

# The happier missing middle

Lessons for building an urban cohousing village

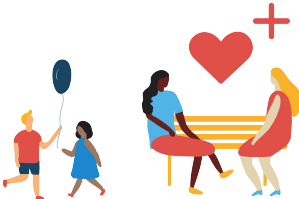


April 2024

 Happy Cities

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*Our Urban Village. (Happy Cities)*

# Executive summary

## Our Urban Village: A new model for socially connected, missing middle housing

Our Urban Village is a three-storey, 12-unit cohousing project in Vancouver. The development is a unique collaboration between Our Urban Village, a cohousing community, and Tomo Spaces, a local developer. In cohousing, residents have private units with extensive common spaces. They participate in regular activities and share management of the building, creating a more supportive and social community than in typical multi-unit housing.

Typically, cohousing projects are undertaken by residents themselves acting as the developer. However, cohousing groups face many barriers to development, including long project timelines, escalating land bids, complex municipal policy, and significant time commitments. Many groups that form are unable to overcome these challenges and complete their project.

Our Urban Village piloted an innovative “cohousing lite” model to reduce many of these financial and time barriers. The development prioritizes resident wellbeing and social connection, and offers an innovative model for developing low-rise, “missing middle” housing in a largely single-family residential neighbourhood. This report outlines key learnings from this “cohousing lite” community to explore how cities can add gentle density and grow in a sustainable and social way.



OUV exterior. (Matheson Photography)

## Goals of this report

- Share learnings that can enable more missing middle, community-oriented housing in an urban context
- Identify the wellbeing benefits associated with living in community-oriented housing
- Identify design strategies that can support resident wellbeing and increase opportunities for positive social interaction among neighbours
- Illustrate the wellbeing benefits of mutually supportive, trusting neighbours in multi-unit housing

# Measuring changes in wellbeing

Our Urban Village emerged through a collaborative and intentional design process between residents, the design team, and the developer. From the start, the building's layout, amenities, circulation spaces, and private units were designed to support resident wellbeing and social connection. This study sought to measure the impact of these design decisions to answer a central question: Can the design of multi-unit housing nurture stronger, more supportive social relationships?

Happy Cities designed a research methodology to measure how residents' wellbeing changed before and after moving into Our Urban Village. This included interviews, surveys, and on-site observations with residents before move in and approximately three and six months after. The results highlight impactful actions that can be implemented in future, community-oriented, missing middle developments to boost sense of community, wellbeing, and belonging.



Shared dinner in the common house. (Our Urban Village)

## Project timeline

### Space assessment (2020-2021)

The space assessment analyzed the architectural drawings to understand and hypothesize how residents will use the space.

### Baseline study (January 2023)

The baseline study included a survey of and interviews with residents, to gather a snapshot of their wellbeing prior to move in.

### OUV residents move in (July 2023)

### First post-occupancy study (October to November 2023)

The first survey took place approximately three months after residents moved in. During this period, people are still settling in and starting to form deeper social relationships. There is also a “honeymoon phase” when you first move into a new place, where things are new and exciting.

### Second post-occupancy study (January 2024)

Surveys and interviews took place approximately six months after move in. During this period, people become more settled and start to form habits. They may also start to notice issues or problems, and friction between neighbours can start to occur.

### Best practice guide (April 2024)

The best practice guide compiles learnings from the study, connecting wellbeing results with the design of the building.



# Wellbeing results snapshot

Six months after move in...

**88%** have four or more people in their life they can confide in

...representing a 20% increase compared to before move in.



**100%** have four or more neighbours they can ask for favours from

Baseline study comparison:

- 0% had four or more neighbours to ask for favours from
- 40% had zero neighbours to ask for favours from



**100%** feel lonely never or rarely

...representing a 60% increase compared to before move in.



**88%** consider two or more neighbours as friends

...compared to 11% before move in.

**“I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here.”**

**63%** agree or strongly agree  
...compared to 50% before move in.



**88%** interact with neighbours daily or weekly on the shared walkways

Baseline study comparison:

- 30% weekly
- 0% daily

**75%** interact with neighbours daily or weekly on the stairs or elevator

Baseline study comparison:

- 22% weekly
- 22% daily



For full results, refer to Section 4: Key Learnings & Appendix A: Wellbeing results summary

# Key learnings summary

This report explores how people's wellbeing changed after moving into Our Urban Village. Our learnings are organized into five categories: **sociability, belonging and trust, private spaces, circulation spaces, and common spaces**. Through each, we connect key wellbeing trends to various design decisions and the experience of living in an intentional community. Our results find that—as research and the residents themselves predicted—interactions with neighbours, social support, and trust in neighbours have significantly increased since moving in. At Our Urban Village, the organized weekly activities, the common house, and the wide, exterior walkways are particularly effective at connecting neighbours.

