

Building social connections

A study of Active Design policy in the City of North Vancouver



January 2024

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Acknowledgments

This document was published in January 2024 by Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective, in collaboration with researchers from the Simon Fraser University (SFU) Department of Gerontology. We gratefully acknowledge that this research took place on the traditional and unceded territories of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Finally, we are grateful to the residents, City staff, developers, and architects who participated in the survey, interviews, and focus groups. Insights from each participant have informed and greatly enriched this research.

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[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.

The [SFU Department of Gerontology](#) includes faculty, researchers, and students looking at aging from an interdisciplinary perspective. As part of the Gerontology department, Dr. Atiya Mahmood's lab collaborates with municipalities, health authorities, and service organizations to enhance aging in the right place and older adults' wellbeing.

[Hey Neighbour Collective](#) (HNC) brings together landlords and 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.

Introduction

How can multi-unit housing can be designed to support resident health and wellbeing?

[Research](#) shows that housing design, policy, and programming can influence people’s physical activity, connections with neighbours, and overall health. Social connections between neighbours are the building blocks for many elements of wellbeing, from greater trust, to increased resilience, a stronger sense of belonging, and even financial savings.

Multi-unit housing is [the dominant housing form in the City of North Vancouver](#), and has a key role to play in supporting City Council’s ambition of becoming “the healthiest small city in the world.” In addition to supporting resident wellbeing, multi-unit housing can help address climate goals, accommodate population growth, and improve housing supply and affordability. The City of North Vancouver adopted [Active Design Guidelines](#) in 2015, incentivizing the design of active and social features in new multi-unit developments. The Guidelines have informed the design of at least 14 buildings identified in this study. Architects, developers, City staff, and residents alike have expressed support for innovative design features and the efficient development approval process.

North Vancouver engaged Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective in 2023 to assess the impact of the Guidelines, along with faculty and students from SFU Gerontology. This document presents a summary of this research, including design and wellbeing considerations for future multi-unit housing development in the city. This research is timely, given [new provincial legislation](#) that will require cities to legalize and build more multi-unit housing. The findings aim to inform policy decisions around active and social design in multi-unit housing in the City of North Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, contributing to a healthier, more resilient future.



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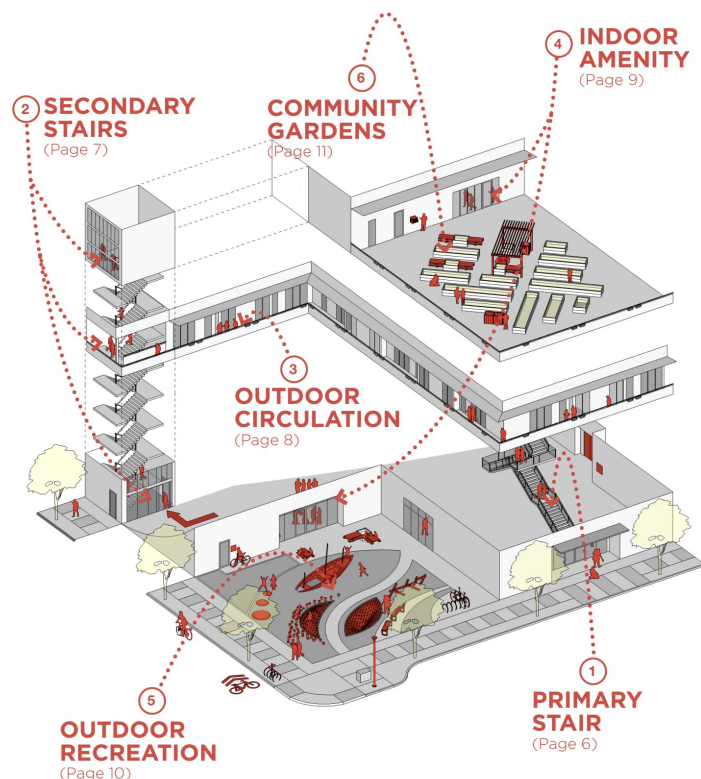
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Active design in the City of North Vancouver

What is active design?

Active design seeks to encourage physical activity and social interaction through the built environment, recognizing that both are essential elements to support overall wellbeing and a healthy lifestyle. New York City was one of the first municipalities in North America to adopt an active design approach for multi-unit housing. [One research study](#) out of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai finds that at a Bronx building with active design features, residents reported increased stair use and greater feelings of safety and health after just one year of living there.

