# Generating Capital Through Cooperative Living

A Case Study of Pacific Gardens Cohousing Community

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#### Introduction

In response to growing issues surrounding the lack of suitable and affordable housing in the Vancouver Island region, this report aims to assess the viability of cohousing as a potential alternative to conventional housing models based on its ability to meet human needs while preserving and enhancing various forms of capital. Using an ecological economics perspective, our definition of 'capital' in this case is not limited to *financial capital*: it extends to *physical capital* (such as the structures and tangible items that make up a home [or other buildings or infrastructure), *natural capital* (including natural resources and ecosystem services that support life), *human capital* (involving education, health, motivation, and happiness), *social capital* (involving trust, reciprocity, and cooperation), and *cultural capital* (referring to shared traditions or ways of living) (Daly & Farley, 2011).

The subject of cohousing was chosen for study due to its relative uniqueness in contrast to more 'mainstream' forms of housing – particularly in North America – as well as its potential suitability for addressing the variety of social, economic and environmental issues that appear as both correlations and causations of BC's evolving 'housing crisis'. The specific case chosen for study is Pacific Gardens Cohousing Community (PGCC), located in the coastal city of Nanaimo, British Columbia. As revealed below, the community at Pacific Gardens demonstrates that cohousing has the potential to radically improve each individual residents' quality of life through enhanced social connectedness and reciprocity, as well as ease the process of reducing one's ecological footprint through the sharing of land, resources, energy, household materials, skills, food, and many other forms of non-monetary capital.



Figure 1. Entrance to Pacific Gardens' Cohousing Community on 7th Street, Nanaimo

# **Research Methods**

Data for this case study project was collected almost exclusively through primary research conducted while visiting the Pacific Gardens Community Cooperative as a guest, during which I received an extensive tour of PGCC's grounds and structures and was randomly introduced to several residents of various ages and backgrounds. I also had the privilege of attending one of PGCC's weekly community potlucks, where I observed various forms of social and cultural capital being exchanged. Reflection from my interactions with residents are embedded into my discussion of findings; however, the names of those interviewed have not been provided for ethical reasons. I would like to thank long-term PGCC resident, J. Roberts, for providing me with extensive information about the history and structuring of the community.

## Background: Housing Challenges in British Columbia

Surrounded by incredible natural landscapes, supported by a diversity of economic opportunities, and host to a myriad of indigenous and immigrant cultures, it is no wonder that coastal British Columbia appeals to people of nearly all ages and backgrounds as an ideal place to call home. However, while demand for housing in BC grows steadily, market supply continues to be dictated more by what generates the greatest margins for developers, rather than what meets the social and economic challenges of the era. The resulting increases to market housing prices for middle- and working-class households (more than "65 percent for a standard twostorey home, 46.5 percent for a townhouse, and 33 percent for a condo" (Curran and Wake, 2008, p. 1) have not only made it harder for younger Canadians and immigrants to become homeowners, but have also impacted renters (especially low-income students and seniors) who now face significantly higher rates in areas that were previously considered 'affordable.' These issues have been compounded in recent years by a surge of speculative activity and 'land grabbing' by both domestic and international parties. Naturally, as the search for available and affordable housing in British Columbia becomes increasingly challenging for low- and middleincome households, the conversation surrounding this issue is broadening beyond the context of real estate economics to consider emerging externalities.

Indeed, the economic, social, and environmental ramifications of BC's housing crisis are yet to be fully realized, with indirect implications already appearing through significantly higher rates of homelessness throughout the province in recent years (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017). Meanwhile, many middle- and working-class citizens who used to be able to live in the same urban hubs where they work and play are now often forced to relocate to sprawling suburban outskirts as a result of rising housing costs. The subsequent need to commute up to 2 or 3 hours to work not only drives anthropogenic climate change through increased carbon emissions, but also decreases quality of life for commuters and their families.

While detached, single family homes were previously the most common developments to be approved by BC municipalities (and thus the most numerous), these forms of housing are now the most expensive (Curran and Wake, 2008, p. 2), not to mention the *most excessive*. Consider the sheer amount of land and resources that would be required to build the picturesque 'American dream' home for every single unit family in the world. This vision is clearly neither sustainable nor – this author also contends – desirable. Despite its appeal to those who value propriety and control (Norton & Walton-Roberts, 2000), the suburban 'debt-trap' is now perceived to be a wasteful and unrealistic investment in the minds of more progressive and ecocentric consumers. In searching for alternatives however, one must recognize that 'densification' for its own sake often has its own downsides, especially when delivered in the form of poorly planned public housing projects (Tyrnauer, 2016) or cheaply built apartment complexes that deny coinhabitants of their dignity, privacy, and opportunities to connect meaningfully with other residents.

