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# Social Wellbeing and Sociability in Multi-family Housing Design

## Executive Summary

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Social wellbeing – the degree to which we feel a sense of belonging, or how connected we feel to others and to our community – is vital for health. Connecting with others is a key part of living a healthy life and functioning well in the world.

Yet social isolation and loneliness are persistent issues in Canadian cities. In 2012, a [survey](#) by the Vancouver Foundation revealed that social isolation was the primary concern of Metro Vancouver residents, a more significant concern than even housing affordability.

The design of the environments in which we spend most of our time – our homes – plays a significant role in fostering our social wellbeing. The design of our homes and neighbourhoods can support (or hinder) us to be ‘out and about’, meeting others and building important local relationships.

As Canada strives to curb urban sprawl and build more livable, affordable and compact cities and towns, the demand for multi-family housing has rapidly increased. The nature of home is changing in our cities.

As cities try to address the simultaneous challenges of affordability and wellbeing, it is crucial to identify design strategies for multi-family housing that foster positive social connectedness – we need homes and communities that bring people together in positive, meaningful ways.

This report summarizes the research and industry practice that links on-site design and social wellbeing in multi-family housing. We have distilled these learnings in ten main principles. Together, these principles frame the research, and are associated with guidelines and strategies to best support design for social wellbeing. We have included strategies for each principle below:



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1. **Doing things together.** Residents who have opportunities to do meaningful or enjoyable things together are more likely to develop a sense of trust and connection;
  - Provide common spaces that foster healthy interactions among people of different ages and interests.
  - Include recreational and social opportunities that foster connections between people of different ages and from different backgrounds.
  - Create spaces and policies that enable people to keep and interact with pets.
2. **Exposure.** People who live in spaces that give them a greater sense of control over their exposure to others are more likely to build positive social connections;
  - Provide clearly delineated private, semi private and public spaces.
  - Ensure that multi-family housing unit design promotes feelings of privacy and helps to control perceptions of density.
3. **Tenure.** The longer people can stay in their community, the greater the bonds of trust and local social connection;
  - Ensure that the design and mix of dwellings can meet residents' current and anticipated needs over time.
  - Create spaces that enable programming for diverse age groups so tenants have the option to remain in the same building over the long term.
  - Provide legal frameworks that allow tenants to stay in their home for many years – i.e. provide security of tenure.
4. **Social group size.** Social group size has a direct influence on the quality and intensity of trusting relationships that people develop;
  - Gather homes into clusters and sub-clusters that foster social relationships at various levels of intensity, from intimate to casual.
  - Ensure residents experience regular, close contact with no more than several dozen people in semi-private spaces.
5. **Feeling of safety.** People are more likely to build trusting and meaningful relationships in environments that feel safe;
  - Design places that are accessible and feel secure.
  - Implement collective approaches that allow neighbours to protect and take care of the community together.
  - Design spaces and information systems that help people intuitively way-find and interact with their environment.



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6. **Participation.** Residents who are involved in project design and site management are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and contribute to their community;
  - Include adequate places for meetings, gatherings and co-creation.
  - Develop and implement meaningful public engagement activities during all design stages.
  - Ensure every resident has the opportunity to play an important role, and feels a stake in the ongoing preservation and maintenance of the area.
7. **Walkability.** Mixed-use neighbourhoods that encourage walking are most likely to be associated with positive social encounters and a strong sense of community;
  - Create accessible spaces and connections that promote walking, biking and casual social encounters.
  - Build flexible vehicle parking infrastructure that accommodates various uses and alternate future demand.
  - Locate housing so that shops and services are within an easy walking distance on a safe, comfortable route.
8. **Nature.** Access to nature is strongly linked to positive neighbourhood relationships and trust among community members;
  - Ensure that interior and exterior spaces offer residents the ability to experience nature with all their senses.
  - Create programs that empower community members to participate in the improvement and care of green spaces together.
  - Allow residents to experience nature at various scales from micro to macro.
9. **Comfort.** People are more likely to engage with others in environments that feel pleasant and comfortable;
  - Maximize residents' exposure to pleasant environmental conditions and minimize exposure to unpleasant and unpredictable sensations.
  - Ensure that residents have physical and social tools to allow common spaces work for everyone.
10. **Culture and values.** People feel a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to places that reflect their culture, values and sense of self.
  - Use aesthetic interventions to differentiate housing units and to help create a unique visual identity for each.
  - Provide opportunities and spaces for creativity, cultural and community expression.
  - Ensure that places help people experience culture and history.



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Multi-family housing offers both opportunities and challenges for supporting social connections and building a sense of community. When we foster social connectedness in multi-family housing, we help people to develop a sense of belonging, not just with their neighbours, but also with the wider community. We all benefit when communities are strong and resilient.



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# Introduction: Social Connections, Wellbeing, and Multi-family Housing

“Connect... With the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.”

(Aked et al., 2008, Five Ways to Well-being, p. 5)

All of us need to feel close to and valued by other people in our lives. Connecting with others is a key part of living a healthy life and functioning well in the world<sup>1</sup>. This is social wellbeing – the degree to which we feel connected to others and to our community.

The evidence is clear: social wellbeing is crucial for health. People who report high levels of social wellbeing have better immune function. They also experience positive physiological effects that can lower the risk of many chronic diseases, including heart disease<sup>2</sup> and mental illness<sup>3</sup>.

Beyond helping to maintain good physical health, having positive relationships with others helps us become more resilient, so that we can better cope with life’s challenges<sup>4</sup>. At the neighbourhood level, the social ties we make – the kind of relationships that are nurtured by trips to the corner coffee shop and chats on the sidewalk – build on each other to foster a strong sense of community. Spontaneous “bumping into” neighbours, brief (seemingly trivial) conversations, or just waving hello can help to encourage a sense of trust and connection between people, which is vital for the health of the community as a whole.

Yet social isolation and loneliness are persistent issues in Canadian cities. In 2012, a survey by the Vancouver Foundation revealed that social isolation was the primary concern of Metro Vancouver residents, a more significant concern than even housing affordability<sup>5</sup>.