The City of North Vancouver adopted [Active Design Guidelines](#) in 2015, an incentive-based policy that seeks to encourage active design by offering density bonuses for multi-unit housing development applications that comply. The short document includes six different design categories (indicated in the diagram below):



Successes from the Active Design Guidelines

A key goal of this research was to assess the impact and implementation of the City of North Vancouver's Active Design Guidelines. Overall, developers, architects, and City staff shared largely positive experiences working with the Guidelines. This research identified several key successes of the Guidelines, including:

- The Guidelines have resulted in **innovative, built examples** of active design features in new developments, with particularly successful building active lobbies, primary stairs, and rooftop amenities.
- Architects appreciated the **flexibility in design approaches**, such as the ability to include social circulation and to design creative connections between amenity spaces.
- Developers appreciated the ability to receive **FSR exclusions** for shared amenities and social, active circulation spaces.
- As highlighted in this report, **residents who live in active design buildings in North Vancouver shared positive experiences** around spending time in and connecting with neighbours in their building's shared spaces.

Left: The six shared spaces incentivized through the Active Design Guidelines: primary stair, secondary stairs, outdoor circulation, indoor amenity, outdoor recreation, and community gardens. (City of North Vancouver Active Design Guidelines)

Research overview

Study participation was limited to people living in **multi-unit housing** in the City of North Vancouver, including townhouses, multiplexes (e.g. duplex, triplex), and apartment buildings. This includes people who live in co-ops or cohousing, and people who rent or own their unit.

This research included building audits and engagement with residents, developers, architects, and City staff in North Vancouver to assess two key components:


1. The **impact and implementation of the Active Design Guidelines**
2. The **connections between multi-unit housing design, resident wellbeing and social connectedness** in the City of North Vancouver

Taken together, the findings aim to inform future updates to the Active Design Guidelines, by highlighting successes, challenges, and opportunities for the City to support health and wellbeing in multi-unit housing developments.



Understanding the impact and implementation of the Active Design Guidelines

The impacts of the Active Design Guidelines were assessed through:

-  **Design audits** of five buildings that incorporate features of active design
-  **Focus groups** with 10 residents from three of the active design buildings
-  **Interviews** with 13 City staff, developers, and architects

Understanding the connections between multi-unit housing design, resident wellbeing and social connectedness

We sought to engage a wider sample of multi-unit housing residents in the City of North Vancouver—beyond those living in active design buildings—to gain a broader understanding of the links between people’s housing and their social connections and wellbeing. Multi-unit housing residents across North Vancouver were engaged through:

- A **public, online survey** of 601 residents living in multi-unit housing in the City of North Vancouver
-

Interpreting the survey data

The public survey method sought to efficiently collect a sample of the population and provide a snapshot of community wellbeing. Self-reported responses rely on individual perceptions, so are prone to subjectivity bias and have limited insight into the underlying causes of an individual's wellbeing responses. Correlations found in the data may not be due to causal links. Additionally, responses may be influenced by an individual's mood or circumstances, or recent events. However, the data can be compared with previous regional surveys, such as [My Home, My Neighbourhood](#) (2023) and [My Health, My Community](#) (2014).

The majority of respondents answered optional demographic questions regarding age, gender, ability, race and ethnicity, and more. We heard from a wide range of people representing various household sizes, compositions, and incomes. However, the survey responses are not demographically representative, and data was not weighted as part of this analysis. Additionally, the survey was only offered online and in English. To maintain anonymity, this study cannot verify if more than one person from the same household filled out the survey. It is possible there are some duplicate responses for questions about household demographics (e.g. income). **Further engagement with underrepresented and lower-income residents is important to help the City better understand diverse health, wellbeing, and housing needs in the community.**

About this project

This research is Phase 1 of the Building Social Connections project, in which Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour Collective, and researchers from the Simon Fraser University Department of Gerontology are working with the City of North Vancouver and five other local governments in Metro Vancouver to co-create new housing design policies that support social connection and wellbeing.

To learn more about this project, visit:

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



Have questions? Please contact us: info@happycities.com

Defining shared spaces

In this report, we differentiate between common space and amenity space:

- **Common space** includes all shared spaces within the building, including hallways, stairwells, and lobbies
- **Amenity space** includes functional (ex: parking, laundry) and recreational (gardens, rooftops, lounges) spaces

Online survey: Demographics

The public, online survey received 601 responses from people living in multi-unit housing in the City of North Vancouver. Participants were asked to answer several optional demographic questions.

Age

Just over two thirds of our sample (69%) are under 50 years old, with the greatest proportion of respondents (36%) falling into the 30 to 39 age category. The 50 to 59 and the 60 to 69 age brackets accounted for just over one in 10 respondents each. Just 6% are 70 and over.

Gender

The majority of survey respondents (69%) selected “woman” in response to the gender question. Another 17% selected “man,” and 2% in total selected one or more of “transgender,” “non-binary,” or “Two-spirit” in their response.

Household demographics

Overall, a relatively small percentage of people indicated that their household includes members who are 2SLGBTQIA+, racialized, immigrants, and/or Indigenous (under 11% of respondents for each demographic). In particular, the percentage who identified as racialized in the survey is lower than the 36% identified in 2021 Census data for the City of North Vancouver. Further engagement with underrepresented and lower-income residents is important to help the City better understand diverse health, wellbeing, and housing needs in the community.

