

# Mainstreaming socially connected, affordable multi-unit housing across British Columbia

## Break-out dialogue summary

The following document summarizes discussions during the “Solutions Room” breakout activity, which was the final segment of the online workshop held on September 16, 2021.



## What types of challenges were explored?

**Policy challenges:** Governmental or other relevant policies that hinder stakeholders' ability to design and program multi-unit housing that fosters social connectedness.

**Financial challenges:** Funding issues that hinder the development or maintenance of social spaces and programming in multi-unit housing.

**Cultural challenges:** Ingrained attitudes and practices that discourage stakeholders from committing to build social connectedness with and among residents.

## What core challenges were identified?

Participants identified the core problem as a **lack of diverse and affordable housing that supports residents with the security of tenure needed to build social connectedness in a community over time, or which allows them the ability to move within their community of choice when housing needs change.**

*The number of hurdles that stand in the way of developing ANY affordable housing — sociably designed or not — is a fundamental challenge underlying this whole conversation.*

A key secondary challenge for developers and architects is that, currently, **there are different design guidelines and development processes in each municipality.** Few municipalities offer clear policies or guidance on design elements that might foster social connectedness.

## Who participated?

Architects  
Community organizers  
Developers  
Funders  
Housing industry advocates  
Housing providers  
Planners  
Policymakers  
Property managers  
Public health experts  
Researchers

*“The desire for socially connected, cohesive communities is included in all the broad community plans. But that vision gets filtered out as you build something because it’s not mandated in actual development processes.”*

— A workshop participant (architect)

## What solutions were discussed?

This document offers **preliminary solutions** that focus on addressing the broader **challenges to social connectedness.** Addressing the challenges to social connectedness will help tackle the core housing challenges outlined above. The following solutions were discussion points that came up during the workshop and can serve as starting points for future conversations. They are divided into three categories:



Discovery



Education



Implementation



## Discovery

**Growing knowledge around social connectedness in multi-unit housing among local governments and housing industry stakeholders.**

### The challenge

There are few recognized tools to evaluate how a building's design impacts social connectedness. Without such tools to produce data, it is challenging to make a case for requiring certain 'sociable' design elements in new multi-unit housing. Furthermore, the financial implications of any new criteria that might be added to the development process in order to foster social connectedness need to be addressed and mitigated, particularly for developers of affordable housing.

### The challenge

Developers and municipalities tend to favour low-risk building configurations, which are easier to coordinate and build due to familiarity and adherence to very specific technical criteria. When architects and developers try to implement innovative designs that might support social connectedness, they are sometimes met with resistance or delays due to a lack of familiarity and supportive policies.

### Solution 1: Develop tools to measure the impacts of design on social connectedness

Municipalities will be more willing to incorporate social connectedness guidelines and policies throughout the development process if they have a **better understanding of the impact of sociable design on resident wellbeing**. If balanced with understanding and mitigation of the financial challenges posed by new design criteria, developers will find it easier to comply. If funders understand the value of social connectedness, they will be more willing to **allocate funding towards design features that encourage social connectedness**.

### Solution 2: Pilot and test multi-unit housing with sociable designs

Piloting and testing more sociable designs — including post-occupancy studies that evaluate impacts of such designs on resident wellbeing — can **demonstrate how particular design features and amenities support community building**. Sharing these stories and designs will normalize sociable design within the housing industry and lead to **new standards and municipal guidelines** that encourage innovation.



## Education

Raising awareness and disseminating knowledge about the value of social connectedness.

### The challenge

Broad engagement is needed as a catalyst for the cultural shifts that are required to mainstream socially connected multi-unit housing. Knowledge dissemination and engagement should be conducted in a cross-sectoral way — connecting decision-makers in the housing, planning, finance, and health sectors — and highlight successful examples of projects and policies.



Image credit: Tomo House, MA+HG Architects

**Solution 3: Create a broad engagement strategy, regarding the importance of social connectedness, that reaches stakeholders across the housing industry and beyond.**

This engagement should not only include professionals, but also the public, to increase the awareness about the importance of fostering social connectedness in multi-unit housing. Increased awareness is essential for many reasons:

It can create a **cultural shift** in the industry around the importance of social connectedness in housing.

It can help **shift funding priorities**, which will enable more housing projects to be designed for sociability.

It can encourage building operators to better **train property managers and staff** to encourage social connections among residents.

It can encourage **residents to self-organize** to foster social connectedness and a sense of community within their buildings.



## Implementation

Incentivizing and regulating design guidelines and processes to foster social connectedness.

### The challenge

Current restrictions in zoning and building codes pose barriers to innovative projects that propose something different than the norm. Municipal participants noted that an approach that begins with incentives for sociable design, building towards regulation over time, could be successful in shifting the development sector towards best practices.

Currently, there are few municipalities with clear rules for developing multi-unit housing that intentionally fosters social connectedness.

### Solution 4: Adjust current zoning and building codes to encourage innovative design solutions

Successful policies also need to consider flexibility and room for innovation from designers. Examples of zoning and building code changes include:

**Implementing measures that incentivize more suitable amenity spaces and circulation spaces that encourage social connection.** For example, the City of North Vancouver's new [Active Design Guidelines](#) offer FSR exemptions for hallways and stairwells that meet sociability design requirements.

**Rethinking the building code to allow for alternative fire egress solutions.** For instance, standards used in Europe can be more conducive to social connectedness, without compromising safety.

**Reducing the complexity of municipal policies.** Complex criteria for development already poses a barrier to non-traditional development entities such as smaller nonprofits, faith groups, etc. Municipalities can consider alternative, simple solutions to enable better design standards.

**Creating a continuous feedback loop.** As changes are incentivized, it is important for the industry to continually explore evidence from new projects and retrofits, to assess how evolving municipal design guidelines are influencing design and resident wellbeing. This feedback loop will help new projects understand how to boost resident wellbeing through design.

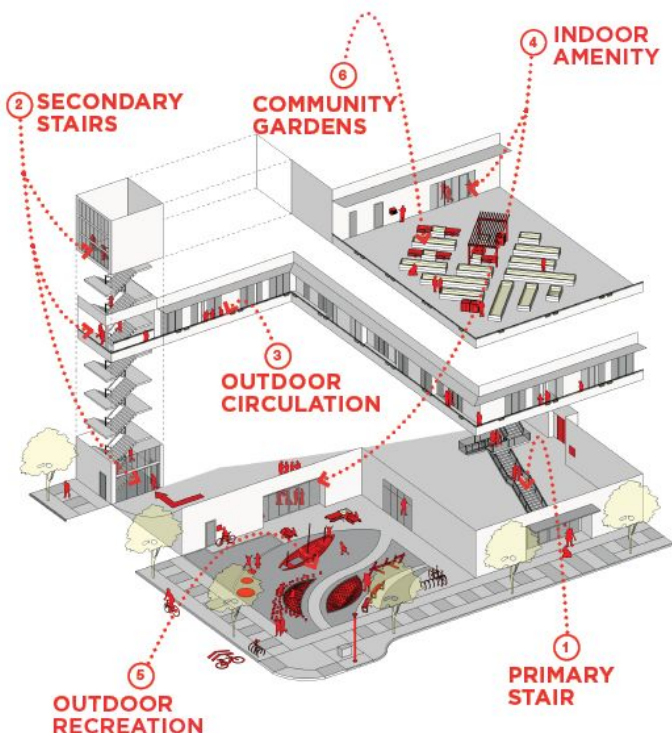


Image credit: Active Design Guidelines, City of North Vancouver