URBAN PLANNING STUDENT JOURNAL

THEME: URBAN BELONGING

ISSUE NO. 1

The Vancouver Special

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Painting by Alec Blair

Land Acknowledgement

The City of Vancouver is located on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations territory. The UBC Vancouver Campus is specifically located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people. The collaborative processes of creating, reviewing and sharing *The Vancouver Special* were all situated on this territory.

As editors and authors gathered on this land, we recognize the immense privilege of expressing ourselves upon land that is not our own and has been cared for by Indigenous communities since time immemorial. Often, the concept of "urban belonging" has been misconstructed and politicized through a settler lens. However, Indigenous urban belonging transcends the colonial structures designed to constrain it. Therefore, the journal seeks to engage through a praxis that is intentionally decolonial and liberatory, moving beyond outdated biases to honour the land's enduring history.

We invite our contributors and readers alike to join us in imagining a city defined by relationality to self, to community, and to the spirits of the land. A city defined by holding accountability to the past, and a stewardship in the present that honours a promise to those yet to arrive.

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Photo by Sydney Hsieh

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Faculty Foreword

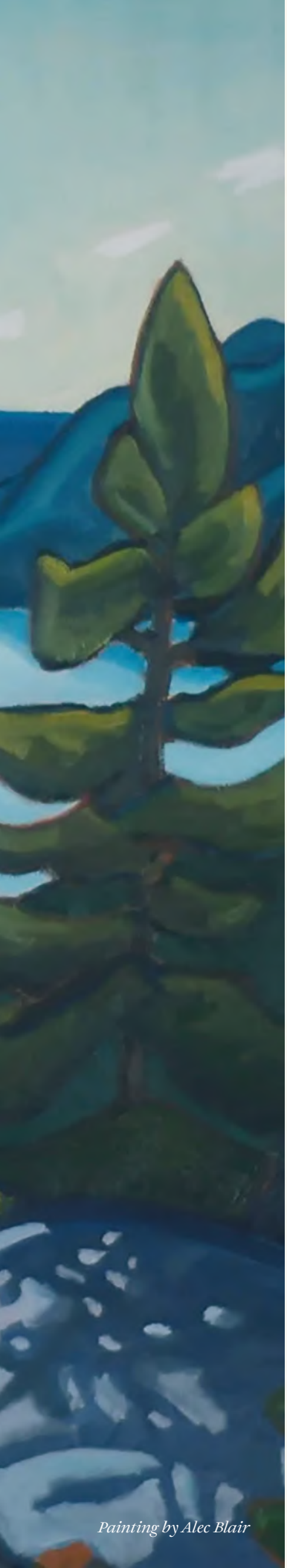
Students in the Urban Studies program at UBC know their cities. They are living the housing challenges in Vancouver, experiencing the anxieties presented by climate change, navigating the underinvested transit system of the region, and critiquing policy and planning decisions that are disconnected from their lived reality. Yet, in the classroom and out in the world, they hope and persevere to imagine better, more just cities, while studying the history, theory and practice of city-making.

A journal that captures student thinking on cities is an opportunity for us all to understand the urban better. This inaugural issue of *The Vancouver Special* shows us the practical, artistic, and theoretical expressions that UBC students are bringing to their engagements with the communities and cities in which they live and learn about. It provides a window into the ideas that are resonating now and will inform the cutting edge of urban thought in the time to come.

This journal has been a long time coming. CAPACity has been the beating heart of the community of undergraduates interested in urban studies at UBC for many years now. Just as it drove the development of urban studies curricular offerings at UBC, it is now creating a platform for students to showcase their thinking. The journal is an excellent opportunity for students to have their work peer-reviewed and published, and to learn the ropes of editing, managing, and producing a journal. There is no doubt that *The Vancouver Special* will be a treasure for city nerds.

As the Co-Chairs of the Urban Studies Program, we are proud to say that *The Vancouver Special* is a student-conceived, student-run, and student-led initiative that we support wholeheartedly. We see in this initiative an excellent platform for surfacing the best of the innovations and ideas that our students take from their engagements with cities. We congratulate the leadership team at CAPACity this year for pulling this off, and look forward to years of good reading to come.

James Connolly and Priti Narayan



Painting by Alec Blair

Letter from the Editors

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *The Vancouver Special!*

This journal began with a simple feeling that the critical and creative work emerging from students deserves a space to live together. So much thoughtful work is produced across classrooms and communities at UBC, yet too often it passes by without a place to be shared and remembered. We wanted to create a home for the wondrous ways of knowledge creation. *The Vancouver Special* was created as a student-led journal for research, reflection, and creative expression on urban life.

We chose Urban Belonging as our inaugural theme because, in the end, so much of urban life returns to the question of belonging. We wanted to unravel the complexity of belonging through the exchange of urban dialogue across students, faculty, and the wider UBC community. Through creating this journal, the restlessness of searching for belonging began to find a home of its own, as collaboration and care gave rise to the very sense of community we had set out to seek. We hope this journal continues to be a space where all who encounter it, too, may find community and belonging.

This inaugural issue unfolds in three parts. It opens with *Vancouver Origins*, a section grounded in the city itself and the experiences that shape life here. At the centre of the journal is *Voices from UBC*, a collective reflection that asks a simple question: What makes *Vancouver Special?* The issue closes with *Urban Commons*, a section that moves outward into the world, while remaining tied to Vancouver as a point of departure.

As a student-led journal, we invited faculty to contribute, and we are deeply grateful to all the professors who supported it. Their pieces give students a chance to encounter more of the intellectual life around them, and to see how their professors reflect on cities and belonging. Bringing faculty and student work together is one way our journal seeks to build community across intergenerational ways of thinking about urban life.

We are especially grateful to the student communities that helped inspire this project. In particular, we want to acknowledge the Urban Studies Student Union at the University of Toronto and their Urban Studies Student Journal *denCITY*, whose wonderful work showed us what a student journal could make possible. Their welcoming and inspiring energy helped spark the idea that UBC's urban planning community could build a platform of its own.

As you move through this issue, we hope you find something that stays with you. We hope you encounter ideas that challenge you and voices that widen your sense of what urban belonging can mean. Above all, we hope this journal leaves you with a deeper sense of how urban life becomes meaningful through the ways we notice, reflect, and live in relation to one another.

Thank you, dear reader, for beginning this journey with us.

Vancouver is Special

By Elvin Wyly

Photo by the Author

Several years ago, a small group of undergraduate students began coming to the office hours of one of the Professors in the Department of Geography. The students arrived with pointed questions. They came from a variety of fields and interests. Some were studying Engineering, in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, while others had declared Arts majors in Sociology, Geography, Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice, and other fields. But they were all passionate about cities. UBC had (and still has) an Urban Studies Minor that is open to students across the University – a legacy of a previous generation's prescient vision of an urbanizing world that would be transnationalized by new cohorts of city-builders (Figure 1; Hardwick, 1974; Ley, 1974a, 1974b; Littlemore, 2024).

But for too many employers and admissions officers who quickly glance at a transcript or resume, a 'Minor' is just that – a minor specialization that doesn't always signal a student's true commitments, labours, achievements, and potential. The students wanted more. *"We are a group of students from various faculties,"* they had written in their initial email,

> *"who want to create a* **STUDENT INITIATIVE** *to bring together students that are currently not registered in urban programs / courses but are interested in learning more about urban planning and its career prospects. We are currently reaching out to faculty, alumni, or anyone interested in supporting students from* **DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES** *in urban planning. We would greatly appreciate it, if you could kindly connect us to someone who may be able to support us in any* **CAPACITY**.*"*

We had wonderful office hours conversations. *"Why can't we major in Urban Studies?"* the students kept asking the Professor. *"Blah, blah, bureaucratic blah, blah, blah"* the Professor began to reply. Boring bureaucratese

Figure 1. City Walk for Urst 200 & Geog 250, Cities, at hour seven on Walter Hardwick Avenue in the Olympic Village, September 2025. Photo by the Author

about budget constraints, curriculum committees, Senate approval processes on new programs, and a bunch of other annoying details.

But the conversations continued over many weeks and months, while other conversations were taking place. Professors in Geography had been working for some time with Professors in the School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP), and with the support of SCARP Director Heather Campbell and Geography Head Geraldine Pratt, they coordinated with staff in the Dean's offices in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Applied Sciences. James Connolly, one of the newly-recruited Professors in SCARP, took the lead on preparing an application to create an entirely new degree program. Several years – and literally thousands of emails and thousands of pages of virtual and paper documentation – later, UBC Senate and B.C.'s Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training approved a Major in Urban Studies. The Major combines foundational, theoretical expertise with applied skills and community-engaged learning in five focus areas: Indigenous Urban Life, The Nature of Cities, Globalizing Cities, Technology and Cities, and Cities and Communities.

It all began with those students who came to office hours with those urgent questions about majoring in Urban Studies. Not long after those conversations began, the students organized and went through the application process to secure approval from the Alma Mater Society (AMS) to create a new student club: *UBC CAPACity*, for those who are *Creative And Passionate About City planning*.

What you're reading now is the latest achievement of UBC CAPACity: *The Vancouver Special*, a unique, rigorous, and creative forum for students who want to understand, experience, and transform our unique moment in space and time. Anyone alive today is the part of the first generation of humans ever to live in a majority-urban world. Individual cities can be traced back hundreds or even thousands of years. Yet it was only about twenty years ago that the percentage of the world's population living in cities finally crossed the fifty-percent threshold. For the foreseeable future, virtually all global population growth is urban growth. Nearly all economic growth is urban economic growth. Hence the tensions and contradictions between endlessly growing economies and populations, versus genuine socio-natural sustainability, are inescapably urban dilemmas, debates, and struggles (Harvey, 1974, 2014).

And in this part of the world, urbanization involves a unique blend of local, regional, national, and global processes reshaping time and space: transnational flows of people, capital, and ideas, along with reascendent Indigeneity in diverse social movements and reconstructions of culture, policy, and law. In a city-region that has acquired its own globally-recognized urban philosophical brand name – *'Vancouverism'* (see Beasley, 2019) – there are unique challenges and opportunities. The science historian George Dyson (1997, p. xi) once called this region *'The Edge of the World.'* It is here and now where Planning on the Edge (see Gurstein and Hutton, 2019) reveals the unique ways that human relations in and with a changing natural world (Bakker, 2024; George and Simpson, 2023) and hybrid diasporic cosmologies of spirituality along the *'Highway to Heaven'* east of the runways of YVR (Tse, 2022; Byassee, Chu, and Lockhart, 2023) require entirely new kinds of cartography to map the urgent possibilities of new kinds of urban worlds (Sandercock, 2023; Kaur, 2020). Just across the water from Vancouver's Olympic Village is a tiny land parcel called The Plaza of Nations, a chunk of old 1870s-era railyards cleared for a 1986 World Exposition and subsequently assessed at about Cdn $40 million in 1989. The parcel became the subject of lawsuits between bitter billionaires fighting over the terms of a few pages of contract language signed in a hotel room in Hong Kong. The parcel is now work about Cdn $800 million. And yet that tiny parcel – along with every other piece of ancestral territory in a vast region where the *'price of dirt'* yields city-of-glass high-rise towers of safe-deposit boxes in the sky (Condon, 20204; Soules, 2021; Ley, 2023) – is capitalized by the planetary reconfigurations of space-time in previous centuries and millennia of pluriversal

Figure 2. Survivors of the September, 2022 City Walk, at hour eight inside the Salt Building. Built in 1931 on 155 timber piles on the False Creek waterfront, the behemoth was dismantled, elevated, and reconstructed as part of a bold fusion of historic preservation and climate change adaptation in the Olympic Village, in preparation for the 2010 Winter Games. The Salt Building has achieved LEED Gold certification, within the Platinum-certified new condos of the Village, in an urban core gentrifying at the speed of LEED. For one analyst, the Salt Building "symbolically 'floats' beside False Creek, representing a metaphor for how layered heritage can adapt to rising sea levels, maintaining relevance and resilience in an evolving environment" (Pan, 2026, p. 214). The mega-micro-brewery inside the Salt structure provides more than 140 beverage options offered to those staying with us for the full length of the City Walk. Photo by the Author

histories and geographies. Cities concentrate everything, including disagreement and debate: in this corner of the world, the disagreements involve fundamentally divergent perceptions and experiences of space and time. Some historical geographies involve Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' 1716 proposal to undertake a trans-Siberian expedition to Kamchatka and what came to be known as the Aleutian Islands – in order to learn more about the origins and evolution of humanity (Dyson, 2020) – and subsequent competitive colonial struggles between Russia, Spain, France, and the U.K. culminating in the Treaty of Paris and the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Other timelines question the chronology dating human settlement in this region to the end of the last glacial period 11,000 years ago, emphasizing instead time immemorial (Grant, Sparrow, Grant, and Scoble, 2019) or the evolution of intergalactic diasporas (Deloria, 1973; Womack, 2014). What is undeniable is that this is the corner of today's urbanizing planet where the fundamentally entangled relations of space and time are co-evolving with the relational implications of Leibniz's theological objections to Newtonian physics (Aczel, 2011), the infinitesimal calculus of instantaneous rates of change in the ponzi portfolios of global urban hierarchies of speculative investment and debt (Gibadullina, 2025), and the competitive moral claims over space by atomised 'monads' of individuals, corporations, and nations pursuing infinite capital accumulation (Sheppard, 2006; Harvey, 2006). It's a very special place, in ways that are simultaneously amusing (Demers, 2009) and deadly serious. What we really need now are new generations who care about Leibniz's imaginative possibilities of entirely different, alternative worlds, who walk and talk together in and about cities (Figure 3) to find new ways of living, learning, and co-evolving – while minimizing the mortgaged ethics of capital, the toxic divisions of sociospatial competition, and the intergenerational traumas of decapitation (Young, 2025, paragraphs 1,286 to 1,289).

It all began with office hours conversations. Cities are real, material, physical concentrations of buildings, people, and capital. But cities are also conversations. They are works of art that reflect and re-create entirely new perspectives of relations across time and space (see Lefebvre, 1987). Most crucially, these are collective creations: you can't have a conversation with yourself, and the most powerful forms of cultural expression come from the relations between an individual artist and broader socio-cultural movements. Cities are collective works of art in which everyone – absolutely everyone, from the most influential builders and architects to the unhoused using every creative tactic to survive in one of the world's most expensive, competitive places to live – plays a part.

Figure 3. City Walk, September, 2022, on the Vancouver waterfront at the new Vancouver Convention Centre. Photo by the Author

And *you*, dearest reader, play a part too. Cities are conversations that take place across the generations. When you learn how to read an urban landscape across space and time – when you read George and Simpson (2023), Kaur (2020), and Tse (2022) alongside Bakker (2024) while glancing out the window on the 99 B Line, or on the Skytrain through Richmond on your way to or from YVR, and in so many other time-space fragments in this fascinating edge of the world (Figure 4) – the collective ideas and voices of multiple generations who have shaped cities help you find your own place, your own voice, and the role you choose to play. That goes for journals too, and particulary the *Vancouver Special*. It's an intergenerational gift to you, from the students who first created UBC CAPACity and who graduated from UBC years ago. They've gone on to a variety of careers in a dynamic urban world, but their work helps you see new possibilities. While *The Vancouver Special* features the extraordinary achievement of individual student authors – and reflects the commitment of time, labour, and creative energy of individual Editors – it is also a collective enterprise built on the relationship with you. You're the reader, and you're also the newest artist to join the never-ending conversation of an urbanizing world.

> *We're excited to work with you to imagine, map, and enact new urban worlds!*

Figure 4. Part of the Vancouver metropolitan region. The view is to the East, along the body of water described by the Tsleil-Waututh and other Indigenous peoples as Sasamat, by the Spanish as Canal de Florida Blanca, and by the British as Burrard Inlet. The snow-capped peak in the distance on the right is Mount Baker, in the U.S. State of Washington. The spatial division of the border, defined by the Treaty of Oregon extending a line west along the forty-ninth parallel across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific, was defined at a point that (at current B.C. rates of life expectancy) was only 2.195 human lifetimes ago. Photo by the Author

Section I

Vancouver Origins

Photo by Rex Wei. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Future of the Last Piece of Expo Lands

By Kwan Ki (Jerry) Wong

Northeast False Creek (NEFC), situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the *xwməθkwəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwx̱ wú7mesh* (Squamish), and *səlilwətaɬ* (Tsleil Waututh) Nations, has been a recurring headline for Vancouver's urban development story. It is a critical parcel of land as a legacy of the 1986 Expo lands in downtown Vancouver, sold to the Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-Shing in 1988 by the provincial government of British Columbia (Mackie, 2018). After nearly four decades, the parcel remains to be a vacant lot. Soon after the announcement of the demolishment of the twin viaducts in 2015 (CityNews Vancouver, 2015), the City of Vancouver in 2018 attempted to formulate a plan (City of Vancouver, 2018a) for the area. Later, the privately-owned Concord Pacific lot re-submitted a proposal of the development to the City Council in early 2025 for rezoning of height and view-cone restrictions (Little and Thibault, 2025). Over the years of ambiguous development, the prime parcel continues to facilitate temporary events beside the obsolete Georgia and Dunsmuir Viaducts. As urban development transforms time and space, the place-making processes of NEFC are not only the site of civic debate, disagreements, and reconciliation, but also a site for the perpetuation of capital flow and growing social inequality. Stakeholder priorities are evolving as society changes socially, economically, and environmentally. The extended time scale of the discussion and implementation of the 2018 Northeast False Creek plan (Little and Urquhart, 2025) suggests that prior commitments and decisions may no longer meet the current needs of the stakeholders, whether it is the developer, the city government, or local community residents.

With citizen participation as the core of urbanism and place-making, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of weighing the shifts in citizens and stakeholder needs timely when the capital-driven planning process is decades long for the site. The future of the site envisioned by the 2018 Northeast False Creek (NEFC) Plan and the proposal of the developers significantly neglected profound social changes the city and the communities have experienced since then. A renewed approach is needed to account for the evolving needs of all parties through timely, decolonial and broad-base civic engagement to create spaces for urbanism, people, and lived realities, not soulless urbanization and capital.

Citizen participation in place-making processes relies largely on understanding spaces by conceptualizing the lived experience, in attempts to create representation for a space that they hope to live through as "representational spaces" (Lefebvre et al., 1991, pp. 38–39). The capitalist economy and neoliberal political climate dominate mainstream social processes in the 21st century and take advantage of cities as the epicentre of globalization, urban entrepreneurialism for capital accumulation. This in turn negates the crucial component of public opinion through citizen participation. David Harvey discusses the idea of "Right to the City" by Lefebvre, depicting the constant search of profitable terrain for surplus capital generated in the context of capitalism (Harvey, 2008). Cities and urban sites end up being a commodity to absorb the effects of capitalism and neoliberalism predominantly through spatial fix as a phenomenon where excess capital are invested into land and speculative real estate (Harvey, 2001) to resolve tendencies of crisis generated by over-accumulation of capital. In the case of NEFC, while it may seem that social responsibilities are accounted for, with the potential involvement of a master-planned residential community on site priorities seem to revolve around the economic profitability of the development. Vancouver has been shaped into a haven for spatial fix of capital and embraces foreign capital investment through the speculative real estate bloom over the years (Ley, 2017). The popularization of the design ideology of Vancouverism (Beasley et al., 2019) shaped by a dense yet green urban residential core continues to perpetuate and market the image of Vancouver as a livable city. Vancouver's relatively stable economic dependency on the real estate market induces developers to further pursue the capitalization on the political stability of the city. For historical reasons, parts of NEFC are currently designated to be luxury condominiums to fulfil the spatial fix.

The hegemony of the ruling class yields unequal contributions of priorities to contentious subject matters like the future of a land that equally affects, or disproportionately affects, marginalized groups outside of the ruling class. With most of the power to develop held by the major private developer Concord Pacific, many of the lands are privately owned and the city can only regulate its zoning by laws rather than propelling the development of the site. The City government has been somewhat forced to hold a passive role on decision making of the larger area for many years since the end of Expo 86, not to mention its absence in a say when the Province of British Columbia (BC) sold the lands. Because of the delayed process and the unjust power dynamics between the private corporation, the city, and the people, there are more reasons for the city to redo public engagement for Northeast False Creek to re-evaluate the needs of the community.

Successful Methodologies of Citizen Participation

Citizen participation can come in multiple forms, great ones and helpless ones. For it to effectively reflect opinions, we should ensure the spaces are co-created by the people rather than treating engagement as a segmented tool to distribute information. As urban lives get produced and subsumed by the built environment, urbanism as a socio-spatial dialectical counter force of urbanization (Soja, 1980) plays a key role in illustrating the social, economic, and political influence on the process of urbanization and planning approaches. It is the people who live, work, play in the area and the political and economic forces within offices and behind planning agendas that create the "socially produced" space (Soja, 1980) used by residents and stakeholders of society. A crucial component of a socially-produced space is citizen participation, which contributes to the opposition, unity, and contradiction (Soja, 1980) of the spatial fate when formulating the present and the future of a neighbourhood.

The Georgia and Dunsmuir Viaducts before development in False Creek and Expo 86. Photo from the City of Vancouver Archives

With diverse ideas, citizen participation manifests in many forms and styles within broader discussions of land-use and planning. Civic engagement comes in levels of participation as a ladder illustrated by Arnstein (1969) encompassing the notion of non-participation, degrees of tokenism and degrees of citizen power. For citizens to hold the power in a traditional hierarchical framework where power is generally centralized to government policies, bottom-up planning approaches for communities could be more beneficial for community needs (Ali et al., 2022). Bottom up approach of planning with citizen participation will only benefit communities that experience "real" forms of engagement, where the power citizens held are by all faucets and have solid forms of participation. This comes in the forms of "partnership", "delegated power" or "citizen control" in Arnstein's ladder (1969) to ensure socially produced spaces are co-created with stakeholders (Seve et al., 2022)

One way for rights of the oppressed and the alienated to be amplified and exercised in a city like Vancouver requires professional perspectives. Civic engagement crying for the right to the city and specifically "the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in urban areas" (Lefebvre et al., 1991) could be

more efficient when facilitated by advocacy and mediating agencies like lawyers representing client voices (Davidoff, 1965). Davidoff previews the contentious nature of serving "the" public interest when a diverse set of interests are to be met. A plural planning process with alternative plans by non-government interest groups, as Davidoff (1965) proposed, would aid in organic creations of alternatives free from particular obligations, bias, and promote quality for plans developed as agencies are forced to compete for political support. Representation, advocacy, and professional support (Davidoff, 1965) gain importance in a competitive plural planning process in which the "advocate planner" negotiates and pursues outcomes best for the represented group's interest in addition to education and outreach work, similar to a lawyer legally advocate for their clients in courts (Davidoff, 1965). Without neglecting the critical role of the public planning agency in coordinating local developments, the inclusivity of planning would rise as more groups are represented by planners well-matched with the levels of professionality needed in major urban decisions, enabling success for a plan that focuses on socio-spatial dynamics closer to the living scale for the many represented.

Theorizing citizen engagement is increasingly important in Vancouver's unique mosaically rich context of diversity. Particularly in Northeast False Creek, the land is at the intersection of unique local Indigenous history and the breeding grounds of multiculturalism powered by immigration and diasporas of visible minority in the region with the majority- Chinese and Black communities adjacent to the site. As cities invite conversation, urban spaces are the canvas for priorities and principles to be integrated from the ground up with the needs of marginalized and culturally diverse groups. The process of "Community Visions" for ethno-culturally diverse communities in Vancouver examined by Uyesugi and Shipley (2005) exemplifies the importance of civic engagement with the different demographics and recognizes that multicultural planning should be an active and deliberate process to ensure underrepresented groups' voices are accounted for. Beyond the inclusive participation process, timely implementation of policies and procedures to adjust for diverse community needs and preferences (Uyesugi & Shipley, 2005) is of the essence to ensure visions travel beyond the planning table and end in tangible outcomes through physical spaces and policy changes.

To elevate Vancouver's citizen participation, particularly in the Northeast False Creek site, the involvement of plural planning and advocate planners in the city's planning department, the implementation of strategies to ensure diversity is taken into account on the ground level by the city plans, and forming local forces through coalitions for stronger bargaining power are ways to resist from the capitalistic oppression and to advance the role of citizens up the ladder of participation

Conclusion

Under ever-changing economic, social and environmental conditions, I argue that the fate of the last piece of Expo Lands under Concord Pacific's new proposal (Fumano, 2025a) should weigh-in current voices from the public and directly consult with various demographic and socioeconomic classes to create a place for community that serves current challenges and goals rather than a decade-old proposal. To reject the hegemony of capital power and forces as the dominating leadership, the mediation of the municipality government's planning agencies and the city council plays a critical role in citizen participation. Without timely conversations with the planners and developers in this delayed project, residents have yet to see a way out of the livability crisis through the redevelopment of demographically diverse site of interest at Northeast False Creek. To realize the needs and changing conditions of the community, the political economy must give way to the people and enable public voices to hold a stronger position on the ladders of participation illustrated by Arnstein (1969). The evolving needs around stakeholders of Northeast False Creek shall be evaluated timely to create a space for urbanism and the people.

Photo by Pop Snap via Flicker

An Ordinary House that Changed the City

By Erick Villagomez

Walk through much of East Vancouver, and you will eventually notice a familiar form: a boxy two-storey house, often faced in stucco or brick, with a shallow-pitched roof and a balcony stretching across the front. For decades, these homes were dismissed as awkward, repetitive, or simply "ugly." They became known—sometimes affectionately, often not—as Vancouver Specials.

Today, however, the Vancouver Special is increasingly understood not as an architectural mistake, but as one of the most consequential housing types ever built in the city. Its story is less about style than about affordability, migration, zoning, and who gets to belong in Vancouver.

> *The Vancouver Special translated zoning rules directly into livable form. It was not designed to impress architects. It was designed to make ownership possible.*

The Vancouver Special emerged during the mid-1960s and proliferated rapidly through the 1970s. More than 10,000 were constructed before the City effectively halted their approval in 1984.

Contrary to popular belief, the Vancouver Special was not designed by a famous architect or promoted through an official planning program. It was largely a builder-driven innovation—a pragmatic response to changing economic and demographic conditions.

