

HOMES THAT CONNECT US

Building social connections and
community engagement among
residents of multi-family rental
housing

Prepared by Michelle Hoar
Spring 2018

catalyst
Community Developments

PART ONE

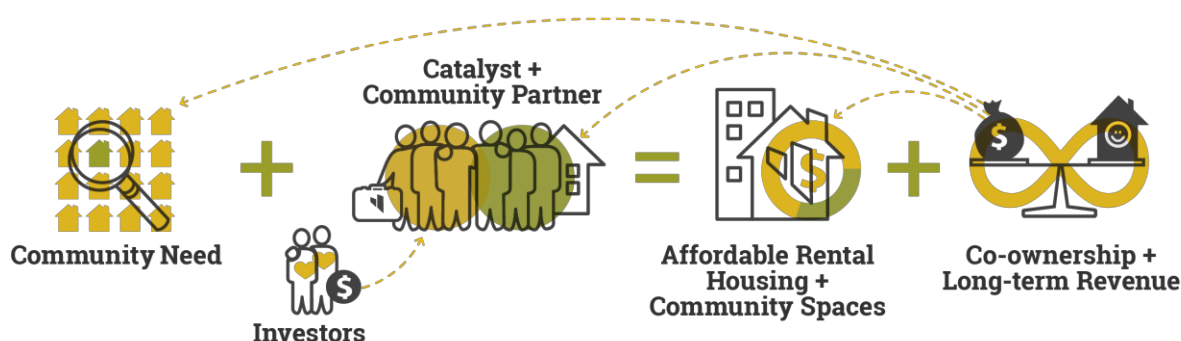
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Introduction

[Catalyst Community Developments Society](#) is a non-profit affordable rental developer that launched in Vancouver in 2013. Partnering with non-profits and municipalities to secure affordable land and keep it under community ownership, Catalyst has eight sites currently under development in Vancouver, Penticton, Langley, Port Moody, and North Vancouver.

• The Catalyst Business Model •

Catalyst partners with non-profit organizations and municipalities to create new affordable rental homes and community spaces, and achieve long-term financial sustainability.



Its first completed site is Madrona, a 49-unit below-market rental townhouse complex in Victoria West's Dockside Green development.

In anticipation of tenants moving in, Catalyst staff asked themselves what it really meant to build vibrant, affordable and inspiring places for people to live. Was it enough to create the buildings and the landscaping, and to offer security of tenure and rents affordable to working people? Or could they be more ambitious, and take active steps to intentionally foster a friendly, socially connected, resilient community there?

Catalyst decided it wanted to be more ambitious, and set out to learn from other housing and community organizations. In fall 2017, it commissioned research and interviews with over a dozen groups to help them put together a 12-month 'Community Connections' pilot project for Madrona. Rather than keep what it learned to itself, Catalyst tasked consultant Michelle Hoar with writing a shareable report highlighting key findings and recommendations.

We hope this report will be particularly relevant to those in the purpose-built rental sector (for-profit and non-profit): developers and property managers, but also funders, investors, and the planners and politicians who oversee the policy environment within which they operate.

But the key findings should also be of interest to architects, market housing developers, strata councils, housing funders and financiers, and policy makers in various levels and departments of government, particularly those interested in social determinants of health.

Intention

The intent of this report is to highlight inspiring examples of community building in multi-family housing developments of different types. The hope is that insights gleaned from studying these examples stimulate a broader dialogue about opportunities to foster social connectedness in dense typology housing, and influence the sector toward a greater focus on affordability, security of tenure and sociability.

Ultimately, Catalyst looked to others for inspiration around successful techniques for community building and tenant engagement. As it grows, Catalyst aims to inspire others in the field to put effort and resources into smart social design and programming that fosters diverse and truly livable, thriving communities.

Catalyst will continue to share what it is learning throughout the 12-month Community Connections pilot at Madrona and will release a report about what worked and what didn't in spring 2019.

• Catalyst Housing — Benefits for Communities and People •

Non-profit organizations, together with Catalyst, contribute to communities by creating affordable mixed-income rental housing and new community spaces.



About Madrona



- 49 stacked townhouse units; mix of studio, 1, 2, 3 and 4 bedrooms
- Max household incomes from \$26,500/yr for studios to \$67,000 for 4 bedrooms
- Rents range from \$695/m to \$1650/m (units affordable to people making between 36% - 76% of local median income)
- Only six parking spots
- All units received a bike, given Dockside Green's proximity to bike paths, transit, and their overall sustainability plan
- Tenants receive 10 transit tickets per month
- Only covenanted affordable rental development currently planned for the large site
- Tenants moved in December 2017

About the 'Community Connections' pilot project

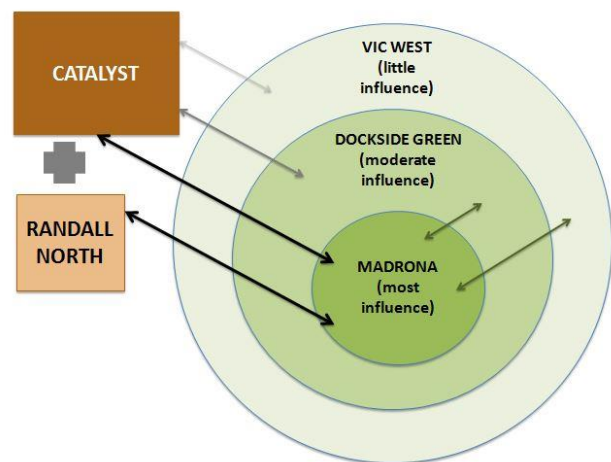
Building on findings and recommendations from this report, Catalyst has designed a 12-month pilot with the following objectives:

1. Increase social connectedness *among* Madrona residents.
2. Increase positive connections *between* Madrona and other Dockside Green residents.
3. Strengthen Madrona tenants' feelings of belonging, inclusion, and engagement within the Victoria West community.
4. Achieve the above goals with a clear sustainability ethic guiding Catalyst and tenant decisions (social, economic, and environmental).
5. Foster a program that is financially sustainable without grant inputs.
6. Maximize the positive social potential of Madrona's physical design.

Catalyst is contracting with Randall North to manage leasing, rent payments and general building upkeep. Catalyst will work with Randall North to establish a welcoming culture, host events, and support tenants to organize social events and sharing initiatives.

The diagram to the right reflects our acknowledgement that collective efforts will likely have the greatest impact at the immediate Madrona scale, and less at the Dockside Green and Victoria West scales.

It is also important to note that Catalyst's efforts are focused on making Madrona a friendlier, more inclusive and engaged community, but we realize that ameliorating deeply entrenched social isolation may be beyond the scope of impact such a pilot can have, as the pilot will not actively help to improve tenants' financial security (other than through affordable rent and secure-tenure, beautiful, dignified housing), or connect them with support services that they might need (mental health, mobility, food security etc.)



Pilot activities will begin early spring 2018:

- Catalyst will organize and host four social events through the year as well as two workshops (e.g. bike maintenance and earthquake preparedness)
- Catalyst will convene tenants to brainstorm what sort of additional events or initiatives they might want to spearhead
- There will be a modest budget to support ideas that tenants bring forward, and assistance to connect them with further grant funding for larger projects that benefit all neighbours

- Four online surveys throughout the year will collect information from tenants on what’s working and what’s not, and whether the pilot is leading to increased feelings of social connection, belonging, and community engagement
- Results from the Madrona pilot will inform both the physical design and programming of future Catalyst homes, many of which will take denser multi-family forms than townhomes. Catalyst currently has eight projects in various phases of development in Vancouver, Penticton, Langley, Port Moody, and North Vancouver

About This Report

Throughout fall 2017, a literature review and a series of in-person and phone interviews were conducted in an effort to better understand successful models of sociable design and programming in different types of multi-family housing communities. In addition, a tour of “friendly” buildings conducted by the City of Vancouver’s ‘Hey Neighbour’ project was attended. Interviews were conducted with:

- [Vancouver Cohousing](#) (multiple resident owners)
- [First Avenue Athletes Village Housing Co-operative](#) (resident member Jeremy Murphy)
- [Concert Properties](#) (Beverly Greene, Senior VP Property Management)
- [Artscape Toronto](#) (LoriAnn Girvan, COO and Liam Hanebury, Manager Community Services)
- [Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation](#) (Meg McCallum, Director Membership and Communications, and Natalia Snajdr, Sustainability Facilitator)
- [Options For Homes](#) (Heather Tremain, CEO)
- Matthew Carter (owner, [MGC Projects](#) and past-president of Great Northern Way Trust)
- [SFU Residence and Housing](#) (Tracey Mason-Innes, Director)
- Doris Koo (Catalyst [advisor](#) and ex-CEO of [Enterprise Community Partners](#))
- Gord Tulloch ([PosAbilities](#), Director of Innovation, and contributor to *Living Up, or Living Apart?*)
- [SHIFT Collaborative](#) (Stacy Barter, Lead Facilitator, *Building Resilient Neighbourhoods* Initiative)
- [Happy City](#) (Paty Rios, Project Lead) and
- [Brightside Community Homes Foundation](#) (Carolina Ibarra, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Special Projects and Sara Thiessen, Community Development Coordinator)
- An anonymous property manager for a large real estate firm

In addition, the ‘Hey Neighbour’ tour included [The James](#) (condo), The Social (condo), Bluesky Chinatown (purpose built rental), and [District Main](#) (purpose-built rental.) Tours were conducted in some cases by tenants, and in others by building staff.