Researchers are now learning more about how social isolation and loneliness – related, but different concepts – are linked to social wellbeing and health. Social isolation refers to the number and frequency of connections we make with others. A person can be socially isolated, but not necessarily lonely, if they prefer little



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contact with others<sup>6</sup>. Loneliness is more about our expectations – whether our hopes for social connections match the reality. In other words, what matters is not whether you are alone, but whether you *feel* alone. A person can have many social contacts throughout the day, yet still feel lonely. Living alone, lacking a social network and having few and irregular social contacts are indicators of social isolation<sup>7</sup>. Some disadvantaged groups in our society, including the elderly, those with diverse abilities, and people living on low incomes, suffer the most from loneliness<sup>8</sup>. Both social isolation and loneliness are associated with poorer health and reduced life expectancy<sup>9</sup>.

Built environments can play a significant role in fostering social wellbeing, in part by supporting people to be ‘out and about’, meeting others and building important local relationships<sup>10</sup>. Researchers have found that streets, pathways, and public spaces that are safe, accessible to all, aesthetically pleasing, and responsive to local culture can go a long way to supporting a strong sense of community and combatting isolation and loneliness.

Due to population growth and limited land availability near job centres, policymakers, planners, and developers are advocating for greater density in urban environments. There is a growing desire to de-emphasize sprawling, auto-dependent communities, and instead favour connected, walkable and mixed use neighbourhoods<sup>11</sup>.

Developing these kinds of more compact neighbourhoods, in which residents can easily access shops and services by walking or cycling, is vital to help people to connect with one another. But so are seemingly minor interventions, like strategically locating park benches, adding playgrounds for children, or enhancing common entries for buildings. These strategies can help foster stronger connections between people and the places they share.

So, we know that many elements of the design of our built environments influence social wellbeing. But we want to focus on the place where people spend most of their time: home.

We spend 90 percent of our time indoors, much of that time in our homes. It’s where we eat, sleep, socialize with friends and family, and often even work. But the nature of home is changing in Canadian cities.

The increasing emphasis on higher density and more compact communities has led to a rapid increase in multi-family housing across the country, especially since the 2008-2009 recession. Multi-family housing is a general form of housing that is available in various forms, like garden apartments, duplexes, townhouses, mid-rises, and high-rises.



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Compared to single-family housing, multi-family units are relatively affordable, and they use less of the limited land available for new residential construction. High-density developments require less land per housing unit, so those developments can be more consistent with the goal of creating affordable housing<sup>12</sup>. Multi-family housing is usually also considered more sustainable and energy-efficient than single-family housing. In cities and towns across Canada, demand for multi-family housing is stronger than ever.

Just like the design of our neighbourhoods, the design of the inside and outside of our homes is critically important for our social wellbeing. The design and form of multi-family housing can vary significantly, but the majority of the research we have reviewed focuses on the experience of living in high-rise buildings.

Research over several decades shows that residents of high-rises have challenges with making friends and building social bonds with their neighbours<sup>13</sup>. Recent surveys, including the 2012 study by the Vancouver Foundation, have found that residents of single-family homes are more than twice as likely to trust or help out their neighbours than those who live in high-rises<sup>14</sup>. The social isolation many residents feel while living in high-rises is linked to higher rates of mental health issues<sup>15</sup>. Families with children are particularly vulnerable<sup>16</sup>. This is especially the case with families who live on higher floors, in part because the necessary use of elevators makes it difficult to supervise children out-of-doors<sup>17</sup>, and limits children's independence as they grow into their early teens. Practically speaking, it is harder to supervise a child 20 floors away than it is to watch them from a nearby kitchen window.

When researchers dug deeper, they found that living in high-rises placed more restrictions on residents than did other forms of housing – residents of high-rises live in more restricted living areas, they have less direct access with the outdoors, and they are forced to share common spaces with others who are not family.

As cities try to address the simultaneous challenges of affordability and wellbeing, it is crucial to identify design strategies for multi-family housing that foster positive social connectedness. We need strategies that bring people together in positive, meaningful ways.

In order to create neighbourhoods and homes that foster social wellbeing, we need to design spaces that help reduce social isolation and loneliness. We can do that by ensuring that planning, programming and design brings people together for casual, trust-building interactions or take part in activities together when they wish.

Our goal with this project is to offer a set of evidence-based principles and ideas to help community planners, developers, and residents build multi-family housing and neighbourhoods that bring people together, helping them to connect in



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meaningful ways.

Our key question is: how can we use design to create and strengthen social relationships in multi-family housing?

In this report, we briefly summarize the research from environmental psychology, sociology and public health,<sup>1</sup> and present ways in which on-site design can increase social wellbeing for residents of multi-family housing. Our primary area of discussion is at the building level, but we do offer other insights on buildings' relationships with their neighbourhoods and highlight patterns that cities can replicate.

<sup>1</sup> Although we have conducted a deep and extensive literature review, some of the research is older – even stretching back to the 1980s. This highlights the need for further research about the links between social wellbeing and the design of multi-family housing.



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## Key Principles

How can we plan and design multi-family housing environments that provide powerful opportunities to support social wellbeing and happiness for all? Based on our multidisciplinary review of the research and promising practices in the design of thriving homes and communities that promote social connections, we have organized the most relevant findings into ten key principles:

1. **Doing things together.** Residents who have opportunities to do meaningful or enjoyable things together are more likely to develop a sense of trust and connection;
2. **Exposure.** People who live in spaces that give them a greater sense of control over their exposure to others are more likely to build positive social connections;
3. **Tenure.** The longer that people can stay in their community, the greater the bonds of trust and social connection;
4. **Social group size.** Social group size has a direct influence on the type and intensity of trusting relationships that people develop;
5. **Feeling of safety.** People are more likely to build trusting and meaningful relationships in environments that feel safe;
6. **Participation.** Residents who are involved in project design and site management processes are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and contribute to their community;
7. **Walkability.** Mixed use neighbourhoods that encourage walking are most likely to be associated with positive social encounters and a strong sense of community;
8. **Nature.** Access to nature is strongly linked to positive neighbourhood relationships and trust among community members;
9. **Comfort.** Neighbours are more likely to engage with others in environments that feel pleasant and comfortable;
10. **Culture and values.** People feel a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to places that reflect their culture, values and sense of self.