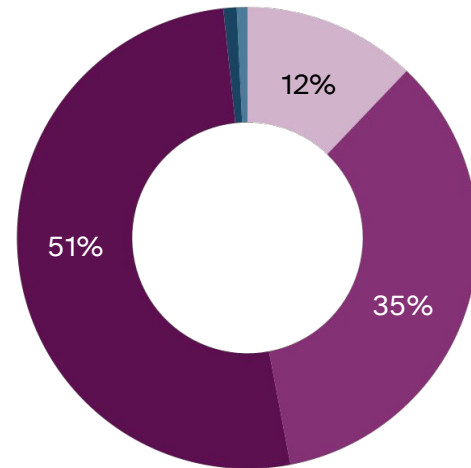
36%

find it difficult or very difficult to meet their household's financial needs.

29%

find it easy or very easy to meet their household's financial needs.

Tenure status



● Owned without a mortgage ● Owned with a mortgage ● Rented
● Prefer not to answer ● Other (please specify)

Tenure

The majority of people that we surveyed (51%) are renters. Just over one third (35%) own their home with a mortgage, and 12% own their home without a mortgage.

Income

Most respondents reported middle to high household incomes. In our sample, the median household income fell in the \$100,000 to \$119,999 range, higher than the medians for both the [City of North Vancouver](#) and [Metro Vancouver](#). The most commonly reported household income range was \$60,000 to \$79,999 (15%) of respondents, followed by \$80,000 to \$90,000 (14%). Another one in 10 people each reported household incomes of \$120,000 to \$139,999 and \$200,000 and over. Just eight households reported earning under \$20,000 per year.

Online survey: Wellbeing profile

General wellbeing

Overall, survey respondents reported being in good mental and physical health. To measure general wellbeing, we asked people to rate their physical health, mental health, and happiness on a five-point scale. The majority of people responded positively on all three measures.

84%

reported good, very good, or excellent physical health.

72%

reported good, very good, or excellent mental health.

Loneliness and social isolation

Overall, respondents reported fairly low levels of loneliness. The majority know and have conversations with at least one to three neighbours in their building. However, engaging in other activities with neighbours remains relatively rare, and **12% of people reported that they know zero neighbours in their building**, highlighting challenges and opportunities to increase social connection in multi-unit housing.

72%

reported being happy or very happy.

42%

reported never or hardly ever feeling lonely.

Connections with neighbours

We asked people about the types of activities they participate in together with neighbours. The majority (70%) indicated that they have conversations with neighbours. The next most commonly selected responses were taking care of neighbours' pets or plants (22%), sharing food or meals (15%), and sharing household items (11%). Another **20% indicated that they do not participate in any activities with neighbours**; however, in open-ended responses, 54% wrote that they are interested in interacting more with neighbours.

88%

know one or more familiar neighbours in their building.

54%

are interested in interacting more with their neighbours.



My health, my community comparison

The data align closely with the 2014 [My Health, My Community](#) survey. In this study, 87% of North Vancouver residents selected “good,” “very good,” or “excellent” in response to both the general health and mental health questions, indicating higher average health than the general Metro Vancouver population. The same survey also found that higher income households (\$120,000+) were more likely to report greater general and mental health, and healthier lifestyle habits. Notably, self-reported mental health is 15% lower in our sample, which may reflect the impact of the pandemic and corresponding [increases in loneliness and social isolation](#).

Key learnings

This study explores the connections between residents' wellbeing and the homes they live in, including aspects like tenure, affordability, design, and activities with neighbours.

The results of our public engagement with residents—living in all types of multi-unit housing in North Vancouver—are categorized into three key learnings. The findings draw links between the online survey, building audits, focus groups, and interviews. Overall, the key learnings reinforce evidence in existing bodies of research around the importance of the built environment for social connection and wellbeing. The following pages provide a high-level summary of each learning.

For results specific to the active design building audits, see pages 14 to 16.