This work is not intended to be considered comprehensive or statistically relevant, but is rather a targeted snapshot of how a small hand-selected group of different housing and community organizations – largely in Canada – go about connecting and engaging residents.

Similar Projects

Catalyst's pilot project takes place parallel to four other projects worth mentioning.

1. City of Vancouver's *Hey Neighbour* project

Led in partnership by Social Policy and Housing Policy, [Hey Neighbour](#) is a 12-month 'social retrofit' pilot testing ways of creating social connections between residents in two existing market rental buildings in Vancouver.

A part-time coordinator at the City will identify and support resident champions willing to step forward and help organize social and sharing activities at each building. This pilot builds on summer 2017 research by Healthy City Scholar Aylin Tavakoli that resulted in a report titled [Supporting Friendlier, More Neighbourly Multi-Unit Buildings in Vancouver](#) and the tour described above. This report draws on many of the findings by Tavakoli in her scan of 17 Vancouver buildings deemed to be friendly by their residents.

2. Building Resilient Neighbourhoods

The second related project is the [Building Resilient Neighbourhoods](#) initiative hosted by [SHIFT Collaborative](#), a Victoria/Vancouver-based co-operative consultancy. Building off prior work studying and deepening sociability and resiliency in Victoria-area single family home neighbourhoods, it is currently scaling its [Resilient Streets program](#) to four additional B.C. municipalities: Whistler, Richmond, Powell River and Sunshine Coast Regional District. Its project will include a mix of denser multi-tenant buildings and single-family home neighbourhoods, and it will be working closely with municipal staff in each community. Additionally, it is currently piloting *Resilient Streets* activities in several multi-unit buildings in Greater Victoria, working closely with resident champions.

3. Brightside Homes' *Community Development Initiative*

The third is a project that [Brightside Homes](#), a Vancouver-based non-profit affordable housing developer and operator, has been working on since spring 2016. Brightside owns and operates 27 buildings with over 1,000 tenants, largely lower-income families and seniors. It works towards a vision of a future where people of all incomes have a secure home in a vibrant, healthy community. In summer 2017 it worked with two university students to conduct an in-depth Community Enhancement Survey, aiming to get information about their tenants' needs, and ideas for creatively fostering healthier Brightside communities.

By better understanding residents and tapping into their ideas and willingness to volunteer, Brightside is discovering new ways to support residents experiencing social isolation, challenges with aging in place, and barriers to accessing affordable food and support services.

4. Happy City's *Happy Homes Toolkit*

The [Happy Homes Toolkit](#) identifies 47 specific design actions that could be taken to make multi-family housing more sociable. Through fall 2017 and winter/spring 2018 Happy City will engage with planners, developers and architects in Metro Vancouver to explore where the strongest areas of priority and interest lie with regards to the proposed actions; identify technical, regulatory and financial blockages and opportunities to recommended actions with highest buy-in; co-design new policies, incentives, etc. This will enable the housing industry to think about and design multi-family housing linking affordability and social connectedness.

Ten Key Findings and Recommendations

How can you go about building community and fostering more engagement from residents? Here are 10 high-level insights gleaned while preparing this report. *Each is unpacked in detail in **Part Two** of the report.*

1. Good building design pays off.

Thoughtfully designed common spaces and well-situated shared amenities are the physical foundation for facilitating connections between residents. But good building design alone won't build strong community.

2. Convert underutilized spaces for social purposes, with resident involvement.

What is a common space? Can a laundry room be retrofitted into a place for positive social connections? What ideas might residents have for transforming spaces for social purposes?

3. Overcome site limitations with a portfolio strategy and/or community partnerships.

Faced with managing older properties, or newer properties with site or budget limitations? You can overcome a lack of common space ('hardware') by adopting a 'software' mindset.

4. Stability of tenure and governance structures matter.

Cohousing, co-ops, and mature, entrepreneurial housing non-profits employ the most robust and creative strategies for building community and unlocking residents' enthusiasm for engagement.

5. For rental developers and property managers, mission and branding are the biggest motivators for investing in community building.

More work could be done to disseminate business case examples and reward best practices, particularly in the for-profit rental sector. For the non-profit affordable rental sector, some financial assistance may be warranted.

6. When crafting community-building strategies, be mindful of your tenant mix.

Tenants who share a values alignment, occupation, or stage of life often connect more easily. But diversity may be lacking in these models.

7. Engage early, engage often, engage strategically.

Natural champions may emerge organically given the right conditions, but sustained community building among residents requires intentionality and resourcing. Think about all possible touch-points as opportunities to create culture, reinforce norms, and invite a feeling of community and openness.

8. Everyday community-building and tenant engagement is more effective than the BIG event.

A clear and consistent strategy, strategic partnerships, and staff or resident committees specifically tasked with social connections and engagement can make modest budgets go a long way.

9. Effective communication is frequent, varied, and as much as possible, in person.

Don't try to cover every communications medium. Find out what your tenants already use, and commit to a small set of platforms that you can manage well.

10. Measure what matters to your mission.

Take a good look at your organizational mission and think about how you might advance it further by engaging residents more creatively. What could you achieve with a dedicated staff person/people or committee? Which meaningful, measurable indicators might you track?

Context: Trends in rental housing, social isolation, and community engagement

Numerous trends affecting the health and well-being of residents of multi-family housing in British Columbia invite new building design, tenure types, and operational practices.

More renters, Higher rent

Costs for all types of housing have been rising rapidly throughout B.C. in recent years. As homeownership costs have risen, the percentage of renters in larger municipalities has increased.

- Vancouver's [renter population grew](#) from 51% in 2011 (26% of whom were families) to 53% in 2016. Forty-four percent of renters spend more than 30% of before-tax income on rent. Vacancy rates in Vancouver hover around the 0.9% level.¹ The City of Vancouver projects a need for [47,900 rental homes](#) of various types in the next 10 years.²
- [2016 census data](#) showed median monthly rent rising much faster than incomes.³ Renters are more financially strained than owners in all 14 municipalities.⁴
- [2016 census data](#) shows that 32% of British Columbians were renters. Forty-three percent of renter households were paying more than 30% of before-tax income on rent, and 21% were spending more than 50%.⁵
- The percentage of renters in 2016 in Victoria was [61%](#). Nearly half of those renters spent more than 30% of their income on shelter.⁶ Vacancy rates in Victoria are just [0.5%](#).⁷
- The [March 2017 Metro homeless count](#) found 3,605 people living on the street, a 30% increase over 2014 and the highest number ever recorded by the count.⁸ [Fraser Valley homelessness](#) increased from 346 in 2014 to 603 in 2017.⁹

With tightening federal lending rules, rising interest rates, flat or declining wages, a rise in precarious freelance work, and growing economic inequality, the number of renters is bound to continue growing. For an increasing number of British Columbians, renting may be permanent. "This isn't some temporary phase of being on the route to home ownership," notes Director of SFU's City Program [Andy Yan](#).¹⁰

Social isolation grows as community engagement declines

In 2012, Vancouver Foundation polled 3,841 people – including 275 charitable organizations – across Metro Vancouver to learn what issue they cared about most. In its often referenced [2012 Connect & Engage report](#), it was surprised to learn that the issue it expected to top the list – affordable housing and homelessness – was eclipsed by a growing sense of isolation and disconnection.¹¹

How can we begin to tackle the complex issues like poverty and homelessness if people are disconnected, isolated and indifferent? How can we make people care about community issues if their concern stops at their front yard?"

**Vancouver Foundation
Connect & Engage report 2012**

In 2017 the foundation [updated its survey](#) (3,785 respondents and special focus groups.)¹² Though the studies didn't report on the same exact data year for year, there are some clear trends:

- People making less than \$40,000 a year and high-rise residents are most likely to say they spend time alone more often than they would like, or are often lonely;
- Renters, young people and low-income people are significantly less likely than homeowners and older people to say they “feel welcome” in their neighbourhoods and to know neighbours well enough to ask for help.
- Many of the measures of community engagement that were tracked have declined in the last five years.

2017 data

Who spends time alone more often than they would like?



QA9. Do you find yourself spending time alone more often than you would like?

Total respondents = 3,785

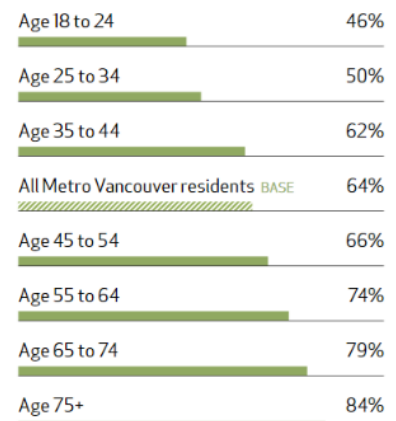
Who experiences loneliness often?



