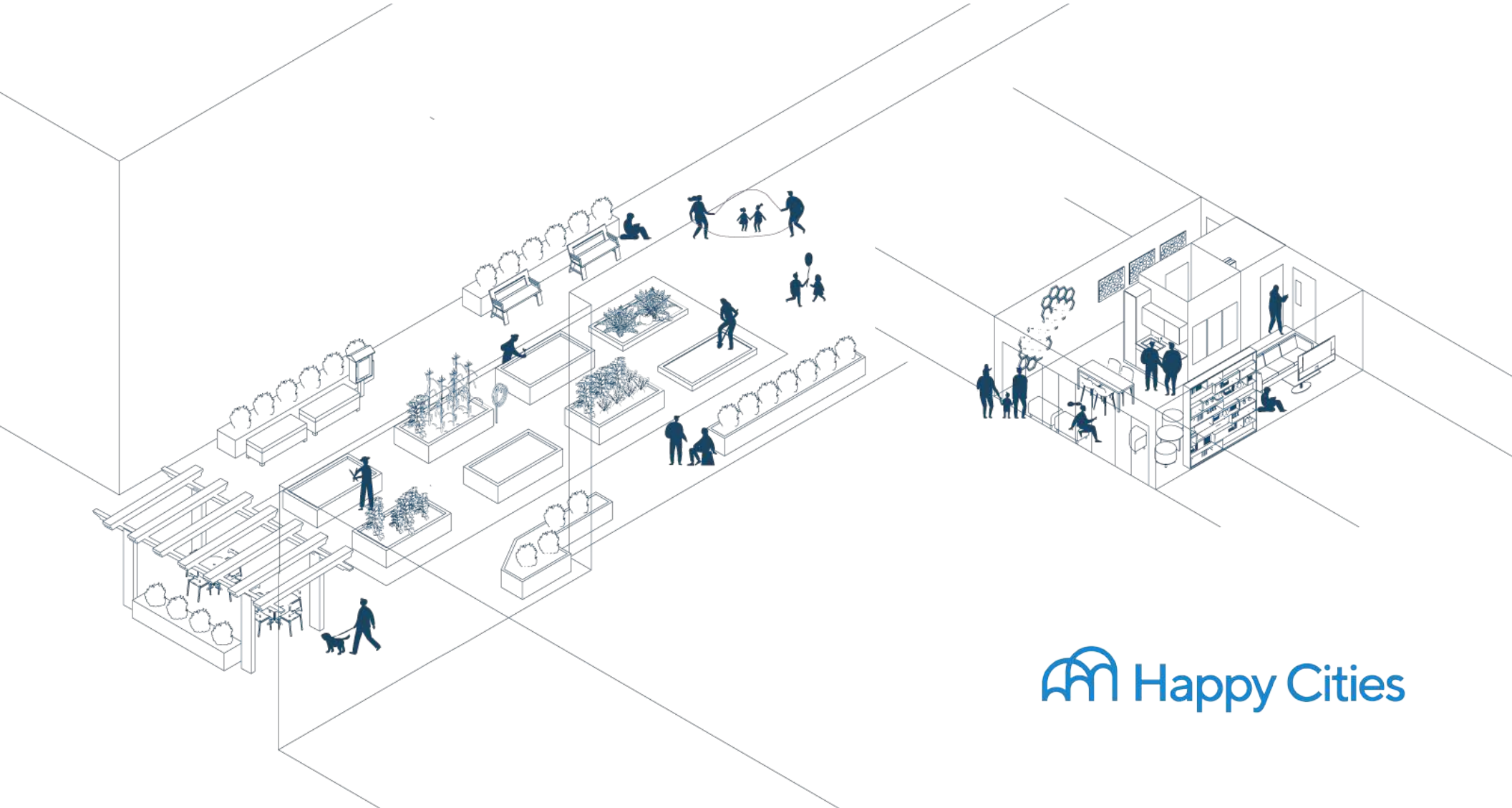
DASH common space system

Metro Vancouver & BC Housing toolbox

May 2026



Happy Cities

About this report

Digitally Accelerated Standardized Housing (DASH) is a project led by BC Housing with Metro Vancouver as a key project partner. DASH aims to streamline multi-family rental housing through standardized regulations and modern construction methods. By aligning regulatory approaches and developing vetted six-storey rental designs, DASH supports faster, more cost-effective housing delivery suited to prefabrication.

This report provides recommendations for common space design. Shared spaces don't build social connections on their own—they have to be designed for it. We have both an opportunity and a responsibility to model socially connected, health-promoting housing for the region.

The content in this report was developed using Happy Cities' **Happy Homes** methodology and **Building Social Connections Guidelines**, created in partnership with **Hey Neighbour Collective**. Through our work with developers, municipalities, and housing providers, we've identified what makes multi-unit housing feel like a home—not just a building.

This information may not necessarily be applicable to all DASH and/or BC Housing/Metro Vancouver delivery projects, and designers are ultimately responsible for their own work per contract and OPR (owner project requirements).

Happy Cities

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Happy Cities is an urban planning, design, and research firm that uses an evidence-based approach to create happier, healthier, more inclusive communities. We harness the science of wellbeing to conduct research and advise housing providers, municipalities, developers, and organizations around the world on how to design buildings and urban spaces that support people's health and happiness.

DASH project team

BC Housing (BCH) develops, manages and administers a wide range of subsidized, affordable and rental housing options across the province. BCH works with the ministry responsible for housing to address critical gaps across the housing continuum, which range from emergency shelter and rent assistance in the private market to affordable home ownership. BCH also licenses residential builders, administers owner builder authorizations and carries out research and education that benefits the residential construction industry and consumers. BCH works with about 800 housing providers and help more than 121,000 households in communities across British Columbia.

Metro Vancouver is a diverse organization that plans for and delivers regional utility services, including water, sewers and wastewater treatment, and solid waste management. It also regulates air quality, plans for urban growth, manages a regional parks system, provides affordable rental housing, and serves as a regional federation. For more than 50 years, Metro Vancouver Housing has built and operated non-market rental housing for families, seniors, and people with disabilities with low to moderate incomes. Today, Metro Vancouver Housing is the second largest non-profit housing provider in BC with 53 sites across the region and 3,400 homes serving nearly 10,000 people — and many more on the way.

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1 | Introduction



Designing a social ecosystem

The importance of neighbourly connections

Across Canada—especially in urban centres like the Lower Mainland—rates of loneliness and social isolation are rising, with long-term implications for both physical and mental health. In response, many residents are actively seeking homes that foster connection, inclusion, and a sense of community. The homes we live in play a significant role in encouraging and enabling positive neighbourly interactions. The design and location of common spaces—both functional and recreational—have a major impact on these connections and are closely tied to residents' social wellbeing. This is particularly important in higher-density housing, where opportunities for spontaneous encounters with neighbours are often limited by design.