Key learnings from engagement with residents:

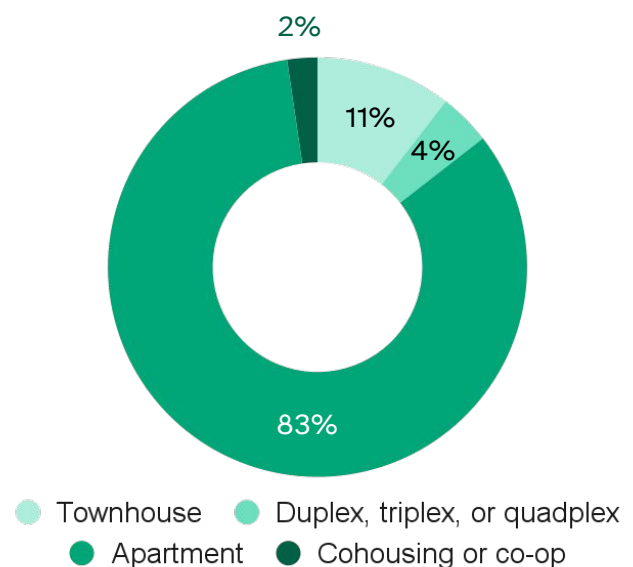
- 1. Wellbeing in multi-unit housing:** Stable, comfortable, affordable housing is the foundation for social connection and community building
- 2. Design considerations:** Residents are more likely to use comfortable, conveniently located spaces that allow for diverse activities
- 3. Programming and management:** Stratas and building operators have a role in creating the right programming and management policy to intentionally build community

Understanding North Vancouver's built environment

The majority of survey respondents reported living in low-rise apartment buildings, in one- or two-bedroom units. In total, 83% reported living in apartment buildings, 11% in townhouses, 4% in multiplexes, and just 2% in co-ops or cohousing.

Only 33 of the 601 people surveyed (6%) live in a building that the City of North Vancouver identified as having incorporated features from the Active Design Guidelines. Due to the small sample size, it is difficult to draw strong comparisons between these residents and the general population. The data and learnings in the following sections encompass what we heard from all survey respondents.

Housing types among survey respondents:



1 | Wellbeing in multi-unit housing

Stable, comfortable, affordable housing is the foundation for social connection and community building.

Stable, secure tenure—in an affordable home that meets one’s needs—is the essential foundation for wellbeing and for building strong connections with neighbours. One consideration when implementing active design is to ensure that extra amenities or social features do not significantly increase the cost of housing for residents. This can be achieved, for instance, through the implementation of incentive-based guidelines for developers

Wellbeing differences among renters

This survey did not distinguish between residents in purpose-built rental and secondary market rental properties. Exploring the variations in wellbeing between these two groups is an important area for future research.

Key findings:

People who are more satisfied with private and shared spaces in their building plan to stay there longer: In the public survey, people who were more satisfied with private and shared spaces in their building were more likely to indicate that they planned to stay in their building in the future. On average, residents were more satisfied with private spaces than shared spaces in their building.

Long-term, secure tenure is linked with knowing more neighbours: In the survey, living in one’s home for a longer time and owning one’s home without a mortgage were both significantly associated with knowing more neighbours and doing more activities together.

Renters and homeowners with mortgages reported lower mental health than homeowners without mortgages: In the survey, renting one’s unit was significantly associated with lower self-reported mental health and lower overall wellbeing. Homeowners with mortgages also reported lower mental wellbeing than those who own homes without a mortgage. These findings suggest that people with greater financial stability and lower housing costs tend to perceive greater mental health, emphasizing the importance of stable, affordable housing for wellbeing.



Key learnings



Image: The indoor playroom at Driftwood Village caters to the many young children living in the building.



Image: Driftwood's common house is a central community heart with a shared kitchen and dining area.

"I chose this building because I am very close to my gym and walkable distances from groceries so that I do not need a car anymore!"

—Survey respondent

32%

reported that the design of their building encourages them to take the stairs regularly.

Community-oriented housing models strengthen social ties:

Focus group participants, many of whom live in cohousing, discussed the importance of intentional design and community building in fostering social ties among neighbours. Participants expressed that these trusting relationships help in resolving conflict and create a more supportive community among people of many ages, with neighbours able to help with errands, childcare, and more.

Building and neighbourhood design can encourage physical activity:

Stairs are one way for able-bodied residents to stay active. Only a small survey sample lived in one of the active design buildings; however, many residents in townhouses and low-rise or older apartment buildings without reliable elevators noted that they take the stairs regularly. In addition, many people reported that their building's location and connection to the neighbourhood was equally, if not more, important in encouraging physical activity, by allowing them to walk to meet daily needs and access outdoor recreation areas, such as dog parks or trails.

Top factors influencing people's decisions to live in their building

The survey asked participants to select which factors influenced their decision to live in their building. The responses were:

- Neighbourhood and location (selected by 82%)
- Price (63%)
- Pet-friendly building (37%)
- Proximity to work or school (33%)
- Design of the unit's private spaces (30%)
- Proximity to friends and family (26%)
- Other (13%)
- Design and availability of amenities in the building (8%)

2 | Design considerations

Residents are more likely to use comfortable, conveniently located spaces that allow for diverse activities.

Satisfaction with private and shared spaces is an important indicator of whether housing meets one's needs. It is also an important indicator of how long a person plans to stay living in their unit for, which in turn impacts the likelihood of building connections with neighbours. Space satisfaction is connected to the design, size, and feel of shared spaces and amenities. Local governments can play a role in incentivizing the shared space qualities and features that residents value most.

