

Happy Cities


Building Social Connections: Designing multi-unit housing for social well-being

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 Happy Cities





Let's start with a story

The Happier Missing Middle:

Social and environmental innovation at Our Urban Village

 Happy Cities

 TOMO

 OUV
OUR URBAN VILLAGE

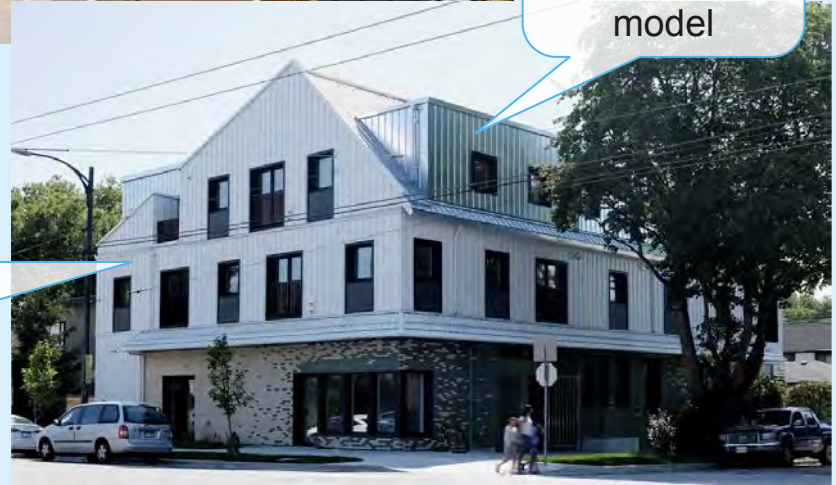
 MA
MAYHEW ARCHITECTS



Intentional design for social interaction

Cohousing
Lite
development
model

Passive House construction



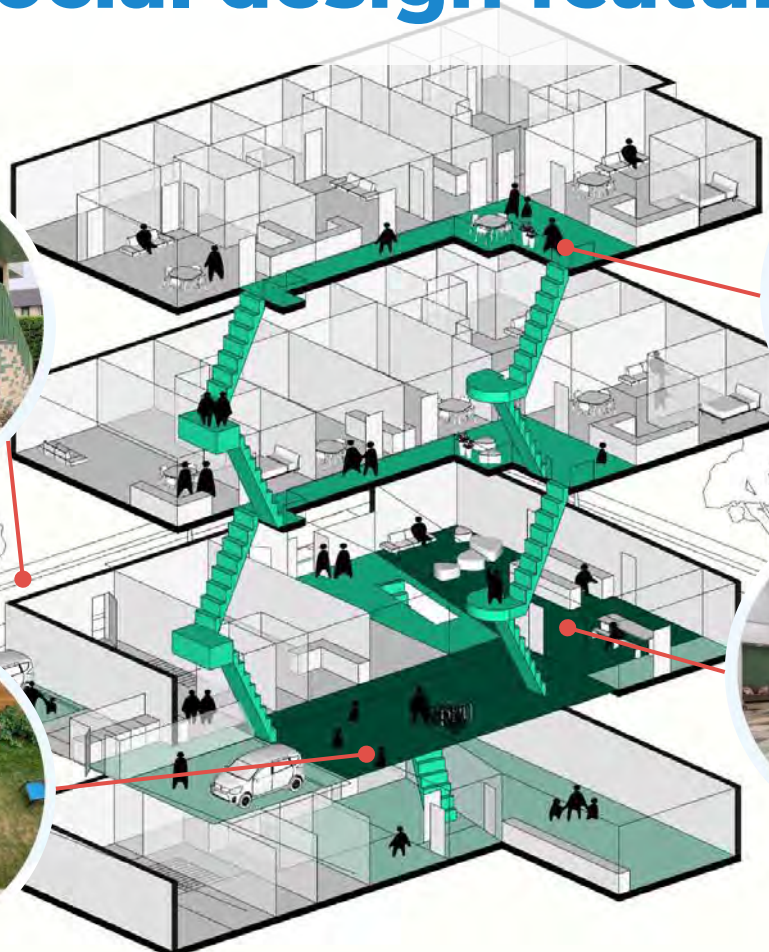


Our Urban Village Cohousing, Vancouver



Our Urban Village Cohousing, Vancouver

Pro-social design features:



100%

feel lonely never or rarely
...representing a 60% increase
compared to before move in.

88%

interact with neighbours daily or weekly
on the shared walkways.

Baseline study comparison:

- 30% weekly
- 0% daily

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 yellow shirt stands on a balcony; a person in a blue shirt sits on a bench; a person in a red dress sits on a bench; a person in a blue shirt and purple skirt uses a cane; a person in a wheelchair sits at a table; a person in a red shirt and white apron pushes a wheelbarrow; and a person in a blue shirt sits at a table. The courtyard features colorful buildings, striped awnings, trees, and plants. Four speech bubbles contain text about community support, social connections, and resource sharing.

I can rely on neighbourly support to help me age in the right place

I can rely on my neighbour when I need someone to watch my kids

I have social connections right at my doorstep

I can share tools and resources with neighbours

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





Understanding social wellbeing

The way we design
our cities can make
or break human
wellbeing.



Our context

In the face of growing challenges—including an acute housing affordability crisis, extreme weather, social isolation, and an aging population—our social connections are one of the strongest resources we have to chart a more sustainable, resilient path forward.

Multi solving
When people work
together across sectors to
address multiple
problems with one policy
or investment.
(Multisolving Institute)

“Being socially connected in meaningful ways is actually key to human health and survival.”

Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad

Chronic loneliness and social isolation can be as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day & increases risk of premature death by as much as 50%.



In contrast....

Strong social supports are protective for physical and mental health and cognitive decline.

