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YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 099. How to build a resilient community - with
Stacy Barter

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Intro: Welcome to Your Strata Property. The podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source. To access previous episodes and useful strata tips, go to www.yourstrataproperty.com.au.

Amanda Farmer: Hello, and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer, and this is Your Strata Property.

Stacy Barter is a learning and community engagement specialist and is involved as a facilitator of the Building Resilient Neighborhoods project, in British Columbia, Canada.

For over 20 years, Stacy has worked in sustainable community development, with a wide range of communities, not-for-profit organisations, and public sector agencies, in Canada, and Latin America. Her recent work focuses on building neighbourhood-based engagement. Public engagement on climate change and health, community resilience, and collective impact across sectors. Stacy holds a Master's of Education from Simon Fraser University, specialising in adult education, community development, and organisational learning. Today, I am delighted to welcome Stacy Barter. Welcome, Stacy.

Stacy Barter: Hi, Amanda, thank you so much for having me.

Amanda Farmer: It's an absolute pleasure to have you. You are halfway across the world, and we were just saying, how, sometimes that's difficult, when we're here in Australia, and trying to organise interviews with our international guests, to get all of that timing right. I think it's just wonderful that you've been able to make the time to chat with us today.

Stacy Barter: Absolutely, yes. Well, we managed to make it work across time zones, and even across seasons. It's our winter here.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, exactly. Yes, we're here today, Stacy, of course, to talk about resilient communities. This really captured my attention when you delivered a paper at the Griffith University Conference in Surface Paradise, and I invited you on the show to share this with our listeners. I know it's something that they'll be really excited about. I'm going to ask you to start by telling us, why is resilience a key concept for people living in strata titled communities?

Stacy Barter: Sure. Well, maybe I'll start more generally, with what we mean by resilience, and then, I can say a little bit about why I think that's so important for people living in strata communities. So, with the Building Resilient Neighborhoods project, when we talk about resilience, we're referring to our ability, both individually and collectively, to respond and adapt to change, or challenges that may come our way.

So often, many of us are familiar with this, on a personal level, I may have personal challenges that I experienced in my life. So my capacity to be able to respond to that reflects my resilience capacity. But my colleagues and I, we've worked for many, many years in community development, so what we've been really interested in is, not just at the personal level, but as groups of people, or in places where we live. How does the concept of resilience apply there?

So we got really interested in the question of why is it that one community ... When I refer to a community, it could be any scale. It could be a municipality, it could be a neighbourhood, it could be a community within an apartment building. Why is it that one group of people, in the face of crisis, or threats, or just general change that may be coming their way, can really, instead of just bouncing back, which is generally the language we hear around resilience, this idea of bouncing back.

Sometimes, we see that these communities actually can go, even beyond that, to bounce forward. So, in the face of challenges, they actually are able to create an even better and more vibrant future for themselves. So that's really what we've been exploring, around the concept of resilience. My colleague, Michelle Colucci, who I work closely with, she studied hundreds of



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communities across North America, to really dig into, what are these core capacities that make one place more resilient than another?

What we have learned, if I had to distil it down, is that the degree to which people are connected where we live is really at the core this. It's not the only thing. There's a whole bunch of other things that make us more resilient, that make communities more resilient, but this essence of being connected to each other, in the communities where we live, is really, really critical for our resilience.

When we were just starting our work, and talking to communities about community resilience, and time and time again, we'd hear about how the invisible parts of community, the degree to which a community was connected, the degree to which people felt welcome, the degree to which there was a sense of pride in the community was so important.

In Vancouver, one of our largest philanthropic organisations did a really interesting piece of research, where they reached out to Metro Vancouver, Vancouver's our largest city here in British Columbia, to ask what people what they saw as the biggest social trends that they needed to be paying attention to. They thought it would be things like poverty, and homelessness, and lo and behold, we're really surprised to find out that the big issues that people cared about were the degree to which they felt connected to others, exactly what we've been talking about.

The interesting thing about their research was that there was a direct correlation with where people lived, and a very stark difference for those living in vertical communities, or high-density apartment environments, versus single detached homes. So they asked questions around the degree to which people knew their neighbours, how frequently had they had conversations with their neighbours, whether they helped their neighbours out, or their neighbours helped them out, whether they trusted their neighbours. There was a very interesting picture that emerged, that, in apartments, people knew their neighbours less, they trusted their neighbours less, and they felt more lonely. So we've become very fascinated by this question of social connectedness and resilience in vertical communities, or high-density communities, and so, I think this is particularly pertinent and interesting for those of us living in strata communities to explore.