QA10. How often do you feel lonely? (Answer = 'Almost Always' or 'Often')

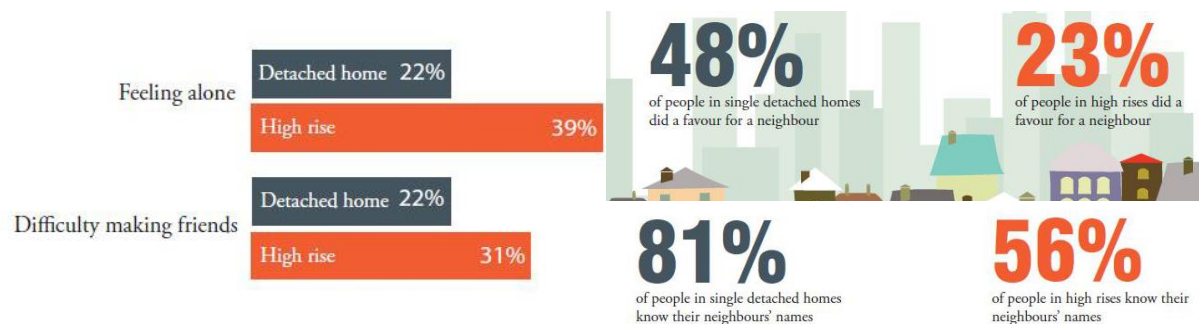
Total respondents = 3,785

How do different age groups experience a feeling of welcome and belonging?



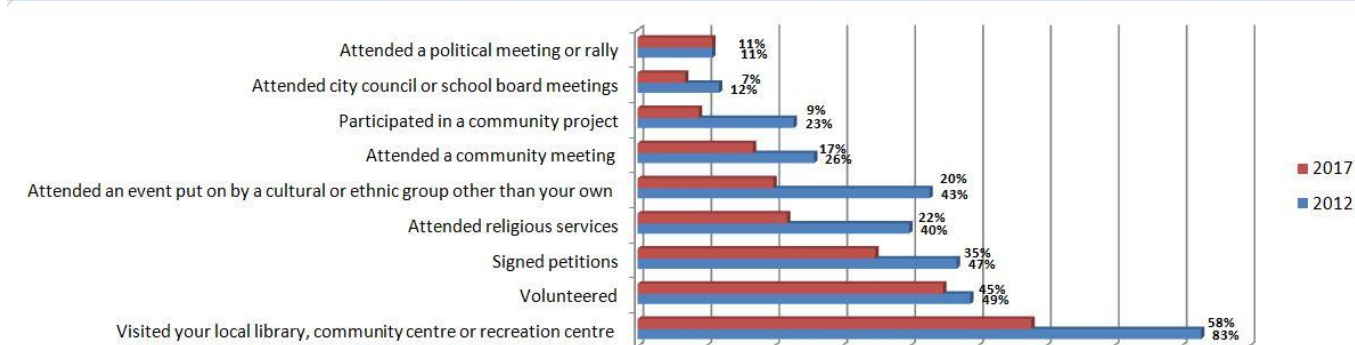
QB3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of these statements: 33 A) I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like

2012 data



**** All graphics used in accordance with Creative Commons license, from Vancouver Foundation's 2012 & 2017 reports, and [2012 sub-report](#) on the effect of apartment living on neighbourliness.¹³**

Percentage who responded positively to the question “In the last 12 months, have you done the following?”



Health consequences and policy responses

Strong social connections are a well-researched and significant determinant of health. One frequently cited [2015 study](#) from Brigham Young University showed that social isolation and loneliness are as harmful as obesity, smoking and lack of physical activity, increasing risk for heart disease, depression, dementia and other conditions.¹⁴

Policy makers around the world are taking note of these problematic trends.

- In January 2018 the United Kingdom appointed a [Minister for Loneliness](#) with a mandate to work across multiple ministries to reduce social isolation. The announcement spurred numerous articles and radio shows questioning [whether Canada should do something similar](#).¹⁵¹⁶
- PlanH, a partnership between Ministry of Health and BC Healthy Communities Society, has prioritized [Social Connectedness](#) for its 2017-18 grant stream and is currently supporting 11 municipalities working in partnership with their regional health authority to implement initiatives focused on increasing social connectedness.
- The City of Vancouver has a number of formal strategies that identify goals for alleviating social isolation and increasing community engagement: the [Healthy City Strategy](#), the [Greenest City Action Plan](#), and the [Mayor’s Engaged City Task Force](#). It has identified homelessness and the lack of affordable housing, the increase in social isolation, and growing economic inequality as some of the [chronic underlying stressors affecting the city’s resilience](#).¹⁷

Local reports on the prevalence and risks of social isolation, with ideas for increasing social connectedness and resiliency:

- [Connections & Engagement Reports](#) (Vancouver Foundation, [2012](#) and [2017](#))
- [Building Neighbourhood Social Resilience](#) (Eliana Chia, Greenest City Scholars program, 2014)
- [Living Up, or Living Apart: Addressing the Social Consequences of High-Rise Living](#) (Sabrina Dominguez, for City of Vancouver, 2015)
- [Resilient Streets Toolkit: The How-To Guide For Building Community](#) (SHIFT Collaborative, Building Resilient Neighbourhoods Initiative, 2015)
- [Happy Homes Toolkit](#) (Happy City, 2017)
- [Supporting Friendlier, More Neighbourly Multi-Unit Buildings in Vancouver](#). (Aylin Tavakoli, City of Vancouver, 2017)

Research shows that communities with strong social cohesion and social capacity are better able to manage and bounce back from acute shocks (earthquakes, major storms, or floods, or events like dramatic economic downturns) and mitigate chronic stressors.

Clearly, there are many reasons to get serious about addressing the triple threat of worsening housing affordability, growing social isolation, and declining community engagement.

Conclusion

The new realities of housing in British Columbia's larger urban centres – a higher percentage of renters facing rising costs – presents challenges and opportunities for those who regulate, finance, design, build and operate rental housing. Beyond the pressure to keep rents affordable and tenancies secure is the need to create living environments for renters that are inclusive and connected.

The health and well-being benefit to tenants in building socially connected housing communities is well-documented, but there is also increasing evidence to show that these efforts yield economic benefits to developers, landlords and property managers, in the form of reduced turnover and maintenance costs, positive referrals, and even improved staff morale. At every stage of development and operations, there are low-cost opportunities to engage tenants in the creation of a more connected and resilient community. Each building will have its own particular context and constraints, opportunities and challenges. We hope this report serves as food for thought for those who are ready to experiment with going beyond the provision of housing and into the cultivation of vibrant communities.

For Catalyst, this report and our soon-to-launch pilot, mark the beginning of a journey. We're eager to share our successes, and our failures, along the way, and hope that others do the same.

Takeaway Questions:

Any positive business benefits from investments in social design and programming in rental developments will accrue mostly to developers who hold their assets, not to turn-key developers who quickly sell the development.

How might all types of developers – for-profit and non-profit – be incentivized to design and build for sociability in an expensive, low-vacancy market like Vancouver?

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PART TWO

KEY FINDINGS
CASE STUDIES

Key Findings

1. Good building design pays off

Thoughtfully designed common spaces and well-situated shared amenities are the physical foundation for facilitating connections between residents. But good building design alone won't build strong community.

Of all housing types surveyed, cohousing and co-op housing had the most generous square footage dedicated to shared space, and the largest variety of intentional shared spaces. The next category of housing types with generous, thoughtfully designed common spaces and shared amenities were newer condos and higher-end market rental. Affordable rentals and older buildings of all types tend to feature less shared spaces, or none at all other than a small entrance lobby.

Without exception, all indoor shared spaces were used more frequently and creatively if they had low barriers to use (physical and financial accessibility), and had a staff person or resident committee animating them.

For example: a party room that's on a random floor, kept locked up when not booked, and only accessible for an hourly fee plus cleaning charges is less likely to be used than a party room that is prominently located off an entrance lobby or other highly used area, free for tenant use, and proactively programmed by a building manager or tenant committee.

Spaces for gardening, eating, celebrating and playing together are the most effective community builders

A common observation from all interviewees was that gathering spaces where people could experience nature, socialize, eat and play were the most effective spaces for building community.

Gardening has strong therapeutic benefits not just for those participating, but those observing. It gives people a safe and simple thing to talk about, it can cross cultural and language barriers, and is an activity that young and old can participate in together.

The communities that decided to manage garden spaces collaboratively, rather than assigning individual plots, reported a higher degree of social connection, and a deeper growth in their capacity to work together, which spilled over into other social activities.

However, not everyone likes to garden, so outdoor spaces that also accommodate shared seating areas, space for kids to play, and even communal BBQs, support a wider range of resident activity.

“

Our survey reveals that 33% of residents in Metro Vancouver do not have a yard or common area where they can easily socialize with neighbours. This figure rises to 44% for people living in a suite-in-house, and 50% for those living in an apartment or condo.