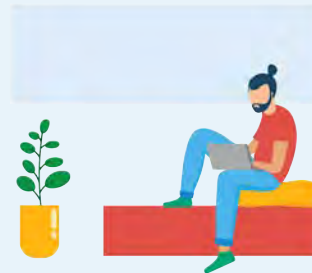
Building the case for social connection

Strong social relationships make us happier, healthier, and more resilient in the face of crises—and are linked with living 15 years longer on average. Yet, loneliness and isolation are on the rise in many places, reaching epidemic levels.

Loneliness in Canada

3 in 10 sometimes feel lonely.

1 in 10 often feel lonely.



Data source: 2021 Canadian Social Survey

Connections with your neighbours...



Higher levels of **happiness, wellbeing** and **life satisfaction**



More likely to **give and accept help** in a crisis



Children twice as likely to engage in **daily outdoor play**



More likely to **volunteer, vote** and **engage**



Youth report better **wellbeing** and **sense of safety**



Older adults report **decreased loneliness,** increased self-reported **health**



Our work

What we do



Planning + Design

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



Research & policy

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.

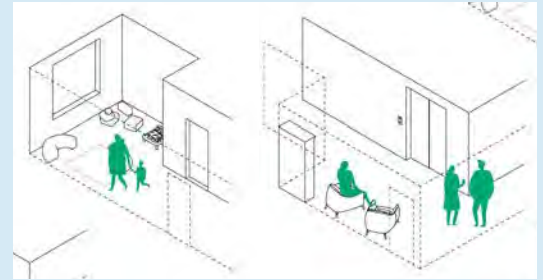
Happy Cities - Housing work



Planning + design



Design audits



Policy + design guidelines



Engagement



Post-occupancy evaluations



Research + education

Happy Homes Toolkit



Designed to Engage



Many factors affect our ability to connect



Design



Programming



Policy

Core Needs

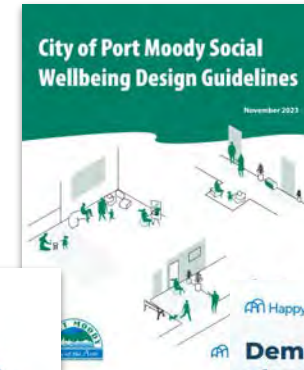
Without **affordable** housing choices that provide **secure tenure**, all of these other wellbeing goals cannot be achieved.