This latter point on 'meaningful connection' is a key element that appears to be missing from most communities today, as alluded to by Taylor, Taylor, Nguyen, and Chatters (2016). Their research reveals how symptoms of depression and psychological distress can occur as a result of social isolation from friends or family, particularly in older adults. Note that this issue is arising at a time in Canada when there are now more people over the age of 65 than there are under the age of 14, and the number of elders living alone is higher than ever before (Statistics Canada, 2015). Meanwhile, young Canadians without any real capital often have no choice but to share apartments and sleep on couches just to afford rent. With these issues in mind, one cannot help but question how our populus will be prepared – never mind *motivated* – to support an aging citizenry while seeking personal fulfillment in an economic environment narrated by scarcity. As energy and housing costs rise, income disparity grows, and predictions around climate change continue to prove ominously accurate (Lewis & Conaty, 2012), surely we can find ways to build communities that guarantee affordability in perpetuity, encourage broad diversity

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of incomes, skills, and cultures, and promote engagement amongst community members for their own benefit. This is the driving inspiration behind cohousing.

## Enter Cohousing

Cohousing offers hope in our often dissociated society. Through cohousing, we can build a better place to live, a place where we know our neighbours, a place where we can enjoy a rich sense of community and contribute to a more sustainable world. (Canadian Cohousing Network, 2018).

The economic, social, and environmental pressures created by today's housing crisis (and those of previous generations) have some prompted some developers, policy makers, and individual citizens around the world to reconsider the purpose, meaning and value of 'home' and 'community'. Is a home an investment, a place, a feeling, or just a building? How much control must we have over it? Is having sufficient money and stuff all that we need to feel secure and complete? Must we make compromises or lifestyle changes to reap the rewards of community?

This is part of the thought process behind the founders of modern day cohousing, a form of collaborative and cooperative living that has the potential to completely revolutionize the way we engage with each other and our environment. The model was developed by Danish architects in the 1960's, eventually making its way to North America in the late 1980's (Canadian Cohousing Network, 2018). It was during this time period that the founders of Pacific Gardens were inspired to bring their 'kitchen-table idea' of a collaborative, cooperative community to fruition (J. Roberts, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

Canadian Cohousing Network's (2018) definition of cohousing is simple: a neighbourhood that combines "the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of shared resources and community living". It should be noted that cohousing developments throughout the world might vary significantly depending on the physical environments in which they are built, as well as the values and intentions of their residents. Most are geared towards 'intergenerational' housing, though some may cater to elders who value peace and quiet above all else. While most cohousing developments appear very different, most tend to focus their private residences around a central 'common area' that features shared amenities.

It should be emphasized that the need for individual privacy is *not* compromised in the design of a cohousing development. However, getting to know one's neighbours is an inevitable and intentional result of living in such a cooperative community. This is partly because a

cohousing development's architectural design intentionally promotes the frequent use of aesthetically appealing common spaces, encouraging social engagement amongst residents as they come and go throughout their daily activities. Most residents of cohousing communities are also called upon to contribute or engage in some small way, each week or month. This may involve the planning of community events, the cooking or clean up of group meals, the redesigning of common spaces, or the ongoing management and maintenance of the buildings. These tasks are often handled by autonomous committees of residents that are self-selected or elected. These committees may meet occasionally to discuss committee business or collaborate on related projects, depending on their skills and background (J. Roberts, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

# A Brief History of Pacific Gardens Cohousing Community

Like many successful innovations, Pacific Gardens was created with the help of likeminded people who could brainstorm ideas over food and drink, maintain perseverance over the long run, and dedicate themselves (and their financial savings) to a cause they believed in (J. Roberts, personal communication, February 16, 2018). Lacking any kind of government subsidy or access to cheap capital, the cost of the PGCC project was borne solely on the backs of its original cofounders. As a result, it took over twenty years of discussion, planning and financing before the project could break ground. In 2007, land was purchased and construction of PGCC finally began and, with the help of advertising on behalf of PGCC's resident-owned development corporation, other prospective residents became interested and chose to 'buy in' to the Pacific Gardens' strata corporation. By 'buying in', prospective residents were pre-paying for ownership of their unit, as well as their proportion of the common space to be constructed. However, not all of the 25 units were effectively sold before the project's completion. To generate the financial capital required to compete the project, some of the original cofounders made the decision to buy two or three units up-front. While these acts of dedication to the cause were instrumental in getting the PGCC completed by 2009, some owners did find themselves in a serious financial bind for several years afterward.

