Building social connections

Toolbox of design actions to nurture wellbeing in multi-unit housing

HEY NEIGHBOUR! Collective

Happy Cities

Land acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge that this research took place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and səl̓ilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

The project team recognizes that colonialism isolates Indigenous Peoples intentionally and by design—for example, by prohibiting cultural practices, separating communities, and weakening family and language ties. We recognize these historic and ongoing inequities and systemic barriers, and strive to be part of movements to correct them.

About this project

This toolkit was published in July 2024 as part of the Building Social Connections project, in which Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective worked with planners from five municipalities and one First Nation to co-create new multi-unit housing design policies to support social wellbeing for all residents. Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective collaborated on the vision for this toolkit, building on project learnings and prior research, policy, and engagement by each organization. Happy Cities led research, writing, and design of the toolkit, with detailed content review and collaboration from Hey Neighbour Collective and external reviewers.

The project included three phases:

▸ **Phase 1:** Measuring the impacts of the City of North Vancouver's Active Design Guidelines

▸ **Phase 2:** Co-creating housing design policies to support wellbeing in multi-unit housing

▸ **Phase 3:** Developing this Building Social Connections policy and design toolkit

This work was supported by researchers from the Simon Fraser University Department of Gerontology. A special thank you to Dr. Atiya Mahmood's team who co-led Phase 1 research with the City of North Vancouver.

SFU GERONTOLOGY RESEARCH CENTRE

Happy Cities

Certified B Corporation

Happy Cities is an urban planning, design, and research firm that uses an evidence-based approach to create happier, healthier, more inclusive communities. Our firm has spent over a decade collecting evidence on the links between wellbeing and the built environment. Our Happy Homes research shows how intentional design can reduce social isolation and boost community resilience in multi-unit buildings, culminating in a toolkit to help housing providers turn wellbeing evidence into action. As part of our housing practice, we advise municipalities, developers, and housing providers on strategies to support resident wellbeing throughout all development stages.

Team members: Madeleine Hebert, Emma Avery, Sheree Emmanuel, Leah Karlberg

HEY NEIGHBOUR! Collective

SFU MORRIS J. WOSK CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC) brings together housing operators, non-profits, researchers, local and regional governments, housing associations, and health authorities. Together with residents of multi-unit housing, these HNC partners take action to alleviate loneliness and social isolation through building social connectedness, resilience, and capacity for neighbourly support and mutual aid. HNC is housed at the Simon Fraser University (SFU) Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. Key academic research partners include SFU Urban Studies, Gerontology, and Health Sciences.

Team members: Michelle Hoar

Project funders

To learn more about this project, please visit:

happycities.com/projects/building-social-connections-housing-design-policies-to-support-wellbeing-for-all

Participants

Thank you to all the organizations and individuals who participated in and contributed to the Building Social Connections workshops, which took place between October 2023 and February 2024.

A special thank you to our guest speakers:

- Dave Ward, CEO, Lu'ma Development
- Barbara Lawson Swain, Director of Housing Operations and Programs, Lu'ma Native Housing Society
- Kimani Geoffrey, Swahili Vision International
- Carla Guerrera, Founder & CEO, Purpose Driven Development
- Annelise Van Der Veen, Manager of Strategic Projects & Operations, Purpose Driven Development
- Lilian Chau, CEO, Entre Nous Femmes Housing Society
- Peter Atkinson, Principal, Human Studio
- Michael Guenter, Vice President of Development, Concert Properties
- Robert Brown, Principal, Chesterman Properties
- Alicia Medina, Manager, Housing Accelerator Program, Vancity Community Foundation
- Katie Maslechko, CEO, Rental Protection Fund

Local government and First Nation partners:

- City of Burnaby
- City of New Westminster
- City of North Vancouver
- City of Surrey
- City of Vancouver
- Tsawwassen First Nation

Other participating organizations

- Aboriginal Housing Management Association
- BC Centre for Disease Control
- BC Housing
- BC Non-profit Housing Association
- BC Society of Transition Homes
- Beyond The Buildings Ltd
- Brightside Community Homes Foundation
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)
- Chesterman Properties
- Concert Properties
- Co-operative Housing Federation of BC
- Co:Here / Salsbury Community Society
- Entre Nous Femmes Housing Society
- Fluid Architecture
- Hogan's Alley Society
- Human Studio Architecture
- LandlordBC
- Ledcor
- Lu'ma Native Housing Society
- Metro Vancouver
- Phoenix Housing
- Peterson
- Placemaker Communities
- Pooni Group
- Purpose Driven Development
- Public Architecture
- Ron Hart Architecture
- Sacha Investments
- Ske'eyk Housing Society
- Small Housing BC
- Swahili Vision Society
- Terra Housing
- Tikva Housing
- TL Housing Solutions
- Translink (Development)
- Vancity Community Foundation
- Vancouver Coastal Health

External reviewers:

Thank you to the architects and housing industry experts who participated in workshops and reviewed this toolkit for best practices, applicability, and clarity:

- Peter Atkinson, Principal, Human Studio
- Kira Gerwing, Chief Real Estate Investment Officer, Sacha Investments
- Bruce Haden, Principal, Fluid Architecture
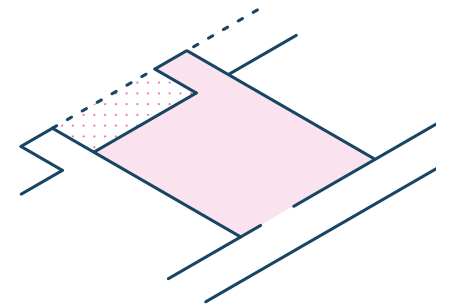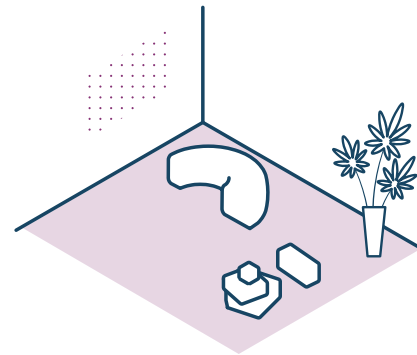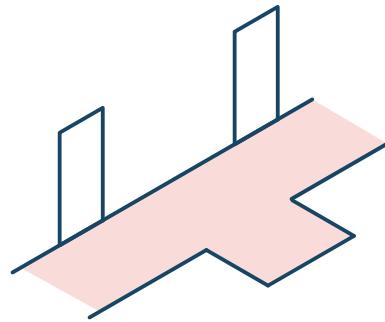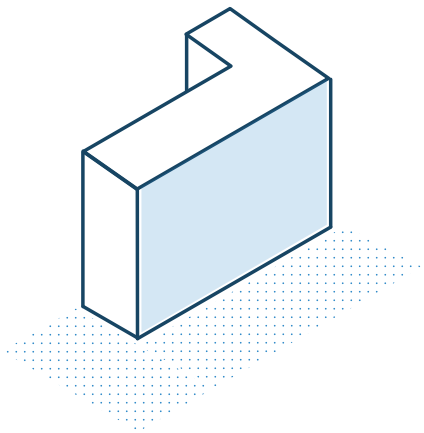- Sarah Klym, Design Researcher, Human Studio

Participants share challenges, ideas, and opportunities for promoting social wellbeing in multi-unit housing at a workshop for the Building Social Connections project. (Sogol Haji Hosseini) ▶

Contents

Design toolboxes

1 Introduction

1 | Introduction

Making the case for social connection in housing

Strong social relationships make us happier, healthier, and more resilient in the face of crises—and are linked with living 15 years longer on average. Yet, loneliness and isolation are on the rise in many places, reaching epidemic levels, as stated in a 2023 report by the U.S. Surgeon General. In 2021, the Canadian Social Survey found that three in 10 people across Canada feel lonely sometimes, and one in 10 feel lonely often, with loneliness being greatest among young women and single people.

This toolkit seeks to rebuild social connection back into our lives through the design of the homes we live in, with a focus on multi-unit housing. The design principles and actions equip policy makers, planners, designers, and community members to build and advocate for more socially connected, inclusive communities, drawing on over a decade of research and engagement with residents and housing industry actors—including non-profit housing providers, city planners, architects, and market developers.

In the face of growing challenges—including an acute housing affordability crisis, extreme weather, social isolation, and an aging population—our social connections are one of the strongest resources we have to chart a more sustainable, resilient path forward.

Understanding loneliness in Canada

According to the 2021 Canadian Social Survey by Statistics Canada,

3 in 10 sometimes feel lonely.

1 in 10 often feel lonely.

In the same survey, young people report feeling lonely more frequently than older adults, with young women and people not in a couple reporting the highest levels of loneliness.

1 in 4 young people ages 15-24 often or always feel lonely.

Why do we need design guidelines for social wellbeing in housing?

Local governments typically require a minimum area of common space for multi-unit residential developments. But beyond minimum requirements, there is limited information on specific design strategies on how to design housing that promotes social connection and wellbeing. Policies typically do not offer clear guidance on creating convenient, welcoming spaces that residents want to spend time in. Many shared spaces lack comfort, functionality, and flexibility. As a result, they often go unused, or are not used to their full potential.

Why multi-unit housing?

Denser housing forms are becoming increasingly common in Canada. It is critical that we design these homes to support community wellbeing, social connection, sustainability, and inclusion for everyone.

CMHC estimates that Canada needs an additional 3.5 million homes by 2030—on top of what we are already projected to build—to reach housing affordability. The share of new apartment housing being built each year in Canada has steadily grown over the past decade, with multi-unit housing representing close to half of Canada's housing stock. All levels of government are increasingly allowing and encouraging denser development,

recognizing that multi-unit homes are more attainable, sustainable, and desirable for many demographics than a single detached home.

Multi-unit housing is diverse. It includes multiple forms—townhouses, multiplexes, low-rise apartments, and high-rise towers—and tenures—both market and non-market, with varied rental and ownership models. Several actions in this toolkit can apply to any form of multi-unit housing; however, the actions are most focused on mid- to high-density apartment communities.

| Townhouse, row house, or semi-detached | Multiplex or low-rise apartment | Mid-rise apartment | High-rise apartment | Master-planned community |

MULTI-UNIT HOUSING
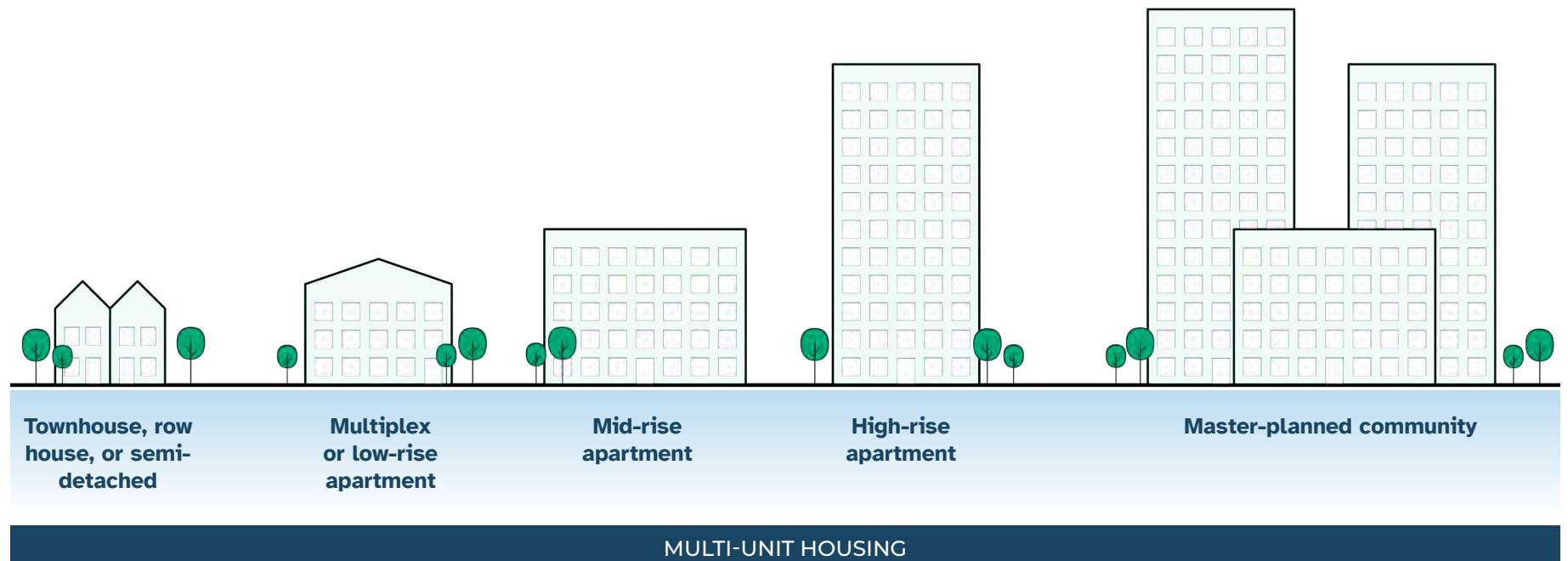
This table focuses on considerations specifically related to the relevant social spaces and design actions in this toolkit (sections four to seven). It is not meant to be comprehensive. Considerations may vary according to jurisdiction and local policy.

Considerations for different multi-unit typologies

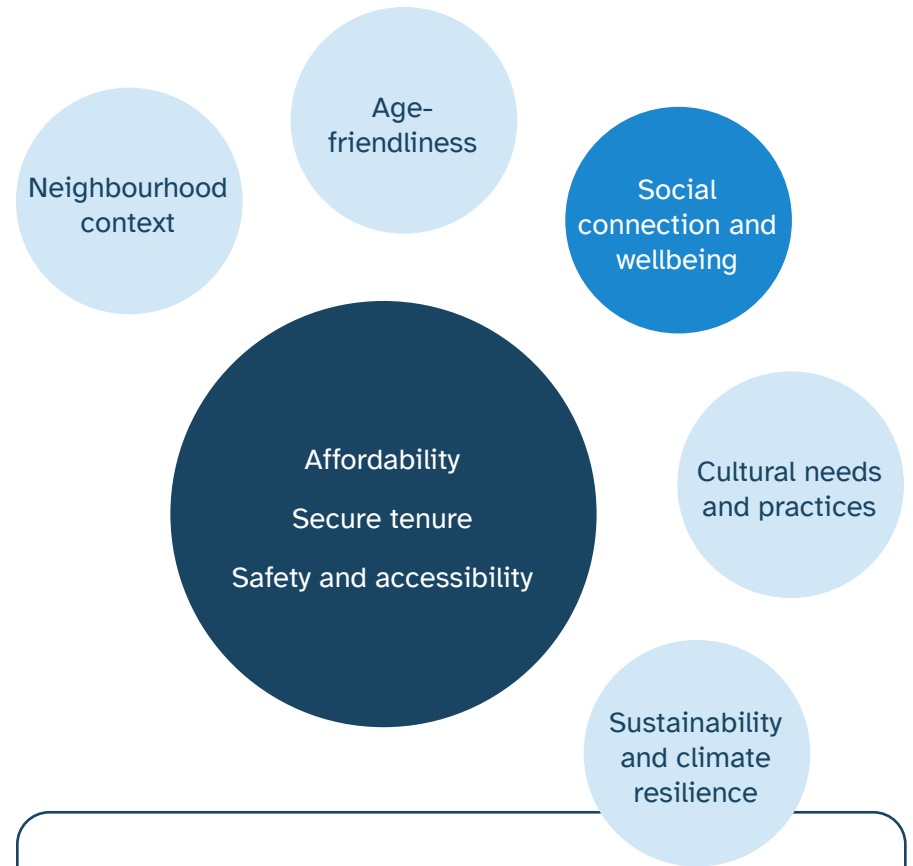| Typology	Scale	Opportunities	Challenges
Small-scale missing middle	Less than 6 homes per lot (e.g. super small apartment, duplexes, triplex, row house, townhouse)	• Small social group size can create an intimate community. • Ground entrances and/or balconies can offer a good connection to the street. • Ground-oriented homes are often attractive to families.	• Typically do not have much indoor common space, and outdoor spaces are mostly semi-private. • Higher cost per home. • May be challenging for accessibility (e.g. stairs in multi-storey townhomes).
Missing middle	6-25 homes (e.g. low-rise apartment, row house, townhouse, multiplex)		
Mid-rise	4-8 storeys, 25-100 homes	• Project budgets can support the inclusion of some indoor and outdoor common space. • Potential for social programming. • Medium community size can support sense of belonging and neighbourly relationships.	• Building code and density requirements can limit the amount of common spaces. • Including more common spaces can lead to a smaller number of homes.
High-rise	9+ storeys, 100+ homes	• More room for amenities. • Potential for social programming.	• Towers typically have limited area per floor allowed by zoning, which can limit the placement of common space. • Can be more challenging to get to know neighbours without intentional design or programming interventions. • Building edges need careful attention to feel friendly and human-scale.
Master-planned community	Mix of housing forms, often high rise	• More space for amenities. • Potential for social programming. • Opportunity to create a shared, central amenity building and more publicly accessible shared spaces.	

How to apply the actions in this toolkit

Sections four through seven of this document offer toolboxes of design opportunities to nurture social wellbeing in housing for people of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, household sizes, and incomes. The toolboxes are designed to be widely applicable and act as a starting point for both designers and policy makers. All design decisions should be considered in relation to local policies, building context, and budget in order to select high-impact actions that are complimentary, flexible, and adaptable, and that suit the needs of anticipated future residents. To maximize opportunities for social connection, sociable design actions must be accompanied by social programming and property management after development (for example, by strata councils, co-op committees, or property management staff).

This work begins from the premise that affordable, secure housing choices are a crucial foundation for social wellbeing. We consider social wellbeing and connection in relation to this core need and several other intersecting policy areas, including neighbourhood planning, sustainability and resilience, cultural practices, age-friendliness, adaptability, and accessibility.

The toolkit does not go in depth into all these areas. For example, the design actions are meant to complement existing guidance on accessibility features, including the Rick Hansen accessibility certification and requirements in the building code. There are also many well-researched resources that identify design considerations for specific demographics (for example, guides specific to housing for Indigenous Peoples, women who have experienced violence, African Canadians, Muslim families, and older adults aging in place).

Age-friendliness

Neighbourhood context

Social connection and wellbeing

Affordability

Secure tenure

Safety and accessibility

Cultural needs and practices

Sustainability and climate resilience

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is for anyone interested in or working in housing, community planning, and development, including:

- Planners and planning consultants
- Architects and designers
- Market and non-market housing developers and operators
- All levels of government involved in housing
- Individual residents and community advocates

Policy context and precedents

This document considers policy tools that can help enable more buildings with social design features, without significantly increasing construction costs.

