients the ability to have a sense of safety, avoid re-traumatization and live in a healing environment.

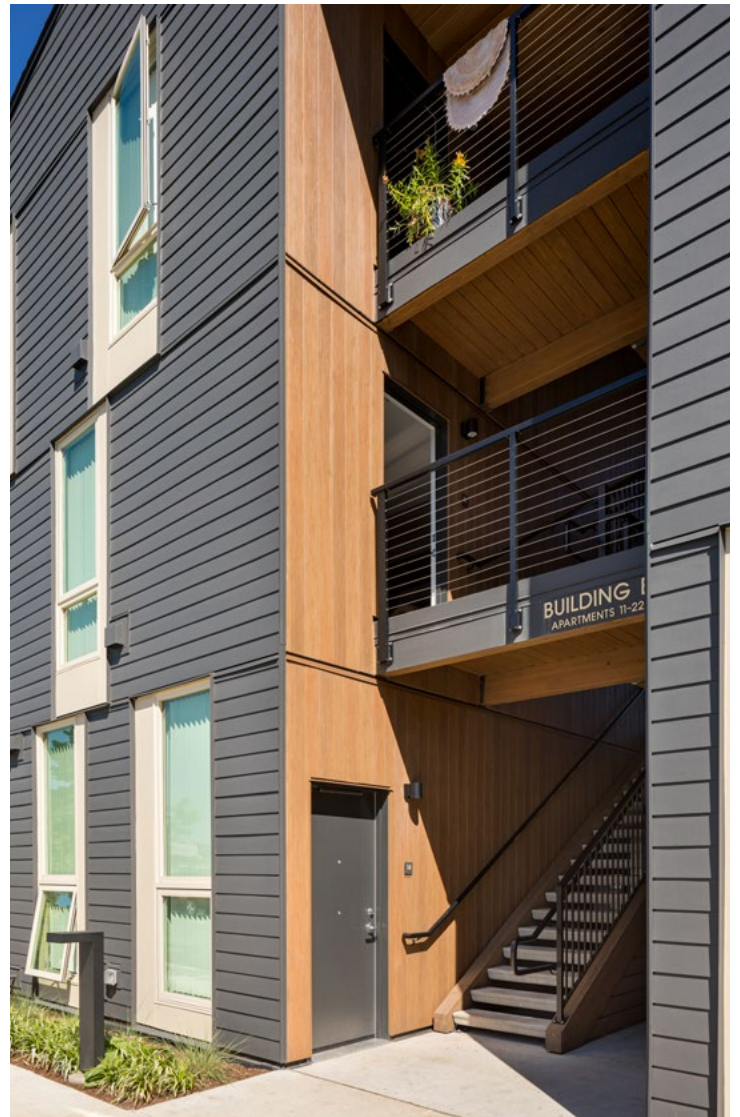
This meant being very deliberate in design and layout decisions when working with Access in order to help the residents work to put their traumatic experiences behind them and develop a personal identity beyond homelessness.

About the Project

The focus of the Elwood project was trauma-informed design. “This kind of design is getting a lot more attention now that people understand it more,” explains Brendan. “It applies in this project, and we’re also just finding that it doesn’t have to be a certain traumatic event we design for. It can also be a systemic problem — we all have our own traumas we’re working through, especially after the events of the pandemic last year. So Access likes to focus on how we can create healing spaces in this kind of design.”

The Elwood needed to feature accessible, comfortable and community-centered design for people coming out of homelessness. “Our office does research around the goals our clients have. In this project, the goal was to create a safe, comfortable setting to promote healing and sense of agency,” explains Brendan. “So we looked at how a building could use materials that would make residents feel more comfortable — we knew we wanted to reference nature in some way.”

This natural aesthetic motivated Brendan and his team to look for wood-inspired products and materials. “That’s why Nichiha appealed to us ... and because of its durability,” says Brendan.



Choosing Wood-Textured, Durable Siding

The Elwood consists of 46 units, providing permanent supportive housing for people who need access to it. “We liked the wood look. We designed and built the Elwood cost-effectively and wanted something durable for the exterior. Fiber cement seemed like a good way to go.”

Brendan hadn’t selected Nichiha before but was aware of the product because of previous projects he’d worked on. “Nichiha combined durability with the natural aesthetic we were going for. And when we compared other products, Nichiha felt most authentic,” he says.

In the design process on many construction projects, some materials and products are value-engineered out of the final project. “When we do affordable housing, we have to be really judicious with the budget,” explains Brendan.

Brendan was firm on the decision to use Nichiha’s VintageWood cladding and anticipated some pushback about the product being used in construction. “But we were able to get it incorporated because of the value it offered. Because of our research, we found that the warmth and texture of wood have been shown to decrease stress levels,” Brendan says.

Nichiha offered the aesthetics Brendan was after, and a host of other features, like durability, weather resistance and the comfort of Elwood’s residents. “If you value-engineer it out, you’d lose all those additional benefits,” says Brendan. Having a product that provided not only visual interest but a calming effect was crucial for a project like this.

A Perfect End Result

The result was a successful affordable housing project design that achieved the goals set out by the Council for the Homeless. “Everyone has loved it,” says Brendan. “It’s all hypothetical until it gets built; now they can see it and the ‘extra’ that it brings. The residents love it, too.”

Affordable housing projects are becoming increasingly more necessary in cities like Vancouver, where the homeless population is growing. Projects like the Elwood are important today because they don’t just provide a place for people to land after experiencing trauma like homelessness. They have the potential to provide healing. “We’re really interested in how we create better accessibility to the built environment through our work. It’s very intentional design,” says Brendan.

Access Architecture has another affordable housing complex in the works with the Council for the Homeless. “We’re doing other projects with them, including The Meridian, and we’re using Nichiha again,” says Brendan.



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Nichiha USA, Inc., a subsidiary of Nichiha Corporation, was established 1998 and is headquartered in Johns Creek, GA. Nichiha Corporation, an international leader in fiber cement technology for more than 35 years, has 13 plants worldwide and markets distinct patterns of fiber cement siding products in the U.S. In 2007, Nichiha opened its first U.S. manufacturing plant in Macon, GA, responding to an increase in demand for fiber cement products in the Southeast market. For more information, call 1.86.NICHHA1 or visit www.nichiha.com.

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