*“We generally have more people to ask questions of. We don't need to ‘go it alone.’ Some of this is borrowing a cup of sugar. Some is having other people to ask questions. Also, the extraordinary relief of having other people cook meals for us twice a week.”*

—Our Urban Village resident, six months after move in

*“Unexpectedly, I found it quite difficult in the first month or so to transition to just having to be ‘available’ all the time, in the sense that there was so much activity and questions and interaction. This has since eased a bit. More than I expected, I'm finding it really pleasant to chat quickly with a neighbour in passing on my way in and out of the building.”*

—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in



## 1 | Sociability

**Small-scale cohousing embeds social connection into daily living, through building design, shared activities, and intentional community.**

Many residents shared that they chose to move into Our Urban Village due to a desire for greater social connection. Overall, residents expressed positive experiences of living in the community so far. As of six months after move in, residents reported:

- An increase in both the number and frequency of social interactions they have, with all residents reporting that they have weekly or daily conversations with neighbours, compared to just 50% before
- An increase in the number of neighbours they consider as friends, with all but one respondent having at least two or more neighbours they consider as a friend
- An increase in the number of people they have to confide in, with all but one having four or more people
- A decrease in loneliness, with all but one reporting that they feel lonely rarely or never

Overall, the study found positive changes in social support and connection as early as three and six months after move in. However, residents noted that it takes time to adjust to living in a community-oriented building. As of six months after move in, some residents expressed that social activity (aside from casual encounters along the walkways, for example) occurs primarily through scheduled activities. However, they expect that over time, more get-togethers will happen spontaneously. Overall, our research finds that 12 units is an effective size for fostering social connections and a sense of community in cohousing.

### 2 | Belonging and trust

**Living in an intentional community builds a stronger sense of belonging and trust among neighbours, which can grow mutual support over time.**

Residents expressed overall that they have a strong foundation of trust, cooperation, and shared values to build on. Since moving in, all residents have reported overall positive experiences, with several noting that living in cohousing has exceeded expectations and that the group is very cooperative.

The first year is important in navigating and shaping what that community looks like (for example, organizing activities, managing shared spaces, getting to know one's own capacity for social connection, and setting boundaries). Through frequent social interaction and shared activities, residents are able to build deeper, more trusting relationships over time.

As of six months after moving into Our Urban Village, residents reported:

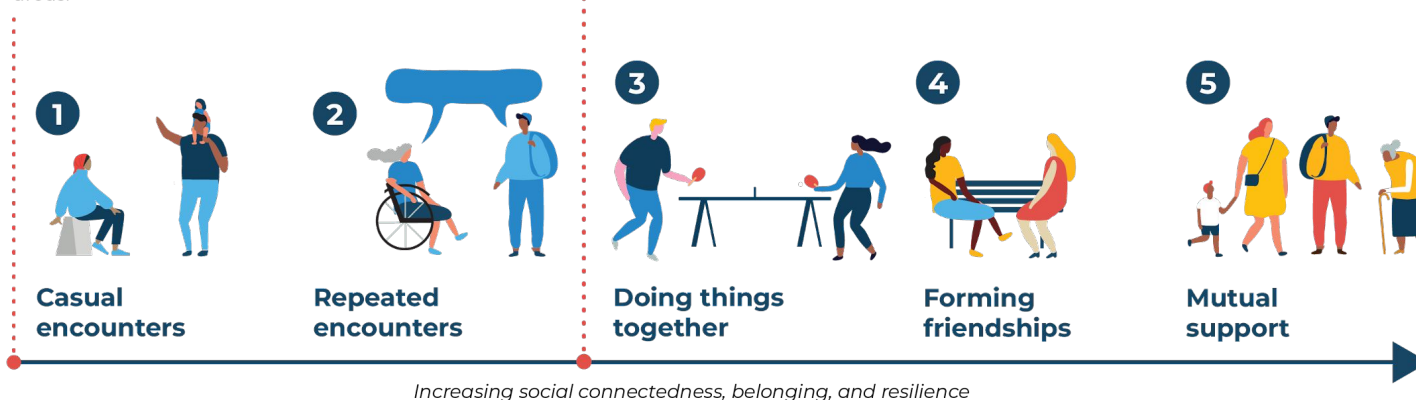
- A significant increase in sense of belonging, with all respondents agreeing that they feel they have something important to offer to their building or neighbourhood
- An increase in their sense of trust in neighbours, with all residents reporting that they have four or more neighbours they would feel comfortable asking for favours from
- An increase in the sharing of household items and responsibilities, including tools, appliances, vehicles, and even childcare