Multigenerational and youth-friendly spaces

Participants emphasized the importance of spaces that cater to multigenerational interactions, such as shared dining rooms, kitchens, rooftops, and gardens. Driftwood Village Cohousing residents also noted the success of the building's teen room, which has games and cozy spaces to sit. In the survey, several people who felt that their building's common spaces met their needs noted that shared spaces like a courtyard were ideal for playdates and socializing with neighbours.

Key findings:

People want to use shared spaces that are comfortable, easy to access, conveniently located, and practical: The top three most important factors for shared amenity spaces are the look and feel of the space, access hours, and the types and diversity of activities to do there, according to survey respondents. More broadly, residents that we engaged expressed a strong desire for:

- **High-quality spaces** with attractive design features and of appropriate sizes
- **A mix of practical and recreational spaces** that allow for diverse activities and uses
- **Spaces that are easily accessible**—for people of all ages and abilities, at convenient hours, and without having to book in advance

88%

of survey respondents reported having access to at least one indoor amenity space.

Key learnings

35%

are satisfied or very satisfied with the shared indoor spaces in their building.

43%

are satisfied or very satisfied with the shared outdoor spaces in their building.

The importance of circulation spaces for social connection

The survey data suggests that the spaces that residents interact the most in are **hallways and corridors, the lobby, and outside the building**. These findings emphasize the importance of thinking about design for social connection beyond more formal amenity spaces.

Additionally, people who lived in buildings with **exterior walkways** recognized these corridors as important spaces for unplanned encounters and spontaneous social interactions. Cohousing residents shared stories about morning encounters with neighbours and even singalongs on the walkways, illustrating how comfortable shared spaces can spark social connection.

31%

reported that the common spaces in their building **help them build social connections with neighbours**.

58%

reported that the common spaces in their building **do not help them build social connections with neighbours**.

Indoor amenity spaces: The majority of residents (88%) reported access to at least one indoor amenity, with 72% having access to between one and three indoor amenity spaces. Parking is by far the most commonly reported amenity (indoors and overall), followed by bike storage, laundry, and a lounge or multi-purpose room. These findings suggest that most surveyed residents have greater access to practical spaces than to recreational amenities. Although practical amenities are essential, many residents also expressed a desire for more recreational spaces and activities. At the same time, these practical spaces may be able to fulfill social needs and still offer spaces for community building if they are designed intentionally for social connection.

Outdoor amenity spaces: Courtyards are the most commonly reported outdoor amenity space that multi-unit residents have access to in North Vancouver. Rooftop patios are popular among those who have access to them, while cohousing residents in particular expressed appreciation for the social potential of wide, exterior walkways. Residents further expressed a desire for furniture and design that supports activities in outdoor spaces, such as play structures, barbecue spots, pet areas, and community gardens.