A summary of the research and the rationale for each principle are presented below.



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# 1. Doing things together

## **Residents who have opportunities to do meaningful or enjoyable things together are more likely to develop a sense of trust and connection.**

People can build a rich community life based on what might seem like insignificant meetings with others. Those meetings can happen in a wide variety of spaces – from places that are designed to bring people together to more private areas that allow residents to view other people from a distance. Even providing opportunities for nodding and smiling is important for social wellbeing<sup>1</sup>.

Semi-private, shared spaces within or between buildings, such as facilities and amenity rooms, encourage casual social encounters among residents. These shared areas include mailboxes<sup>2</sup>, kitchens, dining rooms, laundry rooms, workshops, and lending libraries<sup>3</sup>. Shared rooms are especially important for residents of high-rise buildings to establish social bonds with neighbours. Including amenities and shared rooms in diverse levels of the building can help to provide opportunities for social interaction. Various physical and digital tools can be also be used to bring residents of high-rises together<sup>4</sup>.

Outdoor common areas designated for residents can also encourage casual social interactions<sup>5</sup>, in part by offering opportunities to have fun together. Spaces that are available only to the building's residents ensure people experience relative privacy, helping to reduce feelings of crowdedness<sup>6</sup>. Common private and semi-private spaces, like seating areas in common entrances to buildings, create opportunities for residents to interact. This can help to build a strong sense of community<sup>7</sup>.

Although people often seek to create ties with others who are in similar life circumstances<sup>8</sup>, 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. There are numerous opportunities to promote age diversity in multi-family housing such as community gardens, childcare programs assisted by senior residents, bike repair stations and shared toolsheds. When planning policy emphasizes diversity, based on age, gender or cultural group, the result can be more vital, economically strong and socially resilient communities<sup>9</sup> that are also healthier places to live, work, play and study.



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Many people consider their pets to be important members of their families, and policies that support pet ownership can play an important role in nurturing social connections. Taking care of pets, especially dogs, can encourage people to get out into their communities. Pet owners are therefore more likely to develop social relationships with their neighbours and others who live nearby<sup>10</sup>. The interaction between humans and pets helps with depression, stress, loneliness, grief, and social isolation<sup>11</sup>.

**Cohousing neighbourhoods** are communities that combine the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of shared resources and community living. Residents of cohousing developments usually own individual homes, but come together with other families to enjoy common areas, including shared kitchens, children's playrooms, workshops and office areas. Shared meals and events among residents are regular occurrences in a common house or building. Cohousing residents participate in the planning, design, and ongoing management of their community. (Canadian Cohousing Network, 2016).

In cohousing communities, residents are responsible for different activities and play an important role in their communities. Sharing resources gives residents more opportunities to engage and develop meaningful relationships, through a variety of activities including weekly dinners, gardening, or childcare programs.

(McCamant & Durrett, 1994)

Strategies that foster opportunities to do meaningful or enjoyable things together:

- Provide common spaces that foster healthy interactions among people of different ages and interests. For instance, create features and activities in shared corridors that offer opportunities for neighbours to engage with each other in a casual way.
- Include recreational and social opportunities that foster connections between people of different ages and from different backgrounds. Create programs and activities that allow residents to share their interests and knowledge with the community.
- Create spaces and policies that enable people to keep and interact with pets. For instance, offer public or semi-public amenities that draw pet owners, such as an outdoor station to wash dogs.



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## 2. Exposure

**People who live in spaces that give them a greater sense of control over their exposure to others are more likely to build positive social connections.**

Regardless of where we live, our social wellbeing is linked to the sense of control we have over our surroundings.

Researchers have found that residents of high-rises move homes more frequently than residents of other forms of housing. In high-rise developments, there is also a higher risk of the neglect of common spaces and an architectural design that supports anonymity. All these factors interfere with people's ability to make meaningful social connections with one another<sup>1</sup>.

Various studies show that social wellbeing is generally worse among those residents who live on the upper floors of high-rise buildings. For instance, some early research indicated that residents of garden apartments have more friends than those who live on upper floors<sup>2</sup>. Many residents of high-rises have plenty of opportunities to interact with other people, but few of those opportunities result in developing a strong sense of trust and friendship. Designing balconies and roof gardens as spaces for social interaction can help residents connect and promote a sense of belonging. To best foster social wellbeing, researchers suggest that high-density, low-rise developments have three or four storeys<sup>3</sup>.

Front porches can also help residents to connect with each other and their broader community. Researchers have found that front porches are correlated with residents' feelings of satisfaction and belonging<sup>4</sup>. The positioning of front porches is important. When a porch is near the common areas of a development, residents are more likely to informally connect with their neighbours. When porches are closer to the street, residents have more opportunities to meet passers-by and feel more a part of street life<sup>5</sup>. In terms of design, social interactions are most likely to occur when a porch is located at a maximum 20 feet distance from the street or common areas<sup>6</sup>. Ideally, the porch should be as wide as an 8 foot wide room<sup>7</sup>, allowing people to place furniture and create a comfortable gathering space. Placing the passage to the front door of the home at the side of the porch rather than in the middle, will keep the porch as a functioning living space<sup>8</sup>.

Beyond front porches, entrances to residential units present opportunities for neighbours to meet and engage in casual encounters. Entrances should be within talking distance of one another, so that people can easily talk with their neighbours<sup>9</sup>. Common meeting spaces should be in central, easy to see locations,



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like in ground floor lobbies or on the way to shopping areas.

It is important that people have opportunities to bump into their neighbours, but it is also vital that the design of the building allows residents to control when and where those interactions happen. Residents of high-rises have less ability than residents of single-family homes to control day-to-day social interactions, often being forced to interact with others within sometimes constricted spaces when they enter and exit a building or use an elevator. These forced interactions can interfere with a sense of privacy<sup>10</sup>. Giving residents control over their own private spaces can reduce feelings of exposure.

