

Building a Vertical Community Floor by Floor

A Canadian Project Director champions “vertical community” over anonymous towers – transforming multi-unit housing policy to prioritize neighborly connection in cities where people live close but remain strangers.

PROFILE:

Michelle Hoar *serves as Project Director of the Hey Neighbour Collective and Fellow at Simon Fraser University’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. Her background as co-founder of The Tyee, one of Canada’s leading independent media organizations, informs her systems-focused approach to complex urban challenges. She regularly presents her work at international conferences on housing policy, community development, and urban resilience.*

Michelle Hoar

on:



The Paradox of Proximity

The phone calls started coming to City Hall around 2018. Housing developers wondered why their new towers sat partially vacant. Health officials noticed upticks in emergency calls from high-rise buildings. Community center directors reported declining participation despite growing populations. Few connected these dots until Michelle Hoar and her colleagues began convening the unlikely conversations that would change how Vancouver thinks about urban living.

Traditional urban governance operates through institutional silos that fragment responses to complex, interconnected challenges. “The Hey Neighbour Collective is what’s called a collective impact project,” Hoar explains from her workspace, pointing to whiteboards covered in policy flowcharts and resident feedback loops. It’s a framework that brings housing providers, health authorities, researchers, and residents into sustained partnerships around shared outcomes rather than departmental mandates.

The approach emerged from recognizing that loneliness in multi-unit housing requires coordinated intervention across sectors that rarely talk to each other. Housing departments focus on unit counts. Health agencies track disease patterns. Community groups plan programming. None were equipped to address the growing epidemic of neighbors who live inches apart but remain strangers.

The analytical significance extends far beyond loneliness prevention. As cities confront climate adaptation, demographic transition, and economic volatility, challenges increasingly span traditional governance boundaries. Hey Neighbour’s methods demonstrate how sustained cross-sector coordination can produce systemic change impossible through isolated interventions.

Six years later, the evidence speaks clearly. Pilot buildings implementing social connection programming report 40% higher resident participation in community activities and measurably stronger social support networks – outcomes with implications that ripple through everything from emergency response capacity to civic engagement levels.

Who's in Your Emergency Toolkit

Michelle frames Hey Neighbour Collective's methodology around a deceptively simple revelation, borrowed from partner organization Building Resilient Neighbourhoods: "It's more about who's in your emergency toolkit, not what's in your emergency toolkit." This philosophy underpins what she describes as collective impact - bringing together organizations that came together six years ago now out of a concern about loneliness. Hey Neighbour Collective operates not as a traditional organization but as what Michelle calls "an initiative" that creates spaces for housing providers, health authorities, researchers, and residents to collaborate around shared outcomes. "We create spaces where people can step away from their

desks and daily tasks to engage directly with colleagues in other departments or across cities" she explains, identifying bureaucratic silos as the primary obstacle to addressing urban loneliness systematically.

Partner programs like "Connect and Prepare" exemplify this philosophy - bringing neighbors together around emergency preparedness that focuses less on supplies than on relationships: "getting to know your neighbours better and planning together for crises." When the west coast of Canada and the US experienced a heat dome emergency, buildings with active social programming reported significantly better outcomes, with residents checking on vulnerable neighbors and coordinating cooling resources organically.



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Vertical Communities

The numbers tell a striking story about urban Canada's future: multi-unit housing now accommodates the majority of new households, transforming cities from collections of single-family homes into forests of apartment towers. But Michelle argues we're building this vertical future without understanding how to make it optimally livable.

"We're moving into this reality where multi-unit housing is becoming the dominant form for many - if not most - households," she observes, describing a demographic shift that urban planners are struggling to address. The transition isn't just about housing supply; it's about fundamentally reimagining what community looks like when hundreds of families share a single building address.

Michelle identifies the core challenge: "Proximity does not equal sociability." Traditional neighborhood planning assumed that people living close together would naturally form connections through front porches, shared yards, and casual street encounters. Vertical housing eliminates these organic connection points, replacing them with anonymous elevators and sterile corridors that discourage rather than enable social interaction.

The psychological impact proves profound. Research Michelle cites shows that "weak ties"—those familiar neighbors whose names you might not know but who make you feel "seen"—are "really important for our social well-being because they make us feel

welcome, they make us feel like we belong." But apartment living often prevents these ties from forming through what she calls "forced proximity" in elevators and hallways where "people feel awkward" because "they're not choosing that proximity."

Hey Neighbour's vertical community vision addresses this disconnect through intentional design and programming. "We make it very hard to do the natural thing, but multi-unit housing isn't inherently isolating" she notes, describing how simple design changes - wider hallways, comfortable seating areas, well-lit mail rooms - can transform anonymous buildings into welcoming, functioning neighborhoods. The goal isn't forcing interaction but creating

choices: spaces where residents can engage socially when they want to while maintaining privacy when they need it.

