



# *Age-friendly, socially connected multi-unit housing*

*Design ideas and research findings to support aging in the right place*

# Acknowledgements

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Thank you to our partners, Concert Properties and Brightside Community Homes Foundation, who provided access to their buildings, time, and knowledge.

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Thank you to all staff, management, partners, and residents who participated in the engagement including the focus groups and the community forum.



## About Happy Cities (Vancouver, BC, Canada)

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

**Happy Cities team:**  
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## About SFU Gerontology (Vancouver, BC, Canada)

[SFU, Department of Gerontology](#) includes faculty, researchers, and students looking at aging from an interdisciplinary perspective. As part of the Gerontology department, Dr. Atiya Mahmood's lab collaborates with municipalities, health authorities, and service organizations to enhance aging in the right place and older adults' wellbeing.

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## About Hey Neighbour Collective (Vancouver, BC, Canada)

[Hey Neighbour Collective](#) (HNC) brings together landlords and housing operators, non-profits, researchers, local and regional governments, housing associations, and health authorities. Together with residents of multi-unit housing, these HNC partners take action to alleviate loneliness and social isolation through building social connectedness, resilience, and capacity for neighbourly support and mutual aid.

**HNC team:**  
Michelle Hoar

# Land acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge that this research took place in numerous unceded, traditional and ancestral territories, including those of the following peoples: Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səliłw ətaʔt (TsleilWaututh), xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), and Ləkʷəŋən (Esquimalt and Songhees).

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

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# Introduction & methods

# 1.1 Overview

Through this research, Happy Cities, Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC), and Simon Fraser University (SFU) have collected evidence on the importance of social connection for older adults living in multi-unit housing. This project builds on decades of research expertise and knowledge on housing wellbeing. We partnered with Concert Properties and Brightside Community Homes Foundation to assess spaces and engage residents and staff.

Within the next 50 years, more than one in four people in Canada will be aged 65 and older. The majority of older adults express the desire to age in place. Many older adults live in apartments, co-ops, and condos that were not built with older adults in mind, which can cause health, safety, and accessibility challenges. Although estimates vary, about one in 10 Canadians aged 65 years and older report feeling socially isolated, and one in four report low social participation. Having a supportive social community can help older adults stay longer and remain healthier within their own community.

This report identifies good design practices for new and existing multi-unit buildings. In addition, it discusses common challenges and barriers to social connection and aging in the right place, related to policy, programming, and design. **Although this research focused on older adults, the principles, strategies, and actions benefit residents of all ages.** In particular, there is growing interest in multigenerational communities that allow residents of all ages to 'age in place.' When designing homes with our aging in the right place principles, people of all ages and abilities benefit.

*Through our research we explored how...*

- **Neighbourhood factors and building location;**
- **Environmental qualities and features of indoor and outdoor shared spaces; and**
- **Building layout and circulation**

*impact aging in the right place, social wellbeing, and neighbourly connections.*

## Project goal

Understand how the design of multi-unit buildings impacts wellbeing, social connectedness, and residents' ability to age in the right place

### 10 principles for aging in the right place in multi-unit housing



Dignity



Autonomy & choice



Ease & comfort



Exposure (privacy)



Safety & security



Social integration



Meaning & belonging



Stability & affordability



Health



Equity and accessibility

## 1.2 Research methods

**Our study included five main data collection methods aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of the 20 buildings that participated in the study.**

These five methods helped us understand how the built environment, space use policies, and programming impact aging in the right place and social connectedness. We used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to capture the perspectives of residents, staff, management, and community stakeholders.

### **Step 1A: Built environment audits (quantitative)**

Using the audit tool developed for this project, we assigned scores to the building's shared spaces in each category.

### **Step 1B: Behavioural mapping (quantitative)**

We observed types and frequencies of social interactions in shared spaces such as lobbies, laundry rooms, and amenity rooms.

### **Step 2: Focus groups with residents (qualitative)**

We engaged with residents to understand the most important characteristics of the built environment to age in the right place. We asked residents where, when and how they interact with their neighbours. In addition, we explored programming and policy impacts.

### **Step 3: Interviews with staff and management (qualitative)**

We engaged staff and management from Brightside and Concert to understand their goals, strategies, design principles and management principles to promote social interaction and aging in the right place. In addition, we explored supportive initiatives and operational and social challenges.

### **Step 4: Community forum (qualitative)**

We invited Brightside and Concert to connect with a wider net of partners such as municipalities, community advocates and organizations, health authorities, academics, and other operators. Through facilitated discussions, we explored challenges and opportunities related to social connection and aging in the right place.

**Our audit tool builds on existing frameworks developed by SFU and Happy Cities:**

#### **SFU Gerontology precedent frameworks**

- [Aging in the Right Place: Building Capacity for Promising Practices that Support Older Persons Experiencing Homelessness](#)
- Stakeholders' Walkability/Wheelability Audit in Neighbourhood ([SWAN](#))

#### **Happy Cities precedent frameworks**

- [Happy Homes](#) framework and principles
- Happy Cities' [wellbeing framework for people transitioning out of homelessness](#)
- Happy Cities' [recipe for urban wellbeing](#)

# 20 buildings

In total, we studied 20 **Brightside** and **Concert** operated buildings located in Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia. These two organizations are long-time Demonstration Partners of Hey Neighbour Collective, and both organizations have a strong interest in social wellbeing. While Brightside houses mainly older adults, Concert has intergenerational communities. All the buildings assessed in this study are rental buildings, with a mix of market, below-market, and social housing. We looked at a variety of building types, from low-rise, mid-rise, to high-rise buildings. In addition, we included both new and older buildings in the study.