Providing a distinct separation between private and public spaces can help residents to maintain their sense of control over a space, and to help them feel safe. Designers, architects and landscape architects can help to achieve a strong sense of separation through simple strategies, like installing flower boxes or other vegetation, front porches or gates<sup>11</sup>. Fences are the obvious choice to provide separation, but it's important to build fences low enough so that they allow people to easily see each other and connect verbally, if they wish<sup>12</sup>.

In low-rise or townhouse/duplex developments, architects and planners can help to reduce feelings of crowdedness by increasing the open space between homes and filling that space with green landscaping<sup>13</sup>. Although shared yards can help residents to experience a greater sense of connection to those around them, greater green spaces can also aid in separating and controlling residents' exposure to their neighbours. People are less likely to use large green areas in ways that lead to social connections<sup>14</sup>.

When designing apartments, mid-rise and high-rise buildings, it is recommended to separate them, leaving a space of at least 30 feet between buildings<sup>15</sup>. Streets and alleys aid to maintain this sense of separation and make sure each home receives enough natural sunlight. Finally, locating the 'open' side or windowed façade of one home facing the 'closed' or solid side of another, with a side yard in between, can help to assure privacy and separation.

Strategies that help control residents' exposure to others:

- Provide clearly delineated private, shared private, and public spaces. For instance, design spaces to create a clear and gradual transition between private and public realms.
- Ensure that multi-family housing unit design promotes feelings of privacy and helps to control perceptions of density. For instance, create both amenity spaces for the public and other amenity spaces that are solely for residents.



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### 3. Tenure

#### **The longer people can stay in their community, the greater the bonds of trust and local social connection.**

When people live in one place for a long time period, they tend to report greater satisfaction, sense of community, and neighbourhood trust<sup>1</sup>. Residents can also develop a stronger, more positive view of their community when they are able to create long-lasting social bonds with neighbours and participate together in local activities<sup>2</sup>.

To achieve optimum social wellbeing for all members of the community, places need to support the interaction of a wide variety of population groups - ideally, people of different ages, ethnicities, races, income levels, and household sizes. Clearly, different types of housing attract different target populations<sup>3</sup>. However, current socio-economic constraints often create homogeneous and less robust neighbourhoods.

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<sup>4</sup>. New tenure arrangements, such as co-ownership with government and mechanisms such as rent control and subsidies, allow low-income families to live in vibrant and thriving communities. Planning policies that encourage a broad range of population groups to live within one area can lead to vital, economically strong communities that support good social wellbeing for their residents<sup>5</sup>.

Multi-family housing developments that offer a mix of housing types allow people to stay within their community for longer, as their needs change over time<sup>6</sup>. This mix of housing types can serve as an important 'hook' for many people who are downsizing from single- to multi-family housing<sup>7</sup>. A mix of housing types can help build social resilience in the community.

Another option is to develop a cooperative model of ownership for housing units that enables owners to expand, contract or re-design their units as residents' needs change. For example, residents could adapt their housing when a new baby is born, or when children leave for university. Once the development has been built and occupied, it is then important to recommend policies or strategies that welcome a mix of people at different life stages, and then allow them flexibility to stay in their home as their needs change<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, common, flexible spaces, such as workshops or play areas for children, can go a long way in supporting interaction among neighbours. Ideally, residents



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are empowered to co-manage common spaces to address specific individual needs. While three or four families might enjoy a flexible space to be used as a childcare unit for one year, for example, that same space could later be transformed into a teenage hang-out area the next year.

Strategies that allow people to stay in their community:

- Ensure that the design and mix of dwellings can meet residents' current and anticipated needs over time. For instance, design housing with flexible spaces, such as dividable rooms, secondary suites and the potential for exterior additions.
- Create spaces that enable programming for diverse age groups so tenants can visualize living in the same building over the long term.
- Provide legal frameworks that allow tenants to stay in their home for many years – i.e. provide security of tenure. For instance, include mechanisms for low-income families, such as rent controls, subsidies, and neighbour-sponsored assistance.



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### 4. Social group size

#### **Social group size has a direct influence on the quality and intensity of trusting relationships that people develop.**

To maximize their social wellbeing, residents of multi-family housing developments need opportunities to meet and greet some – but not too many – of their fellow residents. Neighbours are most likely to interact and bond with one another when only a limited number of them use the same semi-public access paths or staircases<sup>1</sup>.

If there are too many people living within one development, there is a potential for residents to encounter more unfamiliar faces than they can keep track of. This causes anxiety and often leads people to retreat from social interaction. This issue can be addressed by designing and maintaining places where smaller groups of people can interact and children can play<sup>2</sup>. When developments include hundreds of units, researchers recommend dividing the project into smaller clusters in order to reduce perceived density and feelings of crowdedness. This also allows residents to get to know their neighbours on a deeper level<sup>3</sup>.

In multi-family housing, crowdedness is always a potential concern. If people feel crowded, those perceptions can corrode their interactions with neighbours and others in their community<sup>4</sup>. But supporting connections to nature can help -when residents can see, smell and access trees, grass and open space, their perceptions of crowdedness lessen<sup>5</sup>.

People tend to be more satisfied with their homes in developments with fewer units<sup>6</sup>. Some research has found that residents report the highest satisfaction when no more than 10 households share an entrance. In order to avoid crowding, yet still give people ample opportunity to connect with one another and build trust, some studies suggest that the optimum number of people sharing semi-private common space is 4-12 households<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, people who live in apartments, townhouses, and single-family homes report a preference for 6-8 households sharing a private common area. Research also suggests that 10 is the ideal number of households for sharing a laundry room<sup>8</sup>.