Amanda Farmer: Absolutely. As a lawyer working in the sector, I often say that I tend to see the worst of the worst in my work, unfortunately. So I see these communities that are, dysfunctional, let's say. There's litigation, there's disputes, people don't get along. Just hearing what you say there about connection, and a sense of pride in the community, and feeling like, you're a part of something bigger than just yourself, that is what's missing from these dysfunctional buildings that I often work with, and come in to assist owners, or assist the committees.

I often say to the owners, if it's the owner I'm working with, "Have you spoken to?", "Have you knocked on the door?", "Have you gone around and do you know Mrs. Jones in Unit Six, who seems to be causing all of this trouble?" And nine times out of 10, they say, "Oh, no. Oh, no, I don't. Oh, no, I couldn't." Or, "Oh, no, we don't see. Oh, we go the other way when we ..." I think, "Gosh, no wonder you're having this problem," and to hear you articulate it that way, that in the research, that's what's coming out, is really, really fascinating.

Stacy Barter: Yes, I would agree, and I see a lot of those patterns that you're talking about, in the communities that we work with, as well. I always, in sort light-hearted way, say, it doesn't mean that we need to be best friends with our neighbours. But there's a difference between, feeling like we need to be best friends and being neighbourly. And having that sense of, we help each other out, and we look out for each other. Knowing that there's that degree of connection, I think, is what we're after.

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We talk about these sort of altruistic values behind this, but I think there's also real market value ...

Amanda Farmer: Oh, yes.

Stacy Barter: That is worth considering, as well, because these communities that are more connected are safer, they're generally better prepared, in the event of emergencies. We know that people are healthier, and this translates into a benefit for building owners, and building managers, that people take more care of property, when it's safer. So it's a worthwhile investment, on many levels.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, and I imagine that people buy in and stay in for longer. There's not a high turnover of ownership, or tenants, and that's really important in strata schemes, because you need to have that committed few, if it is only a few, who are willing to take on the long-term projects, and invest in that value building that can go on, if you're renovating, for example, and adding value that way, and having that really lovely community that you do feel connected to, a part of that's contributing to your well-being. Well, of course, that's a place that you want to live, and stay, and help grow.

So I am lucky enough that some of the buildings I work with are really good examples of those kind of communities, and they are taking on big projects, whether it's a revamp of the building for energy efficiency, or new balconies, they are the kind of communities that can add value that way, because they just work well together. The people work well together. They knew who to talk to, who has what skills they're able to assist, and they're kind of that other side of the coin. So, yes, I think it is important that we look to those communities, as well.

Stacy Barter: Absolutely. Yes, we often talk about the communities that have that, we call it a can-do attitude. Again, it's one of those invisible parts of a community, but there really is a difference between different communities that have that or don't have that.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Well, I was going to ask you, what do you say a resilient strata community looks like? But I think we've probably covered off a bit of that. Is there anything else that you wanted to add, with buildings that you're looking at there, in British Columbia?

Stacy Barter: Well, you know, it is a lot of the things that we've been talking about, that connection between neighbours, that sense of pride, but some of the other things we've touched more lightly on. We talk a lot about a strong local economy, often, and looking at the informal economy, and you just gave some great examples of that, where neighbours are sharing. And so, sharing ideas, sharing skills, sharing information, knowing who kind of has what. It can be sharing things, but often, sharing skills can be such a value-add, in that context.

The other piece is that if we look more broadly at the context of resilience, and what are some of those key characteristics that we're trying to foster, there's also this piece around collaborative leadership, so that residents are engaged in being part of building the community, and have a role, and a voice, in planning for what's happening.

The other piece that we haven't touched on as much, and that can be a bit trickier, depending on the context, is really how building design affects these things that we're talking about. So building design has a huge influence, obviously, in the degree to which people connect, or don't connect. So often, we're inheriting infrastructure that may or may not foster that, and so, how do we get creative, within that context?

Amanda Farmer: I do see a lot of attention, in recent times, being given to that by developers, by architects, and certainly, the conferences that I go to, that no doubt, you go to, as well. It's always a hot topic. How do we design our spaces to help build better communities? We are seeing that, particularly in Sydney, where we have some fantastic inner city buildings that have green space, play areas, community areas, rooftops, places where people can come together, and help build that community. So, absolutely, that's such an important facet, and why it's so important to include developers and the designers of these buildings in these kinds of conversations.

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Stacy Barter: Yes, I couldn't agree more. Absolutely.