Designing for connection

Common spaces build social connections—but only if we design them to support it. By designing intentionally for connection, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to create a model of socially connected, health-promoting housing for the region.

When buildings offer a mix of formal and informal gathering places, they become social ecosystems—environments where relationships can develop naturally over time. From a quick wave in the hallway to shared meals and spontaneous conversations in common rooms, these everyday interactions help neighbours move from strangers to friends.

Supporting a range of social group sizes

To build connections, it's important to design for a variety of social group sizes, from small clusters of close neighbours to larger gatherings. Getting to know those around us doesn't happen all at once—it requires repeated, low-pressure opportunities to connect. Thoughtful design increases the chances of these encounters by shaping how people move through spaces, where they pause, and how often their paths cross. Over time, a combination of inviting design and inclusive programming can nurture the progression from casual chats to shared activities, deeper trust, and lasting mutual support.

The placement of common spaces

When space and budget are limited, early decisions about where to place shared spaces are crucial. People are more likely to use spaces they see and pass through regularly. Clustering social spaces together concentrates activity, increasing the chances of spontaneous encounters that can lead to lasting relationships. Typically, co-locating these spaces near a building's lobby or courtyard is an effective way to foster connections. Functional spaces also offer valuable opportunities for social interaction because they are accessed frequently by residents.

Principles of sociable design

Using Happy Cities' Building Social Connections research, we recommend designing with six core principles in mind:

Location: Maximize opportunities for interaction by placing social features and spaces in convenient, visible, and naturally lit locations. Multiply social impact through co-location of uses.

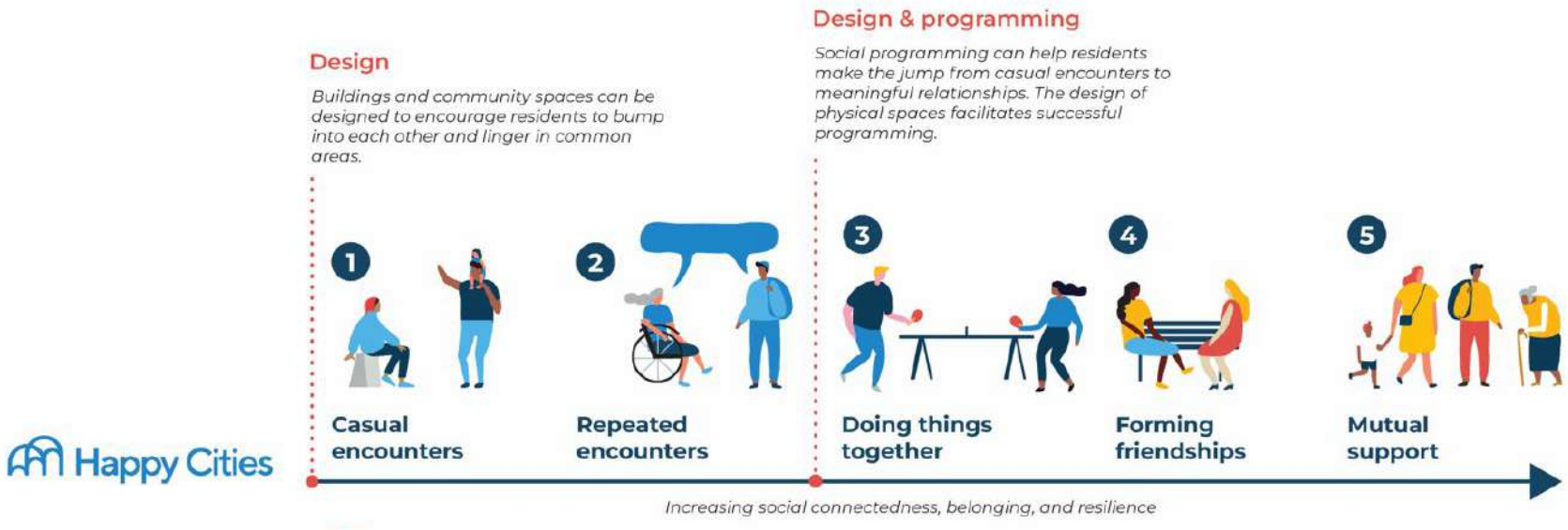
Invitation: Encourage spontaneous daily encounters by designing places to pause and interact. Use the built environment as a social icebreaker.

Activation: Create interesting and functional spaces that act as a hub for the community. Design at diverse scales with intentional things to see and do.

Inclusion: Ensure spaces are accessible and safe for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. Reflect diverse cultural preferences and identities.

Transition: Balance high-quality, livable private homes with welcoming common spaces. Design thoughtful transitions and gradients from public to private areas.

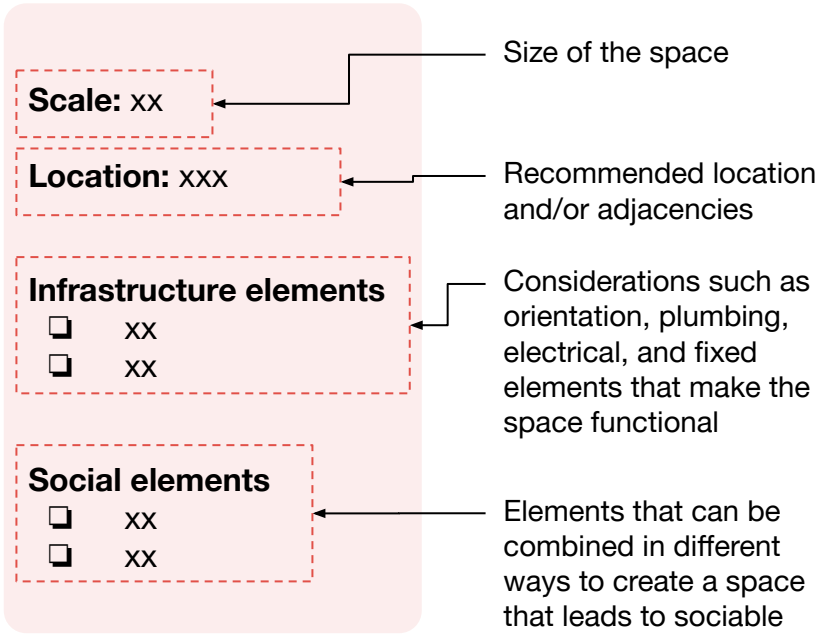
Evolution: Foster a sense of belonging through stewardship of common areas. Design flexible spaces that can evolve over time to meet changing community needs.