At the same time, residents in cohousing communities thrive in much larger social clusters. Cohousing is designed to emphasize social contact among community members while preserving and respecting individual privacy. In cohousing communities, private homes, which contain all the features of conventional homes, are built among common facilities such as open spaces, courtyards, playgrounds



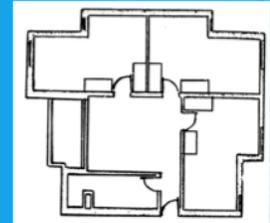
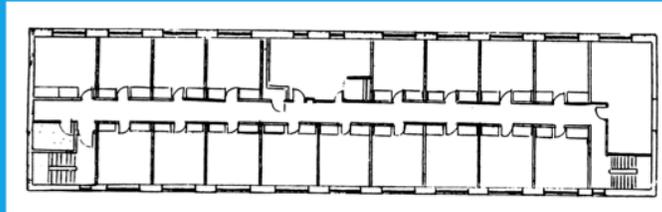
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or shared buildings<sup>9</sup>. These types of communities usually aim to include 25 to 35 households. However, that ideal number of households can vary. In some well-established cohousing projects in Denmark, the threshold for a successful community is considered to be 50 adults<sup>10</sup>.

In 1973, researchers Valins and Baum compared two types of dormitory designs. They found that the design that imposed interaction with 34 other residents (the 'corridor' design) had a negative effect on social interaction. Residents who lived in dormitories with that 'corridor' design tended to avoid social interaction, cooperate less in group assignments, and experience more stress than residents living in a dormitory in which they interacted with only 3 to 5 other people (the 'suite' design):



(Valins & Baum, 1973, p. 424, 426)

Strategies to promote ideal social group sizes:

- Gather homes into clusters and sub-clusters that foster social relationships at various levels of intensity, from intimate to casual.
- Ensure residents experience regular, close contact with no more than several dozen people in semi-private spaces.



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## 5. Feelings of safety

### **People are more likely to build trusting and meaningful relationships in environments that feel safe.**

In 1961, Jane Jacobs advocated street design that ensured ‘eyes on the street’ – the notion that, when residents and business owners are connected to street level and are able to observe what is happening there, they can help build neighbourhood safety. Those feelings of safety help people to perceive a greater sense of community<sup>1</sup>. Recent research backs up this concept – if residents live too far from public spaces to easily see what is happening in those spaces, they report feeling less safe<sup>2</sup>. When the distance among people exceeds 25 feet, they start losing contact and familiarity with the people around them<sup>3</sup>. People living on the higher floors of residential towers with little access to life in public spaces report feelings of isolation<sup>4</sup>.

Other safety issues specific to high-rises include concerns about children playing in and around the building. Parents’ concerns about the safety of their children in high-rises can lead to keeping their children indoors, preventing both children and adults from building relationships with other families<sup>5</sup>.

If people feel safe in their communities, they are more likely to spend time outside their homes, interacting with others. They are also more likely to feel satisfied with their neighbourhood<sup>6</sup>. In general, people will not feel part of a community in which they feel uncomfortable or unsafe<sup>7</sup>. This can interfere with their ability or desire to connect with others<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, designers of public or semi-private spaces need to consider aesthetics, safety and security together.

When spatial design offers clear way-finding and orientation, residents feel safer and more in control of their decisions. Signage and other visual cues are important ways to help people to know how to behave in shared spaces. When people know the appropriate etiquette in common areas, like on new trails or paths, those signals can help to minimize friction between users and provide opportunities for positive social interactions<sup>9</sup>.

The design elements of multi-family housing that can help residents feel more safe include windows that can be closed and secured, clear and direct escape routes in case of emergency, well illuminated common areas, and common area windows with clear views to the street.

Aspects of neighbourhoods that decrease the feeling of safety include graffiti, litter, and derelict buildings. Common areas that do not have a clear sense of



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ownerships and responsibility – so-called ‘indefensible spaces’<sup>10</sup>– can easily become sites of neglect, vandalism, and illegal activities<sup>11</sup>. Unused spaces can turn into ‘blind spots’ in which residents withdraw from each other. An empty parking lot is a good example of a ‘blind spot’<sup>12</sup>.

Defensible spaces, on the other hand, are ‘owned’ spaces, where the residents themselves feel responsible for their appearance and maintenance. Residents can organize social activities in these spaces, and feel safe and welcomed.

By designating semi-private spaces where people can easily view others in the area, architects and landscape designers can help residents better connect with neighbours and feel an attachment to their homes. Other good ideas include building shorter paths between buildings or common areas, making sure areas are accessible for people of all ages and abilities, and ensuring that common spaces are visually interesting. On the other hand, designers can avoid empty and antisocial areas by avoiding blank walls when possible. People tend to bypass blank walls and they can discourage social interactions. These design elements can affect safety and allow people to feel more comfortable outside their homes.

Strategies to build environments that feel safe:

- Design spaces that are accessible and feel secure. For instance, design courtyards so that neighbours can easily look out for each other from their homes.
- Implement collective approaches that allow neighbours to protect and take care of the community together.
- Design spaces and information systems that help people intuitively way-find and interact with their environment. For instance, ensure that pathways are clear, visible, and intuitive to navigate.



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## 6. Participation

### **Residents who are involved in project design and site management are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and contribute to their community.**

When people participate in the shaping of their environment, that participation fosters a sense of empowerment and connection to the community<sup>1</sup>. Communities become more cohesive when residents are part of the design and management process. At the very least, members of the public should be given an opportunity to express their thoughts regarding a new development and how they feel it will impact their experience of place<sup>2</sup>.

Residents' local knowledge can significantly improve future development and planning<sup>3</sup>. Renewal projects are more likely to succeed when residents are offered the opportunity to make choices about the process. This helps preserve existing social networks and strengthen the connections in the neighbourhood.

The benefits of public participation in planning processes include enhanced social relationships and higher levels of trust among participants<sup>4</sup>. Various models of participation can be implemented to involve residents from the early stages of a project. For instance, many co-housing models demand that residents invest time in the design process of the community. Once the development is established, residents are expected to help manage and maintain the community. Involving residents so actively can be arduous, but the process itself fosters stronger ties. Addressing the specific needs of residents during the design process can also lower construction costs by as much as 10 to 20%<sup>5</sup>.