#### Design

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

#### Design & programming

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



## Key learnings summary

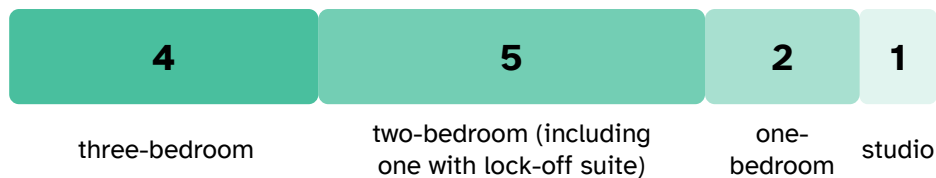


OUV interior unit. (Tomo Spaces)

*“I’m most surprised by how much I like my cozy little unit. I thought I might have found it a bit inadequate but I don’t at all. I also haven’t minded having to use the shared laundry and I thought that was going to be a drag. I had expected to have more social interaction here than my last place and that expectation has been met very much.”*

*—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in*

### Unit mix



## 3 | Private spaces

**Comfortable, well-designed private spaces nurture community by allowing people to control their social exposure and build positive relationships with neighbours.**

When residents are satisfied with their private unit and living spaces, they are more likely to stay in a home or community for longer. In turn, long-term tenure allows people to build deeper social relationships with neighbours and with their community. As of six months after moving in, residents reported:

- No significant change in satisfaction with private living spaces, with all respondents but one agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are satisfied with private living spaces
- Overall satisfaction with comfort of their new unit, including aspects such as noise, natural light, and temperature control
- Overall satisfaction with privacy, with all respondents but one reporting that they feel they have enough privacy in their unit

Satisfaction with private units is especially important in urban cohousing, where space is limited and units are smaller to make room for larger shared spaces and amenities. Our Urban Village prioritized a wide variety of unit types in order to accommodate diverse household sizes needs. The small scale of the building made it difficult to standardize unit types. However, the units are designed to be comfortable, functional, and adaptable over time, with ample natural light and cross-ventilation. Results from the study show that residents are overall pleased with the high quality of their private units.



### 4 | Circulation spaces

**Walkways, stairs, and elevators with social design features can increase opportunities for positive and spontaneous social interactions, fostering a sense of community.**

Circulation spaces are not typically considered to be social spaces. Our Urban Village intentionally designed wide, outdoor walkways, stairs, and an elevator with social nooks to support interaction among neighbours. These design decisions have paid off, as residents report that the wide outdoor walkways are the most social spaces in the building. As of six months after move in, the majority of residents report interacting with neighbours daily in circulation spaces, showing the social potential of shared spaces that are built into people's daily routines and along the pathways to and from their unit.

In buildings without a lot of space for amenities, well-designed, shared walkways with social nooks can offer extra space for connection.



**Policy idea:** Municipalities can offer density bonuses or floor area exclusions for widened, social and active walkways or circulation spaces, such as the City of North Vancouver has done with its Active Design Guidelines.



OUV outdoor walkway with a social nook. (Happy Cities)