Amanda Farmer: Now, are there any buildings of neighbourhoods, perhaps, Stacy, that you had a close look at, as part of your research, that you could share a bit of a case study with us, or a story on how they're doing well, building their resilience?

Stacy Barter: Yes. Well, you know, it's interesting, Amanda, a lot of times, we're so inspired by these stories that we hear all the time, about what different buildings are doing, and often, it really is just such simple little actions. They start as very small, and kind of humble projects, but what I'm so inspired by, is sort of the ripple effect of that. So, the example you just gave, actually, of a rooftop garden is one of my favorite stories of a particular building in Vancouver. It's a newer building.

They were lucky. They already had an existing rooftop garden, but the neighbours came together and decided to transform it from being an ornamental garden to a food garden. And they started working together, to grow food, and then, I hear these stories of the transformation that happened, by creating a space for neighbours to interact more casually, the relationships that were formed, by gardening together. The space that wasn't really used suddenly was really being used. But it also fostered these relationships across ages and across cultures, and I always say, food is the universal bonding agent, that, it brings people together so well.

So, the experience of transforming the garden, being in the garden together, was one thing. But then, they also have now created this tradition of harvesting, and having a huge annual celebration of making food together, and then, eating food together. And so, that, of course, then, spins off into so many different kinds of relationships that are formed, and people helping each other out, in so many different ways.

So that's one small example, but I hear of stories like this all the time, where a neighbour or a building manager gets one simple idea: "Well, let's try this out," and then, it kind of sparks from there.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, absolutely, and if you don't have the benefit of maybe, that kind of a space where you can grow a garden, there are plenty of other ways to do that. I was working with a building once that did a multicultural food fest. So they recognized that they had lots of different cultures represented in their building, and they chose a particular date, the first Sunday in May. They said, "Hey, let's set up in the foyer. We'll get our folding tables out, and bring down a bowl of your favourite food that maybe represents your background, your culture, what you enjoy eating with your family."

I thought that was just such a fabulous idea, and again, a way to come together around food, for people to get to know each other, to try something maybe they haven't tried before, and to recognize that vibrancy that they have, right at their doorstep.

Stacy Barter: Yes, absolutely. We talk about the difference between the hard infrastructure, and the soft infrastructure, and while, obviously, the hard infrastructure helps, and is really important for creating ... We call them bumping spaces, those spaces where people can casually interact. There's also all this soft infrastructure, of people who are willing to take the initiative to plan social events or things like the example that you just described right now is a perfect one of soft infrastructure, yes.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Now, we try to do our best. We try to build a resilient community, and will take up all of these tips, and have the best of intentions, but, sometimes, we encounter problems, and sometimes, there are stumbling blocks. I think it's really important that those blocks are acknowledged, and identified, so that we can avoid them, if not, first of all, then, in the future. So, as much as I don't like to dwell too much on problems, I always ask guests who come on the show to talk about these exciting topics. What problems have you noticed that people are facing, when they're trying to build these kinds of communities, and how do we overcome those problems?

Stacy Barter: Yes, to be quite honest, the problems that I hear about most often are the ones we've already been speaking about, which is that, so frequently, I hear that people say, "I live in this building, I want to be connected, and I don't know anyone." So that may not be the kind of problem that you're referring to, but that, I would say, is really a core problem for many, many people that we hear about, and that sense of, how do I even get started, when this isn't the culture of the environment where I live?



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Amanda Farmer: Yes. Yes.

Stacy Barter: Or, I live in a really culturally diverse building, and I'm not even sure how to start with bridging across our different contexts and realities and cultures. So, often, it's that challenge of getting started, and maybe going against what feels like the culture as it is right now, or the way people interact right now. And then, of course, you've spoken some of the challenges that we see a lot, which is that there may be a history of conflict within the building and sort of overcoming that.

Now, I am a firm believer that these small interactions, and having, kind of, light touch ways for people to interact in a healthy way, that can start to shift some of those dynamics, and actually enable people to build trust over time.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Stacy Barter: So that, then, when those challenging situations come up, they're better able to navigate them, and there's just a bit more trust more there.

Amanda Farmer: So it's the small steps every day. It's saying hello, to people in the lift, or in their basement garage, when you're down there parking your car, the small steps to get to know each other, to build on that each day, so that when you do have, perhaps, a big problem, like litigation, or damage to property, a large insurance claim, you can come together to deal with that big problem, in a way that is more efficient and effective, and helps you grow from that, rather than being overcome, because you haven't got that strong foundation in the beginning. Is that a fair summary?