At the time of its completion, PGCC was valued at approximately nine million dollars, and the average price of a two-bedroom unit in the main building (which includes access to all common areas) was priced at approximately \$337,000. Because some of the original cofounders of PGCC owned more than one residence upon the project's completion, 'extra' residences were usually rented out until a suitable buyer could be found. While most cohousing communities prefer for everyone to 'own' their space (since owners tends to be more committed to the community in the long-term), current residents of PGCC seem to appreciate the diversity of incomes and family types that have come as a result of allowing rental units in the cohousing community.

It took over nine years to secure 90% ownership of the units at Pacific Gardens, and at the time of this report, one four-bedroom unit still remains for sale. Today, Pacific Gardens is now home to about 50 individuals that make up 25 households, each representing a diversity of ages, ethnicities, professions, incomes, and family sizes – from single widows to immigrant families with multiple young children – all living in community with each other (J. Roberts, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

# **Uncovering Capital At Pacific Gardens**

Based on the assertion that an intentionally organized and designed human landscape will communicate a specific set of values, (Cosgrove 1989, p. 126) it should be emphasized that architecture and design – especially in the context of cohousing – serves as a pivotal influence on how a community's capital is preserve and enhanced. By both enabling and limiting the kinds of activities that community members can participate in, the physical environment of Pacific Gardens, both its interior and exterior, becomes both "determined by and determinative of human consciousness and human practices" in the community (Cosgrove 1989, p. 123). Considering the overwhelming influence of the 'built' environment in this case, I have chosen to focus my assessment on the ways in which the cohousing community's physical capital serves to preserve or enhance all other forms of capital for its residents, especially social capital.

A vast majority of Pacific Gardens' 4.73 acre property – including a significant portion of the square footage in the main building – is dedicated as commons, or shared space. Thus, this study focuses primarily on the influence of intentionally shared spaces since the cohousing community would not be any different from a conventional luxury condominium without these communally used and managed common areas.

This study also considers the numerous processes, materials, and specialized labour required to construct and maintain a non-mainstream housing development of this scale and complexity. It reveals instances of how natural capital has been preserved through the conservation of resources, avoidance of pollutants, and reduction of carbon emissions where possible in the construction and maintenance of Pacific Gardens. This study also recognizes the sustainable building methods, energy and heating efficiency innovations, unique cooling systems, and extensive waste management systems that are integrated into the Pacific Gardens project. These considerations have proven not only to decrease the community's ecological footprint, but also add financial value to the property and decrease utility expenses, enhancing value for residents.

#### Private Units Encourage Diversity

To a layman's eyes, the 24 apartment-style units occupied by residents of PGCC appear similar to what might be found in a typical luxury condominium. However, it is worth noting that the units vary in size from one to four bedrooms, with the intention being to promote diversity in the structure, size and age of households in the community. This strategic design has proven very effective, enhancing social capital, cultural capital, and community resilience through the increased diversity of skills, backgrounds, professions, life stages, cultures, and income levels represented.

**Notes on accessibility.** Only a handful of the residential units in PGCC are considered inaccessible to wheelchairs. These units are intentionally laid out as 'loft-style' apartments to attract younger households and help promote age diversity.

#### Common Spaces Abound

The extensive list provided below contains details about the main common spaces that existed at the time that data was collected for this report. Some spaces were 'in-transition' at the time, pointing to the fact that the Pacific Gardens is a dynamic, ever-changing cohousing 'project' that adapts to the needs and interests of its inhabitants as they change and grow older. It is also worth noting that residents occasionally use different nicknames for these spaces, reflecting the varied interpretations of meaning and significance that exist within the community, and alluding to elements of cultural capital.

Some spaces are purposefully managed by certain committees made up of residents that have a vested interest in the space and what goes on there. This report does not go into detail on the workings of each specific committee but does allude to where these committees are involved in terms of common spaces.

**Notes on accessibility.** All common areas of the community are fully accessible to those with disabilities, with widened doors, plenty of handrails, and elevator access to all three

floors. Common areas are generally concentrated around the middle of the building, close to the central staircase and elevator. Aside from the laundry room (which is used by only a small portion of residents), each common area has access to an exterior patio or balcony that connects it to other common areas on that floor.



Figure 2. Each unit at Pacific Garden has a door leading into the central atrium.

1. Central atrium. This large, central hub serves as a common 'front porch' for the Pacific Gardens community. Its glass roof provides ample sunlight throughout the daytime hours, helping to heat the open space and feed the many plants that inhabit the common area. This key architectural feature not only reduces the need for artificial lighting, but also allows residents to *feel* as though they are outside while still staying relatively warm and dry even if it is raining or snowing. The glass roof also creates a 'greenhouse' effect to offset heating costs in the winter. In addition to passive solar heating through the many windows, electrical under-floor heating prevents the atrium's temperature from dropping below 15°C in colder months, when days are short and the sun is lower over the horizon.