Using this toolbox

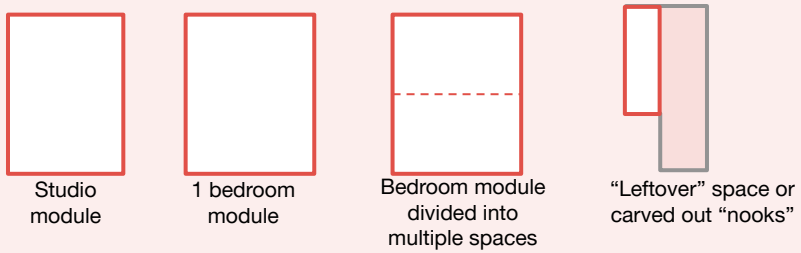
The framework on the next page provides key considerations for decision-making around toolbox elements. For each element, consider complementary functions to create variations tailored to anticipated demographics and uses. Each element shows both recommended and optional recommendations.

Each toolbox element includes the following information:



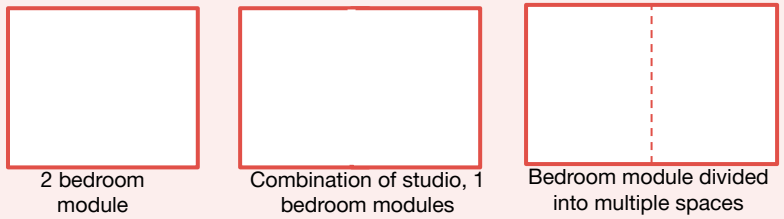
Fitting spaces into the DASH system modules

Small spaces (2-15 people)



**Outdoor spaces can also fall under small spaces*

Medium spaces (16- 49 people)



**Outdoor spaces can also fall under medium spaces*

Large spaces (over 50 people)



**Outdoor spaces can also fall under large spaces*

Framework for selecting toolbox elements

This report proposes a shared space system within the DASH framework, offering options to support a strong social ecosystem while considering budget, space, and policy constraints. The goal is to guide the DASH team in designing these components, recognizing that each site will have unique conditions. The following framework is recommended to support decision-making around design elements and placement.

1. Fitting into the DASH system: Because the DASH system is prefabricated and modular, integrating features such as wider corridors or social nodes can be challenging. Site-specific constraints—like the absence of underground parking—may also influence lobby layouts and amenity locations. Flexibility will be essential to navigating these limitations while still achieving key design objectives.

2. Cost and building efficiency: Discussions with the design team highlight that cost-consciousness is critical, especially in non-market housing. Interventions should be meaningful without significantly increasing costs. This involves prioritizing flexible, high-impact spaces and standardized components that facilitate ease of replication and promote long-term efficiency. For example, millwork should be considered carefully as a cost item, and whether that function can be accommodated other ways (such as through shelving/furniture solutions).

3. Safety and security: Design decisions should account for safety considerations such as visibility, clear sightlines, and potential long-term maintenance challenges. Ensure that furniture placed outside enclosed common rooms complies with local fire regulations and operational requirements—for example, ease of maintenance, cleaning, and relocation. Lightweight, modular furniture can help meet both safety and flexibility needs.

4. Replicability: We've provided flexible recommendations—for example, amenity scale ideas aligned with the DASH system without prescribing exact dimensions. Many of these amenities can be mixed and matched according to programming needs and should be adaptable over time to reflect residents' evolving preferences. Each section offers general design considerations intended not as a checklist, but as a toolkit to support occupant wellbeing.

5. Individual buildings vs. site-wide amenities: Projects with multiple buildings on a single site present opportunities for shared amenity spaces. Many developers in Metro Vancouver are moving toward this model, as pooling resources enables higher-quality and more diverse amenities. This approach also improves the feasibility of programming and helps manage maintenance and cleaning costs. While shared amenities are effective, it remains important to include small- and medium-scale gathering spaces within each building.

2 | Toolbox: Indoor spaces



Toolbox: Indoor spaces

The following table summarizes the indoor spaces included in this toolbox.

Community room *The community room is the main medium to large gathering space in the building. The space should invite interaction and provide flexible use for residents of all ages and interests.*	Scale: Medium to large	P. 12
Gathering or elevator nook *A nook is a small-scale gathering space that provides residents opportunities for lighter-touch interaction or activities.*	Scale: Small	P. 14
Garbage/recycling area *The garbage and recycling area is an area where many neighbours interact on a daily basis. It should maximize positive encounters through intentional design.*	Scale: Small	P. 15
Bike repair nook *A bike repair nook provides opportunities for neighbours to maintain their bikes together. A dog wash in the same area can increase social opportunities as well.*	Scale: Small	P. 16
Social laundry *Shared laundry areas, when intentionally designed and placed within the building, can provide important social spaces for residents.*	Scale: Small	P. 17
Active stair *Active stairways provide residents with an opportunity to be physically active and bump into neighbours.*	Scale: Small	P. 18
Social mailbox *The mailbox is an important area of intergenerational and spontaneous social connections between neighbours.*	Scale: Small	P. 19

Community room

The community room is the main medium to large gathering space in the building. The space should invite interaction and provide flexible use for residents of all ages and interests.

Scale: Medium to large

Location

- ❑ Near main lobby
- ❑ Visual or physical connection to outdoor common space
- ❑ Same-floor access to universal washroom and furniture storage

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Water connection with sink
- ❑ Opportunity to preview space before entering (glazing)
- ❑ Coffee/tea station
- ❑ Maximize natural light
- ❑ Non-slip and non-reflective flooring
- ❑ Power outlets to suit selected social functions
- ❑ Clear signage or graphics inviting people of all ages to find and use the space
- ❑ **3** types of lighting (ceiling, task, ambient)
- ❑ Wi-Fi access
- ➔ Kitchen millwork and appliances
- ➔ Room divider or partition in larger spaces

Social elements

- ❑ Soft seating for **5-10** people
- ❑ Moveable tables/chairs for **10-20** people
- ❑ At least **5** decorative elements (e.g. rug, art, plants)
- ❑ **2** textured/colourful wall elements (e.g. mural, wood)
- ❑ Community bulletin board at entrance
- ❑ Shared games/books stored in visible shelving
- ➔ At least one designated quiet zone and one active zone
- ➔ Larger games (e.g. foldable ping pong table)
- ➔ Computer/desktop access