Emerging research & topics

Building the case for wellbeing-focused design



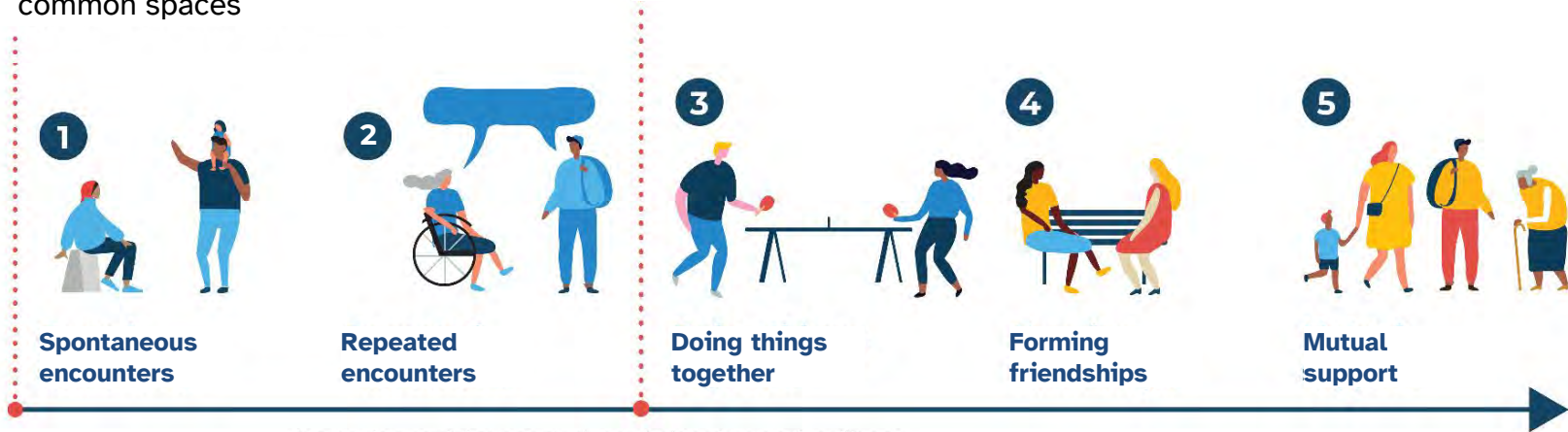
Spectrum of neighbourly interactions

Building design

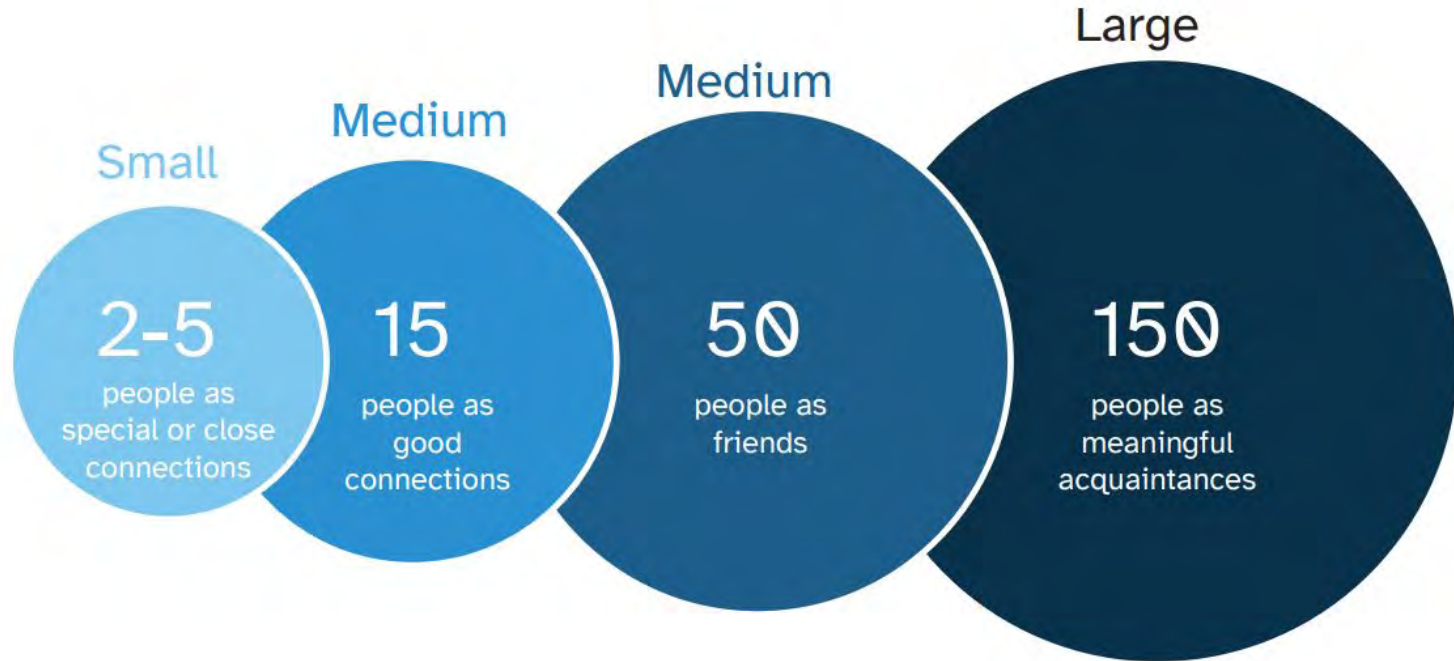
Buildings can be designed to encourage residents to bump into each other and linger in common spaces

Building design & programming

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



Social group size



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

Happy homes exist across densities & typologies

Neighbourhood density is not strongly associated with greater or lower wellbeing

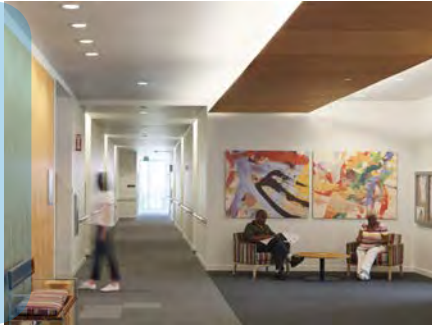
Housing typology (ie. single detached home, apartment, townhouse, duplex/triplex) doesn't produce measurable differences in wellbeing

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

Frequent connections with neighbours

1 in 4

Lobbies, corridors,
near elevators



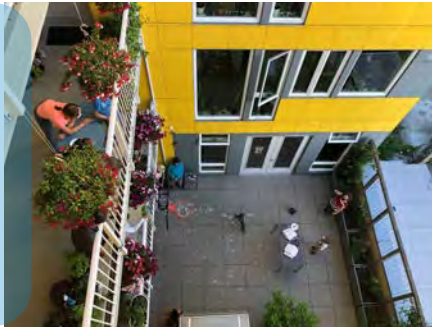
1 in 5

Outside the
building



1 in 10

Common outdoor
spaces



1 in 10

Parkade



*Results from North Vancouver survey conducted by HNC, Happy Cities, and SFU

Images (right to left): Lakeside Seniors Housing & Mason West, David Baker Architects; Capitol Hill Cohousing, Grace Kim; Little Mountain Cohousing

Access to multiple social spaces is associated with...

Higher
likeliness of
knowing
neighbours

Better overall
social
connections

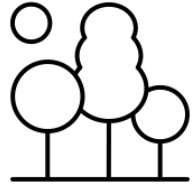
Greater
willingness to
ask
neighbours for
help

Feeling less
lonely

Daily or weekly reported use of common spaces



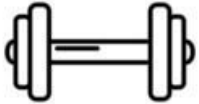
29%
Laundry



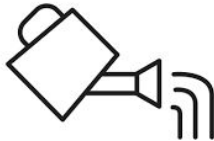
23%
Courtyard or
shared yard



16%
Bike storage



9%
Gym

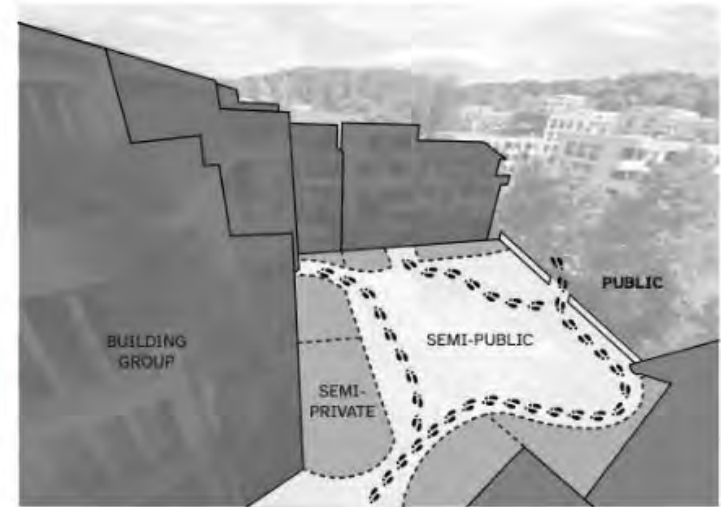
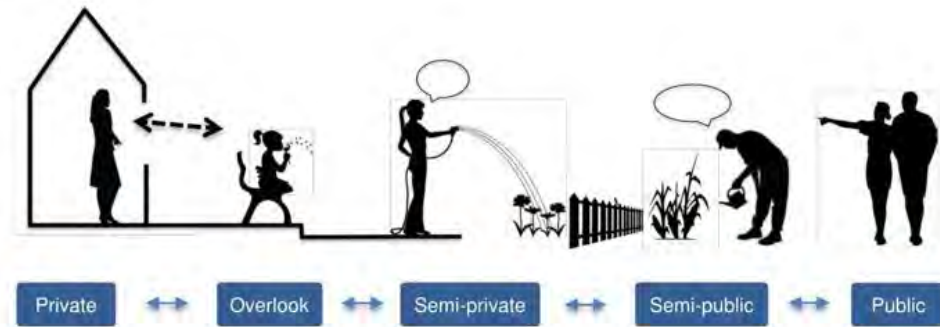