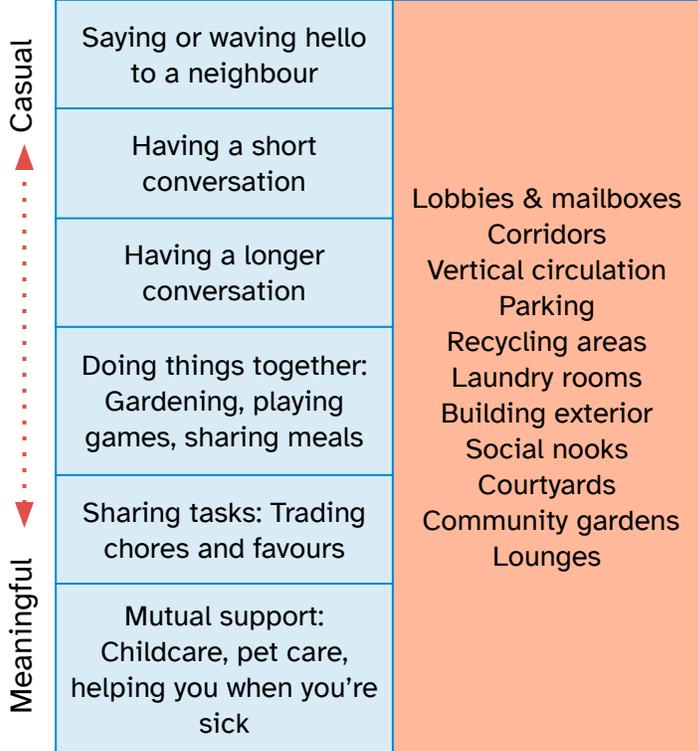
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 **Brightside**

# 1.3 The importance of social connections

Research shows that it is crucial for people to engage in a wide variety of social interactions, from casual everyday social encounters to meaningful, long-term relationships. Our homes, where we spend the majority of our time, can either help bring us closer together or keep us apart.

As we age, the amount of time we spend in our homes tends to increase, while our social networks tend to diminish. For seniors and older adults, social connectedness can lead to increased safety, independence, and improved physical health (Regnier, 2018). The [Hey Neighbour Collective evidence backgrounder highlights](#) how social connectedness between neighbours supports health and well-being. Social connection can occur at various scales, including interactions with the wider community, casual interactions with neighbours, and more meaningful or structured social activities. Multigenerational connections can be particularly beneficial for both older adults and younger community members. The design of the built environment plays a crucial role in creating spaces that enable all types and scales of social interaction.



### 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 casual encounters to meaningful relationships. The design of physical spaces facilitates successful programming.



# 1.4 Understanding the impact of the built environment on aging in the right place

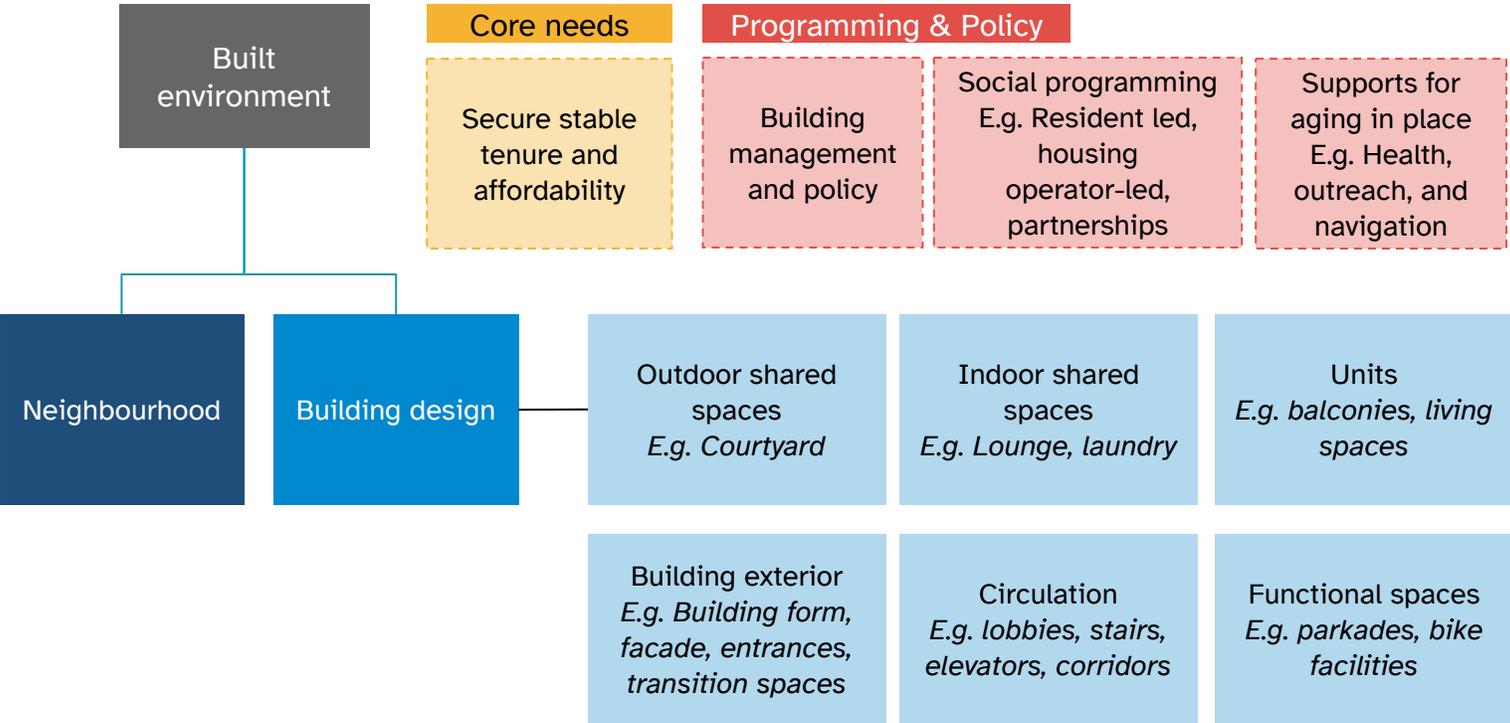
**The design of the built environment plays a significant role in shaping how people feel and interact within spaces. However, it is crucial to recognize that several other components also significantly influence how individuals utilize and engage with these spaces.**

Factors like affordability and length of tenure directly impact people's social connections and sense of belonging. When basic housing needs are unmet (such as safety, accessibility, and having a healthy living environment), social connections can be compromised. In addition, the management of spaces has a considerable impact on how they are utilized by the community.

