

A PICTURE IS WORTH 1000 WORDS

A Photovoice Exploration into Sociability in Multi-Unit Residential Buildings



SFU

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HEY
NEIGHBOUR! Collective

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Additionally, a huge thank you to the Photovoice participants. This report shows the creative and poignant ways that participants chose to share their experiences, ideas, and opinions. It demonstrates the diverse ways in which participants experience social connection and isolation in their homes, buildings, and communities. Their willingness to share their photos and insights is essential to our research.

This project took place on the unceded, traditional and ancestral territories of the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), sə́lilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations. Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC) recognizes that colonialism isolates Indigenous Peoples intentionally and by design, by, for example, prohibiting cultural practices, separating communities, and weakening family and language ties. HNC recognizes these historic and ongoing inequities and systemic barriers to social connections and strives to be part of movements to eradicate them.

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SUMMARY

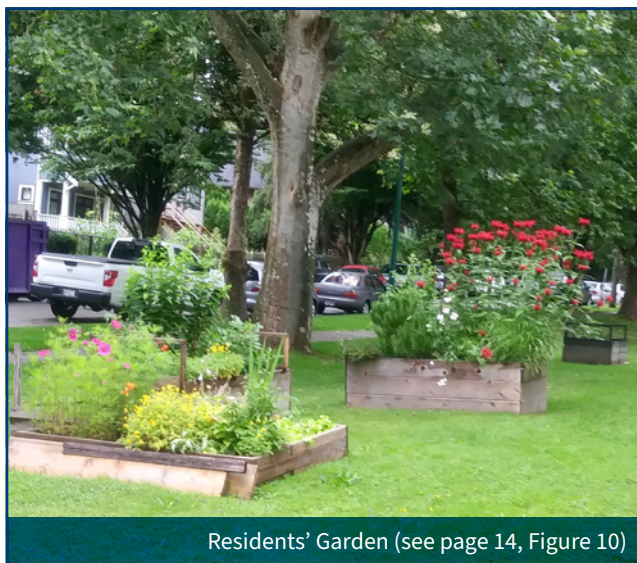
“A Picture is Worth 1000 Words” invited households in participating multi-unit residential buildings in Vancouver to share and showcase their experiences of social connections and isolation and their wishes and worries about the sociability of their lives at home. Additionally, we asked participants to show us how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their sense of social context, including their local neighbourhood environment. The result is a showcase of the places and situations that participants identified as facilitating or inhibiting their social connections in their home environments at this time, participants’ explanations of the way they understand and relate to these places, and what they think it would take to generate a greater sense of sociability

This research was done as part of the Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC). HNC brings together housing providers, non-profits, researchers, local and regional governments, housing associations and health authorities to experiment with and learn about ways of building community, social connectedness and resilience in BC’s fast-growing multi-unit housing communities. This project builds on the “Developing Truly Complete Communities: Social Equity, Social Connectedness, and Multi-Unit Housing in an Age of Public Health and Climate Crises” discussion paper and research recommendations compiled and published by HNC in 2020. The discussion paper presents six key policy recommendations to regional and municipal governments and their partners, with a view to a housing system that supports and promotes socially connected communities.

The results of this photovoice project complement the HNC discussion paper recommendations and add emphasis via the lived experience of residents. In addition, this photovoice project illuminated the following more specific resident needs that are elaborated upon in this report:

- » A need for accessible common spaces within buildings and surrounding neighbourhoods.

- » Support and assistance for resident-led initiatives rather than exclusive reliance on programs led by housing providers.
- » A need for more clear and consistent open communication channels between residents and property managers and provision of effective conflict resolution processes.
- » Recognition of the resilience and creativity of residents in coping with safety concerns and physical distancing requirements related to COVID-19 and building upon this to create sustained focus on safety, inclusion, and communication.



Residents' Garden (see page 14, Figure 10)

This project’s results demonstrate the value of photovoice research to highlight individual stories and put participants in charge of research that aims to capture meaning across lived experiences in daily life. As a complement to survey-based research, the photovoice approach provided participating residents with agency and control to contribute what sociability and neighbourly environments mean to them, during the COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, they provide vital, rich, qualitative insight to HNC.

PARTICIPANT-IDENTIFIED THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS: WHAT AFFECTS SOCIAL CONNECTIONS IN MULTI-UNIT RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS?

A core assumption of HNC is that residents of multi-unit residential buildings have **latent social connections capacity**, by which we mean people who by their nature, experiences, skills, and inclinations seek to improve the social quality of their home environments in the interest of improved social well-being.

We believe that this photovoice project opportunity drew some of these individuals and capacities out and that the results reflect their views of their local social world, their experiences of sociable places and opportunities, their considerations of what inhibits sociability in their communities, and their ideas to improve upon and reverse negative trends. Because COVID-19 so drastically changed home and neighbourhood environments for so many, we also sought to understand the meaning that our participants made of social distancing requirements in terms of social connections potential and barriers.

We understand people with qualities of sociability to be more likely to make social connections with their neighbours. Sociable people have higher levels of social well-being, that are defined by elements of:

- » **social integration:** sense of having valuable relationships with society and other community members
- » **social contribution:** sense of having social value and an ability to contribute to the social setting
- » **social actualization:** sense of the potential and trajectory of the society in which they live, and their ability to actualize pro-social plans, and
- » **social coherence:** sense that the world makes sense, that people and institutions are generally trustworthy, and that they themselves can take action on concerns about the world around them.

This project asked residents of multi-unit residential buildings in Vancouver: “What affects your social connection and isolation at home and in daily life?” Their insights are presented below, first in the summary table, followed by their photographs and discussion.

We developed the six themes used below in part by taking suggestions from participants in their scrapbooks, interviews and workshops. While quantifying experiences and ideas about the social qualities of buildings and neighbourhoods was not the intention of this project, the Appendix presents a sense of the strength of each theme in terms of the number of times it was raised as well as the positive, negative, or mixed sentiment associated with each mention. Overall, the theme “The Need for Shared Spaces” was the most popular among our participants and the least mentioned theme was “All Neighbours I’ve Seen for 20 Years... Gone With the Wind!”

Table 1. What affects social connections in my building and neighbourhood?