In the context of B.C. and Metro Vancouver, where the Building Social Connections project emerged, recent policy changes to enable more socially connected, multi-unit housing include:

- **Province of B.C. housing legislation:** British Columbia has implemented wide-ranging housing policy changes since 2023, including legalizing four to six homes per lot in municipalities with over 5,000 residents, and increasing the minimum density for developments within 800 metres of rapid transit and 400 metres of bus exchanges. The Province also plans to legalize single egress stair buildings in the new building code, anticipated for Fall 2024, to increase livability and design flexibility, particularly on small lots.

- **Metro 2050:** Metro Vancouver's Regional Growth Strategy, passed in 2023, outlines a vision for complete, resilient, connected communities. One action item under 4.1.8 calls on member jurisdictions to identify policies and actions that contribute to specific outcomes, including "increased social connectedness in multi-unit housing." This strategy was informed by the Hey Neighbour Collective discussion paper, "Developing truly complete communities: Social equity, social connectedness and multi-unit housing in an age of public health and climate crises."
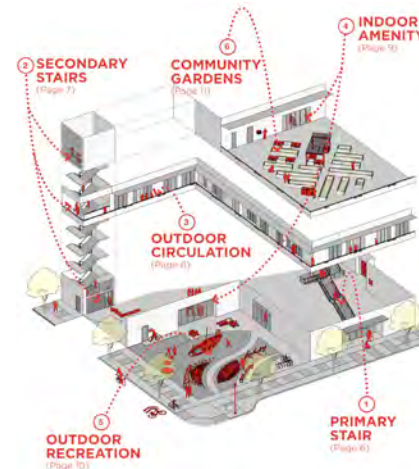
North Vancouver Active Design Guidelines: The City of North Vancouver first published Active Design Guidelines in 2015, offering developers incentives (floor area exclusions) for design features that encourage physical activity and social interaction in multi-unit housing.

Port Moody Social Wellbeing Design Guidelines: Happy Cities created Social Wellbeing Design Guidelines that were adopted by the City of Port Moody in June 2024, offering comprehensive design guidance and incentives for developers to include social design features in multi-unit housing. The guidelines are organized according to scale of density.
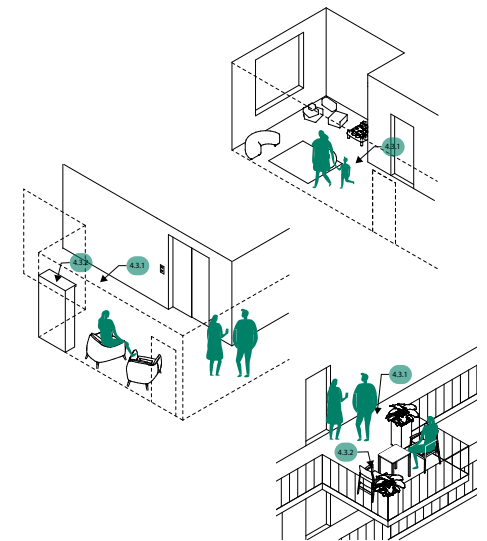
2
Wellbeing and housing

2 | Wellbeing and housing

Why do relationships with neighbours matter?

Our neighbours are our closest source of social support and connection. Socially connected homes and neighbourhoods greatly benefit wellbeing, nurturing greater physical and mental health, community resilience, and social trust between diverse residents.

The homes we live in play a significant role in encouraging and creating opportunities for positive neighbourly interactions. In particular, evidence consistently shows that the design and location of common spaces in multi-unit housing—including common amenities, circulation spaces, and outdoor areas—can support our connections with neighbours, and are closely connected to the social wellbeing of residents. Programming and policy also play important roles, such as by ensuring residents can easily access and use shared spaces in ways that meet their needs.

Outdoor walkways and social nooks overlook the courtyard at Our Urban Village in Vancouver, BC, allowing adults to hang out above while kids play downstairs. (Our Urban Village) ▶
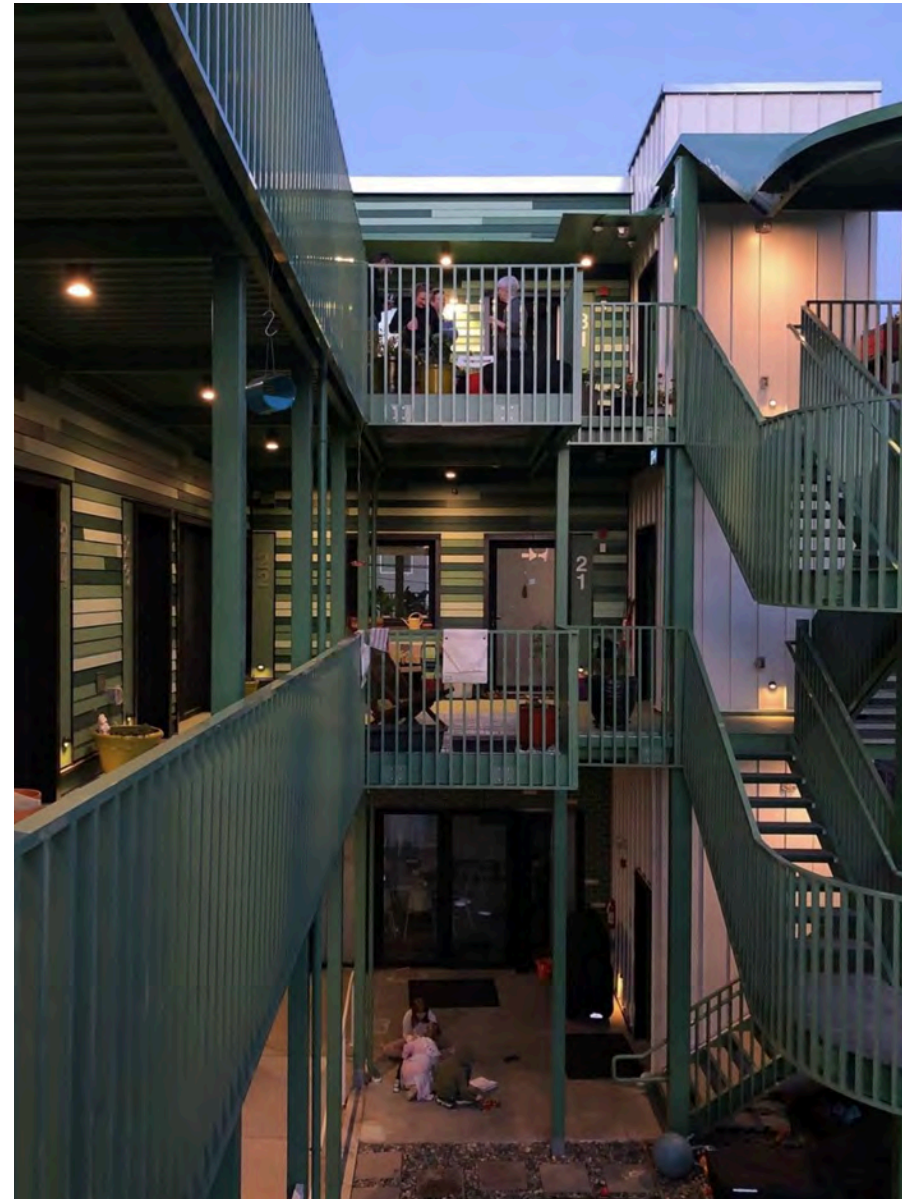
Understanding social wellbeing

Social wellbeing refers to the extent to which individuals and communities experience a sense of belonging, social inclusion, and overall satisfaction with their social relationships and connections. These connections include both casual encounters in the community and deeper relationships with family, friends, and neighbours.

Social wellbeing is a core dimension of overall wellbeing. People in socially connected neighbourhoods report greater physical and mental health. They can provide both emotional support and physical help with errands or household tasks. They are also more resilient in times of crisis. For example, neighbours can check in on one another during extreme weather or a pandemic, and can support each other through personal challenges, like an injury, illness, or other circumstances. Over time, relationships with neighbours can bring many benefits, including financial savings, sharing household items, and even sharing childcare and meals.

However, there are basic needs that need to be met in order for residents to feel comfortable and to have the time for creating strong social ties. For example, secure, affordable, and stable tenure in a safe home is an essential foundation for wellbeing. Without a home that meets these core needs, it is much harder for people to nurture supportive relationships with neighbours and build a sense of belonging in a community. These principles are explored in more depth in the Happy Homes toolkit, released by Happy Cities in 2017.

▼ *The Happy Homes toolkit identifies a framework for wellbeing in multi-unit housing, including 10 wellbeing elements to consider in design. (Happy Cities)*

EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT: SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND WELLBEING

Why do social connections matter for health?

Loneliness is linked to poor mental health and lower life satisfaction.

In Canada, nearly half of those who feel lonely frequently also report "fair" or "poor" mental health.

Loneliness increases our risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death.

The impact of loneliness on mortality is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

For more, check out Hey Neighbour Collective's evidence backgrounder by PhD candidate Meredith Sones: "How does social connectedness between neighbours support health and wellbeing?"

Frequent social interactions are associated with higher levels of happiness, physical and mental health, community belonging, and life satisfaction.

People with strong social connections live 15 years longer, on average, than those who are socially isolated.

Regular social interactions with neighbours boost wellbeing at all ages.

Neighbourhood connectedness is extra important to life satisfaction for older adults, people on low incomes, people with less education, and people with health challenges.

Youth in supportive, trusting communities are more likely to play outside and have better physical and mental health.

Casual, daily social interactions in the community are just as important for our health as deeper relationships with friends or family.

Regular interactions with neighbours help us integrate social connection into our daily lives—making them one of the most effective ways to reduce loneliness.

The spectrum of social connections

Building connections with neighbours takes time. The actions in this toolkit consider the entire spectrum of social connections, recognizing that people need frequent opportunities for casual encounters to start to get to know one another. Building design is critical in facilitating these repeated encounters. Over time, both design and programming play a role in encouraging neighbours to start building deeper, more trusting relationships, through opportunities to do activities together. The goal is to design homes that nurture these relationships and build friendships and mutual support in the long-term.

Design & programming

Social programming can help residents make the jump from casual encounters to meaningful relationships. The design of physical spaces facilitates successful programming.

Design

Buildings and community spaces can be designed to encourage residents to bump into each other and linger in common areas.

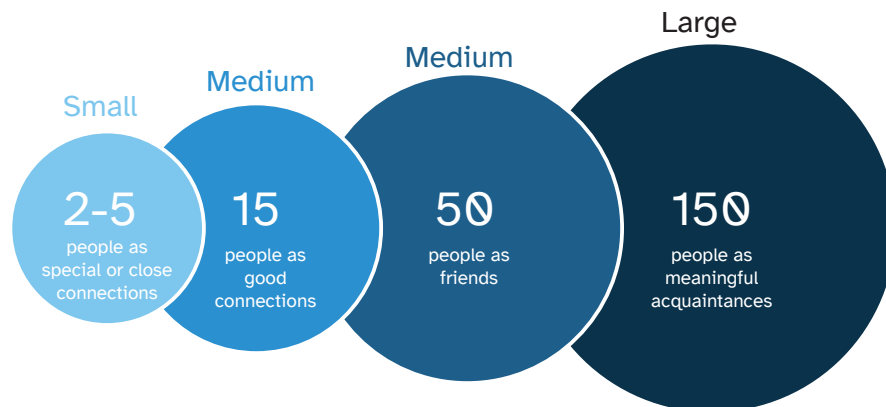1 **Casual encounters**

2 **Repeated encounters**

3 **Doing things together**

4 **Forming friendships**

5 **Mutual support**

Increasing social connectedness, belonging, and resilience

Happy Cities

Social group size

Dunbar's number proposes 150 as the theoretical limit on the number of people with whom any individual is able to sustain a stable or meaningful relationship. Dunbar's theory also defines different social scales, from close relationships, to friends, to acquaintances. These numbers provide a useful framework for thinking about social relationships when it comes to planning new communities. They also illustrate the importance of providing social spaces that can facilitate interaction for different social group sizes and various kinds of connections.

Large

Medium

Medium

Small

| 2-5 people as special or close connections | 15 people as good connections | 50 people as friends | 150 people as meaningful acquaintances |

Social programming resources

During the design stage, it is important to consider building operations and social programming (e.g. maintenance and cleaning of amenities, potential for social activities, resident safety, and opportunities for residents to shape and manage common spaces). Residents, property managers, landlords, and local governments all have a role to play in fostering neighbourly connections in multi-unit housing.

Hey Neighbour Collective has published four in-depth practice guides that share strategic approaches and compelling benefits to building strong multi-unit housing communities:

- Guide 1 shows how residents can take leadership.

- Guide 2 and Guide 3 look at what landlords, housing operators, and community non-profits can do on their own or in creative, adaptive collaborations.

- Guide 4 discusses specific opportunities for local governments to sow seeds and help support the entire sector.

3
Design principles
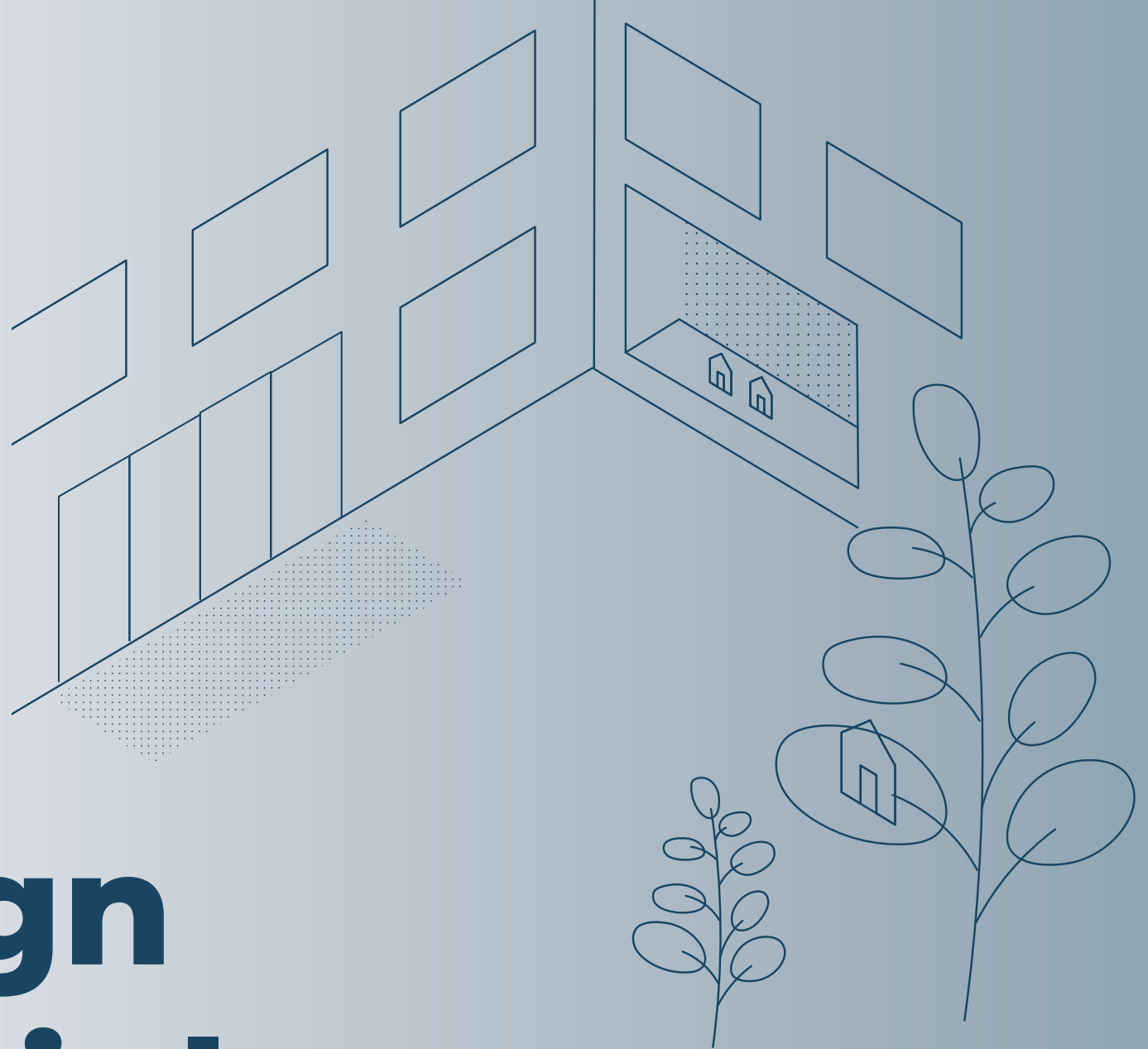
3 | Design principles

An outcomes-based approach

This toolkit seeks to shift the housing design conversation towards designing for social wellbeing as a key outcome, rather than prescribing set solutions. An outcomes-based approach recognizes that there are many ways to design for social connection. We propose six design principles that can inform design decisions for common spaces, including common amenities, circulation areas, and transitions from private, to semi-private, to public space. The principles consider multi-unit housing design from a social wellbeing lens, while allowing designers and housing providers flexibility to respond to diverse building sites, demographics, and typologies.

This outcomes-based approach was supported by planners, developers, architects, housing providers, public health professionals, community non-profits, and researchers engaged through the Building Social Connections project. Beyond checking a box, outcome-based thinking challenges housing industry professionals to think about the impacts of design on residents beyond project completion. The following pages introduce six guiding design principles for social wellbeing.

Location

Maximize opportunities for interaction by locating social features and spaces in convenient, visible, and prominent locations with natural light; Multiply social impact through co-location.

Invitation

Maximize spontaneous daily encounters by designing places to pause and interact; Use the built environment as an icebreaker for social interaction.

Activation

Create interesting, functional spaces and a centre or heart for the community through diverse scales of common spaces with intentional things to see and do.

Inclusion

Create spaces that are accessible and safe for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds; Reflect different cultural preferences and identities.

Transition

Balance high-quality, livable private homes with common spaces; Consider thoughtful transitions and gradients from public to private space.

Evolution

Nurture a sense of belonging through stewardship of common spaces; Allow spaces to evolve with residents over time to meet changing community needs.

Location

Maximize opportunities for interaction by locating social features and spaces in convenient, visible, and prominent locations with natural light; Multiply social impact through co-location.

Why is this important?