Several forces converged at once.

Postwar Vancouver was growing quickly. Immigration patterns were shifting, bringing in new families from Southern Europe and, later, from East and Southeast Asia. At the same time, detached homeownership remained central to the Canadian middle-class dream. Yet rising land prices made conventional houses increasingly difficult to afford. The Vancouver Special solved this problem with remarkable efficiency.

Built close to maximum allowable lot coverage, the house placed its main living floor above grade while using the lower level for flexible space—often finished later as a rental suite or accommodation for extended family. Large interior spans minimized structural complexity. Standardized construction reduced costs. Nearly every square foot of zoning entitlement was used.

In short, the Vancouver Special translated zoning rules directly into livable form. It was not designed to impress architects. It was designed to make ownership possible.

To understand the Vancouver Special, it helps to recognize that housing types rarely emerge independently of regulation. Vancouver's single-family zoning framework—introduced earlier in the twentieth century—was intended to create a suburban landscape of detached homes occupied by nuclear families.

But zoning regulates form, not culture.

By the 1960s, builders realized that existing regulations allowed a larger, more adaptable house than planners had anticipated. The result was a dwelling capable of accommodating multi-generational households, rental income, and incremental improvement over time.

Ironically, the Vancouver Special aligned closely with the era's emerging planning goals. City officials were exploring ways to increase density and legalize secondary suites, while attempting to retain neighbourhood stability. Specials quietly delivered both. Yet they did so without professional authorship or aesthetic approval.

And that mattered.

Resistance to the Vancouver Special was rarely framed in economic terms. Instead, criticism focused on appearance. Residents complained that

the houses disrupted neighbourhood "character." Newspapers described them as monotonous or incompatible with established architectural traditions. By the late 1970s, the Planning Department undertook studies specifically addressing public concern over this single housing type—an unusual move for municipal planning.

Why did these houses provoke such strong reactions?

Part of the answer lies in Vancouver's longstanding urban identity. Much of the city's preferred architectural imagery drew on British and North American revival styles meant to signal permanence, stability, and social status. These visual traditions were especially prominent on the west side of the city.

The Vancouver Special ignored those conventions entirely. Its flat façades, wide balconies, and pragmatic proportions reflected efficiency rather than heritage. For many newcomers, this was irrelevant—the house functioned well and enabled entry into the housing market. But for critics, the Specials appeared to challenge established ideas about what respectable homeownership should look like.

Architecture became a proxy for deeper anxieties about neighbourhood change, and the geography of the Vancouver Special reinforced an existing divide. While Specials appeared across the city, they were overwhelmingly concentrated east of Main Street. These neighbourhoods historically housed working-class residents and successive waves of immigrants. Unlike the more tightly curated west side, east-side development often evolved through small builders and individual homeowners rather than large institutional actors.

The Vancouver Special, therefore, became associated with a different urban trajectory—one shaped less by architectural control and more by adaptation. For many immigrant families, the house enabled economic mobility. Mortgage payments could be supported through rental suites. Extended families could live together. Ownership provided stability and participation in civic life.

Seen this way, the Vancouver Special was not merely housing. It was an infrastructure for settlement.

By the early 1980s, opposition intensified. In 1984, the City stopped approving new Vancouver Special designs. Subsequent zoning and design regulations increasingly governed rooflines, façades, and massing. Importantly, affordability concerns did not disappear.

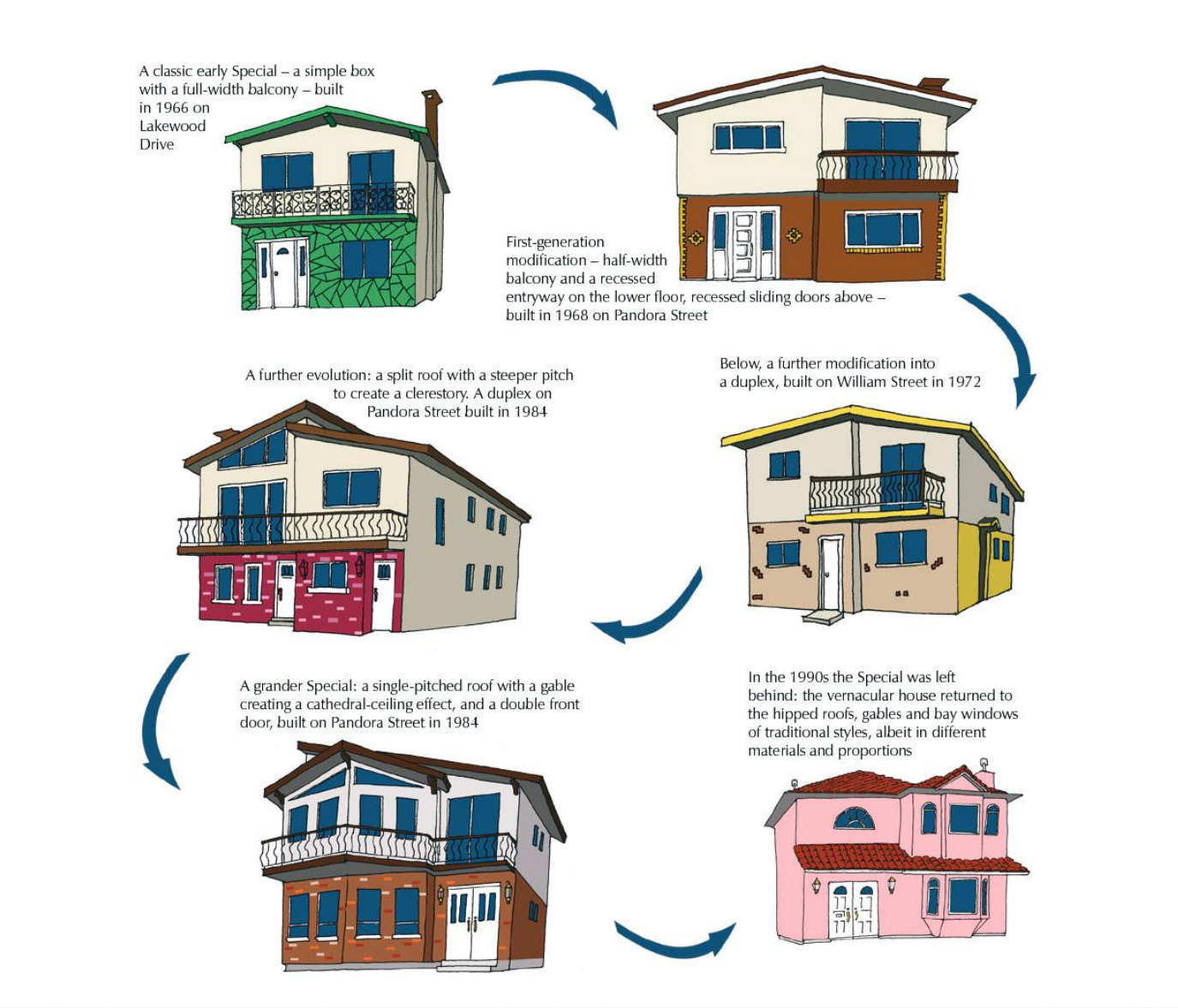
What changed instead was the acceptable expression of density. Larger and more elaborate houses—later labelled "Monster Houses"—began appearing, particularly on the west side. These homes often occupied similar building envelopes but adopted stylistic cues perceived as more architecturally legitimate. The underlying zoning logic remained intact. The controversy had shifted from how much could be built to how it looked.

Today, public attitudes toward Vancouver Specials are changing. Many have been renovated, expanded, or retrofitted. Some are prized precisely for their adaptability and generous interior layouts. In an era defined by housing shortages, planners and designers increasingly recognize qualities once dismissed: efficient land use, incremental affordability, suite flexibility, durability, and compatibility with family change over time.

The Vancouver Special anticipated many contemporary discussions around "gentle density" decades before the term existed. It demonstrated that density does not always arrive through towers or master plans. Sometimes it emerges quietly, through ordinary buildings responding intelligently to everyday constraints.

For students of planning and design, the Vancouver Special offers an important reminder.

Cities are not shaped solely by visionary plans or iconic architecture. They are also shaped by anonymous builders, regulatory loopholes, immigrant aspirations, and economic necessity. The Special reveals how zoning distributes opportunity—determining not only what can be built, but who can participate in urban life. It also shows how aesthetic judgment can obscure deeper structural questions about affordability and



Drawings of Vancouver Special Houses Over Time. Photo by Michael Kluckner

inclusion. Perhaps most importantly, it challenges us to reconsider what counts as "good urbanism".

The houses, once criticized for lacking refinement, helped thousands of families establish roots in Vancouver. They expanded access to ownership at a moment when the city was becoming increasingly expensive. And they reshaped entire neighbourhoods without waiting for institutional approval.

The Vancouver Special reminds us that successful housing is not always elegant. Sometimes it is simply effective. The irony of the Vancouver Special is that its very ordinariness made it transformative. Built quickly, repeated widely, and rarely celebrated, it nonetheless altered Vancouver's social and spatial fabric.

Today, as cities across Canada search for housing solutions, the lessons embedded in these modest houses feel newly relevant. The Vancouver Special was never just a style. It was a negotiation between regulation and reality–between what city planners imagined and the city people actually needed.

And in that negotiation, an unremarkable box-shaped house became one of Vancouver's most important urban inventions.

Photo by Taimur Masood

What Running Taught Me About Belonging

By Stephanie Mak

In October 2024, I started running. The stress of balancing work, school, volunteer, social, and personal commitments was starting to weigh on me. The last time I had a regular running routine was a couch-to-10k program years ago. One day, I just felt an urge to put on my runners and run, perhaps away from the sense of overwhelming demands my life had on me.

The moment I stepped out the door, I learned that running is not really a private act, because it takes place in public spaces. I was sharing sidewalks and crossings with cars, walkers, young parents, cyclists, dogs. I became more attuned to the urban landscape as the seasons changed. I started running with others and made connections through our shared pains and aches. I felt the curves of the street, the misery of steep hills on another street, and looked forward to the neighbourhood libraries on street corners. Running began to shape me internally and externally, and I started to feel more connected to the city.

Running also exposed me to the experience of being a woman running through dark streets at night, and how infrastructure can include or exclude certain bodies. I reflected on how belonging can be many things. It can mean feeling safe moving through the city, being acknowledged as a pedestrian, and having access to basic needs.

Stephanie Mak at the BMO Marathon. Photo by the Author

> *"I felt the curves of the street, the misery of steep hills on another street, and looked forward to the neighbourhood libraries on street corners."*

For me it showed up in small moments too like smiling at strangers, and overhearing snippets of people's joys and sorrows as I passed by. I felt the city open up to me, and with it came the sense that the world, and all its freedom, was at my fingertips.

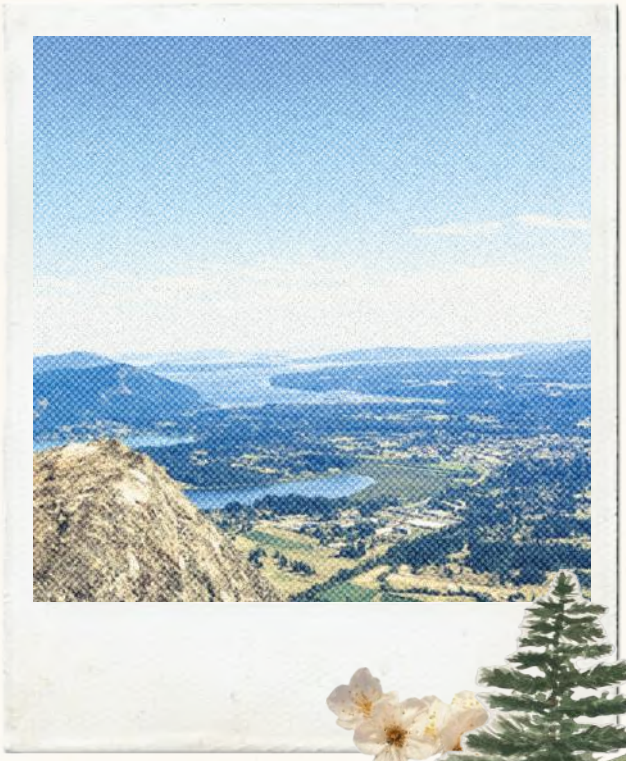
I signed up for the BMO Vancouver Marathon in May 2025 after a few months of running consistently. The demands of my life were still there, perhaps greater than before, but they no longer felt all-consuming. On that day, I was running the streets with thousands of others and being cheered on by strangers. I recognized that belonging is something we practice together through the built environment, through our individual experiences, and through collective ones.

In these shared moments, the city becomes a place we do not merely move through, but belong to.

Photo by Taimur Masood

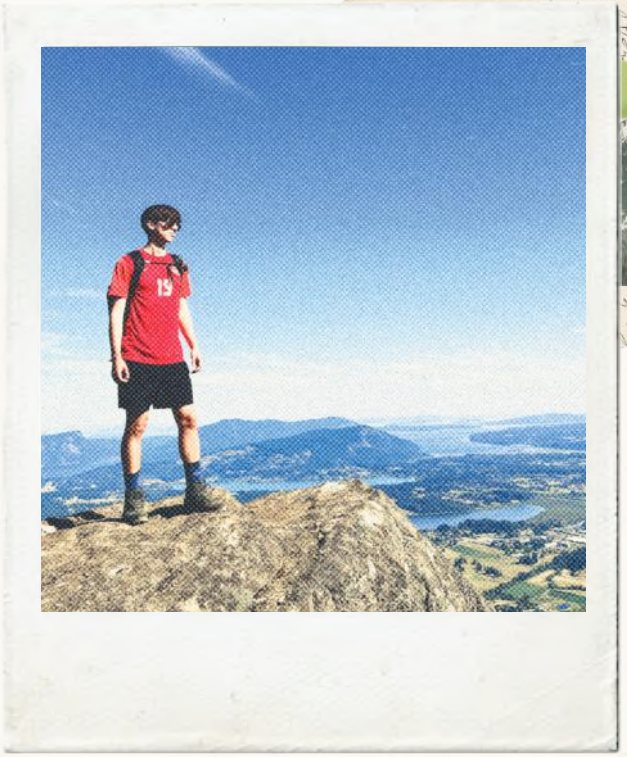
An Ode to the City that Made Me

By Matthew Chen



Sometimes I wonder if I should move away
Change of scenery, that's what they all say
Maybe life does takes me somewhere else someday

I can't control the future, regardless of
how I might see the way
But, for now, this is where I learned to play



Where I learned to seize the day
that mistakes happen and that's okay
As I take a stroll by English Bay
Vancouver, I don't care what they say
Vancouver, you know I wouldn't have it
any other way

Photo by Taimur Masood

Vancouver Kaleidoscope: Photo Collages from the City

Photo by M.K. Malik.
Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

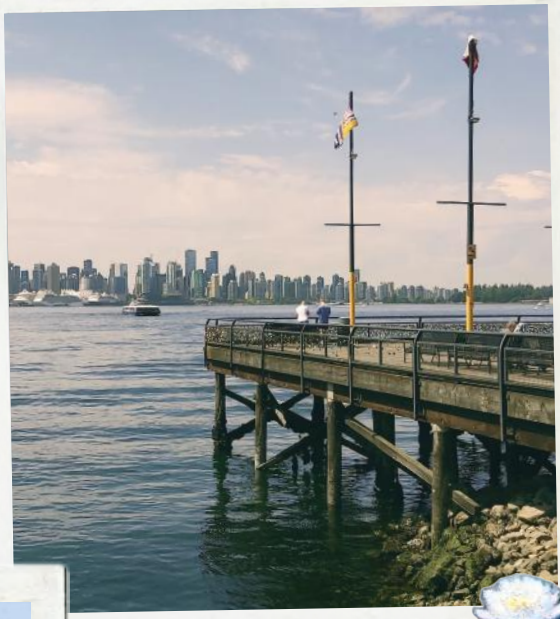


Photo by Ace Valdez

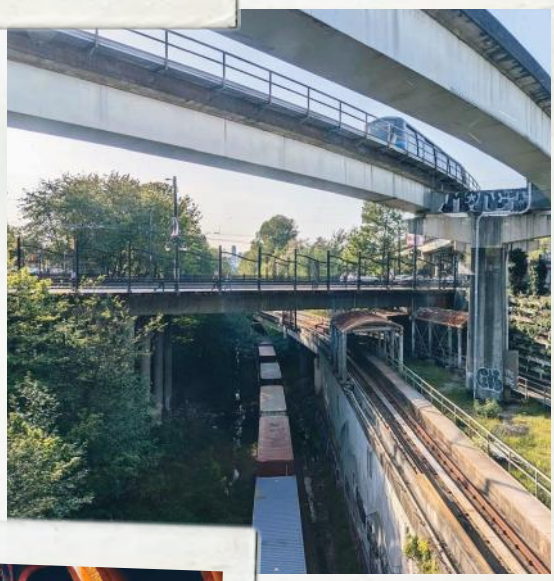


Photo by Chris Ng

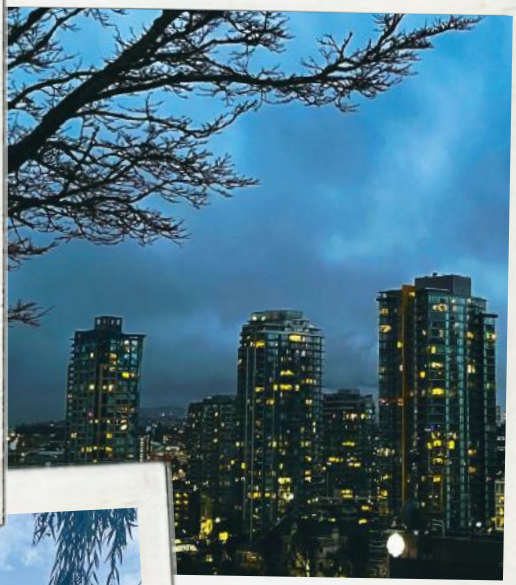


Photo by Albert Melky Simatupang

Photo by Jun Tsang.
Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Photo by Ishwarejan Balaratnamg.
Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Photo by Taimur Masood

Photo by August Kitka

Photo by Cindy Seto

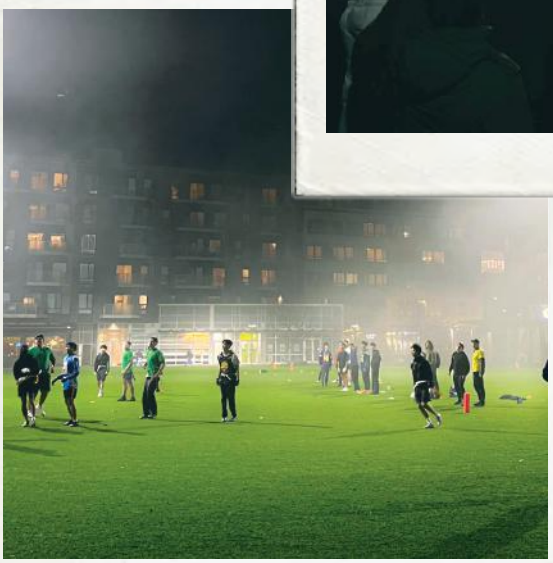


Photo by Albert Melky Simatupang

Photo by Chris Ng

Photo by Taimur Masood

Photo by Polina Gorn.
Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Photo by Tunan. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

The Geography of Privilege and Pain: Vancouver's Overdose Crisis

By Adam Battistel

"They talk about it like it's an overdose crisis when in fact it's basically genocide." This statement from Mary, a woman in her late fifties living in the Downtown Eastside, frames the overdose crisis as an extension of historical racial violence rather than a random tragedy. Her words capture Vancouver's longer history of racialized segregation, dispossession, and displacement, which shaped the distribution of privilege and pain we see today.

Vancouver lies at the epicenter of the opioid crisis in Canada. BC has the highest rate of opioid toxicity deaths in all of Canada, disclosing an opioid toxicity death rate of more than double the national average (44.2/100,000 vs 20.2/100,000). Although BC reports the highest rate by far, the pain of the opioid crisis is concentrated in specific areas of Vancouver; Strathcona and the Downtown East Side (DTES). Opioid toxicity death rates reported by local health authorities (LHA's) show this concentration clearly. The LHA section with the darkest squares contains the DTES and reports a rate of 424.9 deaths per 100,000. Similarly egregious rates can be observed just west and south of this area, with the two slightly lighter red squares indicating rates of 41.8 and 70.3. As you move further west on the map, opioid toxicity death rates seem to fall off a cliff. The LHA directly west of the second and third highest rates in the city reports a rate of only 6.4, and just across the Lions Gate Bridge to the west reports an 8.5. These are the two lowest rates in the city. The city does not experience "the overdose crisis" evenly; the DTES absorbs it.

This unequal distribution of pain across Vancouver is not random. The concentration of pain in these areas of Vancouver intersects with the concentration of class. Overlaying household income with opioid toxicity death rates by LHA reveals a gradient of privilege and pain from west to east; as you move east, household income goes down as opioid toxicity death rates go up. The map shows a spatial relationship between location and death in Vancouver, which demands a historical explanation rooted in urban planning, not an explanation that stops at individual behaviour or drug potency.

Unpacking Vancouver's history of racial segregation yields an explanation for the spatial gradient from western privilege to eastern pain in Vancouver. It was engineered through zoning laws, exclusionary covenants, and racially motivated planning decisions that concentrated non-white and working-class populations in the east while preserving western neighbourhoods for upper-class imperial culture. That is why the overdose crisis appears as a class divide on the map. The map reflects a much older divide that was produced through market, state, and structural violence.

In the early 1900s, Black, Chinese, and Japanese people had become concentrated in what is known today as Strathcona and the DTES. Chinatown, Japantown, and Hogan's Alley emerged; Chinese, Japanese, and Black ethnic enclaves had been formed at the historical center of Vancouver. At the same time, racist sentiment in Vancouver was huge. In 1885, the Chinese head tax was imposed, which would grow from $50 to $500 between 1885 and 1903, effectively barring most working-class Chinese men from bringing their families to Canada. Asian ethnicities also lacked the right to vote in Canada until 1947/1949. In 1907, the Asiatic Exclusion League "marched to Chinatown where they beat up dozens of Chinese, wrecked stores and smashed windows". "Everyone at that time was generally racist," writer and historian Ed Starkins told VICE. "The labour unions were racist, the newspapers were racist, the political parties were all vying for the 'anti-Oriental' vote." Around this time, the city center of Vancouver began to shift west, away from the ethnic diversity of the city center. "Town planning," urban historian Neil Smith notes, "was often used in the 1800s and 1900s as a tool to segregate wealthy Europeans from perceived undesirables." Vancouver was no exception. Racial sentiment functioned as an engine for spatial sorting in Vancouver.

The built expression of that sorting is clearest in how Vancouver's west side was imagined, branded, and legally protected. In 1907, the same year as the racist riot in Chinatown, CPR's General Superintendent announced that 50 acres would be cleared for "the Nob Hill of Vancouver." Nob Hill was a rich neighbourhood in San Francisco, and

the comparison seems deliberate: Nob Hill was a rich neighbourhood developed in San Francisco while Chinese immigrants were being confined to San Francisco's Chinatown that was only a few blocks away. The "Nob Hill of Vancouver" was developed to the west of Chinatown and is known today as Shaughnessy. The original community plan made a deliberate effort to imitate the rich neighbourhoods of Britain, with extra time and money put towards importing greenery native to Britain. The geography of the west side was therefore not only wealth; it was an imperial identity project.

> *"Racial sentiment functioned as an engine for spatial sorting in Vancouver."*

British culture was not just represented cosmetically in the neighbourhood, it was enforced. Racially exclusive land titles have been repeatedly discovered in the Shaughnessy and West Vancouver areas. Those of Asian and African descent not only were not allowed to own the homes but could not even enter Shaughnessy or West Vancouver unless they were servants. This enforcement of British imperial supremacy was common practice as white populations fled west from the original city center of Vancouver. The planning of North Vancouver was even more egregious. In 1931, British Pacific Properties, financed by the Guinness family, purchased 4,000 acres of forest in West Vancouver for development and imposed the same racial covenants. Racial exclusion was part of development.

After the development of this racially exclusive enclave, the Lions Gate Bridge was designed, constructed, and financed by British Pacific Properties to connect the enclave to the rest of Vancouver. The enclave and bridge opened in 1939 and was celebrated by the British Empire when a motorcade carried King George VI and Queen Elizabeth across the bridge. This massive investment into the new neighbourhood is telling of what was to come for the DTES; segregation is not just about racial separation, it is about the concentration of investment and neglect. The bridge made the British properties easier to access, more valuable, and more protected.

Not long after this segregation was complete, Strathcona and the DTES became targets of neglect and state violence. In 1941 the dispossession of Japanese land began. Japantown was dispossessed from the Japanese by the Canadian government. It was quickly sold off well below market price and later rezoned for single room occupancy. This rezoning matters because it is a physical restructuring of the neighbourhood into low-income housing forms that concentrate poverty. The dispossessed Japanese area is currently the epicenter of the overdose crisis in Canada. In the 1950s, as part of the North American "urban renewal" movement which targeted racialized communities, Vancouver proposed to demolish Hogan's Alley and parts of Chinatown to make way for a modern freeway system. The plan commenced but was met with intense opposition from the communities. In 1972, the freeway was cancelled, but the entirety of Hogan's Alley had been bulldozed and replaced with viaducts as part of the early stages of the project. The Black residents of BC's first and last concentrated Black community were scattered. "Renewal" did not renew the communities; it attempted to erase the communities. During the 1960s, economic decline hit Strathcona and the DTES harder than other areas of Vancouver as a result of the concentration of working-class people. Disinvestment does not happen everywhere equally. It happens where the city can tolerate decay, where specific people are already socially contained.