In the summer, large fan systems at the top of the atrium, combined with air vents are the base of the building, can be opened to promote cooling airflow when

temperatures rise (see Figure 3 in Appendix A). This system can also be modified in an emergency to suppress a fire through negative air pressure. This ingenious addition was actually mandated by the City of Nanaimo's building inspection department, showing that collaboration and cooperation with the local municipality was crucial to the success of the building.

- 2. Dining hall. This large and flexible room can host the entire community for potlucks or shared meals, or be adapted for workshops, dances, movie nights, or group yoga sessions, for example (see Figure 4 in Appendix A). The entire Pacific Gardens community uses it on Thursdays to host their weekly potlucks, which fluctuates between 20 and 50 people, depending on the season and the number of guests that people have staying with them. This space can also be 'rented out' to external groups, if they are sponsored by a resident. This provides a supplemental revenue stream for the entire community, as well as a way for residents to support various projects they are involved with outside of Pacific Gardens. A section of the dining hall is set up as a sort of common 'living room', with several couches, a wall-mounted TV, a stereo, and a piano that anyone is free to play (see Figure 11 in Appendix A). The exterior 'concertina' walls in the dining hall can be opened to promote air circulation throughout common space, removing the need for air conditioning during the summer months.
- 3. Common kitchen. Attached to the dining hall, this semi-commercial kitchen includes ample counter space, two large fridges, multiple sinks and cabinets, and an industrial dishwasher. If serving a large group, cooks can open the 'bar-style' window into the kitchen to lay out food or serve plates. This kitchen also stores uncommon or rarely-used kitchen appliances that residents can borrow, as needed.
- 4. Workshop. This well-stocked and maintained workshop contains multiple workbenches, storage shelves, and a wide variety of power tools to make or fix nearly anything on site (see Figure 7 in Appendix A). The contents of this workshop were primarily donated by 'handy' residents who transitioned to PGCC from larger homes.

This room is managed by the Building & Maintenance Committee, who have the authority to issue keys to those who are properly trained on workshop safety and

power tools. Children under a certain age must be accompanied by an adult when in the workshop. The workshop is kept locked at all times for safety and security reasons.

- 5. Fitness room. This space includes an array of new and used exercise equipment, including free weights, yoga gear, a rowing machine, hoola-hoops, and a bench press (see Figure 8 in Appendix A). One of the residents is a fitness trainer. They not only use their expertise to source high quality equipment, but also use this space to generate self-employment income!
- 6. Music room. This room contains an assortment of musical instruments that are intended for any player who has some training or experience. Those who are learning are encouraged to use the piano in the dining hall. A sound barrier was added when walls for this room were constructed. This room is also occasionally used for committee meetings, community open mic nights, house concerts, or musical 'jams' amongst residents of all ages.
- 7. Kids play room and outdoor playground. Managed by PGCC's 'Happy Kids Committee', these indoor and outdoor spaces are essential common spaces for parents and their children (see Figure 9 in Appendix A). Centrally located on the main floor, the playroom room contains an assortment of toys for kids of different ages, including a complete Brio train set, foosball table, mini trampoline, slide, and chalkboard. The outdoor playground is built of wood, located adjacent to the community garden.
- 8. Talking lounge. Situated in the center of the top floor, this comfortable, multipurpose space contains a carpeted floor, multiple couches, a TV, and a large coffee table. The balcony for this room includes a splendid view of Mount Benson, as do the following two spaces listed below.
- 9. Arts & crafts room. This room is ideal for making a mess, since it includes sinks for cleanup, as well as ample storage for art supplies. Small desks are provided for kids to use during arts & crafts activities facilitated by art-loving adults, or the Happy Kids Committee.
- **10. Sewing room/teen room (in transition).** Previously called the 'teen room', this common space used to be a place when the community's young adults would

gather. Now that many of them have moved out on their own, the space is rarely used. The Collaborative Living Committee was involved in the decision to retrofit this space for a more current, relevant purpose.

In response to a growing activity and interest amongst residents who are avid textile artists, this space is currently being retrofitted into a sewing room. All furniture and equipment for this space will be donated by residents, allowing them to clear out space in their own units. It is likely that members of the unofficial 'sewing club' will set guidelines for use and access to this space once it is completed.

**11. Laundry Room**. This room includes two high efficiency (HE) washing machine and two high efficiency dryers. A sink and counter space are provided as well.

A few smaller, one-bedroom units at Pacific Gardens were intentionally designed not to have their own washer and dryer. In other cases, some residents purposefully chose not to have a washer and/or dryer, simply to reduce redundancy and free up floor space in their apartment.