## Key learnings summary

### Our Urban Village common house



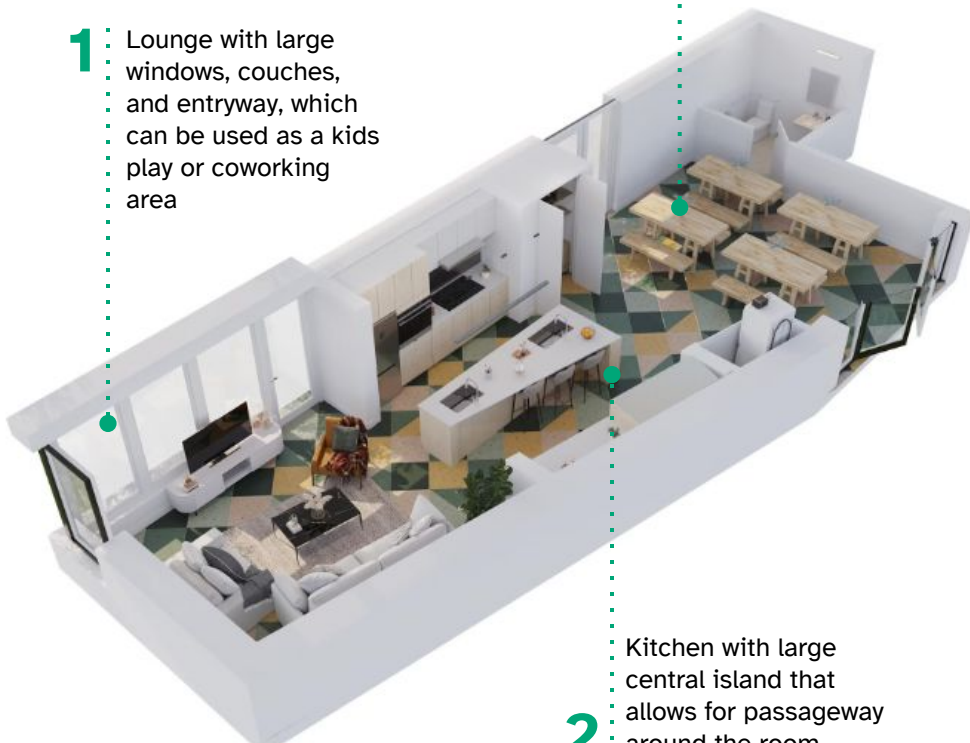
Common house (Darren Sutherland)



Common house (Darren Sutherland)

- 3** Dining area with tables and chairs, connected to an accessible washroom

- 1** Lounge with large windows, couches, and entryway, which can be used as a kids play or coworking area



- 2** Kitchen with large central island that allows for passageway around the room

3D view of Common House

## 5 | Common amenities

**Common amenities that are functional, diverse, and easily accessible—designed as extensions of smaller individual homes—create a strong community heart.**

Shared outdoor and indoor spaces at Our Urban Village were designed through a collaborative, intentional approach. The design team conducted workshops engaging residents on key decisions, particularly for common amenities. Beyond the courtyard and common house, Our Urban Village considered the social potential of all shared spaces in the building—including walkways, stairs, laundry, parking, and storage. As of six months after move in:

- Many common spaces facilitate weekly social encounters among residents, particularly through the communal meals and meetings
- Satisfaction with shared indoor and outdoor spaces increased post occupancy, with all residents expressing satisfaction with indoor shared spaces
- There are no feelings of overcrowding in any of the common spaces at the building
- All respondents with kids reported they feel comfortable letting their kids play unsupervised in the building's courtyard or outdoor spaces at Our Urban Village, compared to just one household before
- All respondents are satisfied with the amount of natural light in common spaces in the building

Overall, our research finds that shared spaces and amenities help nurture a sense of community and belonging. However, small sites can make it difficult to include some types of amenities, depending on zoning, municipal policies, and other constraints.

# Land acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge that this project took place on the traditional and unceded territory of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam), selílwitulh (Tseil Waututh) and sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nations.

# Project contributors

## Study contributors

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## Design team

The project design team for Our Urban Village included:

- Tomo Spaces
- MA + HG Architects
- Lanefab Design/Build
- The Haebler Group
- Our Urban Village
- Prospect & Refuge Landscape Architects

Happy Cities advised on design principles.

## Our Urban Village residents

Thank you to the residents of Our Urban Village for their time, insights, and participation in this study.



# Funding

This research was funded by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) National Housing Strategy (NHS) Demonstrations Initiative. The views expressed in this report are the personal views of the authors and the project funders accept no responsibility for them.



## About Happy Cities

[Happy Cities](#) is an urban planning, design and research firm that uses an evidence-based approach to create happier, healthier, more inclusive communities. We work with housing providers, municipalities, developers, and organizations to design buildings and urban spaces that support people's health and happiness. 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 buildings, culminating in a toolkit to help housing providers turn wellbeing evidence into action.