Various other supports are necessary for individuals to age in the right place, including access to health care, home care, and a strong network of family and friends. These elements are crucial in providing a supportive environment that meets the unique needs of aging individuals.

Another key aspect that we studied is the importance of programming to foster a sense of community among residents. Such programs can be initiated by housing operators or established through partnerships with community organizations, effectively bringing people together and enhancing their overall experience.

At the level of the built environment, we focused on analyzing both neighbourhood and building designs. We recognized the significance of the building exterior in establishing a positive relationship with the public realm. Additionally, we extensively studied various elements within buildings, such as outdoor shared spaces, indoor shared spaces, circulation, functional spaces, and individual living units. All of these factors, along with many others, intersect and collectively contribute to creating an environment that enables us to age in the right place, promoting well-being, social connection, and a sense of belonging for all residents.





# Findings & Ideas

## 2.0 Spaces for aging in the right place

Through our various methods of data collection, we looked at the following spaces in each building:

### 2.1 Neighbourhood context

- Sidewalks & roads
- Nearby amenities

### 2.2 Building exterior

- Facades
- Transition to the public realm
- Exterior entrances

### 2.3 Lobbies & circulation

- Lobbies
- Stairs & elevators
- Corridors

### 2.4 Outdoor shared spaces

- Courtyards
- Community gardens

### 2.5 Indoor shared spaces

- Lounge & amenity rooms
- Laundry rooms
- Social nooks

### 2.6 Units & balconies

- Unit types
- Unit entrances
- Balconies

### 2.7 Parking & bicycling infrastructure

- Vehicular parking
- Bike storage

#### Research highlight:

*Throughout this report, dotted boxes contain observations and highlights from this project's research.*

#### Research highlight: important spaces for social interaction

We identified some of the most important spaces for social interaction in multi-unit housing including:

- Lobbies and mailboxes
- Outdoor spaces such as courtyards
- Flexible indoor spaces
- Community (third) places in the neighbourhood

## Strategies for aging in the right place in multi-unit housing

Through our research, we identified four strategies to support aging in the right place. The “**Establish age-friendly housing systems**” strategy requires collaboration between different levels of government, from municipal planners to health authorities. While these strategies were developed with older adults in mind, they offer benefits to residents of all ages.

For the purpose of this report, we are focusing on design, programming, and policy ideas that housing operators, municipalities, and developers can consider. We've identified three main strategies (listed below) that help create age-friendly and socially connected multi-unit housing.

#### Strategy

### Build options for social interaction

Maximize choice over **social integration** by balancing connection and **exposure**.



#### Strategy

### Design user-friendly environments

Prioritize **comfort, accessibility,** and **safety** in order to maximize **autonomy**.



#### Strategy

### Establish age-friendly housing systems

Ensure that housing systems provide **dignified, stable, affordable,** and **healthy** housing **choices** for older adults.



#### Strategy

### Activate spaces for connection

Activate spaces with things to see and do that help build **connections** and a **sense of belonging**.



## 2.1 Neighbourhood

### What we heard

Older adults tend to spend most of their time close to home. Complete, walkable, and pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods provide opportunities for intergenerational interactions and allow older adults to feel fully integrated within their communities.

Key social hubs for older adults include community centers, grocery stores, and shopping malls. Unfortunately, inadequate pedestrian infrastructure and limited transit choices can hinder their ability to access these essential spaces.

### Features to consider for aging in the right place:

- What is the predominant land use and characteristics of the area?
- What public spaces are available nearby?
- What types and conditions of pedestrian infrastructure exist nearby?
- Does the area feel safe and well-maintained?
- What are the traffic and noise levels?



*A former intersection converted into an open space*

Location: Montreal, QC

Image: Emma Avery / Happy Cities

### Research highlight: neighbourhood gathering places

Residents who live in proximity to community amenities, and frequently spend time engaged in neighbourhood activities and social interactions, reported a stronger sense of community belonging during our focus groups.

## Ideas for neighbourhood design

### Build options for social interaction

**2.1.1 Design intergenerational communities** that provide opportunities for older adults to live near people of all ages.

**2.1.2 Build community connections** by locating housing for older adults in active neighbourhoods with existing social opportunities.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.1.3 Choose walkable neighbourhoods** for new housing developments so that residents can walk or roll to shops, services, and community amenities.

**2.1.4 Choose transit-friendly locations** where older adults can choose from rapid or local transit options.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.1.5 Design third places** and community destinations where seniors can observe activities, such as kids or pets playing.

**2.1.6 Provide transportation options** by organizing a shared vehicle that brings residents to natural or cultural resources that can't be easily accessed with transit.

## 2.2 Building exterior

### What we heard

The design of building edges and entrances plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging among residents and in shaping sociable neighbourhoods. When residents inhabit a building that is accessible, safe, and properly lit, they are more inclined to engage with their community by spending time outdoors and going for walks, which can greatly benefit the health of older adults. Clear wayfinding to the building's entrance helps ensure that visitors, residents, and emergency responders can easily access the premises. Living in a building with a distinctive visual identity or aesthetic contributes to a stronger sense of belonging and community pride. For people with declining cognition – such as dementia – distinct entrances are critical to safely navigate the environment.