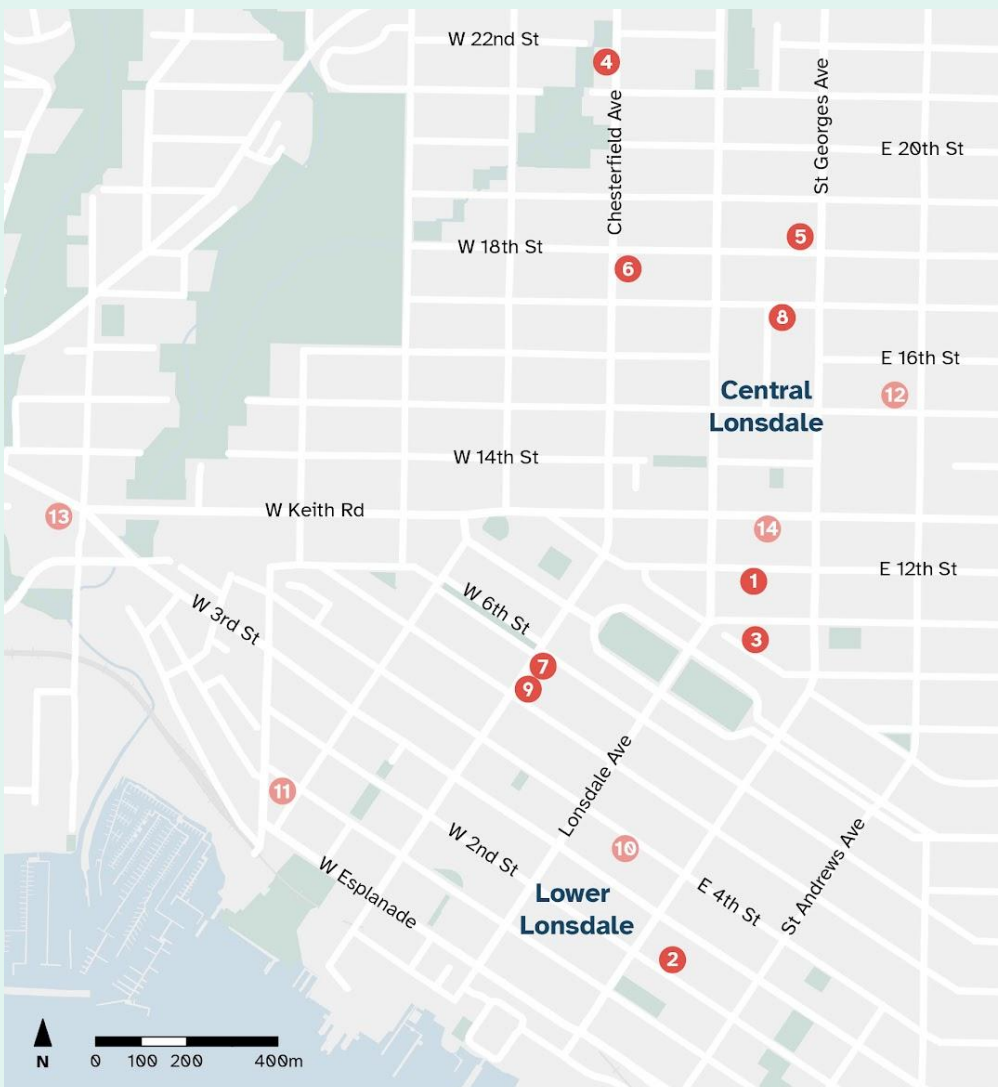
Connections with neighbours in shared spaces: The data suggest that the spaces that residents interact the most in are hallways and corridors, the lobby, and outside the building. Of the residents who reported having access to shared indoor and outdoor amenity spaces, a relatively smaller percentage said that they connect with neighbours in those spaces. This reinforces the importance of considering social interaction in circulation areas and other practical spaces. Further, it underlines that indoor and outdoor shared amenities may not be used for social purposes if they are not welcoming, well-designed and programmed, and if they are not well-connected to circulation spaces.

Learnings from active design buildings

The City of North Vancouver identified 14 multi-unit buildings as part of this study that had been built to include one or more recommendations from the Active Design Guidelines. These include nine buildings that are complete, and five that are under construction or development. To gain a thorough understanding of the connections between shared space design and wellbeing, we conducted design audits of five of these buildings, and held a focus group with residents living in these buildings. The high-level findings are summarized on the following pages.



Map of active design buildings considered in the study:



List of buildings

Buildings audited as part of this study are bolded below.

- 1. The Victoria**
- 2. The Bowline**
3. Crest by Adera
- 4. Driftwood Village Cohousing**
5. St. George
6. Central
7. Avesta
- 8. Origin by Anthem**
- 9. Quayside Village Cohousing**
10. 145 East 4th (under construction)
11. 309 - 311 W 1st St (under construction)
12. 250 East 15th St (under development)
13. 705 West 3rd St (under development)
14. 123 - 127 & 145 East 13th St (under development)

Learnings from active design buildings

Neighbourhood integration

- Spaces that facilitate interactions between residents and the broader community help enhance the building's sociability, such as by leveraging transition spaces between the building and the public realm for social features (e.g. gardens, seating).

Lobby and entrance design

- The design of the lobby significantly influences people's initial impressions and social atmosphere of the building.
- Residents may feel less inclined to socialize and linger in outdoor lobbies, especially in inclement weather. However, these lobby spaces can also be important extensions of a courtyard.
- Indoor lobbies with comfortable seating, amenities, and ample natural light are more welcoming and contribute positively to the social experience in a building.

Circulation and nooks

- The design of exterior circulation, including stairs and walkways, plays a crucial role in the overall sociability of the building, particularly when paired with a courtyard.
- Opportunities for personalization, such as outdoor nooks and corridors, enhance residents' sense of ownership and community identity.
- Functional nook spaces, such as a bike repair area or a small dog park, are well-used by residents.



Image: The exterior of Quayside Village is colourful and expressive, with extensive gardens.

