

Building social connections

through multi-unit housing design,
policy, and programming

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Let's start with a **story**



Our Urban Village Cohousing, Vancouver

Design moves

Social group size: Clusters of housing with 10 to 15 units are ideal to nurture social connections.

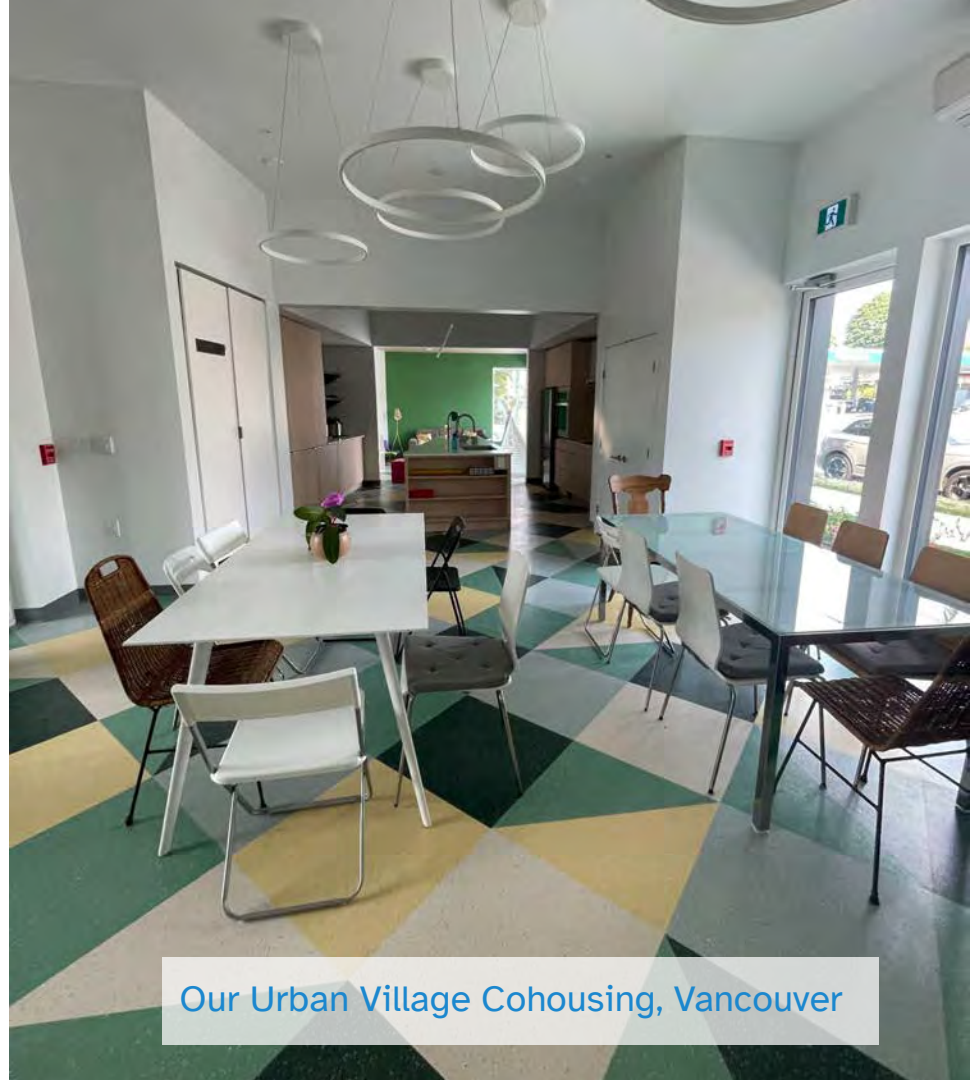
Social capital: When people self-organize to work on causes bigger than themselves, they feel happier.

Privacy gradients: Delineating a gradient of social spaces gives people a sense of control and creates feelings of safety.

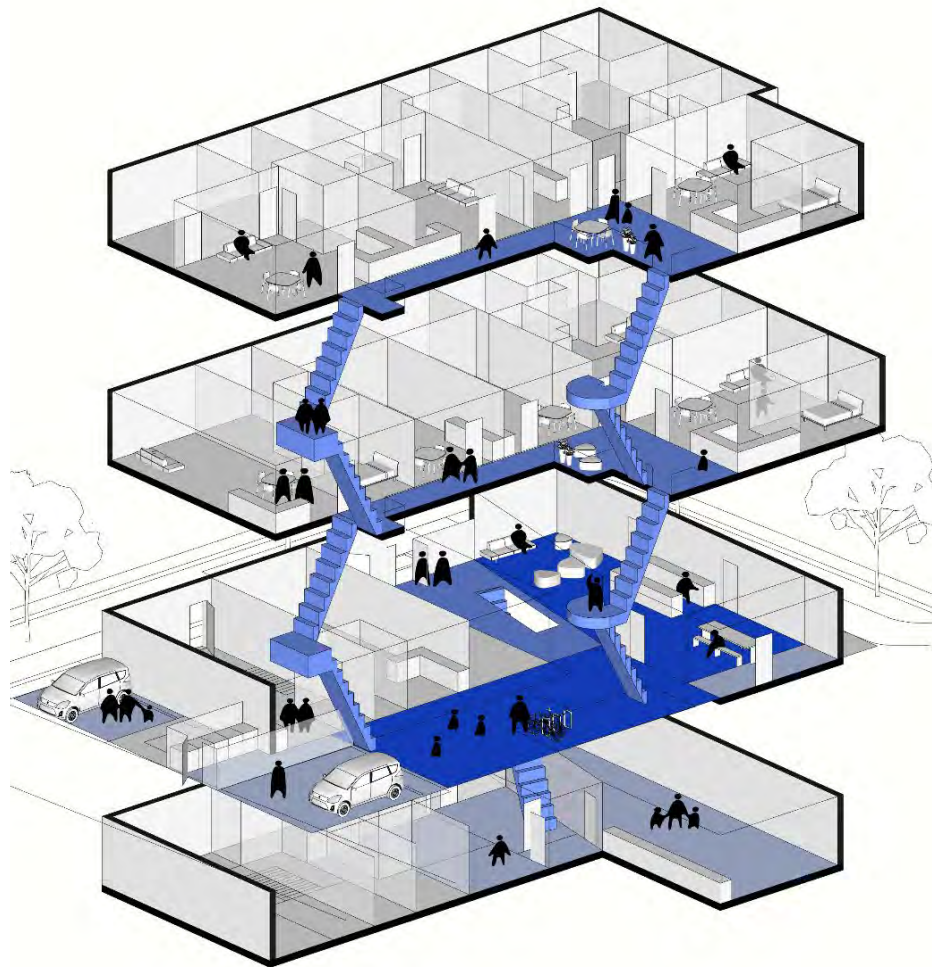
Informal social interactions: Informal, unscheduled encounters nurture trust and belonging.