### Features to consider for aging in the right place:

- How does the building's look, feel, and scale integrate into the neighbourhood context?
- Does the building feel distinct and include aesthetic and cultural elements that relate to residents?
- Does the transition to public feel gradual and include active elements?
- Are the building entrances easy to find and universally accessible?

## Ideas for entrances

### Build options for social interaction

**2.2.1 Build connections with the wider neighbourhood** through the placement of visible amenity spaces or seating areas, while ensuring that residents also have access to shared spaces that feel more private. Consider integrating community or public functions that can bring services into the neighbourhood and create a lively housing community.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.2.2 Design easy-to-find entrances** for residents, visitors, and emergency services by using signage, entry location, and design (material and form) to distinguish entrances.

**2.2.3 Create accessible entrances** by providing automatic openers, creating level entrances or adding ramps that feel integrated into the architectural and landscape design.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.2.4 Create a resident and staff directory or display** so that residents can get to know their neighbours and know who to reach out to.



*An inviting exterior seating area, thoughtfully positioned adjacent to the front entrance and amenity room, provides a vibrant and warm welcome to the building.*

Location: Mason Mariposa Housing, USA

Image: Craig Cozart / David Baker Architects

### Research highlight:

#### activating spaces with seating

At buildings where benches are strategically placed near entrances and transition areas, we observed residents spending time in those spaces, which helps create more opportunities for social interaction.

## 2.2 Building exterior (continued)



*This accessible entrance provides a clear transition to the public realm, allowing residents to pause before accessing the neighbourhood.*

Location: Lakeside Seniors Apartment, USA  
Image: Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects



*The accessible and distinct entrance at this seniors apartment provides an accessible entryway kiosk with push button, fob access, and resident directory.*

Location: Mason Silver Gardens apartments, USA  
Image: Rose Romero

### Ideas for transition spaces & facades

#### **Build options for social interaction**

**2.2.5 Create mixed-use and multigenerational buildings** for older adults who like living in a vibrant community.

**2.2.6 Create a transition from public to private** through the design of patios and ground-level entrances that face the public realm. Use architectural elements, such as fences and vegetation to create privacy barriers of varying height that allow people to control their exposure while still connecting with neighbours.

#### **Design user-friendly environments**

**2.2.7 Use lighting to enhance safety** by helping older adults navigate around the building edges in all lighting conditions. Use a diversity of different lighting types to reduce glare and shadows.

**2.2.8 Design drop-off areas** that allow older adults to wait near the building's entrance. Provide shelter, seating, and a visual connection to the lobby.

#### **Activate spaces for connection**

**2.2.9 Create opportunities for people watching** by providing seating areas around the building that connect to the public realm.

**2.2.10 Create places to garden** outside the building and near the public realm so that older adults can connect with neighbours and remain physically active.

## 2.3 Lobbies & circulation

### What we heard - Lobbies

Lobbies play an important role as a hub for casual interactions with neighbours. The lobby can complement other indoor amenity spaces by creating comfortable areas to spend time. Ensuring mailboxes are easily accessible is particularly important for older adults, and thoughtful design details, such as incorporating a parcel shelf, can enhance convenience. It's equally important to consider finishes and materials, with a specific focus on flooring surfaces that minimize reflections, which can pose challenges for older adults. Additionally, maintaining up-to-date notice boards is essential, as they serve as crucial sources of information for residents.

### Features to consider for aging in the right place - Lobbies

- Does the lobby allow people to do multiple activities?
- Are there community bulletin boards?
- Is the lobby comfortable by providing natural light, heating, and cooling?
- Does the space provide areas to sit, wait, and observe?

### Ideas for lobbies

#### Build options for social interaction

**2.3.1 Maximize social opportunities created by mailboxes** by locating them prominently in the lobby and creating a seating area nearby.

**2.3.2 Create space to connect** by ensuring that at least 4-8 people can comfortably hang out in the lobby at once.

#### Design user-friendly environments

**2.3.3 Choose safe flooring surfaces** that are easy to clean, non-slip, and don't create strong reflections or patterns.

**2.3.4 Create a safe waiting area** with comfortable seating where residents can see the street while waiting for a ride or taxi.

#### Activate spaces for connection

**2.3.5 Provide access to Wi-Fi** near seating areas in the lobby for residents who don't have access at home.

**2.3.6 Create updated information areas** such as a bulletin board with colour-coded notices (for example, red paper for notices that require immediate attention from residents).



*The puzzle table in the lobby provides a passive social activity for residents at this Concert building*

Location: The "Q", Victoria

Image: Hey Neighbour Collective

#### Research highlight: social lobbies

We found that comfortable seating areas and well-organized and accessible mailboxes serve as focal points for social interaction. The most common activities we observed people doing in such lobbies were lounging, greeting neighbours, and observing the public realm. Pets helped facilitate social encounters. In intergenerational buildings, we observed many interactions between children and older adults.

## 2.3 Lobbies and circulation (continued)

### What we heard - Circulation

Providing opportunities for residents to personalize their unit entryways not only enhances wayfinding but also fosters a greater sense of belonging within the community. Wider corridors are especially beneficial for older adults, particularly those with mobility challenges, as they improve navigation and improve safety. However, wider corridors can benefit residents of all ages and abilities. Avoiding lengthy, featureless corridors can reduce confusion and improve overall wayfinding within the building. Additionally, the presence of safe and well-designed stairwells can encourage residents, especially in lower-rise buildings, to partake in daily exercise.

### Features to consider for aging in the right place - Circulation

- Does the building have intuitive circulation and wayfinding cues and signage?
- Are the elevators and stairways visible from the lobby?
- Do unit entrances allow residents to personalize or do they have distinguishing features?
- Does the lighting reduce glare and shadows?
- Are there wider areas that allow residents to sit?
- Are there enhanced accessibility features such as handrails?
- Do stairs provide opportunities for active use?



