

# The happier missing middle

Lessons for building an urban cohousing village



April 2024

 Happy Cities

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# Executive summary

## Our Urban Village: A new model for socially connected, missing middle housing

Our Urban Village is a three-storey, 12-unit cohousing project in Vancouver. The development is a unique collaboration between Our Urban Village, a cohousing community, and Tomo Spaces, a local developer. In cohousing, residents have private units with extensive common spaces. They participate in regular activities and share management of the building, creating a more supportive and social community than in typical multi-unit housing.

Typically, cohousing projects are undertaken by residents themselves acting as the developer. However, cohousing groups face many barriers to development, including long project timelines, escalating land bids, complex municipal policy, and significant time commitments. Many groups that form are unable to overcome these challenges and complete their project.

Our Urban Village piloted an innovative “cohousing lite” model to reduce many of these financial and time barriers. The development prioritizes resident wellbeing and social connection, and offers an innovative model for developing low-rise, “missing middle” housing in a largely single-family residential neighbourhood. This report outlines key learnings from this “cohousing lite” community to explore how cities can add gentle density and grow in a sustainable and social way.



OUV exterior. (Matheson Photography)

## Goals of this report

- Share learnings that can enable more missing middle, community-oriented housing in an urban context
- Identify the wellbeing benefits associated with living in community-oriented housing
- Identify design strategies that can support resident wellbeing and increase opportunities for positive social interaction among neighbours
- Illustrate the wellbeing benefits of mutually supportive, trusting neighbours in multi-unit housing

# Measuring changes in wellbeing

Our Urban Village emerged through a collaborative and intentional design process between residents, the design team, and the developer. From the start, the building's layout, amenities, circulation spaces, and private units were designed to support resident wellbeing and social connection. This study sought to measure the impact of these design decisions to answer a central question: Can the design of multi-unit housing nurture stronger, more supportive social relationships?

Happy Cities designed a research methodology to measure how residents' wellbeing changed before and after moving into Our Urban Village. This included interviews, surveys, and on-site observations with residents before move in and approximately three and six months after. The results highlight impactful actions that can be implemented in future, community-oriented, missing middle developments to boost sense of community, wellbeing, and belonging.



Shared dinner in the common house. (Our Urban Village)

## Project timeline

### Space assessment (2020-2021)

The space assessment analyzed the architectural drawings to understand and hypothesize how residents will use the space.

### Baseline study (January 2023)

The baseline study included a survey of and interviews with residents, to gather a snapshot of their wellbeing prior to move in.

### OUV residents move in (July 2023)

### First post-occupancy study (October to November 2023)

The first survey took place approximately three months after residents moved in. During this period, people are still settling in and starting to form deeper social relationships. There is also a “honeymoon phase” when you first move into a new place, where things are new and exciting.

### Second post-occupancy study (January 2024)

Surveys and interviews took place approximately six months after move in. During this period, people become more settled and start to form habits. They may also start to notice issues or problems, and friction between neighbours can start to occur.

### Best practice guide (April 2024)

The best practice guide compiles learnings from the study, connecting wellbeing results with the design of the building.



# Wellbeing results snapshot

Six months after move in...

**88%** have four or more people in their life they can confide in

...representing a 20% increase compared to before move in.



**100%** have four or more neighbours they can ask for favours from

Baseline study comparison:

- 0% had four or more neighbours to ask for favours from
- 40% had zero neighbours to ask for favours from



**100%** feel lonely never or rarely

...representing a 60% increase compared to before move in.



**88%** consider two or more neighbours as friends

...compared to 11% before move in.

**“I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here.”**

**63%** agree or strongly agree

...compared to 50% before move in.



**88%** interact with neighbours daily or weekly on the shared walkways

Baseline study comparison:

- 30% weekly
- 0% daily

**75%** interact with neighbours daily or weekly on the stairs or elevator

Baseline study comparison:

- 22% weekly
- 22% daily



For full results, refer to Section 4: Key Learnings & Appendix A: Wellbeing results summary

# Key learnings summary

This report explores how people's wellbeing changed after moving into Our Urban Village. Our learnings are organized into five categories: **sociability, belonging and trust, private spaces, circulation spaces, and common spaces**. Through each, we connect key wellbeing trends to various design decisions and the experience of living in an intentional community. Our results find that—as research and the residents themselves predicted—interactions with neighbours, social support, and trust in neighbours have significantly increased since moving in. At Our Urban Village, the organized weekly activities, the common house, and the wide, exterior walkways are particularly effective at connecting neighbours.

*“We generally have more people to ask questions of. We don't need to ‘go it alone.’ Some of this is borrowing a cup of sugar. Some is having other people to ask questions. Also, the extraordinary relief of having other people cook meals for us twice a week.”*

—Our Urban Village resident, six months after move in

*“Unexpectedly, I found it quite difficult in the first month or so to transition to just having to be ‘available’ all the time, in the sense that there was so much activity and questions and interaction. This has since eased a bit. More than I expected, I'm finding it really pleasant to chat quickly with a neighbour in passing on my way in and out of the building.”*

—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in



## 1 | Sociability

**Small-scale cohousing embeds social connection into daily living, through building design, shared activities, and intentional community.**

Many residents shared that they chose to move into Our Urban Village due to a desire for greater social connection. Overall, residents expressed positive experiences of living in the community so far. As of six months after move in, residents reported:

- An increase in both the number and frequency of social interactions they have, with all residents reporting that they have weekly or daily conversations with neighbours, compared to just 50% before
- An increase in the number of neighbours they consider as friends, with all but one respondent having at least two or more neighbours they consider as a friend
- An increase in the number of people they have to confide in, with all but one having four or more people
- A decrease in loneliness, with all but one reporting that they feel lonely rarely or never

Overall, the study found positive changes in social support and connection as early as three and six months after move in. However, residents noted that it takes time to adjust to living in a community-oriented building. As of six months after move in, some residents expressed that social activity (aside from casual encounters along the walkways, for example) occurs primarily through scheduled activities. However, they expect that over time, more get-togethers will happen spontaneously. Overall, our research finds that 12 units is an effective size for fostering social connections and a sense of community in cohousing.

### 2 | Belonging and trust

**Living in an intentional community builds a stronger sense of belonging and trust among neighbours, which can grow mutual support over time.**

Residents expressed overall that they have a strong foundation of trust, cooperation, and shared values to build on. Since moving in, all residents have reported overall positive experiences, with several noting that living in cohousing has exceeded expectations and that the group is very cooperative.

The first year is important in navigating and shaping what that community looks like (for example, organizing activities, managing shared spaces, getting to know one's own capacity for social connection, and setting boundaries). Through frequent social interaction and shared activities, residents are able to build deeper, more trusting relationships over time.

As of six months after moving into Our Urban Village, residents reported:

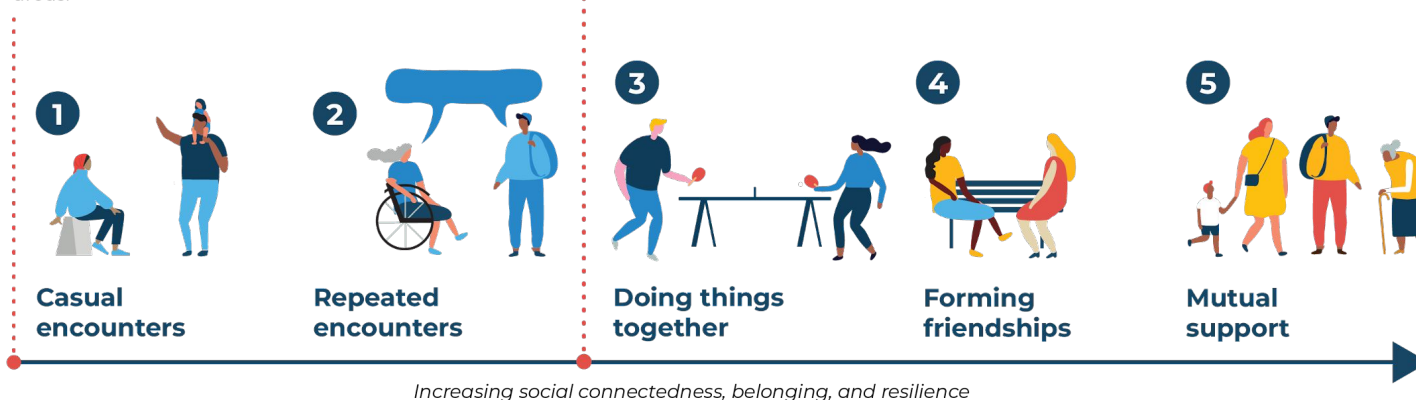
- A significant increase in sense of belonging, with all respondents agreeing that they feel they have something important to offer to their building or neighbourhood
- An increase in their sense of trust in neighbours, with all residents reporting that they have four or more neighbours they would feel comfortable asking for favours from
- An increase in the sharing of household items and responsibilities, including tools, appliances, vehicles, and even childcare

#### 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.



## Key learnings summary

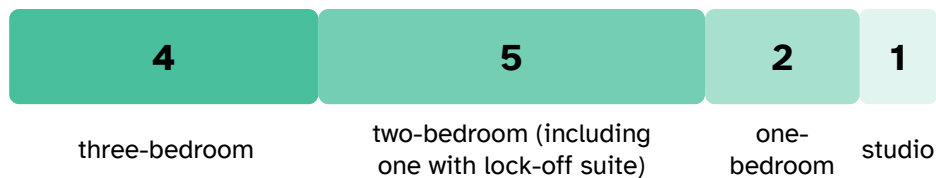


OUV interior unit. (Tomo Spaces)

*“I’m most surprised by how much I like my cozy little unit. I thought I might have found it a bit inadequate but I don’t at all. I also haven’t minded having to use the shared laundry and I thought that was going to be a drag. I had expected to have more social interaction here than my last place and that expectation has been met very much.”*

*—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in*

### Unit mix



## 3 | Private spaces

**Comfortable, well-designed private spaces nurture community by allowing people to control their social exposure and build positive relationships with neighbours.**

When residents are satisfied with their private unit and living spaces, they are more likely to stay in a home or community for longer. In turn, long-term tenure allows people to build deeper social relationships with neighbours and with their community. As of six months after moving in, residents reported:

- No significant change in satisfaction with private living spaces, with all respondents but one agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are satisfied with private living spaces
- Overall satisfaction with comfort of their new unit, including aspects such as noise, natural light, and temperature control
- Overall satisfaction with privacy, with all respondents but one reporting that they feel they have enough privacy in their unit

Satisfaction with private units is especially important in urban cohousing, where space is limited and units are smaller to make room for larger shared spaces and amenities. Our Urban Village prioritized a wide variety of unit types in order to accommodate diverse household sizes needs. The small scale of the building made it difficult to standardize unit types. However, the units are designed to be comfortable, functional, and adaptable over time, with ample natural light and cross-ventilation. Results from the study show that residents are overall pleased with the high quality of their private units.



### 4 | Circulation spaces

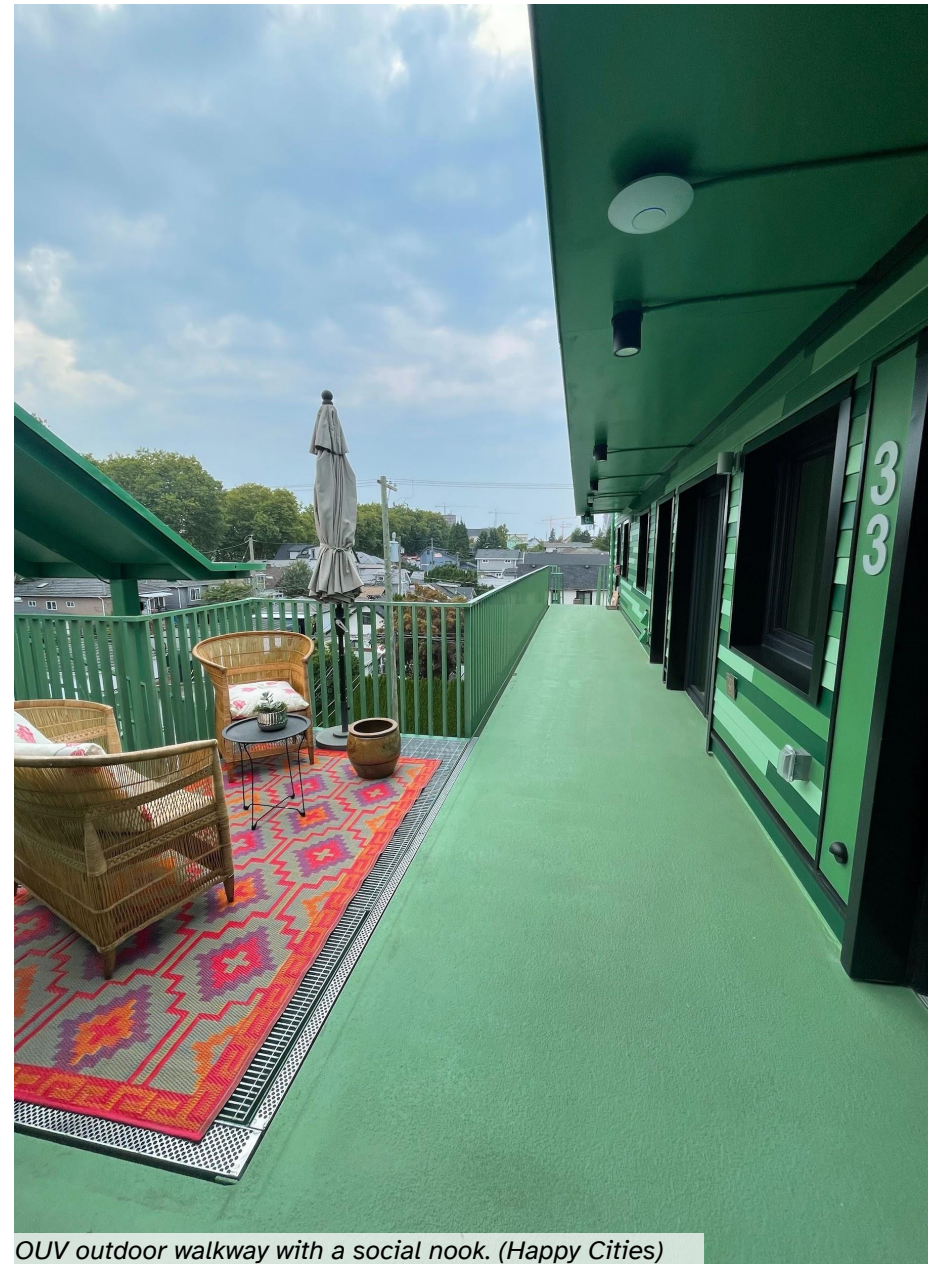
**Walkways, stairs, and elevators with social design features can increase opportunities for positive and spontaneous social interactions, fostering a sense of community.**

Circulation spaces are not typically considered to be social spaces. Our Urban Village intentionally designed wide, outdoor walkways, stairs, and an elevator with social nooks to support interaction among neighbours. These design decisions have paid off, as residents report that the wide outdoor walkways are the most social spaces in the building. As of six months after move in, the majority of residents report interacting with neighbours daily in circulation spaces, showing the social potential of shared spaces that are built into people's daily routines and along the pathways to and from their unit.