Early results from pilot buildings in British Columbia, Canada demonstrate the potential. Multi-unit housing communities implementing community building principles report higher resident retention, lower management conflicts, and stronger emergency response networks. During the pandemic, socially connected buildings showed dramatically better outcomes, with neighbors organizing grocery delivery, childcare support, and wellness checks without formal coordination.





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Casual Encounters as Infrastructure

Hey Neighbour’s approach to urban planning operates on a fundamental insight: “Everything in a building can be designed to work better with our neurobiology.” This philosophy extends far beyond traditional “amenity spaces” to encompass what she calls the building’s “social system” - treating connection infrastructure with the same systematic attention cities give to energy or ventilation systems.

Building on years of partnership work with consultancy Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour’s specific recommendations for planners challenge conventional practice at every level. For building circulation, Michelle advocates for “wider hallways that are well lit” with “light at the end of a hallway” and “landing spaces with seating” that create “transition moments and transition spaces” between private and social zones. “You wouldn’t want to leave your apartment and immediately be in a social space,” she explains, “but a wide hallway with light - you might not host a party there, but you’re gonna feel more safe and welcome to talk to your neighbour for a few minutes.”

The mail room becomes a case study in missed opportunities. Instead of “dark, dangerous corners,” Michelle recommends locating mail areas with visual connections to welcoming lobby spaces, ensuring residents feel safe while creating natural gathering points where “you might say hello to people and feel safe.”

For common spaces, her guidance is specific: locate amenities where residents will naturally encounter them, not “in the

least marketable part of the building” with doors “locked most of the time” requiring fees to access. “If you’re walking into a building, instead of going straight to the elevator in a very pristine but not inviting or welcoming lounge,” she suggests creating spaces with “a reason to stop, comfortable places to sit, good lighting” that connect visually to other building functions.

Michelle emphasizes co-location as a design principle: “locate different functions of a building together so that you’re maximising the potential” for encounter. This might mean positioning community rooms near building entrances, connecting laundry facilities to social spaces, or ensuring children’s play areas are visible to create opportunities for parent interaction.

Her recommendations extend to outdoor spaces as well. Community gardens become not just sources of food but “regular gathering points.” Children’s play areas should be “positioned to encourage parent interaction.” Seating arrangements should “create opportunities for casual conversation without forcing unwanted social engagement.”

The overarching principle is choice and safety: “For people to feel safe to engage socially, they have to feel like they’re choosing it. They can’t feel like they’re being forced into it.” This means creating what she calls “transition moments” that help people move gradually from private to social spaces, always providing options for privacy and retreat.

Designing Belonging Into the Rulebook

One of Hey Neighbour Collective's contributions is a systematic approach to changing how cities regulate and incentivize social connection through policy. "We're trying to work with local governments to shift their policies so that they are guiding and incentivizing this kind of design," she explains, describing a coordinated effort to embed social outcomes into the mechanical systems of municipal governance.

Policy recommendations operate at multiple scales. For instance, she advocates for requirements that go beyond traditional "amenity space" mandates to specify location, accessibility, and programming potential. "Planners don't really say much about what that party room needs to be like, or where it needs to be in the building," she notes, describing how developers often satisfy requirements by placing community spaces "in the least marketable part of the building" where they remain underused.

Instead, Michelle recommends design

guidance and/or incentives that require community spaces to be easily accessible, well-lit, and connected to other building functions. Fee structures put in place by property managers should make spaces affordable to use, and programming should be encouraged through ongoing operations requirements, not just construction mandates.

For development incentives, possible policy approaches can be very specific: offer density bonuses and FSR exemptions for buildings that include measurable social infrastructure. But rather than generic "community space" requirements, she advocates for guidelines that specify design principles supporting social connection: sight lines that create safety, circulation patterns that encourage encounter, and outdoor spaces designed for informal gathering.

Michelle also emphasizes the need for cross-departmental policy coordination. "If you try to tell the Ministry of Health to fund a programme in housing, they tell you

it's housing. If you tell the Ministry of Housing to fund a programme that's going to help people's well-being, they tell you that's health," she describes, identifying bureaucratic silos as obstacles to comprehensive policy innovation.

Her solution involves creating formal mechanisms for cross-sector collaboration: joint funding streams, shared evaluation criteria, and coordinated policy development processes that treat social connection as infrastructure requiring systematic government attention rather than departmental afterthought.

