Let's Grow Old Together

A Study on Creating Intentional Communities to Maximize the Social Resilience of Elderly Torontonians

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INTRODUCTION

- The number of seniors in Toronto, Canada is expected to double by 2046 [1]
- 20% of seniors living in Toronto in 2012-2014 had mobility issues, 32% regularly experienced some level of discomfort or pain, and 39% had a physical or mental disability [2]
- These figures indicate most elderly people do not have any disabilities or chronic pain, but those who do require unique supports
- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed grave inadequacies in long-term care system and exacerbated the loneliness epidemic among seniors (27% of elderly Torontonians live alone) [2]
- Toronto's infrastructure must be reconfigured with social resilience in mind to ensure residents age comfortably and with dignity

KEY DEFINITIONS

- Aging in Place (v.) - growing older in the same home without needing to relocate
- Cohousing (n.) - a method of intentional community design in which residents share communal spaces for activities like cooking, eating, recreation, and leisure while maintaining access to their own private quarters [3]
- Social Resilience (n.) - the ability of a group or individual to maintain fulfilling communal bonds in the aftermath of a traumatic event such as a pandemic

OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

- Analyzed existing strategies for improving community well-being
- Explored interventions that increased seniors' social resilience
- Examined impacts of traumatic events on social resilience and how seniors typically cope in a social capacity

CASE STUDIES

- Highlighted best practices and opportunities for improvement from cohousing projects in Vancouver, Canada; the Netherlands; and the United States
- Adapted these learnings to the Toronto context and set a blueprint to support a Just Recovery from the pandemic

CASE STUDIES

REGION	BACKGROUND	BEST PRACTICES	AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
VANCOUVER, CANADA	• Number of seniors is growing at twice the rate of the overall population [4] • Severe natural disasters, opioid epidemic, lack of affordable housing, and COVID-19 pandemic have forced residents to rely on each other more • City of Vancouver has established a network of partners to offer more supportive and affordable housing and widen the variety of housing options for the elderly [5]	• Wide sidewalks, inviting gardens, private and semi-private courtyards, playgrounds, and dedicated spaces where people can explore hobbies together [6] • Walkable neighbourhoods close to community services and public transit [6] • Maintaining small group sizes, fostering collaboration, encouraging frequent and casual encounters, incorporating nature, and increasing the length of resident tenure [7] • EXAMPLES: Quayside Village Cohousing Development and Vancouver Cohousing in Kensington-Cedar Cottage	• Since 2017, only 33% of approved housing units were considered affordable for people earning less than $80,000 per year [8]; median household income in 2015 was $72,662 [9] • City has committed to increasing the number of affordable housing units to 50% by 2030 [10], but more immediate measures must be taken • Need for more privacy in certain housing developments • High startup and living expenses have made cohousing projects inaccessible to many marginalized groups
NETHERLANDS	• By 2030, more than 25% of people will be 65 years or older [11] • Cohousing projects have existed since the 1970s [12] • Strong seniors' advocacy across the country [13] and an affordable housing model that incorporates financial need into housing allocation [14] • Local authorities and housing agencies partner with seniors' groups to expand cohousing infrastructure [15]	• Empower residents to live as independently as possible while aging in place [16] • Attract tenants from multiple generations [17] • Prioritize resident happiness and autonomy • Encourage volunteerism • Focus on what the body is able to do, not what it cannot • Offer a variety of restaurants, cafés, bars, shops, and activities [16] • EXAMPLES: Humanitas Apartments for Life in Bergweg and Deventer	• Many seniors' homes have shut down recently, leaving access to long-term care for those with only the most extreme care needs [18] • Some residents find cohousing overly rule-based and paternalistic [18] • Need for mutually agreed-upon codes of conduct to minimize the likelihood and impact of conflict [18] • Design of buildings and social structures must better protect residents' right to data privacy [18]
UNITED STATES	• Nursing homes are the default option for senior residences, but often fail to provide adequate care [19] • Advocacy for home and community-based support is on the rise [19] • Cohousing is the fastest growing form of intentional living in the country [20]	• Celebrate mutual support and spirituality instead of materialism and ownership [21] • Seniors can give and receive care from each other instead of relying on family, friends, and institutions [21] • Emphasis on nurturing friendships • Residents are empowered to design and run activities for each other [22] • EXAMPLE: ElderSpirit Community, Virginia	• Need for more cultural diversity • More healthcare support is needed on site for certain residents • More cohousing developments should be built in and around urban centres to facilitate access to emergency healthcare

LITERATURE REVIEW RESULTS

- Elderly resilience is correlated with community well-being
- Wellness outcomes improve when residents have access to physical spaces that prioritize walkability, nature, privacy, and safety
- Affordable housing is essential to ensuring all seniors have a dignified place to live
- Programming that encourages interaction, learning, skills development, fitness, and independence supports healthier aging
- Cohousing can bring all these elements together

IMPLICATIONS FOR TORONTO

- Encourage aging in place
- Incorporate seniors' feedback in community design
- Retrofit existing buildings to accommodate the elderly
- Focus on establishing welcoming communal areas like coffee lounges, rooftop patios, gardens, libraries, and movie rooms
- Improve ventilation and designate quarantine zones in case of future pandemics
- Invite residency from people of all ages to improve diversity and community longevity
- Include public services like hair salons, fitness centres, and childminding services in building design

CONCLUSION & OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Toronto's population is aging rapidly. However, the city's infrastructure was not designed to support such unprecedented growth in the number of people over the age of 65. City and community planners must act quickly to provide more appropriate housing for the elderly, especially given the mounting climate crisis and ongoing pandemic. Future research should explore the social impacts of other forms of collaborative housing, such as co-operatives and Indigenous longhouses. It should also address more precise methods of ensuring personal safety for seniors. This data will ultimately help build a more socially resilient city, not just for seniors but for all Torontonians.

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