8%
Community
garden



7%
Lounge or
amenity room

Balancing privacy, connection and allowing for social choice



-  Walking path
-  Semi-public space
-  Semi-private space
-  Building group



Building social connections toolkit

Building social connections project

HEY
NEIGHBOUR!
Collective

Happy Cities

SFU RENEWABLE
CITIES



Phase 1 (2023): Measuring the impact of the City of North Vancouver's *Active Design Guidelines*



Phase 3 (2024): Developing the *Building Social Connections* toolkit



Phase 2 (2023-24): Co-creating housing design policies to support wellbeing in multi-unit housing (*four workshops*)

6 local governments from the Lower Mainland of BC,

Phase 4 (2025): *Building Social Connections in Practice*, National training sessions

125 planners across Canada, **45** municipalities represented!

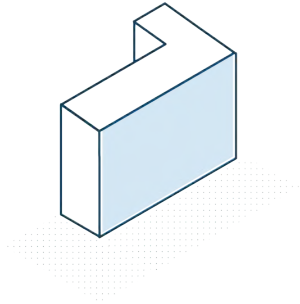
Introducing the Building Social Connections Toolbox!

This toolkit is for anyone interested in or working in housing, community planning, and development, including:

- 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 advocates

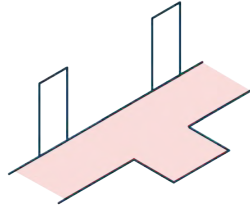


Design toolboxes



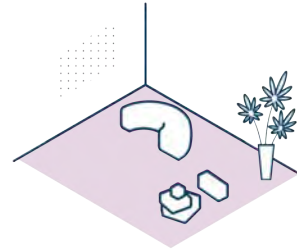
Social building edges

- Transition zones
- Building entrances
- Publicly accessible spaces



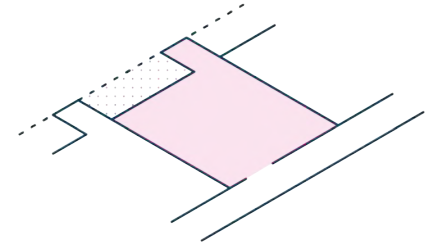
Social circulation

- Lobbies
- Corridors
- Nooks
- Stairs



Social amenities

- Indoor amenities
- Outdoor amenities
- Bicycle spaces



Social homes

- Entryways
- Private homes
- Balconies

Design principles

Location

Invitation

Activation

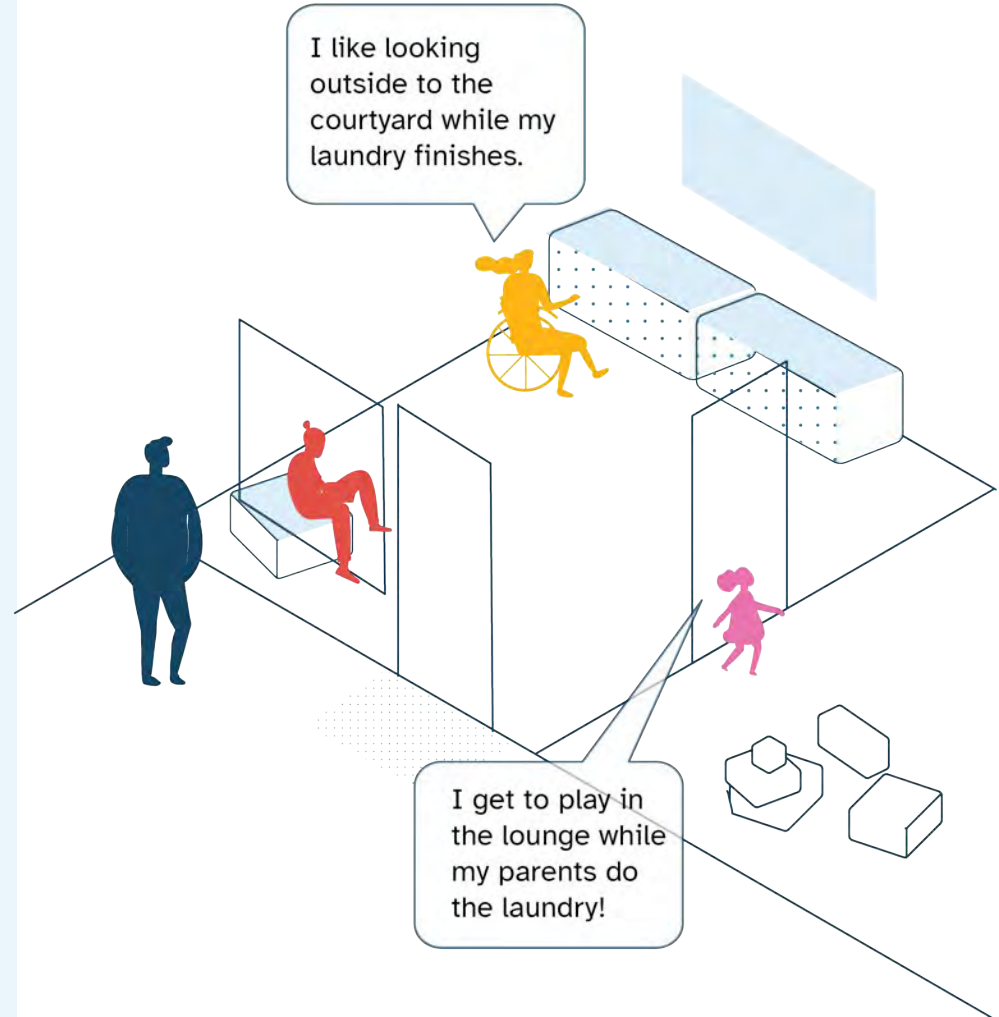
Inclusion

Transition

Evolution

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.





