

# Designed for Belonging: Enhancing Social Integration in Permanent Supportive Housing

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**Abstract**—Permanent supportive housing (PSH) has emerged as a critical solution for addressing chronic homelessness by providing stable, long-term accommodations paired with supportive services. However, beyond providing shelter, PSH must foster a sense of belonging and social integration among residents to support their overall well-being and transition into community life. This study examines how interior design and spatial organization influence social connectedness in PSH environments. Using an analysis of 20 representative PSH projects, this research explores how design elements such as shared spaces, private retreats, circulation patterns, and visual connectivity contribute to social integration. The findings suggest that strategic design decisions—such as creating inviting communal areas, offering semi-private transition spaces, and balancing personal and social domains—can enhance the sense of belonging for residents. The study concludes with design recommendations to improve social cohesion in PSH settings, reinforcing the importance of supportive housing as both a physical and social framework for recovery and reintegration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a persistent issue in urban areas, necessitating innovative housing models that provide not only shelter but also stability and community support. Permanent supportive housing (PSH) has gained recognition as an effective intervention, offering housing along with social services to help individuals transition from homelessness to independent living [1]. While much research has focused on the functional aspects of PSH, fewer studies have explored the role of interior design in fostering social connections among residents [2][3].

Research suggests that social integration is a crucial factor in achieving long-term housing stability [4]. Social isolation is a common challenge for individuals transitioning from homelessness, often exacerbated by past trauma, mental health challenges, or substance dependency [5]. Additionally, the spatial configuration of housing

environments can influence residents' sense of community and security [6]. Studies have shown that supportive design elements, such as well-structured communal spaces and transition areas, play a key role in promoting social interaction and well-being [7][8].

This study investigates how spatial arrangements and design choices within PSH influence residents' sense of belonging and connection to others, thereby supporting long-term stability and well-being. By examining case studies and prior research, we aim to highlight the importance of interior design strategies in fostering a socially supportive housing environment.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND DESIGN

Social integration refers to the degree to which individuals feel connected to and engaged with their community. In the context of PSH, social integration is critical for fostering a sense of security, reducing loneliness, and enhancing overall well-being [9]. Design strategies that promote interaction while respecting personal autonomy can contribute to a healthier living environment for PSH residents.

Key design principles drawn from environmental psychology and housing studies include:

1. **Threshold Spaces:** Semi-private transition zones between private apartments and communal areas help residents feel comfortable engaging with others [2]. These spaces act as buffer zones that allow individuals to gradually adjust to social settings.
2. **Shared Activity Areas:** Well-designed common areas encourage organic interactions and social engagement [6]. Spaces such as communal kitchens, lounges, and outdoor seating areas foster community building and collaboration.
3. **Visual Connectivity:** Open sightlines and transparency between spaces can create a sense

of safety and openness without compromising privacy [4]. This helps residents feel connected while maintaining autonomy.

4. Scalability of Social Interaction: A mix of small and large communal spaces accommodates different social preferences and comfort levels [1]. Providing multiple options for engagement ensures inclusivity.
5. Autonomy and Control: Residents should have the ability to personalize their space, which supports identity formation and stability [8]. Personalization fosters emotional attachment and a greater sense of ownership.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes 20 PSH projects across North America, selected based on diversity in location, architectural approach, and resident demographics. Floor plans were examined for spatial organization, communal area design, and circulation patterns. In addition, site visits and interviews with housing providers were conducted to assess the effectiveness of these design strategies in fostering social integration. The study used qualitative analysis to understand the lived experiences of PSH residents and how different design features contributed to their well-being.

## III. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 1. The Role of Shared Spaces

Communal areas significantly influence resident interaction. Projects with central lounges, shared kitchens, or garden spaces exhibited higher levels of informal socialization compared to those with minimal common spaces [9]. Flexible seating arrangements, natural lighting, and varied activity zones were particularly effective in fostering engagement. Common spaces that were thoughtfully designed promoted both structured and unstructured social interactions, creating opportunities for community-building activities such as group cooking, reading clubs, and hobby workshops.

### 2. Transition Zones and Semi-Private Areas

Threshold spaces, such as small alcoves outside apartments or semi-enclosed seating areas near hallways, played a crucial role in easing residents into social interactions. Without these transition spaces, residents often experienced social avoidance or discomfort [2]. The study found that residents in

units with well-defined transition areas were more likely to engage in casual conversations with neighbors, fostering a greater sense of belonging.

### 3. Circulation Patterns and Visual Connectivity

The layout of hallways and the positioning of communal areas affected social interaction frequency. Open-plan corridors with natural light and visual access to shared spaces encouraged spontaneous encounters. Long, enclosed hallways with little transparency, however, often led to isolation and disengagement [4]. Additionally, wayfinding elements such as color-coded pathways and interactive notice boards further facilitated engagement by providing visual cues and communal announcements.

### 4. Privacy Considerations in Social Integration

While social interaction is beneficial, it is essential to balance it with personal privacy. Units with adequate sound insulation, well-defined personal spaces, and adjustable partitions allowed residents to control their level of social engagement, reducing stress associated with forced interactions [8]. In some cases, modular furniture and retractable partitions enabled flexible room configurations that adapted to residents' evolving social comfort levels.

## IV. CONCLUSION

PSH design must go beyond merely providing shelter to create environments that foster social integration and belonging. This study highlights how spatial organization, transition spaces, and communal area design impact social interactions among residents. By implementing strategic design choices, architects and housing providers can enhance the social well-being of PSH residents, contributing to their long-term stability and quality of life. Future research should explore resident perspectives and behavioural studies to further refine these design principles.

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