People are more likely to use spaces that they pass by on a daily basis. The ability to observe community activity can help people feel connected to neighbours even if they are not yet ready to join in, and encourages forming connections over time. Locating spaces in close proximity to each other helps to triangulate and concentrate social activity, increasing the chances of bumping into a neighbour.
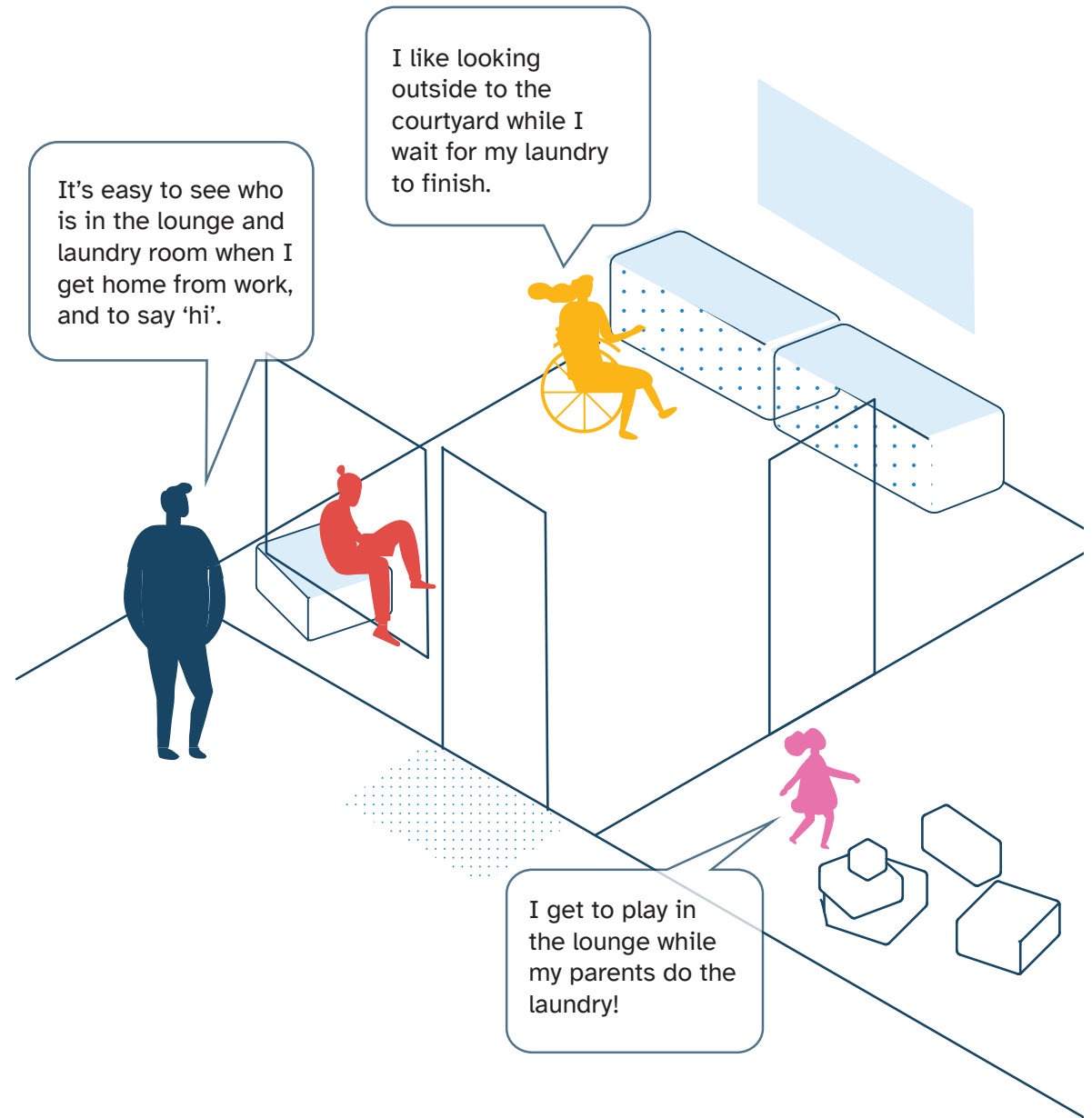
Invitation

Maximize spontaneous daily encounters by designing places to pause and interact; Use the built environment as an icebreaker for social interaction.

Why is this important?

Inviting, welcoming design elements encourage people to pause and linger, and create opportunities to connect with others. When people feel safe and comfortable in a shared space, they are more likely to want to spend time there and engage in social interaction. Natural light, colour, and spatial cues, like a wide hallway, can help people feel comfortable and more open to social connections.
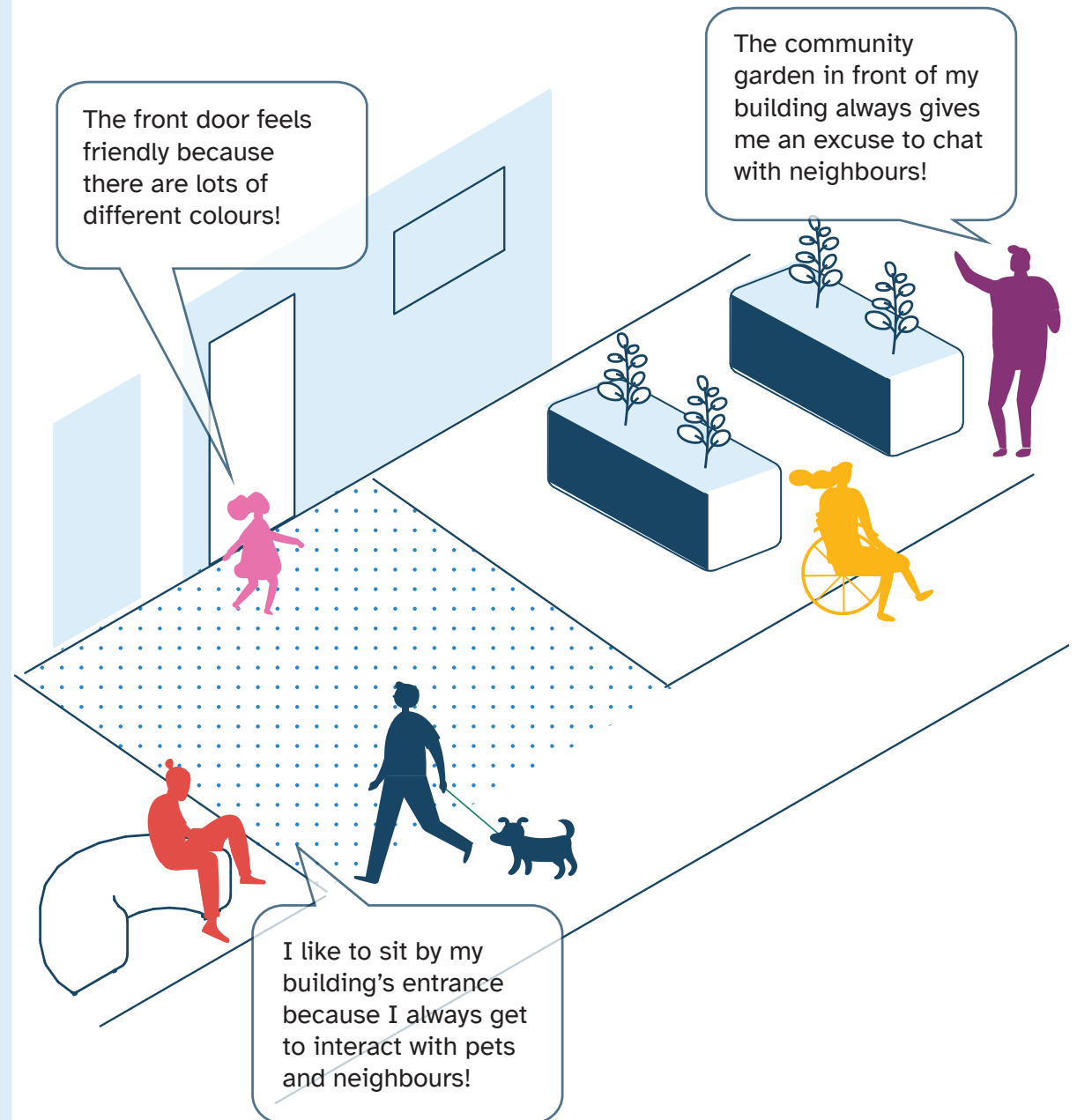
The front door feels friendly because there are lots of different colours!

The community garden in front of my building always gives me an excuse to chat with neighbours!

I like to sit by my building's entrance because I always get to interact with pets and neighbours!

Activation

Create interesting, functional spaces and a centre or heart for the community through diverse scales of common spaces with intentional things to see and do.

Why is this important?

People are more likely to use shared spaces when there are multiple activities or reasons to visit them. Organized social activities are key to activating shared spaces. However, interactive design elements—such as community gardens, message boards, pet areas, or play spaces— also encourage use and offer something for everyone. When shared spaces become part of daily routines, residents have more opportunities get to know their neighbours in a casual setting.
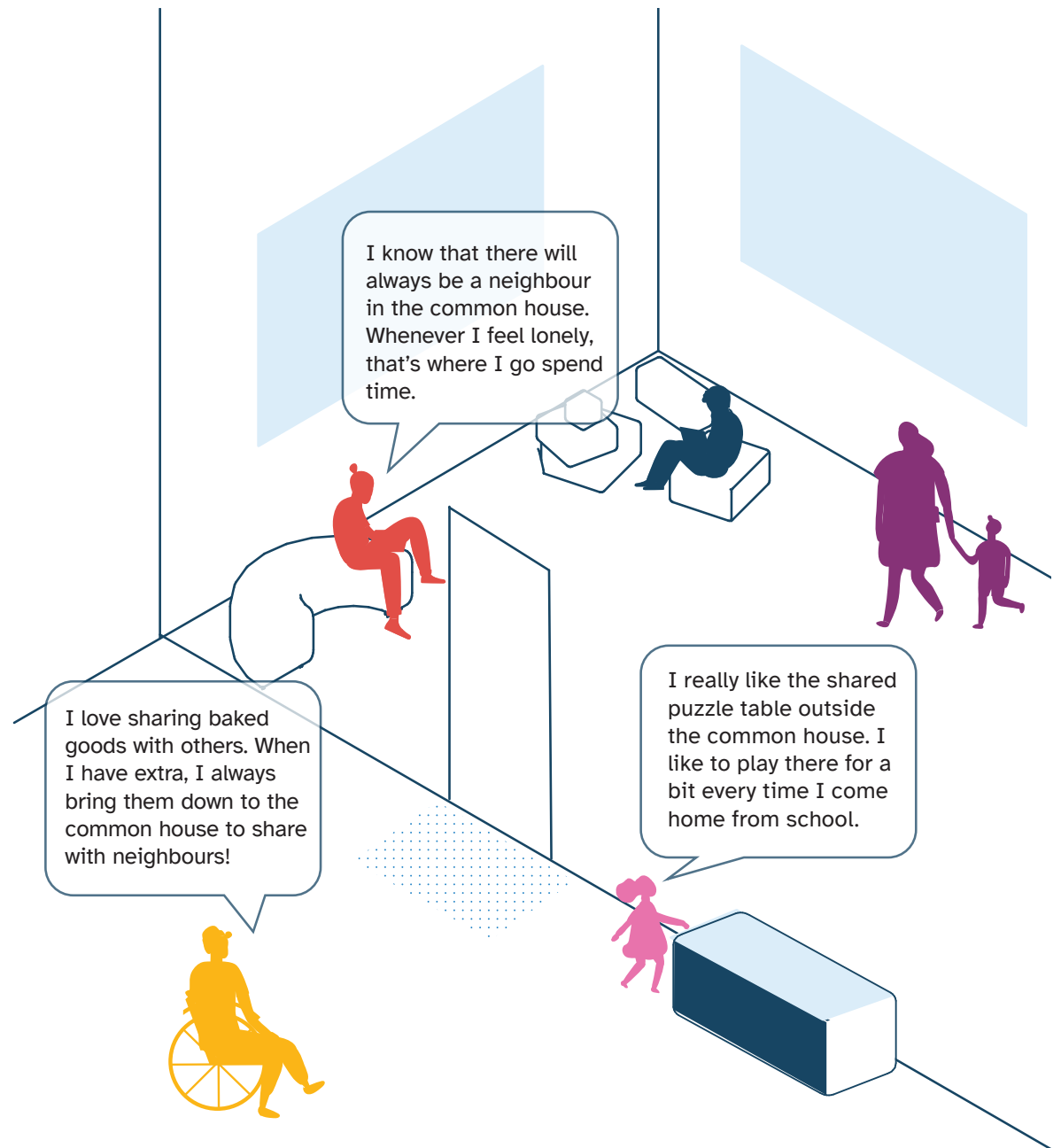
I know that there will always be a neighbour in the common house. Whenever I feel lonely, that's where I go spend time.

I really like the shared puzzle table outside the common house. I like to play there for a bit every time I come home from school.

I love sharing baked goods with others. When I have extra, I always bring them down to the common house to share with neighbours!

Inclusion

Create spaces that are accessible and safe for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds; Reflect different cultural preferences and identities.

Why is this important?

Places that promote interaction among residents of various income levels, backgrounds, ages, and household sizes help bridge differences and build trust. Equitable access means that residents of all ages and abilities should feel safe and comfortable using shared spaces. Building management policies also play a role, by ensuring that people can access shared spaces at convenient hours, without having to book in advance.
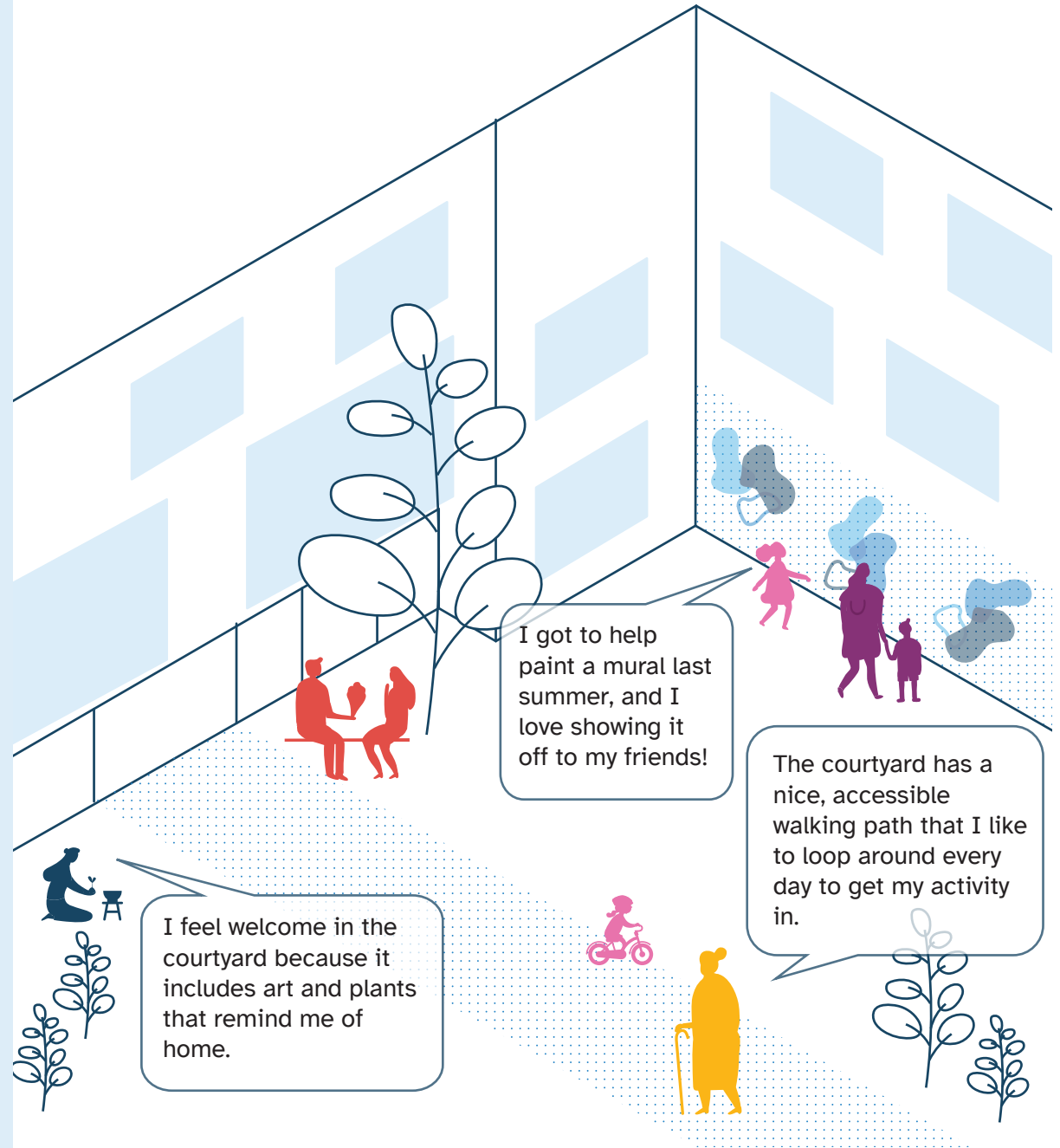
I got to help paint a mural last summer, and I love showing it off to my friends!

The courtyard has a nice, accessible walking path that I like to loop around every day to get my activity in.

I feel welcome in the courtyard because it includes art and plants that remind me of home.

Transition

Balance high-quality, livable private homes with common spaces; Consider thoughtful transitions and gradients from public to private space.

