

Toolbox of design actions to nurture wellbeing in multi-unit housing





Land acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge that this research took place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətat (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

The project team recognizes that colonialism isolates Indigenous Peoples intentionally and by design—for example, by prohibiting cultural practices, separating communities, and weakening family and language ties. We recognize these historic and ongoing inequities and systemic barriers, and strive to be part of movements to correct them.

About this project

This document was published in January 2025. It is a companion document that builds on the strategies and actions in the <u>Building Social Connections Toolkit</u>, providing additional guidance on age-friendly multi-unit housing design. It is further informed by previous research on <u>aging in the right place</u> conducted by Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour Collective, and researchers at the Simon Fraser University Department of Gerontology.

Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective collaborated on the vision for this toolkit, building on project learnings and prior research, policy, and engagement by each organization. Happy Cities led research, writing, and design of the toolkit, with detailed content review and collaboration from Hey Neighbour Collective.

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To learn more about this project, please visit:

happycities.com/building-social-connections-toolkit





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.

Team members: Madeleine Hebert, Emma Avery, Sheree Emmanuel, Michelle Gagnon-Creeley





Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC) brings together 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.

Team members: Michelle Hoar, Dr. Atiya Mahmood

1 | Introduction

Homes can be designed to support wellbeing at all ages and life stages. This document compiles best practices and design ideas for multi-unit homes that meet diverse and changing needs over time, so that people can build long-lasting relationships in their communities.

More than one in four people in Canada will be 65 or older in 2068—just over 40 years from now. Surveys repeatedly find that older adults want to stay in their homes for as long as possible. However, many homes are not built to meet changing needs as people age. Critically, inadequate design can cause health, safety, and accessibility challenges. Other older adults would like to downsize into a smaller home, but cannot always find affordable, desirable options that will meet their needs as they age, and that foster a strong sense of community.

The design of our homes and neighbourhoods influences how likely we are to feel lonely or isolated. About one in 10 Canadians age 65 and older report feeling socially isolated, and one in four report low social participation, according to a 2022 report from the National Institute on Ageing. Socially connected neighbours are healthier, more resilient, and often able to stay longer in their home and community as they age.

This toolkit illustrates how to design home environments that foster neighbourly connections—building inclusive, resilient, age-friendly communities.

Tackling loneliness at all ages

People can feel lonely and isolated at any age. The design ideas in this toolkit aim to support wellbeing at all stages of life—but particularly for older adults—while accounting for diverse incomes, abilities, and life experiences.

When multi-unit housing communities are designed to support aging in place, they nurture long-term, intergenerational relationships, building resilience and connections across all ages.



2 | How to use this document

This document is designed to complement the <u>Building</u>
<u>Social Connections</u> Toolkit, published by Happy Cities and Hey Neighbour Collective.

Building Social Connections Toolkit:

Broad toolbox of design actions to support wellbeing for residents of all ages, incomes, and life experiences.

This document:

Additional considerations for aging in the right place, including design ideas for intergenerational buildings or those with a high proportion of older adults.

Applicability

This document considers multi-unit housing forms all the way from townhomes to low-, medium-, and high-rise apartments. Many of the actions apply to both new and existing buildings; however, some must be considered at the start of the development process. Although the design ideas focus on homes that support aging in the right place, they also support wellbeing at all life stages.



Who is this document for?

This toolkit is for anyone interested in or working in housing, community planning, and development, with a focus on designing homes that meet the needs of older adults and support residents to age in the right place. The actions are intended for:

- Planners and planning consultants
- Architects and designers
- Market and non-market housing developers and operators
- All levels of government involved in housing
- Individual residents and community groups or advocates

Design principles

The Building Social Connections Toolkit outlines six principles for designing shared and semiprivate spaces that support resident wellbeing:

Location

Maximize opportunities for interaction by locating social features and spaces in convenient, visible, and prominent locations with natural light; Multiply social impact through co-location.

Invitation

Maximize spontaneous daily encounters by designing places to pause and interact; Use the built environment as an icebreaker for social interaction.

Activation

Create interesting, functional spaces and a centre or heart for the community through diverse scales of common spaces with intentional things to see and do.

Inclusion

Create spaces that are accessible and safe for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds; Reflect different cultural preferences and identities.