*At this seniors' apartment building, the corridor provides widened space, handrails, seating areas, and natural light in the circulation spaces to enhance safety, comfort, and accessibility.*

Location: Quail Park seniors housing, USA  
Image: Arch Design

## Ideas for circulation spaces

### Build options for social interaction

**2.3.8 Allow residents to personalize their unit entrances** by incorporating shelves where they can add small items, doors with different colours, a bulletin board, or a place to pin up photos.

**2.3.9 Create wide corridors**, over 1.5m, that allow people with mobility devices to circulate comfortably.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.3.10 Design safer stairs** by using colour contrasting materials, solid handrails, and tactile warning strips.

**2.3.11 Provide accessibility features in hallways**, such as handrails, to help prevent falls.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.3.12 Activate stairs to encourage use** by providing natural light and active design features, such as graphics and numbering at different floors.

## 2.4 Outdoor shared spaces

### What we heard

A variety of outdoor shared spaces encourage social connections and provide a safe place to access nature. These spaces can also provide an important connection to the public realm. Spaces should maximize seating opportunities, as well as integrate accessible walking paths if they are large enough. Having access to a universal washroom from the outdoor space can allow older adults to feel more comfortable using the space. Community gardens are important social spaces for some older adults.

### Features to consider for aging in the right place

- What types and sizes of spaces are provided to residents?
- How many residents share each space?
- Is the access secure, safe, and private?
- Is the space universally accessible?
- Is the space co-located with other amenities to generate activity and increase visibility?
- Does the space provide multiple, intentional uses that are supported by the right infrastructure?
- Are there spaces to garden and enjoy nature?
- Does the space feel safe and well-lit?
- Does the space provide opportunities to participate in programming or modify the environment?



*The lively rooftop garden features various socialization spaces for residents to enjoy*  
Location: Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver  
Image: Happy Cities

### Research highlight: pets connect us

Outdoor spaces that are pet-friendly encourage interaction among residents. These spaces were frequently used by pet owners, which helped spark connections and conversations.

## Ideas for community gardens

### Build options for social interaction

**2.4.1 Locate gardens in prominent areas** (such as courtyards or near the main entrance) and adjacent to seating areas, so that residents can connect with each other and/or the wider community.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.4.2 Design accessible gardens** by using raised beds and providing ample space to circulate around the garden beds.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.4.3 Provide funding and support** for residents who want to start a community garden at their building, or champions who work hard to maintain the garden over time.

## 2.4 Outdoor shared spaces



*Resident community garden plots at a Brightside building*  
Location: Lionsview rental Housing, Vancouver  
Image: Hey Neighbour Collective

### Research highlight: seating increases space use

The quality and availability of seating in outdoor spaces is critical for older adults. If a space does not have seating, then it does not get well-used.

### Research highlight: community gardens

Community gardens increase the use of outdoor shared spaces among older adults. The gardens provide a reason to visit the space, which can provide older adults with motivation to go for a small walk or connect with neighbours. However, running a successful community garden requires management and maintenance, and ongoing budgets for annual expenses. Community gardens that lack organization risk underuse or become a source of frustration for residents and operators.

## Ideas for courtyards & terraces

### Build options for social interaction

**2.4.4 Provide frequent seating options** through a mix of fixed and flexible seating and spaces for individuals, small, and large groups to sit.

**2.4.5 Create a flexible lawn** that allows residents to play games, gather, or participate in programming.

**2.4.6 Design focal points for social gathering**, such as a small water feature with seating nearby.

**2.4.7 Balance areas that feel public and private.** Garden walls, fencing, and hedges can help demarcate space and provide areas that feel more enclosed.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.4.8 Design walking paths** within and leading to the space that are clearly marked, level, and well-maintained. Hard and solid surfaces (such as concrete) are easiest to navigate.

**2.4.9 Provide shaded areas to sit** through the provision of overhangs or structures like gazebos.

**2.4.10 Prioritize maintenance and upkeep** to create a sense of safety and reduce potential slipping or tripping hazards.

**2.4.11 Provide access to a universal washroom** that is near the outdoor space.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.4.12 Provide 3-5 activities to do in the space** through multiple features to draw people to the space, such as a beehive, places to share food, gardens, or places to play games.

**2.4.13 Use diverse materials and colours** to distinguish different uses in the space and create visual interest.

**2.4.14 Use diverse plants** that engage all the senses and change seasonally to create a warm, inviting environment.

## 2.5 Indoor shared spaces

### What we heard

Indoor amenity spaces offer valuable opportunities for social interaction, but often suffer from underutilization if they lack programming or have maintenance challenges. Strategic placement, such as next to a courtyard or lobby, can encourage more activity. Equipping the space with suitable furniture is essential for functionality and appeal. Warm and comfortable decor, personalized lighting, and artwork enhance the ambiance. Effective programming is key to ensuring residents actively enjoy and utilize the space. Particularly in older buildings that lack air conditioning, retrofitting can also provide cooler and cleaner air in indoor shared spaces during extreme weather conditions

### Features to consider for aging in the right place

- What types and sizes of spaces are provided?
- How many residents share each space?
- Is the space universally accessible?
- Is the space co-located with other amenities to generate activity?
- Does the space provide multiple, intentional uses that are supported by the right infrastructure?
- Does the space feel safe and well-lit?
- Does the space provide thermal and acoustic comfort?
- Is the space flexible?
- Does the space have suitable and ample seating?
- Does the space provide opportunities to participate in programming or modify the environment?

#### Research highlight: the power of co-location

Through our observations, we saw a significant increase in activity in indoor amenity spaces that were adjacent to a lobby. This proximity to the entry point of the building helps generate activity in the space, since it's on people's path of daily travel.