Starting around 1970, continuing into the 2000s, city plans induced condo conversions and boutique businesses in the place of many SROs. Programs such as the CityPlan initiative (1995) and the Vancouver Agreement (2000) framed redevelopment as socially balanced, emphasizing mixed-income communities. However, these initiatives failed to protect existing tenants,

Photo by the Author. Adam Battistel's GIS Story Map

producing displacement through rent inflation and loss of welfare housing. The city's goal of branding Vancouver as livable and creative depended on sanitizing visible poverty in central neighborhoods. This "revitalization" displaced long-term residents and further concentrated poverty and addiction within the remaining low-income friendly northeastern blocks of the DTES. Redevelopment was less about inclusion than about turning land once seen as socially burdensome into assets for investors, while long-term residents bore the cost through social displacement and tightening housing insecurity. Residents have become aware of the consequences of revitalization and have routinely resisted, such as protest from residents of Chinatown against the 2025 plan for a 133 unit condo to be built adjacent to the Chinatown Memorial Plaza. In this instance, residents explicitly stated their goal was "preventing displacement." The DTES is first contained, then neglected, then "cleaned up," and the people are pushed into fewer blocks.

The overdose crisis intensified in the area carved by historical urban planning. In the 1990s, prescription opioid deaths began in the DTES. In the early 2000s, heroin overdose deaths began. Sharing needles contributed to HIV and hepatitis outbreaks. Around 2010, suppliers started using fentanyl. Fentanyl is 50–100 times stronger than morphine. This made dosing unpredictable, leading to the surging overdose deaths we see today in the DTES. The toxic supply explains why mortality rises, but it does not explain why mortality is so geographically concentrated. The DTES was already structurally primed for extreme overdose mortality because it had been produced as a containment zone through racial exclusion from western Vancouver and state violence against the historically racialized DTES.

This history of racial exclusion from Western Vancouver and state violence against the historically racialized DTES has created a clear gradient of privilege and pain. As Vancouver expanded westward, wealth, infrastructure, and public investment followed the white population, while the DTES was left to deteriorate under deliberate state oppression and abuse. Thus, the overdose crisis mirrors the racialized planning that kicked off almost a century ago. The same communities originally denied access to land, capital, and infrastructure now experience structural violence through the overdose crisis. The distribution of privilege and pain visible on the map is the physical legacy of racial segregation and oppression.

Photo by Samson Chan. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Hugill's "settler colonial city" clarifies why this gradient is so durable: Because the settler colonial city's fundamental aim is replacement rather than exploitation, it requires displacement of Indigenous and racialized groups and the creation of physical zones where the displaced can be contained and managed. Read through this lens, the DTES is not a random "high-risk environment," but a containment zone produced through settler colonial urbanism designed to preserve western Vancouver for upper-class imperial culture.

Mary's claim that this is genocide rather than crisis reads differently after tracing the geography. In this view, overdose mortality is not merely a medical emergency. It is what it looks like when a city's spatial order has long concentrated racialized poverty, disinvestment, and displacement into one district, and then the drug supply turns lethal. The DTES is not just where the drug crisis is visible; it is Vancouver's oppressive history made visible.

Access *The Geography of Privilege and Pain* story map online here.

Photo from Sole Food Farms

Finding Where You Belong in the City: Sole Food Farms & Volunteerism

By Leo Adams-Pastor

Sole Food Farms is a local social enterprise dedicated to employing individuals who may otherwise face barriers and unemployment and providing on job training in agricultural work in an urban setting. Last summer, I was able to volunteer with them and gain my own experience on an urban farm. In a city that can so often feel bleak and lonely here was a group of people so committed to their work and each other that even being there for a few hours would lift your mood. Finding urban belonging is critical to our well-being and happiness both in educational and professional settings. Sole Foods does more than train people for one job; it encourages them and challenges the formal educational hierarchy as a necessity in the workplace. As one of Sole Foods key goals, they bring people together in a way that can be educational for them all. This interview with Laura Gordon-Mitchell from Sole Foods covers some of the issues that the farm continues to face.

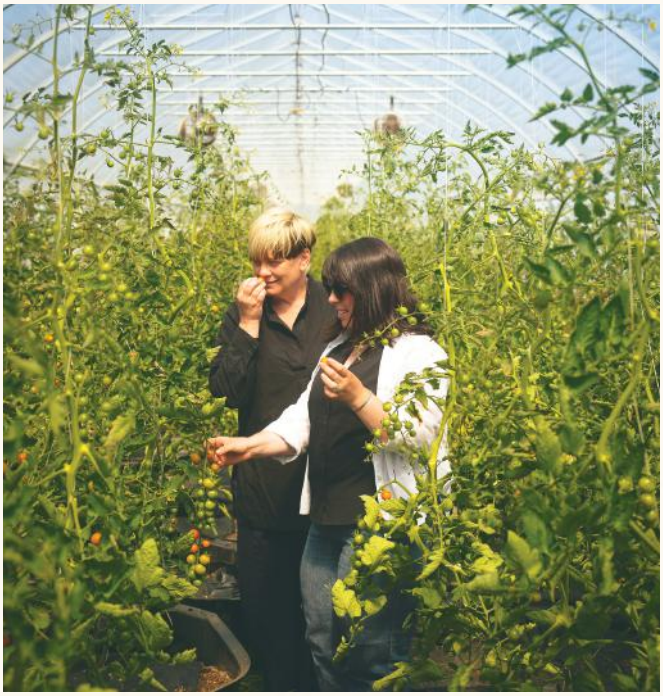


Photo from Sole Food Farms

Leo: So I just had a couple of short little questions.

Laura: I'll do my best.

Leo: I guess I wanted to start off with some context. I have a little bit of understanding of how you got into Sole Foods, but maybe just some background on your involvement and why it was interesting to you. I know you did the practicum program at UBC, right?

The UBC Practicum Program is a hands-on farm training program that runs each year on the UBC farm.

Laura: Yes, I did. So my background is in environmental geography. I've always been very passionate about food and about the connection between food and people and place, so I was studying that when I was in school. I did the farm practicum program, and that was a really cool experience of more just hands-on learning and growing. Personally, I really like growing food. I like getting my hands in the soil. But I definitely have more of an interest and focus on the planning and thinking and organizing that goes around growing food.

I don't have a natural green thumb. I love to cook, I love to be around food, but when I did the practicum that became a bit more clear to me. I like farming, but I'm not going to start my own farm next year and go and do that. From there I was working at a cafe and then I found this job at Sole Food as their sales and processing supervisor. I thought that that would be really interesting as a way to go on working with food but also getting to work with restaurants. I think Sole Food specifically spoke to me because there are so many other areas that the farm is tackling. Obviously we're an employment program so we grow food but that's kind of just what we happen to do.

Leo: So what sort of collaboration did you have with the restaurant side of things when you were working in that role for Sole Foods?

Laura: My specific role was ensuring that we were meeting restaurant standards and delivering their orders on time. I knew restaurants and the quality standards that they had. I had an

understanding of specific chefs and what they're putting on their menu. The reality of any type of organic small scale farming is it's going to be more expensive than buying from Cisco, Gordon Foods, all those things. Ensuring that the relationship that you have with a restaurant partner is stable and that you're offering them something that's different beyond just the food. High quality food obviously can be grown in so many different ways, but with Sole Food specifically a lot of restaurants really like to support our mission.

Leo: Absolutely! So what was your experience like when you got involved? What was your experience working with just all the different staff?

Laura: It was a bit nerve-wracking. Last year when you came that was the first year in a while that Sole Food had a complete turnover rate of all our supervisors and managers.

I think when you come into a place like Sole Food that has so much history, that people have been there for so long and it's a very vulnerable working environment. You really do have to take the time to listen. I hadn't really worked in a professional setting. It was one of my first real big jobs. Obviously I worked through school and stuff, but I think that sometimes you learn something and you're like, I really want to share this. With Sole Food, it's so important to be like, I actually am just here to build upon my skills and learn from you folks and be a part of this community with what I just have to offer as a person and not like, oh, these are all the things I know, these are the relationships I have. I think that letting that time settle, which again, sometimes can be hard when you're a young working professional and you just want to go to work and do your thing. Letting people build their own relationships with me and trust that they have with me. And again, I have such unique and wonderful relationships with all the farmers now, but that took a long time. And it definitely didn't feel that way for me for the first little bit.

Leo: So what's the actual process for bringing in different farmers? And how is it that so many people have been there for so many years?

Many of the farmers have been there for over a decade and have now worked on the farm through multiple locations and managers. Photo from Sole Food Farms

Laura: Sole Food as an organization has a mandate to employ mission-based staff, people that fit our specific mission. That is people experiencing barriers to employment such as addiction, mental health issues, discrimination and things like that. No one has to have a resume and no one has to have references to be employed by Sole Food. We get internal referrals or requests and we work with organizations in the Downtown Eastside that do community engagement work and social support. And like, I also think it is interesting, again, in that process, because it's like a sensitive thing, you know, to ask someone about their vulnerabilities in an interview like that. But again, to ensure that we're just having people who really need employment with how low barrier we are, that's unique. So there's a lot of nuanced questions, you have to ensure people understand the position that we're both in. I guess why people stay for so long is that Sole Food offers so much support.

Leo: How do volunteers factor into that employment system?

Laura: For a really long time because Sole Food is a mission-based employment program there were blurred lines around who can volunteer and who could not. In the past two years when we started taking on more volunteers that thinking changed because of the soil and all of the weeds. That labor wasn't required on the farm 10 plus years ago. So then it's how do we go around that in a way that respects people's time and ensures that

our values as an organization are met and I think volunteer labour often comes to play. I definitely think there's a lot of consideration that needs to be done when you're having volunteers in your space, just to make sure that they feel as though they're part of community, make sure that they're feeling like they're getting something out of it, make sure that they're not just being exploited, which happens too often. Which I hope we succeeded at.

Leo: I really liked volunteering there. I feel like there are so few places that even just have volunteer opportunities in the city. I wanted to get involved in farming and I was so curious about it, but the opportunities that are available are pretty much, you either want to go do something like the practicum at UBC or you want to move to the middle of nowhere. I just kept thinking, I think I want to live in the city. Are there any farms anywhere near me? I don't have a car.

Photo from Sole Food Farms

Leo: What're your interactions with the city? The land the farm is on is city owned right?

Laura: City owned. Yep. We have a lease with the city, they give it to us for free because Sole Food couldn't be a profitable business if we had to pay for our lease. So our relationship with the city is very complicated. It's like a lot of back and forth. There's a lot of land tenure issues. I feel like for Sole Food right now, that's the biggest challenge that is facing the organization with like, keeping our business going, honestly. It's a really tenuous issue because that plot of land specifically is very high value for Vancouver. So nothing really can happen for quite some time from my understanding of it. And so that's why they've allowed us to stay there for so long. I think we're really thinking about and focusing on, how can Sole Food integrate into the city's model for a greener Vancouver, for a more sustainable Vancouver, for like all those mandates that Vancouver used to be really, really intense about and then now has shifted priorities a little bit in recent years.

Sole Food farms has been located in Olympic Village since 2020. Prior to that the farm was split into two smaller plots in the Downtown East Side. Photo from Sole Food Farms

Leo: Within the farm specifically, is there an idea of the environment that you want to create?

Laura: I think so much of it just happens naturally. A lot of the people there have connections in their lives that I'm not involved in and I think that's really cool. Our farmers specifically are very keen and passionate about doing more workshops and having more say about what is happening on the farm.

Workshops build trust in the community and allow staff and volunteers a chance to learn from each other. They might range from edible plant identification to learning how to cook someone's favorite meal.

Laura: And then the rest is just silly. I think it's just fun. I want it to be fun. I think that for me at least, it's always been reflected that there's just so much levity in the working environment, even though there's a lot of serious things happening for people every day. Creating a space where they feel like they don't need to analyze everything going on in their lives is really important. I think that also ensuring that they have the space to not need to think about that. is like a really cool aspect of Sole food that I'm very committed to like keeping intact.

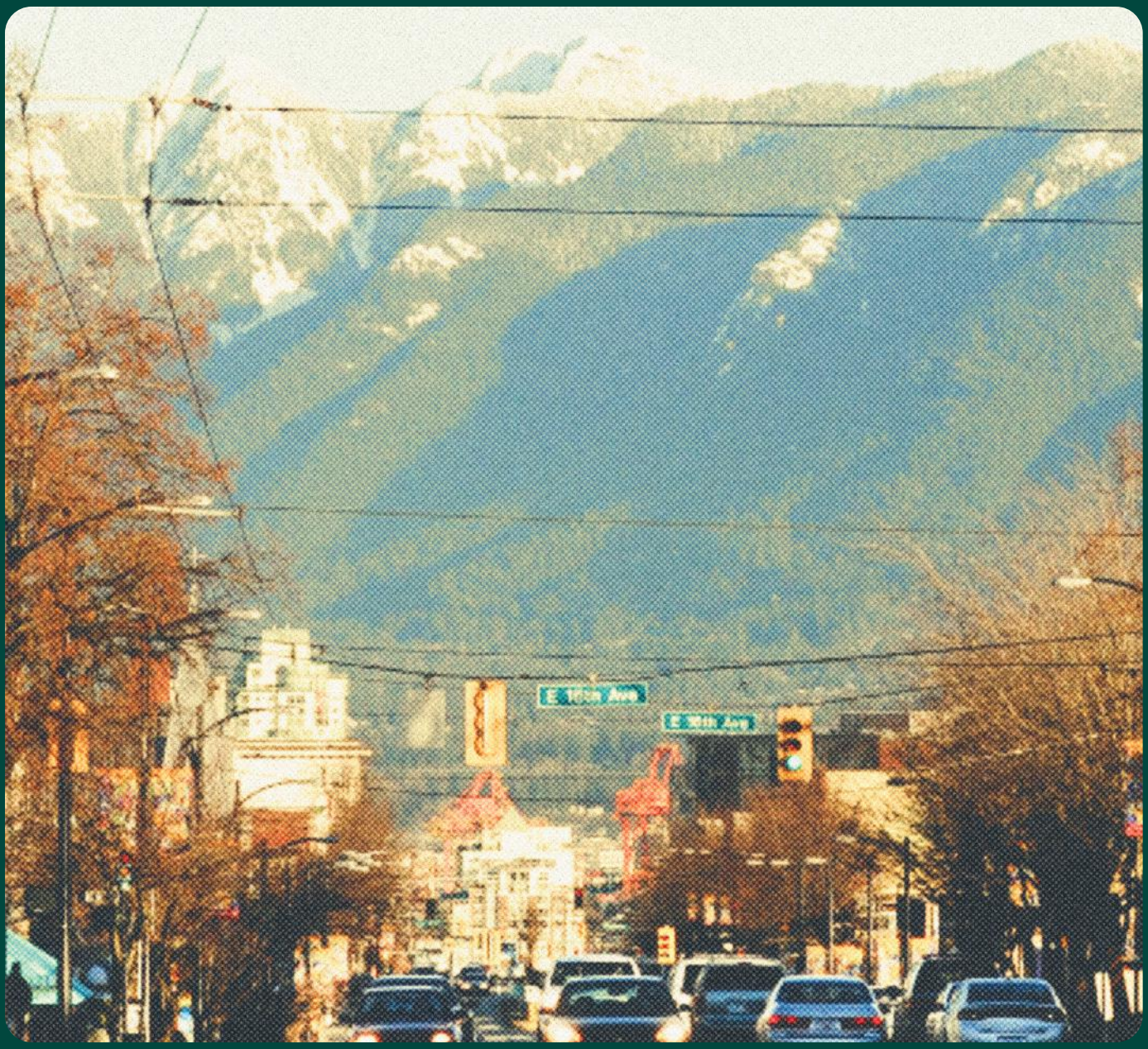


Photo from Abigail Lester et al.

Mapping Colonial Narratives in Mount Pleasant

By Abigail Lester, Cooper Kucera, Daniel Blackmore, Nadia Vukicevic, and Tracy Tan

This project supports the ongoing colonial audit of infrastructure in the City of Vancouver by analyzing current narratives in pre-existing signage. The definition of a sign being "A notice giving information" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), seen in this context as giving information about histories from the time of colonization and presenting it as the history of the area, is at the core of the analysis. We will be analyzing signage under the jurisdiction of the Department of Engineering, including those affixed to poles, rocks, and mosaics installed by the City of Vancouver and/or its community partners. The core objectives are to:

- Identify commemorative signage projects within Mount Pleasant.
- Analyze the narratives found within the commemorative signage in relation to colonial impacts
- Provide recommendations and guidance for future and current commemorative signage in alignment with Indigenous cultural visibility.

To accomplish these objectives, we surveyed the main arterial roads of Mount Pleasant to geotag signs in Mount Pleasant. Thematic analysis of this data created two key deliverables, an interactive map and this written report have been created to provide a visual representation of the distribution of signage patterns and analyse narratives observed within the public realm of commemorative signage.

Methodologies

Thematic Coding

Coding in this context refers to a method of thematic analysis that assigns different labels or "codes" to parcels of text to help organize the data. Since the signage in Mount Pleasant discusses a wide variety of topics, analyzing the various texts without any form of processing makes it difficult to recognize common narratives throughout the various themes. Ultimately, the coding process gives a sense of the range of themes in the data and sets the stage for the discourse analysis that will be performed afterward.

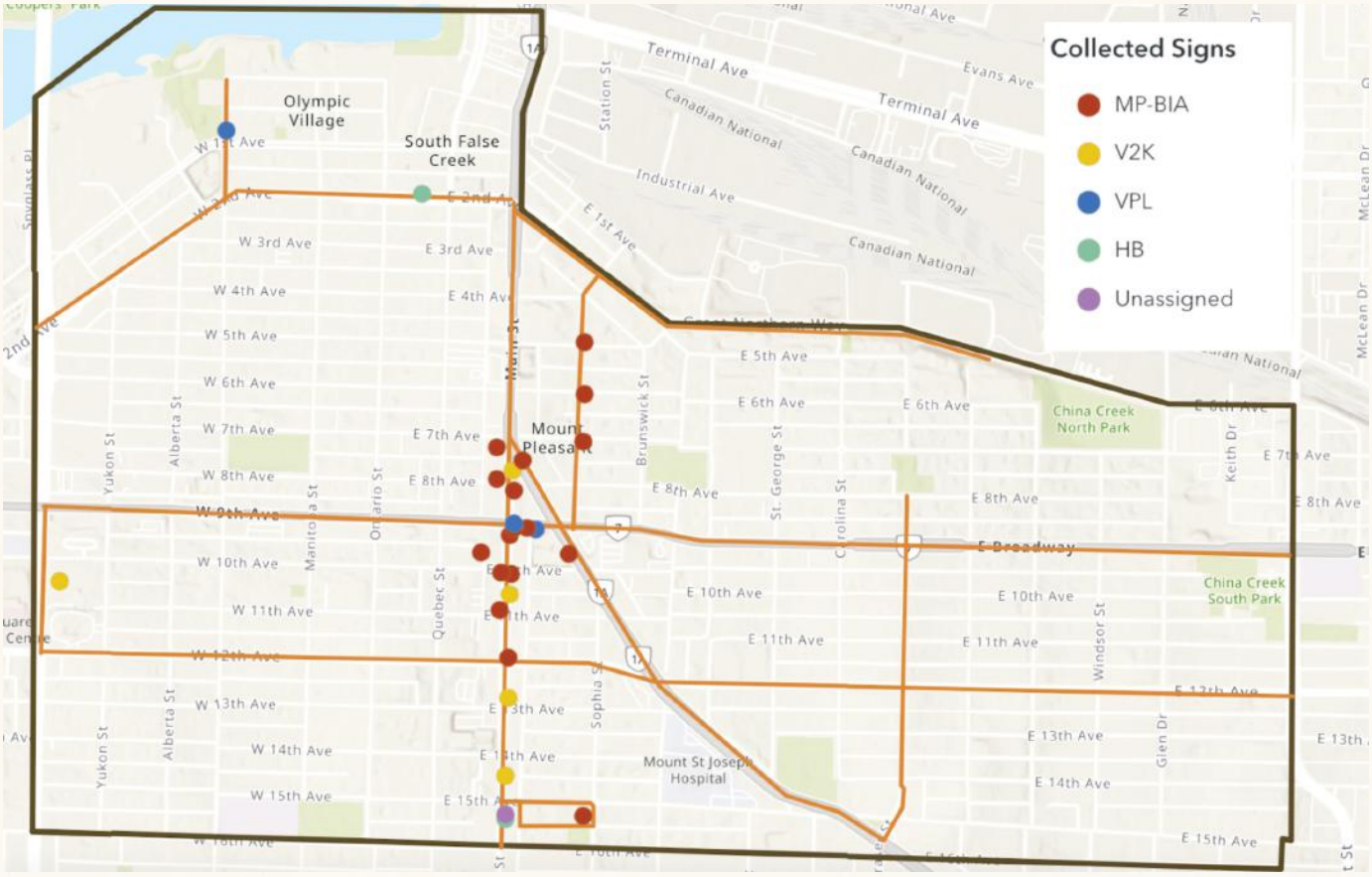
The coding process was performed in three stages: open coding, codebook creation, and focused coding. During the first stage, open coding, the goal is to derive all possible themes from the text so that the full extent of its discourse is recorded. This is done by going line-by-line and "coding" the exact theme that is being presented. In-depth interpretation is not done in this stage to avoid jumping to conclusions; instead, the code simply focuses on what the person says and means.

The final stage was focused coding. Here, we used only the codes in the codebook and specified the exact pieces of text that applied. Not all text in this phase needed a code, just pieces that were relevant to this project. The aim in this stage is to code certain broader themes under one code to understand how people discuss and understand the concept.

Belvedere Court along Main St in Mount Pleasant. Photo from the City of Vancouver Archives

Mapping

To address the principal task of locating signage within Mt. Pleasant, the group has created an interactive web map using the ArcGIS Online MapViewer platform. This map consists of the geographic location of collected signage in relation to the Mt. Pleasant area and the routes along which the group collected data. Geographic coordinates of signage were collected with the Qualtrics survey, allowing for integration into GIS.



Map of the Mount Pleasant boundary (black), data collection routes (orange) and points of collected signs. Photo by Abigail Lester et al.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method that analyzes language in texts, signs, and social contexts to understand broader meanings, power dynamics, and social constructs (Jacobs, 2006)

To gain an overview of the types of themes prevalent in the signs we coded, we began by quantifying the number of times each focused code was present. By looking at the actual frequency that each code is used, we can quickly see what themes are consistently represented versus only mentioned sporadically. This then allows us to investigate the most common codes and understand how these themes are being presented in the text.

While discourse analysis attempts to analyze language and its power, the method itself is still vulnerable to reproducing ideological assumptions. Two primary concerns involving discourse analysis as a method must be addressed: subjectivity and qualitative rigour (Jarman-Clarke & Cambre, 2021; Mullet, 2018).

Results

In total, 33 signs were located through a mixture of online and in-person field work. More than half (60.6%) of the signs located were part of the Mount Pleasant History Boards project by the Mount Pleasant Business Improvement Association, a neighbourhood-based organization. Additionally, signs were also found from projects that spanned the whole of Vancouver, from municipal organizations such as the City of Vancouver (24.2%) and the Vancouver Public Library (9.1%). Some sign projects, such as the Vancouver Centennial Projects, were referenced online but not found during in-person fieldwork, suggesting that the signs have since been removed or are no longer actively managed.

Name of Project	Principal Organisation	Date Installed	Number Found	About
Mount Pleasant History Boards	Mount Pleasant Business Improvement Association	2024	20	Signs highlighting community histories connected to former establishments, buildings, and notable figures in Mount Pleasant.
V2K Portrait Project	City of Vancouver	2000	6	Signs commemorating the millennium by highlighting local stories and memories throughout Vancouver.
Places that matter	Vancouver Heritage Foundation	2011~ Ongoing	0	Signs highlighting community histories with 6 signs located on Mount Pleasant listed on the Vancouver Heritage Foundation website. However, these were not identified in person during the study.
Literary Landmarks	Vancouver Public Library	2015	2	Signs highlighting prominent authors, placed throughout Vancouver.
Heritage Buildings	City of Vancouver	Ongoing	2	Signs indicating protected heritage status on historic buildings designated by the City of Vancouver.
Reading Lights	Vancouver Public Library (VPL)	2017	1	Signs highlighting local children's books placed throughout Vancouver. Some signs listed on the VPL website were absent.
Vancouver Centennial Project	City of Vancouver	1988	0	Signs commemorating the centennial of the colonial founding of Vancouver. Information about this project was found online. However, no signs were found during site visits.
Unassigned	-	-	2	Standalone signs related to specific private buildings without belonging to a particular project.

Sign Survey Results. Adapted figure from Abigail Lester et al.

Themes

Absence of Indigenous Representation and History

As we conducted the discourse analysis, we identified a lack of Indigenous representation and history within the narratives present on the signs. Much of this signage was developed before Vancouver moved towards a focus on UNDRIP and reconciliation, which may be an element of the discourse seen on these signs.

