

CRISIS RESPONSE: UBC PLANNING STUDENTS RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIMES

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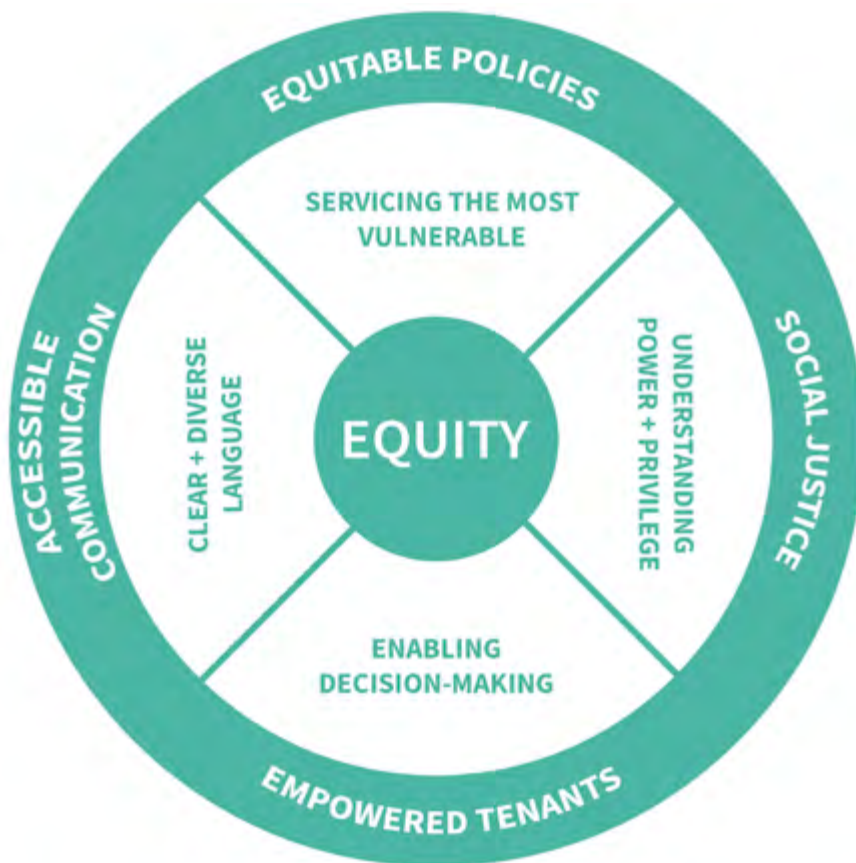


Image from report by Buckman, Edwards, and Parent showing their approach to foregrounding equity in their reconsideration of how to protect tenants in the face of redevelopment.

One of the watchwords of the past year has been “crisis.” While the barrage of bad news can be daunting, UBC’s School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP) has been at the forefront of responding to our new context of interconnected crises. In particular, SCARP’s students are leading the way by showing how we can move to a more just and sustainable future, in spite of massive hurdles. In this annual update from SCARP, I want to draw attention to some of the remarkable efforts our students are making to tackle the many crises that confront us as planners.

SCARP’s PhD program sometimes gets less airtime than our larger professional planning degree. But, it’s worth noting that SCARP is home to one of the continent’s most dynamic planning PhD programs and is a major source of planning faculty and researchers worldwide. Since becoming Chair of the PhD program a year ago, I have been blown away by the talent, creativity, and phenomenally hard work that our PhD students put into their research and I’m excited to showcase some of this work in this article, particularly since the theme of “crisis” animates many of our students’ research projects.

In addition to the climate and housing crises we hear much about, we’re also aware that another, slightly less concrete (but no less important) crisis is reshaping planners’ work. This is the crisis of misinformation and conspiracism that is rocking professional and public life and which is exacerbated by the rise of online news and communication. PhD student Wes Regan’s research tackles this crisis. Wes describes his work, saying: “While I had been concerned about ‘fake news’ and online misinformation, it was working in public health during the COVID-19 pandemic that led me to realize the scale of this crisis and how it undermines our ability to collectively understand and respond to challenges.”