In buildings without a lot of space for amenities, well-designed, shared walkways with social nooks can offer extra space for connection.



**Policy idea:** Municipalities can offer density bonuses or floor area exclusions for widened, social and active walkways or circulation spaces, such as the City of North Vancouver has done with its Active Design Guidelines.



OUV outdoor walkway with a social nook. (Happy Cities)

## Key learnings summary

### Our Urban Village common house



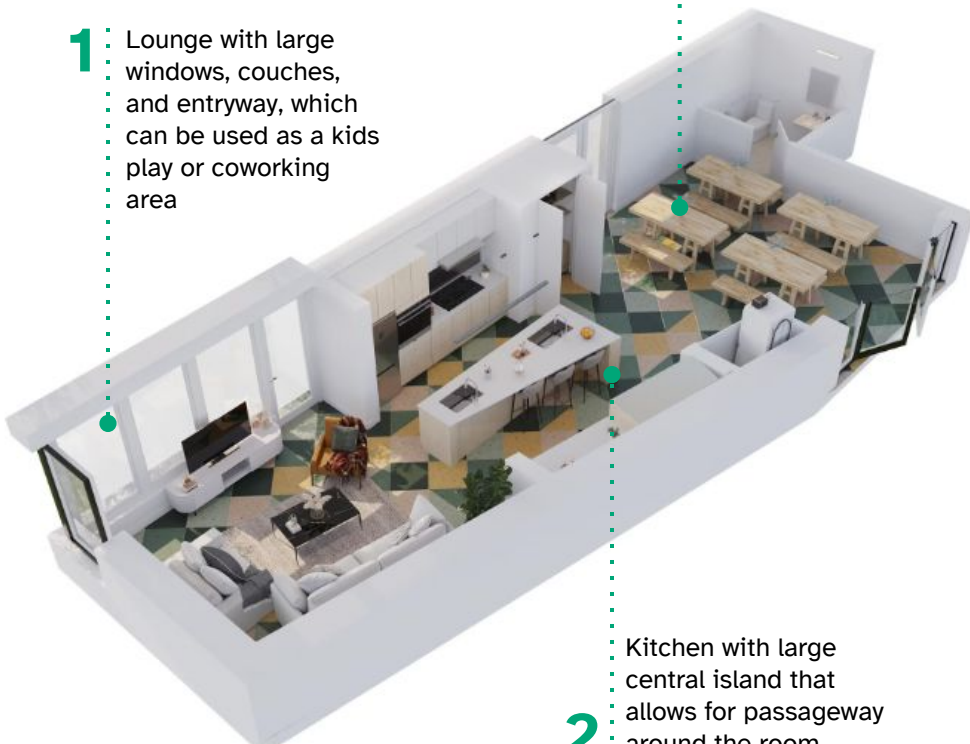
Common house (Darren Sutherland)



Common house (Darren Sutherland)

- 3** Dining area with tables and chairs, connected to an accessible washroom

- 1** Lounge with large windows, couches, and entryway, which can be used as a kids play or coworking area



- 2** Kitchen with large central island that allows for passageway around the room

3D view of Common House

## 5 | Common amenities

**Common amenities that are functional, diverse, and easily accessible—designed as extensions of smaller individual homes—create a strong community heart.**

Shared outdoor and indoor spaces at Our Urban Village were designed through a collaborative, intentional approach. The design team conducted workshops engaging residents on key decisions, particularly for common amenities. Beyond the courtyard and common house, Our Urban Village considered the social potential of all shared spaces in the building—including walkways, stairs, laundry, parking, and storage. As of six months after move in:

- Many common spaces facilitate weekly social encounters among residents, particularly through the communal meals and meetings
- Satisfaction with shared indoor and outdoor spaces increased post occupancy, with all residents expressing satisfaction with indoor shared spaces
- There are no feelings of overcrowding in any of the common spaces at the building
- All respondents with kids reported they feel comfortable letting their kids play unsupervised in the building's courtyard or outdoor spaces at Our Urban Village, compared to just one household before
- All respondents are satisfied with the amount of natural light in common spaces in the building

Overall, our research finds that shared spaces and amenities help nurture a sense of community and belonging. However, small sites can make it difficult to include some types of amenities, depending on zoning, municipal policies, and other constraints.

# Land acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge that this project took place on the traditional and unceded territory of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam), selílwitulh (Tseil Waututh) and sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nations.

# Project contributors

## Study contributors

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Hanna Negami | Perkins Eastman

## Design team

The project design team for Our Urban Village included:

- Tomo Spaces
- MA + HG Architects
- Lanefab Design/Build
- The Haebler Group
- Our Urban Village
- Prospect & Refuge Landscape Architects

Happy Cities advised on design principles.

## Our Urban Village residents

Thank you to the residents of Our Urban Village for their time, insights, and participation in this study.





# Funding

This research was funded by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) National Housing Strategy (NHS) Demonstrations Initiative. The views expressed in this report are the personal views of the authors and the project funders accept no responsibility for them.



## About Happy Cities

[Happy Cities](#) is an urban planning, design and research firm that uses an evidence-based approach to create happier, healthier, more inclusive communities. We work with housing providers, municipalities, developers, and organizations to design buildings and urban spaces that support people's health and happiness. 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 buildings, culminating in a toolkit to help housing providers turn wellbeing evidence into action.



## About Tomo Spaces

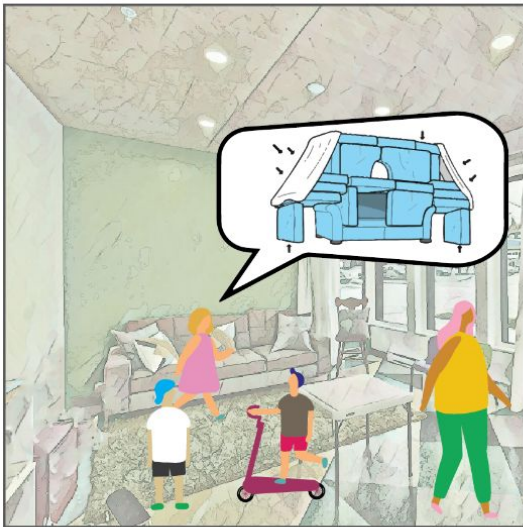
[Tomo](#) stands for Together More. We help people live happier together in densifying communities. We build at the intersection of "hardwhere" and "softwhere," where physical space and intangible activities meet. As developers, operators, and researchers, we believe in the power of place to enable people to do amazing things. Our integrated research-and-develop approach challenges us to engage with complex urban issues. Since 2005, we've cultivated award-winning places like Schoolhouse in Vancouver and River Market in New Westminster.



# 1 | Introduction



IT'S A REGULAR, RAINY SUNDAY EVENING IN SOUTH VANCOUVER.  
BUT AT OUR URBAN VILLAGE COHOUSING, THERE'S ACTIVITY  
BREWING IN THE COMMON HOUSE!



These people are the members of [Our Urban Village](#); a 12-unit cohousing community in Vancouver. The developer, Tomo Spaces, and Our Urban Village, the cohousing community, piloted a collaborative “cohousing lite” approach, whereby the community partners with a developer to bring the project to life.

THESE PEOPLE MIGHT LOOK LIKE FAMILY NOW, BUT THEY USED TO BE STRANGERS. SO HOW DID THEY COME TOGETHER TO SHARE THIS MEAL IN A CITY THAT IS NOTORIOUS FOR BEING LONELY?

### What is cohousing?

Cohousing describes a collaborative, intentional community where people own their own units but share extensive common spaces beyond traditional amenities. These spaces are designed purposely to support social connections, and residents are expected to contribute to communal social activities and building management. In this way, cohousing creates a more community-oriented form of living than typical multi-unit housing.

Cohousing communities are diverse, but are all built around the goal of living in a social community where neighbours know and support each other. The Canadian Cohousing Network counts 29 [cohousing communities](#) in B.C.—in addition to Our Urban Village—more than any other province in Canada. These communities are driven and shaped by the residents who comprise them. They exist across all types of neighbourhoods, from small towns to urban centres, and at many different scales of density.

### Cohousing Lite

Our Urban Village was created through an innovative “cohousing lite” model, by which a cohousing group partners with a developer. Under this approach, the developer is responsible for land acquisition, project design, and construction management. The cohousing group gives feedback at strategic points and makes decisions on a limited set of critical issues. Cohousing lite streamlines the development process to overcome many of the financial and time barriers that often prevent cohousing projects from coming to fruition.

### Cohousing in an urban setting

Cohousing projects are built in various settings—rural, suburban, and urban. Each context presents its own unique design considerations and tradeoffs. In the urban context, some considerations include:

- The high price of land in a city like Vancouver poses challenges for affordability
- Lots are smaller in dense urban settings, requiring creative design strategies to maximize social space and balance the needs of private units with common areas
- Smaller lot sizes often mean denser or taller development, which can pose challenges for creating diverse unit sizes and units for families
- Smaller lot sizes mean that new multi-unit developments may require land assembly
- Municipalities often have complex regulations about the height and density, impacting the number of units and families for a cohousing community
- Municipal regulations around amenity space area and definitions can make it challenging to include some social features
- Development agreements for denser housing are often negotiated through rezoning applications, which can be lengthy and add significant costs to a project

### **Our Urban Village: A case study in socially connected, missing middle housing**

Socially connected housing can play a key role in supporting healthy, happy communities. Our Urban Village is an innovative “missing middle” solution, providing low-rise, small-scale multi-unit housing in a largely low-density, residential neighbourhood. As a unique “cohousing lite” community, the development offers important lessons for how cities can add gentle density to grow in a sustainable and social way.

Social connections, including both casual encounters and deep relationships, are crucial to our overall wellbeing. People who regularly have brief social interactions report higher levels of belonging and happiness than those who do not, living [15 years longer](#) on average. In contrast, chronic loneliness and social isolation are as bad for health as smoking a pack of [cigarettes](#) per day. Our Urban Village aims to strengthen individual and community wellbeing by embedding social connection in people’s daily lives—through the building’s physical design, shared management, and resident-organized activities.

**This report explores the successes and challenges faced by Our Urban Village, in their journey to create a new cohousing community in Vancouver.**

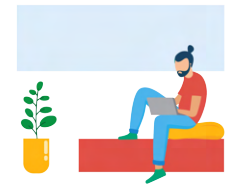
The findings are based on three rounds of engagement with residents before and after move in, to measure how their wellbeing and perspectives on their housing have changed since moving into the cohousing community. The report outlines key learnings for building urban cohousing—particularly in a residential, urban context where land is expensive and space is limited.

In Metro Vancouver...

**1 in 5** feel their neighbourhood is lacking a sense of community

**1 in 5** feel lonely often

**46%** feel lonely at least sometimes



*Data from 2023 My Home, My Neighbourhood Wellbeing Study*

#### **Goals of this report**

- Share learnings that can enable more missing middle, community-oriented housing in an urban context
- Identify the wellbeing benefits associated with living in community-oriented housing
- Identify design strategies that can support resident wellbeing and increase opportunities for positive social interaction among neighbours
- Illustrate the wellbeing benefits of mutually supportive, trusting neighbours in multi-unit housing



# 2 | About Our Urban Village



## 2 | About Our Urban Village

Our Urban Village is a multigenerational, 12-unit cohousing community in Vancouver. The development is a unique collaboration between Our Urban Village, a cohousing community, and Tomo Spaces, a local developer. Typically, cohousing projects are undertaken by residents themselves acting as the developer. However, cohousing groups face many barriers to development, including long project timelines, escalating land bids, complex municipal policy, and significant time commitments. Many groups that form are unable to overcome these challenges and complete their project.

For these reasons, Our Urban Village members decided to partner with a developer to build the project, anticipating this would increase the likelihood of their development succeeding. Our Urban Village founders began meeting with developers to identify the right partner, and engaged Tomo Spaces after interviewing more than 10 developers.

The three-storey low-rise building is designed intentionally to foster social connections between residents and with the wider neighbourhood. The design team drew from the evidence presented in [Happy Homes](#), a multi-year research into the most impactful strategies to strengthen social connection and wellbeing in multi-unit housing. The evidence demonstrates that careful design can enable the kinds of frequent trust-building encounters that nurture friendship, mutual support, and belonging.