Why is this important?
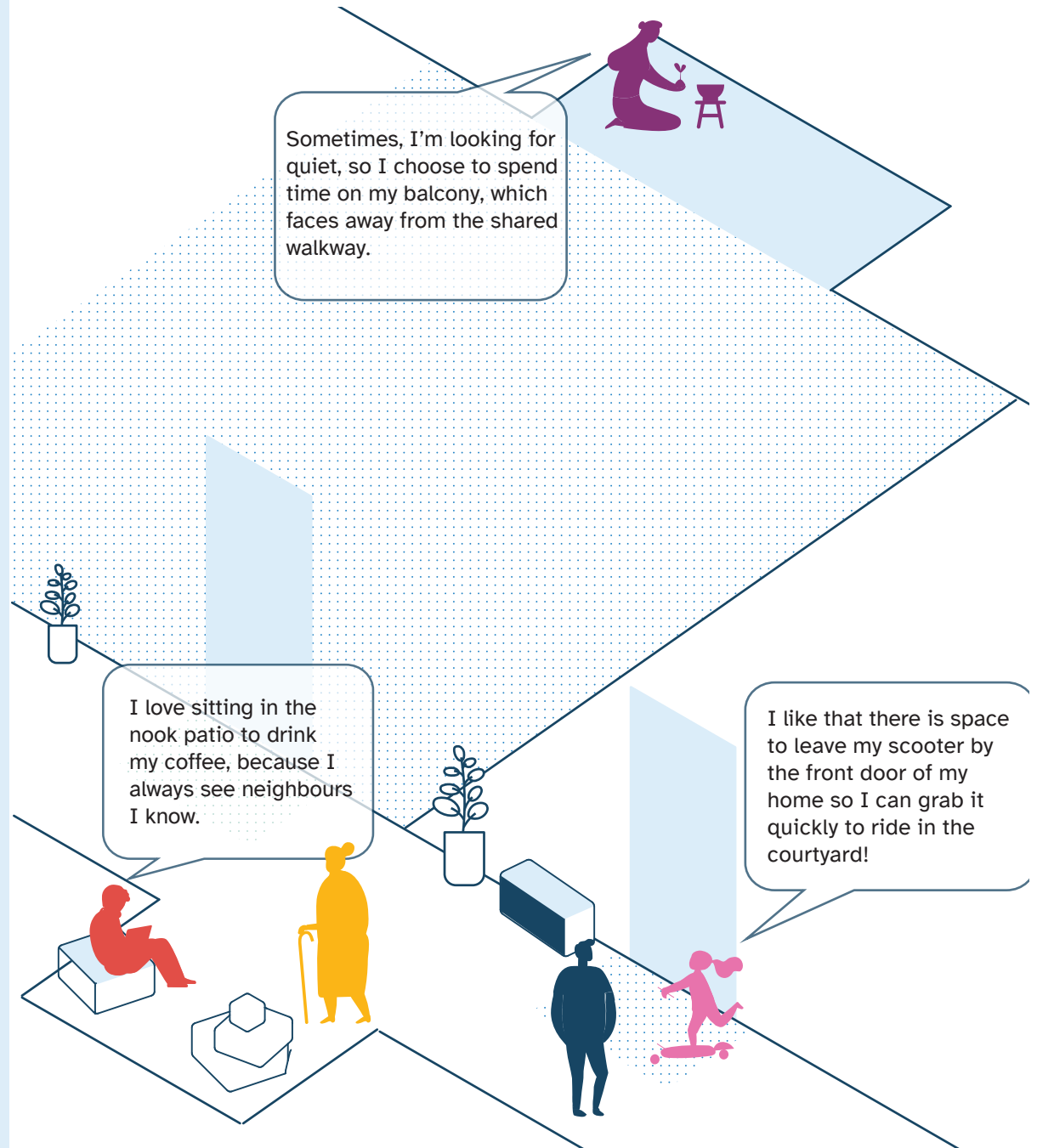
Residents feel safer and more comfortable when they can choose when they want to interact with others. This sense of control over social exposure can be created by offering a clear gradient of spaces from private, to semi-private, and semi-public, with gradual increases in exposure to the public realm. This sense of control enhances opportunities for positive social interaction, ensuring that people do not feel a lack of privacy or overcrowded.

Sometimes, I'm looking for quiet, so I choose to spend time on my balcony, which faces away from the shared walkway.

I love sitting in the nook patio to drink my coffee, because I always see neighbours I know.

I like that there is space to leave my scooter by the front door of my home so I can grab it quickly to ride in the courtyard!
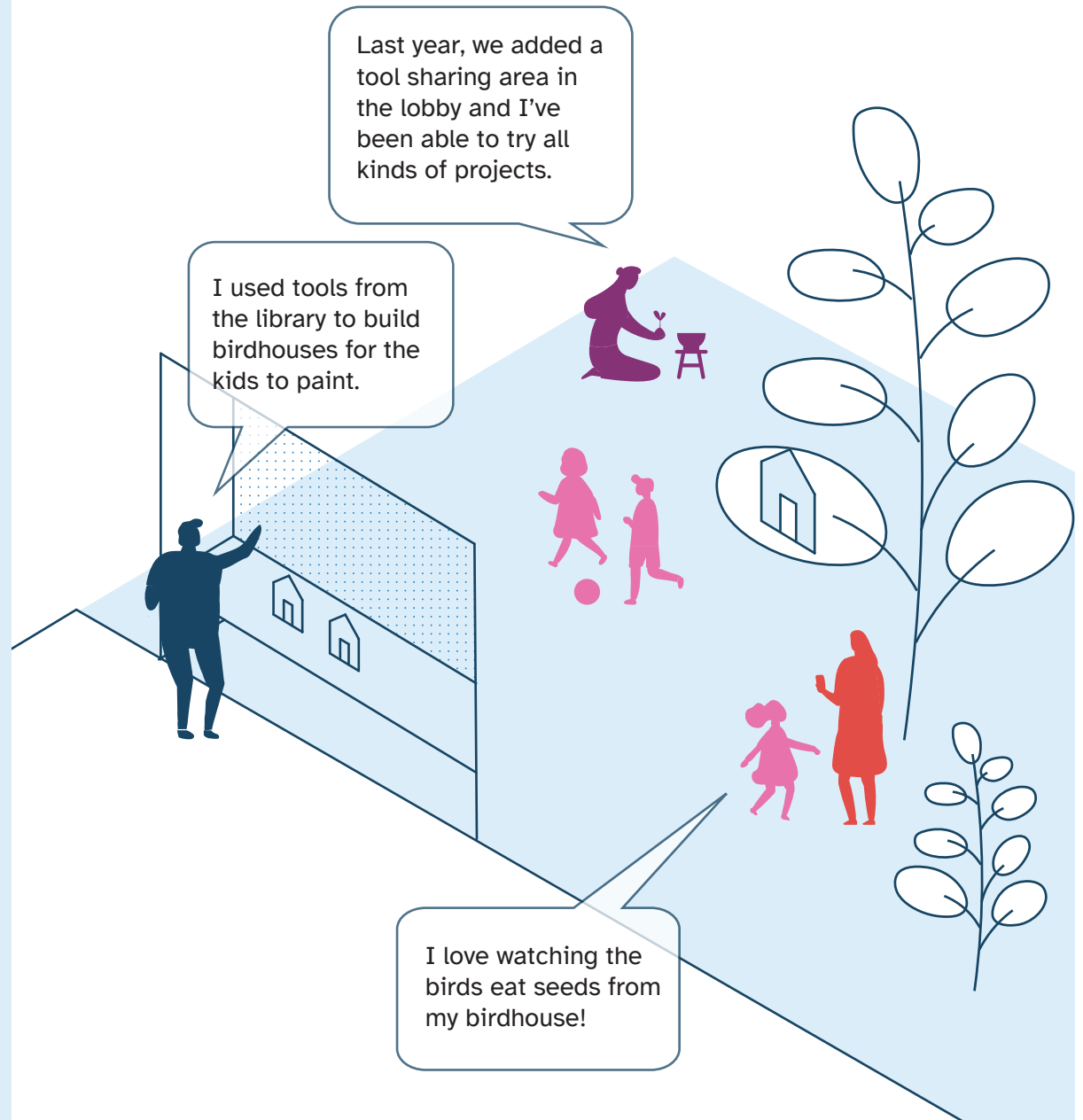
Evolution

Nurture a sense of belonging through stewardship of common spaces; Allow spaces to evolve with residents over time to meet changing community needs.

Why is this important?

Residents are more likely to care for shared spaces and build a strong sense of community when they can work together to shape these spaces. In particular, cohousing communities share responsibility for social activities and building management, and tend to report a stronger sense of belonging than people in other types of multi-unit housing. Shared spaces that can evolve to meet changing needs over time allow people to live in their homes longer and build deeper relationships with neighbours.

Last year, we added a tool sharing area in the lobby and I've been able to try all kinds of projects.

I used tools from the library to build birdhouses for the kids to paint.

I love watching the birds eat seeds from my birdhouse!

Toolbox:
Social building edges

4

Designing social...
Building edges

Why are building edges important for social wellbeing?

The zone just outside a building is a critical transition zone between public and private space. This includes the design of the building edge itself and how it integrates with adjacent streets and public spaces. Active edges—meaning visually diverse facades lined with entrances, visual connections to the street, and interesting features to pause and linger at—create a safer, more welcoming, human-scale experience for people walking, rolling, and biking outside. Active edges also help foster stronger sense of place attachment for everyone. Well-designed transition areas let residents choose when they want to retreat into private spaces, while still providing opportunities to interact with the wider community.

1 in 5

North Vancouver residents reported having frequent connections outside their building, making this area the second-most important zone for social interaction in our study.
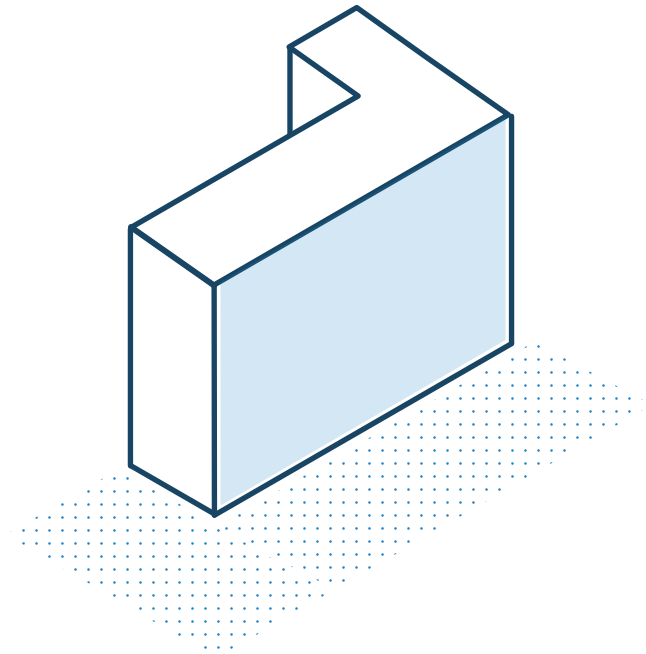
In this section, you will learn how to design social:

4.1. Transition zones
4.2. Building entrances
4.3. Publicly accessible spaces

4.1. Transition zones

Sociable design outcome:

Design an activated transition zone that provides a smooth transition between private, semi-private, and public spaces.

Considerations

Applicability: These actions apply to all building scales. They can be particularly important for denser building forms.

Social group size: Encourage spontaneous interactions between two or more residents living in the same building, and between building residents and the wider community.

Scale: Gehl Studio finds that the optimal distance between the building edge and public realm is between 3.5 to 4.0 metres. This allows people to choose their social interaction and exposure.

Principles in action

1 Invitation | Provide opportunities for placemaking interventions to boost sense of belonging and joy. Co-designing placemaking features together with residents nurtures a sense of community.

2 Activation | Create building edges that feel continuous while providing visual variation. Visual variation can be achieved through interesting openings, entrances, materials, and textures. Varied, continuous edges help people feel comfortable navigating urban streetscapes.

3 Inclusion | Provide comfortable seating opportunities, including shaded areas or places where a person can rest their back against the edge.

4 Transition | Ensure that edges have clear transitions between public, semi-private, and private zones. Consider landscaping and materials rather than fences to create transitions and delineate zones.

5 Transition | Use architectural and landscape elements to create both private areas and semi-private spaces that allow neighbours to see each other and interact.

▲ The main residential entry at Lakeside Senior Apartments in Oakland, CA creates a sense of privacy and clear transition between the street and private zones through setbacks, shelter, and landscaping. The building edges are visually stimulating. (Treve Johnson / David Baker Architects)

◄ The Nuutseumuut Lelum Housing and Aboriginal Centre on Vancouver Island, BC offers 25 units of rental housing for Indigenous families, youth, and Elders centred around a publicly accessible community gathering space. The entrance provides an invitation into the courtyard from the public sidewalk. (BC Housing / Flickr)

4.2. Building entrances

Sociable design outcome:

Create distinctive entrances by considering building articulation, material variation, and placement on the site.

Considerations

Applicability: These actions apply to buildings with shared indoor or outdoor entrances.

Social group size: Encourage spontaneous interactions between two or more residents living in the same building, and between building residents and the wider community.

Scale: Where possible, limit the number of households sharing an entrance. Smaller group sizes facilitate social interaction and a sense of belonging. Research finds that the optimal number is 8 to 12 homes sharing an entrance; however, in denser building forms, up to 25 homes per entrance may be a more attainable goal to create social benefits and belonging.

Principles in action

1. **Location |** Locate entrances adjacent to exterior and interior common spaces to increase visibility, connection, and vibrancy.

2. **Invitation |** Distinguish entrances from the surrounding architecture through building articulation and material variation, and consider their location in relation to main road access. Clear, distinct entrances are critical for accessibility and ease of wayfinding.

3. **Invitation |** Provide seating near the entrance.

4. **Activation |** Create sociable stoops where neighbours can chat with other residents in their building or people passing by.

5. **Inclusion |** Provide weather cover while considering daylight access and shadows.

6. **Inclusion |** Include an easy to reach push button, call system, and clear address graphics.

7. **Inclusion |** Consider artwork, materials, or forms that celebrate residents' cultural heritage.

For guidelines on entrances to private homes, refer to 7.1, Entryways (p. 62).

The entrance at Mason on Mariposa in San Francisco, CA is distinct and invites social connection. Social features include seating where residents can chat, weather protection, and an accessible call system. (Craig Cozart / David Baker Architects)

The main entrance at Five88 in San Francisco, CA provides residents with clear wayfinding and sight lines into the lobby and offices. The sheltered entrance allows people to linger under cover and can facilitate spontaneous interactions with neighbours and the community. (Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects)

4.3. Publicly accessible spaces

Sociable design outcome:

Provide value to the wider community by creating pleasant, publicly accessible spaces that complement existing neighbourhood gathering places.

Examples include:
- *Mews*
- *Plazas*
- *Ground-level parks with spaces to garden, walk, and play*

▼ *A street parking spot in front of Quayside Cohousing in North Vancouver, BC has been transformed into a vibrant parklet with a repurposed shipping container. (Meg Wray)*

Considerations

Applicability: These actions apply to all building scales, particularly higher-density housing forms. For mixed-use buildings, consider how publicly accessible spaces can help activate commercial areas.

Social group size: Encourage spontaneous interactions between two or more residents living in the same building, and between building residents and the wider community.

Scale: Provide a flexible space that can support the anticipated uses and number of users.

Principles in action

1 **Location |** Locate spaces to attract passersby and maximize social potential. Connect spaces to circulation areas and public paths of travel.

2 **Activation |** Include design features that complement existing businesses, spaces, and parks in the neighbourhood.

3 **Activation |** Include three to five reasons to visit the space, such as a play area, community garden, public art, seating, tables, plants, walking paths, or pet areas.

4 **Activation |** Design active edges that include windows, openings, and textures and colours to provide a sense of enclosure. Use windows, balconies, and doors to create visual connections between the building and the public space, to enhance sense of safety.

5 **Transition |** Ensure that public spaces complement and are distinct from private or semi-private spaces dedicated to a building's residents. Use balconies, porches, plants, and other buffers to create a clear transition.

6 **Evolution |** Provide opportunities for active placemaking and community co-design.

◀ *The apartments at 1010 Potrero in San Francisco, CA include many publicly accessible gathering spaces, including a dog play area. (Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects)*

▼ *The proposed public mews at Mary Anne's Place in Port Moody, BC provides a strong public space that complements the mixed-use building. (Placemaker Communities / GHL Architects)*

Toolbox:
Social circulation

5

Designing social...
Circulation

Why are circulation spaces important for social wellbeing?

Circulation spaces have significant—and often unmet—social potential. Residents use these spaces daily, regardless of whether they are looking to socialize with neighbours or not. Design influences whether people rush through corridors, elevators, and stairs or linger on their way in and out of their homes. For example, narrow, dark, empty hallways may feel uninviting or even unsafe, and reduce the likelihood of people stopping to chat. In contrast, wide corridors with natural light and social nooks encourage lingering and increase opportunities for spontaneous, positive interactions between neighbours. Saying 'hello' to a neighbour in the hallway is often the starting point to a longer-term relationship.

1 in 4

North Vancouver residents reported connecting with neighbours in lobbies, corridors, and elevators, making these the spaces where residents connect most frequently!
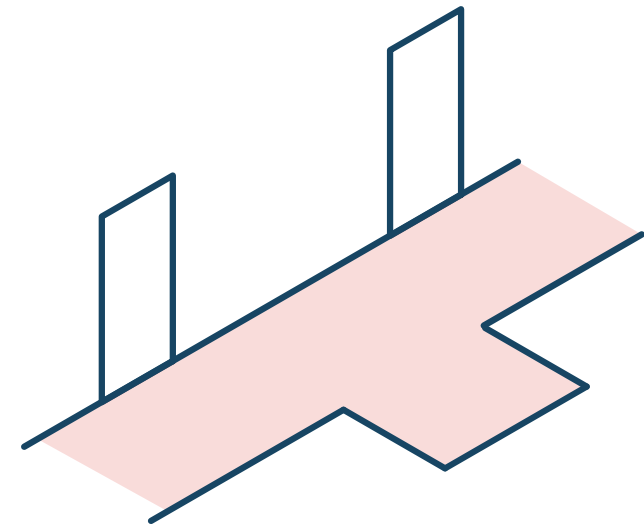
In this section, you will learn how to design social:

5.1. Lobbies
5.2. Corridors
5.3. Nooks
5.4. Stairs

5.1. Lobbies

Sociable design outcome:

Design comfortable, multi-purpose lobbies that encourage neighbours to linger and connect with one another, by co-locating multiple activities and uses in the space.

▼ *The lobby at Quayside Village in North Vancouver, BC uses comfortable seating and warm materials to create a desirable hang out space for residents. It is also the access point to the common house and courtyard. (Happy Cities)*

Considerations

Applicability: These recommendations generally apply to mid-rise and high-rise buildings. For smaller buildings that may not have lobbies, consider how the design principles can apply to common entry points.

Social group size: Encourage spontaneous interactions between a small number of neighbours.

Scale: For buildings with few indoor common spaces, consider creating a larger lobby to serve as an indoor social space for residents.

Principles in action

1 **Location |** Connect the lobby with other indoor and outdoor amenity spaces.

2 **Location |** Where appropriate to the site context, design open-to-below stairs to create connections to and from the lobby in buildings where amenities are located on the second floor.

3 **Activation |** Create visually appealing and prominent mailboxes that have nearby seating to encourage interactions on a daily basis. Design functional areas to store parcels and recycling and minimize clutter.

4 **Activation |** Provide multiple social and functional elements, such as soft seating, tables, power outlets, WiFi, shared bookshelves, a fireplace, games cupboard, bulletin board, coffee station, movable furniture, artwork, box of toys for kids, and more.

5 **Inclusion |** Use warm materials, colours, natural light, and artwork to create a sense of joy and belonging for residents of various cultures and ages.

6 **Inclusion |** Avoid blank corners and tight spaces that make the lobby uncomfortable to navigate and spend time in.