Cities can support and encourage the promotion of building groups and associations by facilitating planning processes, postponing the sale of city land to allow time for building groups to organize and find funding<sup>6</sup>, and fast-tracking collective community models. Municipalities can also help promote residents' engagement. For example, local governments in Germany provide consultation and meeting spaces for those interested in establishing a Baugruppen building group<sup>7</sup>. They also offer online resources and forums where people can search for a community that matches their housing and lifestyle preferences.



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*Baugruppen* or “building groups” is a co-housing model in which private owners work together with architects to build multi-family housing projects. Popular in Germany, in this approach, owners and architects use a collaborative, democratic process to discuss their needs and concerns. This process results in a greater commitment to the project’s success, generates trust and creates a community that best suits residents’ specific needs. The process also contributes to a greater sense of pride, respect, and belonging. However, the approach does take extra time, and it can be challenging for the participants to reach an agreement.

(Bridger, 2015; Eliason 2014a; Roberts, 2013)

Strategies that enable people to participate in the design and management of multi-family housing:

- Include adequate places for meetings, gatherings and co-creation.
- Develop and implement meaningful public engagement activities during all design stages. For instance, bring together potential future residents to be part of the design process.
- Ensure that every resident has the opportunity to play an important role, and feels they have a stake in the ongoing preservation and maintenance of the area. For instance, advocate to all levels of government to support collective community models like co-housing.



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## 7. Walkability

**Mixed-use neighbourhoods that encourage walking are most likely to be associated with positive social encounters and a strong sense of community.**

People who live in homes within ‘walkable’ communities walk more and drive less than people who live in sprawling, automobile-dependent communities. Walkable communities have the following characteristics:

- They are centrally located, so that public transit is easier to access and commute distances are shorter;
- They are compact, with higher residential densities, so that residents can more easily walk to visit friends or shop;
- They consist of mixed uses within the same small geographical area, combining homes, shops, and services;
- They have interconnected street networks (such as a ‘gridiron’ street layout), rather than cul-de-sacs or large, busy highways, that can discourage walking and cycling; and,
- The landscape in the community is designed for pedestrians, with narrow streets, wide sidewalks, safe street crossings, and architecture that is easily accessible and visually appealing.

Residents in walkable communities are more likely to be socially engaged, trust their neighbours, and get involved in local decision-making<sup>1</sup>. Communities in which people can access local shops and services through walking or cycling allow for more casual connections with neighbours and visitors<sup>2</sup>.

Walkable neighbourhoods also ensure that communities are more resilient in times of crisis. In natural disasters, those neighbourhoods characterized by greater sense of community were found to recover more effectively because people knew their neighbours<sup>3</sup>.

Residents of dense, mixed use neighbourhoods with functioning public transport and highly accessible street networks tend to choose an active transportation mode more often. They are therefore more likely to run into neighbours and friends when walking or cycling to and from public transit stations.

Urban sprawl undermines social capital because relying on private vehicles for transportation limits opportunities for people to connect with each other in person. People in car-dependent communities more often report feelings of disconnectedness and isolation than do residents of more walkable communities<sup>4</sup>. Local policies for new developments, which typically require a minimum of two



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parking spots per unit, can discourage walking and exacerbate urban sprawl by reducing neighbourhood density<sup>5</sup>.

Fortunately, parking design and policy strategies can be shifted to make a positive impact in the ways that people connect with each other. Social capital and 'sense of community' can be strengthened by increasing the commercial floor space to land area ratio (FAR), and reducing the amount of surface area designated for parking<sup>6</sup>. Where governments once set minimum parking requirements, new national guidelines in the United Kingdom now recommend a maximum level of 1.5 off-street parking spaces per house. Flexible parking requirements that include one parking space per unit, on-street parking, or even no parking at all can contribute to more compact and livable developments<sup>7</sup>. They can also encourage walking, which fosters stronger social wellbeing.

Accessible pathways to local services, coupled with maximum connectivity to local amenities, can encourage walking among residents and visitors. Buildings should be located close to the street, with interesting fronts, such as porches, to make walking more engaging and pleasurable<sup>8</sup>. Where local shops cannot be provided within a walking distance, planners and developers should make sure that effective public transit is available<sup>9</sup>.

Creating street opportunities that promote social encounters within the development is also important. The provision of local 'everyday public spaces' creates opportunities for people to connect<sup>10</sup>. Seating and other street furniture, as well as other design elements like trees, support the use of commercial streets as social spaces and encourage social interaction. Providing access to amenities on site and within walking distance enables residents to save time they would have spent commuting. Residents can use this extra time for different purposes, such as connecting with neighbours and the people they love. People are better able to build local relationships when they have more free time<sup>11</sup>.

On site mixed land-use can include meeting/work spaces, day care centres, indoor workout spaces<sup>12</sup>, roof-top gardens<sup>13</sup>, shops and cafés, office services, and more. Other experts suggest that if possible, day-care centers should be integrated within a project, especially if there are more than two hundred families living in the development<sup>14</sup>. This can be done by turning a ground level apartment with adjacent open space into a daycare.



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Residents of the Olympic Village project in Vancouver, BC, were found to be very satisfied with their mixed use neighbourhood. Compared to their former neighbourhoods, these residents were more physically active and felt they had more opportunities to socialize. They also felt attached to their homes and were deeply engaged with the community. However, low-income residents, who found local services so unaffordable that they had to travel greater distances for basic needs, had a somewhat different reaction.

(Westerhoff, 2015)

Strategies to promote social encounters in mixed use neighbourhoods:

- Create accessible spaces and connections that promote walking, biking, and casual social encounters.
- Build flexible vehicle parking infrastructure that accommodates various uses and alternate future demand. For instance, design parkades so that they can be also be used for recreational purposes, such as street hockey.
- Locate housing so that shops and services are within an easy walking distance on a safe, comfortable route.