The kind of common areas residents would like to enjoy include community garden (28%), green space or pocket park (22%), BBQ area (18%) and games room (14%).”

**Vancouver Foundation
Connect & Engage 2017**

“

Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or worse, different people in different places – and on the conviction that it is architecture’s task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.”

Alain de Botton
The Architecture of Happiness

Gyms and Fitness Rooms

Gyms have become standard in newer high-end condo and market rental buildings. Interviewees observed that though residents like having gyms available, they aren’t conducive to deepening resident connections.

Smaller and more flexible fitness rooms are more common and are featured in a wider variety of housing types. For example, Vancouver Cohousing’s yoga room is also used for meditation, toddler time, dance practice, and other fitness classes. Options For Homes, a non-profit developer of affordable condo projects in the Greater Toronto area, also prefers low-key fitness spaces to gyms, as they’re less expensive to build and maintain, and allow for more diverse and socially inclusive uses.

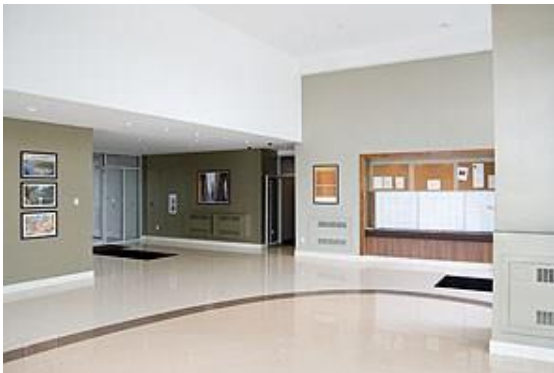
Case study: 1st Avenue Athletes Village Co-op (Vancouver)



A large open front lobby is used for activities such as kids’ story-time, seasonal decorating, and ping-pong. The lobby flows seamlessly into two well-situated and well-used spaces: a large, welcoming, and airy multi-purpose room with a full kitchen and shared book, toy, and DVD libraries, and the outdoor

courtyard. The office of the part-time onsite building manager is connected to the shared kitchen.

Two communally cared-for rooftop gardens include seating areas, and look out over a shared courtyard and playground. Kitchen windows look out over the courtyard.



The multi-purpose party room and kitchen is always open, and is often used for building-wide gatherings such as movie nights, book clubs, and volunteer committee meetings. A group of resident librarians voluntarily keeps the well-stocked sharing libraries organized and alphabetized.

Case Study: The James (Vancouver)



This 155-unit townhouse and condo complex, built in 2012, is mostly owner-occupied with a few suites rented out.

Rather than situating a party room behind a closed and locked door, The James' common area begins right as you step out of the elevator and into the 13th floor dining room, kitchen, and lounge area. Most walls are floor-to-ceiling glass with incredible city views. The interior is surrounded on three sides with an accessible patio, featuring a large and covered communal BBQ, tables and chairs, and numerous raised beds.

With the exception of closure due to special events and private bookings, the top floor space is open to all residents from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m. every day. Every resident – renters included – gets two private bookings of the space per year, at no cost.

When owners first moved in the raised beds were filled with landscaping plants. Over time, residents formed a garden committee. With a series of \$200 - \$500 Vancouver Foundation [Neighborhood Small Grants](#), they began to transform the beds into communal gardens. The communal structure of the gardens forced residents to work together, accelerating social connections, strengthening capacity, and leading to more spontaneous socializing. Eventually a separate social committee emerged, and more grant funding was secured to outfit the shared kitchen with plates, cutlery and other materials to make social gatherings easier.

Residents continue to expand the gardens through small grant funding, adding composters, irrigation, etc. This [video](#) is a lovely window into how gardening pulled people together at The James, and also allows you to see how the smart design of their rooftop common space facilitates their efforts.

“

The next thing you knew we were making plans outside of gardening. We were planning social gatherings together, going for drinks, hanging out at the beach.”

James resident, in [Vancouver Foundation](#)

Other successful shared spaces and amenities

Artscape Toronto: This non-profit urban development organization, whose mission is to make space for creativity and transform communities, owns and manages a number of live/work spaces for artists. Some of the well-used amenities in these spaces include kilns, workshops, small rehearsal rooms and galleries.

Simon Fraser University Housing: Newer buildings feature wellness rooms, interfaith rooms, game rooms, and learning commons (semi-social study areas.) Most of these newer spaces are being designed with floor to ceiling windows to maximize visibility and a sense of openness, safety and inclusivity. In newer buildings, laundry rooms are now being placed next to lounges, with glass walls to encourage connectivity and flow. (To learn more about SFU’s well-being design guidelines check out their [Housing Master Plan](#) and [Healthy Campus Community](#) plan.)

Takeaway Questions: *In a market where it’s already very challenging to develop affordable housing, how can we make sure that thoughtful social design isn’t only for the well-off?*

What can different levels of government do to support developers who want to integrate good social design while preserving affordability, or property managers who want to invest in social programming?

Bluesky Chinatown: This 191-unit market rental high rise in Vancouver’s Chinatown neighbourhood features a large lobby, an outdoor lounge and individual garden plots, a woodworking room, an internal bike rental program, and a novel co-location feature: side-by-side dog and bike washing stations.

Commercial and other public spaces: Doris Koo, Catalyst advisor and ex-CEO of U.S.-based Enterprise Community Partners says that if you really want to get serious about building community, think of your whole building as a shared amenity for residents *and* non-residents. Enterprise now strongly encourages co-location of commercial businesses and publicly accessible amenities like early childhood education facilities, meeting rooms or community centres in the affordable housing developments that it funds.

2. Convert underutilized spaces for social purposes, with resident involvement.

What is a common space? Can a laundry room be retrofitted into a place for positive social connections? Can a recycling room become more than a dumping area? What could be done to animate hallways or stairwells?

What ideas might tenants and/or owners have for transforming spaces for social purposes? Are there ways you could allow residents to showcase their personalities or cultural traditions in otherwise sterile spaces (front doors, hallways, lobbies)?

Many interviewees had examples of common rooms being transformed over time from little-used spaces to widely embraced spaces, usually based on feedback from residents.

For example, developer and property manager **Kevington Building Corp.** changed up the small gyms on each floor of District Main, a market rental building, after an online survey to tenants about what sorts of equipment they wanted. The results led them to sell all the existing equipment and install what tenants wanted instead, increasing use of the spaces and deepening their engagement with tenants.

After consultation with tenants, 60% of whom are seniors, **Brightside Homes** unearthed huge appetite for community gardens, and for volunteering to help build and maintain them. Along with 50 volunteers, they set about building gardens at nine of their buildings, and plan to continue to expand this successful project.

Takeaway Questions: Are there underutilized or problematic spaces that could be transformed with input and assistance from residents? Are there parts of the building that could be animated or taken care of collaboratively with tenants?

Self-expression holds an important place in defining a collective identity.



People are more likely to improve their communication and be empathic among each other when they find a place to be creative and share their ideas and values."

Happy Homes Toolkit
Happy City, 2017

3. Overcome site limitations with a portfolio strategy and/or community partnerships.

Faced with managing older properties, or newer properties with site or budget limitations? You can overcome a lack of common space ('hardware') by adopting a 'software' mindset.

Portfolio strategy:

For developers and property managers with multiple properties, think of these properties as interconnected communities, rather than as isolated buildings. This works best for properties with a reasonable degree of geographic proximity.

Examples:

Doris Koo points to New York City-based nonprofit housing and economic development group [Asian Americans for Equality](#) as a good example of how to knit together a portfolio of buildings. Some of its buildings had little to no common space, so it decided to hold major events like Christmas parties or food bank events in the larger spaces, inviting tenants from all buildings. This encouraged mingling between tenants from different neighbourhoods and income levels, and made better use of existing spaces.

A property manager for a 400+ unit property in Victoria explained how three rental properties in Victoria would share amenities. For example, two of their new buildings would share amenities that include a gym and social lounge. None of their buildings in the area have a large enough party room, so a multi-building tenant appreciation event was held in a new downtown public market. Management is considering blocking off a carriage way (a private, treed, pedestrian-oriented street) connecting buildings for a summer party to connect and engage residents.

Many of [Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation](#)'s affordable rental homes and buildings have little shared amenity space, but what is available is open to all 1,600 households and the public. There are three meeting rooms, ranging from a basement meeting room that can accommodate up to 20 people, to a newer space with a full kitchen that can handle 70 people. The spaces are available for free for any event open to CCOC tenants, and carry a very modest fee for private use.

A focus on community partnerships:

Artscape Toronto: Well before it added affordable work/live artist housing to its mix, Artscape Toronto was securing, developing and managing affordable commercial spaces for artists throughout Toronto. Over the years, these spaces have evolved from simpler artist co-locations to transformative master-planned districts with sophisticated arts and culture amenities available to artists and the general public.

As a result of this broader mission, Artscape focuses as much on connecting residential tenants and condo owners to the larger arts and culture community as it does to fellow residents, with a distinct focus on supporting artists' professional livelihoods. It runs a [wide range of programs](#) out of various different Artscape spaces for artists and community members, ranging from artist residencies to business workshops and mentorship services to neighbourhood-based arts initiatives pairing artists with kids and families.