7 **Inclusion |** Ensure that the lobby provides a good waiting point with visual access to the street.

▲ *The lobby at Station Center Family Housing in Union City, CA has natural light and warm colours. It includes access to other amenities, mailboxes, and sight lines to public spaces outside. (Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects)*

◄ *The lobby at 150 Dan Leckie Way in Toronto, ON has an active stairway connecting the lobby to amenity spaces on the second floor. The double height ceiling contributes to a comfortable waiting area with ample natural light and visual access to the street. (Maris Mezulis / KPMB)*

5.2. Corridors

Sociable design outcome:

Create easy-to-navigate, comfortable, accessible circulation spaces that allow neighbours to bump into each other, pause, and interact.

Considerations

Applicability: Low-rise, mid-rise, and high-rise buildings with shared corridors or outdoor walkways.

Social group size: Encourage spontaneous interactions between a small number of neighbours.

Scale: Consider a corridor that is at least 1.5 metres wide to accommodate social functions.

▼ *Bright colour accents and natural light along the corridors of 150 Dan Leckie Way in Toronto, ON welcome activity and interaction among residents. (Maris Mezulis / KPMB)*
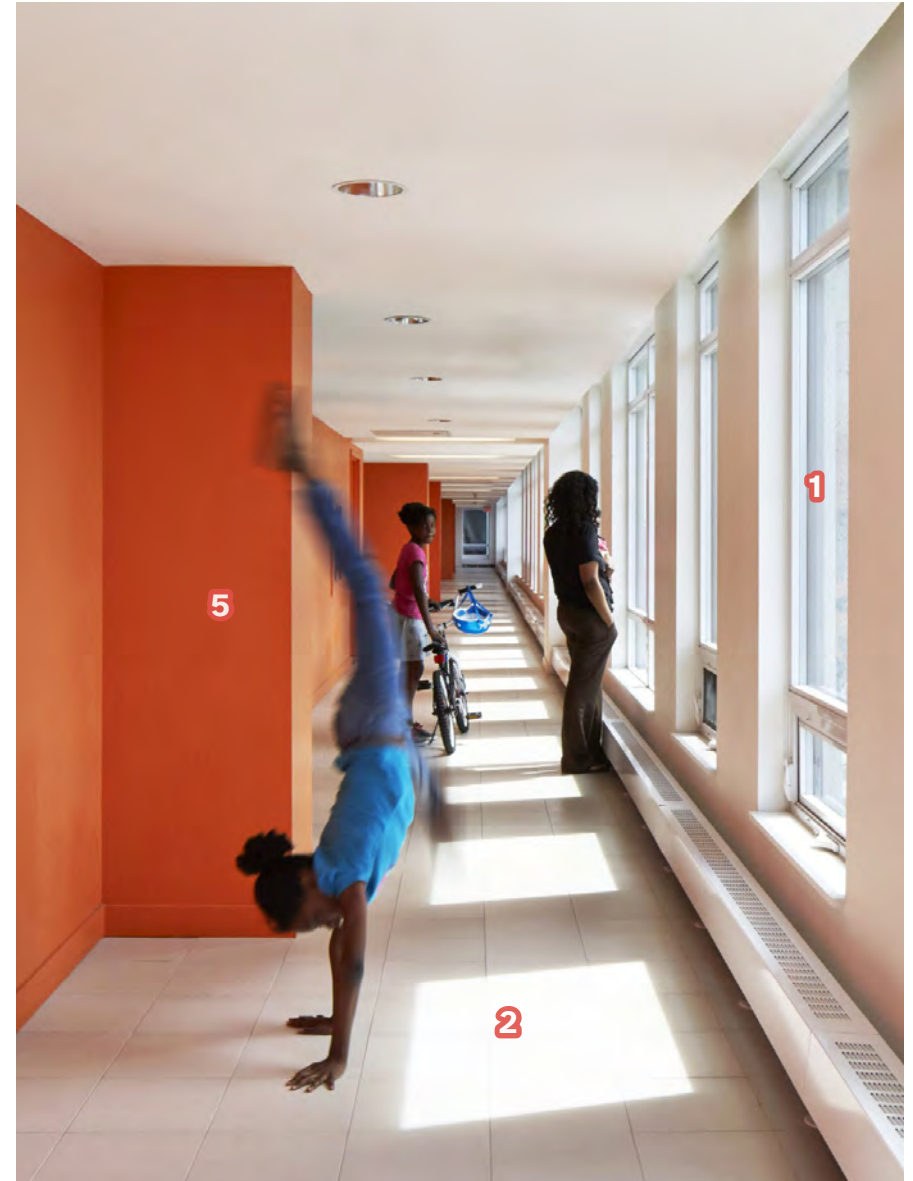
Principles in action

1 **Invitation |** Introduce natural light into corridors. Where not possible, consider warm colours and lighting quality to create a comfortable area.

**2** **Invitation |** Consider single-loaded circulation, where homes are placed only on one side of the corridor. Consider designing exterior walkways that allow for cross-ventilated homes and overlook social spaces, such as courtyards.

3 **Activation |** Provide multiple reasons to pause and interact in corridor spaces.

4 **Inclusion |** Consider wider corridors with integrated accessibility features, such as handrails.

5 **Inclusion |** Break up long corridors through building form, social nooks, widened areas, and variation in lighting, colour, and materials.

6 **Transition |** Consider acoustic solutions to avoid noise transfer and echoes, particularly in areas with wider corridors or social functions.

For guidelines on entrances to private homes, refer to 7.1, Entryways (p. 62).
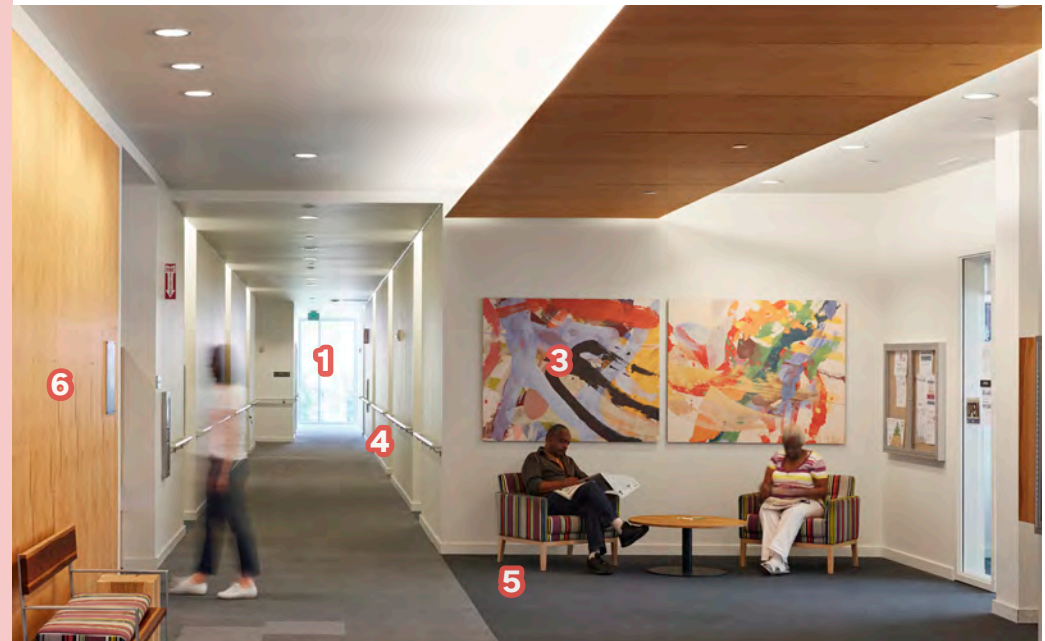
▲ *The wide lobby and hallways at Lakeside Senior Apartments in Oakland, CA allow two people using wheelchairs or walkers to pass by comfortably. Natural light, seating, artwork, bulletin boards, and handrails create a comfortable, accessible environment for all ages and abilities. (Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects)*

◀ *Wide, outdoor walkways at Our Urban Village Cohousing in Vancouver, BC include social nooks. Neighbours gather and have coffee in these shared spaces, which overlook the common courtyard. The single-loaded corridor allows for cross-ventilation in homes with natural light and windows on two sides. (Happy Cities)*

5.3. Nooks

Sociable design outcome:

Create social nooks off of corridors, lobbies, or outdoor shared spaces that allow for a small group of residents to interact.
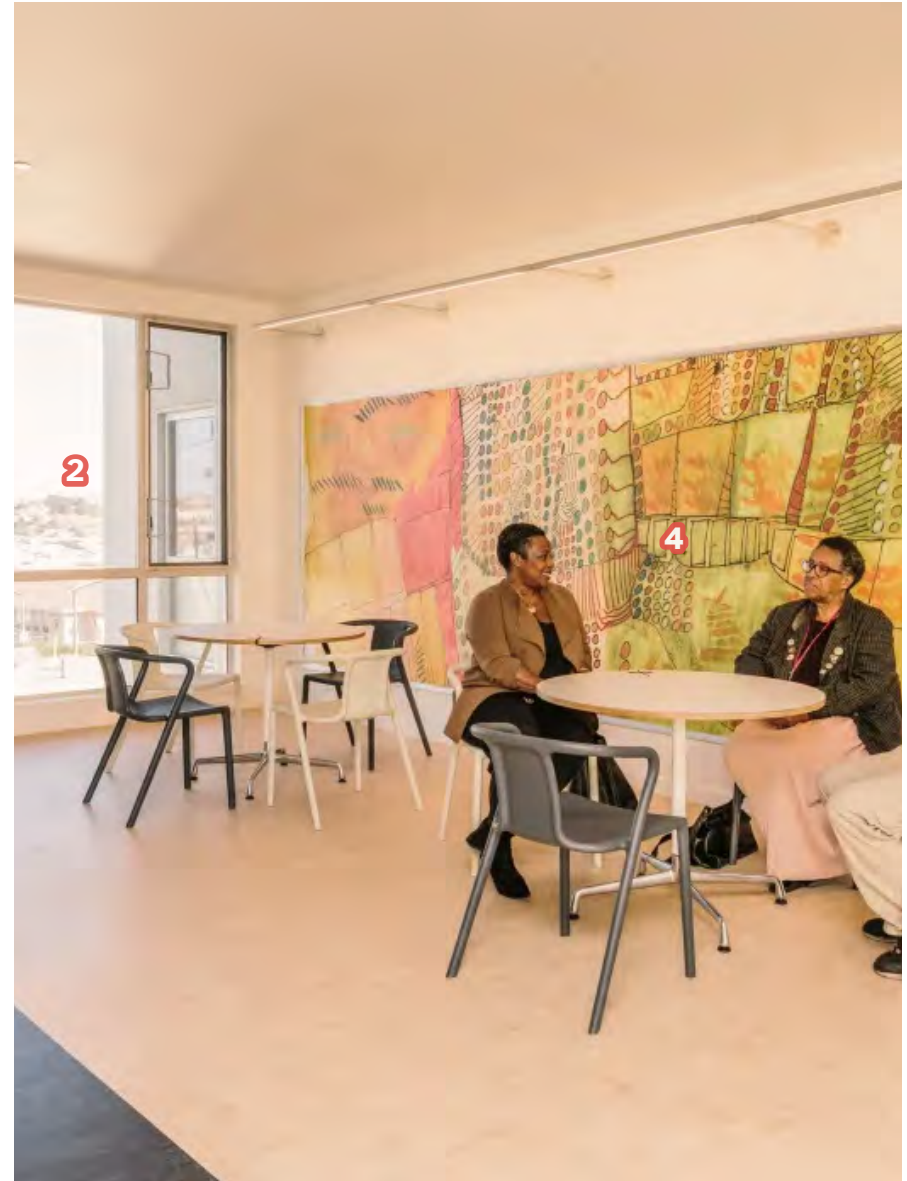
Considerations

Applicability: Ideally, distribute small social nook spaces throughout the building, particularly in larger-scale buildings.

Social group size: Provide opportunities for small groups of neighbours to meet and interact.

Scale: Social nooks should be sized to accommodate a small group of residents comfortably.

Principles in action

1 **Location |** Ensure that nooks are prominently located (e.g. visible from an elevator landing) and residents are able to preview the space or pass by it without feeling pressured to connect.

2 **Invitation |** Provide access to natural light in social nooks to make spaces more appealing and encourage people to spend time there.

3 **Activation |** Create dedicated programming in these spaces, such as storage for books and games, plants, a place to display art, and comfortable seating.

4 **Inclusion |** Provide details, materials, and a spatial configuration that creates a warm and intimate space.

5 **Transition |** Create acoustic privacy between homes and social nooks.

6 **Evolution |** Consider who will live in the building and how residents can work together to shape activities or uses of social nooks to meet various cultural backgrounds, ages, and household compositions.

▲ *The social nook off the elevator at Little Mountain Cohousing in Vancouver, BC is well lit and functions as the community library. Comfy seating, natural light, and a rug create a cozy atmosphere for residents of all ages. (Little Mountain Cohousing)*

◀ *Wide, exterior walkways at Driftwood Village Cohousing in North Vancouver, BC are lined with differently coloured doorways, windows, plants, and seating areas. Nooks are placed adjacent to the elevator and stairs, increasing opportunities for social encounters as people pass through the building. (Happy Cities)*

5.4. Stairs

Sociable design outcome:

Encourage the use of stairs to promote physical activity and movement through the building.

Considerations

Applicability: Mainly applies to low and mid-rise buildings, or the lower portions of a high-rise building. Stairways should be prominent and inviting, complement elevators, and encourage use by those who are able.

Social group size: Encourage spontaneous interactions between a small number of neighbours.

Scale: Stair widths are primarily determined by building code. To encourage sociability, provide enough width to allow two people to stop for a conversation with a comfortable space between them.
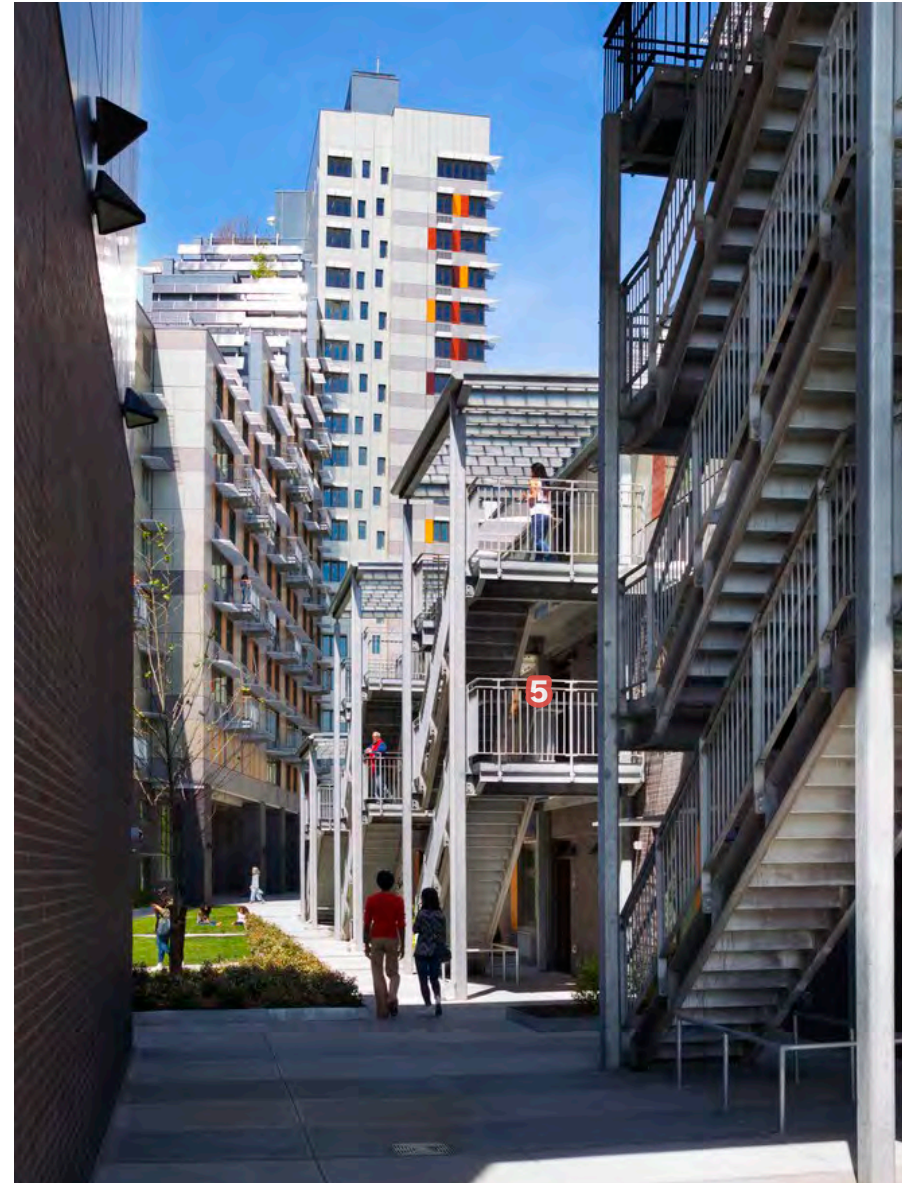
Principles in action

1 **Location |** Ensure that stairs are easily accessible and visible from the main lobby and entrance.

2 **Location |** Consider an open-to-below lobby stairway to connect different amenity spaces together on separate floors.

3 **Invitation |** Where possible, provide natural light in stairwells.

4 **Invitation |** Include colourful graphics in stairwells that mark levels or encourage people to linger and interact.

5 **Activation |** Where possible, pair outdoor stairways with an outdoor walkway and/or courtyard to encourage use.

6 **Evolution |** Allow residents to participate in creating artwork and graphics to decorate stairwells.