Transition

Balance high-quality, liveable private homes with common spaces; Consider thoughtful transitions and gradients from public to private space.

Evolution

Nurture a sense of belonging through stewardship of common spaces; Allow spaces to evolve with residents over time to meet changing community needs.

To learn more about the design principles:

See Section 3 of the <u>Building Social Connections</u> Toolkit to explore design principles for social wellbeing in multi-unit housing.

3 | Aging in the right place

What do we mean by aging in the right place?

Aging in the right place means living in a home that supports all aspects of wellbeing as people grow older—including social connections, sense of belonging, safety and comfort, physical and mental health, cultural practices, and more.

Importantly, people need affordable housing choices. Without affordable, secure tenure in a home that meets one's needs, it is difficult to fulfill all aspects of a person's wellbeing.

Age-friendly design must accommodate for changes in physical or cognitive abilities. But it also must address more holistic wellbeing needs. Age-friendly homes offer environments where people can thrive, maintain community connections, and feel a sense of belonging and fulfillment—regardless of age, ability, or other life experiences. In this way, age-friendly design can improve wellbeing and social support for people of all ages—and help foster intergenerational relationships.



For more on aging in the right place, please see the references and further reading (p. 27).

Precedents for this work

This toolkit draws on years of research and engagement with market and non-market housing developers and operators—and residents of all ages in multi-unit housing.

In 2023, Happy Cities worked with Hey Neighbour Collective and researchers from the Simon Fraser University Department of Gerontology to develop a building audit tool to assess the capacity of buildings to support aging in the right place. We studied 20 different buildings operated by Concert Properties and Brightside Community Homes Foundation in Vancouver and Victoria, B.C. A large proportion of Brightside residents are older adults, in addition to families and people with disabilities. All buildings assessed in this study were rental buildings, with a mix of market, below-market, and deeply affordable non-market housing.

This research included:

- Audits of the built environment, scoring different categories of spaces within a building
- Behavioural mapping, observing types and frequencies of social interaction in shared spaces
- Focus groups with residents, asking about the most important spaces in their homes and how they connect with neighbours
- Interviews with building staff and management, asking about their goals and strategies to promote social interaction and aging in the right place

The design actions and ideas in this document build on the findings from this research.

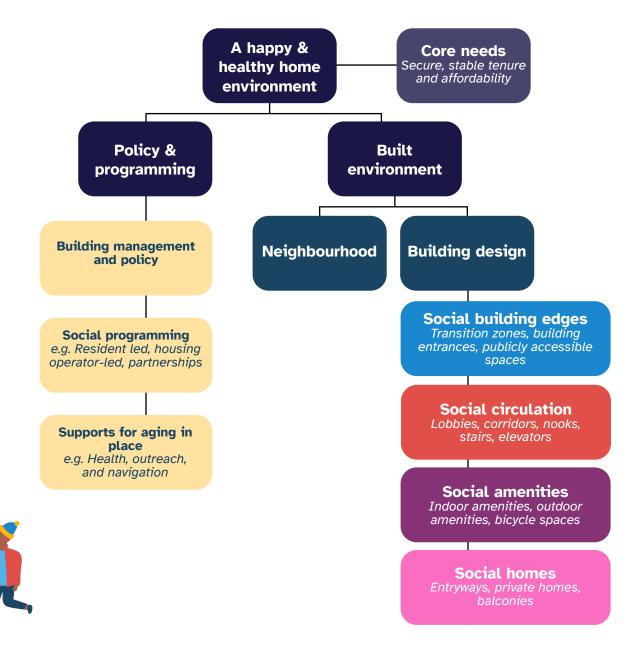
For more information, visit: <u>happycities.com/projects/aging-in-the-right-place-designing-housing-for-wellbeing-and-older-adults</u>



Role of the built environment

Building design plays an important role in creating healthier, happier, more inclusive home environments. Sociable design strategies can help maximize opportunities for neighbours to run into one another, and increase the likelihood of them having a conversation or positive interaction.

However, there are several other factors to consider beyond design, including programming, policy, and building management. The chart on this page shows how these elements work together to foster healthy aging.