Impact of nature: People's ability to experience nature is strongly linked to positive household relationships and trust.

Longtime tenure: Residents who can live in the same place longer, either as owners or renters, build stronger bonds of trust.



Our Urban Village Cohousing, Vancouver



Our Urban Village Cohousing, Vancouver

Intentional community

An illustration of a vibrant, multi-level courtyard in an intentional community. The scene is filled with people engaged in various activities: a person in a red hoodie walks on the left; a person in a white apron pushes a wheelbarrow in the foreground; a person in a wheelchair is being assisted by a person with a cane near a table; a person sits on a bench; and a person stands on a higher level. The courtyard features colorful awnings (yellow and white, blue and white), tables, benches, and stylized trees. The background shows modern buildings with large windows. Three speech bubbles contain text about community support and social connections.

Neighbourly support helps me age in the right place

I can rely on my neighbour to listen when I need someone to talk to

I have social connections right at my doorstep

Turns out, social connection is contagious!

5x

more likely to want to connect with neighbours



Residents who participated in Concert's Community Connectors program were five times more likely to want to connect with neighbours than those who didn't participate.

What if we start **thinking about our homes as catalysts for social connection** that can positively impact all aspects our daily lives?



Core Needs

Without **affordable** housing choices that provide **secure tenure**, all of these other wellbeing goals cannot be achieved.



How do we **study**
social wellbeing in
multi-unit housing?

What we do



Planning + Design

We work with our interdisciplinary consulting team to co-create thriving urban places that boost human wellbeing.



Research

We explore the hidden ways cities influence human wellbeing with our action-oriented research team.



Education

We inspire and enable stakeholders to build happier, healthier, more inclusive cities with our keynotes, workshops and studios.

Happy Homes Toolkit



Designed to Engage



Happy Homes evidence & practice

Research, reports & engagement

Social Wellbeing Design Guidelines

(City of Port Moody)

*Incentivizing
inclusive, healthy,
and social
multi-unit housing*

My home, my neighbourhood wellbeing study

(funded by VCH)

*Links between
density, housing
types, and
wellbeing*

Happy Neighbours

(funded by CMHC)

Programming and
design for social
wellbeing - Concert
Properties and
Tomo house

Social Wellbeing in temporary modular housing

(funded by CMHC)

*Programming,
policy and design
for Indigenous-led
temporary modular
housing*

Happy Homes evidence & practice

Research, reports & engagement

Age-friendly, socially connected housing audits

(Hey Neighbour
Collective & SFU)

Built environment
features for aging in
the right place

Dementia- inclusive neighbourhood design guidelines

(SFU DemSCAPE)

Neighbourhood
design for people
living with dementia

Wellbeing-centred tenant relocation study

(Brightside)

Measuring the
impact of tenant
relocation on older
adults

North Vancouver Active Design Guideline study

(City of North
Vancouver)

Evaluating the
impact of the active
design guidelines
policy

Research & engagement tools

Surveys



Observations



Building audits



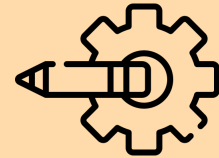
Interviews



Focus groups



Design audits



What do we mean by
social wellbeing?

How **connected** are we?

Wellbeing



Social
connection



Belonging



Health



Safety and
comfort

Experience

Affordability

Happiness

Accessibility

Preferences

Trust

Cultural background

Neighbourhood

Age

Length of tenure

Mental health

Building design

Loneliness by numbers - 2023

My home, my neighbourhood survey
(across Metro Vancouver)

6% Always

46% Sometimes

19% Often

29% Never or hardly ever

Active Design Guidelines study
(North Vancouver)

4% Always

39% Sometimes

13% Often

42% Never or hardly ever

17 - 25 % feel OFTEN or ALWAYS lonely

Familiarity with neighbours - 2023

My home, my neighbourhood survey
(across Metro Vancouver)

19% None

19% 4 to 6

41% 1 to 3

21% 7 or more

Active Design Guidelines study
(North Vancouver)

12% none

22% 4 to 6

40% 1 to 3

26% 7 or more

12 - 19 % do not know ANY neighbours

What role does the
built environment
play?