THEMES FROM PARTICIPANTS	DESCRIPTION
1. THE NEED FOR SHARED SPACES	Participants showed the shared spaces in and around their buildings and described how these foster social connections. Participants also detailed the indoor and outdoor spaces that do not contribute to social connections.
2. COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES	Participants explained some existing initiatives they know about that build social ties in their communities and offered new ideas for what they would like to see.
3. CONFLICT AS A BARRIER TO SOCIAL CONNECTION	Participants gave accounts of conflicts with neighbours that have hindered their ability to build and maintain social connections.
4. DURING THE PANDEMIC EVERYONE FEELS ISOLATED AND ALONE...	While most participants described negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing requirements on social connection, others offered resilience and creativity in finding new ways to connect socially, safely.
5. SAFETY CONCERNS AFFECT SOCIAL CONNECTION	Participants emphasized the importance of safety. Participants recounted how feeling unsafe prevented them from using shared amenity spaces.
6. ALL NEIGHBOURS I'VE SEEN FOR 20 YEARS... GONE WITH THE WIND!	Another theme that surfaced was how neighbourhood change negatively affected social ties, when buildings are demolished, and neighbours are forced to move. As a result of this change, people lost connection with their long-time neighbours.

1. THE NEED FOR SHARED SPACES

Shared spaces are important places to congregate with friends, family, and neighbours. These spaces are particularly important for residents of multi-unit residential buildings, who may not have access to private spaces to congregate such as back and front yards, balconies, or patios. Others may not have safe shared streets and sidewalks. Many project participants mentioned the importance of having access to shared spaces to connect with neighbours. Some participants explained how shared spaces had been used to play games with neighbours, chat, or garden. Other participants argued that the mere presence of shared spaces does not facilitate social connection and stressed the importance of programming or planned activities to facilitate interaction among neighbours. A lack of sense of control of shared spaces was also noted as impeding residents from using the spaces. For example, a participant recounted how a nearby park was mostly unused, due to its location in the middle of several busy streets. These participants' concerns drew attention to the fact that the use of space is determined by not only physical proximity, but other accessibility features too. To increase the use of shared spaces, social access should be improved by building a sense of belonging and the right to occupy certain spaces for resident groups through programming and cultural events (Klein et al., 2021).

Outdoor green spaces are important for health and wellbeing, especially in urban areas where they act as places to create social capital, promote social cohesion, and help maintain social ties (Jennings & Bamkole, 2019; Sefcik et al., 2019; Zhou & Parves, 2012). Some participants talked about the importance of shared outdoor spaces for creating social connections with others. This included outdoor shared amenity spaces, local parks, and private balconies within visibility lines to their neighbours' balconies. Participants detailed how outdoor spaces facilitated connection with their neighbours and cultivated an appreciation of nature. The importance of outdoor spaces, and parks specifically, has been illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Parks have become some of the safest places to socialize with reduced risk of infection and have contributed to the wellbeing of many over the course of the pandemic (Dempsey & Dobson, 2021; Park People, 2020). Participants demonstrated how, in many cases, outdoor spaces were the only places they could socialize, due to indoor space closures and regulations put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19.

“

“So having the spaces but also having reasons for people to be there in a way that you can actually interact... Having a way that people can find something that they share in common, or share an event, or an experience together. To actually find good reasons to build those networks would be great. A great way to use the spaces that we have and that could come in the future.”

”



FIGURE 1.

“Actually a friend of mine, we grabbed coffee to-go, and we just sat there amidst tulips... It’s kind of a cool little spot because [there are] little benches. And it’s a little bit in the way of traffic because you have Cambie like right there and you also have 6th, which is the transit hub and you have 2 express buses like right in front of that, stopping. But despite that busy-ness it feels like a little oasis.” (Participant #1)



FIGURE 2.

“And [this photo] is the umbrella I was talking about that was blown away, we had to replace it. And that’s the table we got from across the street, we fixed it up. And now it’s in use. People use it like crazy, even the smokers they sit down there and they have a place to sit and smoke.” (Participant #5)



FIGURE 3.

“[The neighbours have] done a lot of work there and they planted primulas. And my picture shows [that] they like green and flowers. They have the attitude of care.” (Participant #6)

Other participants talked about the importance of shared indoor spaces for creating social connections with others. This included amenity spaces, hallways, and spaces inside their home. Many participants shared that the amenity spaces in their buildings were underused, describing them as “lifeless” or “sterile”. Others believed that their indoor amenity spaces could be improved with regular programming to encourage residents to socialize. As well, some participants recounted how their amenity spaces had been closed due to COVID-19 and how that challenged social connections.



FIGURE 4.

“And I finally trained some of the residents to make sure that there are no bikes in there. And I asked them to put the chairs [away] properly so they’re not scattered all over the place. And they’re quite proud to do that. Actually, one gentleman came over to me the other day yeah, he said “I love the way our room looks now. You know what I do now?” and I said no. “I picked up all the paper from the floor and then I organize the chairs around the table” and I said, you know, that’s great.” (Participant #5)

Many participants shared that the amenity spaces in their buildings were underused, describing them as “lifeless” or “sterile”.



View from Here #5

The foyer has a table with a green table cloth and chairs. The weekly flyers are piled there and sometimes community newspapers. Everyone who lives here appreciates the flyers and papers. They are scooped up quickly. Sometimes people put food, plants, art, plates on the to share with other folks before bundling it off to Big Brothers. Folks sit and chat at the table or open their mail as the post boxes are in the foyer, too. And the elevator. The foyer is a social spot. It feels warm and friendly to pass through the foyer when a couple of people are chatting and laughing together. Even though everyone is wearing a mask now.

FIGURE 5.

Photo and description by Participant #7.

...it was a great place to gather
and have social interactions...



FIGURE 6.

"Because [the amenity room] used to be open (pre covid and pre some residents mis-using it) and it was a great place to gather and have social interactions with friends and neighbours and develop a sense of 'community' with my fellow tenants." (Participant #1)

Some participants noted the value that they found in the indoor amenity spaces, even though these spaces were not currently being used in a way that was appealing for them personally:

"There's a small group that plays cards. But not now since COVID it has stopped. That's where they play for two or three hours. Maximum 3 hours, not longer than that. But for me it's too much because I'm an outdoor person right now... I don't feel like playing ... it should be on a rainy day for me, not when not if it's sunny and you'd rather be outside."