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

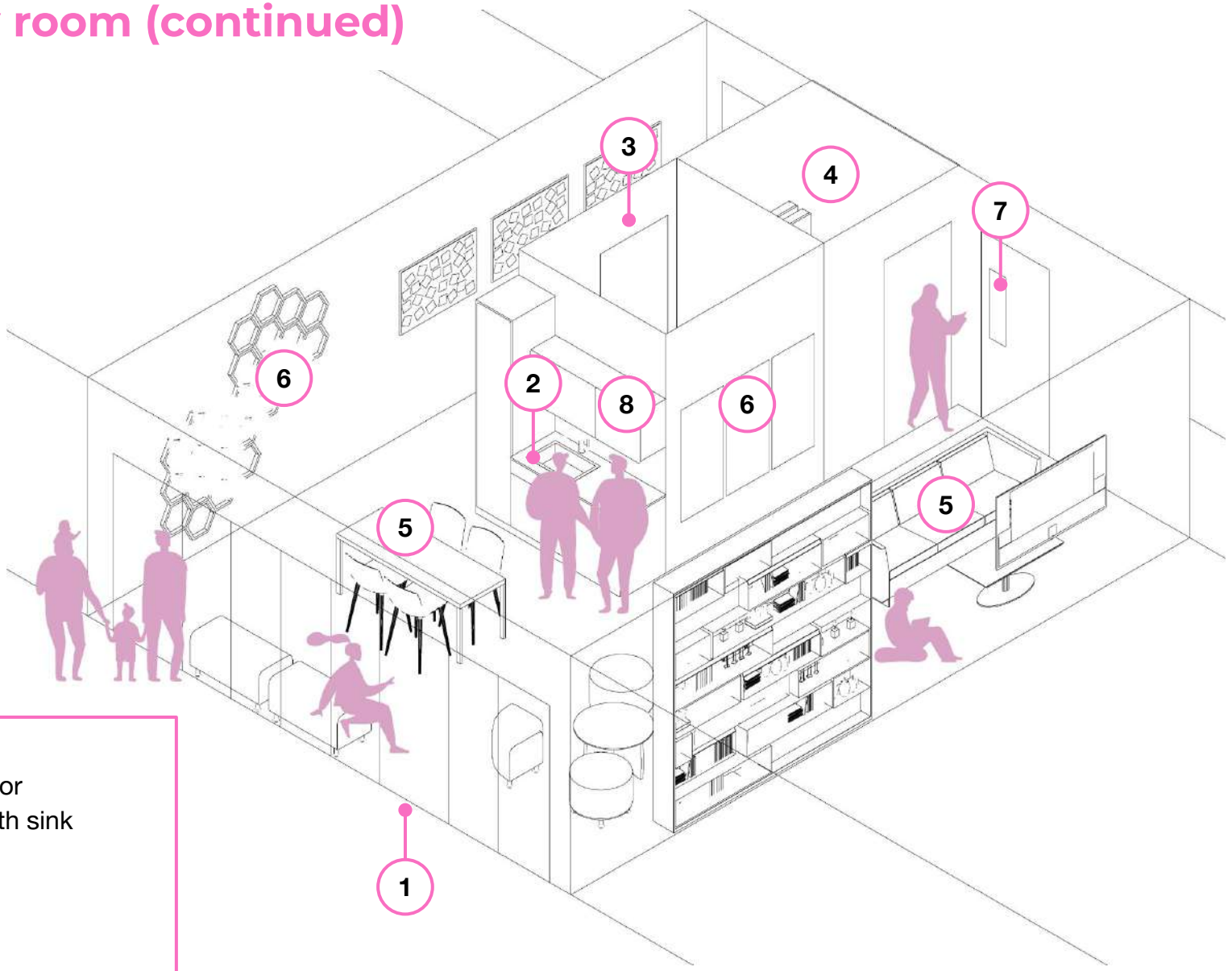


The community room at Tahanan Supportive Housing, can be divided into smaller spaces. Image: Bruce Damonte



The Common House at Marmalade Lane.
Image: David Butler

Community room (continued)



Legend

1/ Connection to outdoor
2/ Water connection with sink
3/ Universal washroom
4/ Storage
5/ Variety of furniture
6/ Art
7/ Opportunity to preview space
8/ Millwork and appliances

Note: design is based off of the scale of a 1 bedroom unit block (585SF)

Gathering or elevator nook

A nook is a small-scale gathering space that provides residents opportunities for lighter-touch interaction or activities.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ Near a stairwell, common space, or across from an elevator
- ❑ In main building lobby (co-locate with social mailbox)
- ❑ For safety and accessibility, nooks should be in high-visibility areas with clear sightlines
- ➔ Consider distributing these spaces across different building levels

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Power outlets
- ❑ Acoustic buffer (soft surfaces or materials)
- ❑ Non-slip and non-reflective flooring
- ❑ At least **2** power outlets
- ❑ Wi-Fi access
- ❑ Clear signage or graphics inviting people to use the space
- ➔ Millwork for storing items
- ➔ Natural daylight from at least one source

Social elements

- ❑ Seating for **2-5** people to support the clear function (below), such as:
  - ➔ Small couch/bench, bean bag, or armchair
  - ➔ Moveable table and chairs
- ❑ **1** clear function for the nook, such as
  - ➔ Book shelves/books and table lamp
  - ➔ Storage area for arts and crafts supplies, puzzles, or kids toys
- ❑ At least **1** decorative element (e.g. rug, art, plants)
- ❑ At least **1** textured/colourful wall element (e.g. mural, wood)



Lobby nook with bulletin board at Lakeside Seniors Building
Image: Mariko Reed



Landing lounge at Bayview Hill Gardens.
Image: Matt Edge

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Garbage/recycling area

The garbage and recycling area is an area where many neighbours interact on a daily basis. It should maximize positive encounters through intentional design.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ Along a route that maximizes interaction (e.g. residents have to walk through the main lobby to reach it)

Infrastructure elements

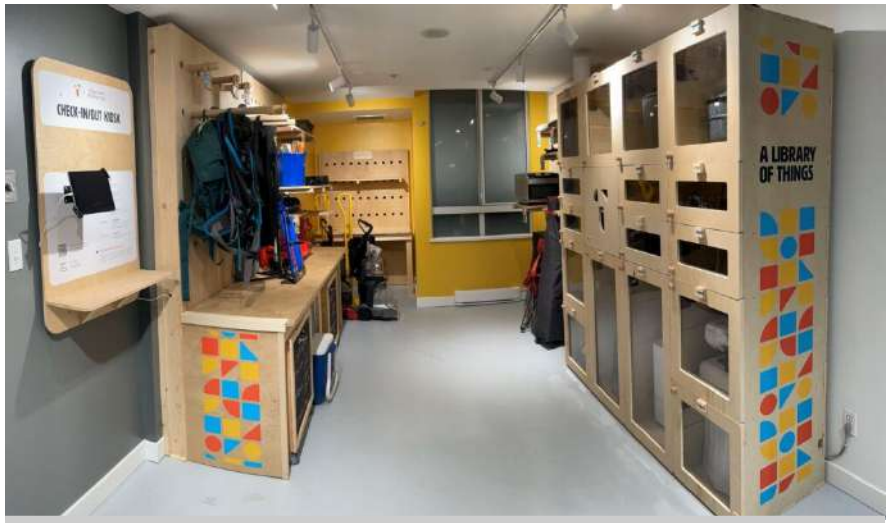
- ❑ Recycling and garbage bins
- ❑ Opportunity to preview space before entering (glazing)
- ❑ Ceiling and ambient lighting
- ❑ Floor markers or tactile indicators
- ❑ Wayfinding with icons to identify functions and areas