Artscape's community focus is so embedded that it recently renamed its '*property management*' team to '*facilities and community services*,' with a full-time manager of community services. It is the manager's job to understand the totality of the Artscape community and organizational mission, and find opportunities for linkages, initiatives, tenant engagement (commercial and residential) and strategic partnerships.

It also employs a portfolio strategy in that it uses larger available Artscape spaces to host events open to all tenants and residents, over time cultivating a more expansive community than it could at any one site.

“ It's not 'build it and they will come, in terms of common spaces: you need intention and coordination... [] We also think hard about where it makes sense for us to create our own programs, and where facilitating a partnership makes more sense.”

LoriAnn Girvan, COO Artscape Toronto

Centretown Citizens Ottawa: As part of their robust sustainability programming, staff help organize an annual fall tour of CCOC buildings highlighting sustainability features for the board, staff, tenants and the public. In fall 2016 they did the tour by bike, in partnership with Green Energy Doors Open. They have also been a partner for a number of years of [Centretown Movies](#), a weekly pay-what-you-can outdoor family film festival held in a public park in the Centretown neighbourhood. The impetus for the festival came from a tenant, and it was such a good fit with Centretown's mission to revitalize neighbourhood public spaces and engage community that they agreed to house the project within their non-profit and even assist with fundraising. In addition, CCOC has supported tenant-initiated projects like a Good Food Box, and a parent-led daycare group.

Brightside Community Homes Foundation: Brightside partners with dozens of different community organizations as a way to connect tenants to services and supports that can make life more affordable and healthy for them. Examples include neighbourhood houses, food banks, community pharmacies, United Way's Better At Home program (non-medical day to day support for seniors), PosAbilities (assistance for people with developmental disabilities), YWCA and more. More on their strategies for supporting tenants later in this report.

Takeaway Questions: *Are there ways to connect multiple buildings in your portfolio?
What might happen if you thought of all your residents as one big community?*

What ideas might residents have for ways of creating, deepening or supporting community partnerships?

Are there aspects of your corporate or non-profit mission that could be focused on for more strategic, creative resident engagement?

The Centre for Digital Media is an innovative graduate-level educational partnership program jointly owned by Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia and the BC Institute of Technology. The four institutions co-own the Great Northern Way Trust (GNWT), which manages the 10.5-acre campus in one of Vancouver's last major brown-field development sites.

Centre for Digital Media (CDM) students live in the same building where they take their classes. Student housing is well designed and programmed for social connections. A large communal kitchen and student lounges allow students to socialize and collaborate. Resident advisors work with staff to support students and organize social events.

The CDM campus also includes a number of older buildings that have been converted into office space for 15 local tech start-ups.

In an effort to foster social and business connections among commercial tenants *and* CDM students in their related fields (~200 workers and 100 students), it allocated a budget and staff to organize connectivity initiatives open and free for all: a speaker series, a variety of exercise initiatives (yoga classes, running clinics, etc.), business open houses with pizza and drinks, and a food truck program. Some experiments were more successful than others, but over time students and commercial tenants did start to take ownership, gave feedback, and suggest new ideas for activities.

4. Stability of Tenure and Governance Structures Matter.

Cohousing, co-ops, and mature, entrepreneurial housing non-profits employ some of the most robust and creative strategies for building community and unlocking residents' enthusiasm for engagement.

Two things became clear from interviews:

- The ownership, governance structures, and formal missions of housing organizations had a strong effect on how deeply they committed to building community, and how actively they engaged residents in the process.
- The more stable people perceive their tenure to be, the more likely they are to participate in or help organize social activities, or engage in other activities that manage or improve shared spaces.

“

In multi-family housing, legal frameworks that allow tenants to stay in their home for many years can help to nurture a diverse and inclusive community.”

Happy Homes Toolkit
Happy City, 2017

Vancouver Cohousing (Strata Cohousing)

Prospective owners came together years before occupancy to manage all facets of the development through challenging but fruitful consensus decision-making. By the time they move into their homes they have been through the trenches together and have each signed formal agreements detailing the philosophical principles, rules and regulations of what is effectively a strata organization. With help from a property manager who keeps track of legal and financial issues and sources bids for work that is outside the capability of owners to undertake, the cohousing community manages all aspects of the building and community through formal committees and a highly-structured communications and workflow process.



Vancouver Cohousing members socialize in front of the 6,000sf common house.

Vancouver Cohousing was completed in 2015, on three assembled lots. Its 31 units includes two covenanted rental suites. A few suites are also rented out by their owners (secondary market.) Renters are fully included in committees and other activities, but do not have a formal vote on the strata. The one renter interviewed reported feeling completely involved and engaged in the community.

The diversity and depth of sharing and collaboration at Vancouver Cohousing are impressive. In addition to the shared use of spaces such as outdoor garden beds, a kids play room, a craft room, two guest suites, and more, sharing activities include regular shared meals in a large kitchen/dining room, film screenings, informal trading of child care; bulk food purchases, sharing school drop-off and pick-up; sharing of camping gear, kitchen equipment, vehicles; clothing trades, and shared hiring of professionals for on-site music and yoga classes, haircuts, etc.



Though each home has its own kitchen, the common house also includes a large communal kitchen and dining room, where group dinners are held three times a week.

Athletes Village Co-operative Housing (Co-op Structure)

All residents of non-profit co-operative housing are members who vote on building issues and the election of a board of directors to manage co-op business. Members work together to keep their collectively managed home in good order, but there is also a full time Co-op Coordinator, a part-time repair technician/handyman, and a full-time janitor to help maintain the building and collect housing charges. There is full security of tenure in a co-op: as long as residents abide by the co-op's rules and regulations and pay their rent, they can stay as long as they like.

There is resident turnover of course, but at Athletes Village the main reasons tend to be geographic moves for work or school, or transition to full home-ownership. Often family members and close friends move in, strengthening the ties and support systems within the co-op.

Beyond the attractiveness of affordability and stability, a values-alignment around intentional community living draws people to the co-op housing model. This feeling of security and home leads to ownership-type behaviour: personal investments in remodeling suites, mutual care of common space, and more active bubbling up of ideas for connecting, collaborating and sharing.

Brightside Community Homes Foundation (Non-profit Landlord)

Brightside is a 65-year-old non-profit housing organization that builds "resilient communities for those who struggle to meet the demands of market housing." To ensure that homes are reserved for low-income residents, there is a maximum income cap and rents are geared to income. A resident needs to exceed the maximum income for three years in a row before Brightside begins to work with them to transition to suitable market housing. Enormous effort is expended by staff to keep tenants housed, sometimes even extending temporary in-

house subsidies during times of financial duress, other times by connecting them with external supports such as affordable food programs to reduce costs elsewhere.

In order to balance the need to maintain its housing stock in good condition, and its mission to keep tenants securely and affordably housed, Brightside underwent a rent policy review in summer 2017. Throughout the process it held information sessions to keep tenants informed and receive input. It also undertook an extensive community engagement survey, making in-person visits to tenants to assess their individual needs and gather their ideas for building community and supporting tenants' mental and physical health. Those parallel processes helped to build trust between Brightside staff and residents, unearthed many individuals willing to volunteer their time, proactively identified residents in need of critical support services, and unleashed residents' creative ideas for building community.

Brightside has now committed to organizing and hosting annual health fairs, is building community gardens and supporting tenant-led social gatherings, and is forging an ever larger number of community partnerships that make tenants' lives healthier and more affordable. It is also saving money by reducing tenant turnover and reducing suite damage due to physical and mental health crises.

Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation (CCOC) (Non-Profit Housing Operator & Neighbourhood Association)

CCOC blends a strong non-profit mission with a formal tenant-driven committee model. The organization grew out of a neighbourhood association that banded together in the 1970s to fight a proposed freeway development. It wanted to preserve existing affordable housing and help preserve the community feel of Ottawa's downtown core, and espoused what now would be considered 'smartgrowth' principles: mixed-income housing, dense walkable neighborhoods with strong public transit, accessible parks and other public spaces etc.

Since then CCOC has grown to include over 50 sites of various sizes, from single family homes and townhouses to larger multi-tenant buildings. About 1,600 households call CCOC rental suites home. Though there is an intentional mix of incomes in CCOC developments, including some subsidized and program-supported units, there is no maximum income beyond which a tenant would be asked to leave. Average tenancy is six to eight years, as opposed to two to three years in the regular rental market.

Takeaway Questions: For smaller non-profit housing providers with constrained staffing and budgets, would external funding to engage tenants in community building and resilience initiatives be helpful?

What can your housing organization do to strengthen residents' security of tenure? How can you better execute on your mission by involving tenants more intentionally?