There were other spaces that participants recognized as having an intention to provide opportunities for social connections but that do not fulfill this purpose. One characterized such a space as “underutilized” – and detailed some of the reasons why this space did not serve its function for them. Reasons participants gave for the infrequent use of these spaces included uninviting design, a lack of programming or activities, and a missing sense of ownership of the space.

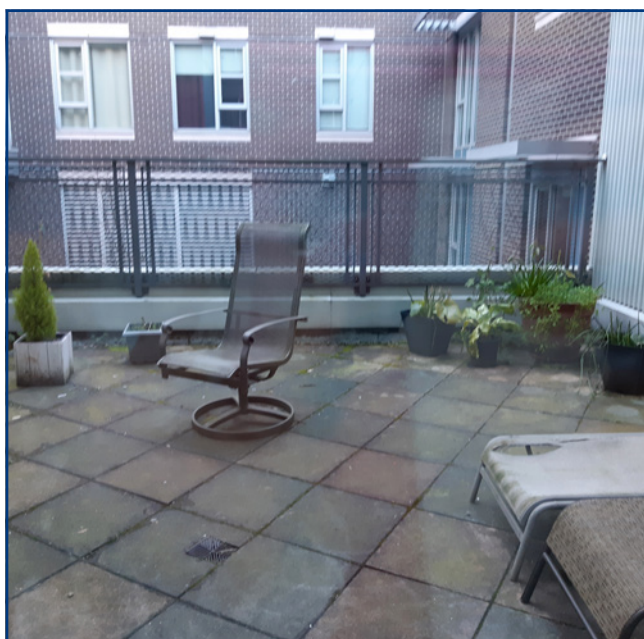


FIGURE 7.

“People, whether government, landlords or residents, do not or cannot develop spaces that have the potential to bring happiness and better health to those who can use them. For example, the 2nd floor patio in the photo is sterile and un-inviting and has only been used in the past by smokers rather than a potentially green, clean and inviting outdoor space to compensate for the lack of gardens and green spaces in this block.” (Participant 1)



FIGURE 8.

“Many areas in the city and my neighbourhood are simple thoroughfares or used by squatters rather than cleaned, built-up and developed as green/park/ garden areas that all residents and neighbours can enjoy.” (Participant 1)

Some participants had a vision for improving their amenity space but had yet to find a way to implement this together with their building management:

“And #3 is the main lobby area, that’s supposed to be our lounge area. And people don’t use it as such. One of the old guys sits there on the couch and watches TV all the time and there’s people store bikes in there. And there’s no sense of development of any program like maybe board games or coffee get togethers or luncheons. Because it can easily be used for that. And I’m trying to get the [property management company] to help me with that, but I’m not getting anywhere. People are interested, but they want somebody to organize it for them.”

Others lamented the unrealized potential in their amenity spaces that seemed particularly unfortunate to them given the inadequacy of their private home spaces for socializing:

“It’s nice to see some greenery left but I think it’s a very under-utilized space. This is something I brought up in a lot of my photos, is how the potential for a place is not being developed, to the community’s detriment. For example, there really is no space [in my apartment] to have community of any kind.”

2. COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES

Participants emphasized the importance of community-led initiatives in facilitating and maintaining social connection. Community events led by housing providers or neighbourhood outsiders may be generic and not address the needs of specific communities (Finney et al., 2019). When residents lead the processes of developing and implementing programming and events, they can create a sense of agency and accurately address the needs of the local community. Community-led initiatives may also support the creation of informal social networks which contribute to structural social capital and support community resilience (Harris, 2007; Sherrieb et al., 2010). During the project, participants stressed the importance of having initiatives designed by the community rather than imposed by others. Participants gave examples of ongoing initiatives in their neighbourhoods that they felt addressed the community's needs. Examples included the creation of outdoor gathering spaces, an impromptu comedy stand, or the creation of a resident block watch team. Some of these initiatives were in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

...participants stressed the importance of having initiatives designed by the community rather than imposed by others.



FIGURE 9.

"The picture is the day I decided to participate in your project, because of this lady. She's living on Nanaimo St, where our building is... I visited this lady she was so happy and cheering up other people. And I remember every car passing through the street was honking at her and waving and she was saying to me that she was also singing. And she was there all through the year, irrespective of the weather, whether it was sunny, raining, all kinds of weather, she was staying there and making people happy. It was a nice act because it was showing how she has sympathy with other neighbours, yes." (Participant #4)

"I feel this act is very thoughtful. During the pandemic everyone feels isolated and alone. Many people [are] struggling with mental health issues. So these kinds of activities can help people to cope with this stressful situation better."



FIGURE 10.

“So 5 of us got together, we took an older model wheelbarrow from [our] next door neighbour... it was all with holes in it and everything, but we managed to hold soil from gardens that were just going to waste and put it into our garden beds. Then we went [and] dug up some plants like hosta, roses, stuff like that. And then we brought them up [and] put them in beds. So it seems to me that we have become closer, like people are not really picking on each other. We feel that it's a family now.” (Participant #5)

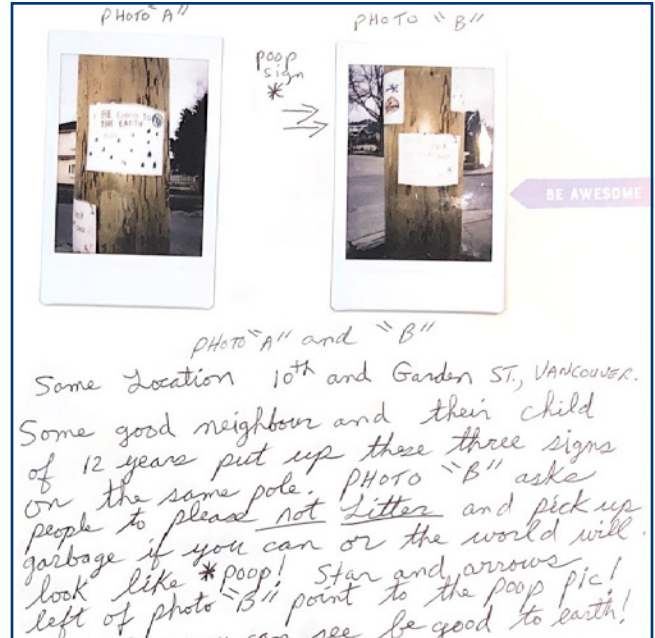


FIGURE 11.