▲ *The interconnecting stair at the Bowline in North Vancouver, BC allows residents to travel directly from the lobby to the second floor where the majority of amenity spaces are located. (Happy Cities)*

◀ *The landing of the stairs at Aboriginal Housing in Victoria, Australia features bright graphics. The brick-clad walls of the stairs stand out along with graphic decals of birds. (Andre Wuttke / Breathe Architecture)*

6

Toolbox:
Social amenities
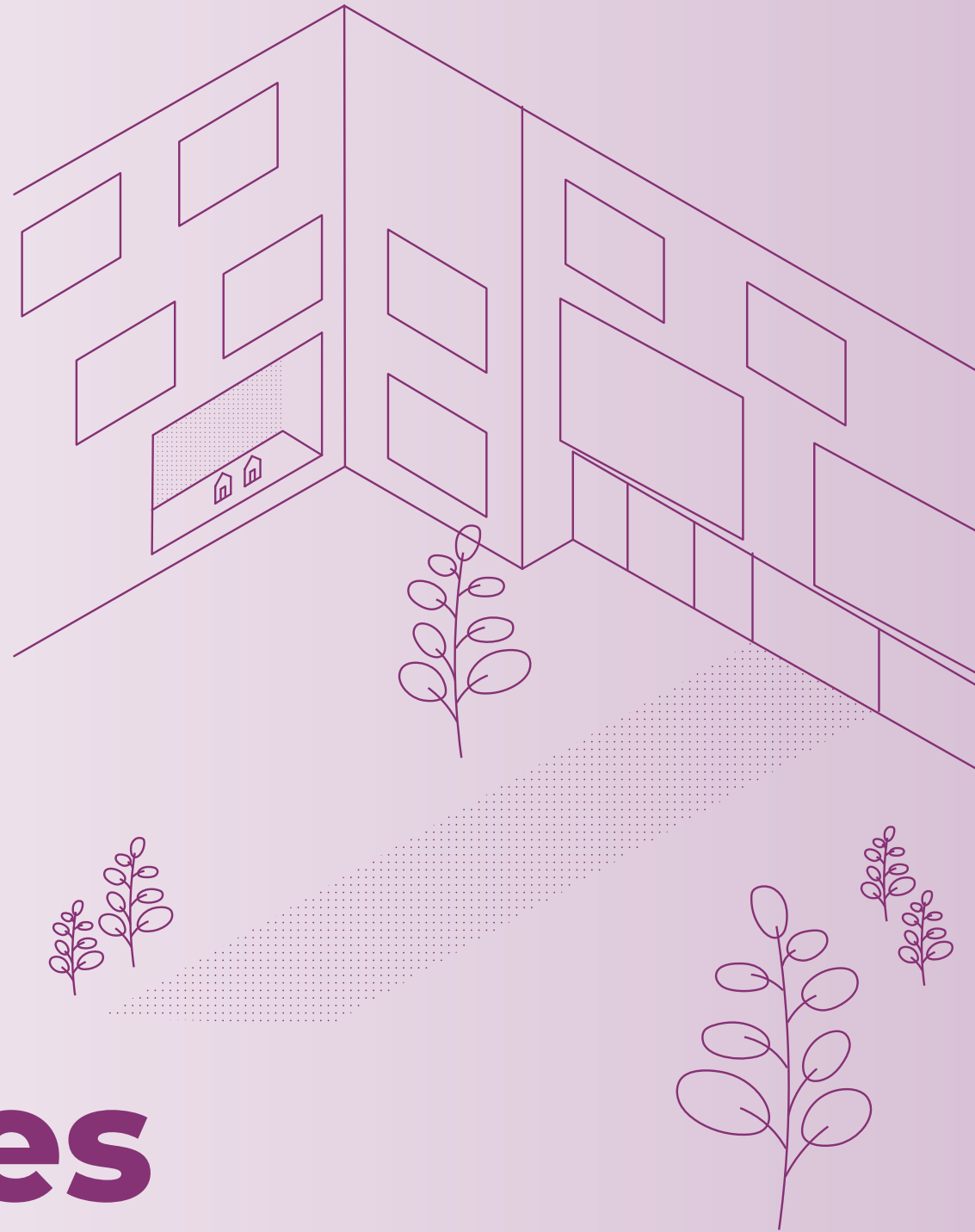
Designing social...
Amenities

Why are shared amenities important for social wellbeing?

Shared amenities offer space for residents to participate in activities together on common ground. They also accommodate uses that multi-unit housing residents do not have space for in their private units, such as workshops, outdoor areas, or a large gathering room. Functional and well-designed common amenities allow residents to participate in a variety of social activities and provide gathering places, encouraging intergenerational and cross-cultural relationships. In addition, programming and policy (for example, how and when residents are allowed to use spaces, and what activities they can do there) influence how likely it is that residents will use shared amenities.

1 in 10

North Vancouver residents reported connecting with neighbours daily in outdoor spaces and parkades.
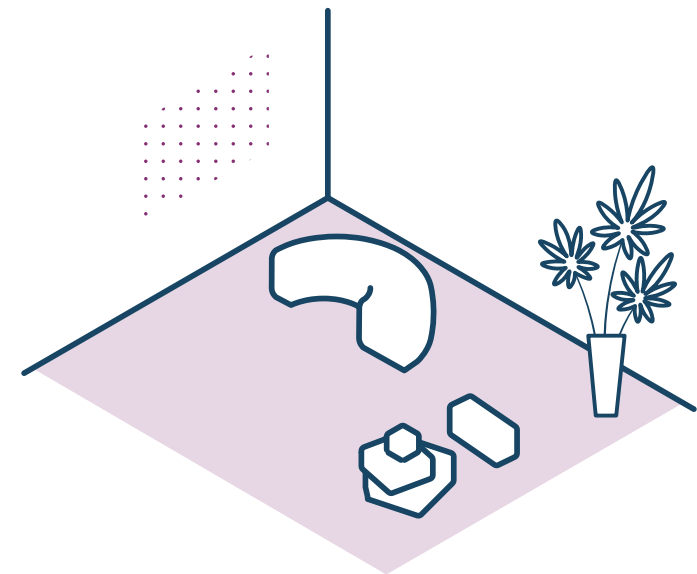
In this section, you will learn how to design social:

6.1. Indoor spaces
6.2. Outdoor spaces
6.3. Bicycle spaces

6.1. Indoor amenities

Sociable design outcome:

Provide a variety of recreational and functional amenity spaces that are prominently sited and in easily accessible locations, with flexibility to accommodate different uses.

Recreational amenities may include:

- *Lounges*
- *Shared kitchens*
- *Kids playrooms and teen lounges*
- *Exercise facilities*
- *Music rooms*

Functional amenities may include:

- *Shared laundry*
- *Bookable guest suites*
- *Co-working spaces*
- *Bookable meeting rooms*
- *Tool libraries and workshops*
- *Pet areas and pet wash*
- *Sports equipment storage*

▼ *The community room at OME in San Francisco, CA opens onto a shared deck overlooking Folsom Street, with city views, planters, a grill, and access to the laundry room. (Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects)*

Considerations

Applicability: Applies to all typologies, with particular considerations for mid-rise and high-rise buildings.

Social group size: Encourage both spontaneous and planned interactions between smaller and larger groups of neighbours.

Scale: Size spaces according to their function, anticipated uses, and the number of people who will share a space. In buildings with multiple amenity spaces, create spaces at a diversity of scales from small, to medium, to large.

Principles in action

1 **Location |** Locate amenity spaces near to lobbies and people's daily travel paths.

2 **Location |** Where appropriate, co-locate functional and recreational amenity spaces to encourage greater interaction and use.

3 **Location |** Create a direct and visual connection between indoor and outdoor amenity spaces.

4 **Invitation |** In smaller buildings with few recreational amenities, consider how to maximize the social potential of functional spaces (e.g. laundry, parking, etc.).

5 **Invitation |** Include colour, artwork, natural light, and a variety of types of lighting.

6 **Invitation |** Include a comfortable seating area in functional amenities (e.g. in a shared laundry room).

7 **Activation |** In larger spaces, include three to five functions that can appeal to residents.

8 **Activation |** Design resident-led programming to take place regularly in amenity spaces.

◀ *Little Mountain Cohousing in Vancouver, BC received a reduction on the overall number of parking spots required by the City. The community used the extra space to create a sound-proof music room below ground, next to the parking garage. (Little Mountain Cohousing)*

▼ *The common room at Our Urban Village in Vancouver, BC offers residents a flexible space for shared activities. Colour accents and playful lighting brighten the space, which also has a door and windows facing onto Main Street. A variety of seating areas allows for multiple functions, including a space where residents can cook and eat meals together. (Darren Sutherland)*

6.1. Indoor amenities (continued)

▲ The lounge at Bayview Hill Gardens in San Francisco, CA is co-located with the laundry and computer rooms, with clear sight lines between the different spaces. (Matt Edge / David Baker Architects)

▲ The shared workshop at Driftwood Village Cohousing in North Vancouver, BC adds value for residents by allowing them to borrow tools, work on projects, and share knowledge while living in multi-unit housing. (Happy Cities).

◄ The dedicated indoor kids play area at Driftwood Village Cohousing in North Vancouver, BC is a safe and joyful place for young residents to spend time with neighbours. The play room is directly connected to the courtyard and includes a shared washroom. (Happy Cities)

Principles in action

9 **Inclusion |** Provide access to a universal washroom in large amenity spaces.

10 **Inclusion |** Consider opportunities to accommodate cultural needs (e.g. ventilation for smudging or acoustics for musical activities).

11 **Inclusion |** Offer convenient access hours that allow residents to drop in to a recreational space without booking in advance.

12 **Transition |** Provide an opportunity for residents to 'preview' the space before entering, through placement of glazing.

13 **Transition |** Consider both active and quiet functions, use acoustic solutions, and locate amenities to minimize noise disruption.

14 **Evolution |** Provide one or more ways for residents to take ownership over shared spaces (e.g. an undesignated space that residents can determine a use for, or an intentionally blank wall for community art).

15 **Evolution |** Design spaces to be flexible and allow uses to shift over time to meet the needs of residents.

▲ *The Common House at Marmalade Lane in Cambridge, England is a year-round social hub for the intergenerational community. (David Butler / Mole Architects)*

◄ *The common house at Edwina Benner Plaza in Sunnyvale, CA provides dedicated space for kids and an indoor-outdoor connection. (Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects)*

6.2. Outdoor amenities

Sociable design outcome:
Provide a variety of recreational outdoor amenity spaces on site, with flexibility to allow for different uses.

Outdoor spaces may include:
- *Courtyards*
- *Rooftops*
- *Barbecue areas*
- *Community gardens*
- *Gazebo or small seating areas*
- *Dog run or park*
- *Playgrounds and informal play spaces*

▼ *Vindmollebakken housing in Norway co-locates the lobby, common amenities, and shared walkways around a central courtyard. (Sindre Ellingsen / Helen & Hard Architect)*

Considerations

Applicability: Applies to all typologies.

Social group size: Encourage both spontaneous and planned interactions between smaller and larger groups of neighbours.

Scale: Size spaces according to their function, anticipated uses, and the number of people who will share a space. In buildings with multiple amenity spaces, create spaces at a diversity of scales from small, to medium, to large.

Principles in action

1 **Location |** Create direct and visual connections between indoor and outdoor amenity spaces. These connections can allow residents to observe passively or participate, depending on their preferences.

2 **Invitation |** Use colour, diverse plants, and lighting to create a visually appealing space.

3 **Invitation |** Maximize the amount of sunlight while also providing covered and shaded seating opportunities.

4 **Activation |** For larger spaces, include three to five functions that can appeal to residents.

5 **Activation |** Ensure that the building edges facing the outdoor space (particularly for courtyards) are active. Active facade elements include home entrances at grade with a clear transition from private to public, balconies overlooking the space, direct access to an indoor amenity space or lobby, or exterior circulation.

6 **Inclusion |** Provide access to a universal washroom nearby.

▲ *The outdoor courtyard at 855 Brannan Apartments in San Francisco, CA offers residents multiple and flexible outdoor gathering spaces at the building edge as well as access to interior amenities. (Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects)*

◄ *The colourful, outdoor, covered play area at AYA Housing in Washington DC offers a flexible space with sunlight for children of all ages. (Hoachlander Davis Photography / Studio Twenty Seven Architecture + Leo A Daly JV)*

6.2 | Outdoor amenities (continued)

▲ Residents play together in the common courtyard at Capitol Hill Urban Cohousing, a single egress stair building in Seattle, WA. (Schemata Workshop)
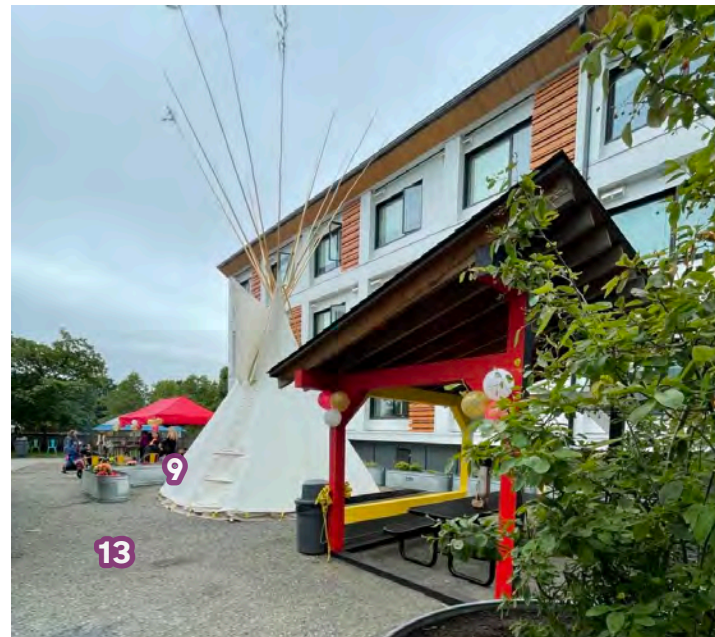
▲ Rooftop community gardens offer an intergenerational community space at Via Verde in the Bronx, NY. (David Sundberg Grimshaw + Dattner Architects)

◄ Lu'ma Native Housing Society worked with Indigenous residents and a local artist to build a teepee in the common courtyard outside their modular housing building in Vancouver, BC. The outdoor space hosts community celebrations and activities, and includes sheltered seating space and a community garden to grow local and medicinal plants. (Happy Cities)

Principles in action

7 **Inclusion |** Consider both active and quiet functions, and how they relate to each other.

8 **Inclusion |** Consider convenient access hours that allow residents to drop in to a recreational space without booking in advance.

9 **Inclusion |** Provide opportunities for plants, placemaking, and artwork that celebrate and reflect culture.

10 **Transition |** Provide an opportunity for residents to 'preview' or overlook the space before entering, through placement of windows, doors, or other openings.

11 **Transition |** Consider acoustic solutions and locate amenities to minimize noise disruption to private spaces.

12 **Evolution |** Include at least one element that allows residents to take ownership of the space (for example, a community garden, flexible furniture, or a place to paint a mural).

13 **Evolution |** Design spaces to be flexible and allow uses to shift over time to meet the needs of residents.

14 **Evolution |** Provide access to a shared storage area to store seasonal items.

▲ *The courtyard at Station Center Family Housing in Union City, CA has a kids playground and community garden. The laundry room is located off the courtyard, allowing kids to play while parents do laundry. Balconies overlook the courtyard to connect private units with shared space, creating a sense of community. (Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects)*

◀ *Round Prairie Elders' Lodge in Saskatoon, SK provides affordable homes for Metis elders. The small courtyard gardens are at an accessible height and connect to the indoor community gathering space, supporting social programming and community connections. The building is owned by Central Urban Métis Federation Inc. (Big Block Construction)*

6.3. Bicycle spaces

Sociable design outcome:
Provide secure, comfortable, easily accessible, and convenient bicycle infrastructure that encourages residents to ride their bikes and provides opportunities for social interaction.

Bicycle spaces may include:
- *Secure long-term parking (e.g. in a parking garage)*
- *Short-term, convenient parking (e.g. at building entrances)*
- *Bicycle repair room, workshop, or station*
- *Storage area for cargo bikes, trailers, strollers, and mobility devices*

Considerations

Applicability: Applies to mid-rise and high-rise buildings.

Social group size: Encourage spontaneous interactions between small groups of neighbours.

Scale: Reference the relevant municipal policy, LEED standards, and other best practices to align with or exceed the highest standard for bike parking quantity, quality, and location (both short-term and long-term spots).

The designated stroller parking at the Bowline in North Vancouver allows families the flexibility to store items that can be challenging in typical multi-unit homes. (Hey Neighbour Collective)

Principles in action

1 **Location |** Ensure that bicycle rooms are secure and easily accessible from the street (e.g. at grade or near the parkade entrance) and main entrances.

2 **Location |** In large buildings, consider a bike elevator or designated bike pathway beside vehicle access to the parkade.

3 **Location |** Co-locate bike area with other amenities.

4 **Location |** Minimize the number of locked doors that cyclists have to pass through to get outside with their bicycle.

5 **Activation |** Create a bicycle repair area with tools and an area to work.

6 **Activation |** Consider a designated dog wash, bike wash, or car wash facility near bike storage.

7 **Inclusion |** Include signage and wayfinding to indicate bicycle access routes.

8 **Inclusion |** Dedicate a percentage of long-term bicycle spots for larger bikes and wheeled devices, such as cargo bikes, bikes with trailers, strollers, and mobility devices. Accommodate charging infrastructure for e-bikes.