Social elements

- ❑ Shelving and bins for comprehensive recycling
- ❑ Bulletin board
- ❑ Buy nothing/sharing shelf
- ➔ Tool or equipment sharing area
- ➔ Bench seating for **2-3** people, near buy nothing/sharing shelf or comprehensive recycling area
- ➔ Compost area for community garden



The recycling shelf at Quayside Village in North Vancouver
Image: Happy Cities



The Thingery at Collingwood Village in Vancouver
Image: Thingery

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Bike repair nook

A bike repair nook provides opportunities for neighbours to maintain their bikes together. A dog wash in the same area can increase social opportunities as well.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ Near a lobby or central bike storage area, ideally with potential for indoor/outdoor connection.
- ❑ For bike repair nooks with access to the exterior, consider theft risk for bicycles by introducing an additional exterior entry point.

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ At least **1** tool station and workstand
- ❑ Area to rinse bikes such as:
  - ➔ An interior water connection with sink and floor drain
  - ➔ An exterior hose and bib nearby
- ➔ Natural daylight
- ➔ Wi-Fi access

Social elements

- ❑ At least **1** decorative element (e.g. art, plants)
- ❑ At least **1** textured/colourful wall element (e.g. mural, wood)
- ❑ Bulletin board
- ❑ Bench seating for **2-3** people
- ➔ Water bottle filling station
- ➔ Dog washing station



The bike nook at the Bowline in North Vancouver
Image: Happy Cities

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Social laundry

Shared laundry areas, when intentionally designed and placed within the building, can provide important social spaces for residents.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ Near the lobby or larger amenity spaces
- ➔ Consider and indoor/outdoor connection nearby

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Washing machines and dryers (front-loading for accessibility)
- ❑ Sink
- ❑ Charging station
- ❑ Wi-Fi access
- ➔ Natural daylight from at least **1** source

Social elements

- ❑ Seating for **2-5** people to suit function, such as:
  - ➔ Small couch/bench, bean bag, or armchair
  - ➔ Moveable table and chairs
- ❑ Bulletin board
- ❑ At least **1** decorative elements (e.g. art, plants)
- ❑ At least **1** textured/colourful wall elements (e.g. mural, wood)
- ➔ Little book library



The social laundry at Bayview Gardens, San Francisco.
Image: Matt Edge



Community laundry room at the Aster in Vancouver
Image: Brightside Community Homes Foundation

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Active stair

Active stairways provide residents with an opportunity to be physically active and bump into neighbours.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ Direct visual access from the main lobby

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Tactile strips
- ❑ Contrasting handrail and wall colours
- ❑ Provide fob access from the lobby to go up the stairs
- ❑ Improved ventilation to allow for daily use
- ➔ Natural daylight from at least **1** source

Social elements

- ❑ At least **1** decorative element (e.g. art)
- ❑ At least **1** textured/colourful wall element (e.g. mural, wood)
- ❑ Graphics to indicate different levels



Stairwell with graphics and window.
Image: Flavio Ricci





Graphics at the Aboriginal House in Victoria, Australia.
Image: Andre Wuttke / Breathe Architecture

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Social mailbox

The mailbox is an important area of intergenerational and spontaneous social connections between neighbours.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ In the lobby or main entry area, designed as a comfortable spot to check mail with visual and conversational connection to passersby

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Mailboxes
- ➔ Parcel lockers

Social elements

- ❑ Seating for **2-5** people such as a bench or chairs that faces the mailbox
- ❑ Wi-fi access
- ❑ Bulletin board
- ❑ At least **2** decorative elements (e.g. art, plants, special lighting fixture)
- ❑ At least **2** textured/colourful wall elements (e.g. mural, wood)
- ❑ At least **1** additional social element
  - ➔ Little book library
  - ➔ Shelf for shared items (e.g. board games, puzzles)
  - ➔ Puzzle table
  - ➔ Coffee station



Quayside Village Mailboxes with games storage and seating
Image: Happy Cities



Portero Apartments social mailbox next to bike room, lobby and elevator. Image: Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

3 | Toolbox: Outdoor spaces



Toolbox: Outdoor spaces

The following table summarizes the outdoor spaces included in this toolbox.

Community garden *Gardens offer a natural icebreaker for neighbours of all ages to connect, collaborate, and build community through growing food and flowers.*	Scale: Small to large	P. 22
Gathering node *Outdoor gathering nodes create inviting spaces for small groups to engage in a range of activities—from quiet reflection to active play—while connecting with nature.*	Scale: Small to medium	P. 24
Outdoor lobby *An outdoor lobby at the entrance to a courtyard creates a visible, multifunctional space that supports everyday social interaction among residents.*	Scale: Small to medium	P. 25
Shared entrance *The main entrance plays an important role in resident experience as both a social and transitional space, helping to define the building's identity.*	Scale: Medium	P. 26
Private balcony *Balconies offer valuable outdoor space for residents, especially when designed as seamless extensions of indoor living areas.*	Scale: Small	P. 27
Juliette balcony *Juliette balconies provide a cost-effective alternative where full balconies aren't feasible due to budget or design constraints, while still offering residents a connection to the outdoors.*	Scale: Small	P. 28
Ground-level patios or stoops *Ground-level private spaces help activate building edges while balancing opportunities for both privacy and neighbourly connection.*	Scale: Small	P. 29
Shared balcony *Shared balconies can serve as a valuable alternative to smaller private spaces, offering residents more room to engage in a variety of social activities.*	Scale: Small to medium	P. 30
Play area *Play areas support family interaction and offer a safe, dedicated space for younger residents to explore and connect.*	Scale: Small to medium	P. 31

Community garden

Gardens offer a natural icebreaker for neighbours of all ages to connect, collaborate, and build community through growing food and flowers.