Photo and description by Participant #2.

“Same location 10th and Garden St., Vancouver.

*Some good neighbour and their child of 12 years put up these three signs on the same pole. Photo “B” asks people to please not litter and pick up garbage if you can or the world will look like *poop! Star and arrows left of photo “B” point to the poop pic! Photo “A” you can see be good to earth! [It] is self-explanatory. I thought very nice! Especially correct way to educate 12 year olds! Right on man!”*

Another participant described how they had collaborated with neighbours to set up a block watch team in response to a perceived lack of safety:

“There’s a few people in my building who I’ve befriended. We share a lot of that passion too. We actually started our block watch so I’m very proud about that, I’m watch captain. Just because we want to have that sense of community and that sense of like safety in our environment... It’s often disconcerting because you don’t know where to take these initiatives to and you feel on your own a lot.”

Participants also shared ideas for potential programming or interventions that they believe could support social connection in their communities. Participants seek opportunities to improve their own social well-being and that of others in their buildings and neighbourhoods and see these as efforts that require some formal assistance, some resources, and that also have potential to build momentum from the initial effort expended.

Participants shared specific ideas for programming that they wanted to see in their neighbourhoods, including gardening, barbecues, book clubs, painting lessons, and game nights. The word cloud below displays the most frequently used words coded in this category to give a sense of the initiatives participants requested.



FIGURE 12.
Most Frequently Mentioned Potential Community Initiatives

Participants emphasized the need for programmed initiatives, as they argued that having only spaces to congregate did not lead to social connection. As well, participants stressed the need for long term support, as without this some initiatives tend to fizzle out:

*“So having the **spaces** but also having **reasons** for people to be there in a way that you can actually find **to interact**. Whatever that looks like, you know, having a way that people can find something that they share in common or to share an event or an experience together. And actually find good reasons to build those networks would be great. A great way to use the spaces that we have and that could come in the future.”*

*“I think it’s about **support**. It’s about supporting. You know those initiatives and if residents do take that initiative then having some kind of support to make sure that they get enacted, I guess.”*

“I would like to see sometimes like support from either city or the governments to either engage citizens and how we can build spaces that build a sense of community or initiatives that provide people the resources to know how to make community spaces.”

3. CONFLICT AS A BARRIER TO SOCIAL CONNECTION

This section deals with the negative experiences of social interactions (or lack thereof) and how housing providers and urban policies are perceived to work against opportunities for social connections and well-being. The creation of informal social networks between neighbours can help build resilience and mutual support, otherwise known as social capital (Kawachi et al., 2008). Negative social interactions between neighbours hinder informal social ties, detracting from social capital, social cohesion and community resilience (Harris, 2007; Sherrieb et al., 2010). Participants felt that they would be able to connect more with their neighbours if they had more support in conflict resolution. These participants found that a lack of formal conflict resolution processes impeded social connections and their willingness to use common areas. Finally, participants raised that they felt unheard by their housing provider when they brought up ideas and concerns. In particular, participants challenged the contradictory messaging and actions of supporting social well-being in theory but enforcing overly strident social distancing in practice.



FIGURE 13.

“In this picture we can see my grandma trying to enjoy her evening. But every time she relaxes a few minutes later a rush of second-hand smoke comes in the house [from outside], and every time we smell the smoke our eyes start to burn. And we have been sending letters/complaints to the company about the people smoking but they don’t bother doing anything even though it’s a no smoking building...It shows that we are having a difficult time with the neighbours and not getting along good.” (Participant #3)

Participants felt that they would be able to connect more with their neighbours if they had more support in conflict resolution.

Some of the participants mentioned difficulty communicating with their housing provider and property managers, which led to conflict over the use of amenity rooms and outdoor shared spaces:

“And I actually called and [housing provider] said yeah we’re just debating the next step for the use of the amenity room, this very diplomatic like it’s closed now and we’re re-thinking...they gave no explanations, no when will [it open]. So for now it’s just closed and nobody knows... again sort of that disconnect that a lot of our residents feel between what is happening in our building and the fact that we have really no recourse to like address these issues or even ask questions sometimes and so that can be frustrating yeah.”

Another participant mentioned conflict with their neighbours as being the only drawback of living in their neighbourhood:

“Well, I love the neighborhood. I like the neighborhood. Definitely. The thing is...there are certain people with problems in their lives. And they want others’ attention. And there is no time sometimes and those people smoke. People do bad things. And they’re bullies. Unfortunately, that’s the negative part, and it’s not only me.”

4. DURING THE PANDEMIC EVERYONE FEELS ISOLATED AND ALONE...

The pandemic changed the neighbourhood and building environment drastically for many urban residents, including participants in this project (Frumkin, 2021). Particularly, COVID-19 has changed the venues in which people interact with neighbours, friends, and family (Government of Canada, 2020; Park People, 2020). The impact of social distancing requirements was felt differently by different participants here. The majority of changes were negative. Participants felt that these safety measures significantly altered their ways of life, with the closing of amenity rooms and postponement of community programming making socializing difficult. Some participants, however, detailed positive developments in social connections over the past year. They felt that the pandemic had promoted resiliency and creativity within their community. They mentioned different ways their community had come together to promote social connection, such as outdoor activities including comedy booths and gardening. Participants reflected on both negative and certain positive experiences of their home buildings and neighbourhoods during the pandemic, related to the spaces and places of social well-being. They witnessed neighbours taking new and unexpected positive efforts to effect greater social well-being. They also experienced frustrations of different kinds with the impacts that restrictions had on their home and neighbourhood environments, which were mixed with their frustrations over enduring challenges in maximizing the social qualities of their daily lives when their environments were not always perceived to be safe and were rapidly changing before their eyes.

Participants detailed their concerns around the negative impact of COVID-19 on their usual social environments and routines. Concerns ranged from building-specific changes, such as closed amenity spaces, to neighbourhood-wide shifts, including the postponing of social programs.