9 **Inclusion |** Include bicycle parking spaces that do not require people to lift their bike.
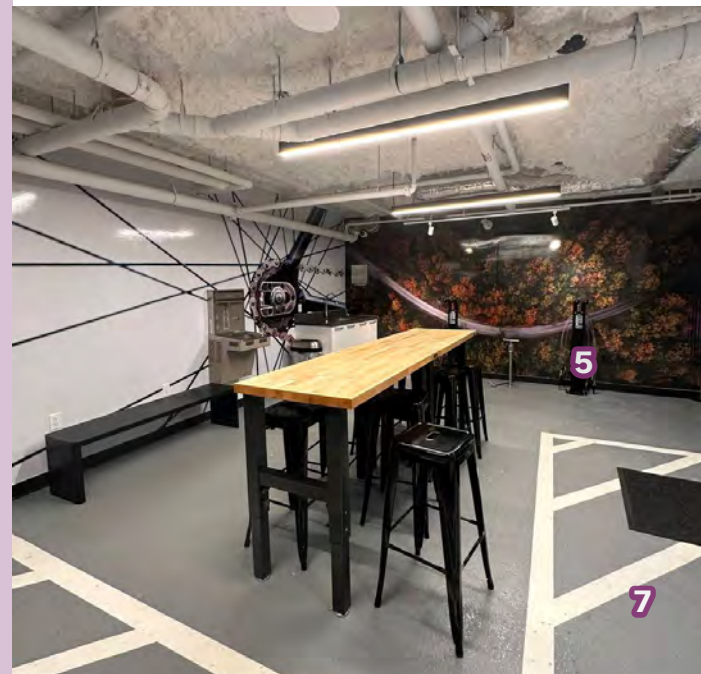
▲ *The bike room at Potrero 1010 in San Francisco, CA is located on the ground floor and directly connected to the lobby, elevator, and mail area next to a street-level entrance. It includes a bike repair station and large windows to provide light and a sense of safety. (Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects)*

◄ *The bike nook at the Bowline in North Vancouver, BC allows residents to socialize while repairing and maintaining their bicycles. (Happy Cities)*
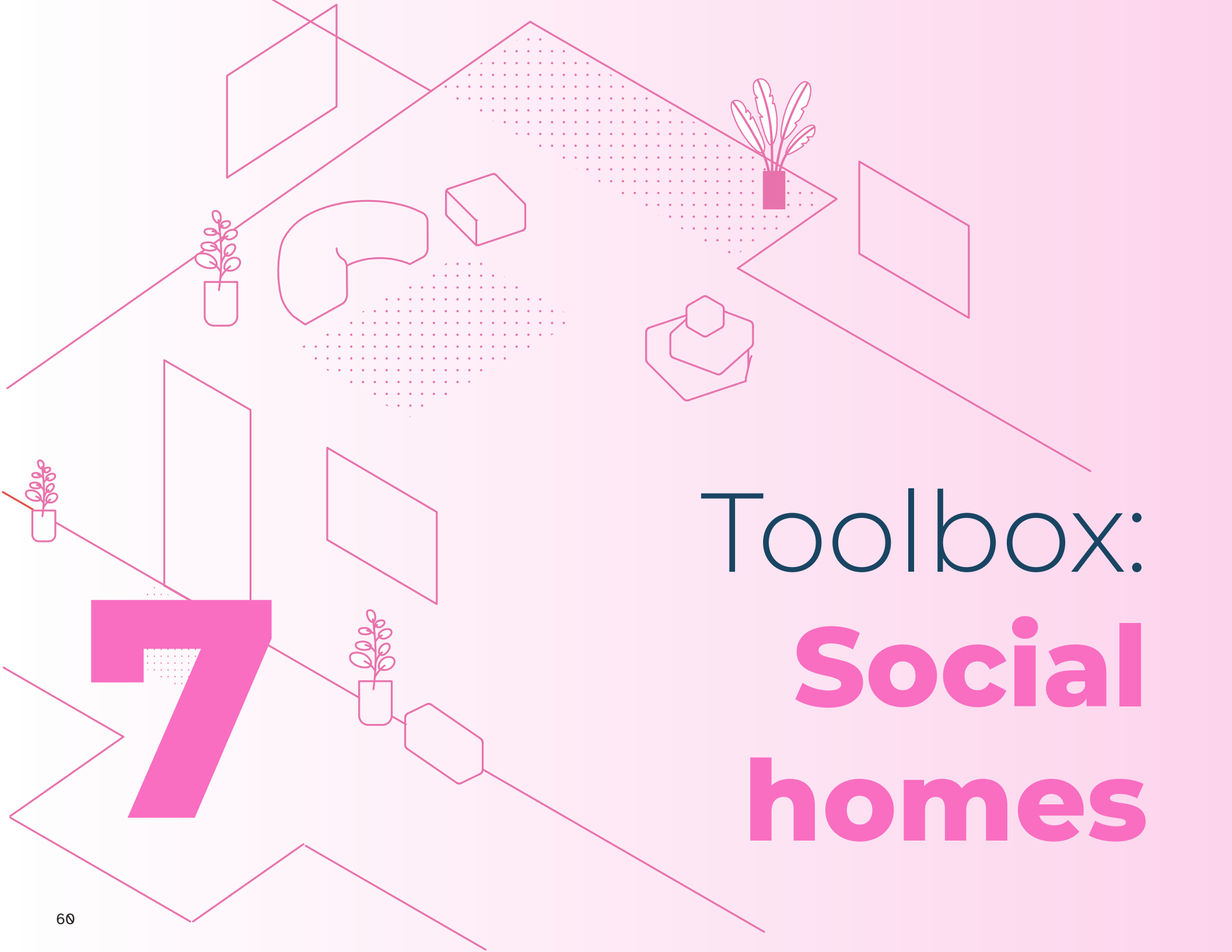
Toolbox:
Social homes

7

Designing social...

Homes

How does the design of individual homes impact social wellbeing?

It is important for people to have a private, quiet, and calm space at home where they can recharge. Transition areas and semi-private spaces, such as balconies and entryways, ensure that when people step outside their homes they have opportunities to engage in social interaction, but can choose when they are ready to engage. When people are satisfied with their homes, they are more likely to stay there longer. Long-term, secure tenure is linked with a higher likelihood of knowing neighbours and greater sense of belonging and trust.

1 in 3

North Vancouver residents reported that they chose to live in their building due to the design of their home's private spaces.
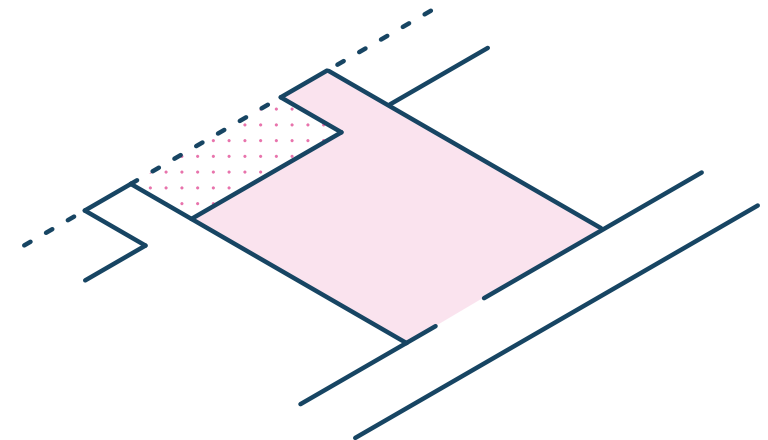
In this section, you will learn how to design social:

7.1. Entryways
7.2. Private homes
7.3. Balconies

7.1. Entryways

Sociable design outcome:

Create a thoughtful transition between private homes and semi-private or semi-public spaces to ensure comfort and privacy for residents.

Considerations

Applicability: Applies to buildings of all scales.

Social group size: Ensure that residents have choice over their social exposure and an opportunity to retreat into private spaces.

▼ *Ground floor homes at 855 Brannan in San Francisco, CA offer residents direct access to the pedestrian path. (Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects)*

Principles in action

1 **Location |** In double-loaded corridors (with units on two sides), stagger home entryways to enhance privacy for residents.

2 **Location |** Use ground-level entrances, patios, and stoops to create an active edge along pedestrian-oriented roads and courtyards.

3 **Inclusion |** Provide a shelf near front doors to allow people to put down an item while reaching for keys, or for placement of small decorations.

4 **Transition |** Create a transition zone and extend living spaces by designing a small setback or patio between the home's entrance and wider social corridors.

5 **Transition |** For ground-level entrances, ensure that there is an adequate transition between private and public through the use of landscaping and orientation of entryways.

6 **Evolution |** Provide opportunities for residents to customize their entrances through decorations, plants, or colour.

◄ *A home entryway at Vancouver Cohousing, BC is located a step back from the wide, social, exterior walkway. The orientation of the window balances privacy with natural light and visual connections to the corridor. Planter boxes and decorations make the entrance feel personalized. (Leslie Shieh)*

▼ *A proposed concept by Human Studio Architecture in Vancouver, BC places private balconies adjacent to the shared outdoor walkway, which allows for cross-ventilated homes and a thoughtfully designed transition space between private homes and the shared walkway. (Human Studio Architecture)*

7.2. Private homes

Sociable design outcome:

Design a variety of high-quality homes that can accommodate diverse households, life stages, needs, abilities, and preferences, with flexibility to meet changing needs over time and allow people to age comfortably in place.

Considerations

Applicability: Applies to buildings of all scales.

Scale: Consider different ways to evaluate the livability of homes. For example, more square footage does not always translate to better livability. However, critical dimensions—such as bedroom and living room width—are important to consider for adaptability and flexibility (e.g. to accommodate changes in household composition, mobility challenges, or disability). In addition, taller ceiling heights make homes feel more spacious.
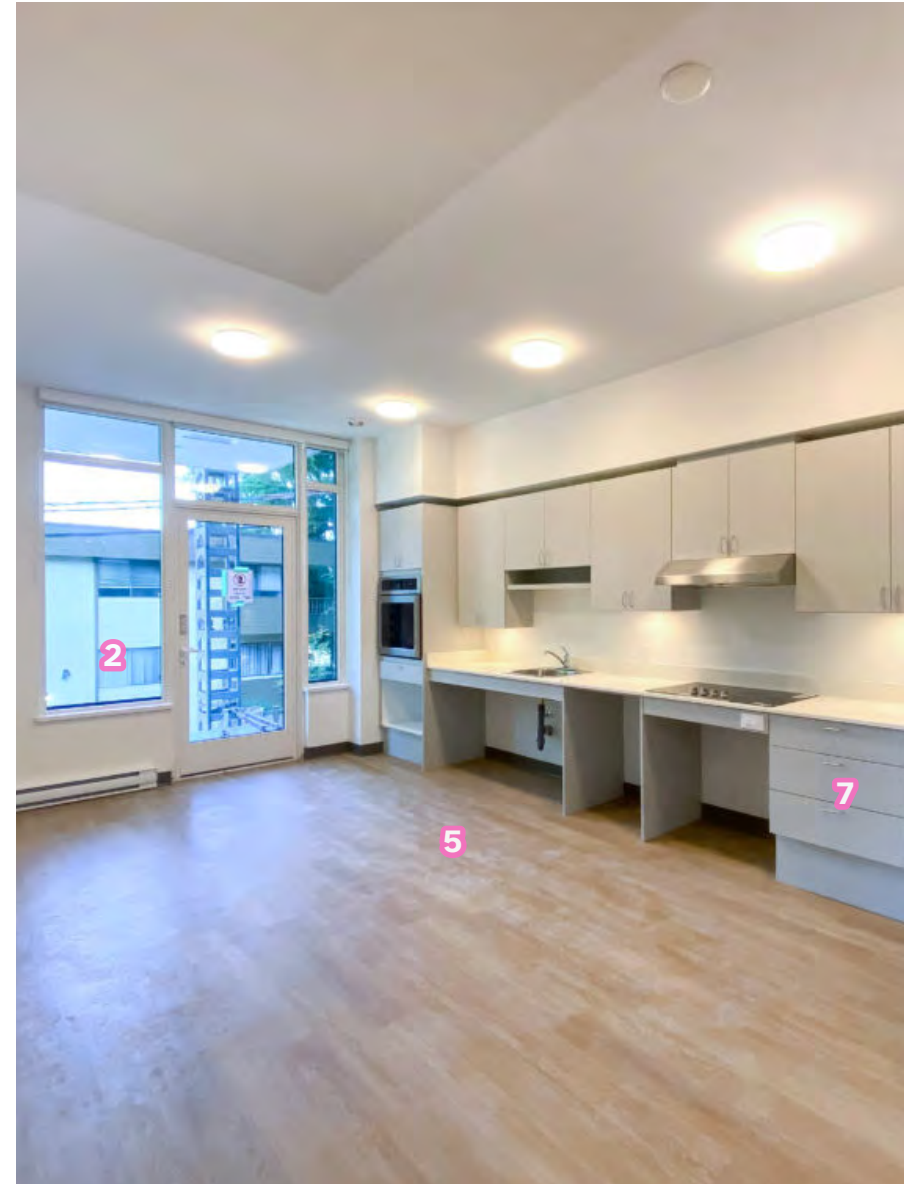
Principles in action

1 **Location |** Consider placing family-sized homes (2+ bedrooms) at grade with exterior entrances or facing a courtyard. On upper floors, consider locating these homes near a common amenity, such as a rooftop or raised courtyard.

2 **Invitation |** Consider building layouts that maximize opportunities for natural light and cross-ventilation in private homes.

3 **Transition |** Invest in good acoustic separation and sound insulation between homes to minimize friction between neighbours.

4 **Evolution |** Consider flexibility in home design through flex spaces (e.g. for a home office, a kids play area, or extra storage) and lock-off suites (e.g. for multi-generational households, changing households, or rental income).

5 **Evolution |** Design adaptable homes that support accessibility and aging in place.

6 **Evolution |** Consider how the structure and placement of services (e.g. mechanical, electrical, plumbing) impacts future flexibility, maintenance (e.g. for repairs), and operations.

7 **Evolution |** Provide ample built-in storage space and space to display personal items.

▲ *This unit at Our Urban Village Cohousing in Vancouver, BC creates a timeless space with high ceilings and excellent natural light. The building is passive house certified, which creates good acoustics and comfort within individual homes. (Tomo Spaces)*

◄ *The family-sized townhouse homes at Driftwood Village Cohousing in North Vancouver, BC provide functional and comfortable living spaces with direct connection to the street and small outdoor, semi-private patios. (Cornerstone Architecture)*

7.3. Balconies

Sociable design outcome:

Provide private balconies and ground-floor patios for residents' use. These spaces allow people to access nature and connect with the public realm, helping to create active building edges.

Considerations

Applicability: Applies to buildings of all scales. Consider the types of homes in the building and how balconies can balance other requirements of energy-efficient buildings (such as passive house design).

Scale: Propose a balcony size that is functional and useful for the home's expected occupants. For example, balconies less than 1.8 metres wide tend to be underused by occupants. For larger homes that will have more occupants, consider larger balconies.

A semi-enclosed patio extends an individual home's living areas at Savonnerie Heymans in Brussels, Belgium. (Filip Dujardin / MDW Architecture)

Principles in action

1 **Location |** Consider the placement and context of a balcony. For example, balconies below eight storeys can provide a strong connection to the public realm.

2 **Location |** Consider the amount of sunlight that the balcony will receive based on the orientation of the home and the building context.

3 **Location |** Ensure that the balcony feels like an extension of a home's living spaces.

4 **Invitation |** Where private balconies are not possible for each home, consider opportunities for other smaller-scale shared spaces. For example, design an outdoor balcony or patio space that three to five units can share and personalize together, rather than each having their own private balcony.

5 **Activation |** Allow residents to grow plants in pots on balconies. For larger patios and decks, consider a hose bib to enable larger gardens.

6 **Transition |** Create a sense of privacy and enclosure, while allowing opportunities to interact with neighbours and the public realm.

7 **Evolution |** Consider flexible indoor-outdoor connections, such as enclosed or semi-enclosed balconies that extend living space. Partly enclosed and recessed balconies can help people feel safe and provide a sense of privacy.

▲ *The balconies at Breese St. in Brunswick, Australia offer residents semi-private outdoor spaces with connections to the public realm. The building's operations are fossil fuel free and carbon neutral, with a maximum of five neighbours per floor. (Anthony Richardson, Tom Ross / Breathe Architecture + DKO)*

◄ *Residential stoops at Lakeside Seniors apartment in Oakland, CA provide a connection and transition to the sidewalk, balancing privacy with social exposure. (Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects)*

8
Policy and implementation

8 | Policy and implementation

Presently, few municipalities provide detailed guidance, support, or incentives for design that prioritizes wellbeing and social connection. Municipal policies have an important role to play in enabling housing that prioritizes sociability through the design of shared spaces. These policies may include zoning bylaws, design guidelines, rezoning requirements, and more. This section outlines challenges, tools, and opportunities to nurture sociable design in multi-unit buildings through city policies and development processes.

Considering policy for new buildings

This toolkit focuses primarily on design strategies for new buildings, while recognizing that action is also needed to promote wellbeing in existing housing.

This section outlines policy and implementation considerations for both non-market and market developments. The chart to the right highlights additional policy considerations when planning for social wellbeing in multi-unit housing, including the importance of retrofitting existing buildings, retaining affordable units, and supporting programming and operations.

New buildings
- Market
- Non-market

Supporting programming and operations

Existing buildings
- Retrofits
- Retaining affordable
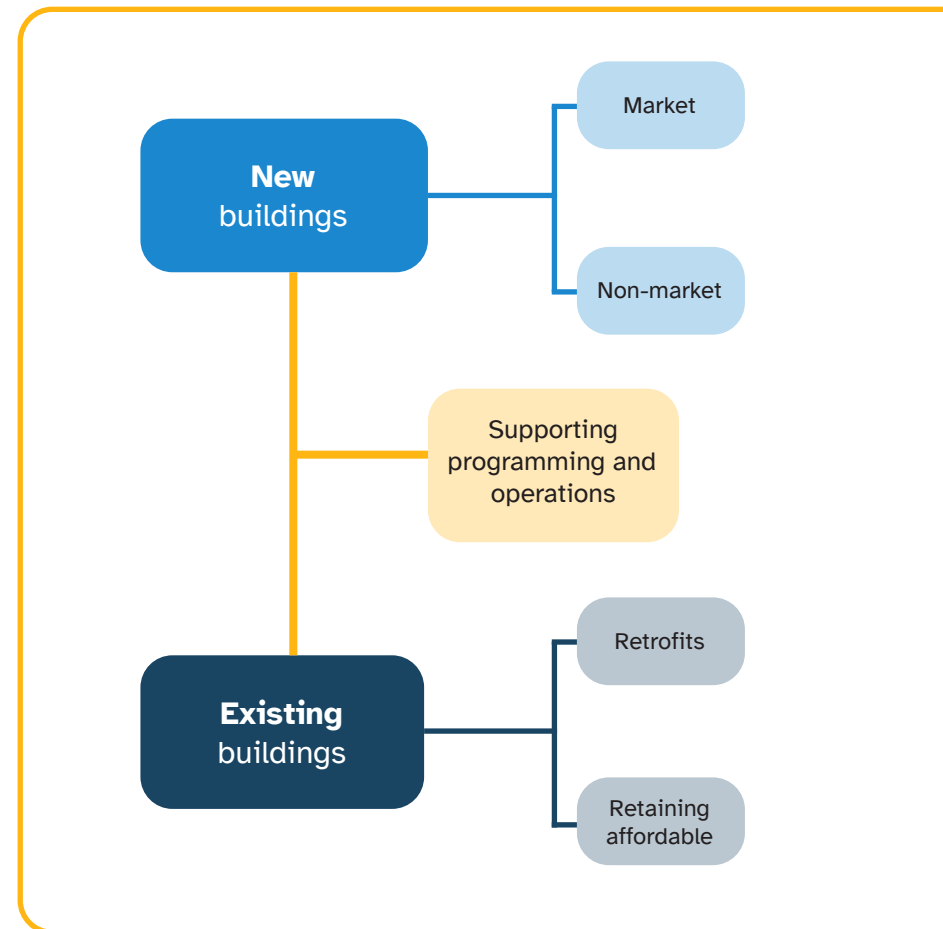
Policy challenges

During this project, we heard several critical policy barriers and challenges to building more socially connected, affordable multi-unit housing. These challenges were highlighted during research, workshops, and engagement with planners, developers, housing providers, and architects across Metro Vancouver.

Amenity space limitations

Across Canada, municipalities have varying definitions of amenity space, but generally define them as enclosed spaces with a specific function—for instance, a gym, lounge, or kitchen. These shared spaces can be valuable for resident wellbeing, but take away from area that can be sold or rented. As a result, many developers do not include any innovative social features or shared amenities outside of private homes without specific policy requirements or incentives.