Since multiple households make use of this room, committee members conducted a survey to determine the most ideal time for residents to do their laundry. This has significant reduced related tension and overlap in this space. Other guidelines have been established, for example, in the case that someone leaves their laundry in a machine for more than 5 minutes; the person who needs to use that machine next can move those clothes into their owner's hamper.

To compensate the rest of the community for the electrical costs of these machines (which are lumped in with electrical costs for other common spaces), residents who use them maintain a tally of how many loads they do in a month. They are billed \$1 per load on top of their household's monthly electricity bill.

**12. Bike room.** In an effort to reduce carbon emissions, the Pacific Gardens community collectively promotes the use of bicycles to get to run errands, pick up their kids, or purchase things at nearby shops. Residents are able to secure their bikes in a dedicated bike storage room on the ground floor of the building, with space on the floor racks set aside for those who physically cannot lift their bikes onto wall mounts, such as children or the elderly (see Figure 10 in Appendix A).

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The community recycling center doubles as the bike storage room, which is ideal for commuters who like to 'take out trash' on their way to work in the morning. The space is large enough for fit over 30 bicycles, along with numerous bins to sort a vast array of recyclables (see below).

13. Recycling and waste center. Based on the ground floor in the bike storage room, the recycling system at Pacific Gardens is extensive but highly simplified. It includes a broad range of sorting categories to avoid landfill waste wherever possible. When containers are filled, their contents are taken to a recycling exchange center that accepts clean, sorted recyclables. Clearly marked containers are provided to sort cloth, soft & hard plastics, glass, Styrofoam, bubble wrap & soft foam packaging, metal cans & foil, electronics, milk jugs & cartons, cardboard, mixed paper & newsprint, gift bags, pens & markers, batteries, zip-lock bags, desiccant pillow pockets, and 'refundables'.

With this system in place, the financial returns from 'refundables' are significant enough to fund two community dinner parties throughout each year! Furthermore, many of the items that some residents consider to be waste are often 'upcycled' for use in other residents' gardening or arts & crafts projects.

- 14. Personal storage ('the stables'). While each 'stable' is technically private space, the hallway that passes through the room is common. Each stable is approximately six-by-six feet, and can be secured be secured with a lock. Some stables were packed to overflowing, while others were less than half full, reflecting a diversity of household possessions and lifestyles.
- **15. Gardens and beehives.** Multiple, well-developed garden spaces surround the main building, serving as a prolific food sources in the harvest months (see Figure 3 in Appendix A). This includes a small greenhouse, a well-built tool shed, and multiple flowers and herb gardens. Additional 'wild space' is preserved around the property.

The common garden not only provides meaningful work and educational opportunities for residents and their families, but also supports the local ecosystem by providing additional sources for pollination, decomposition, and nutrient cycling. It is also a great place to compose food and kitchen waste. Garden plots are assigned to residents by the Gardens, Grounds & Landscape Committee based on their level of keenness, experience, and intended crops. Some plots are quite small, while others have been called "prolific," producing enough food to share throughout the community.

One of the residents is a bee-keeper. The hives they care for remain active all year, playing a vital role in the community garden and those in the surrounding neighborhood. These hives are kept behind a fenced area to prevent young children from accidentally making enemies with the bees.

- 16. Composting. Food waste and non-recyclable items are managed in a secured area outside the main building. Compostable waste is turned back to soil using a variety of different methods, including a rotating 'barrel' composter that can securely breakdown animal byproducts that would typically attract pests. Residents who are avid gardeners often have their own preferred methods for sorting and composting food waste to use as soil in future seasons.
- **17. Smoking area.** A common smoking area on the outskirts of the property (next to the duck pond) allows residents and their guests to maintain certain lifestyle habits without negatively impacting the health of others. The inconvenience of the location may also help to discourage smoking amongst residents or impressionable minors.
- 18. Natural spaces. The marshy and forested ecosystems surrounding the property were preserved by Pacific Gardens' initial development team to facilitate oxygen production, serve as a valuable carbon sink, maintain natural habitats for birds, mammals, amphibians and various native plant species. These spaces also provide significant aesthetic, educational, and recreational value to residents and guests of the community.
- 19. Parking lot & car-share station. Pacific Garden's parking lot is made of gravel, not concrete, likely to reduce environmental impacts wherever possible. In addition to biking (see 'Bike Room', above), the Pacific Gardens community promotes carpooling and car-sharing wherever possible. Some resident recently lobbied the car-sharing organization, MODO, to install one of their vehicle stations at the entrance to Pacific Gardens' driveway. This negates the need for many residents to

own their own car, avoiding high yearly costs of insurance, maintenance, and depreciation in exchange for a nominal 'per/km' rate.