FIGURE 14.

“The first photo shows my son using hand sanitizer, he is addicted to this action... From one point of view it’s good he is following all these rules, including COVID rules. But on the other side, it’s a chemical it’s not good for kids and I don’t like that nowadays, our kids, it’s part of their life, they have to use it whenever they go to the playground, after each play we do this. And I don’t know how it affects their wellbeing both physically and mentally because in the future they may be very used to that. ... So yes, I took this picture to show how life has changed for this new generation.” (Participant #4)

Another participant described how the safety regulations put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 had closed the shared places where they used to socialize with neighbours.

“With COVID they shut [the amenity room] down because they don’t want too many people in there, which I found strange because I never found more than one or two people in there at a time. So it was never really being abused by us tenants but maybe it was just one of those things that is across the board thing, I don’t know.”

Other participants shared how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their willingness and ability to attend programming that had previously been part of their daily routines:

“Yes, actually I want to work as well but because of this pandemic [I am] paranoid of anytime I send [my son] to daycare, every time he comes home, I don’t know whether he’s safe or not, whether he’s going to transmit this virus, whether he’s sick. So, I didn’t send him to daycare all year and I remember for 4-5 months at the beginning we were not even going outside... But I feel he is affected already because he has a speech delay, so I feel that maybe if I had sent him to daycare now, he would speak easily [now].”

“Well, in fact I do [book club] in French twice a month. Not now, but I think they still get together through the internet. I don’t have a computer right now. ... So I’m not connected because it’s only by internet unfortunately.”

A smaller subset of participants discussed the positive ways the pandemic changed the way they connect with their neighbours. They showed the creative ways they keep safely connected with others during the pandemic, including opportunities where they felt connected to others in their neighbourhoods while remaining at a

physical distance, times that neighbours were taking upon themselves to demonstrate their own social value as residents, to make what they determined to be a positive impact on the sense of safety, security, and concern for the world and one another. These actions demonstrated community resilience and strength.



FIGURE 15. [Free: take as much as you need hand sanitizer bottles]

“This act shows the kindness and generosity of the neighbour. This also shows how neighbours help society to get rid of this virus as soon as possible. Also, [it] shows the fact that in the case of [a] pandemic each person has an influence in overall health of society.” (Participant #4)



FIGURE 16.

“[This] is my favourite spot in the neighbourhood where I usually take walks... So, I usually see a lot of children with their mothers, they usually use this [playground]. And I recently saw this hand sanitizer on one of the benches close to the playground. Someone has put it so the children can actually play safely.” (Researcher photo)

One participant took a self-reflexive approach to value the opportunity provided by the COVID-19 restrictions on socialization to focus more on their own small scale social capacity:

“The table and the umbrella [see Figure 2] came mid pandemic era. I was happy, you may be surprised to learn that I was quite happy to have COVID [restrictions] because it gave me a chance to see who I am, what I can do. I mean, I’ve been depending so much on the external aspect like going to movies, eating in a restaurant, and forgetting my own inner strength like developing my painting skills, developing community togetherness.”

5. SAFETY CONCERNS AFFECT SOCIAL CONNECTION

Developing a sense of trust between neighbours is a key aspect of neighbourliness and social cohesion (Wilkerson et al., 2012). Safety concerns may impede residents from forming connections with neighbours or using shared spaces. Participants discussed safety concerns in their buildings or neighbourhoods and how those affected their ability to connect with others. Concerns ranged from the behaviour of other residents to the physical conditions of the building. For example, one participant pointed to a lack of perceived safety in their common room which stopped them from using it for social connection. Participants agreed that a perceived lack of safety can inhibit people from congregating and connecting in shared spaces.



FIGURE 17.

“Generally speaking we have bed bugs and a cockroach problem in our building. And that mattress was discarded in the back lane somehow at nighttime and it’s still there. I was so scared that I didn’t want to go close to it. I just took a picture from far away.”
(Participant #5)

Participants described a lack of safety in shared amenity spaces, which hindered their ability to use amenity spaces with their neighbours:

“I’m afraid to sit on those chairs in the lounge area to be honest. If we’re going to organize a program we’re gonna have to wash them. Because there’s bugs there. Most of the people prefer not the cotton fabric cushions, rather vinyl ones you can just wipe them, that’s it.”

“But then also this is where I kind of struggle sometimes with people’s characters in general because sometimes, twice in my 10 years here [the amenity room has] been locked down for anywhere from three to four months because people misuse it. Like they would let their friends stay over and sleep there, and sometimes a lot of people would go in there and do drugs we have some issues with people here with some mental health issues that would just misuse a space and so it was closed off for the rest of us.”

6. ALL NEIGHBOURS I'VE SEEN FOR 20 YEARS... GONE WITH THE WIND!

The rate of change of one's home and neighbourhood environment can be a hindrance to social well-being. Strong ties between neighbours may act as a confirmation of one's sense of belonging to a place (Burrell, 2016). Further, the informal ties made between neighbours can contribute to mutual support networks and increased resilience (Harris, 2007; Kawachi et al., 2008; Sherrieb et al., 2010). Change in neighbourhood composition may hinder long term social ties between neighbours. Participants recognized change within their communities and connected this to their interest in social connections and well-being. Participants explored how their neighbourhood had changed as people moved due to redevelopment and relocation. Others expressed laments and worries about how gentrification had changed the make-up of their neighbourhoods, as well as positive stories about efforts they had seen to bring existing neighbours together to resist displacement of others.

Change in neighbourhood
composition may hinder
long term social ties between
neighbours.