Design is one piece of the puzzle



Design



Programming



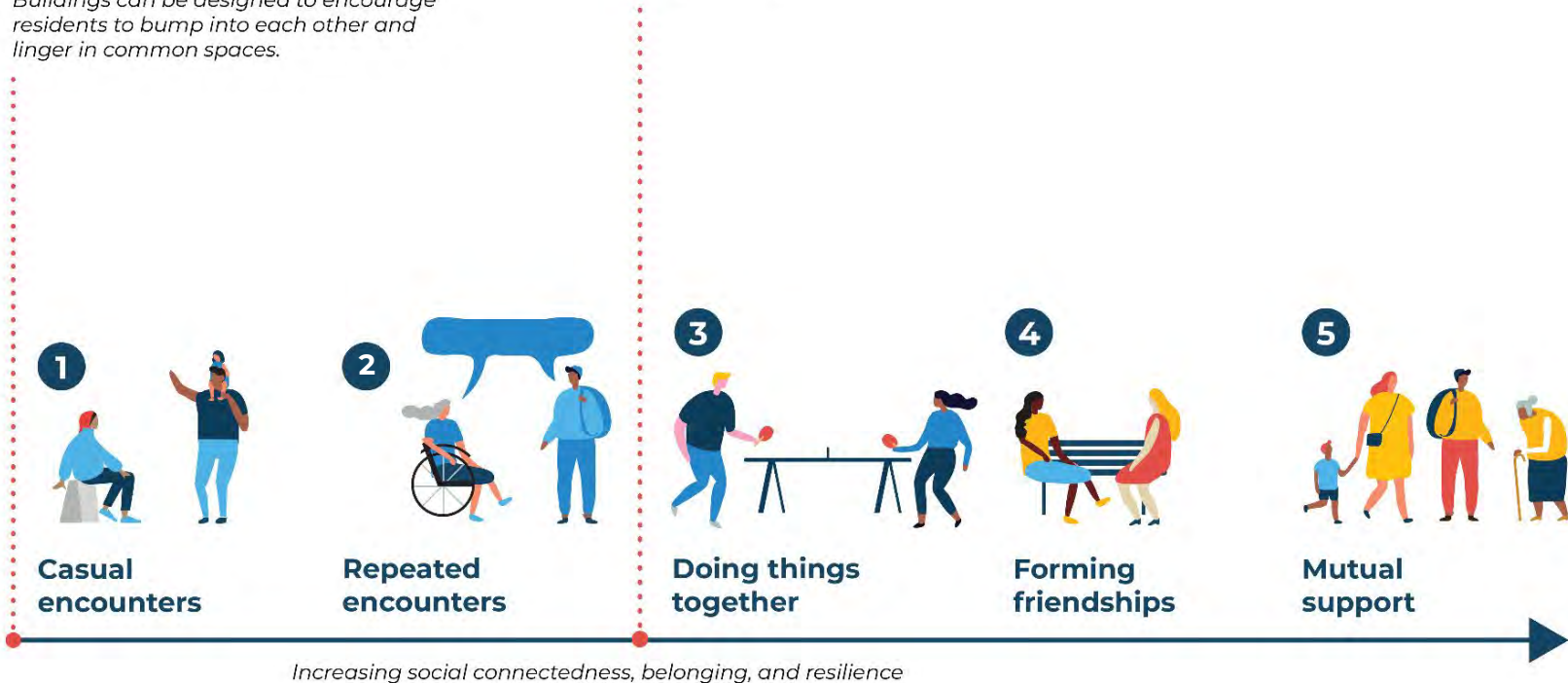
Policy

Building design

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

Building design & programming

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



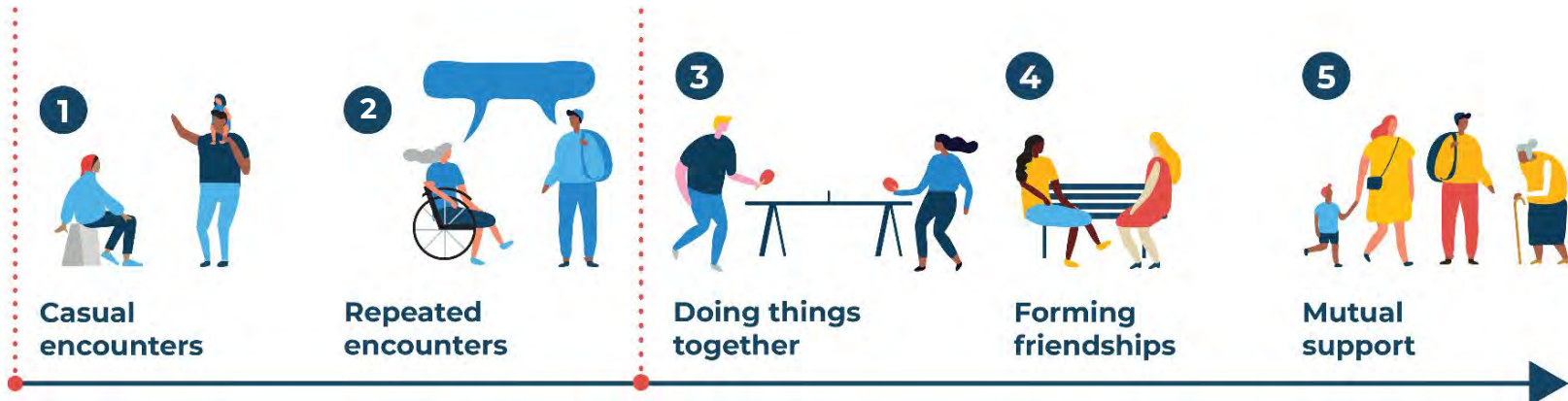
22% don't participate in ANY activities with neighbours

75% have conversations

24% take care of pets or plants
6% share meals
11% share household items
10% have kid or pet play dates

6% participate in outdoor activities
6% share groceries
5% share chores
5% play games

4% share childcare
4% emergency preparedness
4% volunteer together



*Results based on preliminary results from North Vancouver survey 2023 conducted by Happy Cities, HNC & SFU

Access to multiple amenity spaces is associated with...