Shared courtyard. (Our Urban Village)

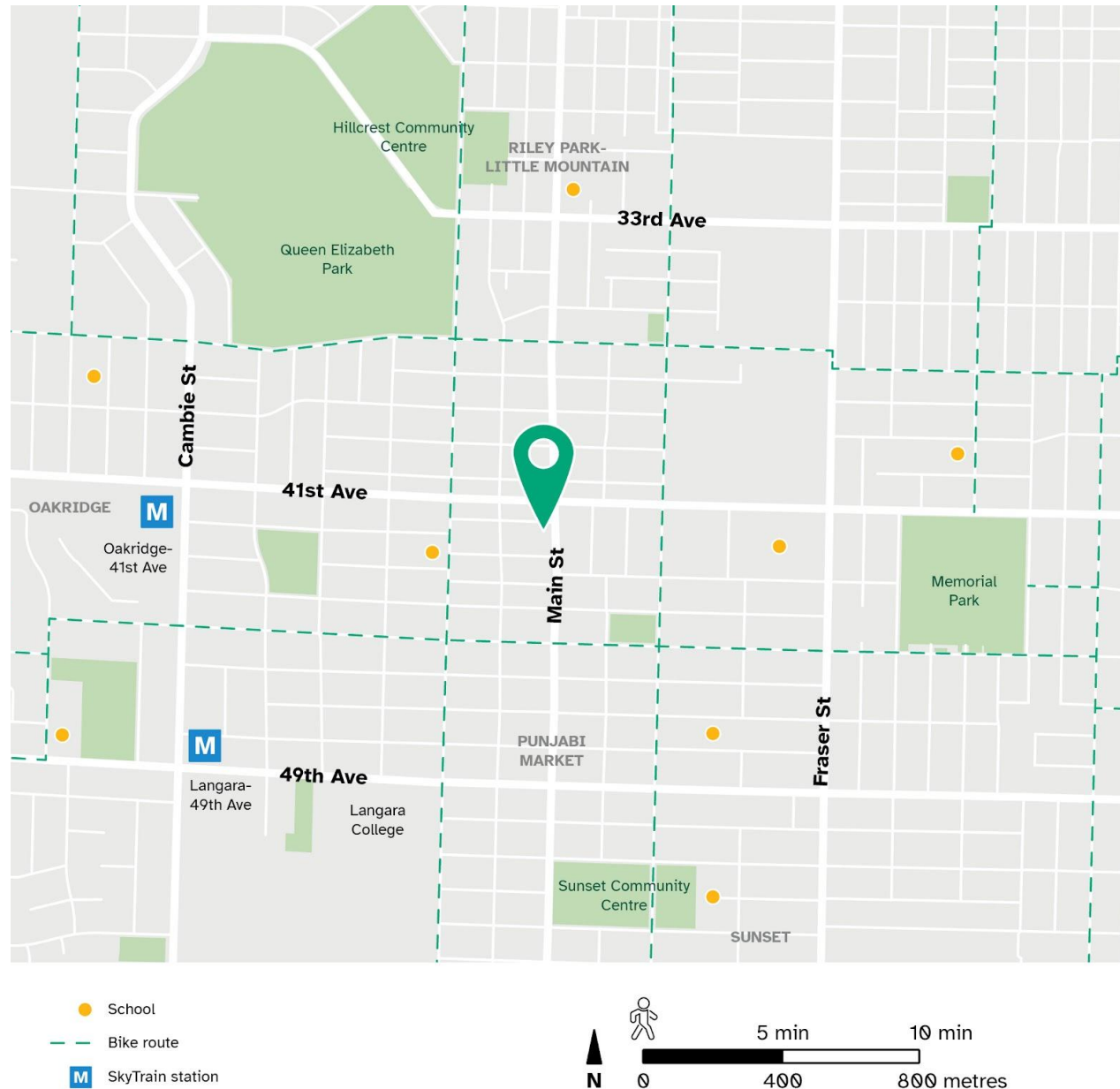
## 2 | About Our Urban Village

### Neighbourhood context

Walkability and proximity to transit, schools, parks, and amenities were important to Our Urban Village members in selecting a location for their community. Their home in South Vancouver is near Queen Elizabeth Park, Punjabi Market, and the shops of Main and Fraser Streets. It is located along a rapid bus route and is around a 15-minute walk away from Oakridge, where the development of a new transit-oriented town centre is underway.

The community has close walking and biking access to local parks, libraries, schools, and community centres. The building adds gentle density to a neighbourhood that largely consists of single-family homes.

Our Urban Village is also located blocks away from another cohousing community, Little Mountain Cohousing.



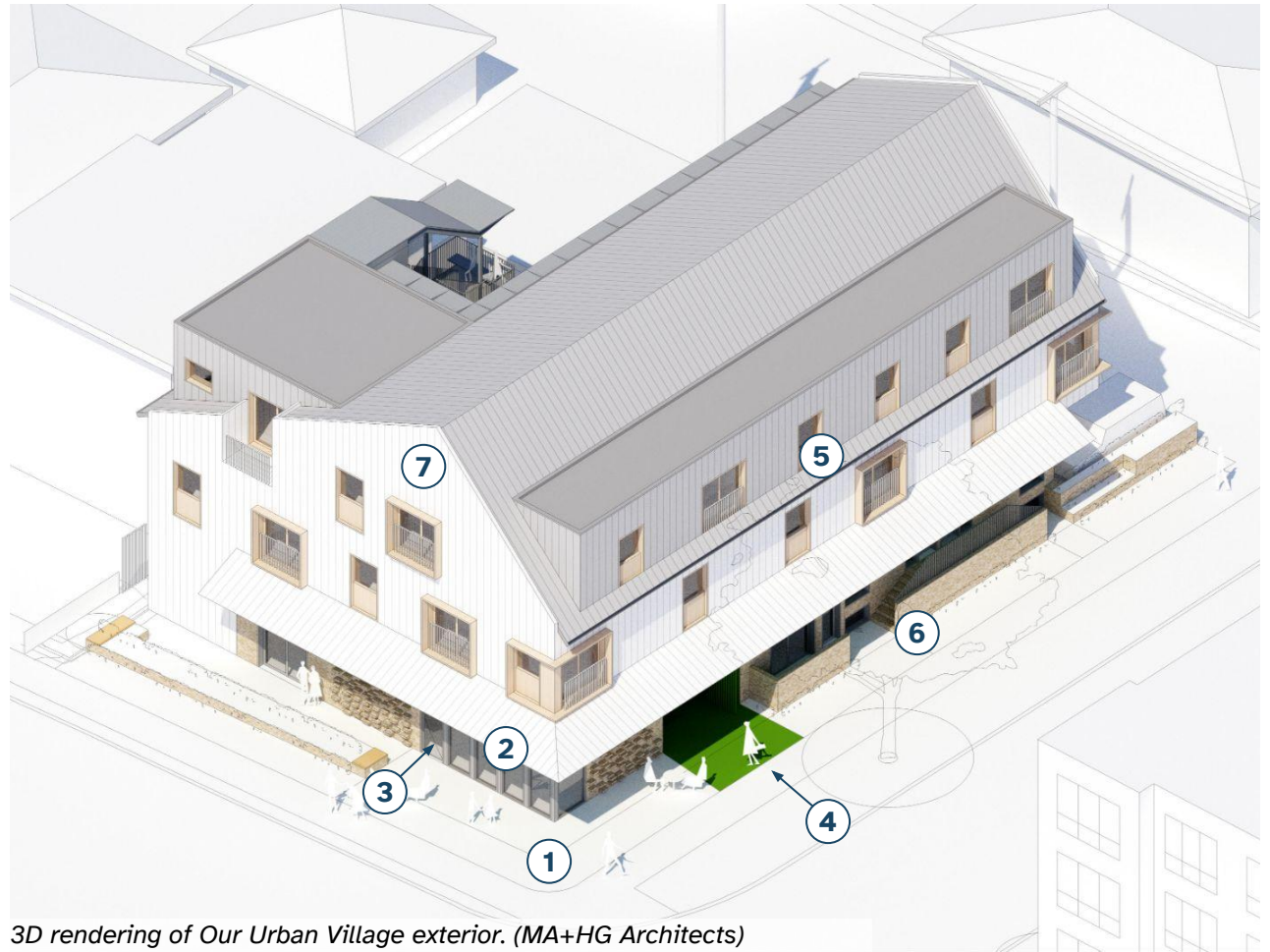


### Design overview: Connections to the public realm

The building's architecture responds to the neighbourhood context, creating a new typology that is neither a traditional single-family home nor a typical low-rise apartment.

#### Design features of interest:

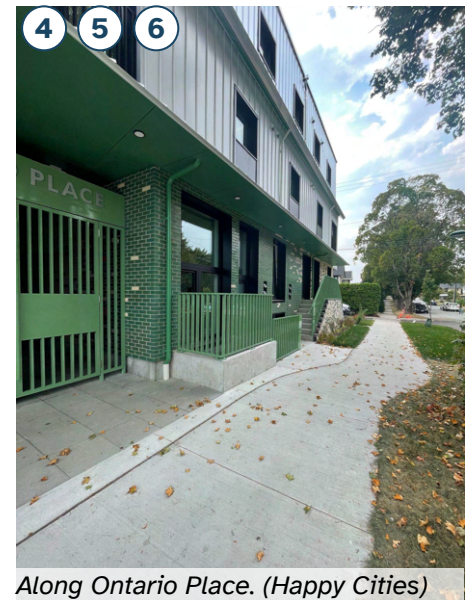
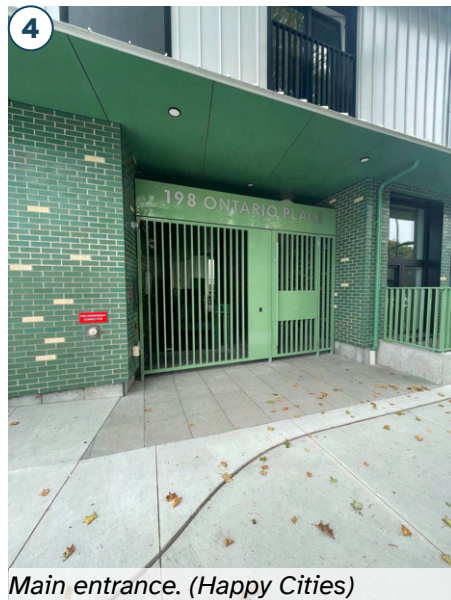
- 1 Public transition zone to Main Street
- 2 Glazing to create a connection between the common house and the public realm
- 3 Common house entry
- 4 Main residential entry off Ontario Place
- 5 Residential-scale facade
- 6 Townhouse entrances with stoops to create a public-private transition zone
- 7 Familiar gable form to maintain residential neighbourhood character



3D rendering of Our Urban Village exterior. (MA+HG Architects)






**Key spaces: Connections to the public realm**



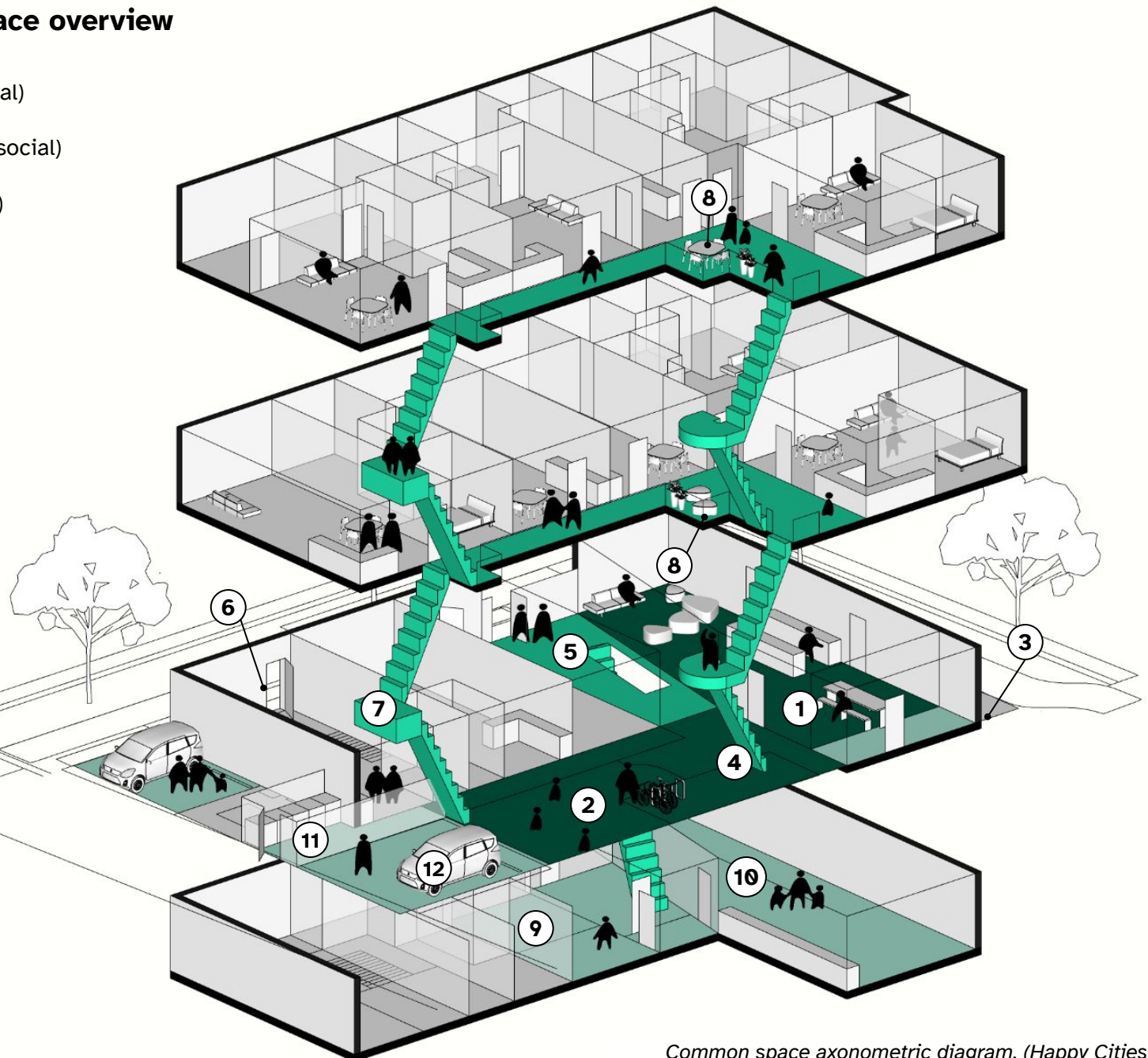


### Common and amenity space overview

-  Amenity spaces (recreational)
-  Common spaces (informal social)
-  Amenity spaces (functional)