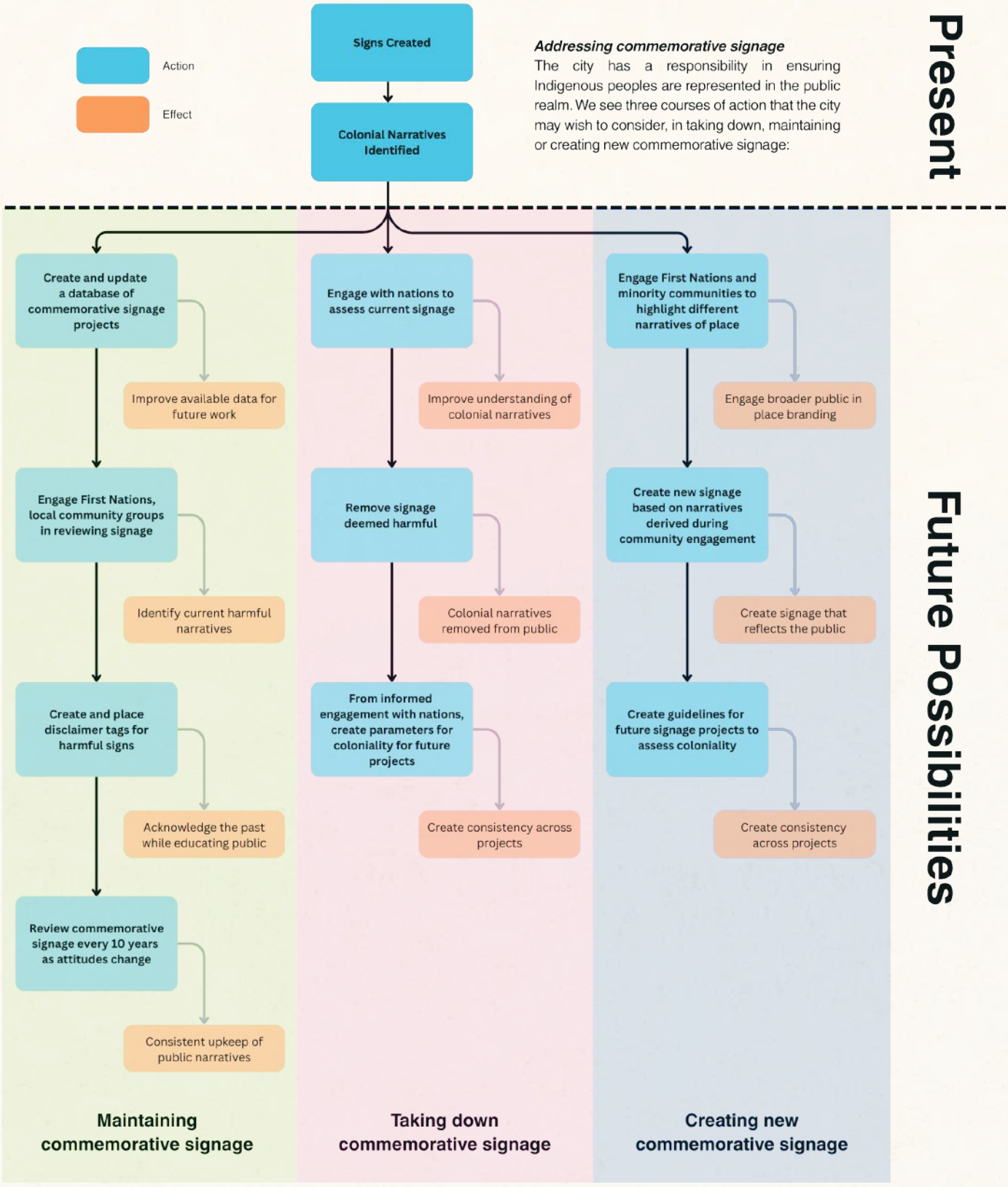
Business and Capitalism

Another major theme we encountered from the signage is business and capital development, which we further divide into two manifestations: (1) business as an agent in colonial place-making, and (2) business and capital as physical imperial expansion through infrastructure.

Depolicized Community and Culture

The themes of community and culture provide an insight into the less widely known histories of Mount Pleasant. The signages on a whole represents a diverse range of communities that have seemingly assimilated into Canadian norms, presenting a version of Mount Pleasant's history as apolitical and sanitized.

Recommendations



Recommendations for the City of Vancouver Engineering. Adapted figure from Abigail Lester et al.

Photo by Calvin Go. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Diversity Through the Built Environment:

History, Identity, and Redevelopment in Burnaby's Maywood Neighbourhood

By Tamara Tan

Living in a dense urban city, I've become accustomed to tall towers where I have to crane my neck just to glimpse the top. Therefore, when a two-story house sits nestled between thirty-story buildings, height becomes the first thing I notice. The Maywood neighbourhood in Burnaby is the city's largest rental housing market. Most buildings are three to four stories and were constructed around the 1960s as affordable housing for the emerging community (Fuller-Evans, 2012). The neighbourhood is situated across from Metrotown Mall and Metrotown SkyTrain Station, with an elementary school and park all within walking distance. According to a 1977 planning document, the area was initially designated as an "adult-oriented residential area," referring to apartments as "utilized by persons, who because of financial circumstances, cannot afford accommodation that is perhaps more suited to their needs or preferences" (City of Burnaby, 1997, p.31). While framing apartments as lower-grade housing is stigmatizing, it demonstrates how historic planning assumptions shaped the neighbourhood. Planners promoted the area as a stepping stone towards owning a house and a self-sufficient hub within the larger city context. Low rental costs then fostered natural diversity, as immigrants were drawn to the neighbourhood as an initial place to settle.

Through the frameworks of two urbanists: Susan S. Fainstein (2005), who questions the authenticity of diversity planning and whether it comes from the built or social environment, and Leonie Sandercock (2007) who argues for diversity in planners and the planning process that goes beyond traditional approaches, I will explore how Maywood has shifted from a quiet residential area to a vibrant mixed-use space. Additionally, I will draw on personal observations from walking through the neighbourhood, as well as my familiarity with the area as someone who grew up frequently passing by. Through an analysis of Maywood's built environment, I argue that its art, heritage, and spatial organization both reflects and produces social and cultural diversity. Sustaining this diversity, however, requires intentional engagement among planners, existing residents, and newcomers.

Maywood Core 2026. Taken from the rooftop garden of a building opposite Maywood. Photo by Asma Merchant

Art and Heritage: Creating a Bridge Between Old and New

When I began my walk through the Maywood neighbourhood, two things stood out: the older buildings had fallen into neglect, while the renewed areas were alive and culturally diverse

with stores and pedestrians. This is not to suggest that older buildings cannot produce the same level of social diversity as new ones, but simply a street-level observation. The visual juxtaposition between buildings is reflected in two aspects of the built environment, public art and historical houses. Public art highlights the multiplicity of voices while heritage sites acknowledge and preserve the continuity of the past and the communities that shaped the present. Together, they reveal how Maywood embodies diversity through contemporary additions and historical preservation.

Immutable Affection by Kim Cooper. "Immutable Affection alludes to molecules and honey as symbols of community & interconnection as the piece slowly expands upwards into the sky" – Kim Cooper Photo by the Author

Public art integrates the neighbourhood's past and present to encourage reflection and interest in its distinctive culture. Each building has a unique design that has avoided what Fainstein (2005) describes as "bland uniformity," which has dominated other parts of Burnaby (p.7). Sculptures line the commercial district of Maywood and the front entrances of new developments. This is due to a policy that requires private development to include public art in its rezoning agreement. The policy is extensive, blending public, Indigenous, and city voices to create pieces that reflect the community's identity. In an effort to encourage diversity, the policy states that artists with three or more commissioned works under the program will not be considered unless part of a host nation (Burnaby Art Gallery & City of Burnaby, 2025). This rule, alongside multiple artists and separate artworks, creates a mosaic of styles and perspectives that embodies what Sandercock (2007) describes as "mutual recognition and accommodation," since no single voice dominates (p. 133). It creates a "multiplicity" that allows residents to feel recognized within the diversity yet "estranged" by encountering works that may be unexpected or unfamiliar (Sandercock, 2007, p.133). However, planners must ensure that design and art reflect the community's identity, and that it's not an "aesthetic intervention" to fit the idea of a diverse community (Fincher et al., 2014, p.45). Ultimately, when done with the right motivations, art is a way for the marginalized and voiceless to feel seen and heard. It creates a sense of identity and uniqueness within the community.

Another feature of the Maywood neighbourhood is the Daniel & Amelia Mowat house, built 1913. It received heritage status in 2012, before being relocated from Beresford Street to McKay Avenue due to a housing project. Presently, it has been restored and sits between a condo and a vacant lot. While the city went to great lengths to preserve that house, owned by a white family, low-income, immigrant tenants were forcibly evicted from their building to make way for new development a couple of blocks down (Vanderdeen, 2023). In a 2018 interview, a resident expressed fears that the new developments would pit existing residents against newer residents, creating a fractured community (Zeidler, 2018). This criticism demonstrates the dual nature of interventions. While preserving the Daniel and Amelia Mowat house safeguards a piece of the neighbourhood's history, it also risks implying that other parts of the community are less worthy of preservation.

Community Cohesion: Public Spaces, Access, and Relationships

When I walked through Maywood, I felt a sense of belonging, a sense of calm despite the bustling mall across the street. In fact, people within and outside the community appeared drawn to various spaces within the neighbourhood. Children were playing in the park, people were sitting on their balconies, enjoying the sun, and couples were sipping coffee at tables outside a café. I began to wonder how age, race, and economic status seemed to co-exist without forced "tolerance" that Fainstein (2005) discusses when different cultural lifestyles clash (p.13).

This phenomenon can be explained through community cohesion supported by public spaces that allow various people to meet, share stories, and collectively exist within the same space. Fainstein (2005) argues that planners focus heavily on the character of public space rather than the level of interaction in those spaces. In a high-density community with little private green space, such as Maywood, interaction through the public sphere becomes a crucial element in fostering community. The neighbourhood achieved this through a communal outdoor space in virtually all new constructions, visible from street view. These include small courtyards or turf yards with a scatter of lawn chairs. Additionally, along the shopfronts are benches shaded by trees, and a community and city-partnered rain garden project. These spaces allow social interaction to occur across the building, neighbourhood, and city scale. The absence of fences and the orientation of outdoor spaces toward the street create permeability in the built environment, blurring the line between private and public and supporting the kind of everyday interactions that sustain communities. This openness prevents the kind of barriers to access that Fainstein (2005) warns about, when places are formally public, but still make certain groups feel unwelcome. Rather, it demonstrates the community's willingness to engage and create relationships with anyone who visits.

Despite its openness to social interactions, Maywood risks losing its identity through densification and an influx of newcomers. In a community with one of the lowest median household incomes in Burnaby, and a high proportion of immigrant and senior residents (City of Burnaby, 2022), even small changes to the neighbourhood can have severe impacts. Fincher et al. (2014) express that cultural celebrations such as festivals and art run the risk of marketing a community to tourists and spectators rather than displaying meaningful relationships. When planning practices focus too heavily on outside perception rather than internal needs, they can create tensions between the community and local authorities, eroding trust and weakening the social fabric. This is particularly critical in multicultural neighbourhoods like Maywood, where long-standing residents and newcomers must negotiate shared spaces.

> *"When planning practices focus too heavily on outside perception rather than internal needs, they can create tensions between the community and local authorities, eroding trust and weakening the social fabric."*

To address this, Sandercock (2007) reminds us through therapeutic planning theory that planners must account for the emotional

relationships to place alongside the physical. If emotions are disregarded, this runs the risk of deepening vulnerabilities and creating distrust between community members and the city. One way the community has supported the diverse needs of its residents is through the Burnaby Neighbourhood House, a community-funded service located within the area's business district. The neighbourhood house provides services in multiple languages, hosts events, and offers advice and education to new immigrants, seniors, and newcomers to the community (Burnaby Neighbourhood House, 2026). By integrating newcomers into the community while continuing to support longtime residents, this community-funded service helps bridge relationships between old and new.

Conclusion

The Maywood neighbourhood in Burnaby represents a form of diversity where no single voice or culture dominates, but instead coexists alongside others. Fainstein reminds us that a diverse physical space does not guarantee a diverse community; it's through the kinds of relationships that Sandercock highlights in her therapeutic approach to planning that explain how spaces can fulfill the needs of the residents without forced

Blending Identities. Outdoor communal space between an old apartment and a new development. Photo by the Author

tolerance. While planners have sought to maintain this diversity through art, heritage sites, public spaces, and programs, tensions persist between new and old residents, and more broadly, around questions about which aspects of the community warrant preservation. To address this, I have highlighted that community-led planning must focus on understanding and engaging with different planning epistemologies, getting to know a community, and adapting to their needs. Maywood demonstrates that socio-cultural diversity cannot be engineered from above. Rather, it emerges from neighbourhood-level relationships that planners must support, rather than manufacture.

Voices from UBC

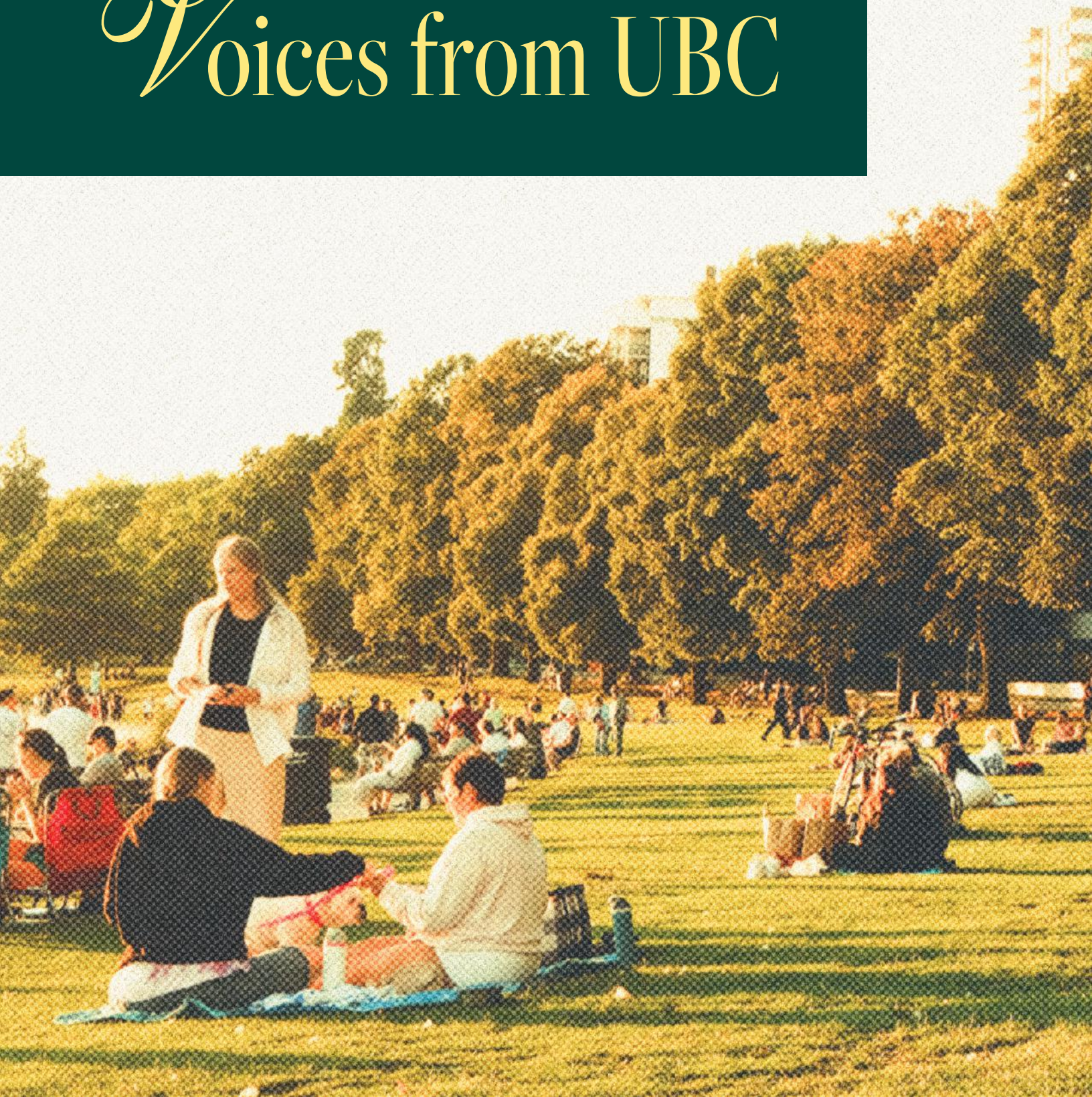


Photo by Taimur Masood

At the heart of this issue is Voices from UBC: a collective reflection bringing together students, faculty, and staff across the university in response to a shared question – *What makes Vancouver special?*

We hope to create a platform to ask how people across positions, generations, and backgrounds come to locate themselves within urban worlds and conversations. Together, Voices from UBC form a snapshot of how urban belonging is understood within UBC's urban planning community at this moment in time.

In one sentence, what makes Vancouver special?

"I think what makes Vancouver special is its ability to have beautiful people, diverse people, beautiful nature, and the city all in a very proximate space."

– *Hanzalah Majid*

"There's a lot of potential here; there's a lot of growing still to do, both in the built environment but also culturally and politically."

– *Andi Binet*

"I think what makes Vancouver special is the presence of the mountains; when i feel lost or a bit stressed, I know I always have the mountains to look at. It reminds me that I'm here and I'm present."

– *Kelly Tan*

What is your favorite place in Vancouver?

"I think my favourite places in Vancouver tend to bring me a sense of serenity, a sense of stillness, and a moment of reflection. I think Vancouver can be kind of hectic sometimes, but on the edges of the city, and even within, if you know where to look, you can find these places."

– *Diana Alhany*

"If you go down to Southlands, there's this small little entrance that you can get through. It's this hidden away, tucked away road and it leads you to this place called Deering Island. It's just a really, really beautiful place. It's connected to the whole Southlands Park and you can kind of see into the Southlands Golf Course area. It's really, really, really quiet. It feels like you're in Pacific Spirit Park–that's how quiet it is. And I kid you not, I think I've seen some of the best sunsets ever. It's just such a chill, relaxed vibe."

– *Noah Romano*

"Robson Square, which I feel like is a hot take, but I feel like it's the only real public square in Vancouver. And so people are congregating there in a way that I love. My favorite cities are grittier cities where people can congregate more naturally."

– *Keisha Maloney*

Photo by Jugraj. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Photo by Gabriel Yang. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

How do the mundane sounds of Vancouver shape your urban experience?

"Something that I really like is when I'm listening to the people kayaking by, sometimes people are like on their boats and they'll be playing music, but it's kind of off in the distance. When it's really quiet, I sometimes hear it and I'm like, oh, okay, there are other people here and they're having a fun time on their kayaks."

– Mo Cincera

"I like hearing foghorns a lot; they remind me of the city's history and connections. They also remind me of the complexities of resource extraction and how much of the local economy is tied up in that version of an economy. But they're also just sort of mystical a little bit, and there's something cool about that on its face."

– Andi Binet

What is your sense of belonging to the city?

"To me, a sense of belonging means I can go anywhere and feel at home, regardless of where it is in Metro Vancouver. I have some sort of memory associated with that place, whether it be when I was growing up or even in my adult life."

– Matthew Chen

What would help support your belonging to the city?

"I wish there was way more student housing... Like we are in so many ways a commuter school. People come from so far away and I would like people to be able to spend more time on campus, spend more time with each other, and all of that is hard when the housing situation at and in the immediate vicinity of UBC is so challenging for students. Give the West Side to the students."

– Andi Binet

How did you develop your sense of belonging to the city?

"I remember when I was around seven years old and it was the 2010 Winter Olympics. It felt so Vancouver. It was hosting the world, and the world was in this one city. I felt like everyone kind of belonged here and everyone felt at home here in their own right because the nature of Vancouver was very welcoming, and welcoming everyone as a guest."

– Matthew Chen

Where have you seen public space accentuated that serves its purpose?

"The art gallery downtown. I kind of like the idea of a modular public space that different people can use...public space is the best when it's kind of integrated seamlessly into daily life, so it's not like you have to go out of your way to experience it."

– Alex Chromy

Photo by Ace Valdez

What kind of planning in Vancouver benefits everyone?

"It means a lot to me to live in a place where planners are focused on prioritizing systems of care beyond just focusing on systems of rent and profit, and taking a really expansive and human-oriented definition of what planning can be."

– Andi Binet

What are some of your favorite memories of Vancouver?

"I love to go explore the mountains as much as I can, then you can also be on the beach the next morning or that day...and then you can go explore Main Street, Commercial Drive."

– Quentin Nelson

"When we actually stopped the car, got out, and stepped to the edge of the parking lot, we saw all of Vancouver in its 3 a.m. majesty. That was a healing, core memory, life-changing, and life-defining moment."

– Diana Alhany

"I often fall asleep or wake up to the sound of the bus either arriving or departing from the stop, which I think is a unique experience because it's not something I necessarily grew up hearing or anything, but it's something I really associate with my time in Vancouver. I think it just goes along with what I was saying earlier about how time spent on public transit for me is really valuable and a way I connect with place and people. So having that sound in the background of my day-to-day life–hearing transit–makes me feel connected. It's my method of connecting with the city."

– Mia Lowenthal

Photo by Bob - Alexandre St-Aubin. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

"With a friend of mine, we went and painted as the sun was going down at Hollyburn Peak in Cypress Provincial Park. As we were coming down, there's a little snow-covered lake that we passed by. We thought, well, maybe when there's a full moon, we could come back and paint here. And so we did that on the weekend. It was amazing to be a 45 minute drive from where I was up in the mountains to Vancouver, and then a short walk, you're in a provincial park. I did a little painting by moonlight, which was something I hadn't done before. I was thinking about it on the walk back after. It's amazing that you can find a place like that–so peaceful and so inspiring–right next to a city in a metropolitan area with millions of people and still be almost totally alone."

– Alec Blair

What kind of feelings do you get from those experiences?

"I feel a sense of peace, and like, reflectiveness because I'm sitting out and watching life happen in front of me. I'm running around, I just came back from volunteering, and I'm tired. Sometimes by just watching other people going through the daily motions of life, I'm taking a step back."

– Alex Chromy

Do you think Vancouver is nature in a city or a city in nature?

"I think you could describe Vancouver as both. I think Vancouver's a–this is going to sound like one of the lectures from a class–but it's a complex socio-ecological system where you have these human and non-human components always interacting, always influencing each other. You definitely have this idea of human elements having agency in decisions about design, about how we use this space, about where we spend time and stuff like that, but also a lot of agency from non-human elements."

– Alec Blair

These responses were taken from several interviews as part of Voices of UBC's segment on CiTR's 24 Hours of Student Power 2026. The full-length recording of the segment can be accessed here.

Section II

Urban Commons

Photo by Taimur Masood

Courtesy of the Seattle Municipal Archives, #123593, Series 0207-01

To Bend a River to Your Will

The Cleanup of the dxʷdəwʔabs River through the Lens of Vicious Sedimentation

By Sidonie Wittman, Brienne Beaudry, Michelle Evans, Sigrun Forint, and Michelle Read

Seattle's *dxʷdəw* (anglecized Duwamish) River is layered in polluted sedimentation, bringing toxicity to all life in the river's bed (EPA, 2013). Removing the sediment's surface layer is not enough to reverse the harm that the pollution has wrought, true remediation requires an end to the continued pollution of the river and the rejuvenation of the river's habitat.

Decolonial scholar Kyle Whyte conceptualizes 'vicious sedimentation,' where Indigenous communities' existence is undermined through layers of settler environmental harm. This layering masks issues of Indigenous sovereignty as simple environmental concerns. Similarly, the *dxʷdəw* River's cleanup cannot be viewed as a simple technological issue fixated on the removal of polluted sediments alone. Real remediation of the river requires a full return of sovereignty to the *dxʷdəwʔabš* (anglecized Duwamish) people. Through the conceptual lens of vicious sedimentation, this paper aims to show how environmental remediation can accumulate, rather than dissolve, colonial power. Meaningful environmental justice along the *dxʷdəw* River requires extension beyond technocratic remediation to include federal recognition of the *dxʷdəwʔabš* and the reassertion of Indigenous sovereignty.

dxʷdəw History and Continuity

Since time immemorial, the *dxʷdəwʔabš* have lived on the river known as *dxʷdəw*, 'the Inside', giving them their name *dxʷdəwʔabš*, People of the Inside. The river gave nourishment and spiritual wellbeing to over sixteen villages with ninety cedar longhouses (Duwamish Tribe, n.d.-b). The river mothered salmon in its valley streams; and salmonberries, camas, and crabapple blossomed on its river banks; all existing in relation (Pingeon, 2025).

White settlers did not care for this relationality. They saw the riverbed's fertile soils as ripe for agrarian labour and industrial production which would dominate the river in the late nineteenth century. Colonizers demanded the river bend to their needs. The curves and loops of the river that led salmon home were dredged and straightened for ship passageway, as the river was reduced from 600 to 480 square miles (Cummings, 2020). In processes of settler colonialism, "land is remade into property and [...] [e]pistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to

Industrial land along the dxʷdəw River in 2009. Photo by Chiara Coetzee on Flickr.

land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage." (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). The *dxʷdəwʔabš's* reciprocal relationship with the river was intentionally disrupted by industrial encroachment which would go on to poison its waters.

Dozens of industrial plants sprang up spreading arsenic, lead, cPAHs, dioxins and furans, PCBs, mercury and other heavy metals into the river (Browne et al., 2010; EPA, n.d.; Washington State Department of Health, 2008). Companies used the river as a dumping ground, including the Boeing Airplane company who poured chromic acid directly into the river daily.

By the 1940s, only fifteen percent of the *dxʷdəw* River's original tidal marshes remained, leaving nowhere for the salmon and other wildlife to live safely (Duwamish Tribe, n.d.-b). In 1983 and 2001 that the river was partially and then fully declared a Superfund site, a candidate for immediate cleanup led by the federal government by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Duwamish Tribe, n.d.-a; Cummings, 2020).

The Lack of Recognition of the dxʷdəwʔabš

EPA law allows federally recognized Tribes to be treated as sovereign governments in the Superfund process (EPA, 2023). During the cleanup of the *dxʷdəw* River, the EPA has had continuous consultation with the Muckleshoot and Suquamish, both whom are federally recognized. The *dxʷdəwʔabš*, whose longhouse sits on the banks of the river, are ignored, left unable to engage with the EPA at this level.

The United States Bureau of Indian Affairs has continually refused to recognise the *dxʷdəwʔabš* Tribe despite a prolonged legal campaign (Duwamish Tribe, n.d.-c). This lack of recognition is largely based in the *dxʷdəwʔabš's* refusal to leave their lands and move to reservations, as surrounding nations including the Muckleshoot and Suquamish did (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2015). The settler government's denial takes the form of a cruel retribution for not easily clearing the way to make Seattle a colonial city. Tuck and Yang (2012) explain that "[i]n order for the settlers to make a place their home, [settler colonialists] must destroy and disappear the Indigenous Peoples that live there" (p. 6). Unable to rid Seattle of the *dxʷdəwʔabš* through the reservation system, burning longhouses, racial discrimination, and an ordinance that forbade any *dxʷdəwʔabš* person from living inside city limits, the settler system uses lack of recognition continue their goal of removing the *dxʷdəwʔabš* from their sovereignty (Tollefson, 1992).