The spectrum of social connections

Building connections with neighbours takes time. The actions in this toolkit consider the entire spectrum of social connections, recognizing that people need frequent opportunities for casual encounters to start to get to know one another. Building design is critical in facilitating these repeated encounters. Over time, both design and programming play a role in encouraging neighbours to start building deeper, more trusting relationships, through opportunities to do activities together. For more resources on programming, visit: heyneighbourcollective.ca/practice-guides/

Design

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

Design & programming

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



Increasing social connectedness, belonging, and resilience

Importance of the neighbourhood

Neighbourhood planning and design set the foundation for healthy, social communities. Although not the focus of this document, inclusive neighbourhood environments are crucial for helping people of all ages stay active, maintain social connections, and access shops and services.

When planning housing that supports aging in place, it is important to consider locations that offer:

- **Intergenerational communities:** Provide opportunities for older adults to live near people of all ages.
- Active communities: Locate homes in active neighbourhoods with suitable social opportunities and accessible community spaces.
- Walkable, accessible neighbourhoods: Ensure that residents of all ages and abilities can safely walk and roll to shops, services, and community amenities. Age-friendly neighbourhoods should have clear wayfinding signage and frequent seating for people to pause and rest.
- **Transit access:** Ensure that people can choose from rapid or local transit options as convenient, accessible alternatives to driving.
- **Community destinations:** Design third places and community spaces where older adults can participate in and observe public life, such as kids or pets playing.

Dementia-inclusive neighbourhoods

In Canada, close to one million people are expected to be living with dementia by 2030. While age- and dementia-inclusive design overlap significantly, there are specific considerations for people living with dementia that are not always captured by broader age-friendly guidelines. Dementia can affect people of any age; however, most people who are diagnosed with dementia are 65 or older.

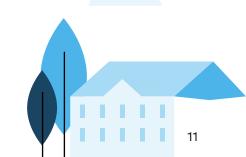
Happy Cities and researchers from the SFU Department of Gerontology collaborated to produce Dementia-inclusive Planning and Design Guidelines, which outline neighbourhood planning and design strategies to support wellbeing, social participation, and inclusion for older adults and people living with dementia.

Explore age- and dementia-inclusive neighbourhood design in more detail at: dementiainclusiveneighbourhood.com/



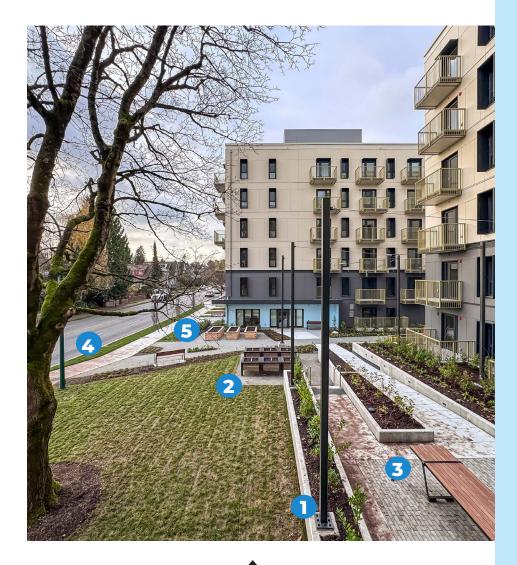








Transition zones



The front of the Timbre and Harmony affordable housing community in Vancouver, BC provides spaces for people to sit and interact safely and comfortably along the building's edges. Buildings designed by Ryder Architecture. (Brightside Community Homes Foundation)