Scale: Small to large

Location

- ➔ Within larger outdoor space such as courtyard
- ➔ Near a main building entrance
- ➔ Adjacent to a gathering node
- ➔ Adjacent to an outdoor lobby

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Maximize sunlight access (8+ hours is ideal for many food producing plants)
- ❑ Hose bib
- ❑ Tool shed or large lockable toolbox
- ❑ Raised garden beds for accessibility
- ❑ Compost access
- ➔ Rainwater capture barrel

Social elements

- ❑ Seating for **5-10** people (or **2-3** in a small garden) (e.g. benches, moveable tables and chairs)
- ❑ A sheltered area at least **6'/1.8 m** deep with seating for **2-5** people
- ❑ At least **2** placemaking elements, such as:
  - ➔ Dog water station
  - ➔ Bunting or overhead lights
  - ➔ Little shared library
  - ➔ Seed sharing library
  - ➔ Resident created artwork
  - ➔ Sensory garden
  - ➔ Water feature (e.g. birdbath)
  - ➔ Painted planter boxes



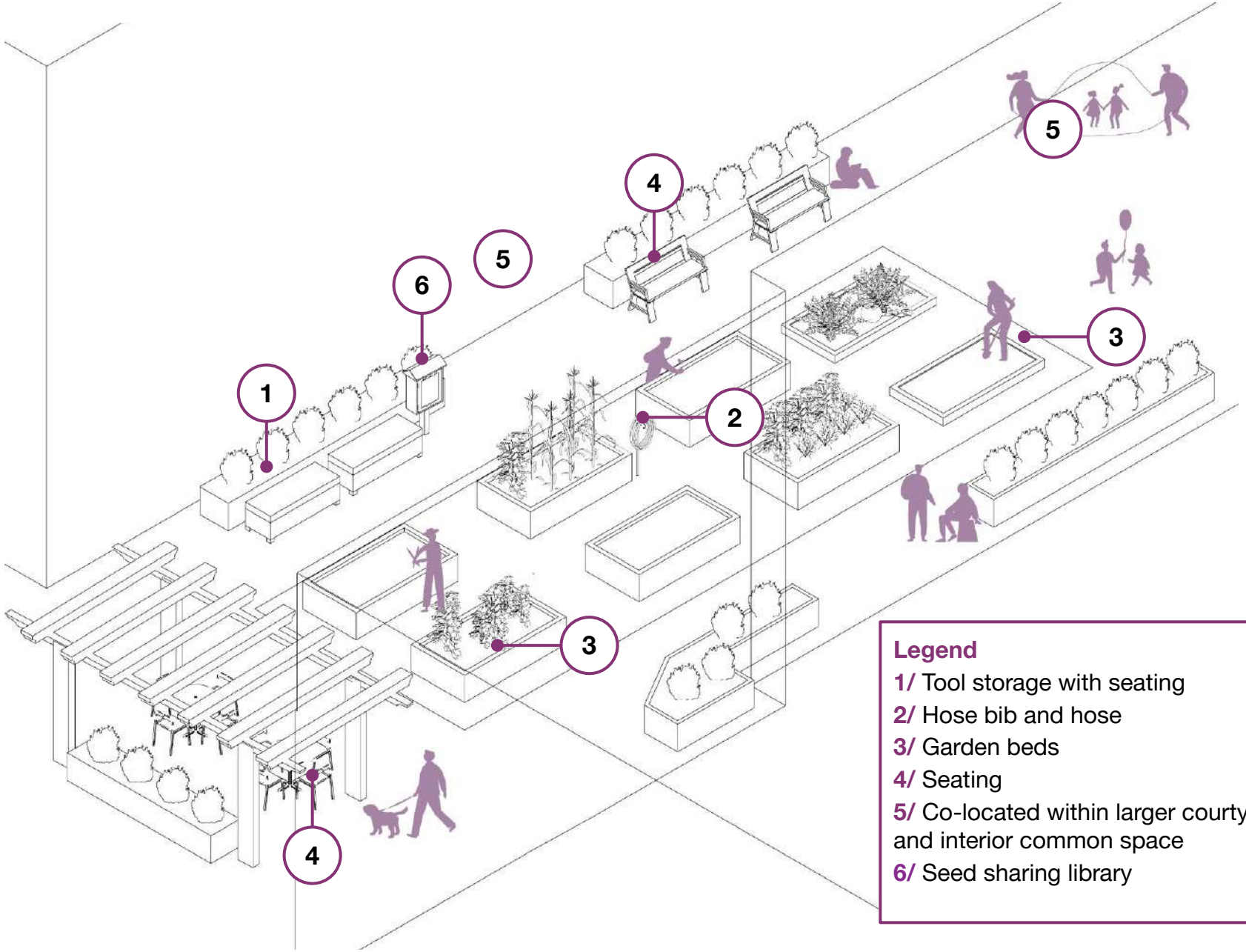
Community Garden at Harmony & Timbre in Vancouver. Image: Happy Cities



Round Prairie Elders' Lodge garden.. Image: David T. Fortin Architect / Big Block Construction

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Community garden (continued)



Legend

1/ Tool storage with seating
2/ Hose bib and hose
3/ Garden beds
4/ Seating
5/ Co-located within larger courtyard and interior common space
6/ Seed sharing library

Gathering node

Outdoor gathering nodes create inviting spaces for small groups to engage in a range of activities—from quiet reflection to active play—while connecting with nature.

Scale: Small to medium

Location

- ❑ Near the main entrance or within a larger outdoor area (e.g. courtyard)
- ❑ A variety of gathering nodes with different functions can be integrated into larger shared outdoor areas, including rooftops or courtyards

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Provide access to both sunny and shaded gathering nodes within a site
- ❑ Power outlets
- ❑ Outdoor lights
- ➔ BBQ hook up

Social elements

- ❑ Seating for **5-10** people (**2-5** in a small node) (e.g. benches, moveable tables and chairs)
- ❑ At least **3** placemaking elements, such as:
  - ➔ Dog water station
  - ➔ Bunting or overhead lights
  - ➔ Little shared library
  - ➔ Seed sharing library
  - ➔ Sensory and seasonal plants (e.g. herbs, flowers)
  - ➔ Water feature (e.g. birdbath)
  - ➔ Painted planter boxes
  - ➔ A box to store outdoor games
  - ➔ Different ground textures/ materials
  - ➔ Natural play elements (eg. logs, long grasses)
  - ➔ Artwork (eg. sculpture, painted benches)



A covered gathering node at Frederick Douglas Haynes Gardens.
Image: PTA



Courtyard at 855 Brannan apartments.
Image: Bruce Damonte / David Baker Architects

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Outdoor lobby

An outdoor lobby at the entrance to a courtyard creates a visible, multifunctional space that supports everyday social interaction among residents.