The *dxʷdəwʔabš* must speak through the Duwamish River Community Coalition (DRCC) to engage in the EPA's river cleanup. The DRCC is recognized by the EPA as a Community Advisory Group, consisting of stakeholders including environmentalists, immigrant groups, and labour representatives (EPA, 2025; DRCC, 2025). The *dxʷdəwʔabš* are relegated to an advisory role, forced to request input on decisions that should be in their control. The layered history of colonial exclusion and erasure continues to undermine the sovereignty of the *dxʷdəwʔabš*.

Excavation of contaminated sediment from the Lower dxʷdəw River Superfund site. Courtesy of the Seattle Municipal Archives, #169655, Series 7001-01.

Political Lexicon of Restoration

The Lower Duwamish Waterway Group, who the EPA has designated as responsible for cleanup of the *dxʷdəw* Superfund site, pose the cleanup as a technical issue of "reduc[ing] over 90 percent

of the waterway's PCB sediment contamination" and other pollutants (Lower Duwamish Waterway Group, n.d.). This is crucial, yet when situated within the river's centrality to *dxʷdəwʔabš* lifeways, the restoration narrative is revealed as dangerously incomplete. The political lexicon of restoration functions as a technology of power that reproduces the structures of dispossession which created the need for ecological intervention in the first place. Reduction of the issue of the *dxʷdəw* River into one of simply a polluted water body in need of technical remediation reasserts colonial authority over *dxʷdəwʔabš* land, history and futurity.

Boeing, a central member of the Lower Duwamish Waterway Group, makes this dynamic evident in their account of the "History of the Duwamish Waterway" (Boeing, n.d). They state "Boeing can trace its nearly 100-year history back to the banks of the Lower Duwamish Waterway... In addition to supplying the U.S. military with nearly 7,000 B-17 bombers throughout World War II, Boeing Plant 2 provided thousands of [...] manufacturing and industrial jobs" (Boeing, n.d.). In their words, the history of the *dxʷdəw* River begins with not with the People of the *dxʷdəw*, but Boeing themselves. Boeing denies accountability for facilitating land dispossession and ecological violence, and *dxʷdəwʔabš* sovereignty and the river's holistic significance is erased by a rhetorical gesture. The river becomes a mere backdrop of collateral in celebrating American military and economic triumph.

In all official EPA files on the *dxʷdəw* river, it is classified as a 'waterway', reducing it from a river flowing from from the Cascade mountains, to solely an infrastructural channel for commerce (Cummings, 2020; Janos, N., & McKendry, C. 2021). James Rassumen, a longtime member of the Duwamish Tribal Council, writes that the classification is an "obvious slight difference, in the sense that people look at it as a waterway. That's not a natural thing, but a river is" (Stein, 2023). This reduction to technological use undermines the reciprocal connection between the *dxʷdəwʔabš* people and the river from which they find their name.

Boeing's presence on the dxʷdəw River, which can be seen at the bottom of the image. Adapted from Boeing Field, Tukwila, Washington, USA by brewbooks, Wikipedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0.

The focus on 'waterway cleanup' as a technical issue functions as vicious sedimentation; where environmental initiatives reproduce colonial harms by disregarding the ecological degradation's root in colonial dispossession. Kyle Whyte writes "vicious sedimentation explains why certain allies are unable to advocate effectively for Indigenous Peoples [...] these allies' advocacy does not engage the longer and larger issues pertaining to mechanisms of colonial power that engendered and maintain land dispossession and the denial of self-determination" (2018, p. 139). As a product of continued attempts to erase the *dxʷdəwʔabš* from their land, including the radical altering of the river and the denial of *dxʷdəwʔabš* recognition, the settler government is able to deny *dxʷdəwʔabš* authority over their river's cleanup. The river pollution becomes, then, not only an "immediate threat to water and cultural heritage," but also a symptom of the layers of dispossession and denial of *dxʷdəw* sovereignty (Whyte, 2018, p. 139).

Conclusion

The cleanup of the *dxʷdəw* River must go beyond removing the layers of polluted sediment that cover the river's floors. It needs to eliminate the vicious sedimentation covering the core issue: denial of *dxʷdəw* sovereignty. To rely solely

on technical remediation is to again recreate *dxʷdəwʔabš* land through a settler colonial vision, adding yet another layer of dispossession and forced disconnect between the *dxʷdəwʔabš* and their river.

> *To rely solely on technical remediation is to again recreate dxʷdəwʔabš land through a settler colonial vision, adding yet another layer of dispossession and forced disconnect between the dxʷdəwʔabš and their river.*

Paths forward must include a return of *dxʷdəwʔabš* sovereignty and federal recognition of the *dxʷdəw*. The *dxʷdəwʔabš* first filed to restore their federal recognition in 1977, and have continually petitioned since then to restore recognition after facing multiple denials (Duwamish tribe, n.d.-e; Cummings, 2020). The *dxʷdəwʔabš* have introduced multiple solidarity efforts supporting their calls for recognition, including joining over 100,000 supporters advocating for their acknowledgement, providing financial support they would otherwise receive with federal recognition under the Real Rent Duwamish campaign, and advocating with elected officials to meet with *dxʷdəwʔabš* leadership and support their recognition process (Duwamish tribe, n.d.-d). Until they receive legal recognition, the *dxʷdəwʔabš* are excluded, standing by as a mere advisor in the federal EPA cleanup.

While federal recognition is a crucial step forward, it remains a part of the colonial framework. Ultimately, the *dxʷdəwʔabš* should not need recognition from the government that continues to erase their sovereignty and facilitated the pollution of their river. Real postcolonial justice is a full return of land and sovereignty to the *dxʷdəwʔabš*, including a return of authority over Seattle and the *dxʷdəw* River to the *dxʷdəwʔabš*. The *dxʷdəwʔabš* are the People of the Inside, the People of the *dxʷdəw* River, as they have been since time immemorial and will be for all time to come.

Photo by Javad Asgari Pirbalouti. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

How Privatization of Public Space Under Neoliberal Capitalism Makes Idiots of Us All

By Mia Lowenthal

Cities are the very place where difference lives (Mitchell, 2003). Under capitalism, that difference is exploited to further the desires of the ruling bourgeois class. This is not done subliminally nor unintentionally, it is the amalgamation of perpetual cycles of exclusion efforts that subjectate marginalized populations for the sake of capital accumulation. Amidst this, what Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels originally conceptualized in the Communist Manifesto, lies the beauty of what cities have the potential to be: places for community and creativity beyond the idiocy of rural life that isolates individuals and inhibits collective consciousness and organization. The neoliberal state privatizes and commodifies urban spaces that are labeled as 'public'. This is the primary mechanism through which capitalism maintains authority over society. The illusion of 'public space' is engrained and reinforced through calculated suppression and exclusive monopoly over spaces within cities. Rather than enabling genuine connection or expression beyond the bounds of private property, 'public space' has become a fallacy imposed on the proletariat and lumpenproletariat. Thus, the privatization of public spaces in urban centers mimics the very alienation and isolation that Marx and Engels first recognized as an inhibiting factor in mass revolutionary organization capabilities. Under the neoliberal state we have reached the idiocy of urban life.

In the communist manifesto, Marx and Engels recognize that it was the bourgeoisie that ultimately led to the rapid spread and development of urban localities: "it has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life" (Marx & Engles, 1976, p. 488). What they meant by this term idiocy is not that those who live in the rural peripheries of cities are any less intelligent, but rather they draw from the Greek word idiotal for their intended definition (Attoh, 2017). This describes individuals who are withdrawn from the public, therefore apolitical as a result of their isolation. Although the two recognized that cities were ultimately fed and reproduced by the machine of capitalism, they did present promise for eliminating the alienation and isolation they saw as a character of rural life that prevented any tangible possibilities for global proletariat revolution at the scale they envisioned. Thus the manifesto can be read as an implicit appreciation of cities, because they have the potential to act as incubators for diverse publics and political movements beyond capitalism (Attoh, 2017).

What is Public Space?

The idea of "publicness" is what gives public space its character, this refers to society as individuals experiencing the city or the state as authority figures enforcing regulation within it (Attoh, 2017). There are four dimensions for what differentiates public from private spaces: rules of access, the source and nature of control over entry, behavior sanctioned in these spaces and the rules of use (Attoh, 2017). These can be seen through spaces such as public parks, public transportation, community centers, and libraries. These are the traditionally conceptualized places for the public and regulated by the state in some capacity. But they are differentiated by their presumed accessibility and frequency from what one can also view as "private public spaces" like retail stores, restaurants or cafes, and even concert halls. These private public spaces act as mediums between truly private or public areas in urban centers, they hold the possibility for spontaneity, creativity and diversity but only for those who are deemed worthy to access them. However, the modern "public space" has been adapted in line with the spread of globalization and digitalization. A new era of "security" in public space has been established through the use of cameras, physical barriers, and rules in spaces that inhibit free use (Low, 2006). The line between private and public has thus become blurred. With private control encroaching upon public behavior in spaces now regulated by and with specific motives or ideals behind them. Public spaces become "public investments designed to prime the pump of private profit" (Harvey, 2006, p. 20). Where "the public"

Regulatory signs along a shared-use pathway found within Vanier Park in Vancouver. Photo by Ace Valdez

can be surveilled and controlled through the mechanisms of privatization that inhibit authentic community and diversity. Marx identified that "common property can be monopolized" (Marx, 1842, as cited in Bensaid, 2021, p. 71). When the rights of the poor to collect discarded tree branches is criminalized, and deemed as theft, we see how the rich use the very nature of the object of private property to monopolize it (Marx, 1842, as cited in Bensaid, 2021). In the modern neoliberal city, when loitering in public spaces is criminalized for marginalized sections of the population, the idea that public space is not truly public becomes normalized in how we engage and behave in urban spaces.

Opportunities of Cities

When public space becomes privatized, the proletariat and lumpenproletariat suffer the greatest. It is the bourgeoisie's greatest tool, the ability to erase the right to participation for those not aligned with, or seen worthy of participation with their goals. The erosion of places of sociality inhibit possibilities for revolution and reinforce overt surveillance and compliance systems that further the success of the neoliberal state. When scarcity in markets doesn't exist, like under neoliberalism, it must be socially created (Harvey, 2003). We see this through the competition of private property and profit rates. When ownership of property deems individuals more valuable than those who do not, any other inalienable rights fall secondary. Visually this is most evident in what public spaces and amenities are available in cities, or more accurately the lack thereof these spaces in specific communities. This is directly and unapologetic signaling of the bourgeois prioritization and monopoly held over space even considered "public" in urban centers. Public transportation, the vital heartbeat of cities, is constructed by the state under the capitalist system to control citizens and their ability to move freely throughout the city without the use of private vehicles. Those who most frequently rely on public transit are "condemned by circumstance to use it" (Attoh, 2017, p. 205), whereby on account of income, disability, or convenience they have no other means of accessing wages, basic necessities or amenities of the city. It is no surprise that these groups that so heavily rely on public goods are also the most exposed under capitalist society. Thus when access to public transit is inhibited or prohibited by lack of accessibility, inconsistent and limited run time, or scarcity of stops, the rights of these groups to actively participate in the city is infringed upon.

Likewise, public parks in cities have historically been vital for community building, civic engagement, and political discussions. When public access to nature in urban centers is obstructed or highly surveilled, the types of activities that can occur within parks is changed, and their use becomes obsolete or privileged for a small section of "the public" (Low, 2006). Marx championed the right to occupy public spaces throughout his work, with parks becoming beacons of political engagement and protest. When public parks become privatized, who is given access to them most often correlates with that value extraction can be pulled by their presence. Building gated communities around public bodies of nature, forests, lakes, or rivers sends an overt message on who is welcomed in these spaces and what use they will continue to

serve for certain populations who can contribute to the value attached to their access (Low, 2006). These acts of privatization of traditionally public spaces is exactly what Marx takes issue with. Capitalism alienates the working class, it inhibits the proletariat's ability to form a collective identity as a class and take a stand against the bourgeoisie. It mimics the very isolation he noted in rural towns that lack the spatial diversity and collective ability to activate. Cities become alienated from themselves when purposeful public infrastructure dictates the congregations and transport of people within its limits.

In the neoliberal system, where ownership of property defines much of what solidifies an individual's rights within the city, the need to disassociate the right to housing from a right to property is essential (Mitchell, 2003). The right to inhabit spaces needs to be reestablished in cities through access to truly shared public spaces. Marx recognized that value is social, and yet our society behaves as if it is natural (Marx, 1987). When value is placed onto space, it gains fetish characteristics through the possibilities of its private use. During the eras of bloody legislation, we even saw how occupying space freely, as vagabonds, was criminalized. By establishing the act of not working or owning property as inherently wrong and thus punishable by the state, reinforces how capitalism holds ultimate control, and illustrates how the subsequent attitudes towards the proletariat were thus manufactured by its expansion, not as a naturally occurring phenomenon (Marx, 1987). The remnants of these policies remain through the inherent criminalization of homelessness and purposeful exclusion of those without private property from public spaces. The concept of public spaces is essential to the very essence of human existence where community should be fostered rather than privatized.

Photo by Taimur Masood

The Right to the City!

For individuals living in urban centers under capitalism, access to public space and the capacity to form spontaneous shared social connections within it, should not be subject to restriction. This principle is reflected in the concept of the “right to the city” where urban inhabitants should have agency to collectively shape and access the spaces they occupy. First coined by Henri Lefebvre, this phrase emphasizes a right to centrality, where cities are viewed as oeuvres that are worked and produced through the labor of urban residents themselves, not the private sphere or the state (Attoh, 2017). This can only be achieved through a transformed and renewed sense of right to urban life, which like Marx, Lefebvre sees relying on the agency of the working classes to achieve (1996). When public spaces are privatized, this agency becomes further obscured and the idiocy of rural life is recreated in urban settings. As citizens, we should be entitled to a right to not only access the city in its existence but also possess a right to change it (Harvey, 2003). The rise of capitalism and the subsequent neoliberal state that prioritizes free markets and bolsters private property rights, gave way to the domination of “abstract space” in our societies (Mitchell, 2003). When there is no open space for diversity or creativity outside of one's private home or the heavily regulated confines of the work place, the isolation of individuals is inevitable. This abstracted arranged space is what continues the proliferation of capitalism.

While creating access to public space is important, we must avoid the trapping of spatial fetishism, whereby an object or in this case space, gains a fetish character because of the value assigned to it through its production. With the privatization of public space, space becomes a production of the capitalist system, and ultimately an empty vessel politically, unless it can connect "symbiotically with the organization of institutional and private spaces" (Harvey, 2006, p. 32). This requires a more fundamental shift in the ways our political system is organized, which cannot be fully eradicated under capitalism.

Marx saw that when equal rights conflict, "force decides." The original German text used the word to describe not a straightforward use of force to overpower a group, but rather the idea that the overarching efficiency of rights only remains credible through the power they are backed behind, through at least the implicit threat of violence (Mitchell, 2003). This is because under the capitalist system, rights have established themselves as being the provider of the instructions behind the use of power within the state. So when the rights of private interests are skewed in favor of bourgeois ideals, they become credible under the system itself, and not because they are inherently more valid. Taken in context with public space, we must recognize that our right to the city cannot be so easily given up, we have the right to stand against the bourgeois to progress change within our public sphere. Calmness and civility should be seen throughout our urban history as the exception, not the rule (Harvey, 2006). We need to take from Marx that lesson that capitalism will not give up an inch unless it is forced (Marx, 1987). Thus we must take action to save our public spaces and free ourselves. The right to the city demands far more than the physical attributes that make it, we need to reestablish the right to inhibit as a unifying and overarching cause of the urban proletarian revolution (Mitchel, 2003).

The Communist Manifesto reads as an unrealized global call to action. From a 21st century analysis, one of the main inhibitors in that call has been instilled through the rise and supremacy of the neoliberal state. Access to public space has been infringed upon and exploited to reinforce capitalist value accumulation and isolation amongst our public spheres. This has direct implications for how the mobilization of the proletariat has been inhibited. In the very urban spaces ripe for revolution, we have become conditioned to tolerate isolated, surveilled, and regulated public spaces. Our only recourse for true liberation stems from collective effort towards a revolutionary consciousness. This must begin by enacting a roll back of the "waves of privatization that has been the mantra of destructive neoliberalism" (Harvey, 2006). This is only possible through the united effort of the proliterate class, only we can destroy the ideology of consumption as we are the ones that suffer at its hands (Lefebvre, 1968). Championing Karl Marx and urban theorists everywhere, we truly only change ourselves by changing our world. Tangibly, we can take action through grassroots community organization and exercising our rights to protest and vote. Disruption is the strongest weapon one can possess against the capitalist machine. We must take back our right to the city, only then can city air make us free.

"Taken in context with public space, we must recognize that our right to the city cannot be so easily given up, we have the right to stand against the bourgeois to progress change within our public sphere."

Photo by Abed Rahim Khatib, Anadolu Agency, Getty Images

A Vision of Palestine: Capturing Genocide

By Elias Mirsky

Since October of 2023, the world has bore visual witness to a two-year genocide against Palestinians in Gaza by the Israeli government and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). This attack is part of a longer history of displacement and colonial genocide, originally escalating with the 1948 Nakba in which Israel forced more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homes, leaving only the West Bank and Gaza Strip as Palestinian land within their ancestral territories. Since then, Gaza has become the world's largest slum, "essentially an urbanized agglomeration of refugee camps" with a besieged population under constant threat of Israeli military and settler violence (Davis, 2006, p. 48). In the current campaign, Israel has killed over 67,000 people, over 20,000 children, and has leveled 92% of all residential buildings and 88% of commercial buildings (Ali et al., 2025), rendering the crucial infrastructure of the world's largest slum to rubble.

The role of visual capture has been crucial in this campaign's discursive production. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag (2003) writes, "War-making and picture-taking are congruent activities" (p. 67). This has been so since photography's inception, with visualities of war collected by colonial aggressors to gather intelligence. The development of the zionist state has also been congruent with the development of the technologies of visual capture and dissemination that have characterized the modern era. Since its foundation, Israel has used visual technologies to surveil Palestinians, mock them, and gather intelligence for violent campaigns. Although Israel has long dominated the visual portrayal of Gaza to perpetrate oppression, Palestinians are now using increasingly accessible technology to turn the lens back on their aggressors, de-normalizing the zionist state and its actions, and commanding a newfound influence over international discourse.

In this essay, I will first explore a history of Israeli "image-fare," their waging of war on a visual front through the tactical use and control of visuals and their circumstances of production (Jones, 2011, p. 40). I will focus on 2009's "Operation Cast-Lead," as well as the less obvious example of Susan Sontag's Promised Lands (1974) documentary. I will then analyze the visualization of the current iteration of Israeli genocide and how Palestinians have reclaimed visual technology that has historically been used to oppress them, and how this shift is a function of newer, widely available technologies. I will argue, using Manuel Castell's "space of flows" and Ariella Azoulay's "citizenry of photography," that Palestinians have embedded themselves in a global, interconnected community through this practice. Finally, I will consider the implications of these developments for the future of Palestine and the future of international engagement with Palestinian visuals, making an argument for "spectatorial solidarity" (Osman, 2022) with the Palestinian struggle.

Visualizing the Past: "Image-fare" and Contolling the Narrative

Israel has a long history of engaging in "image-fare," shaping narratives surrounding occupation by controlling the visualization of Gaza (Jones, 2011, p. 40). Craig Jones (2011), in an analysis of Israeli image-fare during Israel's 2009 assault on the Gaza strip, highlights how the IDF "instituted a ban on foreign journalists into Gaza," stationing them on Sderot Hill in Israel to present an equalized, back-and-forth war (pp. 38-39). This geographical restriction was paired with a public digital diplomacy campaign that established an IDF Spokesperson YouTube Channel, a New York Israeli Consulate Twitter account that held "Twitter-based press conferences," and the paying of "undercover volunteers to deliver the state-sponsored war message to the Internet" (Jones, 2011, pp. 41-42). Sontag (2003) writes that during war-time, "images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties are invariably dismissed as having been staged for the camera" (p. 11). Even though many Palestinian journalists shared imagery from this 2009 attack, Israel's visual control apparatus played on the pre-existing, cherished piety of Israeli supremacy and victimhood, allowing them to successfully suggest to outside viewers that the Palestinian imagery was "politicized," "biased,"

or even altogether fake (Jones, 2011, p. 40). At this point in Israel's existence, engaging in image-fare was a go-to method of gaining international support for military campaigns against Palestine.

However, Israel's tactical manipulation of visual narratives began far before 2009. Susan Sontag, one of the best-known critical theorists of war photography, was herself hegemonized into zionist visual narratives. Shortly after 1973's October War, Sontag directed Promised Lands (1974), a documentary filmed in Israel that both displays and aids the power of Israeli-normalization through visual (mis)representation. The film almost entirely excludes Palestinian perspectives. Palestinians are "deprived of a coherent voice and reduced to either exotic scenery or nameless bodies torn apart by the atrocities of the war" (Landesman, 2021, p. 203). On the other hand, Israeli society is presented as complex, internally tumultuous, and ultimately human,

A scene from Promised Lands by Susan Sontag. Photo by The Guardian

with interviews of two "opposed" Israeli thinkers interpolated throughout. This documentary's flattening of Palestinian identity and complex presentation of Israeli identity contributes to the legitimization of the Israeli perspective as the authoritative voice, allowing it to define "truth" despite perpetrating genocidal, settler-colonial expansion. Sontag's documentation falls into the canon of visual media that bolsters Israel's "regime of truth" (Ramamurthy, 2016, p. 37) which allows them to establish zionist imagery as "true," while Palestinian imagery is dismissed as biased or untrue. Through this carefully crafted visual control complex, Israel has been able to bolster its own normalization and legitimization, simultaneously delegitimizing Palestinian visualities, ontologies, and structures.

The Changing Present: Reclaiming Visual Modes of Knowledge Production

In the present iteration of genocide, Israel has resorted to many of these same methods of attempted visual control. This is reflected in the state "paying a cohort of... social media influencers around $7,000" (Cleveland-Stout, 2025) to influence United States public opinion. In addition to a foreign media ban similar to 2009, Israel has murdered nearly three hundred journalists in Gaza, mostly Palestinian, ten from Qatar-based Al Jazeera (Ali et al., 2025). This is an unprecedented level of journalist murders that can only be explained as targeted attacks. UN Special Rapporteur of Freedom of Expression and Opinion Irene Khan claims that "This is not just about killing journalists. It is about killing the story" (Ali et al., 2025). Israel has also resorted to online censorship of Palestinians' and Palestinian solidarity's visualities, often in coordination with organizations like StopAntiSemitism who claim to protect Jewish safety (Sassoon, 2025, p. 2) through practices of erasure and oppression aimed at Palestinians. These increasingly extreme approaches of massacring journalists and spending exorbitant amounts of money on propaganda and censorship are a symptom of Israel's success in waging image-fare steadily slipping away.

In this era of occupation, Palestinians have harnessed increasingly accessible technology to document and share imagery of their oppression. Since Jean Luc-Godard (1963) claimed that "Cinema is truth, twenty-four times per second," the frames per second captured by filming technology have multiplied a thousandfold. While this advanced visual capture does not necessarily constitute "truth" as such, the ability to represent

one's experiences visually in high definition is now available on every smartphone, and these simulacra can be shared globally with one further tap. The technologies of the Information Age allow Palestinians to insert their voice into the Castellian "space of flows," a cyberspace that "links up electronically separate locations in an interactive network that connects activities and people in distinct geographical contexts" (Castells, 2001, p. 223). While genocide has long been anchored in the "space of places," arranged around "the confines of locality" (Castells, 2001, p. 223), the imagery's insertion into the space of flows globalizes genocide's discursive production, with Israel's attacks being carried out in "a highly connected and mediated environment" (Vesterlund, 2024, p. 43). Palestinians have latched onto this development, photographing and videoing as many acts of aggression and leveled cityscapes as possible and sharing them with the world in an exercise of "citizen journalism" presenting "war as it feels" (Vesterlund, 2024, p. 4). Israel's current genocide is under the scrutiny of all who are connected to the space of flows, with daily visual updates of Palestine's hyper-Godardian "truth." The narrative legitimacy and affective power of this emic, visual representation has sent Israel violently scrambling to censor as they lose control of their visual influence.

As other professional opportunities are violently erased, photographers and journalists multiply throughout Gaza. These visual documentarians join "the citizenry of photography," what Ariella Azoulay (2008) defines as an open community encapsulating "anyone and everyone who bears any relationship whatsoever to photographs" (p. 93). This claim to citizenry is liberating for Palestinians because photography is an act "outside of the state and even outside of property" (Jurich, 2015, p. 11). Furthermore, photography/videography as a social practice within the space of flows allows for Palestinian visual messages to transcend the space of places which has long been prison-like for Palestinians in Gaza. For a group constantly subjected to violence, discrimination and murder based on claims to "statehood" and "property," combined with their mobility in the space of places being limited by Israeli apartheid control, photography/videography within the space of flows offers a crucial portal for alternative, agentive participation within a global citizenry. While Gazans are unable to enjoy basic human rights on the ground, they are considered "equal" within the citizenry of photography thanks to the accessible technologies of the Information Age that project visualities of their place-based struggle internationally. As modern Information flows and technologies afford Palestinians access to the citizenry of photography, they have been able to globally amplify their historical tradition of robust visual documentation as resistance to genocide.

> *"While Gazans are unable to enjoy basic human rights on the ground, they are considered "equal" within the citizenry of photography..."*

With this increasing accessibility and interconnection, citizen journalism has become common practice. Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1 on Instagram) is a prolific journalist who shares histories of Gaza, stories on the ground, and provides positivist statistics, all in front of decimated urban landscapes. While her approach does not center active attacks or zoomed in snapshots of murder (as others do), the visuality of the leveled city is "almost as eloquent as bodies in the street," showing the onlooker how the "War rips open, eviscerates... dismembers" what were once homes and urban services of residents of Gaza City, Rafah and everywhere in between (Sontag,

2003, p. 8). The words that Owda shares with the online community contextualize these visualities of destruction and provide a legitimate source of information, cutting through Israel's "regime of truth." Owda's videos that project knowledge from the post-destruction urban rubble is just one approach within Gaza's diverse tapestry of visual media. Citizen journalism is not limited to Owda or her "well-trained" peers. These journalists offer knowledge and training to other citizens, "not around principles of expertise which serve colonial powers but through the shared anti-colonial premises of not letting the truth of this genocide disappear" (Azoulay, 2024, p. 9). In this sense, citizen journalism doubles as an awareness raising practice as well as as a morbid, Atgetian archival practice of visually preserving the memory of their pre-genocide homeland.