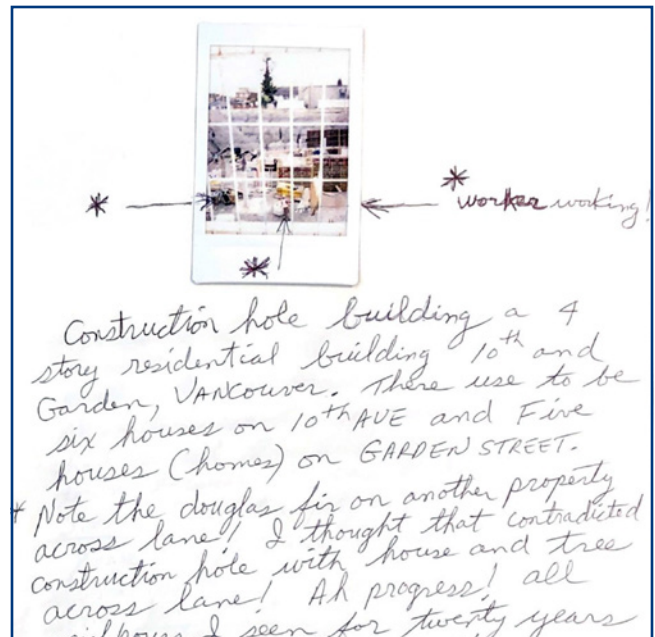


FIGURE 18.

*"Construction hole building a 4 storey residential building 10th and Garden, Vancouver. There use[d] to be six houses on 10th Ave and five houses (homes) on Garden Street. *Note the Douglas fir on another property across lane! I thought that contradicted construction hole with house and tree across lane! Ah progress! all neighbours I [have] seen for twenty years are gone with the wind!" (Participant #2)*

With reference to the image shown in [Figure 1](#), Participant #1 also shared the following about neighbourhood change:

“[The park is] just kind of a nice place to be, but again one of these places that I feel mixed feelings about it. Because it’s like the City had really good intentions and they try to do something really nice, but we have a lot of squatters who have taken up residence there in the last two years and you often see their tents and so nobody has gone there... So, and ever since I’ve seen that I’ve seen like the plants just being trampled and I’ve seen it like much more full of garbage and litter and so it’s unfortunate because again in my area there’s not a lot of that greenery, [or] a good space to just be community hubs or something... there’s nothing like really close it’s very gentrified in my area and so that was one of the places where I thought had potential but then not anymore.”



FIGURE 19:

“It’s kind of the hub of the community... this building is actually up for redevelopment, so we’re not sure what in the future it’s going to be. There could be a 36 storey tower, is what the application is for. And so it’s sad that these businesses might get wiped out and that sense of community gone. But the community has really rallied behind these businesses and have been doing a lot of work to make sure that the businesses are offered a spot in the new redevelopment at the same price... And so it’s been cool to see the community come together behind these businesses that they love and try to get them to be able to stay after the redevelopment.” (Researcher photo)

One participant described the changes they see in their neighbourhood as part of changes happening all over the city. They observed a changing city with less and less green space available for gathering:

“It’s becoming for me kind of like a sad example of how the city is just becoming so urbanized that a lot of these spaces that used to be inviting to community are no longer, you know? So I think this is something that the city and residents and buildings should take a proactive approach in addressing and making sure that as we build space for people to come and live here, to a beautiful city, it’s a great quality of life, we also make sure that the quality of life is ensured and for me a big part of that is making spaces where we can actually build community and know our neighbors and share the outdoors and the beauty etc. Right?”

DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE SOCIABILITY AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS BY AND FOR NEIGHBOURS?

The insights developed within “A Picture is Worth 1000 Words” reinforce several of HNC’s existing policy recommendations to develop more complete communities and offer some new directions for policy development, as well. The table below provides an overview of these policy recommendations, from the “Developing Truly Complete Communities: Social Equity, Social Connectedness, and Multi-Unit Housing in an Age of Public Health and Climate Crises” discussion paper and research recommendations (Hogg et al., 2020). Each of these was reflected by what we heard and saw from participants in this photovoice project.

Table 2. Policy recommendations from HNC’s “Developing Truly Complete Communities” report and the photovoice contribution

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION	PHOTOVOICE CONTRIBUTION
#1. <u>Enable Residents to Stay in their Communities</u>	Renters can be pushed out of their homes or communities due to evictions, gentrification processes, and a lack of suitable rental housing. Frequent displacement tends to hinder people’s ability to build strong social ties in a community. Policy efforts that improve renter security of tenure within a building or neighbourhood can indirectly boost social connections for renters.	Long term stability in housing and a slow rate of neighbourhood change can encourage people to create emotional attachments, a sense of ownership over place, and a responsibility to care for an area (Torres, 2020). When asked to consider why they felt social connection or isolation in their communities, some participants explored how length of tenure aided or hindered connection.
#2. <u>Encourage social connectedness co-benefits in housing upgrade programs</u>	As much of Metro Vancouver’s rental housing stock ages, there is an opportunity to fund upgrades that emphasize both social and environmental sustainability. New streams of funding should be established to improve social environments within older rental buildings.	Access to shared spaces has numerous health benefits and supports the creation of social connections, often along with environmental connections (Nesbitt et al., 2019; Park People, 2020; Pinault et al., 2021). By sharing where they experience social connection and isolation, participants revealed how access to shared spaces, or the lack thereof, affected their ability to connect with neighbours in place.

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION	PHOTOVOICE CONTRIBUTION
#3. <u>Foster Design Education and Dialogue for Social Connectedness in Multi-Unit Housing</u>	In order to work towards a housing system that supports social connectedness, best practices in design for multi-unit housing must be achievable across the income spectrum. While design for sociability is often integrated into higher-end buildings, more effort is needed to facilitate sociable design in housing geared to middle and lower income groups.	We asked photovoice participants to consider which spaces contributed to social connections. We explored why spaces did or did not further social connections, and what differences in design could explain about the state of sociability.
#4. <u>Advocate for Funding and Support of Social Connectedness Programming</u>	Social connectedness programming can create opportunities for residents to develop stable, long-term relationships with their neighbours. Demand for such programs is not always matched by available resources. Sustained funding to support these programs favours social connections.	Resident-designed programming can increase sense of ownership over place and connection among neighbours (Finney et al., 2019). The photovoice project asked participants to consider what programming was needed to support the creation and maintenance of social connections.
#5. <u>Prioritize Underserved Neighbourhoods for Social Infrastructure</u>	Access to social spaces, such as parks, is not equally distributed across the city (Nesbitt et al., 2019; Vancouver Parks Board, 2019). Residents of lower-cost rental buildings are less likely to have adequate social infrastructure within their home spaces and are more likely to rely on the surrounding public realm. An equity-based approach would prioritize underserved neighbourhoods for placing new infrastructure.	To explore whether this inequality in access affected opportunities to connect with neighbours, we did not restrict participation in the photovoice project to one neighbourhood. Participants lived in different parts of the City of Vancouver, which allowed us to compare access to different kinds of public and social spaces.