Wes’ timely research asks: “How can we effectively plan with the public interest in mind when the public is bombarded by increasing levels of misinformation?” Wes describes

his concerns about misinformation, saying: “My fear is that planners, particularly those engaging directly with publics, will find the communicative and participatory aspects of this work increasingly fraught with incivility, performance, and, frankly, chaos.”

Wes notes that planning finds itself intimately connected with these currents of mistrust in institutions, not least due to recent concerns raised about the “15-minute city.” As with other professions, it’s clear that planners will have to adjust how we work given the increasingly polarized way people engage with and discuss policy issues. By learning from planners on the frontlines of this crisis, Wes’ work promises to provide us with insights to better grapple with this challenging new context for our work.

Virtually all British Columbians are now familiar with the housing crisis, which affects the entire province, and beyond. PhD student Paul Akaabre is working on housing issues in both Ghana and Canada and making important contributions to the way we think about tenure security and housing equity. In Ghana, he is investigating how traditional tenure models function and how leaseholders’ rights in such systems might be strengthened. Showing the reach of concerns about shelter security, he is working simultaneously in Canada, with collaborators from across UBC, on housing affordability.

Paul and his co-authors have examined the progressiveness of Canadian property taxation and reported their findings in the *Canadian Tax Journal*. They found that “Vancouver exhibit[s] a particularly weak relationship between income tax and property value.” They propose that a “modest minimum income tax based on property value could raise billions of dollars annually in both the Vancouver and Toronto metropolitan areas.” Paul and his co-authors argue that such a tax could achieve large “increases in government revenue and improvements in overall tax progressivity.” It’s creative and provocative insights like these that I now expect from SCARP’s PhD students and

it’s no doubt that the scale of the housing crisis calls for just the kinds of radical rethinking that Paul offers.

When we think about crises, we tend – to our peril – to consider them in isolation. PhD student Hayfaa Abou Ibrahim would like to change that. She is researching the concept of “polycrisis,” which refers to the growing interconnectedness of cascading and interlinked crises. Hayfaa explains this work, saying: “My interest was triggered by the multiple crises that have hit Lebanon. I realized that the crises affecting the country – financial, economic, political and healthcare crises, a refugee crisis, and the deadly 2020 port explosion – were interconnected, but most organizations were responding to them individually.”

Hayfaa argues: “It’s very important for planners to consider the polycrisis, specifically the urban polycrisis, since our work requires us to coordinate across forms of risk. Many organizations are saying that they do this kind of bridging work, but fewer do it in practice.” Hayfaa is examining the barriers to collaboration between organizations working on different forms of risk and is identifying factors that enable coordinated action across crises. In addition to studying Lebanon, she’s also investigating the polycrisis in Vancouver, a city which is increasingly an exemplar of how interlinked crises, from climate change to homelessness, can pose immense challenges to residents and planners.

UBC students in the professional MCRP program have also been tackling the topic of crisis. One exciting project – titled “Strengthening Tenant Protections in Redevelopment” – was undertaken by students in SCARP’s studio course and involved a partnership with the B.C. Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre. MCRP students Rory Buckman, Sydney Edwards, and Maddi Parent describe their work, saying: “Our project responds to one of the many symptoms of the housing crisis. Rental redevelopment is an emerging challenge as post-war, rental apartments reach the end of their usable life.

Redevelopment of these buildings introduces problems as existing residents are displaced from their homes during the construction process.”

Buckman, Parent, and Edwards add: “The situation can become dire as residents struggle to find new housing given very low vacancy rates, and face displacement from neighbourhoods due to the rent gap between new builds and old stock.” In their project, they provide guidance on how to create more equitable tenant relocation policies. They say: “The key lesson our work teaches is to treat renters with the respect and dignity that they deserve during redevelopment. Although municipalities and developers have a duty to create new, affordable housing, this burden should not be passed onto renters who are displaced from their homes and communities.”

The work of SCARP’s students shows there is bad news and good news when it comes to tackling the crises facing our planet. The bad news is that our species confronts crises on a scale not seen before. The good news is that students are demonstrating that it is possible to grapple with these challenges bravely, with optimism, and with the remarkable ingenuity and inventiveness that are the hallmarks of planning education at UBC.

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