Courtyard buildings

Thoughtful placement of amenities



Mixed-use communities

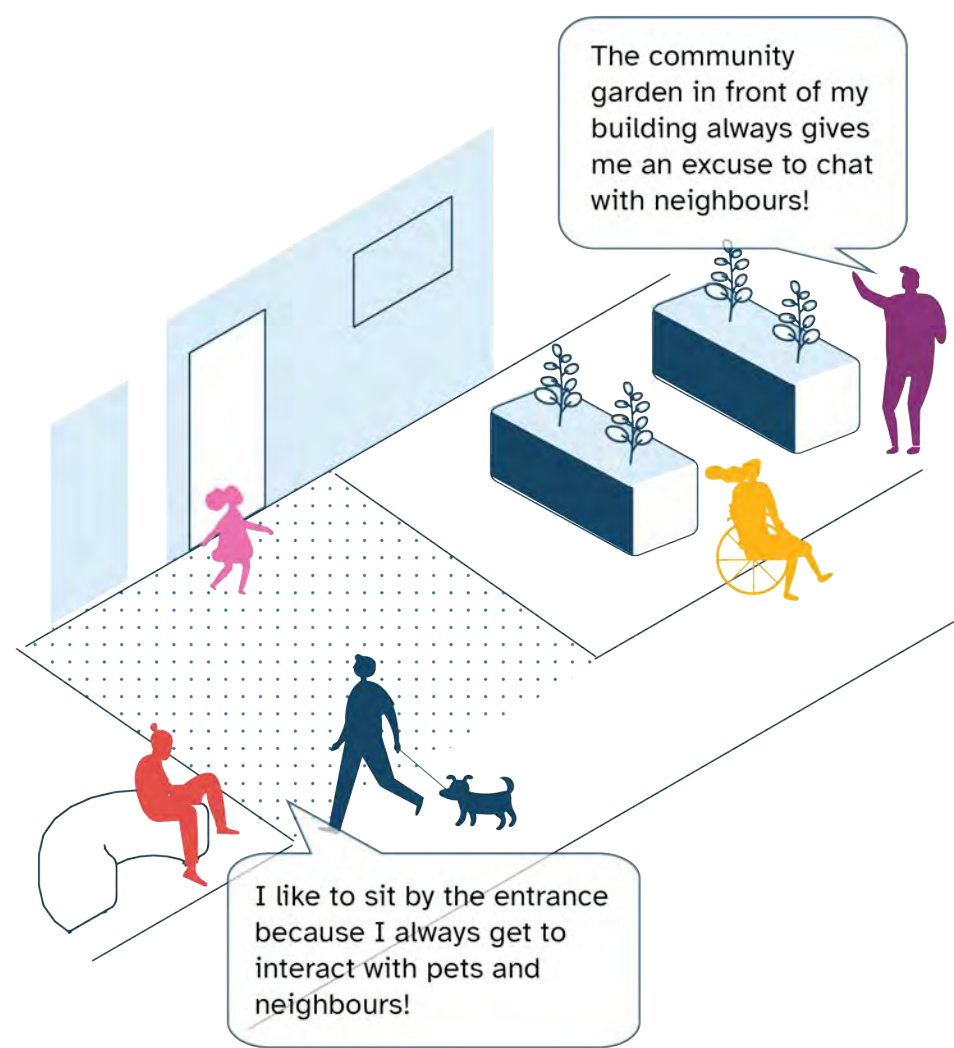
Integrated public spaces

Image: Vindmollebakken Housing - Helen & Hard

Image: Mary Anne's Place, Placemaker Communities

Invitation

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





Lighting and
placemaking
features

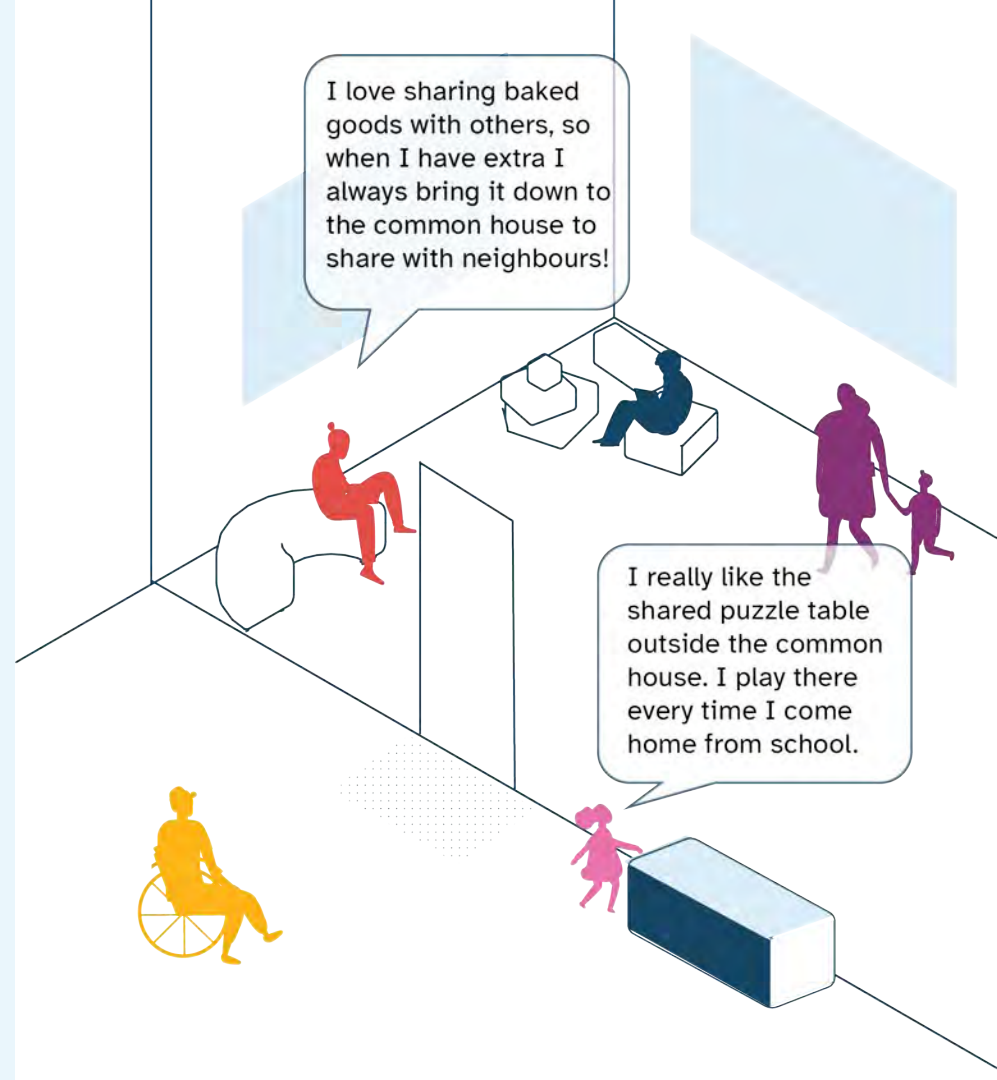
Places to
pause &
interact

Distinctive,
covered,
visible
entrance

Co-location
of amenity
spaces
near
entries

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.