Towards a Palestinian-Envisioned Future

Palestinian visual portrayal of the genocide disseminated through the space of flows has had a notable effect on international discourse. To the outside gaze, this imagery has acted as "an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for the mass suffering offered by established powers" (Sontag, 2003, p. 117). According to recent polling, 59% of Americans now "hold an unfavorable opinion of the Israeli government" and 54% of Canadians are in favor of an arms embargo (Van Green et al., 2025; Angus Reid Institute, 2025). Additionally, more people are educating themselves about the history of the longer genocide and joining Palestinian liberation movements. Israel's past claims that Palestinian visualities are "politicized" is not entirely untrue as they have begun to offer visual corroboration to the long-time realities of state-sponsored violence that Israel commits against Palestinians. Imagery carries communicatory value in the visual economy; Palestinians are effectively communicating their struggle within this context.

Palestinian visualities are indeed political, and should be treated as such by their viewers around the world. Forugh Farrokhzad's 1963 short film about an Iranian leper colony, The House is Black, opens with a narration (in Farsi), "On this screen will appear an image of ugliness, a vision of pain that no caring human being should ignore. To cure this ugliness, to aid, to ease the pain, and to relieve the victims is the motive behind making this film" (00:01:12). This is the framing through which viewers should approach the Palestinian visualities. These photos, videos, and stories of violence, death, and destruction are a call to action, to seek out truth in a storm of media repression, to preserve Gaza. Susan Sontag (2003) writes, "Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it... or those who could learn from it" (p. 42). Here, Sontag approaches war imagery with helpless defeatism. In truth, we can all learn from Palestinian imagery and we can all take action. As Palestinians are forced to resist fast-acting, genocidal settler colonialism, the viewer's obligation as a citizen of photography (Azoulay, 2008) is to support their resistance.

While viewing visuals can be a first step towards action, there must be critical engaged viewers on the receiving end. Azoulay (2024) highlights "that photographs need us in order to do this work just as much as we need them" (p. 8). Just as Palestinians in Gaza have taken the risk to share their visualities, the "spectator" must be the literate citizen of photography that receives them, views them critically within the context of genocide, and uses them to amplify Palestinian liberation. We must practice Osman's (2022) "spectatorial solidarity" (p. 370), using our viewing of the destruction of Palestinian life as a catalyst for action to prevent such destruction. Furthermore, these images begin conversations about the viewer's connection to the carnage presented, and how it is intertwined with wider, oppressive political and economic systems worthy of dismantling. Palestinian visualities are the ties that bind the "spectator" to the journalist in this "civil contract of photography" (Azoulay, 2008), but this connection must go beyond a solely image-driven empathy. This so-called "post-truth" era

Bisan Owda in Gaza City, September 2025. Photo by Bisan Owda via Instagram

of increasingly plural visualities and burgeoning Artificial Intelligence may seek to obfuscate interconnectedness. In this climate, it is the viewer's duty to preserve the truth for Palestinians' sake, and for "humanity" at large. Engaging with this imagery requires holding onto the remaining "truth" through its supposed collapse, an action central to Palestinian liberation.

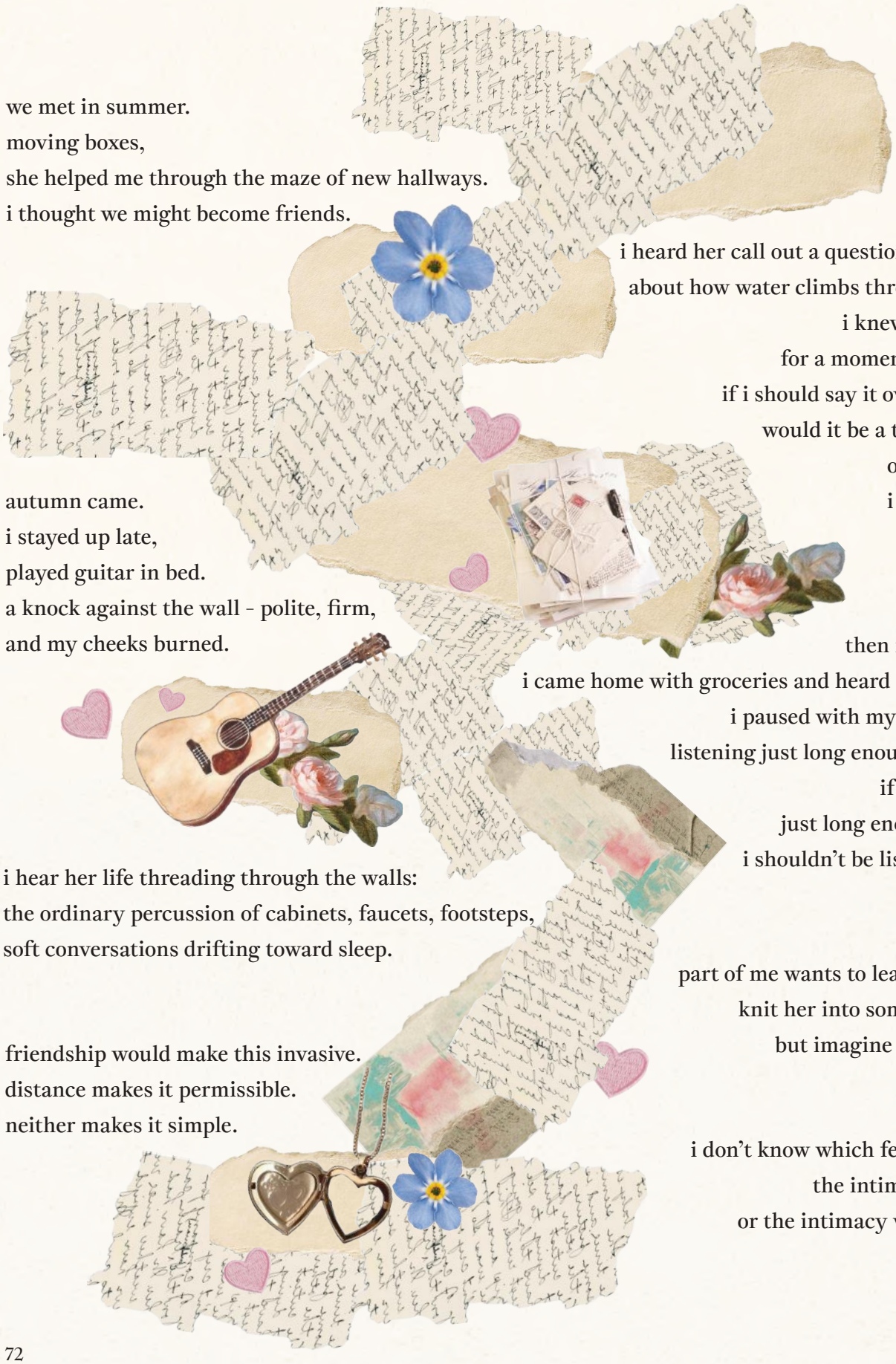
Conclusion

Israel's relentless genocide and destruction of Gaza has tried to eviscerate and erase Palestinian existence. In this harsh environment, visual technologies like smartphones, cameras, and social media have afforded Palestinians in Gaza access to a global citizenry of photography. This citizenry is mediated through the space of flows, providing Palestinians in Gaza an agentive way to represent their reality, effectively (and affectively) globalize their struggle, and maintain an emic representation of their homeland. A critical reading of this visual media should place it in the contexts of genocide, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and dispossession. While these structures aren't necessarily explicit in photographs and videos, these visualities can begin conversations that uncover the structural drivers of inequity and violence. Palestinians are calling on the world for support, it is up to the world to view their imagery, heed their cry, and support their liberation. Start with a picture, then look beyond.

Photo by Easun. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Close

By Heather Bylsma



we met in summer.
moving boxes,
she helped me through the maze of new hallways.
i thought we might become friends.

on the patio,
i heard her call out a question to someone
about how water climbs through a plant.
i knew the answer.
for a moment i wondered
if i should say it over the ferns.
would it be a tiny kindness
or a trespass -
i stayed quiet.

autumn came.
i stayed up late,
played guitar in bed.
a knock against the wall - polite, firm,
and my cheeks burned.

then it was winter.
i came home with groceries and heard her shouting.
i paused with my coat half off,
listening just long enough to wonder
if she was safe,
just long enough to know
i shouldn't be listening at all.

i hear her life threading through the walls:
the ordinary percussion of cabinets, faucets, footsteps,
soft conversations drifting toward sleep.

part of me wants to learn her name,
knit her into something real -
but imagine knowing her.

friendship would make this invasive.
distance makes it permissible.
neither makes it simple.

i don't know which feels stranger -
the intimacy we have,
or the intimacy we're missing

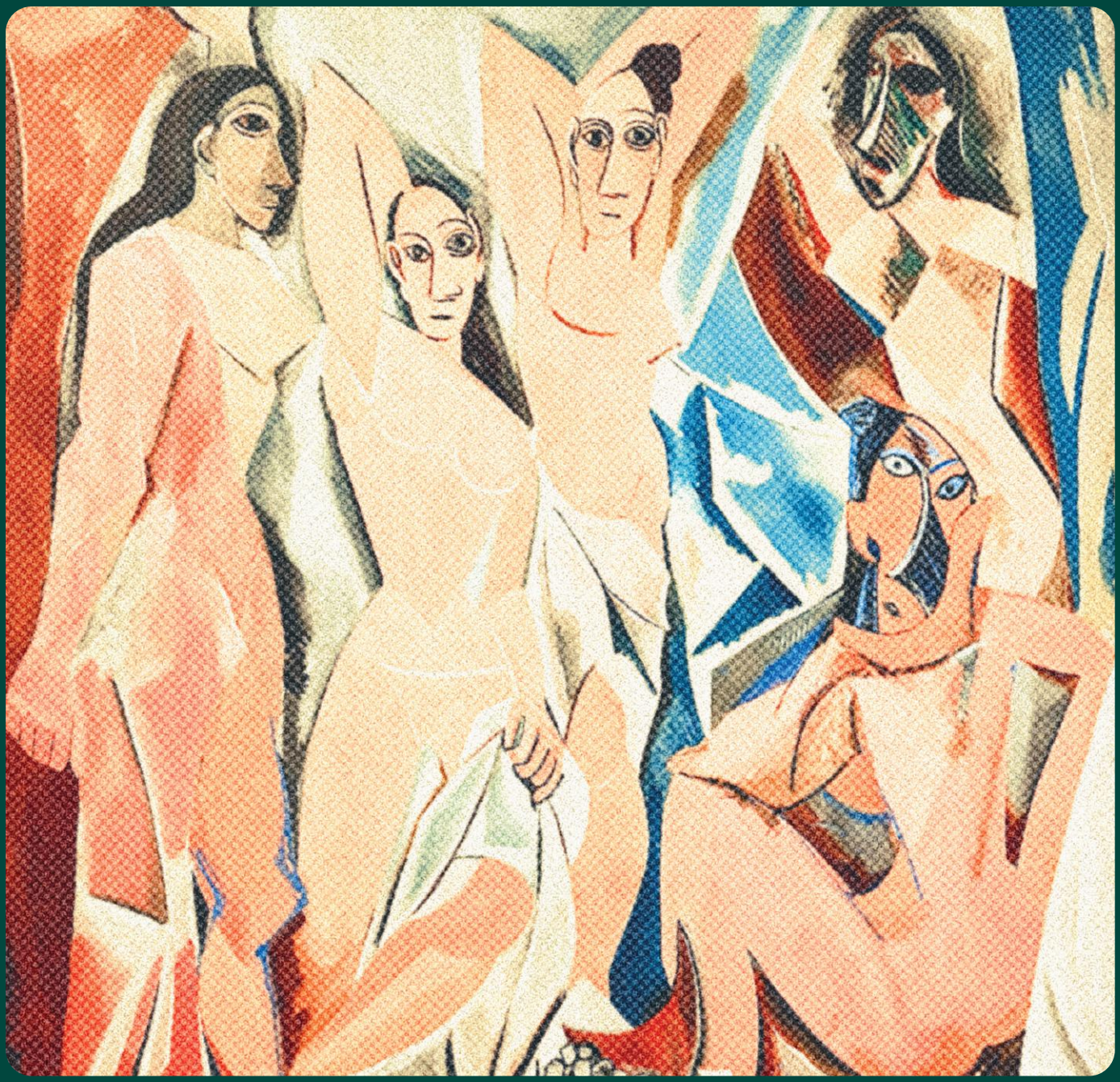


Image by the Author

From Canvas to City: A Personal Theory of Practice

By Sanbo Zou

I am writing this Personal Theory of Practice as a way of making explicit the framework that guides how I professionally approach urban planning, by naming what I am actually doing beneath the surface of my interests. I have accumulated too many threads across urban studies, art history, culture, movement, memory, and the feeling of being pulled towards cities as if they are living sites of learning. These threads pull between ways of knowing that do not easily cohere within a single framework. I need a structure that can hold these tensions without flattening their nuance.

This piece is a deliberate attempt to extract the single question that keeps repeating in my thinking. I want to unravel my subconscious to find what I am seeking through urban planning.

My method for this kind of self inquiry resembles how I learned to examine modernist art. At first, the canvas can look like chaos. Over time, patterns appear. The task is to learn how to see the pattern, then decide what matters. This is the movement I am trying to make here too. I want to let the pattern show itself, then distill it.

Under all my notes, the recurring structure is simple to state.

How do ruptures become structures?

How does a breakthrough in perception become institutionalized?

How does meaning move from shock, to vocabulary, to system?

What is preserved in that translation, and what is neutralized?

These questions, first encountered through art history, I began to recognize in urban planning.

Where These Ideas Came From: Modernism as a Theory of Change

Studying modern art history nourished me in a way I did not expect. I entered thinking I would learn styles and movements. I left with a model for how human consciousness reorganizes itself.

Modern art is often presented as a sequence of strange images, a parade of obscurity. At first, that is what it felt like. Then a pattern emerged. The pattern began with an idea that sounds almost obvious once you feel it in your body.

Artists respond to contradictions in reality. When reality changes deeply enough, inherited forms stop working. A new form becomes necessary.

Industrialization changed how people experienced time and space. Photography destabilized painting's role as representation. World wars changed how people trusted reason, progress, order. New forms of mass media reorganized attention itself. Modern art did not emerge because artists wanted to be strange. It emerged because the world stopped fitting the old visual grammar.

Cubism fractured perspective and broke the illusion of coherent space. Before Cubism, Western painting had trained viewers to accept a coherent space. Perspective made the world feel stable. Cubism fractured that stability. Pablo Picasso broke objects into multiple angles and simultaneous viewpoints that can feel disorienting at first. Then you realize the point isn't confusion, it is an artist's genuine attempt to make sense of a rapidly changing world. Cubism expresses the fact that reality is not experienced from a single viewpoint. Modernity turned perception into something layered, discontinuous, accelerated. Cubism gave form to that truth.

Later, I encountered Piet Mondrian and felt an entirely different kind of shock. His work stripped the world down to relations: line, plane, balance, primary colors. The grid can look cold when you first meet it. Then you start to understand what he is attempting. He is searching for a universal grammar that can hold the complexity of modern life without narrating it. It becomes a proposition about how order might exist without domination. The painting becomes an ethic. The grid of modern life feels like care offered with the most durable structure.

Composition No. II, with Red and Blue by Piet Mondrian in 1929. Photo by the Author

Then Jackson Pollock arrived. Where Mondrian compresses, Pollock spills. His paintings are records of action. Gravity participates. Motion participates. The body participates. Paint becomes an event that cannot be separated from the person moving through time. That was one of the most important lessons I learned: form can be an index of being. A painting can become a trace of lived time.

As the modernist timeline moved forward, another pattern became obvious. Every rupture eventually gets absorbed.

A movement begins as a break that reorganizes perception. Then the world learns how to see it. Museums teach it. Design borrows it. Aesthetic language migrates. What once looked impossible becomes familiar. The rupture becomes vocabulary.

When the rupture becomes vocabulary, its power changes. The breakthrough remains real. Consciousness has expanded. Yet the original disorientation fades. That fading can feel tragic if you love the intensity of the break. The rise and fall of modernism helped me see it differently. Absorption signals success. It means reality bent around the form.

This is where dialectic entered my thinking. A new form arises from contradiction. The form becomes legible. The form becomes normal. A new contradiction appears. A new form becomes necessary. The story repeats as a living, beating pulse.

I began to realize that modernism narrates a history of art by theorizing how change happens. It is a theory of how human worlds metabolize breakthroughs.

So I am left with a question about institutions.

> *If cultures absorb ruptures, institutions absorb them too. What happens to a breakthrough when it becomes structure?*

The Pattern Repeats in Planning: Rupture, Absorption, and Neutralization

I study urban planning because I care about how cities structure life. I also study it because planning sits at the point where meanings become systems. Planning turns values into policy, stories into official narratives, conflicts into procedures, realities into maps.

Number 1A by Jackson Pollock in 1948. Photo by the Author

Once I started seeing the rupture absorption cycle in art history, I could not stop seeing it in urban planning.

Transformative planning ideas often emerge through critique. They begin as responses to crisis, exclusion, injustice. The language is urgent because the problem is urgent. Then institutions incorporate the language.

Radical housing activism becomes policy language. Participatory planning becomes a standard consultation process. Sustainability becomes branding, a design vocabulary, a checkbox. Equity becomes framework jargon.

The incorporation matters because it produces durability. Nothing changes at scale without institutions. Yet incorporation changes the force of an idea. The moment a concept becomes a template, it becomes easier to repeat than to feel. It becomes easier to cite than to enact. The original contradiction can disappear behind the vocabulary meant to address it.

This is the same bittersweet process I learned through modern art.

A rupture succeeds, then becomes ordinary. The world expands, then the edge dulls. It is difficult to maintain ethical intensity inside systems that reward feasibility, standardization, and risk management.

This observation could lead into cynicism, but it could also lead to a deeper question.

> *How can institutions absorb transformative cultural or experiential breakthroughs while preserving their ethical force?*

My Theory of Practice: Planning as the Work of Integration

I often feel drawn to places saturated with culture, places where ideas have sedimented. I want walls that feel aware of their own history. I want to be surrounded by art and density in thought. At first, I interpreted that desire as an aesthetic taste. Now I understand it as a form of epistemic longing. I want environments where meaning is treated as real. I want environments where the relationship between culture and consciousness is visible and taken seriously.

I have always carried a metaphysical homesickness. It feels like nostalgia for a non-existent state of being, a longing for final integration itself. I notice it most sharply when I encounter fragmentation: when thought is separated from feeling, when policy is separated from lived life, when public language is separated from private reality. I experience modernity as a wound that repeats in different forms.

This is where I begin to articulate my theory of practice.

Unfinished structures seek completion.

Unfinished people seek integration.

Unfinished time seeks alignment.

These might be poetic sentences, but they point to something precise: the world generates contradictions, and humans continuously attempt to repair the splits that those contradictions produce. Modern art is one record of that repair attempt. Urban planning is another.

In planning, decisions about what matters become the built environment. The field contains an extraordinary epistemological problem: multiple realities coexist, and institutions must decide which realities count. Technical expertise carries legitimacy. Lived experience carries legitimacy. Historical memory carries legitimacy. Political power carries legitimacy. Planning processes become the arena where these claims collide and, sometimes, become integrated.

This is why planning feels philosophically significant to me. It forces a confrontation with the modern split between cognition and emotion. People arrive in planning contexts with fears, losses, hopes, attachments. Institutions arrive with procedures, standards, utility, frameworks. Planning becomes the site where the world asks: what is real enough to shape a decision?

I care about narrative and sensing because they are forms of urban knowledge. They reveal patterns that budget spreadsheets cannot. Sound, memory, ritual, embodied experience, and cultural time can reveal what formal metrics miss. I also care about institutional structure because without structure, meaning remains private. It remains a beautiful feeling with no spatial consequence.

My practice, as I currently imagine it, aims to hold both.

Meaning and structure.

The Institutional Life of Rupture

I am learning to move between meaning and structure. I want to be able to perceive what is happening in a city at the level of atmosphere, rhythm, silence, and story, then translate that perception into forms that can change material conditions.

I think of this as an attempt to heal fragmentation through governance. That claim can sound grand. I mean it in a specific way. Planning is one of the few places where a collective can publicly negotiate the terms of coexistence. It is also one of the few places where value conflicts must become actionable. For me, that makes planning an ethical craft.

When I translate this tension into a research question, it becomes this:

How can planning institutions integrate transformative forms of meaning, including narrative, memory, cultural ritual, and embodied experience, into durable structures without neutralizing their ethical force?

Picasso, Mondrian, Pollock, each answered modern contradictions through form. They did not solve modernity, but they revealed its tensions and expanded the realm of possibilities. I want to answer institutional contradictions through planning. Planning becomes my medium for working on the same kind of tension: how to respond when inherited forms stop working.

What does that look like in practice?

Does it look like treating consultation as a knowledge generating process?

Does it look like designing planning processes that can hold memory as evidence?

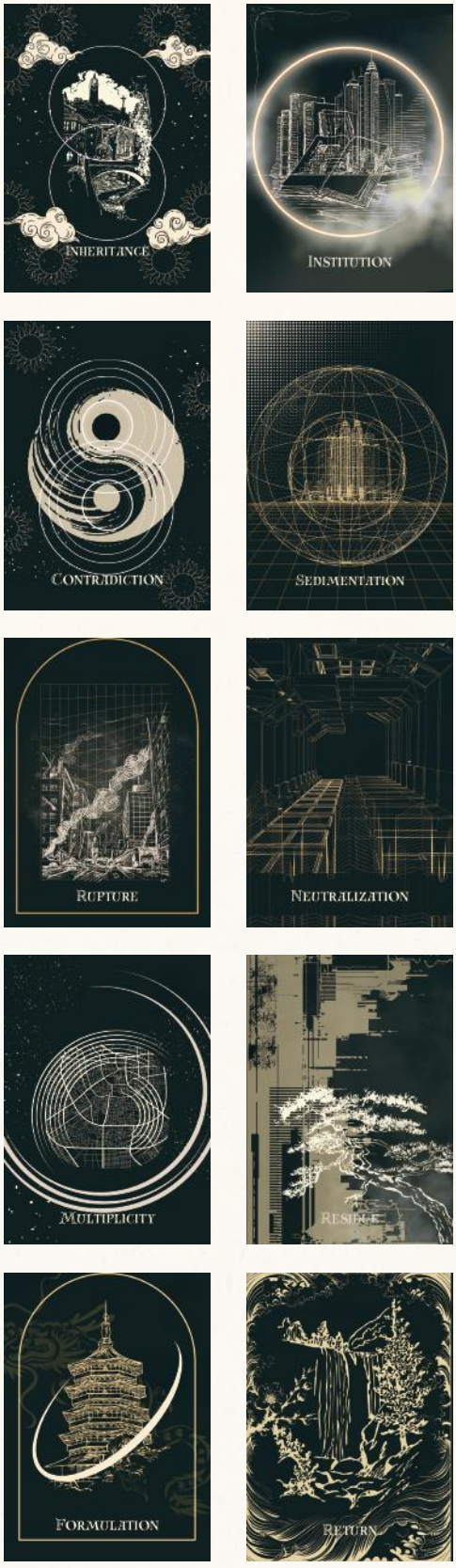
Does it look like treating culture as something that shapes cognition?

Does it look like refusing the false comfort of vocabulary when contradiction remains unresolved?

I began my writing with a desire to unravel my subconscious. The unraveling led to a structure that reveals how my long range work sits at the boundary between transformation and institution. I care about the fate of rupture in structured worlds. I care about how meaning becomes system. I care about keeping ethical intensity alive inside processes designed to neutralize risk.

I will measure my future work by whether it preserves the reality of lived meaning while building durable structures that materially change how people live in cities. I will measure it by whether my work integrates rather than fragments. I will measure it by whether the vocabulary I use corresponds to real transformation rather than epistemological comfort. This is the tension I stand in. This is the tension I want to answer.

This is my personal theory of practice.



Evolution of Urban Form: Urban Archetype Cards designed by the Author, in the order of Inheritance, Contradiction, Rupture, Multiplicity, Formulation, Institution, Sedimentation, Neutralization, Residue, and Return.

Photo by Mio Sugiura. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

Black Urban Space in Toronto

The Public Education System

By Emiko Wijeysundera

On January 29th, 2008, engaged students, concerned parents, and passionate educators across Toronto watched their screens with anticipation: the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)'s four-hour-long trustee meeting was being broadcast live, and trustees were voting on a particularly contentious proposal. Viewers across the city observed as the proposal passed by 11 votes to 9: Toronto would have a new public school, the Africentric Alternative School (Neverson, 2014; Johnson, 2013).

When the Africentric school proposal was first introduced in 2007, it elicited passionate debate throughout the city. The proposal exposed what Toronto's Black community had known for years: there was systemic racism and inequity in the school board, and Black students experienced disproportionately poor outcomes. The 2008 decision was the culmination of 40 years of resilience and ongoing advocacy by Toronto's Black community (Neverson, 2014; Johnson, 2013).

The TDSB is Toronto's public school board and maps urban space through its network of 580 schools supporting 247,000 students across the city (City of Toronto, 2024). While these schools are places of education and growth, they are also spaces of deprivation for Black students who experience a lack of opportunity, resources, and academic prospects. In resisting these outcomes, Black communities transform space through individual mobility, community programs and organized advocacy. In the case of the Africentric Alternative School, in particular, Black people produce and are produced by urban educational spaces in Toronto.