*Diverse furnishings in a Brightside shared lounge*  
Location: Lionsview II rental building, Vancouver  
Image: Hey Neighbour Collective



*The common space features a seamless indoor-outdoor connection through an operable glazed wall.*  
Location: Lakeside Seniors Apartment, USA  
Image: Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects

## 2.5 Indoor shared spaces (continued)

Findings

### Ideas for lounges

#### **Build options for social interaction**

**2.5.1 Create warm and welcoming spaces** by including colours, materials, plants, and meaningful artwork to make the space feel personalized.

**2.5.2 Provide a private meeting space** that is bookable for more intimate gatherings with neighbours or to meet with a health professional.

**2.5.3 Provide multiple spaces** so that residents have choices on which space to use and who to interact with.

**2.5.4 Build community** through programming that helps residents get to know each other, understand the rules of amenity spaces, and help learn strategies to communicate and resolve conflicts.

**2.5.5 Designate keyholder residents** who can open up the amenity space at certain times a day and help manage the space.

#### **Design user-friendly environments**

**2.5.6 Provide a universal washroom** that can be accessed from the amenity space.

**2.5.7 Provide lighting options** such as floor lamps and dimmers so that residents can adjust light to suit their needs.

**2.5.8 Provide air conditioning** so that the space can serve as a cooling centre in hot weather conditions.

**2.5.9 Create accessible spaces** that allow for enough space to navigate around furniture with a large mobility device, such as a scooter.

**2.5.10 Consider acoustics** to ensure that the common space doesn't create noise disruptions in the building. In addition, consider acoustics within a room to ensure that people with decreased hearing or those who experience sensory overstimulation in loud spaces can comfortably participate in conversations.

#### **Activate spaces for connection**

**2.5.11 Create spaces to play games** by providing a card or ping pong table, seating, and storage.

**2.5.12 Celebrate reading** by creating a book sharing area with cozy seating and creating reading-based programming

**2.5.13 Design outdoor connections** by locating the space next to an outdoor patio or courtyard.

**2.5.14 Enable technology use** by creating a small computer room and/or providing access to wifi throughout the building's common spaces.

**2.5.15 Encourage exercise** by providing a flexible area for activities such as chair yoga.

**2.5.16 Support peer learning** by organizing programming where residents can share skills – like photography or how to use an ipad – with others.

## 2.5 Indoor shared spaces (continued)

Findings

### Research highlight: Laundry rooms

Laundry rooms that provide good lighting, particularly natural light, and a comfortable seating area serve as an area for spontaneous social interaction. We observed residents using the space to relax or read while doing their laundry.



*This lounge has a co-located laundry and computer room*  
Location: Bayview Hill Gardens apartment, USA  
Image: Matt Edge / David Baker Architects



*The spacious laundry room at this Brightside building has a reading nook and ample natural light*  
Location: Bridgeview Place, Vancouver  
Image: Hey Neighbour Collective

## Ideas for Laundry rooms

### Build options for social interaction

**2.5.17 Create opportunities to preview** whether someone is already using the space by placing a window into the laundry room. The ability to preview a space prior to entering provides a greater sense of control over social interactions and can boost safety.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.5.18 Consider acoustics** to ensure that the laundry room is acoustically separated from other amenity spaces.

**2.5.19 Consider air quality** by providing natural ventilation and providing some separation from other indoor spaces.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.5.20 Create a book exchange** that is located in or just outside the laundry room.

## 2.5 Indoor shared spaces (continued)



*Social nooks located near the elevator allow small groups to socialize in this Brightside building*

Location: Lionsview rental building, Vancouver

Image: Hey Neighbour Collective

### Research highlight: social nooks

Of the twenty buildings that we audited, only three had social nooks. Although some of these social nooks were well-located (adjacent to the elevator lobby) and had access to natural light, they tended to be underused by residents. We observed that having accessible and comfortable seating, and a reason to visit the nook (such as a bookcase) was critical to ensure people actually wanted to use the space.



*Exterior circulation and social nooks provide areas to pause and chat with neighbours*

Location: Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver

Image: Happy Cities

## Ideas for social nooks

### Build options for social interaction

#### 2.5.21 Locate social nooks

**intentionally** to minimize noise disruptions to other residents, while still being in a prominent location so that residents use the space. Creating nooks at elevator lobbies is typically a good location.

#### 2.5.22 Provide flexible and

**comfortable furniture** that can be configured by residents.

### Design user-friendly environments

#### 2.5.23 Create accessible nooks

by ensuring that there is enough space to circulate around furniture so that people with mobility devices can access seating and activities.

#### 2.5.24 Provide customizable

**lighting** through a mixture of natural light or dimmable and flexible lighting options such as reading lamps.

### Activate spaces for connection

#### 2.5.25 Create 3-5 reasons to

**visit the space** by including features such as bookshelves, places to place games, diverse seating, or a rotating artwork display.

## 2.6 Balconies & units

### What we heard

While our research primarily focused on shared spaces, residents emphasized the significance of private spaces that are adaptable and accessible. Notably, bathroom and bedroom designs should ensure ample space for residents with varying mobility requirements. Balconies hold particular importance for residents, especially those in buildings below six storeys, as they provide a connection to the public realm. Balconies should allow residents to create a comfortable and usable space to garden, sit, or eat meals.

### Features to consider for aging in the right place

- What types of units are in the building?
- How many of the units are accessible? How many are adaptable?
- How many units have balconies?
- Does the balcony provide both privacy and connection?
- Can residents personalize their balconies?
- Are private balconies accessible?
- Do balconies overlook an outdoor space such as a courtyard?