# Intentional Building Design & Construction

The original founders of Pacific Gardens made every effort to adhere to environmentally responsible design and construction practices throughout the project's development, both to mitigate any negative environmental externalities as well as maximize long-term health for residents. In addition to achieving energy efficiency through conventional methods (including installing energy efficient windows and insulation), substantial considerations were made in collaboration with the project's builders to harness renewable energy and preserve natural capital wherever possible:

- Flooring. All non-carpeted floors are made of natural linoleum, composed of linseed oil, cork dust, wood flour, tree resins, and ground limestone. This nonpetroleum product is highly durable, easy to clean, and often contains recycled content.
- **Paint.** All paint used in the building is free of VOC's (volatile organic compounds), which are toxic to humans and produce tropospheric ozone and photochemical smog when combined with nitrogen oxides in the presence of sunlight.
- Avoiding off-gassing. Building materials and household appliances that 'off-gas' toxic coatings or glues were not permitted for use in the initial build. In fact, when residents discovered that a contractor had neglected this request during the construction of 'the stables' (see above), the wood product containing toxic glues was subsequently sealed with special paints to prevent future health hazards.
- Wood vs. concrete. The vertical pillars that form the main structure of the building are made of wood, not concrete, significantly reducing carbon emissions that would be required otherwise. Most of the three-story structure is framed with wood. This is important considering that concrete is "responsible for approximately 5% of global anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions" (Mahasenan, Smith, Humphreys, & Kaya 2003).
- Alternative heating. For cases of electrical failure, the building includes a wood pellet-powered heater, as well as diesel generator that can be activated in the case

of a power outage, maintaining a livable temperature and allowing each unit to use a single power outlet as their residents see fit.

- **Solar energy.** Solar panels installed on the rooftop help to offset hydroelectricity costs throughout the year.
- Shared walls. The apartment-style design of the building allows each unit to share at least two exterior walls with another household, significantly reducing building materials and energy costs for electrical heating.
- **Solar heating.** The greenhouse effect of the central atrium is key to making the space comfortable and energy efficient throughout the year. Additionally, a solar-powered water heating system was installed in the building (however, it has yet to prove cost-effective).

# Social Capital at Work

When considering what it might be like to live in a communal setting with other independent adults and their families, many people will immediately point out the nuisances that are often associated with 'roommate' situations, such as frequent messiness, interpersonal conflict, and lack of privacy. However, most residents of Pacific Gardens would likely insist that such conditions only exist in a cohousing community whose culture does not promote open, non-violent communication and shared values around cooperative living. Where healthy dynamics are fostered, many benefits of communal living can be leveraged for the betterment of individuals, communities, and the planet. Many examples can be seen in modern rooming houses, housing coops, cohousing developments, and eco-villages that are intentionally designed and managed in a way that is conducive to cooperative living (Gorenflo, 2017).

**Sharing helps people and the planet.** The continuous, mutually-beneficial sharing of common space and household items – including power tools, kitchen appliances, children's toys, musical instruments, clothing items, art supplies, exercise equipment, lawn furniture, BBQ's and living room electronics – allows all 25 households to collectively own just *one* set of everything they need. This is a substantial contribution to natural capital that reduces the amount of energy and natural resources required to produce household goods by up to 96%.

By donating used household items from their previous, single-family homes to the community, new resident can still 'downsize' without creating unnecessary waste. Very few 'new' items were purchased to furnish common space after PGCC's initial build was completed.

Donations have included a host of seasonal decorations that are put up and taken down by a few passionate residents, allowing community members to enjoy festivities in common spaces without having to purchase, apply, and store decorations in their own units throughout the year.

The ability to lend and borrow is especially helpful when it comes to personal transportation, which can significantly reduce each resident's carbon footprint. Carpooling can easily become common practice in a cohousing community like Pacific Gardens, especially when residents work, play, or learn in similar areas. In the case that a resident no longer wants or needs a household good for their unit, they can 'freecycle' it; after placing the item in a dedicated 'freecycle' area in the common space, other residents have up to two weeks to claim it before it is donated outside the cohousing community. This could include non-perishable food items, furniture, clothing, or games, to name a few examples.

**Food waste (or lack thereof).** Whenever a resident (or a group) produces (or harvests) more food than they are able to consume before it spoils, they may store it in a communal fridge and invite others in the community to take what they please. This effectively reduces food waste while helping to support others in the community.

Food, especially when cooked and eaten in a group setting, rarely goes wasted, which has a considerable impact when considering that "food waste is estimated at between 30-40 percent of the food supply," and is "the single largest component going into municipal landfills" (USDA, 2018).