Higher
likeliness of
knowing
neighbours

Better overall
social
connections

Greater
willingness to
ask neighbours
for help

Feeling less
lonely

What's important when it comes to encouraging use of amenity spaces?

Look & feel of the space

Diversity and **location** of spaces at building

Whether spaces **feel safe**

Access hours & ability to drop in

Diversity of **activities** you can do in the space

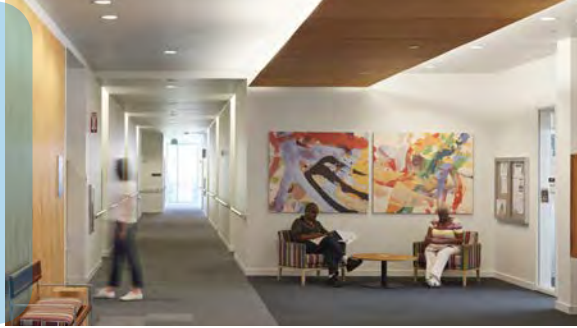
Accessibility features

What makes great
buildings for **social
connection?**

Where do daily connections happen?

23%

Lobbies, corridors,
near elevators



18%

Outside the
building

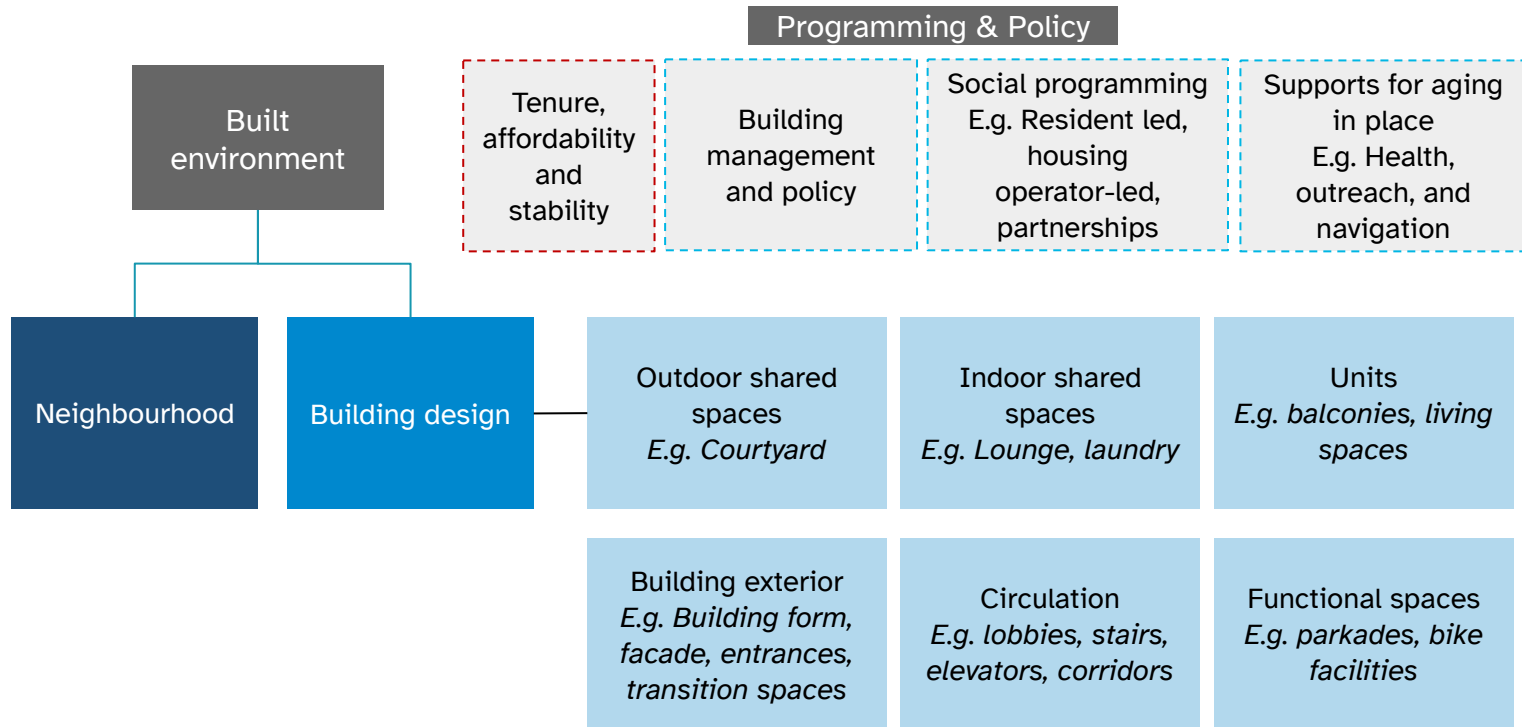


10%

Common outdoor
spaces



Impact of the built environment