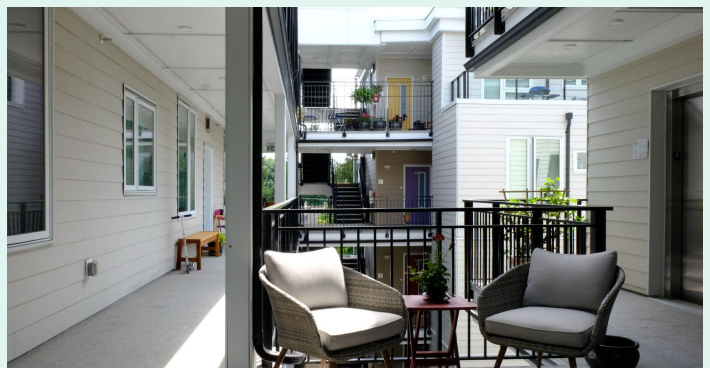


Image: Outdoor walkways at Driftwood Village include diverse seating nooks and create a social atmosphere

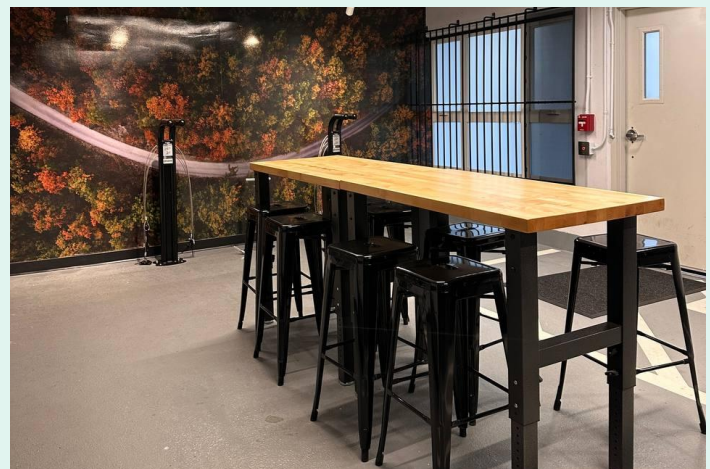


Image: The bike maintenance nook at the Bowline provides a social space for residents.

Learnings from active design buildings

Overall amenity use

- Diverse sizes and functions of amenity spaces contribute to the overall social appeal of the building.
- Buildings with a manager who is also a resident can help create a more social atmosphere. However, management can also hinder social connection, particularly if buildings restrict amenity use to limited hours or require advance bookings.

Outdoor recreation and gardens

- Diverse, outdoor shared spaces foster community interactions. However, outdoor recreation spaces that lack intentional programming and active functions have low utilization by residents.
- Larger outdoor social spaces with multiple uses or functions—both practical and recreational—draw residents to these spaces and create vibrancy.
- Green elements, such as gardens and rooftop spaces, contribute positively to a building's sociability.

Indoor amenity spaces

- The most successful indoor amenity spaces have direct visual connections with entrances, outdoor spaces, stairs, or lobbies to encourage use.
- Activities and furniture within indoor amenity spaces play a vital role in enhancing their appeal and functionality.
- Flexibility in the design of indoor spaces ensures that they can be used for different purposes, according to residents' needs. For example, a flex room can become a co-working area, a games room, or a yoga space, as needed.
- Indoor amenity spaces in cohousing communities had far higher reported use than in non-cohousing buildings. Intentional programming helps ensure that amenities are used and builds a sense of community and belonging.



Image: The rooftop area at the Origin by Anthem provides community garden plots and covered seating.



Image: The rooftop garden at Driftwood Village Cohousing serves as an important social space.



Image: The common house at Driftwood Village is the main community heart. It is a large space with a kitchen and dining area.

3 | Programming and management

Stratas and building operators have a role in creating programming and management policy to intentionally build community.

Several survey respondents explained that amenity spaces in their building could better meet their needs if they were more easily accessible or had regular activities. Participants noted that building policy and programming are key to supporting social connections and wellbeing among residents, by encouraging neighbours to regularly visit and use shared spaces. Although it is difficult for local governments to regulate programming and policy, they can consider encouraging housing providers and landlords to implement social activities and engage in intentional community building, whether through incentives, resources, guides, or small grants.

Key findings

Supportive community: Focus group participants, many of whom live in cohousing, emphasized the wellbeing benefits of community housing models—particularly for seniors and individuals with disabilities—emphasizing how a more community-oriented housing model can help better integrate people who may need extra support into the broader community.

Diverse activities: Focus group participants discussed how passive and active opportunities to socialize can help people connect. In particular, people who are socially isolated may find it difficult to connect with neighbours and the wider community. Regular and passive activities can help, by offering people low-barrier opportunities to engage with the community. These can include a community bulletin board or messaging group, and low-stakes events like regular, drop-in coffee hours. Survey respondents also mentioned the importance of pet-friendly spaces and buildings, ease of access to amenity spaces, and the role that on-site building managers can play in organizing social activities and creating a sense of community.

25%

indicated that programming in amenity spaces is important or very important.

37%

reported that they chose their building because it is pet-friendly.

Implementing design policy to build social wellbeing in housing

The City of North Vancouver offers an important precedent as a local government that has implemented policy to encourage active and social multi-unit housing. Audits of several active design buildings and interviews with developers, architects, and City staff highlighted successful design strategies and opportunities for indoor and outdoor shared spaces. Further, many residents engaged through the survey and focus groups expressed appreciation for shared spaces and amenities in their buildings, highlighting the importance of these spaces for wellbeing and social connection—as long as the spaces are designed to be comfortable, convenient, and easily accessible. Overall, the study suggests that incentive-based policies can be an effective tool for encouraging high-quality, wellbeing-centred development—creating mutually beneficial outcomes for local government, developers, landlords, and residents.