**Building relationships.** In addition, the sharing of common kitchen space, tools and appliances amongst coinhabitants can provide valuable opportunities to develop interhousehold relationships, share skills and recipes, and even trade food or ingredients for other goods or favours – all excellent example of human and social capital at work. These forms of reciprocity that exists when 'living amongst friends' can support a strong sense of social connectedness amongst coinhabitants, which is known to improve quality of life and boost self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

**Saving money.** All of this sharing allows residents to retain more of their personal financial capital, effectively making it easier for them to purchase healthier and sustainably-sourced, -produced and -packaged food (which, ironically and unfortunately, often cost more than highly processed or internationally-imported items). Groups shopping trips can also help to reduce over-purchasing of rarely used or easily spoiled food items, and the implementation of

bulk shopping amongst resident can also preserve personal financial capital through enhanced economies of scale.

**Reinvesting savings.** Reducing household expenditures by sharing space also makes it easier for residents to reinvest in themselves through hobbies and education, or in their community through volunteering (especially if they choose to work less as a result of lower monthly expenses). These increases to free time and personal funds may also help to reduce stress amongst coinhabitants, subsequently improving interpersonal dynamics and facilitating more opportunities for bonding, reciprocity, gifting, and moral support.

Promoting human and natural capital investments. When living closely with others, personal development and self-improvement is often indirectly encouraged and motivated by coinhabitants who share similar interests or motivations. The compounding effects of peer-to-peer inspiration not only have the potential to encourage the adoption of healthy, active habits among residents (such as exercising harder, putting more time into meal preparation, or learning to play an instrument), but can also make it easier for residents to abide by sustainability principles of 'reduce, reuse, recycle.' This also contributes to natural capital when an ecocentric culture is perpetuated through communal chores like 'sort the recycling' or 'empty the compost' and 'house rules' that discourage the wasting of energy, heat, water, or food for the sake of the environment (if not for everyone else's pocketbook).

**People are key assets.** This author must acknowledge that the reduction of one's ecological footprint as a result of living in a cooperative situation is dependent on the values and efforts of the individual residents, as it is in any living situation. Therefore, while cooperative living can provide added value in the pursuit of a one-Earth lifestyle, it is not necessarily the source of the ecocentric habits and cooperative behaviours discussed above. The *people* of Pacific Gardens are the community's greatest assets.

#### Humans of Pacific Gardens

While I will acknowledge that I was unable to interview *every* resident of Pacific Gardens, I found all of my interactions with residents to be both warm and welcoming, which seemed to reflect the culture of the community. Some residents did not openly volunteer to speak with me, while others immediately began spilling their thoughts – which served well for my convenience sampling.

Varied personalities and affinities. Contrary to what many readers may assume, not all residents of PGCC are extroverts or 'social butterflies'. Along with 'quiet hours' from 10pm to 7am, all residents have an unspoken policy that if one's door is shut and blinds are closed, they want to be left alone. Despite hearing no complaints about soundproofing between units, some residents do intentionally live in the upper floors or in quieter areas of the building to feel more detached from the typical 'after-school' hubbub that occurs in the central atrium and other common spaces. Meanwhile, families with young children – or those who simply enjoy lively activity – may have purposefully chosen to live in a unit closer to the center of the building, on the main floor, surrounding the central atrium. In my conversations with residents (especially elders), many claimed that they enjoyed the sounds of children playing in the atrium and would intentionally leave their front doors and windows open to hear the sounds of life and activity in the commons.

Kids and teens that I spoke to compared their current living situation to past homes, commenting that Pacific Gardens provides more opportunities for outdoor play. They also appreciate having other "nice people" around to check in on them and watch them grow. Parents, in particular, are grateful for the extra watchful eyes and ears that help keep kids safe and out of trouble as they play freely throughout the commons. This provides peace of mind for all residents and enhances the children's ability to engage with each other and adults, developing integral communication and conflict resolution skills – all boosts to human capital.

Importance of communication. In my exploratory conversations, several residents emphasized that one of the most important nuances of cohousing – and cooperative living in general – is the importance of open, non-violent communication and consensus decisionmaking. While long-term residents admitted that some small conflicts have existed in the past, they also sheepishly acknowledged that these were too-often related to 'aesthetic' issues like paint colour or interior design, or financial pressures created during the initial construction of the project (most of which have now passed).

Since strong personalities and opinions can often derail the collaborative decisionmaking process, Pacific Gardens purposefully invests in communication workshops for residents to prevent petty personal conflicts from boiling up into community-wide dramas. Some residents also specialize in meeting facilitation and mediation as part of their professional careers. This is just one of the many skills provided to the community by its resident chefs, musicians, storytellers, electricians, plumbers, and seamstresses (to name a few).