Site layout & use

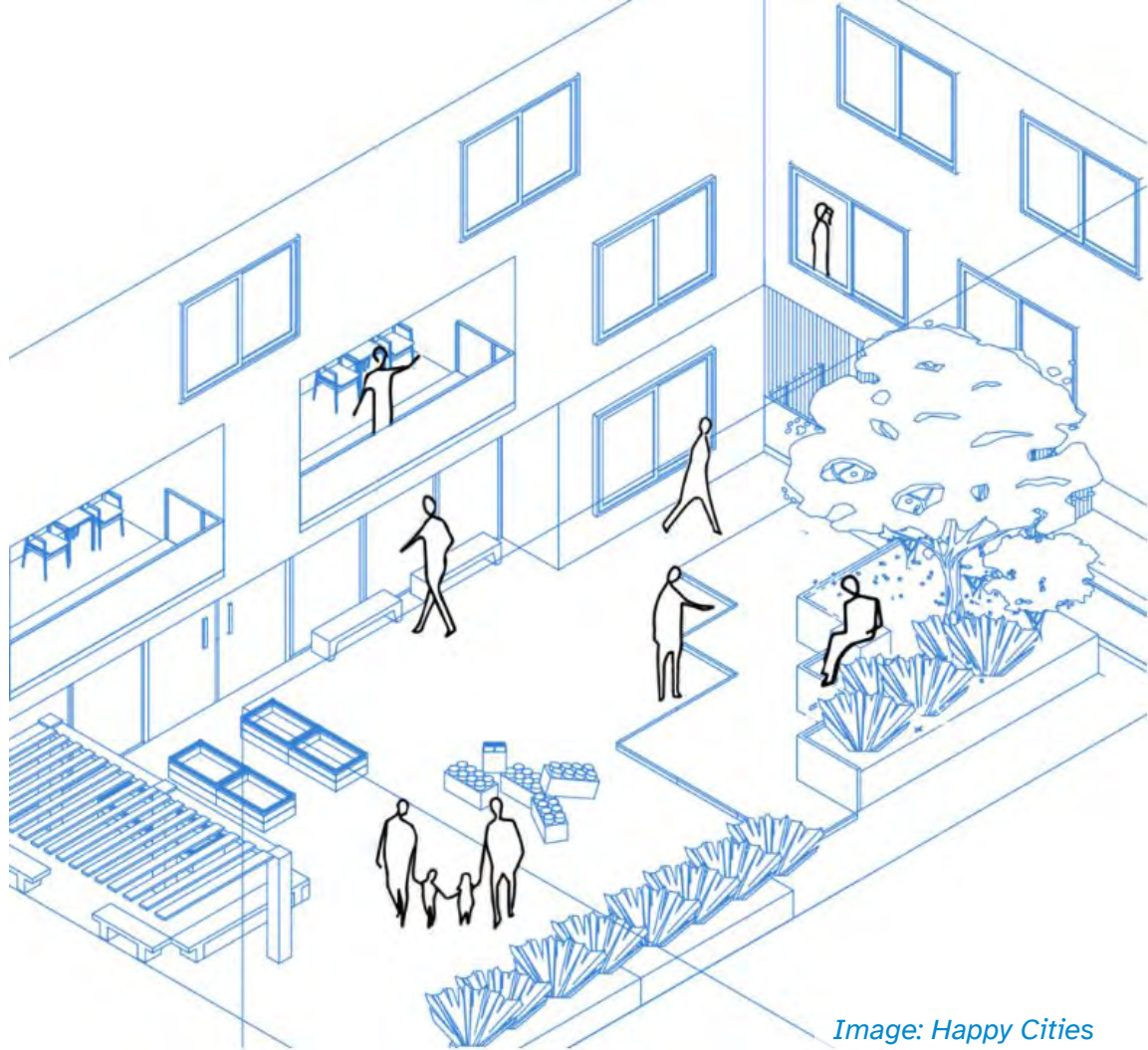


Image: Happy Cities



Courtyard buildings

Thoughtful placement of amenities & units

Image: Vindmøllebakken Housing - Helen & Hard

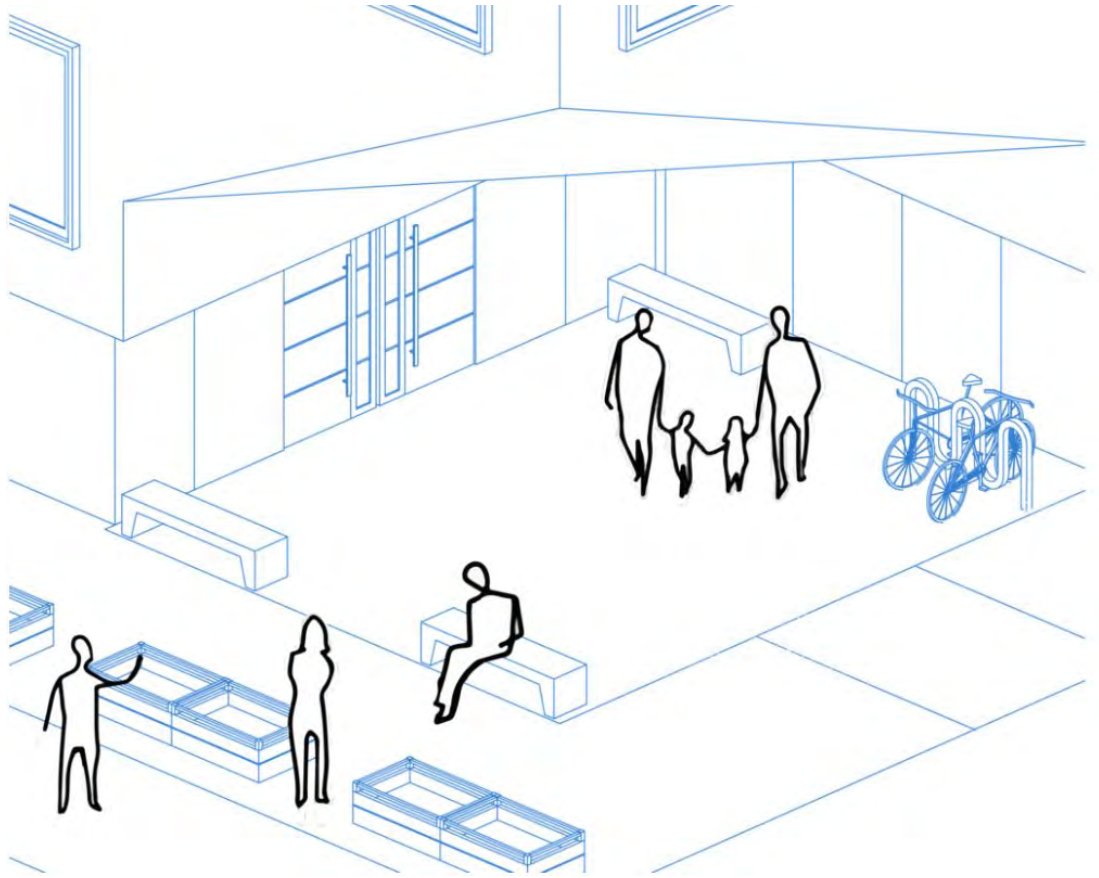


Mixed-use communities

Integrated public spaces

Image: Mary Anne's Place, Placemaker Communities

Prominent entrances & active transitions



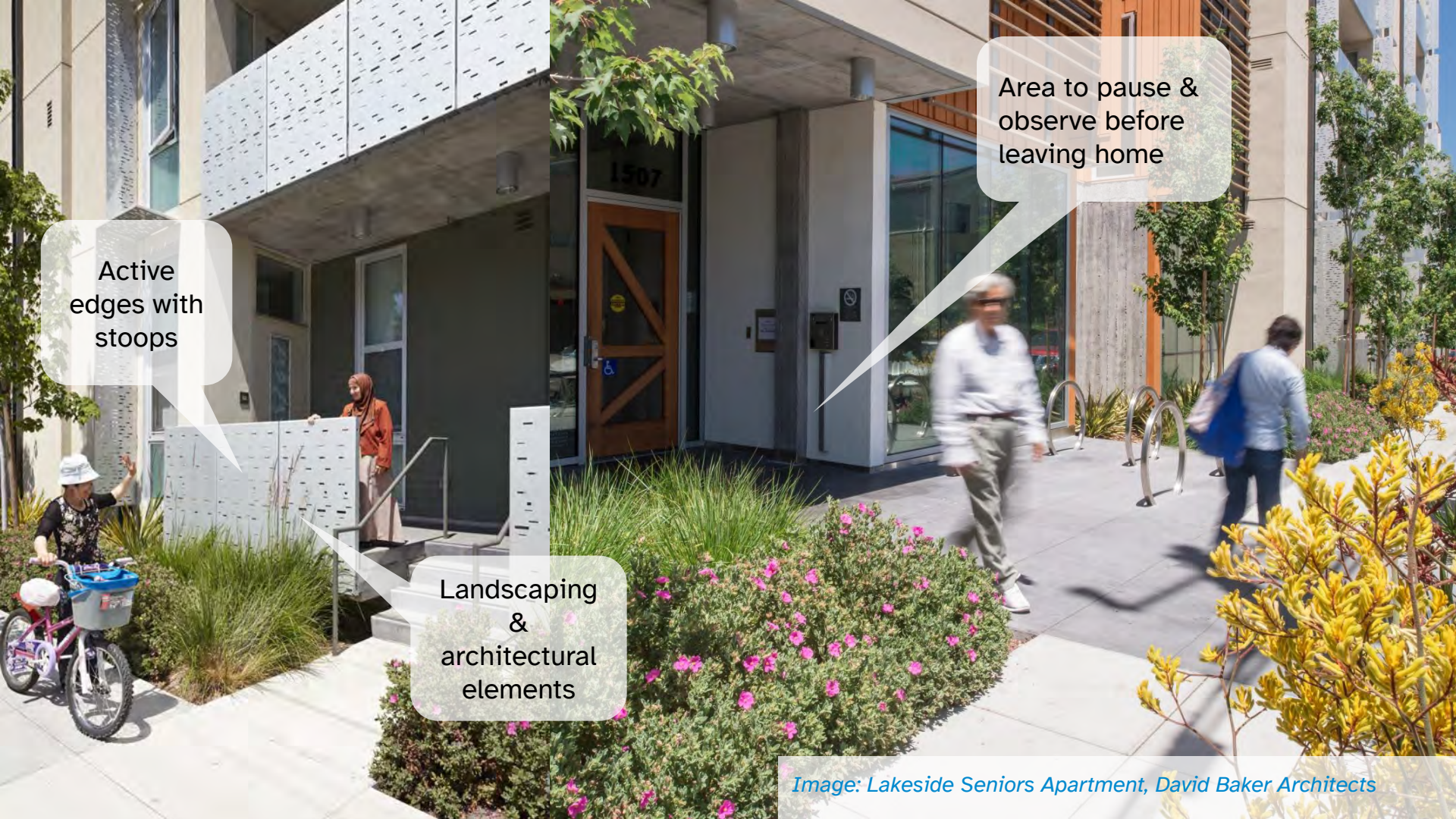


Lighting and
placemaking
features

Places to
pause &
interact

Co-location
of amenity
spaces
near
entries

Distinctive,
covered,
visible
entrance



Active
edges with
stoops

Landscaping
&
architectural
elements

Area to pause &
observe before
leaving home

Social circulation & lobbies



Image: Happy Cities

Natural