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION	PHOTOVOICE CONTRIBUTION
#6. <u>Track and Report on Social Connectedness</u>	While there is mounting interest in promoting social connectedness, there is no coordinated shared response. The mix of metrics and terms used to measure and describe social connectedness make it difficult to compare work across jurisdictions and projects. Creating a regional strategy could facilitate clearer comparison and tracking of efforts over time.	Tracking the state of sociability in multi-unit residential buildings can help reveal where there are possibilities for improvements in design and programming. The photovoice project aimed to support data collection about social connectedness by gathering personalized stories of social connections and spaces.

When asked via this photovoice project, residents told us what types of interventions they would like to see to improve the sociability and social connections in their buildings and communities. The results are presented in the table below, categorized in terms of recommendations, descriptions, and background information. The first three recommendations were directly drawn from asking the participants what could be done to improve social connection in their buildings, while the latter two recommendations were drawn indirectly from participant photovoice submissions and spoke more directly to the HNC “Developing Truly Complete Communities” report.

Table 3. What Can Be Done to Improve Social Connections in my Building?

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION	JUSTIFICATION
Provide Accessible Common Spaces for Residents	Participants identified access to common spaces as important to create social connections among neighbours. Participants expressed the need for both indoor and outdoor spaces, within their buildings and in their neighbourhoods.	Shared spaces can help foster social connections by facilitating spontaneous interactions and planned gatherings. Access to shared community spaces, such as parks, is unequal throughout the city despite its importance for mental and physical health, and social connection. By providing and equipping common spaces, housing providers can ensure that residents benefit from access to shared spaces.
Support Resident-Based Initiatives	Participants identified programming as playing an important role in activating amenity spaces and connecting with others. They believe that support from housing providers would assist them in developing and maintaining community spaces and initiatives.	Some residents are ready and willing to develop social programming that is specific to a community’s needs. When residents take the lead in designing and implementing programming, a sense of agency and ownership over the building and neighbourhood is created.

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION	JUSTIFICATION
Open up clear and consistent communication channels between residents and property managers	Participants felt frustrated about a lack of clarity in communication with their housing provider. In particular, residents felt excluded from decision-making processes around the development and implementation of COVID-19 protocols. The lack of clear processes for conflict resolution was also raised as a matter in need of attention.	Clear, fair and transparent communication from housing providers can help residents feel more control over their surroundings, which is key to engagement. As well, clear processes for conflict resolution between neighbours can help support the creation and maintenance of informal social ties which support community resilience and mutual aid.
Enable Residents to Stay in their Communities	Within the category “All Neighbours I’ve Seen for 20 Years... Gone With the Wind!”, some participants mentioned how neighbourhood change hindered their ability to connect with others. Some mentioned how the construction of a new building next door had displaced their long-time neighbours. Others mentioned processes of gentrification changing the resident make up of their neighbourhoods.	Housing instability may lead to rapid turnover or relocation of residents. Stability, and a moderate and predictable rate of neighbourhood change can promote sociability as residents feel secure laying roots in the community.
Advocate for Funding and Support of Social Connectedness Programming	Participants noted their desire for social programming. Participants emphasized the importance of having both the space and a reason to connect with others. Others explained the existing community initiatives they had taken on, such as building an outdoor space with their neighbours or weekly card games.	Long-term funding is needed to support intentional social programming. Dedicated funding streams could support stable programming that creates and maintains social connections among apartment dwellers.

PARTICIPANT EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Participants received an evaluation survey in their project information packages. The survey aimed to collect some demographic data, assess the ease of participation in the project, and indicate how participants would like their photos displayed.

All participants indicated that participating in the project was between “Somewhat Easy” and “Very Easy.” When asked how their participation could be made easier, one participant suggested more visible recruitment posters. Others mentioned that clarifying the recruitment message to include how this project could assist in changing one’s community for the better may encourage more people to participate. Finally, one participant stated that having more examples and templates in the instructional booklet would help make the prompts easier to follow. The ease with which participants took part in the project demonstrates the potential of remote photovoice as a research and resident engagement technique.

CONCLUSION

The project demonstrated the sense of need for and appreciation of sociable spaces and opportunities amongst Vancouverites living in multi-unit residential buildings during the first eighteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the creative ways that participants have continued to connect with their neighbours and others in their home environments. Participants identified challenges they faced in creating and maintaining sociability in their Vancouver neighbourhoods and ideas for resolving these. As well, participants revealed how poor design, lack of programming, and conflict impedes their ability to connect in shared spaces. Their thoughts and ideas brought forward several suggestions for improving and supporting social connection in multi-unit residential buildings.

This report, and a companion photo book compilation of the photographs and descriptions submitted by participants, is offered to photovoice participants and to housing provider partners of the Hey Neighbour Collective. We hope it conveys a view to deepening and advancing our conversation and commitment to creating residential environments where sociability can be fostered and social connections can be generated and supported, even under the duress of physical distancing constraints.

METHODOLOGY: ABOUT PHOTOVOICE

Photovoice is a participatory research method that is growing in popularity within community-engaged research. First, participants are invited to take photos on a particular theme, shot from their perspective. After submitting their photos to the researcher, participants come together to workshop their contributions, to reflect on and draw connections with contributions from other participants, and to categorize their pictures thematically. The approach creates opportunities for meaningful communication amongst participants and between participants and researchers, and may empower community forms of knowledge, trust, and action. Photovoice research can empower participants as social change agents by inviting them to participate in the design, data collection, analysis, and presentation of research results that are meaningful and valuable to their daily life experiences (Delgado, 2015). Ideally, the photovoice methodology allows for equal engagement of participants and researchers in sharing perspectives in thematic, values-based ways. The photographs' main role is to overcome some of the barriers to collaboration that are often imposed by specialized research terminology or other forms of expertise. Photovoice projects can produce insights that are more difficult to share or articulate when using traditional research methods (Golden, 2020). Additionally, photovoice research has been shown to have potential in reaching policymakers, through the creation of a collective voice of participants and due to the rich visual messaging of photovoice results (Garcia et al., 2013; Labbé et al., 2021).