#### Conclusion

In reflecting on the challenges of preserving and developing suitable and affordable housing in the western world, one cannot deny that cohousing delivers solutions on all fronts of the triple-bottom-line. However, this author must also acknowledge that in order to adopt cohousing as a mainstream model of housing, homeowners – and, perhaps more importantly, legislators and industry leaders that control most of the world's property and development financing – might require a slight shift in values and priorities.

BC's current housing situation appears bleak. Speculation on housing and property continues without much question to the ethical and social repercussions of treating homes like commodities. Costs of living continue to shoot skyward while wages remain relatively stagnant, worsening BC's existing housing crisis while widening the gap between landlords and tenants, lenders and debtors. In contrast to the cooperative, ecocentric, and altruistic intentions of the co-founders and residents of PGCC, one might question if the proponents of conventional real estate markets are less interested in helping people finding the right home and more concerned with enhancing their personal financial wealth – even if at the expense of society as a whole.

It is also clear that developments like Pacific Gardens – though valid solutions to real social, economic, and environmental problems – are not well positioned for innovative or cheap financing measures. Relying solely on the savings accounts of conscientious investors will not be enough to make cooperative and collaborative housing models like cohousing more accessible. Public and private partners will need to collaborate to make these kinds of developments possible, and perhaps even more relevant to the needs of local residents. Locally developed pilots projects may help to prove the case for 'attainable housing' funding in communities.

Looking beyond the bottom line in times of scarcity is a risk in itself, and taking bold initiative to create cost savings for residents, enhance their many qualities of life, and develop environmentally and socially conscious designs that facilitate thriving intergenerational communities is truly an altruistic pursuit – perhaps one that the majority of western society is not quite ready for. Until then, we may have to rely on grassroots, homegrown cohousing developments like Pacific Gardens to kick-start such a revolutionary paradigm shift. But for those of us privileged enough to understand that our current levels of resource consumption are beyond the Earth's capacity to regenerate (not to mention grossly inequitable) (Withgott, Brennen, & Murck, 2010), a worthy conundrum arises. With the freedom to choose between apathy or engagement comes the opportunity to ponder whether to live in a way that preserves the future of the planet and improves the lives of others, or simply carry on enjoying as much as modern human life has to offer before Earth's climate – or the delicate systems of global trade and energy partly responsible for its demise (Delestrac, 2016) – finally collapse for good. This perception of a 'trade-off' between 'saving' and 'savouring' the world is summed up perfectly by the writer and philosopher E.B White:

If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. (Shenker, 1967).

While this author relates deeply to the dichotomic sentiment explained above, the example of Pacific Gardens Cohousing Community showcases that a middle ground can be found. By redefining our concepts of 'wealth' to include natural, human, social, physical, and cultural assets, and reincorporating endangered values like community, reciprocity, and resilience into our daily lives, our efforts to shrink our ecological footprints will not only be more effective but might even make life more enjoyable for ourselves and those around us. Granted, perhaps not every reader can imagine themselves living in a cohousing community with 'strangers' of diverse backgrounds; however, this author argues that the same benefits of cooperative living could still be acquired simply by reengaging with our neighbors and collaborating within our local communities. To demonstrate the validity of this idea, Lewis and Conaty (2010, p. 255) quote the work of Restakis, who emphasizes the value of "relational goods":

Unlike conventional goods, relational goods cannot be enjoyed by an individual alone but only jointly with others... Friendship and care are relational goods and they are their own rewards. They are things whose sale would destroy their worth... Cooperative structures, in which power is shared between provider(s) and user(s), make this possible.

One can only hope that, someday, members of the so-called 'developed world' will have a chance to relearn the value of the relational goods which are so clearly evident in cohousing communities like Pacific Gardens. Perhaps then we might begin a paradigm shift from competition to cooperation; from anthropocentricism to ecocentricism; from continuously wanting more 'stuff' to finding joy in the benefits inherent in cooperative, collaborative living.

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# Appendix A



Figure 3. Various types of gardens surround the main building.



Figure 4. Large fan systems push hot air out or create a vacuum during a fire.



Appendix A (continued)

Figure 5. The dining hall on a Thursday night potluck.



*Figure 6.* Common kitchen complete with commercial dishwasher and appliances.



Appendix A (continued)

Figure 7. Workshops is kept well organized for those that need it next



Figure 8. The exercise room features top of the line equipment.



Appendix A (continued)

Figure 9. The play/kids room adapts to the ages kids of the community



*Figure 10.* The bike storage room and recycling center is neatly organized.



Appendix A (continued) Photos of Pacific Gardens Cohousing Community

Figure 11. One of several 'talking lounges' scattered throughout the commons.



Figure 12. The 'task board' lists simple jobs that need doing around the commons.