### Spaces of interest:

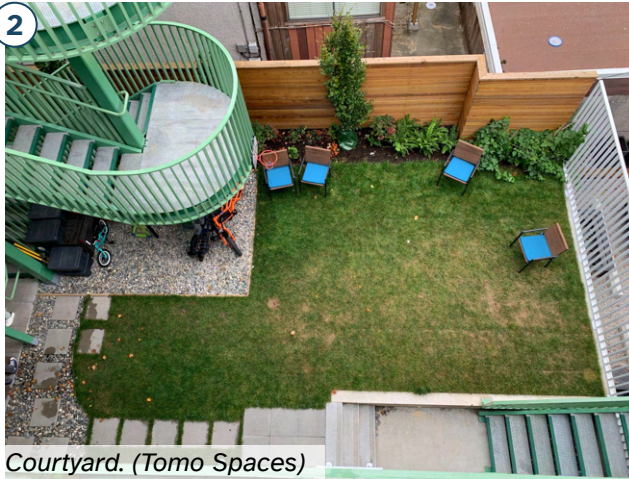
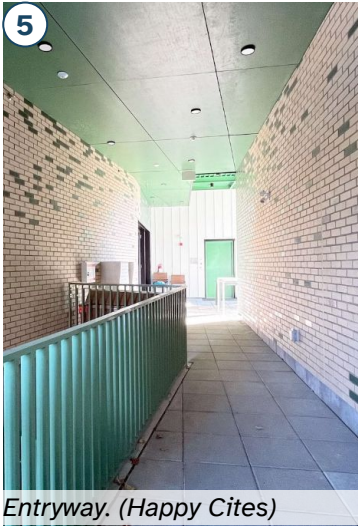
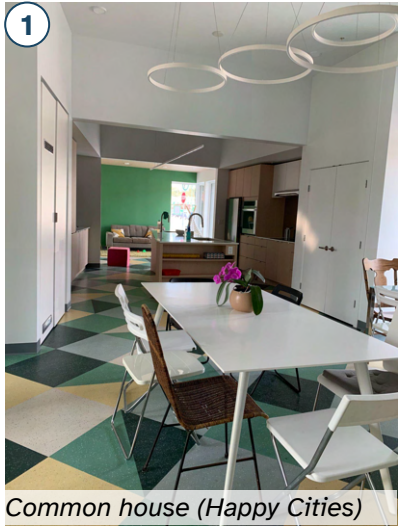
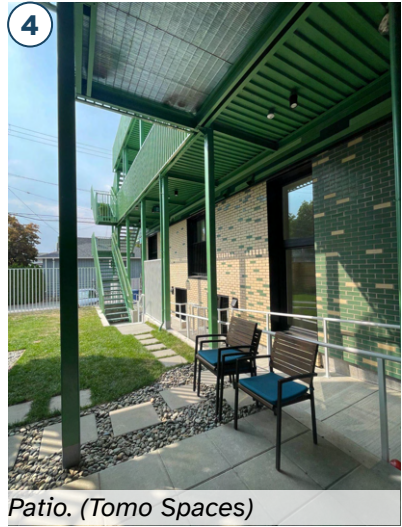
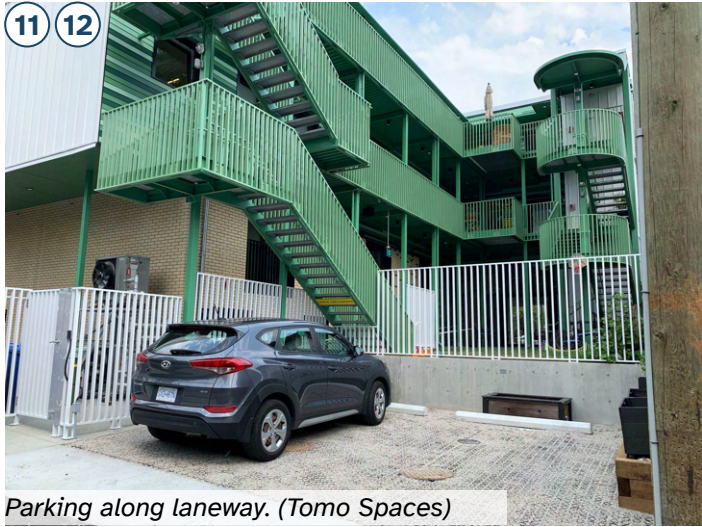
-  Common House
-  Courtyard
-  Street level patio
-  Courtyard patio
-  Exterior lobby
-  Stoops
-  Exterior circulation
-  Outdoor patio nooks
-  Shared laundry
-  Storage and bike parking
-  Garbage and recycling
-  Shared parking



Common space axonometric diagram. (Happy Cities)



**Key spaces: Common areas and amenities**





# 3 | Measuring changes in wellbeing

# 3 | Measuring changes in wellbeing

This study aimed to measure how the built environment—including the building’s layout, shared spaces, and amenities—can nurture wellbeing and sociability among residents. In addition to analyzing the building’s shared spaces, Happy Cities conducted two post-occupancy studies to assess wellbeing trends overtime. These included interviews, surveys, and on-site observations with residents at approximately three and six months after move in. To uncover the social wellbeing changes that residents have experienced since moving into Our Urban Village, Happy Cities compared the post-occupancy data with a baseline study, which was conducted prior to move in.

Of course, many factors other than housing influence people’s wellbeing over time. However, the goal of the study is to identify trends in residents’ wellbeing through the survey, and confirm these trends through qualitative data and observations. By identifying the key design features and spaces that facilitate social wellbeing and connectedness among residents, we are able to generate crucial evidence on the types of actions that can be implemented in future, community-oriented, missing middle developments to support resident wellbeing and social connection.

*“I was prepared to be quite open about the experience. But so far it has exceeded my expectations. We’ve developed a nice balance of privacy and interactions which feels comfortable. The willingness of this particular group to step up to the plate for the tasks that need doing has been great. And we have developed an easy style of organizing ourselves with no need for a lot of rules.”*

*—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in*



## 3 | Measuring changes in wellbeing

### Study participation



We heard from between eight and 10 residents at each survey, from seven different households.



Survey participants identify with diverse groups, including recent immigrants, racialized communities, seniors, and more.



Household sizes range from one to four people, with a median household size of two people among survey respondents.



Residents span nearly all age groups, including children—from preschool age to teenagers—and adults over 70.

### Working with a small sample size

Our Urban Village is a relatively small cohousing community, with only 12 units. During the study, four units were not yet occupied, further reducing the sample size. To evaluate the results, we compared responses with equivalent questions in larger data sets:

- **My Health, My Community, 2014:** Survey of 10,000+ residents in the City of Vancouver, reaching 40,000+ regionally
- **My Home, My Neighbourhood, 2023:** Survey of 1,886 residents across Metro Vancouver by Happy Cities
- **Concert Properties, 2022:** Survey of 119 residents living at multi-unit rental buildings operated by Concert in Vancouver
- **North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023:** Survey of 600 residents living in any multi-unit housing in the City of North Vancouver.

### Project timeline

#### Space assessment (2020-2021)

The space assessment analyzed the architectural drawings to understand and hypothesize how residents will use the space.

#### Baseline study (January 2023)

The baseline study included a survey of and interviews with residents, to gather a snapshot of their wellbeing prior to move in.

#### OUV residents move in (July 2023)

#### First post-occupancy study (October to November 2023)

The first survey took place approximately three months after residents moved in. During this period, people are still settling in and starting to form deeper social relationships. There is also a “honeymoon phase” when you first move into a new place, where things are new and exciting.

#### Second post-occupancy study (January 2024)

Surveys and interviews took place approximately six months after move in. During this period, people become more settled and start to form habits. They may also start to notice issues or problems, and friction between neighbours can start to occur.

#### Best practice guide (April 2024)

The best practice guide compiles learnings from the study, connecting wellbeing results with the design of the building.



### 3 | Measuring changes in wellbeing

#### Understanding the spectrum of neighbourly social interactions

Our Urban Village Cohousing demonstrates that a range of recreational, functional, and informal social spaces can help support both casual and meaningful neighbourly interactions. Over time, frequent social interactions and shared activities allow residents to build deeper, more trusting relationships.

##### 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.



##### Casual interaction examples

Waving or saying hello to a neighbour

Having a conversation

##### Meaningful interaction examples

Gardening together

Playing together

Sharing a meal

## 3 | Measuring changes in wellbeing

### Wellbeing variables

Through the survey and interviews, we measured 12 different elements of resident wellbeing.



#### Tenure

The amount of time someone stays in their home, building, or community.



#### Comfort

Level of ease in one's home, including noise, light, and temperature.



#### Sense of belonging

Feeling welcome and at ease in a space or a community.



#### Exposure

Level of privacy (or lack of privacy) between neighbours.



#### Safety

Feeling comfortable and not perceiving any threats to one's mental or physical wellbeing.



#### Sociability

Meaningful and casual interactions at different scales—with the community, with neighbours, and with close family and friends.



#### Spatial inclusion

Safe, comfortable, and equal access to shared spaces for residents.



#### Engagement

Working in a collaborative and inclusive way to solve problems, make decisions, and help others.



#### Trust

The level to which neighbours feel they can rely on each other, including sharing items, asking for favours, and keeping an eye on children.



#### Perceived health

Self-reported mental and physical condition or state.

# 4 | Key learnings



## 4 | Key learnings

This section explores how residents' wellbeing changed after moving into Our Urban Village. The learnings are organized into five categories: sociability, belonging and trust, private spaces, circulation spaces, and common spaces. Through each, we connect key wellbeing results to various design decisions and the experience of living in an intentional community.

During interviews prior to move in, the majority of residents said they were interested in cohousing because they wanted to live somewhere with a strong sense of community and a built-in support system, particularly if they had children or did not have family members living nearby. Many expressed that, in their homes at the time, they engaged in limited social interaction with neighbours. Generally, interviewees said they expected to alleviate these challenges by moving into cohousing. They were excited to spend time with their future neighbours and develop a strong sense of belonging and community. Across the group, this anticipated increase in social connection was seen as the greatest benefit to living in cohousing.

Our results find that, as research and the residents themselves predicted, interactions with neighbours, social connections, and trust in neighbours increased significantly since move in. In particular, the organized weekly activities, the common house, and the exterior walkways have been effective at connecting neighbours.

### In this section:

- 1. Sociability:** Small-scale cohousing embeds social connection into daily living, through building design, shared activities, and intentional community.
- 2. Belonging and trust:** Living in an intentional community builds a stronger sense of belonging and trust among neighbours, which can grow mutual support over time.
- 3. Private spaces:** Comfortable, well-designed private spaces nurture community by allowing people to control their social exposure and build positive relationships with neighbours.
- 4. Circulation spaces:** Walkways, stairs, and elevators with social design features can increase opportunities for positive and spontaneous social interactions, fostering a sense of community.
- 5. Common spaces:** Common amenities that are functional, diverse, and easily accessible—designed as extensions of smaller individual homes—create a strong community heart.

## Learning 1: Sociability

Our Urban Village demonstrates how intentional community building with a small group of neighbours can result in positive changes to people's social wellbeing. The survey data show a dramatic change in the number of daily interactions that people engage in with neighbours, compared to in their previous homes. Residents also report an increase in the number of neighbours they consider as friends.

The experience of Our Urban Village indicates that smaller group sizes of 10 to 15 units can be effective at nurturing regular social connections. This learning shows how small sites within well-connected, residential neighbourhoods can be leveraged to build cohousing and other social forms of small-scale, multi-unit housing.



Shared dinner in the common house. (Our Urban Village)

## 4 | Key learnings

### Adapting to living in community

Social connections are closely linked to many aspects of wellbeing, including greater trust, belonging, and mental and physical health. Cohousing communities are social by nature: Residents choose to work together to manage the building and participate in communal activities, such as weekly dinners. Residents invest time into building deeper, more trusting relationships with neighbours, recognizing that these connections bring wide-ranging benefits over time—from stronger health outcomes, to a greater sense of community, to mutual support, and even financial savings.

The first year of living together is important for navigating and shaping what that community looks like. Several households noted that it takes time to adjust to a community-oriented building. For example, people need to adjust and learn about their capacity for social connection, including how often they want to connect, versus when they might need to take a break in their private unit. Others may not be used to living with kids, and can need time to adjust to planning activities that all households feel able to fully participate in.

Overall, most residents noted that this adjustment has been easier than expected, and that the benefits of connected, supportive neighbours outweigh any growing pains. Some found that any adjustment to greater interaction with neighbours took only a month or so, while others are still working through how to build mutually supportive relationships. Some residents expressed that social activity (aside from casual encounters along the walkways, for example) occurs more through scheduled activities rather than spontaneous gatherings. However, they expect that over time, more get-togethers will happen spontaneously.

*“[The biggest changes to my day-to-day life have been] daily short contacts with neighbours, spontaneous activities like an impromptu walk in the cemetery before Halloween, shared meals 2-3 times per week, and playing with kids in the community.”*

*—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in*



### Social group size considerations

[Research](#) shows that neighbours are more likely to interact and bond with one another when the number of people who use the same access, paths or staircases is limited. Residents who live in multi-unit housing report feeling less crowded and greater social connection when common spaces are shared by no more than 12 adults and their children. In cohousing communities where residents tend to know each other better, and rely on the group for maintaining the building and the community, recommendations are usually around 25 to 30 units.