Principles in action

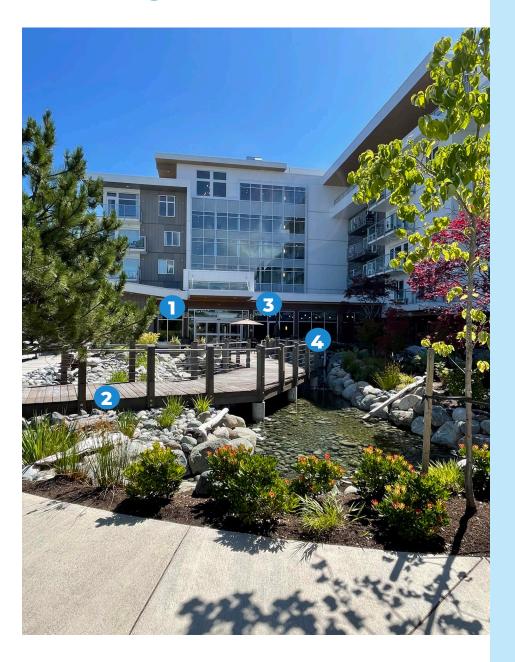
Transition zones

- Inclusion: Use lighting to enhance safety and ensure that older adults can navigate around building edges in all lighting conditions. Use variety lighting types to reduce glare and shadows.
- 2 Activation: Offer places to garden outside the building and near the public realm so that older adults can connect with neighbours and remain physically active.
- 3 **Invitation:** Create opportunities for people watching and social interaction by providing seating areas around the building that connect to the public realm.
- 4 Inclusion: Pay particular attention to areas that could be hazardous, such as loading bays or parking garage entrances. Mark the transition into these spaces with bollards, tactile paving, physical buffers, or signage.

Publicly accessible spaces

Inclusion: Consider integrating community services or public functions into multi-unit developments (e.g. seniors centre, community garden), to support both residents and the wider neighbourhood, and create a lively housing community.

Building entrances



Principles in action

Building entrances

- Inclusion: Design clear entrances that are easy to find for residents, visitors, and emergency services, using signage and distinct colours and materials. Ensure glass doors are marked to avoid confusion, particularly for people living with dementia.
- Inclusion: Create accessible entrances by providing automatic door openers and level entrances or ramps that feel integrated into the architectural and landscape design.
- **Transition:** Design outdoor drop-off areas that allow older adults to wait near the building's entrance. Provide shelter, seating, interesting features to observe, and a visual connection to the lobby.
- **Location:** Provide views from the public realm into the building to improve wayfinding and orientation, locating entrances adjacent to exterior and interior common spaces.
- ◆ The entrance at Berwick, a seniors independent living building on Vancouver Island, BC, includes a generous drop-off area that is easily seen from the lobby, wide sidewalks, a distinct entry point with a wide overhang for weather protection, and an walking area with boardwalk over the rainwater capture pond and native plants. Building designed by Low Hammond Rowe Architects. (Happy Cities)



Lobbies, stairs & elevators



- ▲ Vibrant colours and social nooks activate the wide, outdoor walkways and stairs at Our Urban Village Cohousing in Vancouver, BC. Building designed by MA+HG Architects and Tomo Spaces. (Happy Cities)
- ▶ The lobby at 150 Dan Leckie Way in Toronto, ON has a large open space where people can comfortably stay in the lobby and connect with their neighbours. (Maris Mezulis / KPMB)



Principles in action

Stairs and elevators

- Inclusion: Design safe stairs with colour-contrasting materials, solid handrails, and tactile warning strips.
- **Invitation:** Include social nooks next to stairs and elevator entrances, with comfortable seating, natural light, and multiple things to do in the space.

Lobbies

- Invitation: Create a resident and staff directory or display so that residents can get to know their neighbours and know who to reach out to.
- Activation: Create space to connect by ensuring that at least four to eight people can comfortably hang out in the lobby at once.
- **Activation:** Create a space that residents can go to for information, such as a bulletin board with colour-coded notices (e.g. red paper for notices that require immediate attention from residents, a different colour for organized social events).

Corridors & nooks





- ▲ The wide lobby and hallways at Lakeside Senior Apartments in Oakland, CA allow two people using wheelchairs or walkers to pass by comfortably.

 (Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects)
- Social nooks adjacent to elevators creates opportunities for connections between neighbours at in Vancouver, BC. (Little Mountain Cohousing)

Principles in action

Corridors

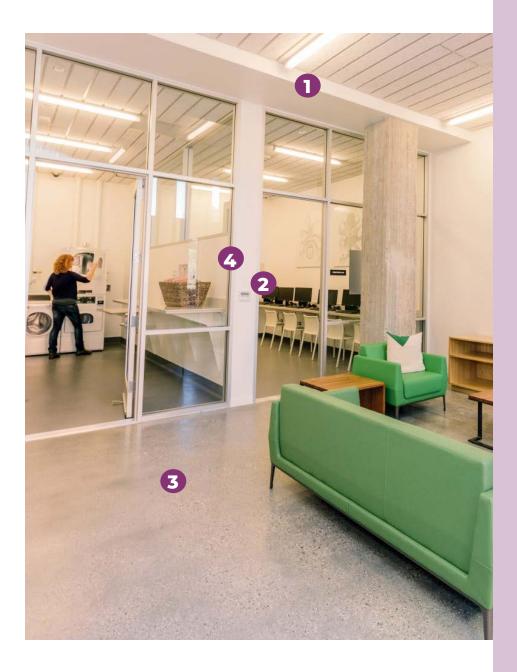
- Inclusion: Choose safe flooring surfaces that are easy to clean, non-slip, and do not create strong reflections or patterns.
- 2 Inclusion: Create wide corridors, over 1.8 metres, that allow people with mobility devices and wheelchairs to circulate comfortably.
- Inclusion: Provide accessibility features in hallways, such as handrails, to help prevent falls.