Scale: Small to medium

Location

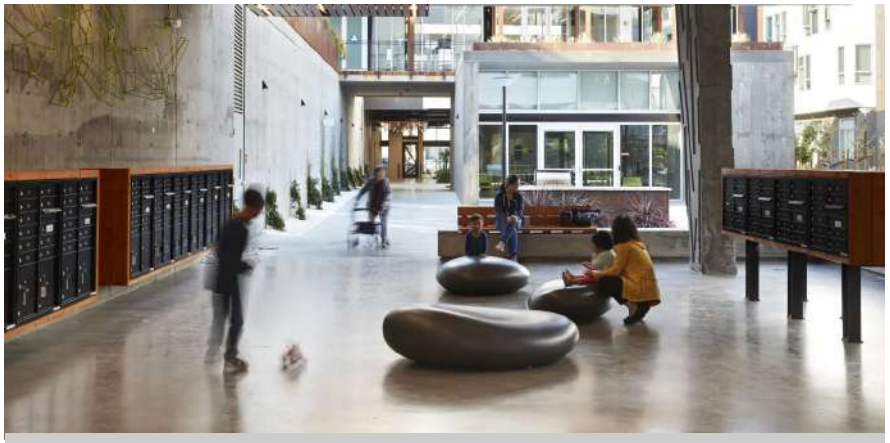
- ❑ In a courtyard building, consider an outdoor lobby at the primary entrance
- ❑ Co-locate with a social mailbox (adapted for outdoor use)

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Full cover/weather protection for the outdoor lobby area
- ❑ Visually interesting lighting elements
- ❑ Mailboxes

Social elements to consider

- ❑ Seating for **2-5** people (e.g. bench or chairs that faces the mailbox)
- ❑ Bulletin board
- ❑ Wayfinding or signage to key amenity areas
- ❑ At least **2** placemaking elements, such as:
  - ➔ Dog water station
  - ➔ Bunting or overhead lights
  - ➔ Little shared library
  - ➔ Potted plants
  - ➔ Seed sharing library
  - ➔ Different ground textures/ materials
  - ➔ Artwork (eg. sculpture, painted benches)



The outdoor lobby at Five88 Family Housing.
Image: Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects



Blue Oak Landing's outdoor lobby.
Image: Brian Ashby

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Shared entrance

The main entrance plays an important role in resident experience as both a social and transitional space, helping to define the building's identity.

Scale: Medium

Location

- ❑ Connected to outdoor spaces
- ❑ Offers good sightlines for drop-off and pick-up
- ❑ Provides visual access into common amenity areas that are located nearby

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Sheltered area at least **6'/1.8 m** deep
- ❑ Strategically placed door push button (ideally off from the main building facade for ease of access)

Social elements

- ❑ Seating for **2-5 people** (e.g. benches, moveable tables and chairs)
- ❑ At least **3** visually distinct elements, such as:
  - ➔ Large address or text with building's name
  - ➔ Wood elements
  - ➔ Colourful wall material
  - ➔ Playful lighting elements



The shared building entrance at Mason Mariposa Apartment.
Image: Craig Cozart / David Baker Architects



Origin by Anthem's entrance in North Vancouver.
Image: Happy Cities

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Private balcony

Balconies offer valuable outdoor space for residents, especially when designed as seamless extensions of indoor living areas.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ The balcony should feel like an extension of the home's living spaces
- ❑ Provide visual connections to the street and/or outdoor shared spaces (e.g. courtyard)
- ❑ Avoid sightlines into other private balconies where possible

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Sunlight access (at least **2 hours** per day)
- ❑ Minimum depth of 1.5 m (5 ft.)
- ❑ Minimum floor area of 4.5 m2 (48 ft2)
- ➔ Overhead shelter (at least **5'/1.5 m** wide to provide rain protection)
- ➔ Power outlet
- ➔ BBQ hook-up

Social elements

- ➔ Space for seating appropriate to the unit size (**2 people** for studio and 1-bedroom, **4-5 people** for 2-bedroom and 3-bedroom homes)
- ➔ Railings or surfaces that allow for planters
- ➔ Noise or privacy buffer



A balcony at Timbre & Harmony in Vancouver.
Image: Brightside Community Homes Foundation



Balcony in family-friendly apartment
Image: HAO design

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Juliette balcony

Juliette balconies provide a cost-effective alternative where full balconies aren't feasible due to budget or design constraints, while still offering residents a connection to the outdoors.

Scale: Small

Location

- ❑ Provide visual connections to the street and/or outdoor shared spaces (e.g. courtyard)
- ❑ Avoid sightlines into other private balconies where possible
- ❑ Ensure that the Juliette balcony feels like an extension of the living spaces

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Sunlight access (at least **2 hours** per day)
- ❑ Protective Railings
- ❑ Overhead shelter (sufficient to provide rain protection)
- ➔ Power outlet

Social elements

- ➔ Noise or privacy buffer
- ➔ Planters that can attach to the balcony railing



At Timbre & Harmony in Vancouver, there are both usable balconies and Julliette balconies. Image: Happy Cities



A Juliette balcony that feels like and extension of the living space. Image: Erika Riley

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Ground-level patios or stoops

Ground-level private spaces help activate building edges while balancing opportunities for both privacy and neighbourly connection.

Scale: small

Location

- ❑ Activate building edges facing walkways, courtyards, or shared paths, encouraging eyes on the street.

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Sunlight access (at least **2 hours** per day)
- ❑ Sheltered area at least **4'/1.22 m** deep or opportunity to install and awning/umbrella
- ❑ Power outlet
- ➔ Universal access (e.g. level threshold, door width and patio width that allows for a wheelchair turning radius)
- ➔ BBQ hook up
- ➔ Hose-bib

Social elements

- ❑ Barrier-free access
- ❑ Space for seating appropriate to the unit size (**2** people for studio and 1-bedroom, **4-5** people for 2-bedroom and 3-bedroom homes)
- ❑ A mix of taller (**6'/1.8 m**) and shorter (**3.5'/1.1 m**) privacy screens to allow for privacy when sitting, while leaving the possibility of connecting with neighbours
- ➔ Built-in gardening boxes



Patios at Bishop's Landing provide opportunities for privacy. Image: Happy Cities



The stoops at Pacific Pointe Apartments offer levels of privacy and space for seating. Image: Bruce Damonte

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Shared balcony

Shared balconies can serve as a valuable alternative to smaller private spaces, offering residents more room to engage in a variety of social activities.

Scale: Small to medium

Location

- ❑ Overlooks courtyards, gardens, or other amenity spaces
- ❑ Adjacent to indoor amenity areas.
- ❑ Offers easy and accessible routes from multiple units

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Sunlight access (at least **4-6 hours**)
- ❑ Shade or shelter (at least **6'/1.8 m** deep)
- ❑ Power outlet
- ❑ Outdoor lights

Social elements

- ❑ Seating for **5-10** people (**2-5** in a smaller space) (e.g. benches, moveable tables and chairs)
- ❑ At least **1** main programming function, such as:
  - ➔ Dog play area
  - ➔ Gardening area
  - ➔ Play elements for children
  - ➔ Picnic area
- ❑ At least **1** decorative element (e.g. art, plants)
- ❑ At least **1** textured/colourful wall element (e.g. mural, wood)



Outdoor shared patio with playspace at AYA Housing.
Image: Hoachlander Davis Photography



Savonnerie Heymans, MDW Architecture
Image: Filip Dujardin

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

Play area

Play areas support family interaction and offer a safe, dedicated space for younger residents to explore and connect.