CCOC staff support and are formally directed by volunteer committees and a board of directors. Committees are composed of tenants and community members, and the bylaws for the board require at least one-third tenants and at least one-third non-tenants. Committee membership is open to anyone who attends three meetings as a guest and has a CCOC membership. CCOC encourages tenant participation by providing opportunities to participate in social and sustainability activities and cultivating increased engagement over time. Barriers to participation for their low and middle income tenants are removed by offering to compensate for travel and family care costs. The blend of tenants and community members ensures a diversity and balance of perspectives.

There aren't hard lines between staff and volunteers: several staff are tenants, and staff may participate on committees as tenants or community members. Participation on CCOC committees is now viewed as a valuable professional development

and leadership opportunity for younger professionals and community activists. CCOC has a modest membership fee of \$3 per year. Anyone who pays the fee and agrees to uphold the mission and values is eligible to stand for election to the board, participate as a committee member and vote at the AGM.

Artscape Toronto (Affordable Ownership & Rental)

Artscape's housing portfolio – built starting in the mid-1990s and expanding still - is all live/work units, with a combination of affordable ownership condos, and affordable rental, often in the same development. The ownership units are made affordable through an [innovative program](#) where Artscape offers buyers a second interest-free, payment-free mortgage for 25% of the market price (effectively maintaining 25% equity in each unit.) Sale agreements stipulate that when owners sell, it must be to Artscape-approved buyers (lower income working professional artists), which passes affordability on to creative workers who might otherwise be priced out of central neighbourhoods.

Because Artscape is a non-profit with an ambitious mission to support Toronto's arts and culture community, revenues from all properties flow directly back into the mission, helping launch more sophisticated and ambitious projects over time. Artscape tenants and homeowners are part of an expansive, supportive and increasingly well-resourced community.

5. For rental developers and property managers, mission and branding are the biggest motivators for investing in community building.

More work could be done to disseminate business case examples and reward best practices, particularly in the for-profit rental sector. For the non-profit affordable rental sector, some financial assistance may be warranted.

Mission-oriented non-profit rental housing providers may be the most philosophically aligned, on the whole, towards engaging tenants, providing security of tenure, and building resilient communities. Interviewees in this sector reported some clear business benefits (lower turn-over, less suite damage, greater care of shared spaces), but for the most part they cited their missions as the rationale for staff and financial investments. However, many smaller organizations with below-market or shelter rate rental revenues may struggle with constrained staff and financial resources, and therefore prioritize basic building maintenance and management over community-building initiatives.

With record-low vacancy rates, along with annual rent increase restrictions in B.C.'s Rental Tenancy Act – particularly with new restrictions on the use of fixed term leases – there is little financial incentive for for-profit rental developers and property managers to encourage stable long-term tenancy or invest heavily in programming that connects and engages tenants.

Though there are reduced costs with low turnover and high referral rates, in an extreme low-vacancy situation those reduced costs may be easily outweighed by the ability to raise rents when turnover occurs.

That said, all three for-profit companies interviewed in this study – two of which develop *and* manage their properties – were quite committed to building sociability and community in their buildings. They cited it as part of their inherent mission and corporate culture as opposed to a clear-cut business goal.

Kevington Building Corporation's District Main (Vancouver)

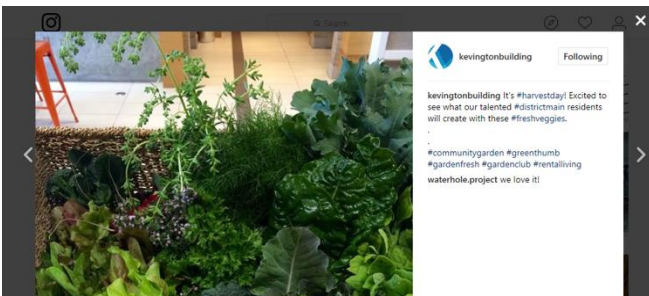
Kevington's tagline **'buildings inspiring people, people inspiring buildings'** is a crisp, clear articulation of the importance it places on thoughtful design, consistent and creative community animation, and storytelling that reinforces its ethos (through social media in particular.) District Main (two side-by-side buildings comprising almost 80 rental units) is a testament to what happens when you thoughtfully align effective social design with a small but well-resourced team with the right skills and community-building outlook.

In other [local studies](#) on fostering sociability in multi-family buildings, Kevington staff have confirmed that they experience low turnover and very high tenant referrals. But they have also pointed out a paradox: though their socially-oriented management style results in tenants staying longer and treating the space with respect, the strong feeling of 'home' and belonging created for tenants also results in some residents feeling more entitled and making more demands than less engaged tenants might.

The fact that this family-owned company continues to be clearly devoted to a high level of tenant service shows that a strong and strategically implemented corporate mission can override temptations to value maximized profitability over positive tenant experience.

“ A Kevington property is about more than just a great building. It's a place where thriving communities are embraced and welcomed, and the individual is celebrated. We believe that creating positive living and workspaces fosters vibrant and healthy communities. When you lease a Kevington property, you get a sense of belonging.

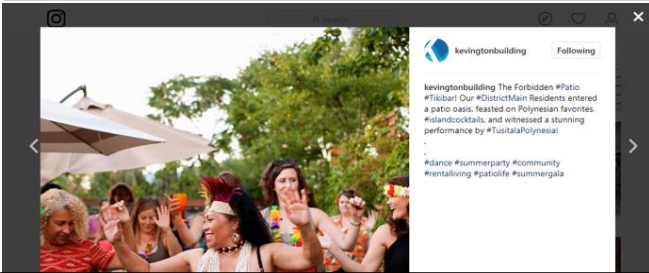
Kevington Website



Kevington staff maintain extensive patio gardens, including enough fruit trees to be considered an orchard, and honey-producing bees on the roof. Produce is shared with tenants.



District Main's lobby is home to local art exhibits and social gatherings. The central stairwell leads to the shared outdoor patio above.



Frequent tenant socials take place at District Main on the large west-facing communal patio.

Concert Properties was established in 1989 with a mandate to develop assured rental housing, and is fully owned by union and management pension funds. Since then, it has become a diversified real estate enterprise with assets in excess of \$3.6 billion. Concert has a strong market rental portfolio (approximately 4200 units), with developments in Greater Vancouver, Greater Victoria and Toronto.

Concert prides itself on its role as a community builder, carving out an internal project called '[CommunityWorks](#)' through which it "contributes to not-for-profit causes, parks and recreation, education and training programs." The focus of these efforts, however, doesn't appear to be tenant or building-centric but outward-facing, philanthropic types of activity that staff, tenants and partners are encouraged to participate in.

An interview with Beverly Greene, Senior VP Property Management, focused more on Concert's efforts to increase social connections among tenants.

The biggest events that Concert organizes focused on social connection, are annual tenant appreciation events for each building, which include free food and entertainment. Greene reports varied but generally strong success with these, noting that they work best in buildings with lots of children. Other successful events have been movie nights with free popcorn and pop, kids' afternoon movies in the summer, wine and cheese parties during winter holidays, ice cream days, and sponsored fitness classes like yoga or zumba (Concert pays half, tenants pay around \$4 for a class.) One of the least successful experiments she mentioned was coffee mornings in lounges (people are too busy to really stop and engage).

She said that her team has also investigated various options to get tenants more involved in social connection

“

We want people picking rental as a lifestyle choice. We're trying just as hard to connect with tenants in this low vacancy era as we did when vacancy rates were much higher.

We don't want to just provide four walls for people. We want our tenants to feel valued, connected to others in the building and the community.”

Beverly Greene
Senior VP, Property Management
Concert Properties

Takeaway Questions: *Are there lessons from cohousing, co-op housing and mission-oriented non-profit rental housing that could be applied to your rental properties to decrease social isolation and engage tenants more thoughtfully?*

What level of increased tenant engagement would your staff, owners and/or directors be comfortable with?

What benefits might you see if you explicitly articulated a mission to focus on the social well-being and engagement of your tenants? How might your efforts to date in this realm accelerate if you had staff dedicated to implementing that mission?

efforts. So far it has not been that successful and no new programs have been tried. Partly this has been due to challenges working in older buildings with very few common amenity spaces, and partly because staff do not have dedicated time or expertise to manage comprehensive social programs. Newer Concert buildings are incorporating green roofs, terraced decks with BBQs, tables and lounge chairs, and other amenities such as fitness rooms, games rooms, party rooms, specialized meeting rooms, theatres, and libraries.

Greene has volunteered one of the company's high-rise rental buildings in Vancouver as a site for the City of Vancouver's 'Hey Neighbour' pilot

project, as she found the offer of people power and creative assistance to boost their efforts attractive. It will be interesting to see what 12 months of dedicated and coordinated effort will yield there, and whether it will have a lasting impact on Concert's property management practices. Greene conceded that tenant-led initiatives hadn't been strongly encouraged to date, largely because it has felt challenging enough to just get people to pay attention to event invites. But Concert is interested in strengthening the relationship between tenant and landlord, and if people got excited about connecting through the pilot, then it would look at how it could support this approach going forward.

6. When crafting community building strategies, be mindful of your tenant mix.

Tenants who share a values alignment, occupation, or stage of life often connect more easily. But diversity may be lacking in these models.

A number of truisms were observed through literature review and interviews.