Visual connections to the courtyard

Indoor-outdoor connection to courtyard

Informal play area with public art

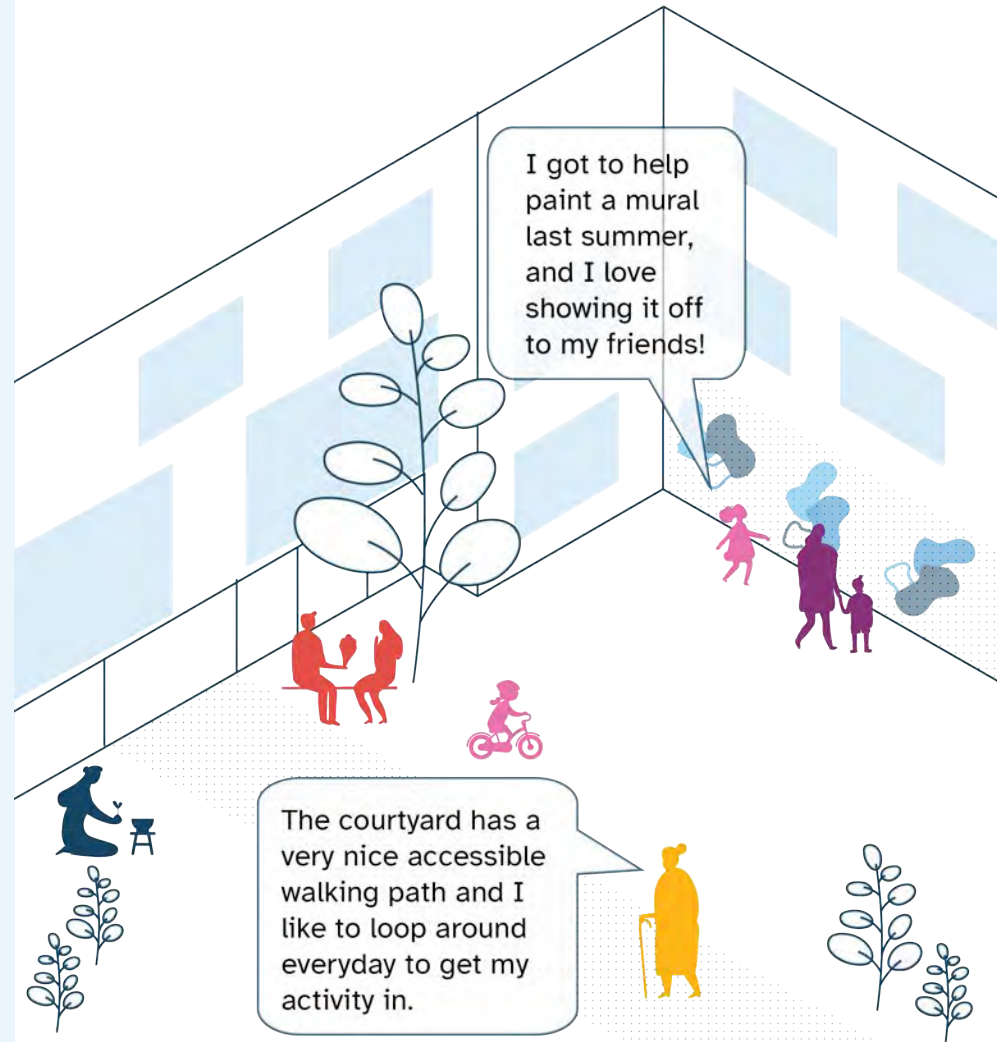
Direct access to the laundry room

Community gardens

Image: Station Center Family Housing, David Baker Architects

Inclusion

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



Natural
light in
corridors

Resident
created
artwork