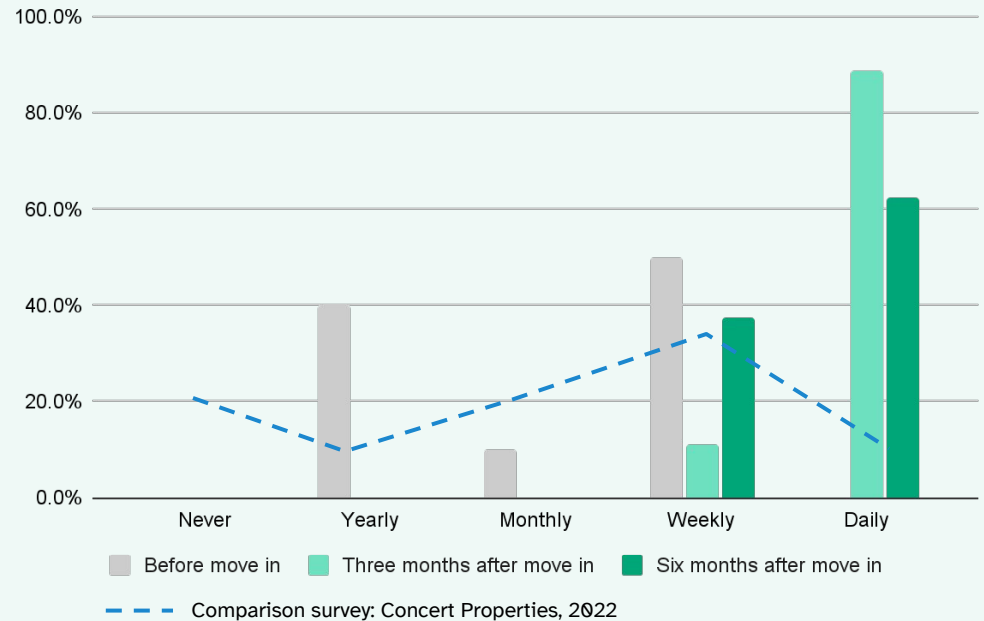
## 4 | Key learnings

### Connections with neighbours

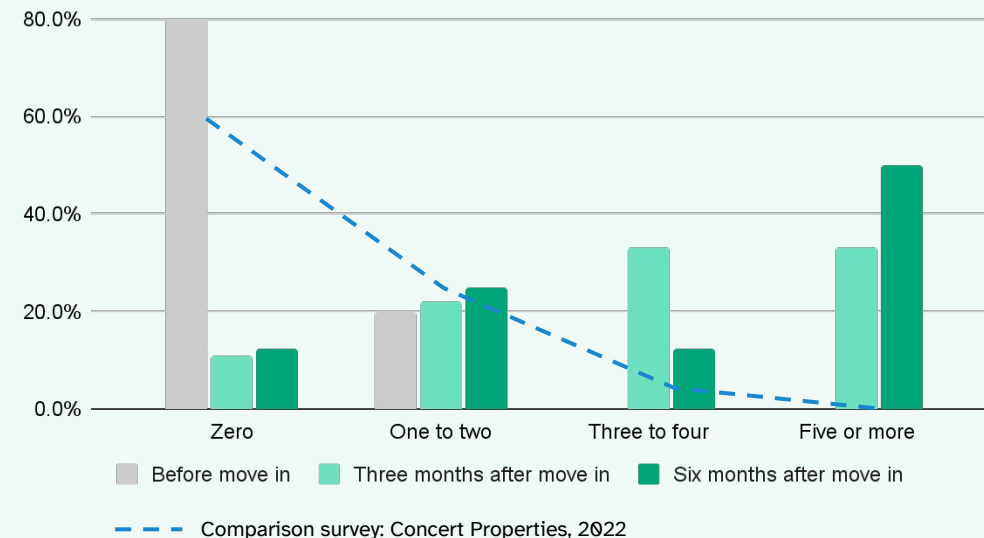
As expected, communal activities with neighbours have increased since move in, with 100% of residents now participating in weekly activities, compared to 60% who never did activities with neighbours before, and 40% who only participated in activities a few times per year. Similarly, conversations with neighbours have increased since move in. When asked about the biggest changes to their daily lives since moving into Our Urban Village, over half mentioned the interactions with neighbours on a daily or weekly basis, both through organized activities and spontaneous encounters. The majority of planned social interactions occur in the committee meetings, and weekly or twice-weekly common dinners.

In both post-occupancy surveys, all respondents reported they have conversations with neighbours weekly or daily, compared to just 50% prior to move in. Over time, regular spontaneous interactions, organized activities, and working together towards a common goal—namely, creating and managing a cohousing community—help people form deeper relationships. As of the second post-occupancy survey (six months after move in), all respondents except one (87.5%) reported that they consider two or more neighbours as friends. Close to two thirds (62.5%) consider four or more neighbours as friends. Prior to move in, the vast majority (80%) said they had zero neighbours as friends, and no one had more than two neighbours as friends.

### Frequency of conversations with neighbours



### Number of neighbours as friends



## 4 | Key learnings

### General connections

In addition to increases in connections with neighbours, we also saw an increase in people's overall level of social connectedness. Six months after move in, 87.5% of respondents (all but one) reported having four or more people in their life they could confide in. This is higher than in both the baseline study (70%) and the first post-occupancy study (67%), which took place just three months after move in. It is also significantly higher than the average in the city of Vancouver, where just 45% of respondents reported having four or more people to confide in in the [2014 My Health, My Community survey](#).

As of six months after move in, all respondents reported “never” or “rarely” feeling lonely. Prior to move in, just 40% reported feeling lonely never or rarely, with 40% (previously) feeling lonely some of the time, and 20% feeling lonely often. In comparison, in the [2023 My Home, My Neighbourhood survey](#) of residents across Metro Vancouver, 46% reported feeling lonely at least sometimes and one in five feel lonely often.

In general, Our Urban Village residents are highly community-oriented. Prior to moving in, all but one respondent reported that they volunteer in their neighbourhood, building, or community. After moving in, 100% reported volunteering in these spaces.

Six months after move in...

**88%** have four or more people in their life they can confide in

...representing a 20% increase compared to before move in.



**100%** feel lonely never or rarely

...representing a 60% increase compared to before move in.

*Results from the study suggest that—since moving in—Our Urban Village residents feel lonely less often and have more people to confide in than the average resident in their city.*

- In Vancouver, [45%](#) have four or more people to confide in.
- In Metro Vancouver, [29%](#) feel lonely never or rarely.



## Learning 2: Belonging and trust

Our clearest finding is that residents' sense of belonging has increased significantly since moving into Our Urban Village, compared to when they were living in their previous homes.

Data from our study—and research on community housing models more broadly—suggest that this increase in belonging is closely linked to the social connections and intentional community that cohousing builds, through both the design of the building and participation in shared activities.

Even prior to moving in, residents met regularly to have meals and to make decisions on design, community building, governance, and recruitment. Typical of cohousing, issues are discussed and decisions are made by consensus where everyone participates. Although learning to live in cohousing can take time, residents feel overall that they have a strong foundation of trust and cooperation to build on. Research shows that working together over time toward a common goal nurtures stronger social trust and a sense of fulfillment.



*Cooking dinner together in the common house. (Our Urban Village)*

## 4 | Key learnings

### Sense of belonging

In the survey, residents reported a significant increase in their sense of belonging after moving into Our Urban Village, compared to in their previous homes. The survey measured people's sense of belonging through two questions that each asked residents to rate their agreement with statements on a five-point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

- “I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here.”
- “I feel that I have something important to offer to events and programs in my building or neighborhood.”

Six months after move in, residents' sense of belonging (averaging the scores for both statements above) increased by a full point on the five-point scale.

More specifically, close to two thirds of respondents (63%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here,” compared to 50% in the baseline study. No respondents indicated that they do not feel welcome at the second post-occupancy survey. All residents (100%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel that I have something important to offer to events and programs in my building or neighborhood,” compared to just 40% before.

In comparison, the Vancouver Foundation's [2012 Connections and Engagement](#) study found that 80% of respondents felt welcome in their neighbourhood; however, 27% of respondents felt that they did not have much to offer to their community.

**“I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here.”**

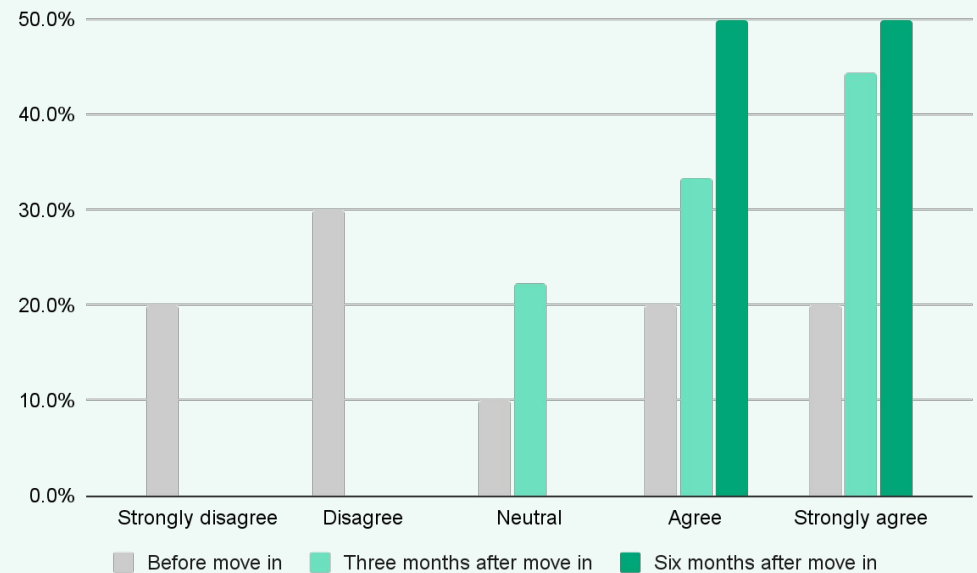
**63%**

**agree or strongly agree**

Baseline study comparison:  
50% agree or strongly agree



**“I feel that I have something important to offer to events and programs in my building or neighborhood.”**



## 4 | Key learnings

### Trust

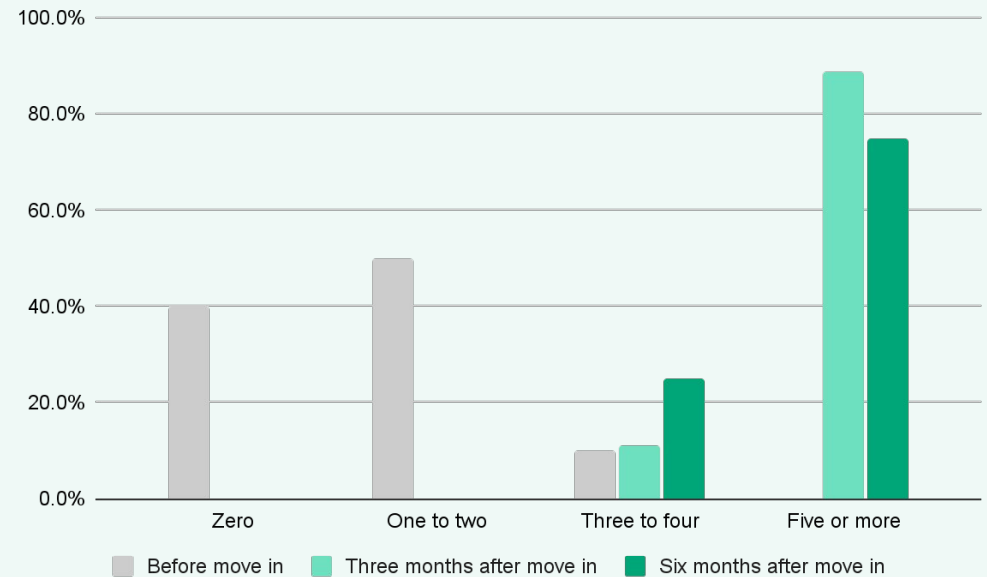
Since moving into Our Urban Village, residents have reported increased comfort in asking neighbours for favours—an important measure of trust in one’s community. All respondents report they have at least four or more neighbours they can ask for favours from. Prior to move in, the greatest number of neighbours that anyone reported being able to ask for favours from was three, and 40% reported that they would not feel comfortable asking neighbours for any favours.

During interviews prior to move in, residents expressed confidence that shared values and good communication would allow residents to work together to resolve challenges. This reflects a high level of social trust within the group. Since moving in, all residents have reported overall positive experiences, with several noting that living in cohousing has exceeded expectations, and that the group is very cooperative.

*“We generally have more people to ask questions of. We don’t need to ‘go it alone.’ Some of this is borrowing a cup of sugar. Some is having other people to ask questions. Also, the extraordinary relief of having other people cook meals for us twice a week. The kids mostly won’t eat what’s cooked, but for adults with broad palates, it takes the edge off having to do it ourselves always.”*

—Our Urban Village resident, six months after move in

Number of neighbours to ask for favours from



**100%**



**have four or more neighbours they can ask for favours from**

Baseline study comparison:

- 0% had four or more neighbours to ask for favours from
- 40% had zero neighbours to ask for favours from



## 4 | Key learnings

As early as three months after move in, all households (100%) reported they would feel comfortable asking neighbours to borrow cooking ingredients, to borrow tools or appliances, and to water their plants or garden. In both post-occupancy surveys, all except one reported feeling comfortable to ask a neighbour to help if they were sick or injured, showing a strong sense of trust in neighbours to provide support during a time when one is vulnerable and in need of help.

Notable findings include:

- The percentage who would be comfortable asking a neighbour to help while they are sick or injured increased from 30% before move in to nearly 90% at three and six months after move in.
- The percentage who would be comfortable asking neighbours to watch their children for a few hours also increased noticeably across the three surveys, rising from 0%, to 33.3%, to 50%.

A greater sense of trust and engagement in one's community can also help people be more willing to address conflicts—and to do so in a non-confrontational way. For example:

- The percentage of residents who would feel comfortable asking a neighbour to turn down their music increased from 40% before move in, to 55.6% three months after move in, to 75% six months after move in.

<b>Comfort with asking favours from neighbours</b>	<b>Before move in</b>	<b>Three months after move in</b>	<b>Six months after move in</b>
<b>For simple advice</b>	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
<b>To accept a delivery</b>	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
<b>To borrow cooking ingredients</b>	20.0%	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>To borrow home tools or appliances</b>	30.0%	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>To do yoga together</b>	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
<b>To help you while you're sick or injured</b>	30.0%	88.9%	87.5%
<b>To take care of your pets for multiple days</b>	20.0%	44.4%	25.0%
<b>To turn down their music</b>	40.0%	55.6%	75.0%
<b>To walk or feed your pet</b>	20.0%	44.4%	25.0%
<b>To watch your children for a few hours</b>	0.0%	33.3%	50.0%
<b>To watch your children overnight</b>	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
<b>To water your plants or garden</b>	40.0%	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

## 4 | Key learnings

Similarly, residents now share household items and responsibilities—such as tools, appliances, ingredients, meals, and chores—more often than the in their previous homes. Tools and appliances are shared most frequently, and all residents (100%) share meals at least weekly. Prior to move in, most people never shared items with their neighbours.