"If you keep moving through a community without putting down roots or building relationships, you never develop a sense of belonging—or agency"

"Security of Tenure" as Social Infrastructure

Behind Vancouver's gleaming towers lies a hidden dilemma that Michelle identifies as the fundamental barrier to community formation: housing insecurity. British Columbia's status as "the eviction capital of Canada" systematically prevents the relationship-building that makes vertical communities possible.

"The foundational piece is actually affordability and security," she emphasizes, describing how practices like "renovictions" and "demo evictions" scatter communities faster than programming can rebuild them. When residents face constant displacement, "you don't have time to put down the roots and build those weak ties or those serendipitous encounters that make you feel like you belong."

Michelle links housing stability directly to

civic engagement: "If you keep moving through a community without putting down roots or building relationships, you never develop a sense of belonging—or agency. You don't vote in local elections because you hardly know what's happening, and you assume you'll be leaving again within a year"

Her policy recommendations begin with tenant protection: stronger eviction controls, security of tenure guarantees, and affordable housing preservation that prevents displacement-driven community fragmentation. "Without security of tenure, it doesn't really matter if the building is perfectly designed," she argues, identifying housing stability as prerequisite to social connection.

Designing for Human Biology



Hoar emphasizes that our built environments should ease the brain's natural wiring for safety, social engagement, and comfort. Neurobiological research shows that exposure to natural light regulates circadian rhythms and releases serotonin, helping residents feel more alert and positive when they encounter one another. Bright, well-lit hallways punctuated with occasional benches give people subtle cues that it's safe to pause and exchange a greeting, activating the brain's reward circuits through small social interactions.

Similarly, locating mail areas within sightlines of active lobby spaces taps into our instinct for visual monitoring: when we can see and be seen, the amygdala's threat response diminishes, lowering anxiety and making casual conversation feel less intimidating. Positioning common rooms where foot traffic is heaviest - rather than tucked behind locked doors - leverages the brain's mirror neuron systems, which respond to others' presence and purpose. Watching someone else use a lounge or kitchen space triggers our own motivation to join in.

Outdoor community gardens and play areas are equally powerful. Studies of biophilia reveal that engaging with green spaces reduces

cortisol and fosters restorative attention - so parents lingering by a garden or playground not only relax but remain open to spontaneous neighborly chat. Hey Neighbour Collective's guidelines - developed through a multi-year partnership with Happy Cities - translate these insights into architecture: by designing spaces that align with our neurobiology, buildings themselves become social tools that gently guide residents toward connection.

Michelle draws on the ideas about "weak ties" - the familiar neighbors whose names you might not know but who "make us feel seen." These connections are "really important for our social well-being because they make us feel welcome, they make us feel like we belong," even though "it's not a person you're gonna call in a crisis."

This insight drives her focus on what creates belonging versus mere fitting in. "All of these little connections make you feel like you belong in a community," she explains, "and feeling belonging is deeply important for our nervous system and for our sensibility because it makes you feel safe."

The neurobiological foundation influences design decisions: spaces need to feel safe before they can foster connection. "There's all sorts of research around what makes us feel

safe,” Michelle notes, “but we don’t use much of that knowledge in residential building design.”

Her approach integrates safety research into community building - lighting that creates visibility without harshness, sight lines that allow people to see and be seen, and gathering spaces that feel protected rather than isolated. The result is environments where residents’ nervous systems can relax to engage socially.

Challenging the Independence Culture

“Humans are not independent—we are interdependent. Our healthiest state comes from being connected: having trusted relationships we can turn to for help, and being trusted enough that others turn to us in return”

Perhaps Michelle’s most insightful address is the cultural foundations of urban loneliness. She identifies “this deep, deep mindset and myth that actually our greatest goal as humans is independence.”

She challenges this fundamental assumption “Humans are not independent—we are interdependent. Our healthiest state comes from being connected: having trusted relationships we can turn to for help, and being trusted enough that others turn to us in return”

In much of Western culture, independence is often celebrated as a sign of strength and maturity. Yet this emphasis can sometimes overshadow our equally important need for connection and trust, which are just as essential to human well-being.



Despite the weight of systemic obstacles, Michelle’s outlook remains rooted in optimism. For her, hope emerges through practice: doing the work itself, and witnessing how people respond when given genuine opportunities to collaborate. She observes that many want to contribute positively, yet often struggle against entrenched systems and mindsets that make progress difficult. What sustains her approach is the belief that even serious challenges can be met with joy and authenticity. In Hey Neighbour gatherings, she and her colleagues deliberately create space for people to show up as full human beings, not only as professionals—making connection, trust, and shared experience central to the process.

Looking ahead, she sees growing possibilities for transformation. Existing policies and systems may not yet fully support the vision, but she notes that the cracks are widening and light is beginning to break through.