- Pets, kids, and gardens create natural and safe opportunities for people to engage in casual conversation with each other. Those safe and casual connections can then deepen over time through repetition as familiarity and trust build.
- It can be challenging for busy working parents to get involved on committees or volunteer activities unless it's within an intentional community like cohousing or a co-op, where they knowingly chose that sort of involvement and barriers are actively reduced to their participation.
- Seniors with more time on their hands – and often greater levels of social isolation – can be easier to bring together, and are more likely to self-organize, especially if given encouragement and support.
- People at similar life stages or with similar interests connect more easily and perhaps more meaningfully if clustered together (students, parents, artists etc.)

Because most rental buildings contain a mix of people at various ages, from various cultural backgrounds, and engaged in different professional activities, it can be challenging to know what types of activities will be successful, and where to focus time and resources.

Interviewee observations:

Anonymous property manager: In one of their larger Vancouver rental properties there is a very active and largely self-organized seniors' social group that meets at least once a month for movie nights and game nights. Property management staff support seniors' activities through free bookings of meeting spaces, and ensuring that invitations are extended to all tenants at that life stage.

Doris Koo pointed to one of the largest and most well-regarded non-profit housing organizations in the US: [Mercy Housing](#). Working in 41 states, and managing over 48,000 rental and affordable homeownership units, Mercy Housing's mission is underpinned by a [resident-focused approach to poverty alleviation](#) that offers services that help people with various challenges at over 70% of its properties.

Acknowledging the value of connecting people in diverse life stages, but also accommodating the often very different needs of different groups, Mercy is increasingly working on developments that pair family-focused housing with seniors housing, often with common greenspace in between specially-designed buildings where kids can play and seniors can relax and engage with neighbours. It supports programs where seniors help families – and connect with youth – by providing volunteer after school care, informal tutoring and more. It also trains and compensates residents to be community health workers.

“

Although people often seek to create ties with others who are in similar life circumstances, international research has highlighted that keeping the housing for different population groups separate can have a negative effect on the health and wellbeing of all groups. [...] When planning policy emphasizes diversity, based on age, gender or cultural group, the result can be more vital, economically strong and socially resilient communities that are also healthier places to live, work, play and study.”

**Happy Homes report
Happy City**

Student Housing

Matthew Carter and Tracey Mason-Innes both discussed how student housing can harness the commonality of interests and life-stages of its tenants to deepen social connections, improve academic performance, and particularly at the graduate level, facilitate professional development and employment opportunities.

Matthew Carter cited the example of UBC's MBA House, where a large meeting room is used for alumni presentations, seminars and special events programmed by the business school. However, he saw it as a model that may not have truly met its potential, partly because non-MBA students were allowed to become tenants a

few years in, diluting the commonality of academic interests, and because there isn't a dedicated staff person animating the facility and engaging the residents. He points to Stanford's vibrant and highly sought-after [Schwab Residential Centre](#), which intentionally clusters graduate business students together and supports the community with intensive social, academic and professional programming.

Tracey Mason-Innes outlined the range of the universities' efforts to positively impact residents during the academic phase of their life. At SFU, there is a ratio of one trained and paid RA (resident advisor) per 40 upper-year undergraduate students, or 50 graduate students. RAs are further supported by RLCs (residence life coordinators), full-time SFU staff who also live in residence

Takeaway Questions: *What does your tenant mix look like? How might you bring people of similar interests or life stages together? What opportunities exist to connect people of different life stages, cultural backgrounds or interests?*

How might you encourage tenants to self-organize or support each other? How might you support and amplify their efforts (space, funds, communications etc.)?

buildings. RAs and RLCs act as peer mentors, conflict mediators, connectors to health and academic resources, and social organizers.

SFU students also have the opportunity to become part of special '[Living-Learning Communities](#)' that allow them to live on the same floor as students with similar interests, and benefit from mentorship and programming to help them thrive. Communities include Engaged Global Citizenship, Beedie School of Business Undergraduates, Leadership Empowerment and Development, and the Indigenous Student Cultural House.

7. Engage early, engage often, engage strategically.

Natural champions may emerge organically given the right conditions, but sustained community-building amongst residents requires intentionality and resourcing. The earlier and more thoughtfully you engage residents, the deeper and wider your efforts will go.

Think about all possible touch-points as opportunities to create culture, reinforce norms, and invite a feeling of community and openness. If residents feel part of something bigger they'll engage more enthusiastically.

Examples:

Options For Homes:

Formed in the 1990s and structured as a non-profit, Options For Homes develops affordable condominiums for people in the Greater Toronto area. Its mission is *"To contribute to a more equitable distribution of wealth in society by making the benefits of homeownership accessible to more people."* To date, it has helped over 3,100 households become homeowners.

It [achieves affordability](#) for middle-income buyers by spreading the word at events in libraries and other community spaces (instead of pricey condo advertising), by eschewing typical for-profit developer profits, and by offering a payment-free shared appreciation loan to each buyer for up to 15% of the unit sale price. When owners sell, they share any increase in value with Options For Homes, which reinvests the proceeds in future similar developments.

During the two to three-year development phase, Options updates buyers on development progress via bi-monthly meetings and building-specific email newsletters. This is an opportunity to answer people's questions, keep them informed of key milestones, communicate Options' unique culture and mission, and build community among future neighbours.



This [video](#) shows how the long journey of community building within one Options condo in Toronto's Distillery District spilled over into residents becoming invested in the development of their wider neighbourhood.

CEO Heather Tremain notes that because of these facilitated pre-occupancy gatherings, tenants begin to self-organize and socialize well in advance of moving in together. Options also hosts parties and tours at holidays and key development milestones: Christmas, ground-breaking, site tours to meet builders, openings, etc.

When a building is ready, there is a months-long transition process where the condominium legally changes hands from Options ownership to strata ownership. In some projects, the new owners have identified improvements they would like to make to their building and these have been paid for from residual development contingencies. Later, owners have access to strata budgets, and tend to be more collaborative around improving or repurposing shared spaces.

Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation: sustainability programming

Though it has always had an inherent focus on economic and social sustainability, CCOC began to focus on the environmental aspect of sustainability about 12 years ago. This was prompted by a realization that “environmental chickens were going to come home to roost” with escalating energy costs, changes in local climate etc. However, instead of just working out mitigation strategies, it decided to include tenants in its theory of change, which was as much about setting new norms of behaviour as it was about changes in building systems and structures. This focus creates an opportunity for interested residents to engage.

Fast forward 10 years and all CCOC buildings have undergone sustainability improvements. New buildings are being built to very high standards, like the five-building [Beaver Barracks](#) development, and an upcoming Passive House building.

Under the green commitments program, a team of three full-time [Membership & Communications staff](#), including one Sustainability Facilitator, is responsible for “membership and volunteer engagement, corporate communications, and community partnerships. They work to involve tenants in energy conservation, recycling, gardening and neighbourhood issues and to promote CCOC through events and activities that build a sense of community.”

Beyond the Green Commitments pledges, three specific outreach campaigns have been created and more are planned: eating greener/urban agriculture, using less water, and reducing phantom power use.

“We create engagement opportunities around sustainability initiatives, but the outcomes are increased sociability and sense of belonging, and resiliency.”

Meg McCallum
Director, Membership and Communications, CCOC



Beaver Barracks, over 200 units of affordable rental apartments and townhomes.

Artscape’s Value Exchange Program:

Coming out of an evaluation of a particular building that wasn’t as engaged or socially connected as it would have liked, Artscape decided it needed more intentionality in its housing programming. It piloted a [Value Exchange Program](#) in two new live/work buildings, where each resident was asked to make a pledge of five hours per

month of volunteer service in the arts & culture community. The pilot project showed so much promise that Artscape will be including it in three upcoming live/work rental and condo developments, taking the number of participants from about 50 to over 200.

Here's how it works. When a prospective tenant or buyer looks into an Artscape development, they are made aware of the mandatory involvement in the Value Exchange Program. If they want to be part of the new development, they have to put together a proposal for what they'll do with their five hours per month. A selection committee vets proposals. The prospective tenants or buyers are not required to know exactly how or where they will act on their pledge; Artscape's full-time manager of community services is there to help connect people with partners who might be interested in their skills, and connect residents with similar commitments for possible collaboration. Because tenants and buyers are often signing leases and purchase agreements a year or more in advance of occupancy, Artscape fosters this community right away, organizing opportunities for residents to meet their future neighbours and getting some going on their volunteering pledges if they're keen.

Though Artscape acknowledged that the program has been a lot of work to get going, it expects that it will become more and more streamlined and self-managed over time. Artscape has found that the program is helping to create very engaged, empowered, and cohesive groups of residents who are actively feeding into and enriching the organization's broader mission. Though it does require some dedicated staff time, the program requires very little additional funding, and doesn't require large amounts of space. This creative program addresses both social isolation and a prominent barrier to people participating in volunteer and community activities: the feeling that they don't have anything to offer, or don't know where to start.