*Balcony gardening can provide health benefits*  
Location: Mayfield Place Affordable housing  
Image: Mariko Reed / David Baker Architects

## Ideas for balconies & units

### Build options for social interaction

**2.6.1 Provide ground-floor units** for older adults who have mobility issues and prefer to have direct outdoor access from their unit.

**2.6.2 Consider visibility from the unit entrance** into the hallway, by providing a sidelight or dual-height peephole.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.6.3 Prioritize adaptable units** for older adults so that units can meet changing mobility needs over time.

**2.6.4 Consider flooring materials that are smooth, hard, and durable** to improve adaptability.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.6.5 Create opportunities to garden** by designing patios that can easily include a small planter and seating area.

## 2.7 Parking & bicycling spaces

### What we heard

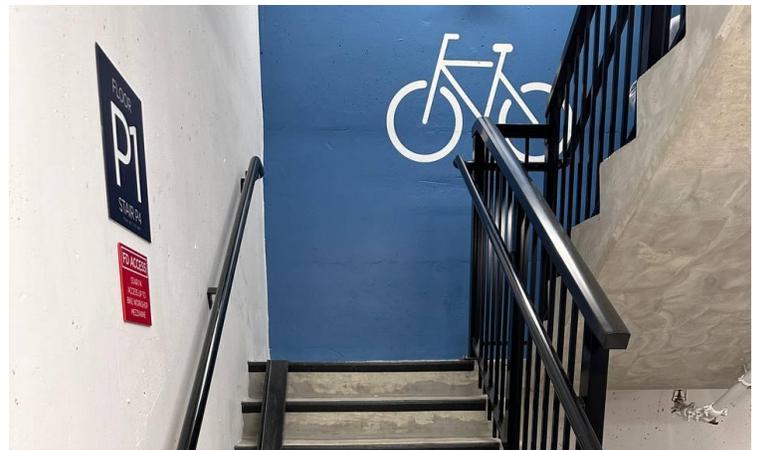
In our study, parking and bicycle spaces were generally not identified as prime locations for social connections. However, the presence of accessible parking spaces remains important for older adults who still drive. Additionally, accommodating larger bicycles or mobility scooters, which can be challenging to store in standard bicycle storage rooms, is a consideration for many older adults. Flexible and diverse bike storage also benefits families who use cargo bikes, bike trailers, and strollers. The incorporation of wayfinding features can enhance safety within parking and bicycle areas.

### Features to consider for aging in the right place

- What types of parking spaces are available to residents and staff?
- Is the parkade easily accessible for residents with different mobility needs?
- Is there clear wayfinding in the parkade?
- Is there adequate lighting for older adults to feel safe?
- Are there secure bike parking options that meet the needs of older adults?



Accessible and cargo bike storage  
Location: Malmo, Sweden  
Image: HOE360



Wayfinding in the stairwells that connects the bike storage with the main lobby  
Location: Bowline rental housing in North Vancouver  
Image: Hey Neighbour Collective

## Ideas for Parking & bicycling spaces

### Build options for social interaction

**2.7.1 Balance mobility choices** by ensuring that there are parking options for residents and visitors who rely on a private vehicle, while minimizing unneeded parking stalls.

### Design user-friendly environments

**2.7.2 Design accessible bike rooms** by providing spaces to store mobility scooters, adult tricycles, cargo bikes, trailers and strollers, and e-bikes. Ensure that older adults don't need to lift their bikes in order to lock them up.

### Activate spaces for connection

**2.7.3 Create a sharing area** where neighbours can trade unused items, such as kitchen appliances, tools, or clothing.



3

Age-friendly  
housing  
communities

## 3.0 The importance of programming

### Barriers to social connection

Despite interest in social connection, some older adults face barriers to having more social interactions with neighbours. Some are wary of connecting with neighbours due to past negative experiences. Often, they have never had the opportunity to experience a strong sense of community in a multi-unit housing context and don't understand the positive benefits. In addition, inconsistent policies and lack of care from other residents for shared spaces can compromise safety and use.

### Programming benefits

Having low-effort options to connect with neighbours is important for older adults, who may have smaller social networks and spend more time at home. Providing consistent opportunities to participate in programming can build relationships over time and help change perceptions about social interaction. Programming should aim to engage different demographic groups by finding common interests. Building design can facilitate these interactions by ensuring that the building has a social centre or community heart – a space where residents know they can go for consistent positive interactions – this could be an indoor lounge, a lobby, or a courtyard.

### The role of housing operators

Housing operators can help create supportive policies and spaces for social interaction. Over time, with the right partner organizations and programs, strong communities tend to self-organize and create resident-led programming. Programs such as [Concert's Community Connectors](#) require resources and effort on the housing operator and resident's part to get started, but can be very rewarding overtime.

*Independent housing operators have a challenge, because they can't directly provide programming or support to tenants. However, through partnerships with organizations, they can work around this.*

— Interview participant

*Some residents have had a lifetime of bad experiences with others and fear that people will cross social boundaries. People are great at building their own barriers, and they need a small nudge to help them see that social interaction is actually really beneficial.*

– Focus group participant

### Programming ideas

**Enable a resident-run community newsletter** to help connect residents with programming happening in their community.

**Support tenant committees and community connectors** that can catalyze relationships and reach those who are isolated.

**Design emergency preparedness programming** to help connect neighbours and improve safety. This is particularly critical for buildings with many people with mobility challenges who would have difficulty exiting the building in an emergency situation.

**Support wellbeing focused programming** such as community grieving support groups, food sharing, physical activity, and health clinics.

## 3.1 Age-friendly housing management

### Providing support in independent housing communities

Although all the buildings we studied are independent housing, many older adults mentioned the importance of having support in this type of housing. Partnerships with organizations can help housing operators indirectly provide services, such as the [Oasis](#) programming in Brightside buildings. The aim of the program is to help improve security of tenure, social connection, and overall wellbeing. Several residents mentioned that having a live-in building manager could help provide rapid assistance in emergencies. Housing operators could also work with tenants who want to contribute to their community by creating part-time roles for janitors, gardeners, key keepers, in exchange for honoraria or discounted rent.