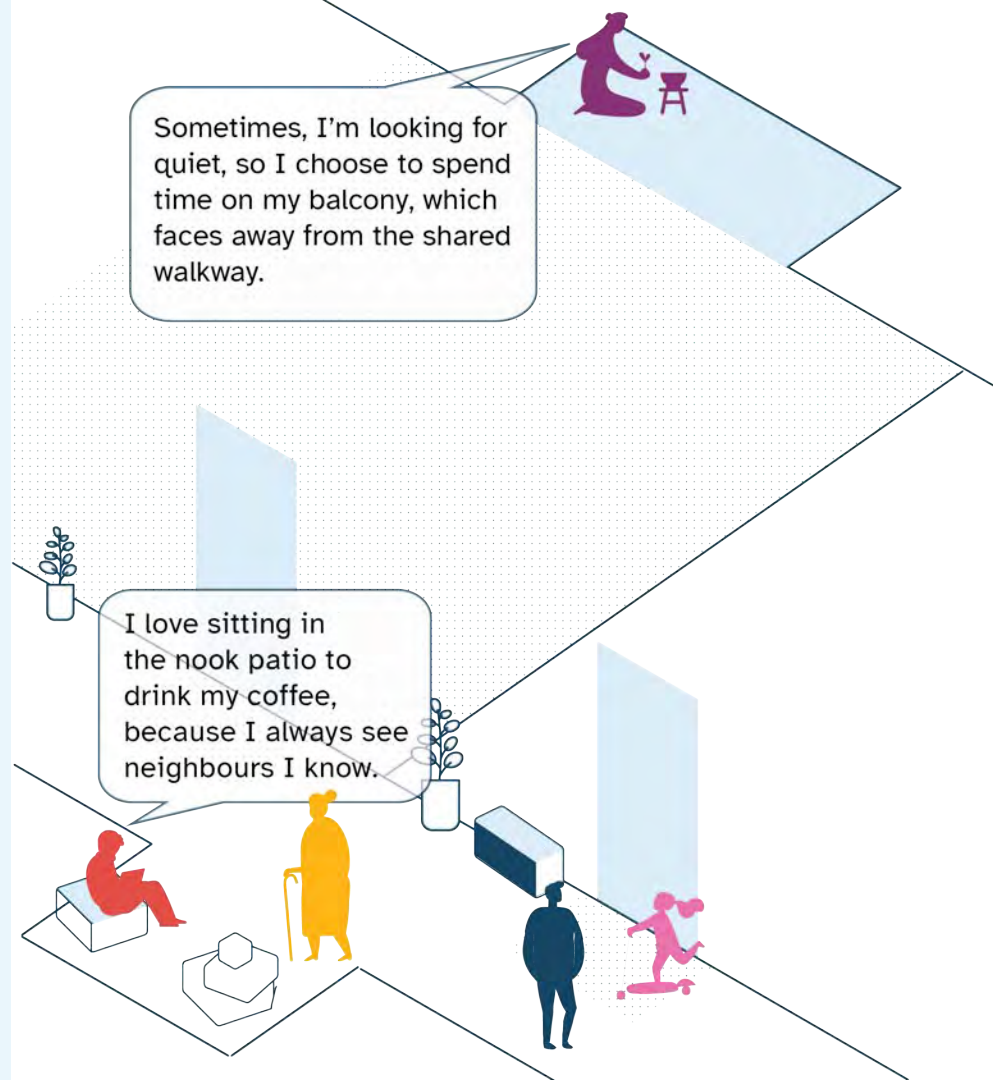
Community
notice
board

Social nook
near
elevator

Enhanced
accessibility
features & wide
corridors

Transition

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





Active edges with stoops

Landscaping & architectural elements for transition



Natural light, acoustics

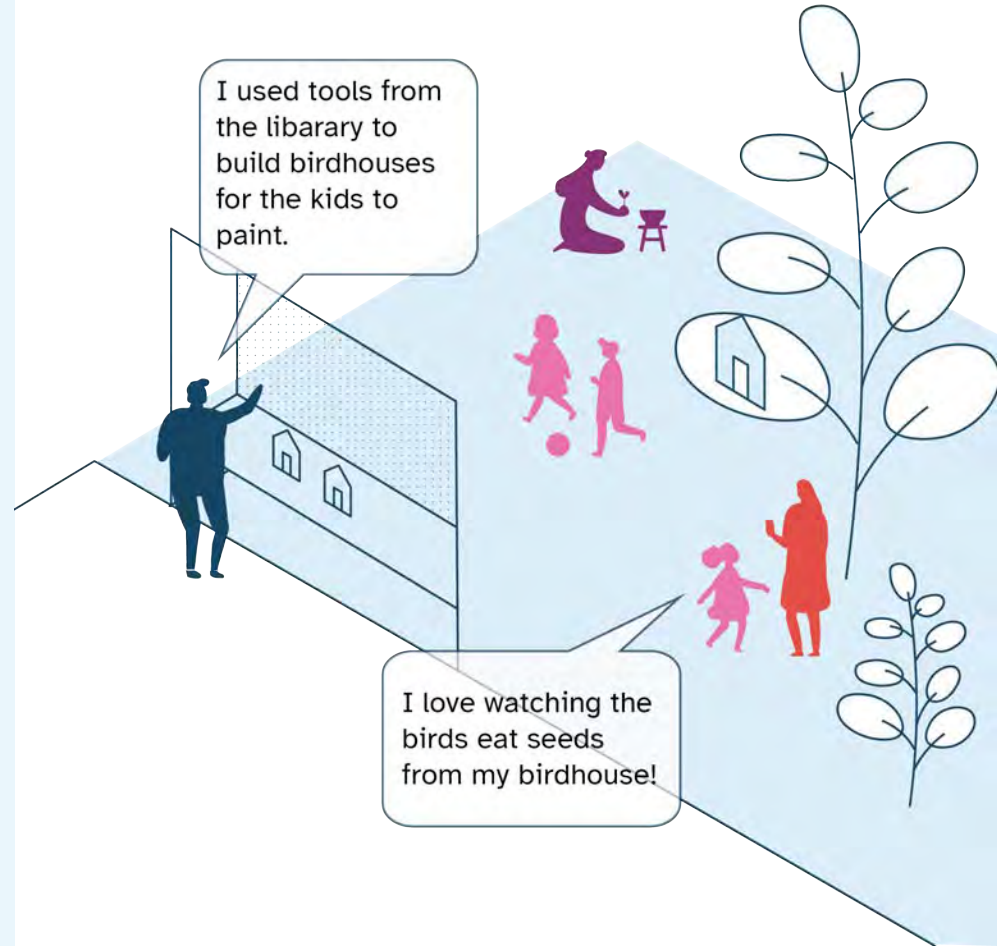
Flexible, accessible, and functional layouts