Another key goal of Our Urban Village is to reduce the need to own a private vehicle through car sharing, proximity to transit, and promoting active travel. Six months after move in, 75% of respondents reported they share vehicles at least sometimes, with three sharing vehicles weekly or daily. Four households report sharing bicycles.

Finally, as of six months after move in, three households now share childcare a few times per year, and three share childcare monthly. In contrast, no residents shared childcare with neighbours before move in. Further, no one reported sharing childcare monthly in the first post-occupancy survey (three months after move in), showing how sharing of childcare and bonds of trust have increased over time.

### Sharing at OUV

**100%** share meals at least weekly

**75%** share vehicles at least sometimes



Shared Modoo car at OUV. (Happy Cities)

*“More than I expected, I’m finding it really pleasant to chat quickly with a neighbour in passing on my way in and out of the building. I also expected there to be some level of sharing/pooling resources but have been nicely surprised at the unexpected ways this has shown up (e.g. being able to borrow a broom, being able to offer up something I had no further use for but could go to a good home, being able to borrow spices).”*

*—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in*

## Learning 3: Private spaces

People are happier and more open to positive relationships with neighbours when they have a comfortable, safe, private unit that they know they can retreat to when they need a break. When residents are satisfied with their private unit and living spaces, they are [more likely](#) to stay in a home or community for longer. In turn, long-term tenure allows people to build deeper social relationships with neighbours and with their community, contributing positively to their social support network and sense of belonging.

Satisfaction with private unit design is especially important in urban cohousing and on small lots, where units are often smaller to make room for more shared spaces and amenities. Our Urban Village shows that high-quality private units can offer a high degree of comfort and satisfaction for diverse residents and households.



*OUV interior unit. (Tomo Spaces)*



*OUV interior unit. (Tomo Spaces)*



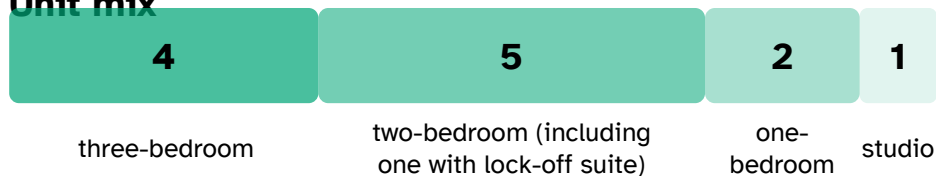
## 4 | Key learnings

### Diverse, accessible, and comfortable units

The building's design prioritizes a wide range of units, from family-sized townhomes to a studio and one-bedroom apartments. Unit types and sizes at Our Urban Village were considered together with common amenity spaces, with the common spaces designed to supplement or extend the private living spaces. Some residents are still adjusting, but overall, they reported feeling satisfied with the comfort and functionality of their private living spaces.

All units are designed according to passive house standards and aim to maximize comfort, functionality, and adaptability. For example, apartment units are all located along exterior walkways overlooking the courtyard, allowing for cross-ventilation and natural light from two sides. Resident input on the building's design focused primarily on common spaces; however, Our Urban Village residents also made decisions around flexibility and needs for private units. For example, most units share laundry facilities in the common house to promote social encounters. However, in consultation with residents, the three-bedroom units were built with their own in-suite laundry, as these units will likely be occupied by families who often need to do more laundry and may do it late at night. All the other units include plumbing for a washer, to allow for changing life circumstances, but do not include the washer or dryer outright.

### Unit mix



### Small site considerations

Because of the small lot, careful considerations needed to be made between public and private spaces. Spaces need to be well designed for efficiency and function, especially attention to opportunities to support interaction and community activities; and balanced with private spaces that included family units (defined as two bedrooms and more). In addition, a wide variety of unit types creates more challenges for floor plan efficiency when designing a building.



One of the units at OUV features a lock-off suite, providing flexibility for a tenant or intergenerational family. (Tomo Spaces).

## 4 | Key learnings

### Comfort

Comfortable private units ensure that residents have a place where they can retreat to when they need to recharge. Overall, residents did not report any significant changes in their comfort after moving in.

All survey respondents indicated that they are comfortable with the amount of natural light in their unit, and no one is dissatisfied with the temperature control in their unit. There was no significant change in noise exposure after move in, with all residents reporting minimal to no interruption by noise. In interviews, residents elaborated that the passive house design (triple glazed windows) helps minimize noise disruptions from Main Street.

### Exposure

When people have control over their exposure to others, they are more likely to build positive social connections. All respondents but one reported that they feel they have enough privacy in their unit, with close to nine in 10 (87.5%) strongly disagreeing with the statement, “I lack privacy in my unit.” The majority of respondents reported that they have greater privacy in their unit at Our Urban Village compared to their previous home.

### Spatial inclusion

There was no significant change in residents’ satisfaction with private units after moving into Our Urban Village. In general, most residents were satisfied with their private living spaces prior to moving in, and maintained that satisfaction after move in. As of six months after move in, everyone is satisfied (87.5%) or neutral (12.5%) with their private living spaces.



OUV interior unit. (Tomo Spaces)

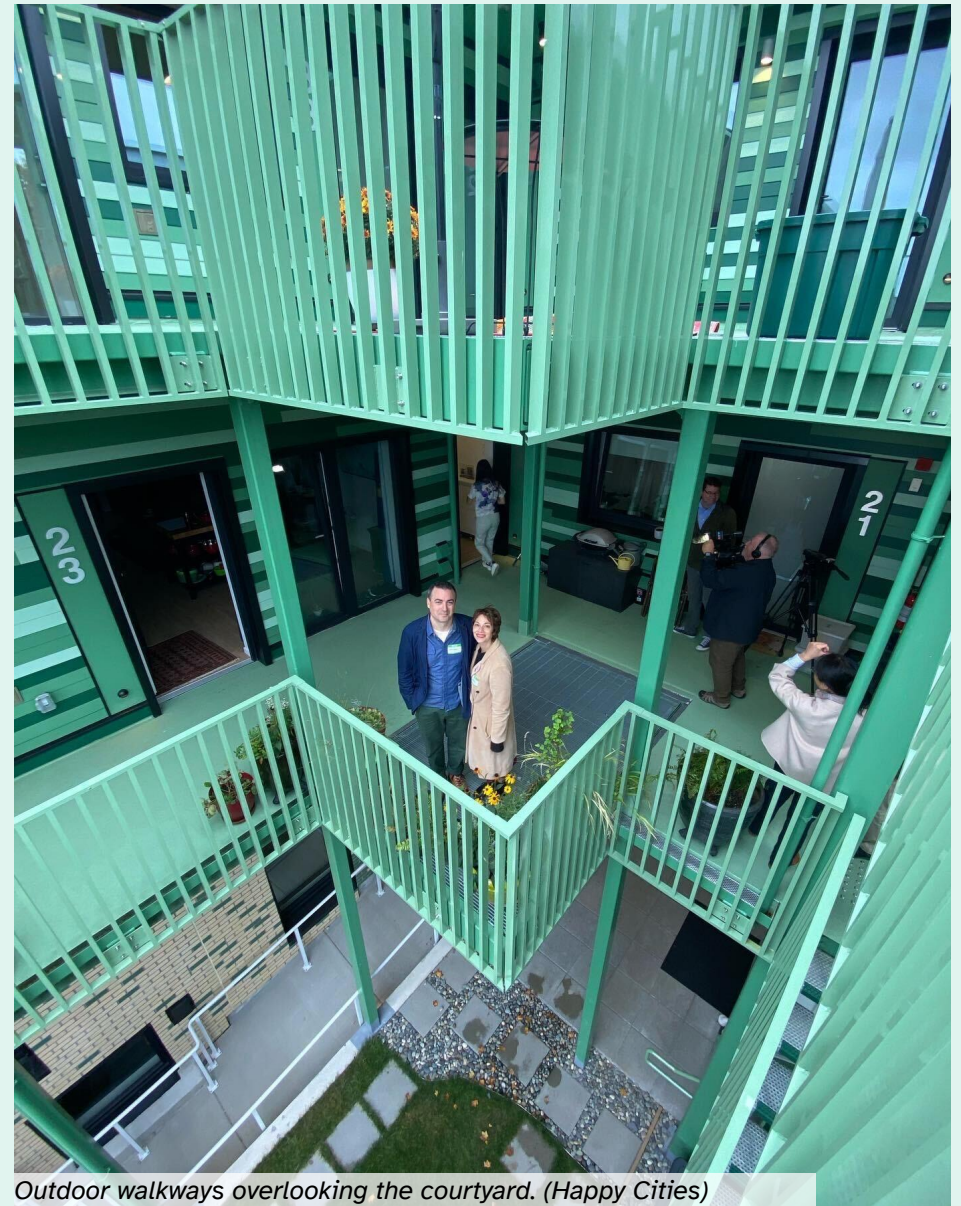
*“I’m most surprised by how much I like my cozy little unit. I thought I might have found it a bit inadequate but I don’t at all. I also haven’t minded having to use the shared laundry and I thought that was going to be a drag. I had expected to have more social interaction here than my last place and that expectation has been met very much.”*

—Our Urban Village resident, three months after move in



## Learning 4: Circulation spaces

Most buildings do not consider hallways, elevators, and stairs to be social spaces. Rather, they are designed purely as circulation routes that people use to travel from their unit, to the entrance, parkade, or other amenities. Our Urban Village takes a different approach: All circulation spaces in the building are designed intentionally to foster social connection, recognizing that these are the spaces that almost everyone uses on a daily basis. Our study finds that circulation spaces in the development are effective at connecting neighbours, with residents particularly valuing daily social interactions along the shared outdoor walkways. Over time, these frequent, informal, and unscheduled encounters nurture trust, social connection, and belonging.



Outdoor walkways overlooking the courtyard. (Happy Cities)



## 4 | Key learnings

### Social circulation

At Our Urban Village, wide, exterior walkways (5'6" wide) face onto the shared courtyard below, allowing neighbours to see each other from different levels and wave hello. Social nooks offer places to pause and sit with a neighbour along the corridors. Covered, outdoor stairs and an elevator connect the walkways to the courtyard below. The design team considered how these circulation spaces could best connect with shared amenities, like garbage and recycling, along pathways that are part of people's daily routines.

Reflecting the social design, our study finds that hallways and walkways are the spaces that the most residents report interacting with neighbours daily in (all but two respondents selected daily), followed by elevators and stairwells. In open-ended responses, many residents noted that the wide walkways are some of the most effective spaces at facilitating social interaction with neighbours. In the interviews, residents living on the second floor reported the greatest sense of connection through the walkways, likely because that level is fully occupied, compared to two out of four units on the third storey.

Other research reinforces the social potential of corridors and other circulation spaces. Happy Cities' [2023 study of multi-unit housing in the City of North Vancouver](#) finds that 65% of those surveyed have frequent (daily or weekly) social interactions in their building's hallways or walkways. About half reported frequent social interactions in the lobby, elevators, or outside the building. Notably, the percentage of neighbours who interact daily or weekly along walkways at Our Urban Village is higher (87.5%), suggesting that intentional design can increase the potential for social connection when moving through a building.



Exterior walkway with a "social nook" in the corner. (Happy Cities)

### Frequent encounters at Our Urban Village

**88%**

**interact with neighbours daily or weekly on the shared walkways**

Baseline study comparison:

- 30% weekly
- 0% daily

**75%**

**interact with neighbours daily or weekly on the stairs or elevator**

Baseline study comparison:

- 22% weekly
- 22% daily



## 4 | Key learnings

### Social nooks

A small minority shared that they are still adjusting to spending more time in the social nooks. One person shared that they felt increased social exposure compared to in a semi-private outdoor space (such as a private patio or yard), and are still adapting to the feeling of needing to be available to connect with neighbours when in the space. Others noted that they are still adapting to sharing the social nooks between multiple units. Over time, as neighbours adjust to living together in community and learn about their capacity for social connection, we expect these challenges to decrease.



Wide corridors and nooks allow extra space to grow plants. (Happy Cities)



Social nook with comfy seating along an outdoor walkway. (Happy Cities)



## Learning 5: Common amenities

Cohousing takes a unique approach to common space design compared to most multi-unit buildings. In cohousing, the common house is envisioned as the community heart, occupying a central location that everyone can easily access. This approach to designing common spaces and amenities helps nurture a sense of community and belonging, but can pose design challenges in an urban context, depending on the site's size, zoning, municipal policies, and other constraints.

Our study finds that well-designed common areas can offset the challenges of living in a smaller unit, particularly in an urban context where land is expensive and space is limited. The majority of residents expressed satisfaction with shared outdoor and indoor spaces at Our Urban Village, which were designed through a collaborative, intentional approach. The design team conducted workshops engaging residents on key decisions, particularly for shared spaces. Beyond the courtyard and common house, Our Urban Village considered the social potential of all shared spaces in the building—including walkways, stairs, laundry, parking, and storage.



*Building exterior. (Matheson Photography)*



*OUV common house. (Darren Sutherland)*



## 4 | Key learnings

### Spatial inclusion

Overall, residents reported greater satisfaction with shared indoor and outdoor spaces after moving into Our Urban Village, reflecting the intentional design effort to create functional, social amenities for the community. Six months after move in, all respondents agreed (25%) or strongly agreed (75%) that they were satisfied with shared indoor spaces in their home. Before move in, only 20% (two households) agreed, while 60% disagreed.

Similarly, the majority (75%) are satisfied with shared outdoor spaces after move in. In contrast, in their previous homes, only two households (20%) reported that they were satisfied with outdoor shared spaces. However, six months after move in, one resident reported feeling neutral about shared outdoor spaces, and one was strongly dissatisfied. These responses may reflect that the surveys were conducted in winter, and that residents are still in the process of adding furniture to the courtyard and learning how to navigate sharing the small outdoor area among diverse households.