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## 8. Nature

### **Access to nature is strongly linked to positive neighbourhood relationships and trust among community members.**

The evidence is clear – green space plays an important role in fostering social interactions and building community cohesion<sup>1</sup>. Within neighbourhoods, both the quality and quantity of green space can affect the degree to which people connect with one another<sup>2</sup>. People who live near green public spaces are more involved in social activities, receive more visitors at home, and know more of their neighbours. They also feel a greater sense of belonging, and feel that their neighbours care and support one another<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, a shortage of green space within urban environments has been linked to feelings of loneliness and lack of social support<sup>4</sup>. Green space of any kind in cities is one of the best correlates of health and happiness<sup>5</sup>.

Green spaces have a complex effect on social interactions, which makes this relationship hard to study<sup>6</sup>. For instance, urban green space that is perceived as unsafe or poorly maintained can discourage social connections and interfere with residents' social<sup>7</sup> lives. At the same time, green spaces that resemble wild, or naturalistic landscapes have the most positive impact on users. Therefore, providing pro-social natural spaces involves a fine balance between nurturing feelings of safety and providing contact with more complex natural ecosystems.

Local urban parks need to be well maintained and provide attractive recreational facilities to support social connectedness<sup>8</sup>. The most beneficial green spaces in urban environments are those that respond to the needs of diverse groups in the community, including residents of various ages, physical abilities, and cultural groups<sup>9</sup>. For instance, the most inclusive park spaces include a playground for children, wheelchair accessible paths, and places for individuals and groups to sit and gather.

When people have access to nature and urban green spaces, they are more likely to participate and collaborate in the community<sup>10</sup>. For instance, community gardens help people to build strong social bonds in their neighbourhood and create meaningful social relationships over time<sup>11</sup>. People who are involved in community gardening have stronger social networks, feel a strong connection to their neighbourhood, and enjoy enhanced feelings of collective usefulness<sup>12</sup>.

The existence and placement of trees near homes and businesses is important. Places and streets with trees tend to attract people, especially when they are close



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to buildings<sup>13</sup>. Within neighbourhoods, people are more satisfied and happy with their homes when they have views of trees from their windows, compared to having simply open space views. Tree canopy is also strongly correlated with social capital<sup>14</sup>. When people are in direct contact with nature, they are more likely to appreciate their environment and engage in sustainable living. Vertical herb gardens in the corridors or staircases promote casual encounters and allow residents to be part of a collective effort. Window boxes, interior gardens and climbing plants bring nature to interior spaces and improve air quality. The use of aromatic vegetation can also help to customize different spaces or environments. There is also a wide variety of plants that provide specific health benefits, such as having antimicrobial properties, improving air quality, promoting feelings of relaxation or stimulating concentration in people.

Programed activities around gardening bring people from different ages together. Gardens can be designed and included in different spaces along the development. Rooftop community gardens in high-rise buildings provide residents opportunities for social encounters<sup>15</sup> and helps them build social networks.

Strategies that promote access to nature in multi-family housing:

- Ensure that interior and exterior spaces offer residents the ability to experience nature with all their senses. For instance, locate windows where residents can overlook trees and other natural features.
- Create programs that empower community members to participate in the improvement and care of green spaces together.
- Allow residents to experience nature at various scales, from micro to macro. For instance, ensure that people can see or touch nature in their homes and in all areas of the development.



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## 9. Comfort

### **People are more likely to engage with others in environments that feel pleasant and comfortable.**

In both interior and exterior spaces, residents are more likely to linger and chat with neighbours in pleasant and comfortable environments. Some of the key qualities of spaces that can facilitate social interaction include:

- location – accessibility and proximity to other communal resources (school, market) to support casual encounters;
- amenities – places to stop and sit, on a park bench or at a café table, so that encounters can be more than fleeting;
- adaptability – spaces without specific or prescribed functions that enable spontaneous, impromptu activities; homeliness – a sense of safety and familiarity;
- pleasantness – clean and peaceful, or bustling and lively; and
- specialness – qualities or aesthetics that make that space unique<sup>1</sup>.

Aesthetics matter - the character, design, and architectural quality of a neighbourhood all influence residents' sense of community<sup>2</sup>. Building design, landscaping, visual appearance and building height have been found to be the most important aspects of design<sup>3</sup>. Various studies suggest that architects and developers can use visual complexity in height, color, roof shape and size to create distinction and support households' attachment to their homes. Visual complexity can also be achieved by varying fence types<sup>4</sup>. However, no matter how innovative and ground-breaking a design is, it is important to consider the character of the place. Buildings that do not comply with the project's surroundings are seen as disruptive and can create hostility<sup>5</sup>.

Other aspects of aesthetics have been shown to affect the way people interact with one another in a neighbourhood. For instance, sharp angles and blank walls can trigger feelings of fear and aversion, while rounded shapes and natural views can help to induce calm<sup>6</sup>. Other elements that help people feel comfortable and enjoy being in a space include good natural light, views, and art. The inclusion of a wide variety of spaces enables residents to engage in different activities and avoid a monotonous environment. Designers of theme parks, for example, use nostalgic architecture, bright colors, and pleasant scents to trigger positive memories, which in turn create feelings of comfort<sup>7</sup>. People are more likely to interact in positive, trusting ways when they feel comfortable and safe.



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Depending on the type of environment that we want to achieve, it is important to consider design strategies. Shape and colour can have a direct impact on people. For instance, blue, tall, and curvilinear spaces, with sky views, are described as more likely to encourage pleasant, sociable and creative environments. On the other hand, red, low-ceilinged, rectilinear environments have been found to be more likely to encourage focus, concentration and study<sup>8</sup>.

Research in environmental psychology tells us that air pollution, noise and crowding can corrode mental health and social wellbeing<sup>9</sup>. People who don't experience enough daylight exposure tend to suffer more from sadness, fatigue, and even clinical depression<sup>10</sup>.

To ensure that homes are as pleasant and comfortable as possible, homes should be designed so that the most-used rooms receive as much natural light as possible. Residents need to be allowed to control the amount of light and heat within each room. It is also important to create quiet and calm atmospheres in homes as much as possible. Noise can be reduced using materials, design strategies and location. For instance, laundry rooms can be located away from common meeting spaces, so that the noise from the machines does not interfere with conversations<sup>11</sup>.

