

# The Future of Planning: Insights from UBC's Planning School

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Planning is ultimately concerned with creating a better future. At the best of times, this is a complex task. In our present era, defined by a host of crises and by declining confidence in public institutions and in professions like planning, the challenge of planning for the future becomes even harder. To get a sense of where planning is and might be headed, this article presents forward-looking insights from students in UBC's School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP). After all, who better to speak to our field's future than the graduate students who will be our future planners? These insights seek to provide a bit of the "foresight" that philosopher Auguste Comte argued is the aim of knowledge.

In conversations with UBC planning students, one topic whose importance stands out is housing. As we all know, likely from both professional and personal experience, BC faces a multi-dimensional housing crisis. As one of the many SCARP graduate students focused on improving housing conditions, Elizabeth Ballantyne is notable for the way her studies and professional background converge. Ballantyne currently serves on the boards of Exchange Inner City and the Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Economic Development Network and previously spent eight years as Executive Director of the Vancouver City Planning Commission. Her PhD research tackles a question many are wrestling with: What would it take to successfully address our lack of affordable housing?

Ballantyne states that her research so far suggests that substantially increased provision of non-market housing will be key to creating a future where all are housed to the CMHC standard: affordably, suitably, and adequately. When asked what is needed to ramp up non-market housing provision, she says: "this is really the question at the heart of my dissertation and one I am posing to interviewees from across the spectrum of planning in BC. My research, which focuses on four municipalities, suggests so far that two ingredients that will be vital to improving housing delivery are a planner's leadership and their willingness to innovate with respect to policies." Ballantyne captures a sentiment shared by many SCARP

students, that charting a new course for planning in the future will require us to be creative leaders willing to depart from established practice.

Another SCARP student at the forefront of thinking about planning's future is Nathan Hawkins, a student in the master's program in community and regional planning (MCRP). Hawkins has played a founding role in multiple organizations that challenge status quo approaches to planning. Hawkins' commitment to future-oriented action, a hallmark of many SCARP students, has been demonstrated as a founding member of Vision Zero Vancouver, the Vancouver Area Neighbours Association (a pro-housing advocacy group), and Movement: Metro Vancouver Transit Riders.

Hawkins' work with Vision Zero Vancouver, which advocates for transportation systems that put safety ahead of driver convenience, highlights the kinds of ground-breaking changes that many students feel planning must embrace. As Hawkins notes, "we're entrenched in established ways of thinking and it's essential that we change the norms that have shaped our cities in unsustainable ways." Hawkins describes a promising model for effecting such changes when he describes how Vision Zero Vancouver has sought to identify easy wins that radically increase pedestrian safety. These include relatively simple physical interventions – like separating cars from other road users, raising crosswalks, adding intersection safety cameras, and increasing crosswalk times – that can serve as a foundation for changing deeper norms, practices and, ultimately, the policies that shape our built environment.

Asked what bigger changes will be needed for planners to effectively tackle future challenges, Hawkins argues we will need to revisit some of our most foundational assumptions and tools. For example, he states "we should rethink zoning and building codes from the ground up." Hawkins, like Ballantyne, concedes that taking on future planning challenges will require both creativity and bravery on the part of young planners. As Hawkins puts it: "Tenacity and willingness to go against the current will be essential skills."

While many students interviewed for this

article emphasized the importance of going against the grain, one group specifically highlighted how such pathbreaking work might be undertaken. This group – composed of Willow Cabral, Christopher Chan, Audrey Choong, and Fumika Noguchi – examined ways to increase car-lite living in New Westminster for their MCRP studio project. Describing the project, Noguchi states: "The city is highlighting densification as a way of responding to sustainability and housing affordability, but it's important to think about what that density looks like and how such transformations can be used as an opportunity for creatively challenging established paradigms, such as around car ownership."

Cabral notes that "there are huge opportunities to enable more car-lite lifestyles, including by incorporating simple innovations within densifying neighbourhoods." Chan adds that "such innovations could include simple but transformative ideas like providing better connections to car sharing networks and expanding access to bike rooms in new buildings." The team spent time interviewing stakeholders in the development process, including developers. From these interviews they realized that communication channels between planners and developers were not always as open as they had assumed and that they, as young planners, could serve as mediators.

Prompted by the developers they interviewed, the studio team found that renters are often less invested in car ownership and in having a parking spot for current or future use. For this reason, the team argues that it will be easier in rental buildings to promote changes like encouraging biking and breaking free from car-centric lifestyles. Cabral notes that "it was only by talking with the widest possible range of people, including developers, and considering a truly diverse range of perspectives that we were able to fully understand what actions could have greatest impact."

Infrastructure stands out as a second planning theme that will be vital to shaping our future. As Paul Goldberger, the New Yorker's architecture critic, writes: "Infrastructure creates the form of a city and enables life to go on." While we all recognize that infrastructure

is important, it's less clear what future infrastructure will look like and how it should be provided. Fortuitously, Julia Kidder, a PhD student in SCARP, is focusing her research on just this question and is doing so in thought provoking ways.

Kidder, an artist and researcher, was drawn to thinking about the future of coastal infrastructure by the observation that traditional hard infrastructure, like dykes, often has a limited lifespan and is poorly suited to changing conditions. This prompted her to broaden her understanding of the land-water interface, drawing on her practice as an artist. Kidder remarks that “the intertidal and coastal zone can be seen as a metaphor for planning – a site of dynamism, sensory experience, connectivity and volatility – and we need to learn

from these natural sites of creativity and vitality.” Rather than thinking of our communities as static, Kidder argues it's vital to understand them as dynamic systems and to plan accordingly.

Discussing her research, Kidder states: “I don't have the answer to what future infrastructure should look like, but my research shows me that it's important not to leap to pre-existing solutions. Instead, we need to explore the full range of what is possible. This is where creativity and the arts can help planners expand our appreciation for what is feasible, especially when this is done in partnership with others.” Kidder acknowledges that broadening planners' toolkits and being open to a wider range of possibilities will be messy, but says that our increasingly unstable

context means this is something planners will need to embrace.

The work of students in SCARP has highlighted a number of themes that will be important for planners' work in the future. These include creativity, fearlessness, thinking outside the box and confronting taken for granted expectations. While SCARP students are already embedding these approaches in their studies and work, they are also themes that planners more advanced in their careers can adopt as we all confront a rapidly changing and increasingly turbulent future.

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**As a window onto one of planners' sources of future uncertainty, the rise of AI, this image was created using Adobe's Firefly based on the prompt "show me an image depicting a group of UBC planners from the future demonstrating the talents, skills and tools needed to plan sustainable, prosperous and just cities for BC's changing demographic, social and environmental context."**