### Exposure

No one reported feeling overcrowded in any of the common spaces at the building.

### Trust

All respondents with kids (five in the first survey, four in the second) said they would feel comfortable letting their kids play unsupervised in the building's courtyard or outdoor spaces at Our Urban Village, compared to just one household before move in.

### Comfort

All respondents are satisfied with the amount of natural light in common spaces in the building.

### Sociability

Compared to circulation spaces, common indoor and outdoor amenities in the building tend to facilitate encounters between neighbours on a weekly basis rather than daily. Likely due to the small group size at Our Urban Village, there are less frequent interactions at the shared storage, shared laundry, mailboxes, garbage and recycling, and exterior parking. During interviews and in open-ended responses, some residents expressed that the common house has been mainly used for organized activities, and does not feel as suited to spontaneous gathering or lounging in the space. This may be in part because residents are still in the process of personalizing and taking ownership over the space. It may also reflect that it takes time for residents to build comfort in their community, including adapting to the increased exposure to social interaction in shared areas.

**75%**

**interact with neighbours weekly in the lobby and common house**

**75%**

**interact with neighbours monthly in the bike room**

**88%**

**interact with neighbours weekly or monthly in common outdoor spaces (e.g. the courtyard, social nooks)**

## 4 | Key learnings

### The common house

In cohousing, the common house is the central community heart—a place where residents can gather for shared meals, activities, meetings, or just to socialize. The design team held workshops with residents to co-create a social and functional design for the common house. The community settled on a vision with three connected but distinct zones: a lounge, kitchen, and dining area.

Other features of the common house include an accessible washroom, shared laundry (one set in the kitchen, and two sets below the common house), and a direct connection with the courtyard to provide a continuous indoor-outdoor common area. The common house also includes windows onto Main Street, to provide a visual connection with the street and the neighbourhood.

The design team recognized that high-quality design of common spaces is important to support comfort and functionality. The space includes good lighting, bright colours, and durable floors, and residents have installed acoustic panels and curtains to improve acoustics in the space with the large group.

In interviews, residents shared that they have mainly used the common house for shared meals. A few have hosted personal gatherings and parties there. The lounge area has also been used for kids to play, and occasionally for coworking. While the majority of residents do not yet use the common house on a daily basis, they hope to get more use from it eventually—such as for exercising or music practice.



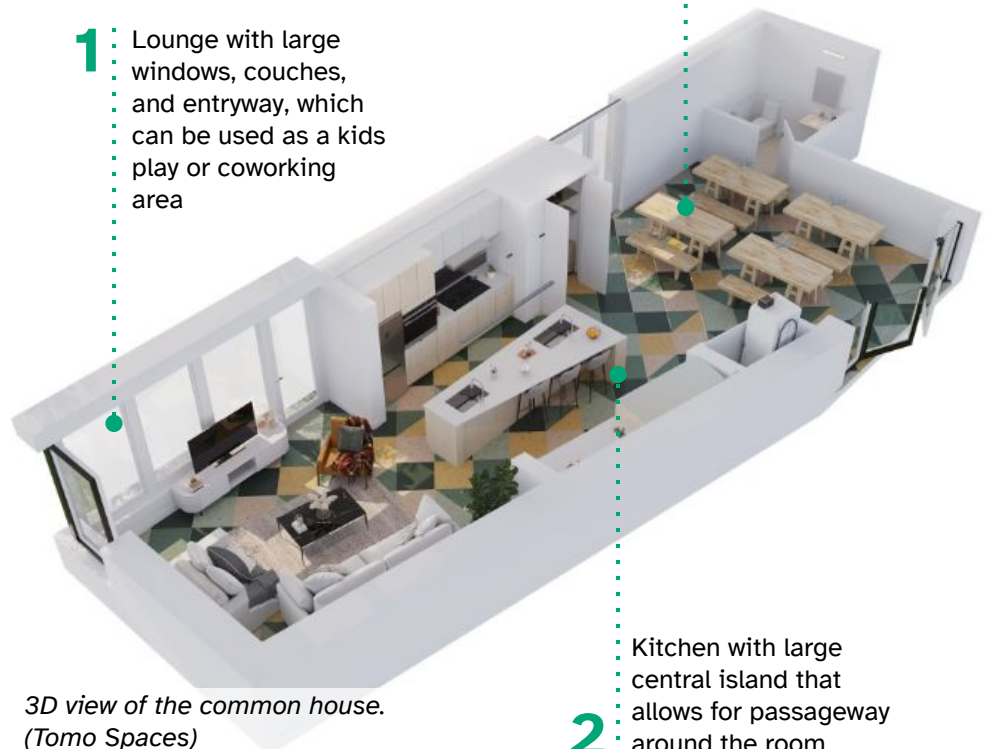
Common house. (Darren Sutherland)



Common house. (Darren Sutherland)

- 3 Dining area with tables and chairs, connected to an accessible washroom

- 1 Lounge with large windows, couches, and entryway, which can be used as a kids play or coworking area



3D view of the common house. (Tomo Spaces)

- 2 Kitchen with large central island that allows for passageway around the room



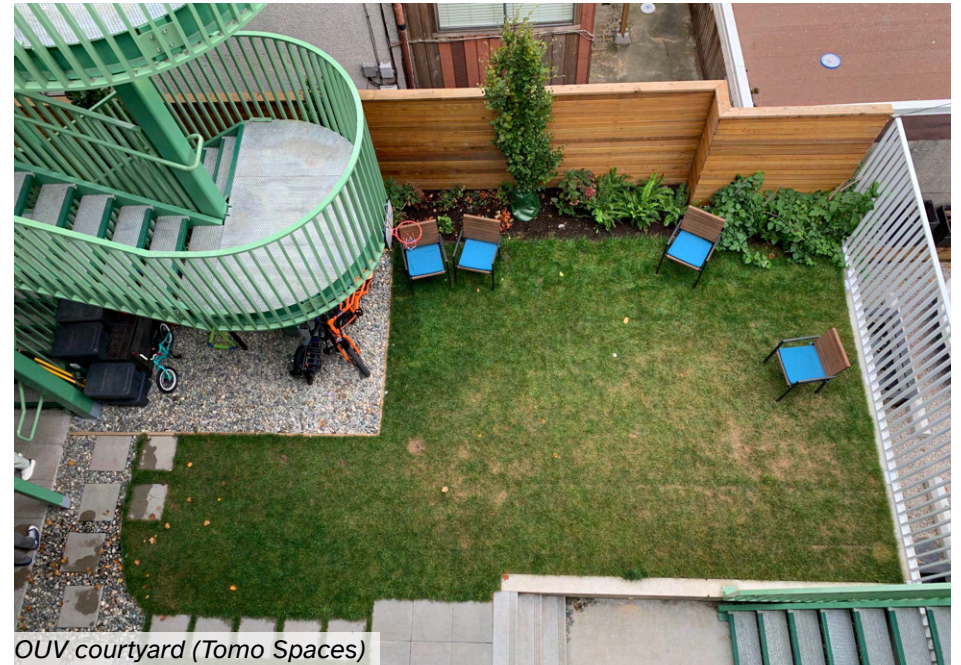
## 4 | Key learnings

### The courtyard

Smaller sites can make it challenging to incorporate a courtyard. Our Urban Village residents and the design team prioritized the courtyard form based on the best practices from other cohousing communities and the desire to create outdoor circulation and units with through-ventilation.

The courtyard at Our Urban Village is oriented to maximize sun exposure, and is located at the heart of the building. It is designed as part of several contiguous spaces: The grass courtyard flows into a covered patio space, which connects to the dining area of the common house through french doors, and into another patio space fronting the sidewalk.

Courtyards on small sites pose constraints and tradeoffs. For example, to make the courtyard feel less cavernous, the design team decided that the building should be no taller than three storeys. Additionally, given the small size, the townhouse units at ground level do not include a direct entrance onto the courtyard, but are connected by a Juliette balcony instead. In surveys and interviews, residents noted some challenges and adaptation to use the courtyard more fully. One person noted that they feel exposed in the courtyard, given that units and walkways face onto it, and brings pressure to engage with neighbours at any moment. Others noted that the courtyard could use more furniture or seating, and that rainy weather limits its use. Another challenge is that when kids play in the courtyard, it can feel difficult to use the space for other uses, given its small size. Residents recently added a barbecue to the courtyard, and expect it will generate more use in the summer.



OUV courtyard (Tomo Spaces)



OUV courtyard (Tomo Spaces)



# 5 | Municipal policy

# 5 | Municipal policy

Municipal policies play a key role in enabling housing that prioritizes sociability through the design of shared spaces. These policies may include zoning bylaws, design guidelines, and rezoning requirements.

However, few jurisdictions provide detailed guidance on or support for [design that prioritizes wellbeing and social connection](#). There is growing interest among municipalities to understand how design decisions—and development requirements—influence the social capacity of multi-unit buildings. British Columbia has the most cohousing communities of any province in Canada, but these buildings remain a very small percentage of the overall housing stock.

Our Urban Village provides a relevant case study as a cohousing project that adds gentle density in a sustainable, social manner. As this study illustrates, when housing is designed intentionally to promote social connection, trust, and belonging, residents benefit from stronger, more supportive relationships with neighbours. However, the project faced some barriers to development, requiring a lengthy rezoning process and various design tradeoffs. This section discusses key areas for future policy action, based on the experience of Our Urban Village and other community-oriented housing developments. The proposed actions aim to reduce policy barriers to enable more socially connected, resilient housing.

## Key policy questions to consider:

- **Re-defining social space:** Given that most social interactions happen outside traditional amenities, how can city policy and building designers facilitate community building in lobbies, corridors, and other circulation spaces?
- **Prioritizing social design in all types of housing:** Since cohousing communities represent the minority of new housing developments, how can housing developers and operators apply the social design lessons from cohousing into rental and strata multi-unit communities?
- **Innovating policy and code solutions:** What are the building code or policy barriers that hinder social design features?
- **Incentivizing cohousing:** If cohousing is a proven way to build socially connected, supportive communities but faces many barriers to construction, how can city policy make it easier to develop this housing form?

### Re-defining social space

Municipalities all have varying definitions of amenity space, but generally, amenities are thought of as enclosed spaces with a specific function—for instance, a gym, a lounge, or a kitchen. These indoor amenity spaces are excluded from floor space ratio (FSR) calculations in most cities (but not all) in the Lower Mainland. However, they are often accompanied by restrictive definitions or caps on size. For example, lobbies or corridors are often not thought of as amenities or ‘social’ spaces. In addition, FSR exclusions do not necessarily incentivize outdoor common areas, such as courtyards, because outdoor space does not factor into FSR calculations.

Our research—both on Our Urban Village and multi-unit housing more broadly—indicates that [circulation spaces](#) are the spaces where residents interact most frequently. The design of these spaces also influences the likelihood of residents pausing and engaging in friendly interactions: For example, widened corridors with natural light and seating nooks feel more comfortable for social interaction than narrow, dark hallways. This evidence suggests that these socially designed corridors offer a different but valuable type of ‘amenity’ that can benefit residents and facilitate a stronger sense of community. However, most developers will not add social features to hallways or corridors under current municipal policies, because adding greater width and social nooks takes away from allowed density on the site, increasing costs for individual units and the project as a whole.

Municipalities can encourage more socially connected housing by offering guidance on and incentives for a broader range of social spaces beyond typical amenity rooms, recognizing that socially connected residents are happier, healthier, and more resilient.

### Policy example: Prioritizing social design in all housing types

In the City of Vancouver, the residential RM zones define amenity space as “including child day care facilities, recreation facilities and meeting rooms.” These functions are omitted from floor space ratio (FSR) calculations to a maximum of 10% of the total permitted floor area. In other zones, the total excluded floor area cannot exceed 20% or 1,000 square metres. This definition does not allow for most circulation spaces to be considered as amenities, making them ineligible for FSR exclusions in a project like Our Urban Village.

The City of North Vancouver offers a solution through its [Active Design Guidelines](#), which aim to encourage social connection and physical activity by offering developers incentives for well-designed circulation and common spaces. The Guidelines have enabled successful built examples of multi-unit housing—both market rental and cohousing—that received FSR exclusions for spaces such as amenity rooms, outdoor rooftops or gardens, active staircases, and exterior walkways. These FSR exclusions allow for greater buildable density on small infill sites. FSR calculations also influence Development Cost Levies (DCL) calculations. Other incentives can include additional height, [parking relaxations](#), or setback relaxations.