Nooks

- **Evolution:** Provide flexible and comfortable furniture that residents can configure to meet their needs.
- **Inclusion:** Create accessible nooks with enough space to circulate around furniture, ensuring that people with mobility devices can access seating and activities.
- **Inclusion:** Provide customizable lighting through a mixture of natural light or dimmable and flexible lighting options, such as reading lamps.



Indoor amenities



Principles in action

Overall considerations

- **Inclusion:** Provide access to natural light, as well as a variety of bright and soft artificial light options (e.g. floor lamps and dimmers), so that residents can adjust light to suit their needs.
- 2 **Inclusion:** Provide air conditioning so that the space can serve as a cooling centre in hot weather conditions.
- **Inclusion:** Create accessible spaces that allow for enough space to navigate around furniture with a large mobility device, such as a scooter or wheelchair.
- Inclusion: Consider acoustics to ensure that common spaces (e.g. laundry rooms, lounges) do not create noise disruptions in the building. In addition, consider acoustics within a room to ensure that people with decreased hearing or those who experience sensory overstimulation in loud spaces can comfortably participate in conversations.
- ◀ The lounge at Bayview Hill Gardens in San Francisco, CA is co-located with the laundry and computer rooms, with clear sight lines between the different spaces. (Matt Edge / David Baker Architects)

Indoor amenities





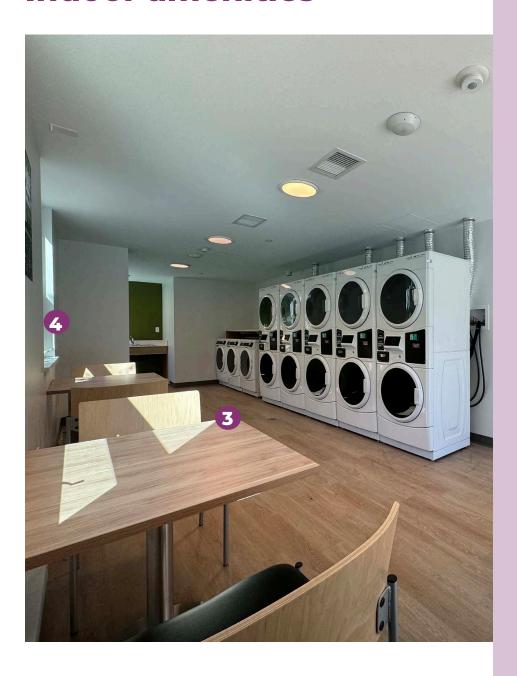
- ▲ The Common House at Marmalade Lane in Cambridge, England is a yearround social hub for the intergenerational community. (David Butler / Mole Architects)
- The common room at the Aster in Vancouver, BC provides a variety of furniture to accomodate different uses and needs. (Brightside Community Homes Foundation)

Principles in action

Diverse uses of space

- **Activation:** Create spaces to play games (e.g. cards, board games, or ping pong) by providing appropriate tables, seating, and storage.
- **Evolution:** Provide a private meeting space that is bookable for more intimate gatherings with neighbours or to meet with a health professional.
- **3 Activation:** Celebrate reading by creating a booksharing area with cozy seating and reading-based programming.
- Activation: Enable technology use by creating a small computer room and/or providing access to WiFi throughout the building's common spaces.
- **5 Activation:** Encourage exercise by providing a flexible area for activities such as chair yoga.
- 6 Activation: Create a sharing area where neighbours can give away or lend household items, such as kitchen appliances, tools, or clothing.