light in
corridors

Resident
created
artwork

Community
notice
board

Social nook
near
elevator

Enhanced
accessibility
features &
wide
corridors



Active stairs

Areas to store items & garden

Entrances that are easy to identify and distinguish

Seating area

Image: Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver



Active stairs

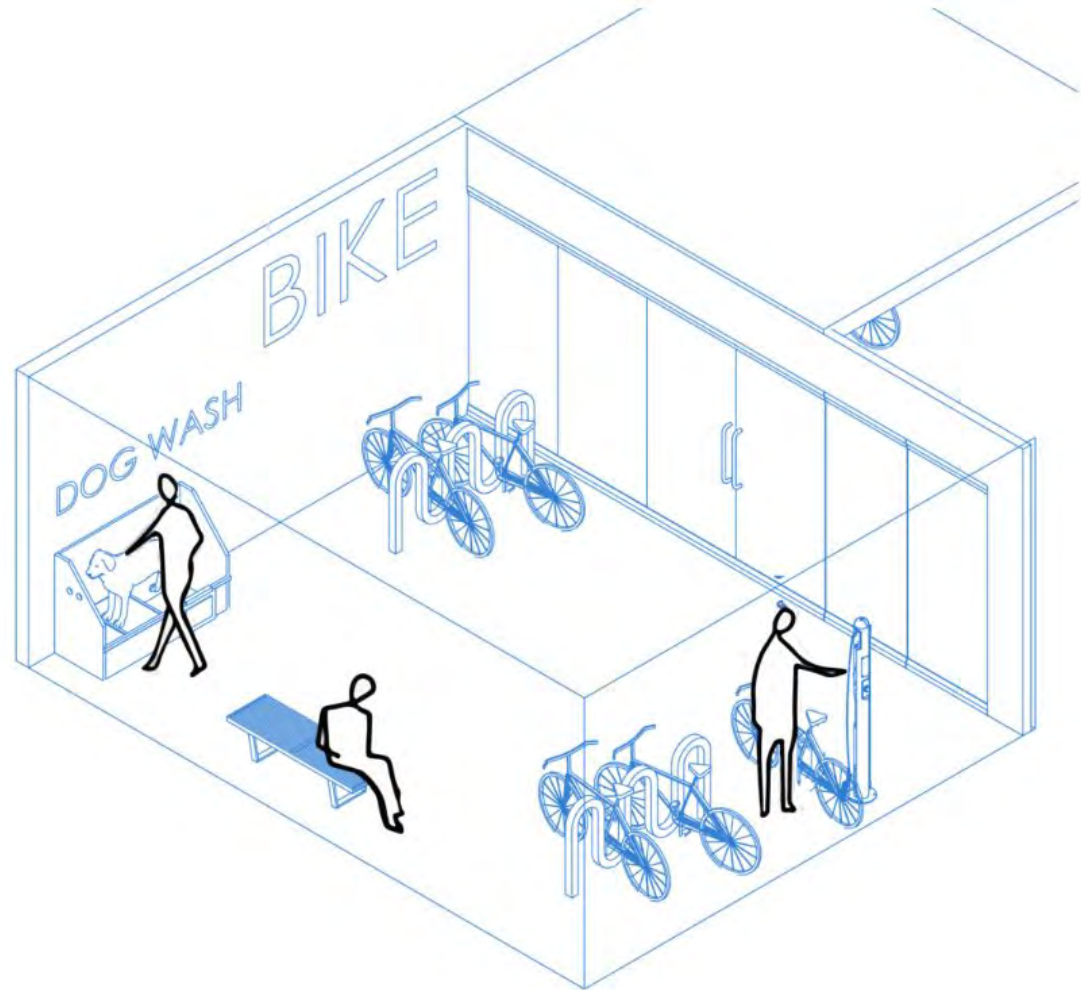
Co-located
amenity
space

Colourful
features &
lighting

Comfortable
waiting area with
view to public
realm

Image: Lobby at Elm 551 at Parkside, Chicago, LBBA

Intentionally designed amenity spaces





Visual connections to the courtyard

Indoor-outdoor connection to courtyard

Informal play area with public art

Direct access to the laundry room