Stacy Barter: Yes, I would say so. I mean, I can speak from my own personal experience, that when I have a relationship with someone, I'm more apt to actually try and be empathetic, and understand their point of view, and be more creative with my problem-solving. So I think that that's a really critical piece, for sure.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, and I think it's important to bring that to the attention of our listeners, that you might think, "Oh, where? That's mostly investor owners here. We have a lot of tenants. Everybody just keeps to themselves. Everybody just gets by. I just want to come home and shut my door, and I really don't want to be bothered, or to be involved." That attitude might be fine, on a day to day basis, but when there is a big issue, like a few of the things that I've been highlighting, that's when you do see communities really struggle, and kind of unravel, because you haven't got those relationships, those connections, that other communities might have built, day by day.

So, if you're feeling like that, if you're feeling like, all this stuff that Stacy and Amanda are talking about, it's not for me, it's not for our building, that's not the kind of building we're in, you never know what's around the corner. You never know what's on the horizon that might be a challenge for your building, that you're going to need to call on that bond, that you can start building today, with those little steps.

Stacy Barter: I would agree, and maybe, a more extreme example, a little bit different from the examples that you're sharing around, sort of, conflicts and litigation, would be in the case of emergencies. So we're actually doing a whole program right now on emergency preparedness, and social connectedness, and of course, we all know, you just look at the evidence across the board. When there's some kind of emergency that happens, time and time again, those that fare well are those who are more connected, and, at a minimum, even have a sense of knowing who their neighbors are, and who's in the building, and who do we have to sort of, check in on, in the case of some extreme event?

So, I think, again, it's not about, always being best friends, and all the warm and fuzzy. I mean, that's lovely, that's if all of those friendships emerge, but at a very core level, just understanding, who our neighbours are, and that sense of looking out for each other, at a very basic level, yes.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Absolutely. Now, I want to ask you the book question, Stacy. What books have had the greatest impact on you, and why?



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Amanda Farmer: Well, Stacy, I want you to let our listeners know how they can find out more about you, and maybe about the Building Resilient Neighborhoods project, that you're involved in, and anything else you want to add before we wrap up.

Stacy Barter: Sure. Yes, absolutely, I'd love to stay in touch with anyone who's interested in what we've been talking about. So, the easiest way, and probably, is our website. So, the project is, Building Resilient Neighborhoods, and the address is, www.resilientneighbourhoods.ca, and, of course, neighbourhoods is the, we would say, the Canadian spelling, with the U in it, not the American spelling.

Amanda Farmer: That's also the Australian spelling.

Stacy Barter: I think it's [crosstalk 00:21:28], as well, so, resilientneighbourhoods.ca, and you can find me through the website, as well. You know, in terms of closing, I think we've covered a lot already. The piece that we haven't talked as much about is, I think, one thing is the role of residence, and that idea that, just starting with something small, can make a big difference. I also really feel like, there's such a key, key role for building managers ...

Amanda Farmer: Oh, yes.

Stacy Barter: And property managers, as well, and so, I hope that people see their role in fostering and building community as an important part of their role.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, absolutely, and thank you for raising that. It's something that I've said before. As we rely on technology more and more, processes become more systemized, property managers, strata managers, start outsourcing a lot of activities. The one thing that you cannot outsource is that human contact, that human touch, that high-level customer service that only you, as a skilled human being, can provide to your buildings. I always urge managers, if you're looking for that point of difference, in what is an increasingly competitive market, than start focusing on building those skills. How do you stand there, with your buildings, as a fellow human, and really relate to them, and help them, as a trusted adviser?

Stacy Barter: Yes, the city of Vancouver is also engaged in a bunch of research about vertical communities, and that was actually one of the key elements that stood out in the research that they did, was the role of supportive building managers, in fostering community, and that role of being, we've actually been starting to use this language of, thinking of social concierge.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, I love it.

Stacy Barter: So, how to accidentally bring that into our work as one of the components that's part of our role.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, absolutely, or, there's a whole another podcast episode there, thanks, Stacy.

Stacy Barter: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: On social concierge. Love to chat with you about it. Well, thank you so much for your time today. Enjoy your winter weather over there, and as I said, we'd love to have you back, to have another chat in the future.

Stacy Barter: That would be wonderful. Thanks so much. It's been a pleasure.

Outro: Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers, to property owners, reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show states, at www.yourstrataproperty.com.au. You can also ask questions in the comments section, which Amanda will answer, in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?