Image: Lakeside Seniors Apartment, David Baker Architects

Image: Our Urban Village Cohousing


Evolution

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





Kids activity
room



Workshop with
shared tools

Image: Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver

Image: Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver

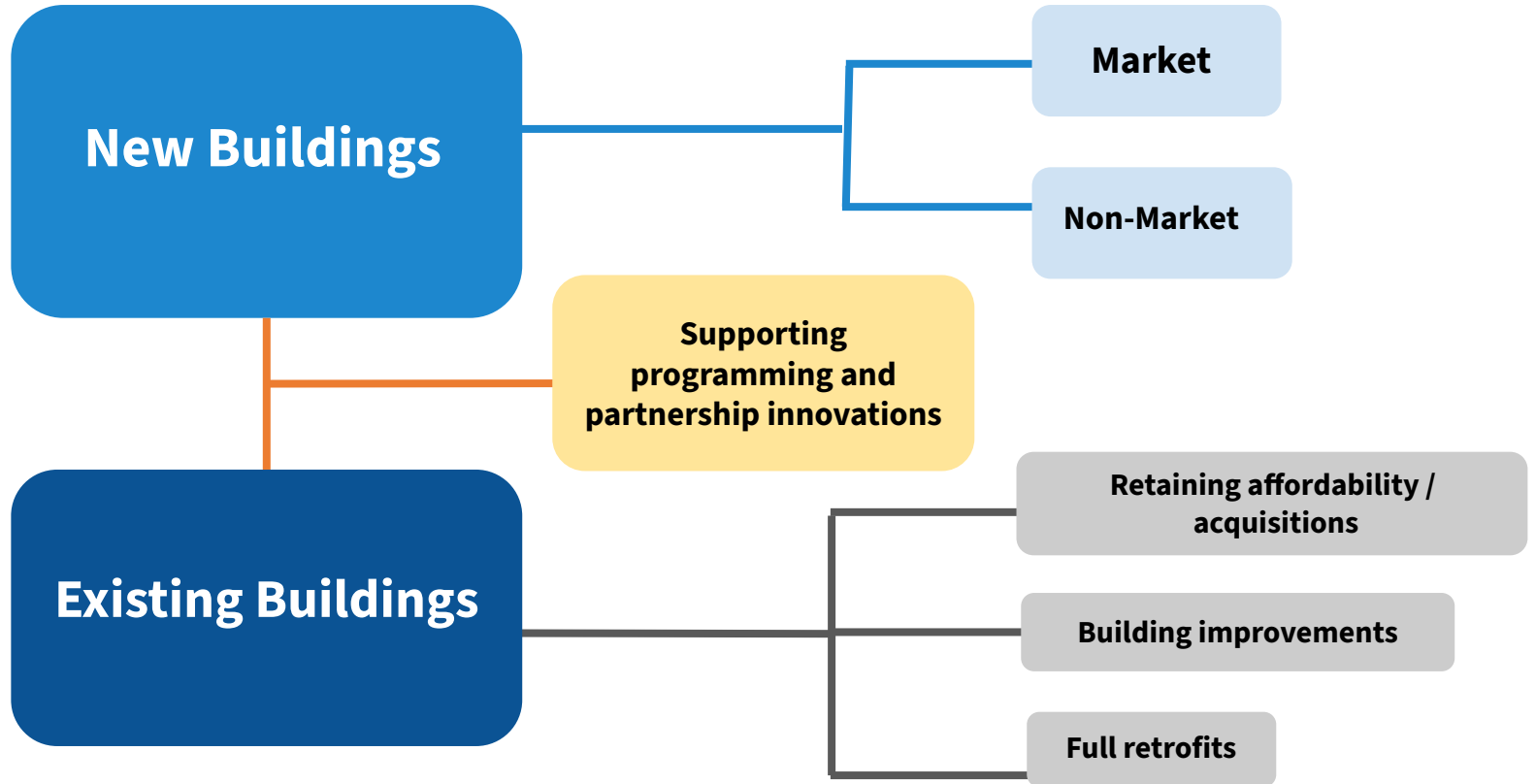


Taking action

Thinking about the home, building, and neighbourhood as a social ecosystem!



Areas of action



Working together

Collaboration is key to all of our research, and we include collaboration with:

- Public Health
- Municipal planners
- Other local governments
- Non-market housing operators
- Market developers
- Non-market developers
- Residents
- Non-profit organizations
- Architect, designers, and landscape architects
- Financial experts
- And more!

Advocacy & education

Highlighting positive examples. Engaging across the housing industry and across silos.



Building the business case

Developing metrics and collecting evidence to support solutions for new and existing communities.



Removing barriers

Updating and aligning local policy and funding criteria. Providing incentives for innovators and adopters.

Making sociable design the standard

Integrate sociable and inclusive design concepts into pre-approved designs and local, regional, provincial and national guidelines and policies.

Thank you!

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