### Housing operator-tenant communication

Having regular opportunities to connect with housing operators was expressed as high priority for many of the older adults we spoke with. These conversations could happen in person, by phone, or video call.

For older adults, communication via notices is important. However, many residents expressed that communication could be strengthened. For example, a colour coding system for notices could help residents know what action they need to take.

### Engaging with older adults

Residents noted that they appreciate participating in surveys and focus groups, but they also want to make sure that what they share is acted upon by housing operators. Transparency and sharing back engagement results is critical. Involving older adults in the design of new spaces, as well as the design of policies, is critical to ensure that these spaces meet their needs on an ongoing basis. There will always be many different opinions from residents, but feeling heard is an important part of the community building process.

### Hey Neighbour Collective Practice Guides

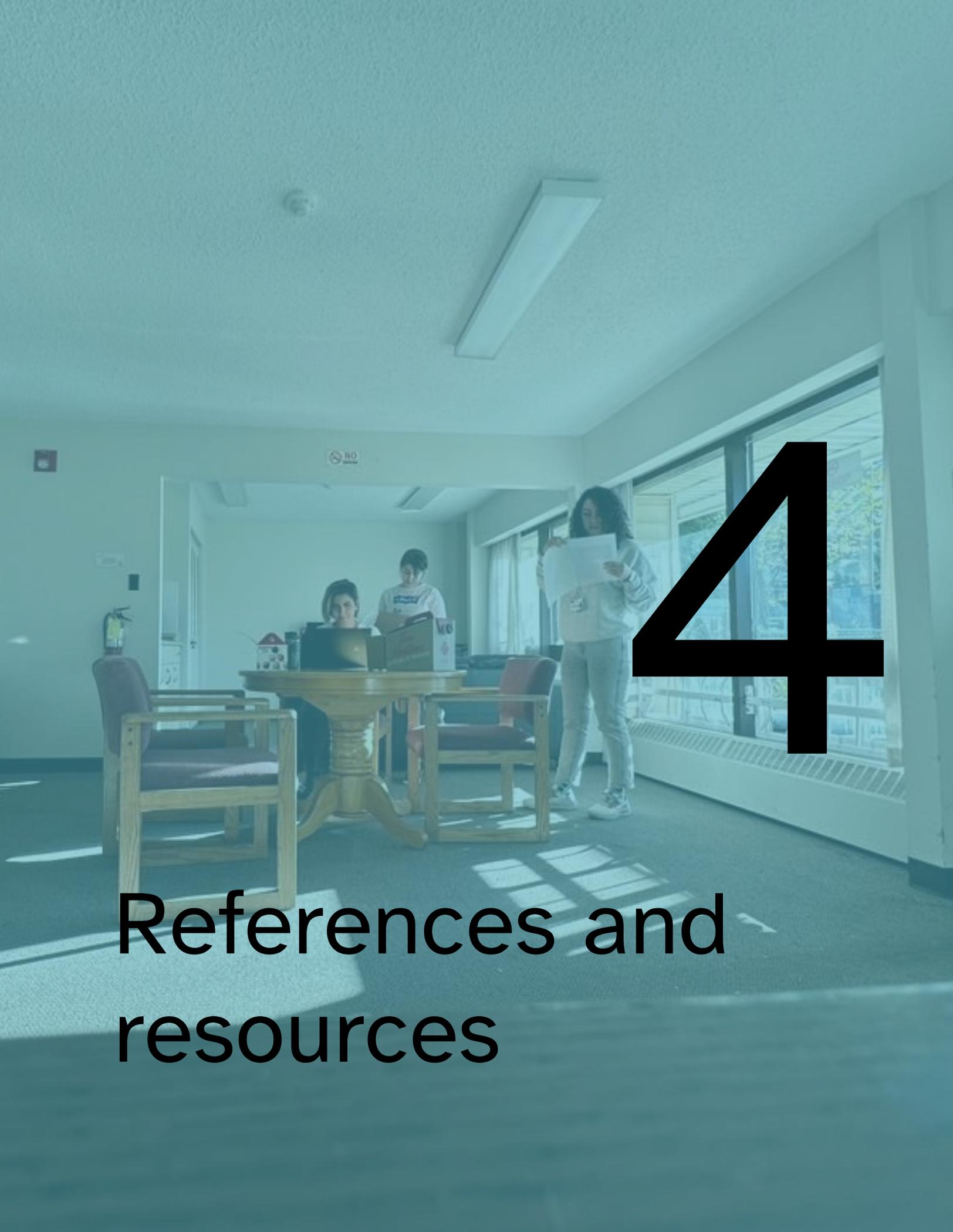
*Hey Neighbour Collective has produced a number of practice guides – written specifically for residents, landlord and housing operators, non-profit organizations and municipal governments:*

- [Supporting residents to become community connectors in multi-unit housing](#)
- [Landlord and housing operator-led approaches to growing community in multi-unit housing](#)
- [Developing organizational partnerships to build community in multi-unit housing](#)
- [Roles for local government in strengthening social connectedness and resilience activities in multi-unit housing](#)

### Ideas to establish age-friendly housing systems

**Create a campus of care**, a housing model that allows older adults to transition from independent housing into assisted living while staying within their own community.

**Form partnerships to offer services to residents.** Although independent housing operators cannot directly offer services, they can work with other organizations to provide things like housekeeping, meal services, health check-ups, and social programming. Aging is complex, and having access to information at the right time can help people make good long-term decisions. This can happen through facilitated peer learning or support from partner organizations.



# 4

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resources

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