Municipalities sometimes exclude indoor amenities from floor space ratio (FSR) calculations to facilitate their inclusion in buildings. However, these incentives typically do not apply to more informal social spaces (such as wider hallways with social nooks). Further, FSR exclusions can become complex for architects and developers to calculate. Building setbacks and height regulations often restrict overall building form, reducing flexibility for designers. Outdoor spaces, such as courtyards, are also not typically incentivized by municipal policy.

Building code restrictions

Beyond municipal policy, building codes and zoning restrictions can add costs and limitations to sites. For example, fire codes may deem personalized entryways (e.g. with pots beside the door), windows, or seating along corridors as fire hazards, which restricts personalization and functionality of common spaces. Single egress stair buildings are also not allowed in most North American jurisdictions, limiting the number of units that can be built on small sites and increasing costs. If legalized, single-stair buildings could bring benefits, including buildings with more windows, more family-sized homes, better energy efficiency, opportunities for social lobbies on each floor, and reduced corridor length.

Rezoning and approval challenges

The Province of B.C. and many local government councils are pushing for staff to approve housing development applications faster. Long approval timelines can add significant costs to housing, with a 2023 CMHC study finding that housing approval delays are linked with lower housing affordability. Complex incentives can be onerous for municipalities to check, adding steps to the development process. It is important for local governments to consider how to design incentives carefully so that they reduce rather than add complexity to the development process. Planners can consider innovative ways to both support social connection and reduce permitting times.

Affordability

Affordable, secure housing choices are critical for building strong social connections, belonging, and trust. Given this core need, it is crucial that new policies around sociable design do not pose additional challenges to affordability.

During the final workshop, we heard from Robert Brown of Chesterman Properties, who provided background on the current state of (un)affordability, key policy levers to reduce housing costs, and potential impacts on sociable design elements. The presentation is available from Hey Neighbour Collective on YouTube.

Funding criteria for affordable housing

One major challenge for affordable housing providers is that funding criteria for social spaces do not necessarily align with current and future needs of housing operators and residents. For example, funding criteria may restrict the overall area dedicated to non-residential spaces (i.e. amenities) that can be included, with a strong emphasis on the number of units built in a given project. These metrics require a balance between quantity and quality of units to ensure that deeply affordable projects also enhance social connection, wellbeing, and livability for residents.

Additionally, many affordable projects 'stack' funding out of necessity, as individual funding sources do not cover the entire cost of a project. As a result, housing providers often deal with conflicting funding criteria, posing challenges during the planning and development process. This context of intricate funding structures, underwriting processes, and legal agreements contributes to increased complexity, prolonged timelines, and higher expenses for affordable housing.

Importance of the neighbourhood

During workshops and in our study of North Vancouver, participants emphasized the importance of complete, accessible, and inclusive neighbourhoods to support wellbeing for multi-unit housing residents. Homes need a supportive context—a community that residents are proud of, that meets their daily needs, and where they love to spend time. In particular, we heard the importance of neighbourhoods that offer:

- The ability to live a healthy, active lifestyle
- Convenient destinations near homes
- Attractive, people-friendly streets and public spaces
- Opportunities to build friendships through chance encounters
- A strong sense of local identity and attachment
- Diverse, affordable housing choices for all residents, and that respond to people's needs

Above all, it is important to consider an equity-based approach to community planning, including equitable access to green space, public transit, pedestrian infrastructure, housing, and more.

Policy toolbox

Guidance, incentives, and regulation

City planners and housing professionals discussed benefits and challenges to an incentive-based approach versus regulation.

A regulatory approach makes certain design features mandatory through zoning or other policy. However, it can be difficult to get cities to adopt new and innovative design regulations, as strict requirements may generate more industry push back.

An alternative approach is for municipalities to create incentives for sociable design features, and align existing policies and regulations to work with these incentives. This approach allows for innovation and flexibility among socially minded architects and developers. It also increases the likelihood that other developers will follow suit, and can improve the quality of multi-unit housing applications.

Case studies of innovative buildings can help highlight the benefits of social connection and generate support from industry partners and residents.

In either approach, it is important for municipalities to consider and offer clear guidance for a broad range of social spaces beyond typical amenity rooms—such as wider walkways or social nooks—recognizing that socially connected residents are happier, healthier, and more resilient. The policy tools on the following pages provide high-level guidance on ways that municipalities can consider improving affordability and social connection through approvals, zoning, plans, design guidelines, and other policy levers.

Affordability

For affordable housing projects, municipalities can:

- Fast track approval processes
- Lease or donate City-owned land to non-profit housing providers
- Provide grants to facilitate sociable programming
- Offer property tax exemptions or forgiveness
- Waive development permit fees
- Waive/reduce municipal development cost charges
- Create or support a land trust
- Create an affordable housing reserve

Approvals process

- Fast track approval of affordable and sociable housing design projects
- Implement a trusted developers program (similar to a certified professional program)
- Introduce pre-approved sociable design solutions and/or designs for different typologies

Planning policy

- Create a sociable, affordable, resilient housing strategy or action plan
- Integrate language in Official Community Plans to show commitment to providing a range of age-friendly, inclusive, sociable housing choices
- Create neighbourhood or area plans that show commitment to providing a range of sociable housing choices that are accessible to the full range of incomes and household needs

Zoning and regulatory tools

- Increase allowable density (e.g. FSR exclusions) for housing that follows sociable design principles
- Relax setbacks and building height requirements
- Reduce vehicle parking requirements for housing, particularly in areas with good access to transit
- Create comprehensive development zone guidelines that favour affordable and sociable design
- Consider inclusionary zoning policies
- Consider modified building standards (i.e. code related)

Existing housing, retrofits, and redevelopment

- Replacement policies for loss of rental housing stock
- Demolition policies
- Condo/strata conversion policies
- Standards of maintenance by-law
- Wellbeing-focused tenant protection and relocation policies

Education and advocacy

- Create resources that help planners, developers, and non-market housing organizations prioritize sociable design (such as this toolkit!)
- Offer guidance for property management companies, strata councils, and co-op committees on pro-social operations and programming

Implementation

Putting this toolkit into action

During this project, we guided planners from five local municipalities and one First Nation through a four-workshop process to explore core questions around the implementation of sociable design. The workshops revealed many new questions and steps that planners must consider before developing new policy to encourage social wellbeing in multi-unit housing. The steps below provide a useful tool for other planners who are considering a similar process.

3 | Identifying alignment, support, and opportunities

- What policies and process updates are happening in your jurisdiction right now? (E.g. accessibility plan, seniors strategy, livability guidelines, OCP or zoning updates)

- What the challenges or resistance points do you anticipate to implementing policy for sociable design?

- What is your assessment of the desire for change within your organization?

- Do you have support from elected leaders? From key community or advisory groups?

1 | Taking a broad look at the wellbeing context

- What strategies, policies, practices, or guidelines already support social wellbeing or sustainability in multi-unit housing in your jurisdiction? (E.g. strategies for inclusion, equity, accessibility, family-friendly design, age-friendliness, affordability, or cultural design)

- What are the current wellbeing and demographic trends in your community? What are some key challenges?

- Are there any pressing council or government priorities (e.g. affordable housing, decreasing permitting times)? Where does social wellbeing fall within your priorities?

2 | Taking stock of current housing regulation

- How is multi-unit housing design (particularly for common spaces) currently being guided or regulated in your jurisdiction? (E.g. incentive-based or optional design guidelines, family-friendly guidelines, BC Housing or CMHC requirements, minimum or maximum common room areas set in the zoning bylaw, development agreements or negotiations)

- Are there key housing types in your jurisdiction that are posing challenges for wellbeing?

- Has your jurisdiction assessed or taken stock of what is being built? What type(s) of housing are being built, and how are they supporting or hindering wellbeing?

4 | Setting goals, intentions, and outcomes

- Which design strategies are you interested in exploring, and why? Consider factors including community impact, political support, and alignment with your existing strategies or plans.

- How would particular policy approaches or design goals transform housing in your jurisdiction if successfully implemented?

- What outcomes would you like to see from your policy changes? How will you measure success or progress towards identified goals?

6 | Identifying incentives and levers

- What are some processes that could be improved to make way for higher-cost design elements?

- What levers or powers do you have at the local government or First Nation level?

- Where might you need to advocate to senior levels of government?

- What are some incentives that could be effective in encouraging developers to change the way they design?

5 | Designing your policy

- Are there any other jurisdictions with policies or experiences that can inform how you write your policy?

- What housing typologies will the policy apply to?

- Are there population groups that will particularly benefit? (E.g. seniors and older adults, people with low or fixed incomes, people with disabilities, newcomers, young people, larger families, etc.)

- How much does the policy differ from current policy, development, and design practices?

- How will the policy impact cost and affordability?

- How complex or prescriptive are your design guidelines to implement from a construction point of view?

- How can your policy multi-solve for social wellbeing and climate resilience at the same time?

- Will this policy and its design guidelines have an impact on the approval process?

- Will the design guidelines be mandatory? If so, where will they reside? Or, will design strategies be incentivized? If so, what incentives will be most effective?

- What are the key design considerations or criteria? Is there any testing, analysis, or engagement needed to confirm the criteria?

Research, evaluation, and post-occupancy studies

Case studies and post-occupancy evaluations are critical to understand and evaluate whether new housing is supporting wellbeing and social connection. Beyond evaluating the built environment, post-occupancy studies should consider funding models and partnerships, enabling policies, innovative design features, engagement with residents, social programming, and building management. Case studies can highlight innovative and exemplary projects and how they support wellbeing for a wide range of demographics. At the same time, it is important to identify how innovative examples differ from current development practices and housing stock. Both can be evaluated to draw insights and inform policy decisions.

Case studies

As part of this project, Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective published a series of case studies to inspire more socially connected multi-unit housing. The case studies include:

- **Multi-unit housing examples:** Seven projects from four countries offer inspiration on socially connected housing that responds to local needs, including affordability, climate resilience, aging in place, and cultural connections.

- **Policy examples:** Four different local governments have each taken unique approaches to encouraging sociable multi-unit housing design and development.

Building social connections

Case studies to inspire socially connected multi-unit housing

July 2024

Building social connections

Innovative housing policy examples for social wellbeing

Post-occupancy studies

Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour Collective, and Simon Fraser University Department of Gerontology have together piloted and developed post-occupancy study methodology to assess social wellbeing and capacity for aging in place in multi-unit housing. In Canada, these types of studies are rarely done and never mandated by governments. However, they are essential to help us understand how residents actually use and interact in shared spaces. Social wellbeing post-occupancy evaluations include several steps:

- Conducting an on-site evaluation of a building's common spaces, looking at over 100 built environment factors that assess scale, quality, functionality, and programming.

- Hearing from residents through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

- Hearing from property managers, landlords, and developers through interviews.

POST-OCCUPANCY STUDY EXAMPLES
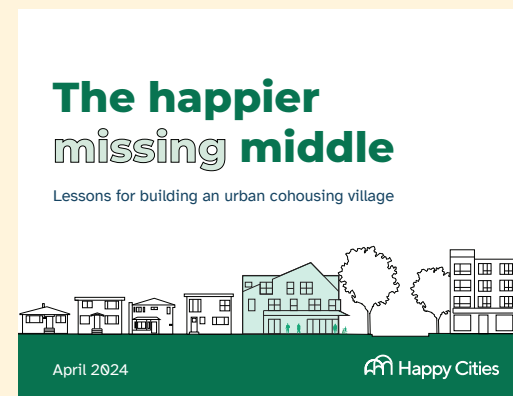
- *North Vancouver active design study*

- *Aging in the right place study*

- *Our Urban Village cohousing study*
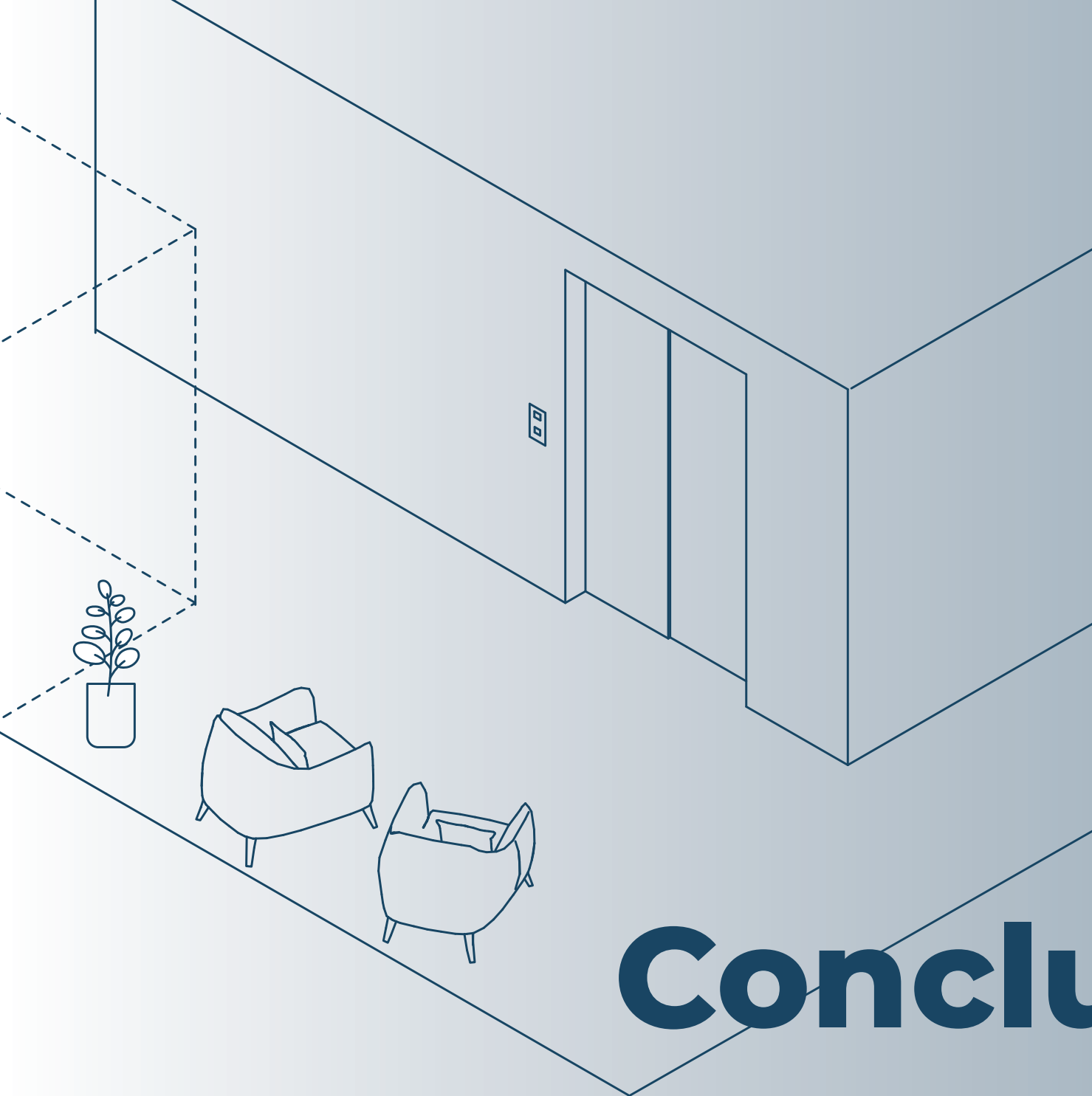
9

Conclusion

9 | Conclusion

As governments, residents, and housing industry professionals push to increase the supply of homes, it is crucial to ensure that new multi-unit housing provides safe, secure homes that make our lives happier, healthier, more connected, and resilient for generations to come.

Over the coming years, communities will continue to add density to accommodate growing populations—all while grappling with climate change, affordability, and meeting the needs of an aging population. This toolkit identifies opportunities for housing—and in particular, shared spaces—to become a catalyst for social connection and wellbeing.

Key next steps include:

- Align metrics across jurisdictions, share learnings, and gather evidence, including through case studies, evaluations of existing housing stock, and engagement with residents.

- Educate planners, architects, housing operators, developers, and elected officials on the importance of social connection in housing for community resilience and wellbeing.

- Advocate to senior levels of government and elected officials to implement policy to support this work.

- Conduct post-occupancy evaluations to measure the impacts of new housing policies on multi-unit buildings

- Implement strategies to improve affordability of sociable design, ensuring that new development benefits everyone.

- Explore co-benefits of sociable design features with other policy priorities, including climate mitigation, resilience, and reconciliation.

- Allow for flexibility in design guidance to accommodate diverse building contexts, demographics, and evolving best practices.

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Definitions

Active edge: A ground floor edge (or first adjacent storey) that is activated with a combination of regular entrances, doors and/or balconies, and windows.

Common space: Includes all common spaces within the building that are shared by multiple residents, including hallways, stairwells, lobbies, and amenities.

Amenity space: An outdoor or indoor area specifically designed for use by multiple residents living on a site for cultural, social, or recreational activities. Amenity space specifically refers to those common spaces with a specific function (ex: parking, laundry) or recreational purpose (gardens, rooftops, gyms, lounges).

Double-loaded corridor: Private homes (units) are located along both sides of a corridor. This configuration is typical of multi-unit buildings in North America.

Floor space ratio (FSR): Calculated by dividing the total area of all building floors by the area of the site. Many muncipalties use this as a key metric to measure what developers are allowed to build.

Private space: Space intended for and used by a single home or household.

Privately owned, publicly accessible space: These spaces are typically on private property, but allow public access and are considered as an amenity for the wider community.

Prominently sited/easily accessible: Amenities that are prominently sited and easily accessible are directly accessible or visible from the main entrance to the building or major elevator or stairway. The spaces are easily accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Semi-private space: A shared space that is accessible to residents of the building and their guests.

Single-loaded corridor: Private homes (units) are located only on one side of the corridor. This configuration allows for an exterior corridor to overlook a courtyard or other common space on one side, for example, and allows for cross-ventilation and windows on two sides of private homes.

Single egress stair building: Also known as point-block access, this typology places small clusters of homes (units) around a single stairway. This form is typical of many lower-rise European buildings but is not allowed in most North American jurisdictions. The layout is most efficient for small or narrow sites, and creates more space for individual homes by requiring only one stairway instead of two.

Social wellbeing: Social wellbeing refers to the extent to which individuals and communities experience a sense of belonging, social inclusion, and overall satisfaction with their social relationships and connections. These connections include both casual encounters and deeper relationships with family, friends, neighbours, and the broader community. Social wellbeing is a core dimension of overall wellbeing, and is closely linked to mental, physical, and emotional health.

Get in touch!

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