Collaboration across jurisdictions

By collaborating and learning from each other's successes and challenges, jurisdictions can help achieve a higher wellbeing standard across all communities. A collaborative approach can also create greater efficiency and consistency for housing developers and funders. Regional governments may also consider establishing minimum wellbeing design standards that apply across jurisdictions, but that are adaptable to different housing typologies and contexts, particularly as greater density is legalized at varying scales across different municipalities.

Equitable design guidelines

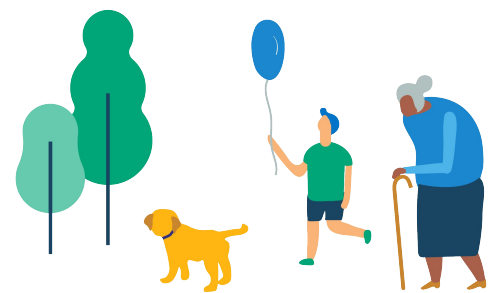
Wellbeing-centred design standards can be leveraged to improve equity in housing. For example, communities that are at greater risk of social isolation may benefit from design that goes beyond minimum requirements for health and sociability.



Considerations for implementing your own social wellbeing policy

Jurisdictions considering how to increase active and social design in new buildings can consider an incentive-based policy as a viable solution. To create a successful policy, local governments can consider the following actions:

- **Engage developers, architects, and housing providers** to build support, identify needs, and share the mutual benefits of wellbeing-centred design incentives for the community
- **Consider which policy tools work best within the existing municipal context**, including whether overlapping municipal guidelines and policies (e.g. around sustainability, walkability, public realm) can be consolidated through the lens of wellbeing and social connection
- **Consider outcome-based objectives** that allow applications to respond flexibly to policy goals to achieve incentives, while still providing clear guidance around social common and amenity space design (e.g. illustrations and examples, and guidance on materials, acoustics, or lighting)
- **Balance affordability and cost by considering incentives** for developers that go above and beyond minimum requirements
- **Consider the social potential of “non-traditional” semi-public spaces**—such as laundry rooms, social lobbies, social corridors, and parking—as well as transition spaces between the building the public realm
- **Build community and industry** support by showcasing great examples of socially connected, healthy multi-unit housing



Shifting perceptions around social connection

When people know their [neighbours better](#), it benefits both landlords and tenants. Socially connected tenants can lean on each other for mutual support, not only during acute collective crises, but for everyday personal and family challenges, too. This mutual support is not only good for residents, but can also make the job of a building manager easier. Happier tenants complain less to their landlords, and are more likely to resolve issues or disagreements among themselves and in a non-confrontational way.

Local governments can play a role by **educating and engaging with landlords and stratas** to communicate the value of sociability, and support them to implement programming and policy that encourages people to use shared amenity spaces

Additional resources

Building social connections project resources

This research was produced as part of the [Building Social Connections](#) project, in which Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour Collective, and researchers from the Simon Fraser University Department of Gerontology are working with the six local governments in Metro Vancouver to co-create new housing design policies that support social connection and wellbeing.

Other public resources created as part of this project include:

- [Building social connections: Case studies to inspire socially connected multi-unit housing](#) (PDF document)
- [Housing that connects us: The health and climate rationale for intergenerational, 'sociable' housing](#) (Webinar)
- [Housing that connects us: A conversation with UK innovators](#) (Webinar)

Learn more about this project

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



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Research spotlight

Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour Collective, and partners at SFU have conducted wide-ranging research to identify best practices and strategies for designing healthy, age-friendly, socially connected, resilient multi-unit housing communities. Most recently, Happy Cities completed [research for Vancouver Coastal Health](#) in 2023 on the connections between density, housing design, and wellbeing in Metro Vancouver, uncovering crucial links between housing and neighbourhood design and wellbeing. This work builds on several resources and toolkits, including:

- [Happy Homes](#): A multi-year research project, including an interactive toolkit that identifies design principles for happier homes
- [Happy Neighbours](#): A two-part research study with Tomo House and Concert Properties to test the impact of design and programming strategies on resident connections and wellbeing
- Hey Neighbour Collective practice guides, including [#4: Roles for local government in strengthening social connectedness and resilience activities in multi-unit housing](#)
- Hey Neighbour Collective evidence backgrounder: [How social connectedness between neighbours supports health and wellbeing](#)
- [Aging in the right place](#): Ideas and recommendations for designing housing that supports wellbeing and safety for older adults, based on an audit of 20 rental buildings