8. Everyday community-building and tenant engagement is more effective than the BIG event.

A clear and consistent strategy, strategic partnerships, and staff or resident committees specifically tasked with social connections and engagement can make modest budgets go a long way.

All of the housing organizations interviewed for this report put time and money into larger seasonal celebrations or tenant appreciation events. The most expensive single events reported were annual tenant appreciation event. Two of three for-profit rental buildings said they spent over \$10,000 a year on tenant social activities, not including upkeep of common spaces and amenities. But most organizations reported spending very little annually on gatherings.

Many examples in sections above show how low-cost activities like gardening, eating together, sharing skills, tools and time, all build community. With a small amount of smart organizing, amazing things bubble up.

Examples:

CCOC: Through an academic partnership with Carleton University PhD students, CCOC put together a sophisticated sustainability outreach and engagement program and green commitments impact-tracking system at very modest cost. It also makes \$1,400/year available for tenant-led activities, and \$3,500/year for staff-led

activities with tenants. Its three-person membership and communications team is guided by a very clear mission and calendar of activities, and is complemented by a volunteer committee composed of tenant and community members. Its work feeds into multiple strategic goals around sustainability, resilience, governance, and engagement, so all costs are easily justified.

Anonymous property manager: Centralized property management staff and resident building managers are all involved in getting word out to tenants about opportunities to connect and socialize, and work to encourage tenants to come forward with ideas, offering small amounts of financial support to help with good ideas for tenant appreciation events or purchase of games. Depending on the size of a development, social activity budgets can range from \$2,000/year to \$10,000/year.

Tap into grant funding: A number of small grant programs exist in B.C. to support community-building efforts between neighbours. This type of small-scale fundraising not only allows for additional funds, but builds community and capacity in the teams working on applications, implementation and reporting.

Vancouver Foundation: Both Vancouver Cohousing and The James mentioned great experiences accessing funding through Neighbourhood Small Grants and Greenest City Neighbourhood Small Grants. The [Vancouver Foundation website](#) offers ideas and encouragement from past recipients. The small grants model has been so successful that other community foundations around B.C. are implementing the model. Vancouver Foundation's goal is to make the grants accessible to people in all corners of B.C. eventually. It has shared their learnings from the project [here](#).

City of Victoria: For neighbourhood projects that “animate public space, develop and enhance a sense of community and leave a positive legacy,” the City offers [‘My Great Neighbourhood’](#) grants of up to \$5,000.

Building Resilient Neighbourhoods: This Victoria-based project managed by SHIFT Collaborative offers [micro-grants](#), which in the last year supported 20 tenant-led projects or gatherings in multi-unit buildings.

9. Effective communication is frequent, varied, and as much as possible, in person.

Don't try to cover every communications medium. Find out what your tenants already use, and commit to a small set of platforms that you can manage well.

Communication techniques and tools varied greatly between interview subjects, with email being the one tool used consistently by all groups. Two of the for-profit rental groups mentioned only being able to do one-way emailing due to privacy restrictions, but other groups got permission from residents to share emails for topical listservs and personal communications.

Social media was common in many models, sometimes formally managed by a landlord or property manager, and sometimes arising organically among residents as a self-organizing tool.

None of the interviewees reported using other available tools like [Bazinga](#), [TheVillage.io](#), or [GoNeighbour.org](#). (For an inventory of relevant online tools for connecting residents or fostering neighbourhood community sharing, see Aylin Tavakoli's [Supporting Friendlier, More Neighbourly Multi-Unit Buildings in Vancouver](#).)

All interviewees reported that getting good turnout at events required getting the word out in every format possible, repeatedly, with face-to-face invitations yielding the greatest buy-in.

Examples:

Vancouver Cohousing: Because of the intensive committee structure and consensus decision-making model, this group displayed the most in-depth resident-led systems for communicating and problem solving. Emails, google groups, social media and [kanban boards](#) (a lean system concept for work-sharing) are used on a regular basis. A special process committee keeps the overall systems working sanely, and they've invested in capacity building such as a workshop on conflict transformation.

Athletes Village Housing Co-operative: Email, Facebook groups for specific topics (clothing swaps, kids activities etc), and even [Slack](#) are used by members of Athletes Village to organize themselves. Notice boards and elevators are also areas where people can learn about activities and issues. One tenant has even decided to take on kids' birthday announcements, posting a monthly notice in elevators including all known birthdays that month.

Options For Homes: During the development process, regular building-specific eNewsletters are circulated to members/purchasers, answering questions posed during in-person meetings and updating on progress, and email listservs are set up so that neighbours can communicate. They are also working on a new CRM tool (customer relationship management) that will include a purchasers' portal and systematize a series of customizable emails at various touch-points in the lifecycle of a development. Once a new condo is transferred over to its strata, direct communications are no longer managed by Options.

Artscape has a vibrant social media presence, and some buildings have their own Facebook groups and pages. Staff put together an eNewsletter for each individual commercial and live/work building. Currently the main Artscape Facebook page focuses on its own events, initiatives and news, but the organization plans to more proactively share resources and opportunities of broader interest with its growing community. It is also in the process of expanding its CRM into being a rich tenant/member portal for communicating with Artscape and sharing with the broader Artscape network.

CCOC is intentional about every communications touch-point, always making sure to keep the tone positive, celebrate victories and continually remind tenants of gatherings and neighbourhood events, daily sustainability actions they can take, and other opportunities available to become more engaged in CCOC decision-making.

Its communications and engagement strategy goes well beyond getting people out to events, onto committees, and suggesting ideas for events and initiatives: it's about behaviour change and a conscious evolution of shared norms.

While CCOC uses email, monthly newsletters, social media, posters, and other physical materials like detailed tenant handbooks and calendars to communicate, it still says that face to face is the most potent way to inform, engage, and build relationships.

Its membership and communications strategy is deeply informed by the community-based social marketing theory developed by Doug McKenzie-Mohr. [McKenzie-Mohr's techniques](#) emphasize “direct contact among community members and the removal of structural barriers, since research suggests that such approaches are often most likely to bring about behaviour change.” Barriers to socializing and engaging can be physical ones imposed by building structure, or they can be language or culture-oriented, or economic. CCOC staff work diligently to remove barriers or work creatively around constraints.

“

If you want to create new norms of behavior, you have to embody the norms you want to see, in all forms of communication and in all actions. There are many opportunities to set, embody, and celebrate those norms: look for all possible touch-points. All players need to be singing from the same songbook: cleaners, property managers, tenant custodians, staff etc. Never use a condescending or critical tone, always praise success. [...]

“Most people are drawn to the ‘magnetic middle’: not to exceed a goal, but not to be at the bottom on the pack. The goal over time is to move the middle upwards, in terms of performance & norms. People innately want to be part of something successful, something measured and tangible, not abstract. Giving regular positive feedback makes people tend towards trying harder.”

Meg McCallum

Director of Membership & Communications, CCOC

10. Measure what matters to your vision.

Consider your organizational mission and think about how you might advance it further by engaging residents more creatively. What could you achieve with strategically deployed resources? Which meaningful, measurable indicators might you track?

Few interviewees spent significant time or energy identifying metrics or tracking efforts at increasing social connections or encouraging sharing and collaboration. Most reported that they put energy and resources into the activities because it was the right thing to do, it supported the larger vision, or it just made developments obviously happier and healthier places to be. Some also described how focusing on sociability, sustainability or tenant engagement increased staff morale and retention. Measuring results wasn't essential to them, because no one was demanding that information. However, most interviewees commented that having stronger impact metrics would support the business case for making investments in community building, and that if they could find time to do it, they would.

The most typical examples of tracking metrics were output-focused: number of people showing up at events, shared meals, or meetings for example. Some did event evaluations or comment boxes in lobbies.

Tracey Mason-Innes at **SFU Student Housing** outlined their tracking of outcomes. Because it is to a certain degree responsible for student well-being and performance, SFU's Residence Life program conducts detailed tenant surveys every two years, and has robust information on how peer and staff supports and shared amenities impact student well-being and academic performance. The program also benchmarks those studies against other

educational institutions. Resident advisors do a needs assessment with each student resident at the beginning of the year to identify what types of supports they might require.

CCOC has initiated a regular tenant satisfaction survey. Meg McCallum said *“Up until 2 years ago, I would have said our work was justified based on values alone, with no tracking of numbers etc. Now we’re tracking participation, budgets, satisfaction, etc, to try and quantify our impact and maximize the social impact.”*

Artscape is undertaking a project called the Thriving Artists Initiative, which will attempt to measure the impact of clustering workspace and other supports for artists.

Doris Koo mentioned that many funders would love to see outcome-focused reporting on programs that address social isolation and other issues faced by low- and moderate-income tenants, but that this information can be difficult to compile, other than anecdotally. However, groups like Mercy Housing are attempting this type of reporting by doing longitudinal studies that track the health status of seniors before and after interventions by community health workers at their housing developments.

Takeaway Comment

If forward-thinking players in the affordable housing, social inclusion and resiliency fields can get better at measuring what works, it will be easier for policy makers and funders to get behind supporting the work. Clear examples and compelling stories will help to shift the industry and scale working concepts.

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