Toronto, the largest city in Canada, is regarded as one of the most multicultural cities in the world. The city has the largest Black population in the country (40% of all Black Canadians reside in Toronto), making up around 10% of the city's inhabitants (Statistics Canada 2022). The Black population is concentrated in the northwest and east sides of Toronto, areas of the city that also face the "most inequitable outcomes" (Social Policy Analysis & Research, 2014). The distribution of Black residents in the city reflects increasing spatial segregation by income and race, the product of structures that maintain Black and other racialized groups in states of poverty and economic deprivation (Johnson, 2013). Herbert writes:

> *"Black students are funneled into certain spatial areas of the city which are labelled priority neighbourhoods via systemic, racist contributions to disparities that are manifested in where people can afford to live" (Herbert, 2017, p. 147).*

As students are funneled into schools based on the catchment area of their home address, the spatial distribution of Black communities across the city is mirrored in the TDSB's school network (Toronto District School Board, 2024). This means that Black students are concentrated in schools within high-need neighbourhoods.

Transformed: TDSB limits Black students

In 2023, Black students had a dropout rate of 23%, nearly double the rate for white students (Moorelands Kids, 2023). In 2008, at the time of the Africentric school proposal, Black dropout rates were at 40% (Johnson, 2013). Both dropping out and graduating black students disproportionately exit the TDSB system with limited career prospects and life opportunities due to inequitable access to i) resources and ii) limited academic options (Neverson, 2014). In this way, the Black community is transformed by urban space through the TDSB, which, in limiting educational outcomes, stunts the community's capacity for upward mobility and socioeconomic gain.

The resource disparity begins in the very bricks of schools. Historically, public schools in Toronto were funded by taxes from their respective neighbourhoods (Herbert, 2017). TDSB schools are no longer funded based on district wealth, but the legacy from old funding models persists in school building infrastructure: historically white upper-class neighbourhoods have nicer facilities than areas where Black students are concentrated. The

TDSB's schools are not made equal, and, due to the socio-spatial layout of the city, schools with large Black enrollment are likely to be poorer facilities.

Although this funding model has been retired, TDSB schools' budgets are still heavily influenced by neighbourhood wealth through fundraising (Toronto District School Board, 2024). According to People for Education's 2023a Ontario survey, "the average amount fundraised in high-income neighbourhoods is almost three times higher than that raised in low-income schools ($10,423/school versus $3,757/school). In addition, priorities differ for the money that is raised: while higher-income areas spend on technology and library/lab/classroom resources, low-income schools use extra funds for nutrition programs and field trips (People for Education [PE], 2023a). This results in further disparities in resource availability for Black students, who are concentrated at these lower income schools.

Course offerings at TDSB schools also differ across space according to neighbourhood income. Wealthy neighbourhoods are also more likely than lower-income neighbourhoods to offer specialized programs such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and French immersion (Herbert, 2017), options that are highly advantageous for post-secondary application and future career opportunities (Toronto District School Board, 2024).

Instead of these popular speciality programs, lower-income areas are more likely to offer special education or vocational study paths, which lead to a basic-level diploma and limited post-secondary options (Herbert, 2017). The former is of note for Black students, who are disproportionately represented in Special Education programs: Black students make up 13% of the student population and comprise 30% of students in Special Education (Herbert, 2017). Herbert writes that Black students are disproportionately represented in Special Education because "teachers rush to label Black students as "special education students" without any real evaluation" (Herbert, 2017, p.152). This results in special education carrying a negative connotation. Howard and James quote a Toronto educator, who describes:

> *"There are significant numbers of parents that do not want their kids ... in the Special Ed. Programs. And a lot of it is informed by their experiences, and what they saw happening to their brothers or their sisters, and as well about what it means being a Black child in a Special Education program" (2019, p.331).*

Unaccountable special education streaming processes compound with remnants from Ontario's controversial streaming model, students were placed into streams at the start of high school that dictated their ability to pursue post-secondary education. Herbert writes that, within the streaming process, "racialized students are funnelled out of academic and applied streams" (2017, p.151), severely limiting their post-secondary prospects and thus, future earning potential. After heavy advocacy efforts, the Ontario government committed to destreaming in 2021, but five years later has still not fully achieved this across the TDSB (CBC News, 2023; PE, 2023b).

Illegitimate special education streaming processes and continued basic programs limit Black students' education, restricting Black economic gain and social uplift. In this way, the TDSB, as urban space, transforms Black communities.

Transforming: Black Advocacy

For over 40 years, the Black community has recognized these educational setbacks and repeatedly advocated for change. Across Toronto and throughout time, Black people have asserted their educational rights and created new educational opportunities through the production of urban space on individual, community, and municipal scales.

On an individual scale, Black families choose to relocate to better school areas, transforming urban space through mobility. Moving to a 'less black' area and into a richer neighbourhood means educational opportunity, at the expense of increased cost of living and distance from the Black community. Herbert describes:

Photo by Emily Chan. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

> *"I have seen a Black immigrant mother uproot herself from a priority neighbourhood and move to a suburb, with the sole intention of providing greater educational opportunities for her children...families paying more for rent so that their children could have ... better resourced schools and greater access to academic streaming and specialised programs such as French Immersion" (Herbert, 2017, p. 147).*

For those who can afford to, individual mobility is a form of resistance to the ways in which urban space limits educational opportunity and a way that Black people affect urban space.

For decades, Toronto's Black community has gathered in support of Black students, creating and altering spaces of education within the city.

In the early 1970s, the Black Education Project (BEP) was formed. Consisting of Black parents and educators, the BEP provided afterschool and weekend tutoring for 50–70 students (Johnson, 2013). Through these informal educational spaces, BEP manipulated the TDSB's urban network. In the late 1970s, the BEP became the Black Liaison Committee (BLC), which pushed the TDSB to investigate internal racism. Other groups included the African Canadian Heritage Association, which focused on re-claiming and celebrating shared African roots, and the African Heritage Educators Network (AHEN), which, alongside the Association of Black Educators (CABE), began projects to supplement school curriculum, literacy and numeracy classes, and teaching "parents how to advocate for their children and navigate the public school system" (Johnson, 2013, p. 7). In 1980, the Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC) was formed, which helped to develop the Transitional Year Programme (TYP) at the University of Toronto to help Black and Indigenous

youth pursue post-secondary education in the early 1990s (Johnson, 2013). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these groups successfully rallied the TDSB to commission multiple important educational reports, all of which supported Black-focused schools (Johnson, 2013). The Africentric school proposal was not new; it was built on decades of advocacy and work from various community groups in Toronto. Since the 1970s, the Black community has created spaces of resiliency and resistance within Toronto's urban fabric and worked to improve Black public education in the city.

Conclusion

With the Africentric school, Black advocates successfully created a new node in TDSB's urban network: a brand-new school and a physical symbol of the community's ability to transform urban space. The school was designed with inclusive pedagogy, Black teachers, and above all, actively resisting racist streaming and resource-allocation practices (Neverson, 2014). Teachers implement curriculum according to their personal ideas of what blackness means and requires, which may take the form of pan-African/Africentrism or Black nationalism approaches:

> *"academic Afrocentricity is not a panacea ... rather, their work delineates how they are interpreting and operationalising what the Africentric label has come to mean for them, and this school community – that is, affirming Black life." (Howard and James, 2019, p. 333).*

The school allows different ideas of Blackness to be explored, celebrated, and created: it is a Black-produced urban space. In celebrating blackness within a TDSB school, black identity becomes part of public space, embraced and belonging in Toronto. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School is a particularly powerful example of how Black people explicitly produce urban space. The TDSB has limited Black success for decades, and in resisting these outcomes across various scales, Black educators and community members have created and transformed space.

> *"In celebrating blackness within a TDSB school, black identity becomes part of public space, embraced and belonging in Toronto."*

Photo by Borgoss Shu. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

From Origin to Destination to Transportation Justice:

A Case for Bike Lanes in Toronto

By Alexander Mock

Geographer Erik Swyngedouw argues that "questions of justice cannot be seen independently from the urban condition... because the city condenses the manifold tensions and contradictions that infuse modern life" (2006, p 80). For decades, planners, city officials, and residents have fought over how Toronto should move; a contentious debate based on conflicting visions of Toronto as a city for cars versus a city for people (Keesmaat, 2025). In the 1950s, the Spadina Expressway Project threatened to destroy culturally rich neighbourhoods such as Kensington Market but was stopped in 1971 due to public opposition. Plans for a Downtown Relief Subway Line were initially proposed in 1982 and have resurged several times since (Keesmaat, 2025). The latest iteration of debate attacks bike lanes. In 2024, Ontario Premier Doug Ford introduced legislation to remove recently installed cycling infrastructure along three major roadways, claiming Toronto's notorious traffic congestion could be solved by restoring car lanes (Cecco, 2024). Figure 1 shows the locations of these lanes.

Figure 1: Map of Toronto Showing Bike Lanes Set for Removal. Note. Basemap © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community, credits to Esri, NASA, USGS, FEMA, Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, and USGS. Map layout created by A. Mock using ArcGIS Pro, version 3.6, by Esri. Data from City of Toronto. Cycling Network. Toronto, ON: Transportation Services, 2026.

This paper will draw upon existing work from urban theorists to argue in favour of bike lanes in Toronto and explore how urban mobility decisions reveal inequities in who has the "right to the city." Understanding the social justice implications of transportation infrastructure is essential for transportation planners and government officials to make well-informed, equitable decisions about how a city should move.

Bike Lanes For Efficiency

The leading argument against bike lanes is that they take road space away from cars and exacerbate traffic congestion. However, this claim has repeatedly been challenged using Lee et al. (1999)'s theory of induced demand: adding another lane encourages drivers to take that route, increasing the number of cars on the road and returning it to a state of congestion equilibrium. Figure 2 illustrates this pattern.

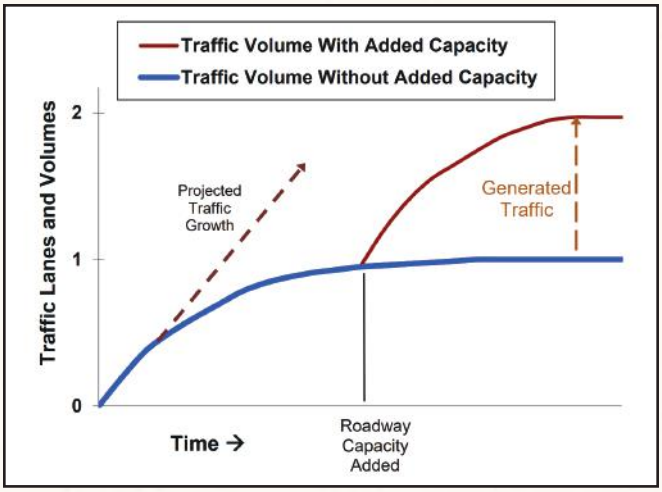


Figure 2: Induced Demand Theory of How Road Capacity Expansion Generates Traffic. Note. This figure visualizes that traffic volumes grow until congestion develops and an equilibrium is reached. When capacity increases, the traffic growth period repeats. From "Generated Traffic and Induced Travel: Implications for Transport Planning," by T. Litman, 2025, Victoria Transport Policy Institute, p. 4. Copyright 2025 by Todd Litman, reproduced here under fair use/fair dealing provisions.

Rather than attract more drivers to a full road, traffic reduction efforts should encourage alternative transportation wherever possible and reduce the number of cars. Induced demand can also occur for cycling; a study in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) found that protected bike lanes were associated with increased cycling rates in both new and regular cyclists (Mitra et al., 2021). Cars are less space, time, and cost efficient than active or public transportation options, and supportive cycling infrastructure may make Toronto residents feel increasingly comfortable choosing to commute by bike instead of by car. Beyond congestion issues, induced demand for cars also worsens carbon emissions and negates efforts to make Toronto a more sustainable city.

Bike Lanes For Sustainability

Removing bike lanes promotes carbon-intensive car travel that continues to increase emissions (Omstead, 2025). The 2021 Canadian Census reported that 83.9% of commuters travel by personal vehicle, while only 6.2% choose active transportation (Statistics Canada). Figures 3 and 4 illustrate how supportive infrastructure is essential for encouraging cycling.

A top barrier to commuting by bike is consistently reported as "I do not want to ride on the road with motor vehicle traffic," and the top enabler is "having a bike lane physically separated from motor vehicle traffic" (Pearson et al., 2023). Clearly, the absence of protected bike lanes dissuades residents from choosing more sustainable transportation options. CO2 emissions are around 98% higher for a person commuting by car than by bike and swapping from car to bike for only one trip a day reduces the average person's emissions by 3.2 kg CO2 per day (Brand et al., 2021). If Toronto wants to become a "sustainable city," the province must implement policies to reduce car usership, not promote it.

Bike Lanes For Safety

By reducing collisions, decreasing vehicle speeds, and adding eyes to the street, bike lanes promote public safety for all users. Cyclists are three to four times more at risk of injury or death in road segments without an on-street bike lane compared to segments with an on-street bike lane (Pulugurtha and Thuakur, 2015). Between 2006 and 2024, 52 cyclists were killed in collisions in Toronto, most occurring on roads without protected lanes (TPS, 2024). Removing cycling infrastructure violates the constitutional right to "life, liberty and security" by putting cyclists in unnecessary danger (Canadian Charter, 1982, s 7). Delineated bike lanes also make roads safer for drivers and pedestrians by decreasing vehicle speeds. A New Jersey study found separated bike lanes were associated with a 28% reduction in average top speeds and 21% in average overall speeds (Younes et al., 2024). When drivers travel more slowly, they are less likely to hit a pedestrian, decreasing the likelihood of severe or fatal injury. Clearly, retaining bike lanes benefits all road users by improving road safety and mitigating dangerous collisions.

Another way bike lanes may promote public safety is by adding what Jane Jacobs calls "eyes on the street" (1961). Cycling is positively associated with actions that benefit the common good; cyclists tend to exhibit more helpfulness and neighbourhood solidarity than drivers because they "experience the local infrastructure more directly, recognize social grievances, and see people in need of help earlier" (Schuster et al., 2023, p. 7). While car passengers have little interaction with their environments, cyclists are constantly observing and reacting to potential dangers. Jacobs (1961) argues sidewalk and street users are active participants in maintaining public peace, because they enforce societal standards of behaviour and civility which reduces violent crime and creates a sense of security. Bike lanes introduce a constant succession of eyes from people inclined towards a common good which results in safer neighbourhoods more desirable for all, improving resident well-being.

Photo by Shane Gates. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

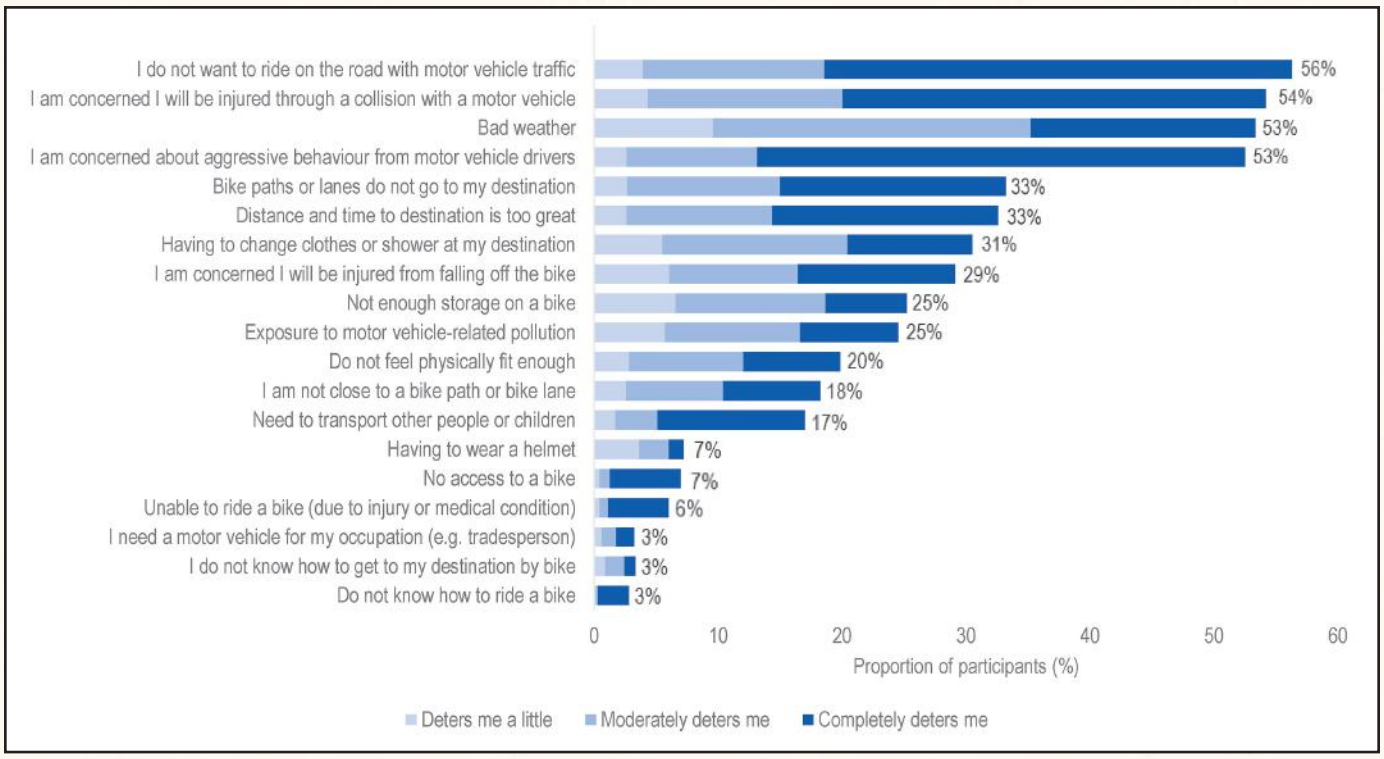


Figure 3: Barriers to riding a bike for transport. Note. From "Barriers and Enablers of Bike Riding for Transport and Recreational Purposes in Australia," by L. Pearson, B. Gabbe, S. Reeder, and B. Beck, 2023, Journal of Transport & Health, 28, p. 6. Copyright 2022 by Elsevier Ltd, reproduced here under fair use/fair dealing provisions.

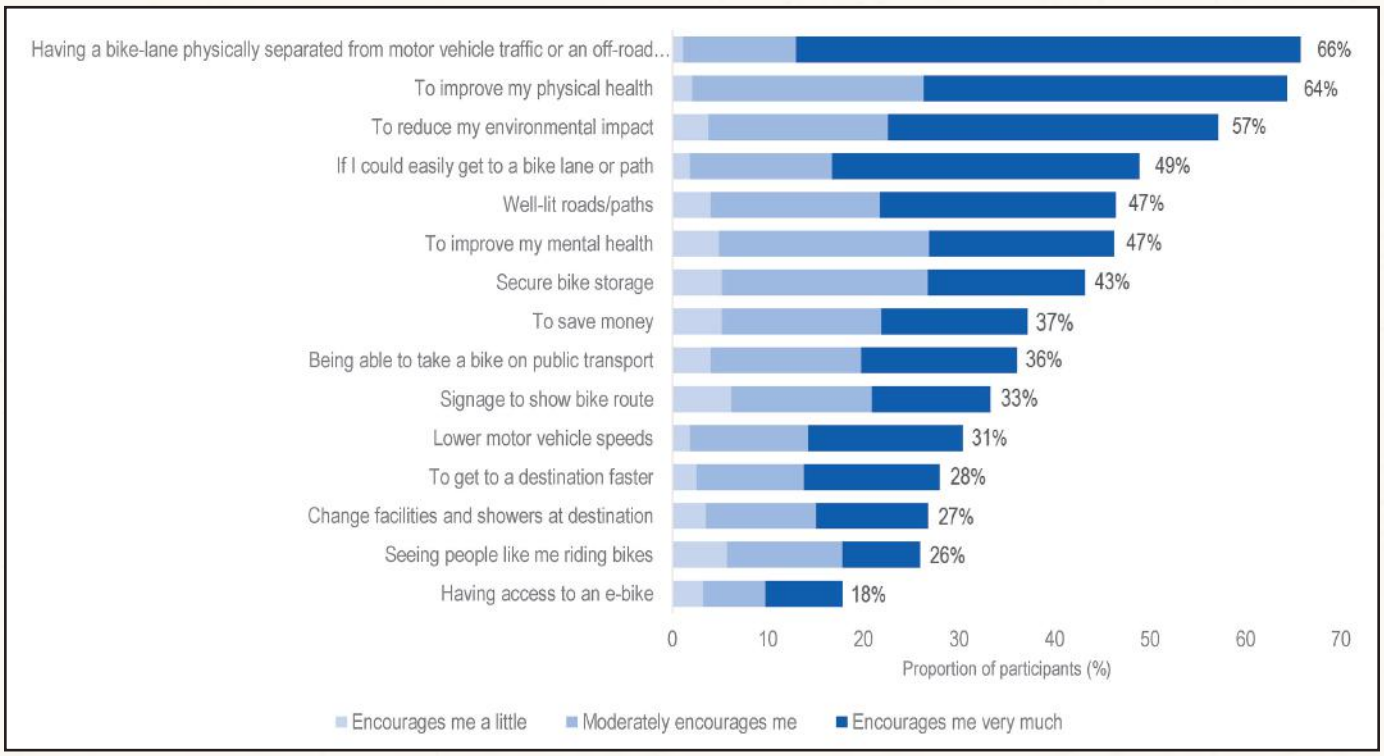


Figure 4: Enablers of riding a bike for transport. Note. From "Barriers and Enablers of Bike Riding for Transport and Recreational Purposes in Australia," by L. Pearson, B. Gabbe, S. Reeder, and B. Beck, 2023, Journal of Transport & Health, 28, p. 8. Copyright 2022 by Elsevier Ltd, reproduced here under fair use/fair dealing provisions.

Bike Lanes For Well-Being

Georg Simmel wrote that "nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd" (Simmel, 1950). Louis Wirth argued that increasing density prevents urbanites from developing deep personal connections with the people they interact with throughout the day, so relationships feel transitory and superficial (Wirth, 1938). Urban "loneliness epidemics" significantly impact resident health and well-being; chronic loneliness can increase risk of death by 26%, accelerate physical aging processes, and increase use of healthcare services (Ljubojevic, 2025). Cycling helps combat urban loneliness by promoting spontaneous encounters with other road users, creating a sense of community between residents. Whereas car dependency contributes to social isolation by spatially insulating drivers and causing them to interact only as other units on the road, biking encourages in-depth interactions with community members and the environment. Cyclists are constantly interacting with other road users and objects as travel requires a high degree of awareness to prevent collisions. As a result, cyclists can develop a stronger emotional bond with their neighbourhoods and a richer "image of the city" (Brömmelstroet et al., 2017).

As people are less likely to cycle without supportive infrastructure (refer to Figures 3 and 4), removing bike lanes also worsens physical well-being by encouraging sedentary lifestyles and increases risk of non-communicable diseases. The 2025 ParticipACTION assessment reports that only 46% of adults in Canada met the physical activity guideline of 150 minutes of moderate activity per week (Bruijns and MacLellan, 2025). Meeting these guidelines dramatically reduces the risk of heart-disease, stroke, some cancers, and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Giles-Corti et al., 2018). Since a common barrier to physical activity in adults is insufficient time (Justine et al., 2013), cycling infrastructure may help increase activity in Canadians by conveniently integrating physical activity into busy lives.

Discussion

Edward Soja, in his book Seeking Spatial Justice, argues that:

> *The geography, or "spatiality," of justice... is an integral and formative component of justice itself, a vital part of how justice and injustice are socially constructed and evolve over time. Viewed in this way, seeking spatial justice becomes fundamentally, almost inescapably, a struggle over geography (2010 p. 2).*

While bike lanes serve as infrastructure connecting travelers from origin to destination, debates over traffic engineering cannot be separated from debates over injustice. In the previous sections, I outline how removing bike lanes fundamentally conflicts with geographical imaginations of Toronto as an efficient, sustainable, safe, and liveable city. By prioritizing driver comfort over cyclist and pedestrian lives, resident well-being, and climate health, the decision to remove bike lanes clearly reflects who has the" right to the city;" who has the power to shape urbanization processes and ways in which cities are (re)made (Harvey, 2003). Car-centric planning puts up physical walls between outer-city commuters and the inner-city residents who navigate the city on foot or by bike. Such

Car-centric planning puts up physical walls between outer-city commuters and the inner-city residents who navigate the city on foot or by bike.

City in Motion by Margo Bagtas. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

insulation enforces what Mike Davis describes as the "Fortress Effect," where exclusionary architecture and infrastructure restructure the built environment to prevent interaction between classes (Davis, 2005). This decision gives outer-city residents power to enforce a vision that entitles convenience to the few, at the expense of inner-city residents.

Despite the efficiency, environmental, safety, and health benefits bike lanes provide, transportation planners must also consider the potential impact cycling infrastructure can have on communities. While bike lanes themselves generally do not cause significant increases in property values, cycling infrastructure is often associated with gentrification and urban renewal and are swept into projects catering to the upwardly mobile white demographic (Hoffmann, 2016, p. 84). A study in Montreal found gentrified census tracks were 44% more likely to receive cycling infrastructure than non-gentrified areas, despite lower-income people being more likely to bike out of necessity (Kiani et al., 2023). This complicates the relationship between bike lanes, income, and community needs. As such, planners must ensure new cycling infrastructure is being distributed equitably and is accessible to those who benefit most from it. Public participation and transparent decision making are crucial to ensure the benefits of transportation infrastructure are shared equitably across the city and marginalized communities maintain the right to their neighbourhoods and to the city.

Urban mobility decisions play a significant role in determining a city's form, liveability, and identity. While bike lanes act to move people from point A to point B, they are also essential infrastructure for climate change mitigation, public safety, and social and physical well-being. Choices about who can access what infrastructure pits conflicting visions of a city against each other, and the decisions made about bike lanes today will influence the type of city Toronto becomes in the future. Walkable and bike-friendly cities attract investment, tourism, and talent, which drives economic growth (Keesmaat, 2025). Will Toronto become a vibrant and culturally rich centre for innovation and economic growth or continue to prioritize sprawl over urban development? As Grace Lee and Jimmy Boggs argued, "the world in which we live has been created by the ideas, the work, and the deeds of human beings" and "can be changed by the ideas, the work, and the deeds of human beings" (2008, p. 14). Choosing to retain and implement bike lanes around Toronto and other cities helps create a world that prioritizes people over their vehicles.