Scale: Small to medium

Location

- ❑ Near entrance/building transition zone, within larger outdoor space such as courtyard
- ❑ Part of a shared balcony or gathering node

Infrastructure elements

- ❑ Sunlight access (**4-6 hours**)
- ❑ Sheltered area for **2-5 people** to sit
- ❑ At least **2** different ground surfaces, such as:
  - ➔ Rubberized play surface
  - ➔ Grass
  - ➔ Turf
  - ➔ Sand

Social elements

- ❑ At least **3** natural play elements, such as:
  - ➔ A large tree
  - ➔ A sandy surface
  - ➔ A series of logs, stumps or boulders
  - ➔ Long grasses
- ❑ Seating for **5-10** people (**2-5** in a smaller space) (e.g. benches, moveable tables and chairs)
- ❑ Diverse plants
- ❑ At least **2** placemaking or visual elements, such as:
  - ➔ Bunting or overhead lights
  - ➔ Little shared library
  - ➔ A box to store outdoor games
  - ➔ Artwork (e.g. sculpture, painted benches)



Armstrong Place public courtyard with play areas.
Image: Brian Rose



Kalkbreite Complex with a play area.
Image: Martin Stollenwerk / Muller Sigrist Architects

❑ Recommended element ➔ Optional element

4 | Toolbox: Programming & operations



Toolbox: Programming & operations

The importance of programming

Building connections with neighbours takes time, but thoughtful design and programming can significantly enhance the process. Operators should consider the full spectrum of social interactions, with an emphasis on creating frequent opportunities for light-touch encounters as a foundation for getting to know one another.

Building design plays a crucial role in facilitating repeated, informal interactions. Over time, both design and programming help foster deeper, more trusting relationships through shared experiences. The ultimate goal is to create homes and communities that nurture friendship, mutual support, and lasting connections by creating:

- Opportunities to observe and experience social spaces without requiring direct participation, allowing for comfort and familiarity to grow.
- Opportunities for spontaneous interactions, such as casual greetings at the mailbox or in hallways.
- Opportunities for meaningful connections, often fostered through collaborative activities. When people work together on tasks larger than themselves, deeper bonds tend to form.

In large-scale residential buildings, integrating thoughtful programming and supportive policies is essential to enhancing residents' wellbeing and sense of belonging.

In a 2023 Happy Cities survey of 600 North Vancouver residents, we found that **access hours**, **look and feel,** and **ability to use the space without booking**, were the three top factors in residents deciding whether they would choose to use a space



Resident completing a paint by number mural in Vancouver, BC.
Image: Concert Properties

The following recommendations share best practices for programming and operations.

Support resident-to-resident communication

- ❑ Provide a bulletin board in the lobby or other high-traffic areas to share regular community updates and activities
- ❑ Establish an online platform for resident communication
- ❑ Complement digital communication and engagement with in-person opportunities and physical postings

Create a welcoming protocol

- ❑ Organize a resident welcome party when the building first opens
- ❑ Form a welcome committee with resident volunteers that help integrate new community members
- ❑ Provide welcome packages that outline community features, amenities, and programs
- ❑ Offer multilingual welcome packages or tours to showcase amenities and programs

Align operational policies with use

- ❑ Clearly communicate amenity rules, hours, and access protocols to reduce uncertainty and encourage confident use
- ❑ Establish and post a schedule that balances quiet and active periods in multi-use spaces to support diverse needs and reduce conflict



A resident-led meet and greet event in Vancouver
Image: Community Connectors / Happy Cities

Build knowledge of community needs

- ❏ Use wellbeing-focused surveys and check-ins to understand how spaces and programs are supporting residents
- ❏ Collect long-term data to inform future design and programming decisions, and to guide investments over time
- ❏ Include informal feedback opportunities, such as suggestion boxes or casual conversations during events, to capture ongoing resident perspectives

Develop external partnerships to run community-building programs

- ❏ Partner with relevant organizations based on resident demographics (e.g. seniors, youth, newcomers)
- ❏ Leverage trusted external partners to provide programming that may be more comfortable or better received than landlord-led initiatives
- ❏ Consider partnerships that bring ongoing or seasonal programming into shared spaces

Host practical events that also build community

- ❏ Organize emergency preparedness workshops and conversations to engage residents who may not typically participate in purely social events.
- ❏ Offer valuable services such as tax clinics, resume workshops, or financial literacy sessions to foster connections while providing meaningful support



A resident-led sewing event in Vancouver at a Lu'ma building
Image: Happy Cities

Enable small-scale social connection

- ❏ Encourage residents to host recurring small events
- ❏ Offer suggestions like coffee meetups, craft nights, or pet-friendly activities
- ❏ Tailor options to demographics such as seniors, kids, or pet owners

Consider a community connectors or resident advisory program

- ❏ Engage residents as social catalysts who help organize and lead community activities
- ❏ Provide support through staff liaisons, modest budgets, and monthly honoraria to recognize their efforts
- ❏ Foster a grassroots, resident-led approach that encourages connection, inclusion, and shared ownership of community life

Allow light-touch passive engagement

- ❏ Create spaces that encourage informal, low-pressure participation, such as book, seed, or tool libraries and puzzle tables
- ❏ Design opportunities for residents to engage organically and at their own pace without formal commitments

Allow resident input into common areas

- ❏ Enable personalization opportunities such as choosing front door colors, gardening, or creating murals
- ❏ Provide flexible, moveable furniture to support adaptable and evolving uses of shared spaces
- ❏ Ensure adequate storage solutions to accommodate diverse resident activities and belongings

Appendix



Definitions

Active edge: A ground floor edge (or the first adjacent storey) activated by a combination of regular entrances, doors, balconies, and windows.

Common space: All shared spaces within the building used by multiple residents, including hallways, stairwells, lobbies, and amenity areas.

Amenity spaces: Indoor or outdoor areas designed for use by multiple residents on a site for cultural, social, or recreational activities.

- ***Functional amenity space*** Amenity spaces with a specific function, such as parking or laundry facilities.
- ***Community node*** Amenity spaces with a recreational purpose, such as gardens, rooftops, gyms, or lounges.
- ***Nook*** A small-scale amenity space intended for recreational use.

Private space: Space intended for and used exclusively by a single home or household.

Prominently sited/easily accessible: Amenities that are directly visible or accessible from the building's main entrance, major elevator, or stairway, and are accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Semi-private space: A shared space accessible to building residents and their guests.

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