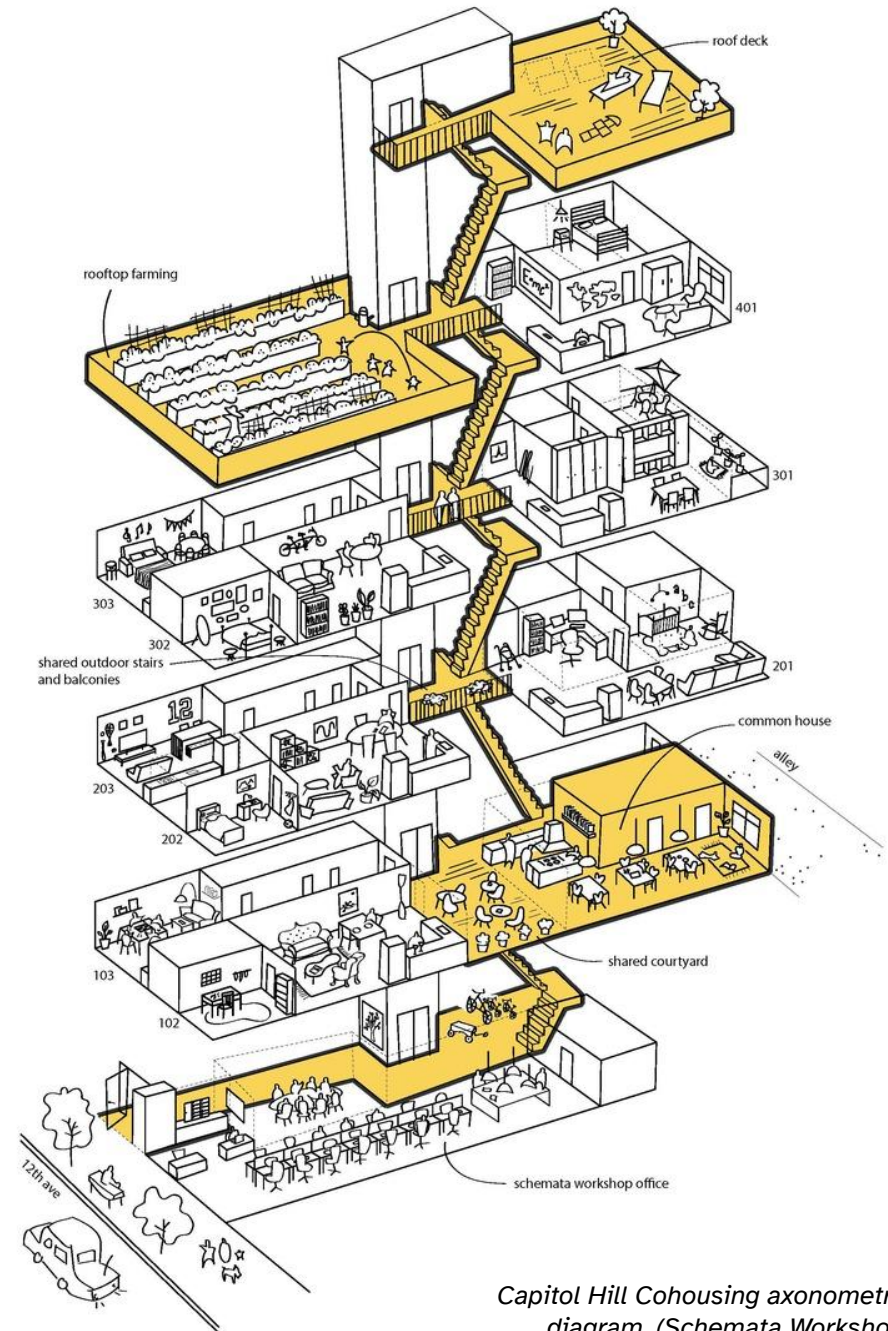
### Building code innovations

The current British Columbia building code requires two stairways for buildings over three storeys. However, [British Columbia](#) is currently exploring single-stair access for buildings up to eight storeys. The requirement has been in place for many years, but does not take into account advances in building construction and life safety systems that have been made since. The requirement for two stairs creates more circulation and staircase area, and leads to long, double-loaded corridors. For small sites in particular, the amount of space available for units and common spaces makes it challenging to build two stairways. In the case of Our Urban Village, a single-stair access design could have enabled a larger courtyard, which may have allowed for different design decisions and accommodated a wider variety of uses in the courtyard.

#### Policy example: Single stair buildings

The Seattle Building Code allows point access (single stairs) for buildings up to six storeys. It requires that these buildings have no more than four units per storey, and that residential uses occupy a maximum of five storeys.

Capitol Hill Cohousing in Seattle provides an excellent example of sociable design enabled by a single-stair design. The tight urban site would have been difficult to build on, but the single stair creates a comfortable flow through the building and allows for the inclusion of a compact courtyard and rooftop deck. This underscores the importance of balancing regulatory requirements with the practical realities of site constraints and community needs.



Capitol Hill Cohousing axonometric diagram. (Schemata Workshop)

### Incentivizing cohousing

Cohousing involves ordinary residents who want to build housing that better meets their needs. However, complex development processes, expensive land and construction costs, and long approval timelines can pose barriers to bringing community housing projects to life. Cohousing—and other community-led housing options—remain rare. Those that are able to build their cohousing dream require financial means, time, and resources to contribute to design decisions and community meetings and to co-develop and purchase their home.

Among other research, this study highlights the numerous benefits of community-oriented living for resident wellbeing and connection. Given this evidence, it is crucial for municipalities to consider how to expand access to community housing choices to a broader range of residents.

Municipal policy is critical to enable innovative projects. Many multi-unit projects experience lengthy rezoning processes. Combined with escalating construction costs, these [long approval timelines can impact affordability](#). These barriers are most acute for smaller-scale and non-profit developers—including cohousing groups—that have less financial means or margin for error than large corporate developers.

Cities can improve access to more attainable community-oriented housing options by streamlining the development process and offering incentives for social design features—across all housing typologies.

### Policy ideas

In incentivizing community-oriented housing models, it is important to consider how policy can incentivize social design for all housing types and income levels—to ensure that these projects remain affordable and inclusive. To increase access to a wider range of residents, municipalities can consider actions such as:

- Providing [city-owned land for cohousing development](#).
- Creating partnerships with nonprofits to develop cohousing-like [housing communities](#) that support diverse tenants and income levels.
- Offering incentives and a streamlined approvals process for developments that meet certain criteria for social design (for example, projects may have to meet certain square footage of amenity space and have a cohousing or affordability covenant on the title). These actions would have to be carefully considered at the policy level to ensure that they are supporting the projects they are intended for.



# 6 | Conclusion





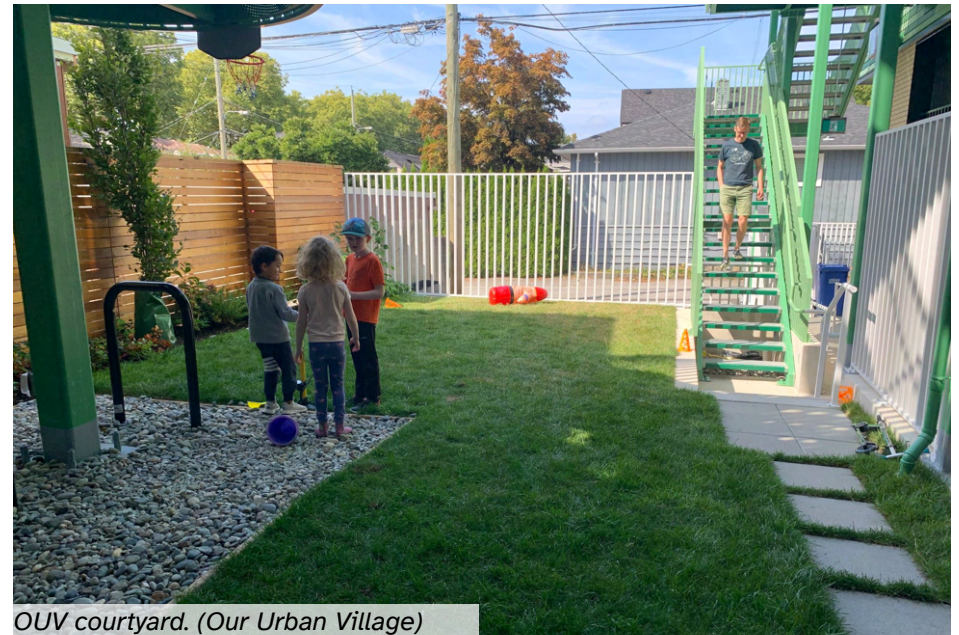
## 6 | Conclusion

This study has demonstrated significant, positive changes in residents' wellbeing since moving into Our Urban Village. Overall, residents expressed positive experiences of living in the community. As of six months after move in, residents reported many wellbeing benefits, including:

- An increase in both the number and frequency of social interactions, with all residents reporting that they have weekly or daily conversations with neighbours, compared to just 50% before
- An increase in the number of neighbours they consider as friends, with all but one respondent having at least two or more neighbours as friend
- A decrease in loneliness, with all but one reporting that they feel lonely rarely or never
- An increase in sense of belonging, with all residents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, "I feel that I have something important to offer to events and programs in my building or neighborhood," compared to just 40% before

Over time, it is expected that these benefits will continue to grow, including in areas like cost savings through shared vehicles or childcare. In turn, more frequent and deeper social connections are associated with stronger health outcomes in the long term.

Of course, many factors influence people's wellbeing over time. Changes in people's overall health, happiness, and sense of connection may be influenced by other factors than moving into cohousing. However, this study finds many positive wellbeing trends and changes that coincided with residents' move in to cohousing, aligning with research on the benefits of community-oriented housing.



## 6 | Conclusion

### Expanding impact

Cohousing is not for everyone. Like any housing choice, living in an intentional community comes with benefits and challenges. For example, it takes more time and effort to participate in shared management of the community, social activities, and communal meals. But in exchange, residents benefit from greater social support, long-term cost savings, and a strong sense of community.

This study finds that the cohousing lite model is a promising solution for people who want to live in a supportive community—particularly for those who may not have the time and resources to develop a new home as a traditional cohousing group. Further, as a multi-unit project designed according to passive house standards, Our Urban Village offers units that are more attainable and sustainable than single-family homes. Importantly, cohousing provides long-term security of tenure, which is vital for building social capital and maintaining health.

In the context of a growing loneliness crisis, there is significant interest in cohousing communities. Cohousing offers a model of housing that is socially connected and associated with a strong sense of belonging, mutual support, and overall wellbeing. Our Urban Village drew significant attention in the media and hundreds of people have toured the building. However, cohousing is still a fairly uncommon form of housing in Canada. Moving forward, it is crucial to innovate municipal policies that can enable more socially connected housing forms, and consider how to expand the benefits of community-oriented housing to those who cannot afford home ownership.



### Future research opportunities

The findings from this study align with research on other cohousing communities, which finds positive associations with [“social support, sense of community and physical, emotional and economic security.”](#) However, existing studies are mainly cross-sectional or qualitative, making it difficult to draw broad conclusions. There are very few examples of long-term studies into the wellbeing benefits of cohousing communities. In the case of this research, some wellbeing trends are expected to emerge more strongly over time, and are not fully captured by this report. To continue building knowledge and evidence around community housing models, recommendations include:

- Consider follow up post-occupancy survey in 2025, to measure long-term impacts on wellbeing
- Explore the socioeconomic impact of cohousing on health, considering future studies to look deeper at affordability, stability, and long-term cost savings
- Expand data collection to other urban cohousing communities to increase the data pool and understand the pros and cons of different design decisions

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# Appendix A | Wellbeing results summary






# Wellbeing results summary

See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Comfort</b> 	<b>100%</b> are satisfied with natural light in shared spaces	20%	<b>500%</b> increase	
	<b>100%</b> are satisfied with natural light in their private unit	100%	No change	
	<b>100%</b> are satisfied or neutral with temperature control in their private unit	70%	<b>43%</b> increase	
<b>Trust</b> 	<b>100%</b> of residents with children reported that they would feel comfortable letting their children play unsupervised in the building's shared outdoor spaces	40%	<b>150%</b> increase	
	<b>100%</b> of respondents have four or more neighbours they would feel comfortable asking for favours from	0% (all report 3 or less, 40% report no neighbours)		
	<b>100%</b> share a wide range of items and tasks, including tools, cooking ingredients, meals, and chores	Less than 20% reported sharing items with neighbours	Increase varies, depending on the item	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: Less than 17% reported sharing items with neighbours
<b>Safety</b> 	<b>100%</b> of respondents report feeling safe	90%	<b>11%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 64.6% Concert Properties, 2022: 89%



# Wellbeing results summary

See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Sociability</b>  	<b>88%</b> have four or more people they can confide in	60%	<b>46%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 49% have four or more people to confide in
	<b>100%</b> have weekly or daily conversations with neighbours,	50%	<b>100%</b> increase	Concert Properties, 2022: 44% have conversations with neighbours everyday or a few times per week
	<b>100%</b> report never or rarely feeling lonely	40%	<b>150%</b> increase	Concert Properties, 2022: 48% report never or rarely feeling lonely
<b>Engagement</b>  	<b>100%</b> of respondents now volunteer in their building, neighbourhood, or community	90%	<b>11%</b> increase	Vancouver Foundation <a href="#">Connections and Engagement</a> study, 2012: 55% report volunteering
	<b>100%</b> participate in activities with neighbours on a weekly basis	0% (previously, all respondents never or only a few times per year did activities with neighbours)		
<b>Exposure</b>  	<b>0%</b> feel overcrowded in common areas	0%	No change	

# Wellbeing results summary



See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Sense of belonging</b> 	<b>100%</b> agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I feel that I have something important to offer to events and programs in my building or neighbourhood”	40%	<b>150%</b> increase	Vancouver Foundation <a href="#">Connections and Engagement</a> study, 2012: 27% of respondents feel that they do not have much to offer to their community
	<b>63%</b> agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here”	50%	<b>26%</b> increase	Vancouver Foundation <a href="#">Connections and Engagement</a> study, 2012: 80% of respondents feel welcome in their neighbourhood
<b>Spatial inclusion</b> 	<b>100%</b> are satisfied with shared indoor spaces	20%	<b>400%</b> increase	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: 23% are very satisfied or satisfied
	<b>75%</b> (all except two) are satisfied with shared outdoor spaces	20%	<b>275%</b> increase	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: 28% are very satisfied or satisfied
	<b>87.5%</b> (all except one) are satisfied with private living spaces	90% (all except one)	No change	North Vancouver Active Design Study, 2023: 85% are very satisfied or satisfied



# Wellbeing results summary

See page 26 for a list of all comparison studies.

	Results (second post-occupancy)	Baseline comparison	Change from baseline	Other comparisons
<b>Tenure</b>  	<b>75%</b> spend less than 30% of their income on housing	90%	<b>16%</b> decrease, with some residents transitioning from renters to owners	Concert Properties, 2022: 20% spend less than 30% of income on rent (all renters)
	<b>50%</b> think that their unit allows for flexibility to grow or change their household size	0%		
<b>Perceived health</b>  	<b>100%</b> of respondents report good, very good, or excellent mental health	70%	<b>43%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 82% reported good, very good, or excellent mental health
	<b>100%</b> of respondents report good, very good, or excellent physical health	90%	<b>11%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 83% reported good, very good, or excellent mental health
	<b>88%</b> report using transit as a mode of commuting	60%	<b>47%</b> increase	My Health, My Community, 2014: 39% use transit  My Home, My neighbourhood, 2014: 46% use transit