Photo by Tarit Arjanurak. Inaugural UofT x UBC Urban Photography Contest Winner

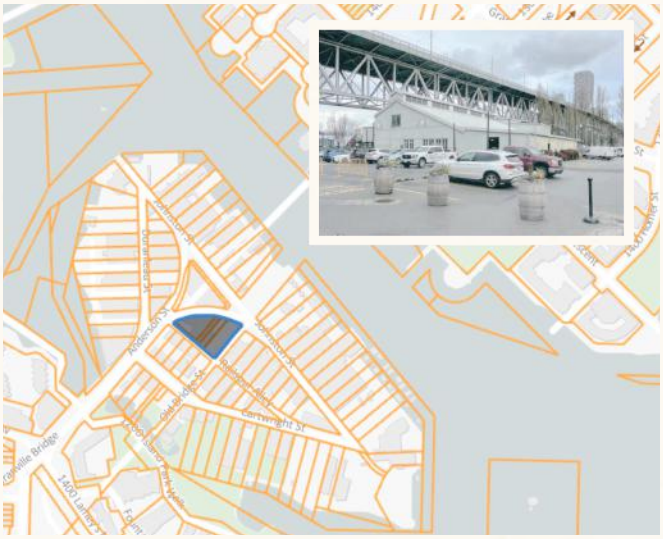
Cultivating Culture in the City:

Reimagining Public Space at Granville Island

2026 UBC CAPACity Design Challenge

The UBC CAPACity Design Challenge is a platform for students to engage critically and creatively with real-world urban questions grounded in Vancouver. This year's theme focuses on the Granville Island 2040 Plan, which envisions Granville Island as a vibrant, inclusive, and resilient hub for the arts, culture, public life, and local economies. It has identified a site, currently occupied by an enclosed parking lot, as a potential location for a new central plaza. However, much of the planning for this project has not been defined, presenting a rare opportunity to shape a new civic focal point for the Island. Participants were proposed the challenge:

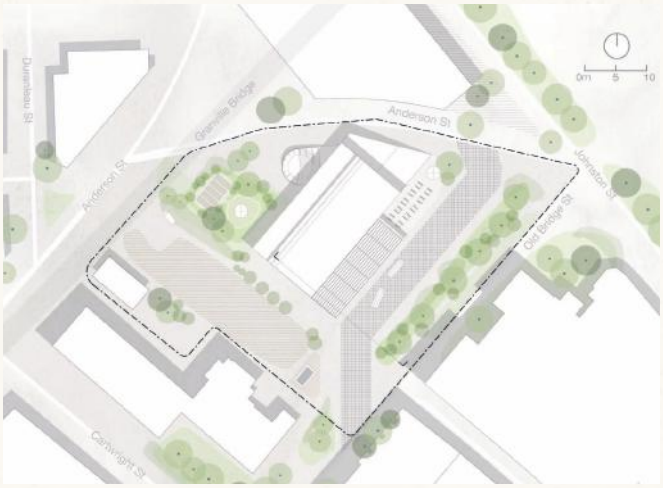
> *How might a central public plaza at Granville Island be designed to cultivate a dynamic, inclusive, and resilient arts and culture community, while responding to the long-term goals of the Granville Island 2040 Plan?*



1402 Anderson Street at Granville Island, which was identified as a potential location for a new central plaza. Includes an adapted image from Group 16

Junction

Proposal and photos by Alexander Mock, Sophie Xiao, and Bernardo Baca Alvarez (Group 16).

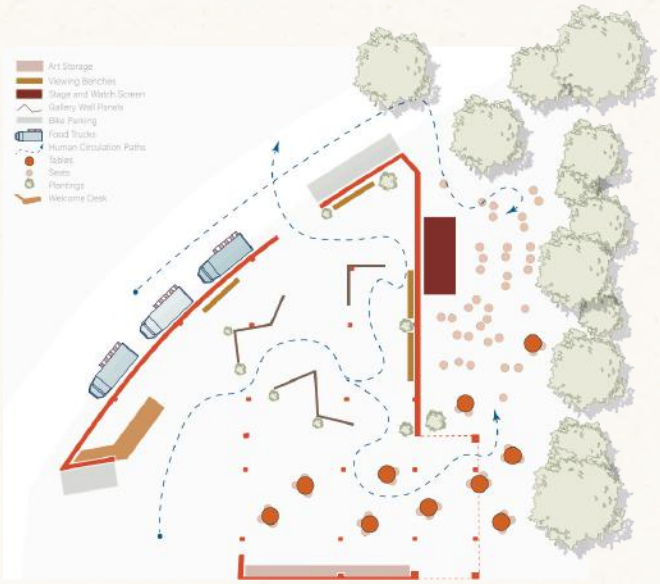


Roots and Rhythm Plaza

Proposal and photos by Alina Jansen, Felix Lo, Jael Okoti, Julia Deng, and Rose Chan (Group 12).

Granville Commons

Proposal and photos by Stephen Antonios, Nathanisha Snitwongse, Jea-kyung Oh, Marcus Lo, and Junfeng (Andy) Yue (Group 9).



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It's a Teacher's Job to Help Students Have Hope

By Mark Stevens

I started teaching in UBC's School of Community and Regional Planning in 2009, and as the old cliché goes, "it was a simpler time". Back then, I thought my job as a teacher was just to help students learn the knowledge and skills they needed to be effective community planners. I didn't think there was a need for me to go beyond teaching the fundamentals of community planning by trying to be "inspirational" or helping students to have hope for the future. It didn't occur to me that young people might struggle to be hopeful.

Fast forward to 2026 and, suffice to say, life is more complicated. Every new day seems to bring new reasons to be concerned about the present and future of human society and planet Earth. We live now in what planning theorist Leonie Sandercock (2022, p. xiv) refers to as a "time of seeming chaos", characterized by "war, genocide, violence, racism, slavery, pandemic, poverty, (and) natural disasters". Despair over widespread suffering is causing many of us to wonder "how (we) can ever intervene to make a difference" (Riddell, 2024, p. 55), and in the words of environmental scholar Elin Kelsey (2020, p. 4), human society is increasingly experiencing an *"epidemic of hopelessness"*.

Motivated in part by my own increasing feelings of despair, I spent the summer of 2024 reading books and articles about the concept of "hope". Drawing from a wide range of disciplines from psychology and philosophy to environmental studies and community activism, my readings sparked a shift in how I view the role of a teacher of community planning. In addition to helping students learn planning history, theory, methods, and so on, the readings made me realize that teachers of community planning also need to help students do something else.

Teachers need to help students have **HOPE.**

Humans Need Hope

My summer readings taught me that hope is critical to being human. Philosopher Stan van Hooft (2011) argues that hope is "an essential existential attitude for all of us" (p. 1), a "fundamental structure of the way we live our lives" (p. 10), and a "structure of our identity" (ibid). Victoria McGeer (also a philosopher) views hope as "an essential and distinctive feature of human agency" (2004, p. 100), in that "To live a life devoid of hope is simply not to live a human life" (p. 101). Likewise, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls hope "the destiny of humanity" (2004, p. 67), and goes so far as to claim that humans "can't stop imagining things as different from what they are now" and that "If we ever stopped hoping, we would no longer be human" (p. 64).

Why is hope so important to humans? For starters, there's a large body of empirical evidence that hope provides us with many psychological and physical benefits. Research has shown that, compared to people with "low" hope, those with "high" hope have more (and more difficult) goals that they're more likely to achieve, greater happiness and less distress, superior coping skills, faster and fuller recovery from physical injury, and less burnout at work (Snyder, 1994, p. 24). Higher hope also corresponds with superior academic, athletic, and work performance, greater physical and psychological well-being, and enhanced interpersonal relationships (Rand & Touza, 2016, p. 425).

Environmental scholars Iain White and Raven Cretney (2022, p. 155) note that hope for a better future has been central to political struggles for equality, as hope offers a more positive outlook compared to "the catastrophism, pessimism, and associated lack of agency" that are common in crisis discourse. On that note, numerous studies have found an inverse relationship between depression and hope, such that depression tends to

decrease as hope increases (Ritschel & Sheppard, 2017, p. 211). People who are hopeful also tend to be less anxious and have fewer emotional distresses (Goleman, 1995, p. 87). Psychology professors Jenny Lee and Matthew Gallagher (Lee & Gallagher, 2017, p. 295) conclude that "More than many other positive psychology constructs, hope appears to be a reliable predictor and promoter of positive mental health."

According to psychologist Shane Lopez (2013, p. 113), hope "works" in all of these ways in part because it "broadens our thinking and fuels persistence". When we have something to hope for and are excited about "what's next", we invest more in our daily lives and are able to see beyond our current challenges (ibid, p. 129). Hope helps us "overcome hurdles that we otherwise could not scale" (Groopman, 2004, p. 177), because it offers a belief that "different futures are possible" (Giroux, 2004, p. 39). When we believe there's a chance we can obtain a better future, we're more likely to work toward that better future and to obtain it

> than if we believe that (strictly) negative outcomes are unavoidable (Govier, 2011, p. 241).

The Importance of Hope for Creating Better Futures

It's not difficult to see why community planners need to be hopeful: the very purpose of planning is to create better futures (Myers & Alicia Kitsuse, 2000, p. 221). When planners have taken action to create better futures, they've made two (implicit) assumptions that are no longer universally taken as "givens" in 2026: first, that humans will continue to exist in the future, and second, that we can make the future what we want it to be.

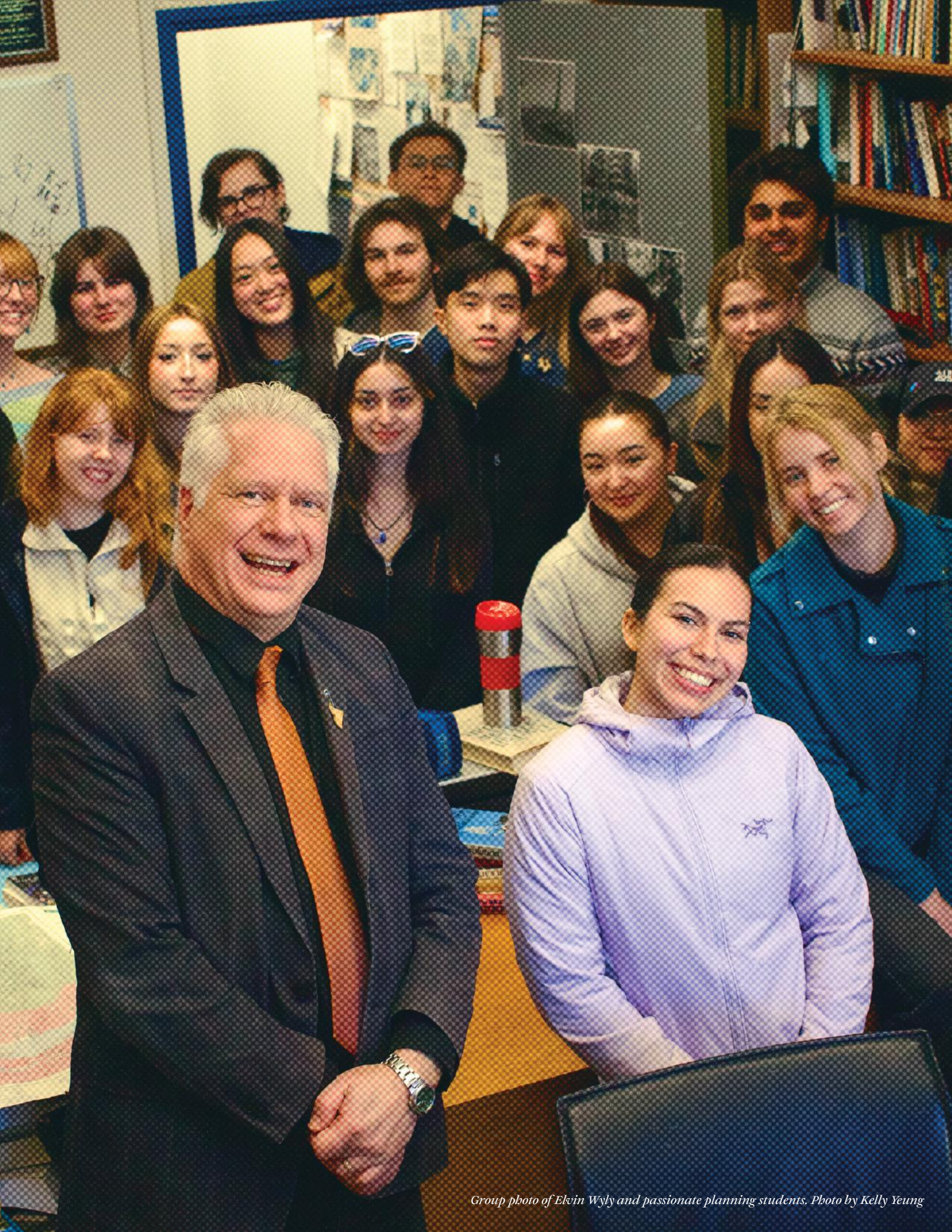
Compared to older generations, young people in 2026 arguably have more reasons to doubt that their actions now will bring about better conditions in the future. Gen Z has been labeled the "climate generation", as they are the first to spend their entire lives in a world impacted by climate change (Ray, 2020, p. 3). Experiencing climate change impacts has been linked to a wide variety of mental health issues, including sadness, distress, despair, anger, fear, helplessness, and hopelessness (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018, p. 275).

Of particular relevance to community planning, these mental health challenges can translate into a lack of motivation to tackle societal problems. So-called "climate anxiety" brings with it "a feeling of dread about the future combined with a feeling of powerlessness to do anything to shape that future" (Ray, 2020, p. 19). As one example, the climate strikes organized by young people in 2019 were partly inspired by a growing sense of hopelessness about the future, as the strikers "were questioning what purpose there was in working hard in school for a future that may never come to pass" (p. 8). Today's young people can be "so frozen by their fears that they are unable to desire...or...even imagine...the future" (p. 2).

Helping Students of Community Planning to Have Hope

For the past three years I have taught PLAN 425: Urban Planning Issues and Concepts for third and fourth-year undergrads, and I have distributed a short survey before the first day of class to all of the students to give me some insight into how optimistic they are about humanity's future. Two of the survey questions are:

> *1. On a scale from 0 to 10 (with 0 meaning "I am convinced that humanity has no future", and 10 meaning "I am convinced that humanity has a very bright future"), how optimistic are you about humanity's future?*



Group photo of Elvin Wyly and passionate planning students. Photo by Kelly Yeung

2. Is your level of optimism about humanity's future much higher than, slightly higher than, about the same as, slightly lower than, or much lower than when you first entered University?

As shown in Table 1, the average level of student optimism about humanity's future has been moderate, ranging from 5.82 to 6.08 over the three years. Optimism among students appears to be declining somewhat, as 46%–54% of students have said that their level of optimism was lower than when they started university, compared to 24%–27% that have said their level of optimism was higher.

	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Level of Optimism	5.82	6.08	5.85
Much Higher	7%	5%	8%
Slightly Higher	20%	19%	18%
About the Same As	28%	33%	22%
Slightly Lower	34%	34%	38%
Much Lower	12%	20%	14%
n	61	83	73

Table 1. Optimism Among PLAN 425 Students. Table by the Author

To help students remain motivated to create better futures, as of 2026 I now consider "helping students to have hope" to be a fundamental part of my job as a teacher. While I'm still learning how to help students have hope and I have much to learn, over the past few years I've made a concerted effort to bring the concept of hope into my lectures and class discussions. I have also included new readings in my syllabi and in-class video documentaries that discuss hope and/or that I find inspirational, with a goal of offsetting despair that students are likely to be experiencing based on the societal chaos they are witnessing on a daily basis.

As a critical part of the design of PLAN 425, I spend several weeks reviewing different planning "domains" (such as environment, transportation, housing, social planning, etc.), and I invite planning practitioners working in those domains to visit the class to describe their experience and share insights with students. In addition to asking the visitors to share a description of the types of problems they work on, I make a point of asking each visitor at the end of each class session to share "success stories" and/or reasons to be hopeful that they find coming out of the work they do. I end on a positive note in this way to help counteract the onslaught of negativity that we are exposed to in our daily lives.

Kelsey (2020, p. 17) notes that humans "are exposed to horrifying events more today than any other time in human history", and that "almost all of the news that we hear about the environment is bad" (p. 18). In order to remain capable of hope, we need to actively seek and listen to "different stories, ones that help us envision a present in which humans can live in concert with our environment" (Pierre-Louis, 2020, p. 141). Hearing stories of success and progress helps to change how we feel about the state of the planet (Kelsey, 2020, p. 6), and seeing evidence that current efforts are making a positive difference serves to motivate us (p. 53) and make us feel more hopeful, which in turn makes us more likely to share our hopeful feelings with others, thus increasing our collective capacity for pursuing transformative solutions (p. 161).

I will continue looking for new ways to help community planning students be hopeful, and I'm encouraged to do so by this heartening email I received from a PLAN 425 student:

> *Despite taking (PLAN 425) as a required elective for my urban forestry program, I left class each week feeling so inspired. I am just buzzing to explore opportunities and ways to further my learning in planning.*

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Painting by Alec Blair

Vancouver Is Special
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Mapping Colonial Narratives in Mount Pleasant

By Abigail Lester, Cooper Kucera, Daniel Blackmore, Nadia Vukicevic, and Tracy Tan

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Team 9 Granville Commons

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It's a Teacher's Job to Help Students Have Hope

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Photo by Ace Valdez

Elvin Wyly

Elvin Wyly is a Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of British Columbia. He studies the relations between market processes and state policy in producing and reinforcing urban social inequalities. His approach blends elements of critical social theory, legal and policy analysis, and multivariate quantitative methods designed to engage state and corporate institutions on their own terrain, with their own data.

Kwan Ki (Jerry) Wong

Kwan Ki (Jerry) Wong is a fourth-year student majoring in Oceanography and Biology and minoring in Urban Studies. Wong's paper connects to urban belonging by exploring the importance of citizen participation and the power it can realize for the city and the people.

Erick Villagomez

Erick Villagomez is a Lecturer in the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia. He teaches architecture, urban design, visual representation, and approaches to design and planning. His work examines how cities are shaped by technical standards, economic models, regulatory tools, and representational practices, and how these systems influence power, equity, and civic participation.

Stephanie Mak

Stephanie Mak is a second-year master's student in Community and Regional Planning. In her piece, she reflects on what running has taught her about belonging and being a student.

Matthew Chen

Matthew Chen is a fifth-year student majoring in Urban Studies and International Relations. Chen's poem reflects the feeling of belonging in Vancouver. Despite ups and down throughout his life, the city has always grounded him whenever he felt lost or disconnected. For every new experience, person, or lesson, he's been reminded time after time that regardless of what happens, this city will always be his home.

Chris Ng

Chris Ng is a third-year student majoring in Physics. Ng's photography of the Vancouver SkyTrain at Commercial-Broadway Station in the summer and in the winter reflects on how cities look as time moves forward.

Albert Melky Simatupang

Albert Melky Simatupang is a first-year student who has yet to declare a major. Simatupang's photography shows how lives that might never intersect are stitched together by the city's rhythm.

August Kitka

August Kitka is a second-year student majoring in Urban Studies. Kitka's photography demonstrates how fog encourages us to engage more closely with a shared space, demonstrating how urban belonging can form through familiarity, movement and coexistence in a space.

Cindy Seto

Cindy Seto is a fourth-year student majoring in Visual Arts. Seto's photography highlights how fireworks are a symbol in Canada of celebration and unity and an opportunity to celebrate today and tomorrow with lots of joy and love.

Adam Battistel

Adam Battistel is a fourth-year student majoring in Political Science. Battistel's map tells the story of how the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver acted as a containment zone for racialized groups in Vancouver.

Leo Adams-Pastor

Leo Adams-Pastor is a third-year student majoring in Urban Forestry and minoring in Landscape and Recreation Planning. Adams-Pastor's interview with Laura Gordon-Mitchell from Sole Food Farms is both an informational and sentimental recounting of the time we each have spent there and the ways that their farm helps connect people from all walks of life in Vancouver.

Mapping Colonial Narratives in Mt. Pleasant

Mapping Colonial Narratives in Mount Pleasant was written by Abigail Lester, Cooper Kucera, Daniel Blackmore, Nadia Vukicevic, and Tracy Tan who were all born outside of Vancouver, and have come from different corners of the world over the past ten years to live, work, study and play on the unceded traditional territories of *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam) land.

Tamara Tan

Tamara Tan is a third-year student majoring in Urban Studies. Alongside Tan's personal voice, the paper tackles the theme of urban belonging through art, public spaces, heritage, and planning theories to encourage both the general public, and planners to rethink how diversity is created and maintained in communities.

Sidonie Wittman

Sidonie Wittman is a fourth-year student majoring in Geography and minoring in Urban Studies. Wittman's paper explores topics related to urban indigeneity, and is especially relevant to urban studies considering the lengths the US Government went (and continues to go) to remove the Duwamish from the city of Seattle.

Mia Lowenthal

Mia Lowenthal is a fourth-year student majoring in Political Science and minoring in Urban Studies. Lowenthal's paper emphasizes the necessity of connection through community in urban centers, something that Marx and Engles have championed since the Manifesto.

Elias Mirsky

Elias Mirsky is a second-year student majoring in Human Geography. Mirsky's paper explores both Israeli visual production of genocide, and Palestinian visual production as resistance, ultimately arguing that Palestinians are using the increasing accessibility of visual technology to make clear the fact that they belong in their homelands.

Heather Bylsma

Heather Bylsma graduated in 2024 with a major in Urban Forestry and a minor in Urban Greenspace Management. Bylsma's poem explores the experience of urban dwelling and the intimacies that arise between strangers sharing walls. It reflects on the tension produced by physical proximity and how such closeness complicates ideas of friendship, privacy, and belonging in urban space.

Sanbo Zou

Sanbo Zou is a fourth-year student majoring in Urban Studies. Zou's essay traces how her study of modernist art shaped the way she understood urban planning. By examining how artistic ruptures become absorbed into cultural norms, she explores a parallel process in planning, where transformative ideas are translated into institutional structures.

Emiko Wijeysundera

Emiko Wijeysundera is a fifth-year student in Honours Human Geography and Engineering Physics. Wijeysundera's paper deals specifically with the public education system in Toronto, and the ways that the Black community in the city produce and are produced by urban space.

Alexander Mock

Alexander Mock is a second-year student majoring in Urban Forestry and minoring in Landscape and Recreation Planning. His paper discusses how multi-modal transportation systems help promote connection, class-mixing, well-being (including human connection), and a sense of belonging for all people in the city.

Mark Stevens

Mark Stevens is an Associate Professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia. He has professional experience as a natural resources planner for a city government and a regional planner for a council of governments in the state of Oregon.

About the Editorial Board

From left to right, Hanzalah Majid, Sanbo Zou, Sydney Hsieh, Kaylen Gill, Aria Sanya, Ace Valdez, and Matthew Chen. Photo by Kelly Yeung

Editor-in-Chief

Sanbo Zou

Having grown up moving between Beijing and Montreal, Sanbo has always explored how cities layer terrains of power, memory, and belonging across borders. As the Founding Editor-in-Chief, she drew inspiration from the people and communities around her, who continue to be an endless source of creativity and hope. Now in her fourth and final year of Urban Studies, she has come to cherish the small moments that make urban life feel deeply human, and believes in the power of creative platforms to foster that warmth.

Managing Editor

Matthew Chen

Matthew is a final-year student double-majoring in Urban Studies and International Relations. As the Managing Editor, he is incredibly happy and proud to be a part of this inaugural issue that encapsulates his passion for urban planning. In his free time, he enjoys hiking and climbing Vancouver's local North Shore mountains, chasing sunsets at Spanish Banks, and watching every type of sport possible.

Technical Editors

Hanzalah Majid

Drawn to the constantly evolving realm of urban discourse, Hanzalah is in his second year currently majoring in Urban Studies with a minor in Economics. Hanz enjoys Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, dancing, painting, cooking, and cold plunges outside of academic life. He can often be found playing spikeball at various spots around campus and the wider city.

Aria Sanya

Aria is a first-year hoping to major in Urban Studies. She is a technical editor at CAPACity, reviewing and editing submissions for the journal. In her free time, she likes long walks by the beach, small white dogs, making monthly playlists, and working towards her goal of watching 100 movies each year.

Kaylen Gill

Kaylen is in her last year of study, with a major in Human Geography and minor in Urban Studies. Kaylen is a technical editor at UBC CAPACity and is proud to be a member of the founding team for *The Vancouver Special*. She enjoys creative and crafty hobbies, including crochet, knitting, scrapbooking, baking, and doing nails.

Layout Editors

Sydney Hsieh

Sydney is a first-year student intending to major in Urban Studies and minor in Commerce. She enjoys graphic design, creating everything from bold brand identities and logo designs to painting her favorite Academicism and Romantic artworks or scenery. In her free time, she loves café hopping, trying Japanese restaurants, exploring beaches and parks, and catching sunsets around UBC.

Ace Valdez

Ace is a second-year student majoring in Cellular and Physiological Sciences. Beyond his academic work, much of his pastimes come from his enthusiasm for cities and planning. Whenever he finds the time, Ace enjoys drawing and 3D modelling cityscapes, with his most recent project inspired by New England.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Urban Studies Major, a collaborative effort between the UBC Department of Geography and the School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP). The program provides the academic rigour and critical lens necessary for this journal to explore the complexities of our built environment.

This inaugural issue was made possible by SCARP for their generous financial support and for fostering a culture of visionary planning. By investing in undergraduate scholarship, SCARP ensures that the next generation of planners has a dedicated platform to contribute to the vital conversations shaping our cities today.

We dedicate this issue to everyone in the urban planning community, from students, professors, practitioners, activists, residents, and dreamers. Whether you are advocating for housing equity or designing the transit networks of the future, your passion for the city is our constant inspiration. Thank you for building the world this journal is all about.