Indoor amenities



Principles in action

Laundry room

- **Transition:** Create opportunities to preview whether someone is already using the space by placing a window into the laundry room. The ability to preview a space prior to entering provides a greater sense of control over social interactions and can boost safety.
- **2 Invitation:** Create a book exchange that is located in or just outside the laundry room.
- **Invitation:** Provide seating in the laundry room for residents to sit and/or socialize while they wait.
- **Location:** Consider natural ventilation to improve air quality and provide some separation from other indoor spaces.
- ◆ The community laundry room at the Aster in Vancouver, BC provides seating, a sink, and natural light. These features create a pleasant area to wait while doing laundry and connect with neighbours. (Brightside Community Homes Foundation)

Outdoor amenities



Principles in action

Community gardens

- Location: Locate gardens in prominent areas (such as in courtyards or near the main entrance) and adjacent to seating areas, so that residents can connect with each other and/or the wider community while gardening.
- **Inclusion:** Design accessible gardens with raised beds and ample space to circulate around the garden beds.
- **Evolution:** Provide funding and support for residents who want to start a community garden at their building, or champions who sign up to maintain the garden over time.
- ◆ Rooftop community gardens offer an intergenerational community space at Via Verde in the Bronx, NY. (David Sundberg Grimshaw + Dattner Architects)

Outdoor amenities



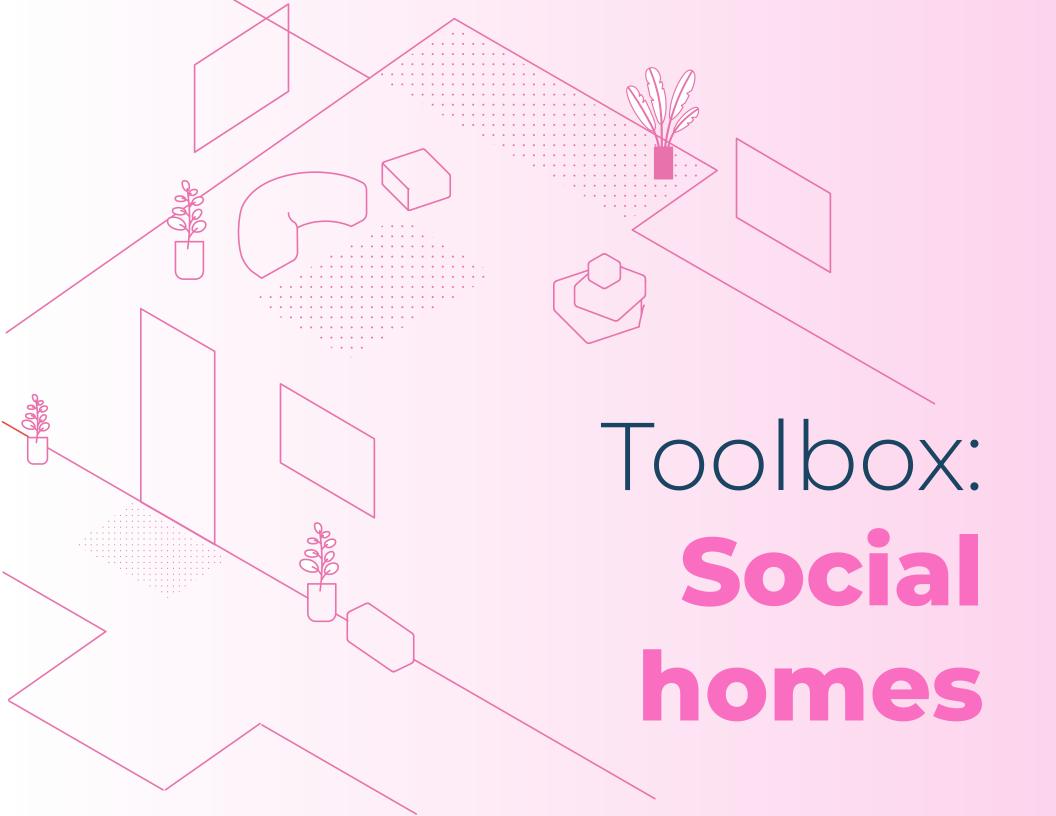


- The intergenerational courtyard at the Frederick Douglas Haynes Gardens Apartments in San Francisco, CA provides a variety of seating and gathering points, as well as shaded seating areas. (Paulett Taggart Architects)
- The rooftop at
 Arkadia provides a
 diversity of plants
 that engage the
 senses. (Breathe
 Architecture)