## About Tomo Spaces




[Tomo](#) stands for Together More. We help people live happier together in densifying communities. We build at the intersection of "hardwhere" and "softwhere," where physical space and intangible activities meet. As developers, operators, and researchers, we believe in the power of place to enable people to do amazing things. Our integrated research-and-develop approach challenges us to engage with complex urban issues. Since 2005, we've cultivated award-winning places like Schoolhouse in Vancouver and River Market in New Westminster.



# Appendix A | Wellbeing results summary




# Wellbeing results summary

See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Comfort</b> 	<b>100%</b> are satisfied with natural light in shared spaces	20%	<b>500%</b> increase	
	<b>100%</b> are satisfied with natural light in their private unit	100%	No change	
	<b>100%</b> are satisfied or neutral with temperature control in their private unit	70%	<b>43%</b> increase	
<b>Trust</b> 	<b>100%</b> of residents with children reported that they would feel comfortable letting their children play unsupervised in the building's shared outdoor spaces	40%	<b>150%</b> increase	
	<b>100%</b> of respondents have four or more neighbours they would feel comfortable asking for favours from	0% (all report 3 or less, 40% report no neighbours)		
	<b>100%</b> share a wide range of items and tasks, including tools, cooking ingredients, meals, and chores	Less than 20% reported sharing items with neighbours	Increase varies, depending on the item	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: Less than 17% reported sharing items with neighbours
<b>Safety</b> 	<b>100%</b> of respondents report feeling safe	90%	<b>11%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 64.6% Concert Properties, 2022: 89%



# Wellbeing results summary

See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Sociability</b>  	<b>88%</b> have four or more people they can confide in	60%	<b>46%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 49% have four or more people to confide in
	<b>100%</b> have weekly or daily conversations with neighbours,	50%	<b>100%</b> increase	Concert Properties, 2022: 44% have conversations with neighbours everyday or a few times per week
	<b>100%</b> report never or rarely feeling lonely	40%	<b>150%</b> increase	Concert Properties, 2022: 48% report never or rarely feeling lonely
<b>Engagement</b>  	<b>100%</b> of respondents now volunteer in their building, neighbourhood, or community	90%	<b>11%</b> increase	Vancouver Foundation <a href="#">Connections and Engagement</a> study, 2012: 55% report volunteering
	<b>100%</b> participate in activities with neighbours on a weekly basis	0% (previously, all respondents never or only a few times per year did activities with neighbours)		
<b>Exposure</b>  	<b>0%</b> feel overcrowded in common areas	0%	No change	

# Wellbeing results summary



See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Sense of belonging</b> 	<b>100%</b> agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I feel that I have something important to offer to events and programs in my building or neighbourhood”	40%	<b>150%</b> increase	Vancouver Foundation <a href="#">Connections and Engagement</a> study, 2012: 27% of respondents feel that they do not have much to offer to their community
	<b>63%</b> agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here”	50%	<b>26%</b> increase	Vancouver Foundation <a href="#">Connections and Engagement</a> study, 2012: 80% of respondents feel welcome in their neighbourhood
<b>Spatial inclusion</b> 	<b>100%</b> are satisfied with shared indoor spaces	20%	<b>400%</b> increase	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: 23% are very satisfied or satisfied
	<b>75%</b> (all except two) are satisfied with shared outdoor spaces	20%	<b>275%</b> increase	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: 28% are very satisfied or satisfied
	<b>87.5%</b> (all except one) are satisfied with private living spaces	90% (all except one)	No change	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: 85% are very satisfied or satisfied



# Wellbeing results summary

See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Tenure</b>  	<b>75%</b> spend less than 30% of their income on housing	90%	<b>16%</b> decrease, with some residents transitioning from renters to owners	Concert Properties, 2022: 20% spend less than 30% of income on rent (all renters)
	<b>50%</b> think that their unit allows for flexibility to grow or change their household size	0%		
<b>Perceived health</b>  	<b>100%</b> of respondents report good, very good, or excellent mental health	70%	<b>43%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 82% reported good, very good, or excellent mental health
	<b>100%</b> of respondents report good, very good, or excellent physical health	90%	<b>11%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 83% reported good, very good, or excellent mental health
	<b>88%</b> report using transit as a mode of commuting	60%	<b>47%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 39% use transit  My Home, My neighbourhood, 2014: 46% use transit