Some outdoor spaces and corridors in multi-family housing offer shelter from weather conditions, allowing residents to be comfortable even during poor weather. Covered corridors can be used as front porches where children play. It is also important to consider services such as toilets, sitting spaces and water fountains that are close to shared spaces whenever the development has more than 25 units.

Strategies that promote environments that feel pleasant and comfortable:

- Maximize residents' exposure to pleasant environmental conditions and minimize exposure to unpleasant and unpredictable sensations. For instance, offer comfortable outdoor spaces where people can sit and enjoy casual conversations.
- Ensure that residents have physical and social tools to allow common spaces work for everyone. For instance, include washroom spaces in common areas that are shared by 100 or more residents. These types of facilities can support residents to stay longer and socialize with their neighbours.



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## 10. Culture and Values

### **People feel a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to places that reflect their culture, values and sense of self.**

Multi-family housing typically offers dozens or hundreds of housing units that are identical (or very similar) in appearance. However, if residents can personalize their space, they can create an identity within and outside of their home that differentiates it as their unique space. Defining a domain can be done using fencing, hedges, and planting. Unique characteristics can include different exterior colors, small gardens or flower boxes, house numbers and family name signs<sup>12</sup>. A sense of visual variety in façade design is important for reducing perceived density<sup>13</sup>. The ability to grow flowers and vegetables in residents' gardens has been linked to a stronger sense of community and a general feeling of friendlier places<sup>14</sup>.

Older neighbourhoods that have been created over time integrate cultural and historical values that are part of the community's identity. In places of historical significance, it's important to maintain local traditions and support the distinctive character of that place<sup>15</sup>. The use of different materials and construction processes can strengthen unique cultural values and create place identity.

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.

Case studies from co-housing show that when residents share common values, they are more likely to develop a unique identity and gradually feel a greater sense of belonging. When management regulations align with these common values, social opportunities are created that strengthen the community's vision.

Strategies to promote a collective identity and a sense of belonging:

- Use aesthetic interventions to differentiate housing units and to help create a unique visual identity. For instance, encourage residents to customize their home's front entrance by choosing colours for their front doors, porches or garage doors.
- Provide opportunities and spaces for creativity, cultural and community expression. For instance, encourage cultural games and the use of an activity board to promote interests in common areas.
- Ensure that places help people experience culture and history.



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## Summary

Feeling close to, and valued by, other people is a fundamental human need, and one that contributes to functioning well in the world. We all need strong social relationships that are supportive, encouraging, and meaningful. But we also benefit from regular, light encounters with other members of our community. Every friendly ‘hello’ exchanged in person with neighbours or even strangers can contribute to good health and wellbeing.

The design and characteristics of our built environments can make a significant impact on how we live our day-to-day lives – and therefore, how (or if) we connect with others. This is especially the case when it comes to our homes, the places in which we spend most of our time. Multi-family housing offers both opportunities and challenges for supporting social connections and building a sense of community. By fostering social connectedness in multi-family housing, we help people to develop a sense of belonging, not just with their neighbours, but also with the wider community. We all benefit when communities are strong and resilient.

Along with this report, Happy City offers a Multi-Family Housing Social Wellbeing Design Toolkit. This accessible, visual toolkit will help policymakers, community planners, architects, developers, and residents build multi-family housing and neighbourhoods that nurture the social bonds and trusting relationships that keep us healthy, happy and resilient in the long run.



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## Appendix: Definition of Terms

**Multi-family housing:** Multi-family housing is generally considered to be property with a minimum of five units, sharing at least one wall (Skobba, 2012). This housing form includes a variety of housing types (e.g. low/high-rise apartments, duplexes, townhouses) and of different tenure. They are often situated in central locations, where services and transit are available. Advantages of multi-family housing include their central location, relatively lower costs (though price depends on the specific location and project itself), smaller ecological footprint, and opportunities they provide for social interactions. The disadvantages of multi-family housing include noise from neighbors, and policies dictated by community or property managers that can influence residents' ability to do what they want (for example, use of semi-private space or pets in the residence policies). Multi-family housing suits people's needs throughout different phases in life, and tenants are therefore characterized by different socio-demographic backgrounds, though by in large they tend to attract smaller households. Units are usually smaller in size compared to single-family homes.

**Social capital:** There are many definitions for social capital in researched literature. The following is used by the OECD: "...the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and therefore work together" (Human Capital - A Bigger Picture, n.d.; p. 102). Or, as Putnam puts it: "'social capital' refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995; p. 66).

**Social well-being:** Social well-being describes "...how people experience their connections with others and the strength of those relationships" (National Accounts of Well-being, n.d.). It represents how individuals are involved with other people and with their communities ("Psychological and social wellbeing," n.d.). Sociable places, where people are doing things for each other, contribute to higher levels of subjective well-being and create more resilient communities. They also generate economic and cultural value resulting from social networks (Rupasingha, Goetz, & Freshwater, 2000; *Seven Wellbeing Principles to guide placemaking practice*, 2015).



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**Subjective well-being (SWB):** Refers to how people think and feel about their lives, such as their emotional state, satisfaction with particular aspects of their life, or with life overall, where assessment is based on one's feelings (also referred to as their psychological well-being). L. R. Larson, Jennings, & Cloutier (2016) cites Rath & Harter (2010) saying that SWB became the “*currency of a life that matters*”. *Such perspectives suggest that wellbeing is ultimately a social and public good...*. Research have shown that SWB (e.g. positive moods, hopefulness, and/or optimism) is correlated with physical and mental health and longevity and it is strongly affected by one's network of positive social relations that affect and are affected by trust (Diener & Chan, 2011; John F. & Shun, 2010; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014; Seven Wellbeing Principles to guide placemaking practice, 2015; Subramanian, Kim, & Kawachi, 2002; Veenstra et al., 2005).