Other recently conducted photovoice research projects in Canada illustrate the potential of this method. For example, designed by the Access Alliance and Wellesley Institute, the Exposed project was designed to equip participants with a means to voice the social impacts of poverty and racism in their neighbourhood, the Black Creek area of Toronto (Access Alliance, 2009). Participants in the Exposed project took their photographs, described them, and brought them together with those of their neighbours, and in so doing brought to

light the individual impacts of the systemic barriers of racism and poverty, and challenged misconceptions about the quality of life in their neighbourhood based on popular media accounts. This project served a community empowerment function for residents of Black Creek and an awareness-raising function beyond the neighbourhood itself. Another project, "Shifting Focus: Snapshots of Resilience" designed in a partnership between the Collaborating Centre for Prison Health at UBC and the John Howard Society of Canada, used a photovoice technique to empower formerly incarcerated men to document their daily life experiences in community (Collaborating Centre for Prison Health & Education at UBC, 2021). In this case, the photovoice approach generated a sense of strength, significance, and respect for participants as researchers and with the members of the research team. As a third example of other photovoice projects of interest, the Relationships Matter project focused on the lived experiences of eight B.C. youth as they aged out of the foster care system, including their hardships, mantras, and relationships with culture, community, and animals. The gallery show that marked the completion of this project also included notes and commentary from youth and show attendees on how to improve the foster care system (Doucet, 2018). These examples demonstrate the benefits of photovoice for bringing together diverse perspectives to create a collective voice with impact. In this project, HNC used photovoice to create opportunities for residents of multi-unit apartment buildings to become researchers with a collective voice from their diverse perspectives and ideas.

Our initial research design included in-person recruitment and follow-up workshops as is common in the photovoice approach. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and new public health restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, we had to adapt our design. Thus, the steps carried out in winter and spring 2021 for this project were an experiment in a remote photovoice technique. The protocol involved minimal in-person contact with participants and workshops over the telephone or via

Zoom, rather than face-to-face. We offer some reflections on the success and limitations of this approach at the end of this report.

We recruited participants living in Brightside Community Homes and Concert Properties buildings in Vancouver, via posters and email blasts sent to residents. Recruitment happened in fall 2020 and spring 2021. The posters and emails asked interested residents to contact the research team for more information. Throughout recruitment, roughly 20 people contacted us, and amongst these, 7 people made submissions. Several factors may explain this low recruitment rate. One is that this was the first time this kind of project opportunity had been offered to these residents, and so it may have been missed by many and viewed with skepticism by others. Another likely factor impeding participation is the fact that the project took place during severe restrictions on socialization due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many residents who would have participated under other circumstances might have considered it an unnecessary risk at the time. As such, we did not seek to maximize participation, but rather to reach those who were motivated to participate.

Participants were given the choice of using their own camera or borrowing a Fuji Instax instant film camera. Those who participated with their own cameras were given a digital instruction booklet which included researchers' contact information, the research questions to guide their choice of photos to take and submit, instructions on uploading their photos, and consent forms. Participants who opted to borrow a camera were given a similar instructional booklet adapted with additional instructions for the instant film camera. They were also given extra film, an empty journal, and miscellaneous scrapbooking supplies. They were instructed to place their chosen photos in the journal, to write their own descriptions of each photo, and to decorate their photobooks as they liked. Participant packages also included a brief evaluation survey. Participants chose both of these options, and all submitted photos with written descriptions of where and why the photo was taken. These descriptions were

elaborated on in a series of workshops and interviews. This meant we collected a mix of visual, verbal, and written data.

Participants were instructed to take pictures of areas in their daily life where they experience social connection or isolation within their homes, buildings, or neighbourhoods. This open-ended prompt helped encourage the submission of diverse stories and individualized experiences and to ward off researcher-imposed or overly specialized understandings of the makers and markers of sociability and isolation. We invited participants to express their experiences of social connections and social isolation in visual and text forms and in so doing, we encouraged participants to reflect on and craft their own understanding of personal and community empowerment within their homes and buildings. This began with recognizing their own social context and how this created and limited opportunities in their daily lives.

After participants had submitted their photos and descriptions, they were invited to take part in a group workshop or interview. Two interviews were conducted, one workshop was conducted with two participants in attendance, and two participants declined to participate in a workshop or interview. All workshops and interviews took place over Zoom except for one, which was done over the phone. The workshops were designed to foster a "round-table" atmosphere, with researchers and participants sharing in the same way. We went about this by beginning with the researchers presenting photos they had taken in their own home environments and proceeded to the participant presentations. As the discussion progressed, participants were encouraged to ask questions and search for common decisions about overarching themes to categorize their photos. The workshop was, in this way, structured as a democratic and transparent discussion of personal experiences and contributions amongst strangers, pulling together certain commonalities of experience as well as points of divergence in accounting for the diversity of individual daily life experiences in the same city. The interviews

were structured similarly to the workshops, where researchers and participants presented their photos and all had chances to ask questions. Afterwards, participants were asked to draw connections between their own photos and generate themes to categorize their work. The phone interview used the same structure, with the difference that a printed booklet outlining the interview schedule, including the photographs to be discussed, was delivered to the participant beforehand.

Finally, the completed photographs, written commentary, and transcripts of the interviews and workshops were used for the data analysis presented here. This analysis was conducted using NVivo software, using common codes and analytical categories identified by participants and further refined by the research team.

APPENDIX

This table presents a snapshot of the frequency of mentions of themes across participant photos, comments, interviews and workshops. Mentions are also organized in terms of the positive or negative association or experience referenced.

Snapshot of Themes by Number and Type of Mention

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	MIXED	TOTAL
Shared Spaces as Sites of Connection	52	72	18	142
Community-Led Initiatives	31	6	0	37
Conflict as a Barrier to Social Connection	3	24	1	28
“During the pandemic everyone feels isolated and alone...”	6	13	5	24
Safety Concerns Affect Social Connection	1	6	2	9
“All Neighbours I’ve Seen for 20 Years... Gone With the Wind!”	0	7	2	9

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