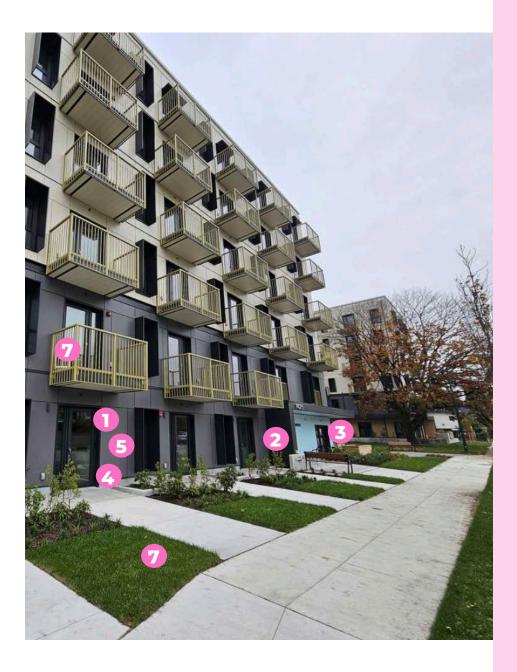
Principles in action

Courtyards and terraces

- Invitation: Provide frequent seating options, including a mix of fixed and flexible seating and spaces for individuals and small and large groups to sit.
- 2 Invitation: Design focal points for social gathering.
- **Invitation:** Provide overhangs or structures, such as gazebos, for shaded seating areas.
- **Activation:** Create a flexible lawn that allows residents to play games, gather, or participate in activities.
- **Transition:** Balance areas that feel public and private. Garden walls, fencing, and hedges can help demarcate space and provide semi-private areas that feel more enclosed.
- **Inclusion:** Design accessible walking and rolling paths within and leading to outdoor spaces. Ensure pathways are clearly marked, level, and well-maintained. Hard and solid surfaces (such as concrete) are easiest to navigate.
- Activation: Use diverse materials and colours with sufficient contrast to distinguish different uses in outdoor spaces and create visual interest.
- **Activation:** Use diverse plants that engage all the senses and change seasonally to create a warm, inviting environment.



Social homes



Principles in action

Entryways

- **Transition:** Consider visibility from the home entrance into the hallway, by providing a sidelight or dual-height peephole.
- **Evolution:** Allow residents to personalize their unit entrances by incorporating shelves where they can add small items, a bulletin board, or a place to pin up photos.
- Inclusion: Install front doors of different colours to help residents easily find their unit along a hallway. Ensure colour contrast with adjacent surfaces.
- Inclusion: Design accessible home entrances that meet accessibility standards (e.g. flush or low-threshold entrances, wide doorways).

Balconies

- **Evolution:** Create opportunities to garden by designing patios or balconies that can easily fit a small planter and place to sit.
- ◀ The ground-level homes at Timbre and Harmony in Vancouver, BC have direct, flat access to the streetscape and opportunities for gardening. The buildings offer affordable, secured rental homes for independent seniors, families, and people with disabilities. Buildings designed by Ryder Architecture. (Brightside Community Homes Foundation)

Social homes



Principles in action

Private homes

- Inclusion: Provide ground-floor homes for older adults who have mobility issues and prefer to have direct outdoor access from their unit.
- 2 **Inclusion:** Use flooring materials that are smooth, hard, and durable to improve adaptability.
- Inclusion: Include adjustable artificial lighting to support different needs and uses in the home. Design lighting to minimize shadows and glare.
- **Transition:** Provide access to natural daylight with views of nature and/or outdoor shared spaces.
- **Evolution:** Design adaptable homes that support accessibility and aging in place.
- 6 **Inclusion:** Consider space to easily store a scooter or mobility device near the entrance, with access to an outlet.

For more resources on accessible homes, please see the <u>Canadian standards on accessible dwellings</u> and the Rick Hansen Foundation's Accessibility Certification.

■ A ground-floor studio home at Our Urban Village Cohousing in Vancouver, BC. The design includes high ceilings, natural light, no-step entrances, and a wheelchairaccessible washroom. Building by MA+HG Architects and Tomo Spaces. (Tomo Spaces).

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