Community gardens

Image: Station Center Family Housing, David Baker Architects

Kids activity
room

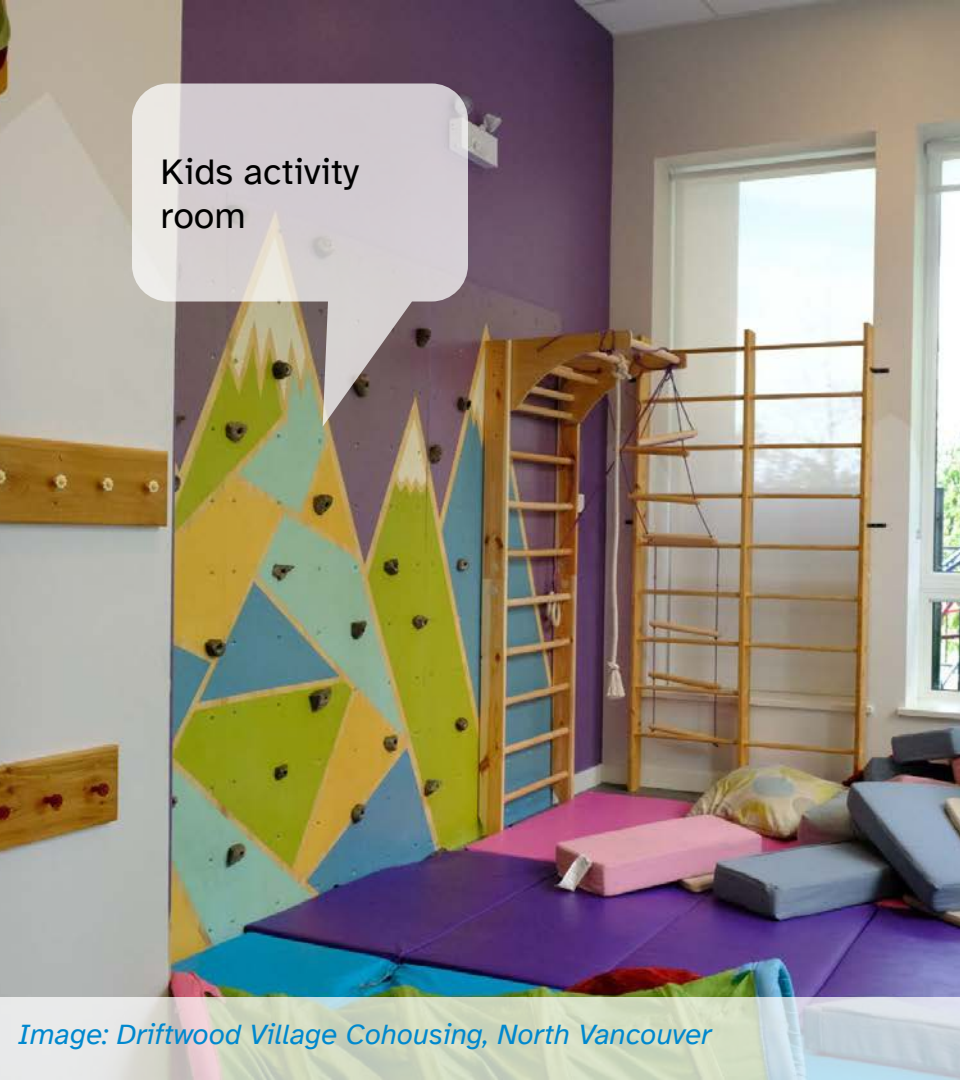
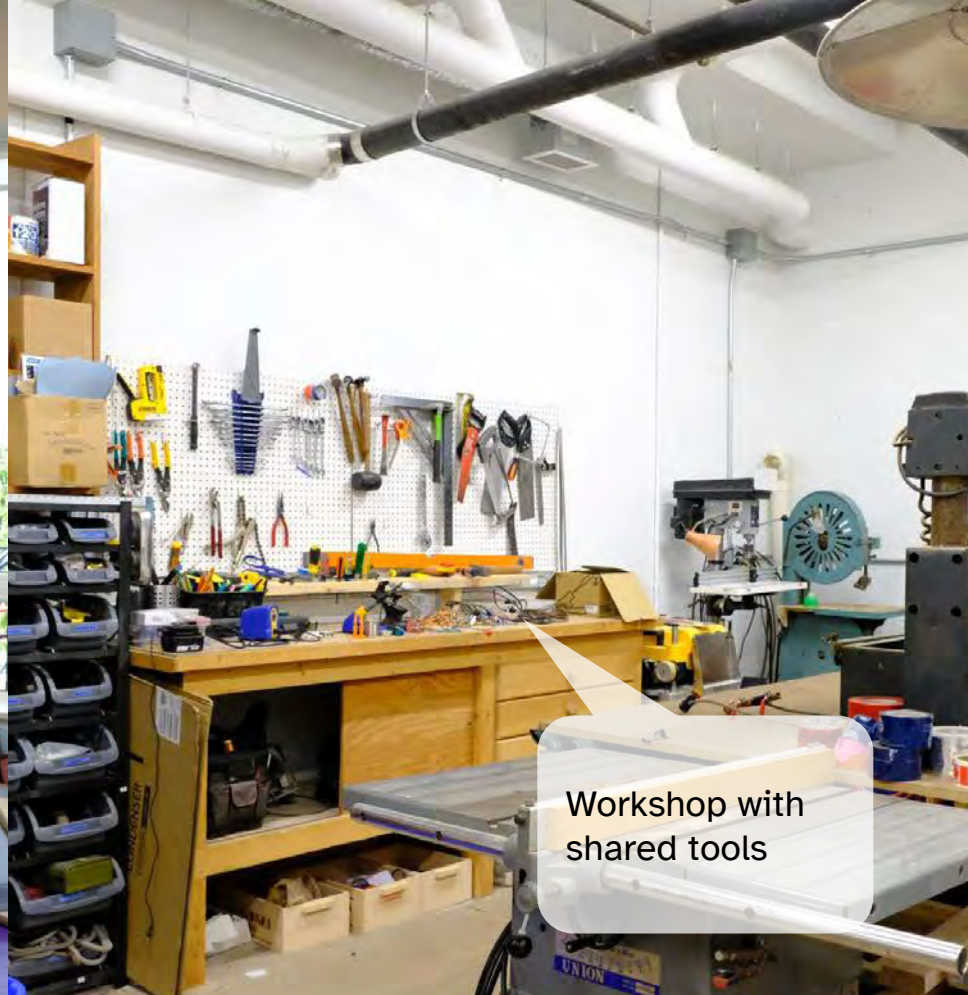


Image: Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver



Workshop with
shared tools

Image: Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver

What about
**different housing
typologies?**

Happy homes exist across densities & typologies

Neighbourhood density is not strongly associated with greater or lower wellbeing

Housing typology (ie. single detached home, apartment, townhouse, duplex/triplex) doesn't produce measurable differences in wellbeing

Living in a **tall building** doesn't negatively impact wellbeing overall

Small units can have wellbeing implications

People living in small units (less than 300 SF) reported lower happiness and health.

More likely to have a disability

More likely to have a lower income

More likely to have a smaller social support network





Newcomers to Canada

People struggling with loneliness



People who identify as 2SLGBTQI+

Racialized people



Indigenous peoples

Young adults



People with disabilities or long-term illnesses

Wellbeing-focused design benefits everyone!

People experiencing mental illness

People with addictions

Women fleeing violence

People with lower incomes

Older adults and seniors



People transitioning out of homelessness



Kids & youth



Thank you!

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