

PLANNERS' ROLE IN BENDING THE CURVE OF THE EMERGING ASOCIAL SOCIETY

By Meg Holden, Robyn Lee, and Sara Emami

SUMMARY

This article presents the challenge of the emerging asocial society in terms of what planners can do to bend the curve toward pro-social communities. While urban and community planning has embraced tenets associated with social connections, like compact urban form and a vibrant public realm, the persuasiveness of this thinking has been tested by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even aside from COVID-19, the risks of social isolation and loneliness in daily life are uneven throughout communities. One of the social groups for which social isolation and loneliness have a pronounced effect is residents of higher-density environments. Planners are well-positioned to lighten the load of loneliness on this population. We explain how planners advance goals for sociability within housing and related municipal work, especially within planning and development processes for multi-unit residential buildings. This article reviews research, cases of pro-social regional and municipal planning efforts, and the work of the Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC), a pro-social, pro-density housing research and practice initiative in Vancouver.

SOMMAIRE

Cet article présente le défi de la société asociale émergente en termes de ce que les urbanistes peuvent faire pour infléchir la courbe vers des communautés prosociales. Alors que la planification urbaine et communautaire a adopté des principes associés aux liens sociaux, comme une forme urbaine compacte et un domaine public dynamique, la persuasion de cette pensée a été mise à l'épreuve par l'expérience de la pandémie COVID-19. Même en dehors de COVID-19, les risques d'isolement social et de solitude dans la vie quotidienne sont inégaux dans les communautés. L'un des groupes sociaux pour lesquels l'isolement social et la solitude ont un effet prononcé est celui des résidents des environnements à forte densité. Les urbanistes sont bien placés pour alléger le poids de la solitude sur cette population. Nous expliquons comment les urbanistes font avancer les objectifs de sociabilité dans le cadre du logement et des travaux municipaux connexes, en particulier dans le cadre des processus de planification et de développement des immeubles résidentiels à logements multiples. Cet article passe en revue les recherches, les cas d'efforts de planification régionale et municipale prosociale et le travail du Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC), une initiative de recherche et de pratique de logement prosocial et pro-densité à Vancouver.

AN EMERGING ASOCIAL CANADA

Social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the already growing rate of social isolation and loneliness in many parts of the world. In recent years, countries including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan¹ have made addressing social isolation and loneliness a national policy priority. This policy focus is emerging at the city scale too. Notably, Barcelona (2021) recently released its ambitious *Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness*, which dedicates a decade of funding to reduce loneliness across municipal sectors.² Here in Canada, the *Imagining Canada's Future* initiative recognized the Emerging Asocial Society as a key societal challenge facing the country and its communities.³

Principles of proximity and concentration have been a silver bullet for city planning since Jane Jacobs (1961) observed as a general principle that, for a great city to happen: “[t]here must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people, for whatever purposes they may be there.”⁴ Fast forward 60 years, and the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai points out the great reversal of this thinking, as a fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ COVID-19 has flipped the definition of social life, such that to be “social” (prudent, risk-averse, informed, considerate) means to cease being sociable. Appadurai sees our present moment as “the first time in history that social distance and isolation have become the requirements of a deferred normality.”

Social research has fretted for decades about increases in asocial phenomena, from bowling alone⁶ to doom scrolling.⁷ Community planning has responded with concepts like complete communities, 15-minute neighbourhoods, missing middle housing, and smart growth. These concepts have yet to explicitly argue why proximity and density should be expected to bring a higher *social* quality of life. This could be a moment for planners to take a stand for what is healthy, sociable, and connected in the post-pandemic new normal.

IS HIGHER-DENSITY LIVING LESS SOCIAL?

While fostering sociability and neighbourhood connections does not feature in all planners' job descriptions, the existence of baseline social trust, connectedness, and belonging is a clear

precondition of community planning in the public interest. As Canadian communities experience changes in built form, the mix of physical and social infrastructures, and socioeconomic and demographic composition, planners must determine new solutions to old problems of cultivating a sociable public domain.

National polling conducted by the Angus Reid Institute just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic found that over half of Canadians interacted with people outside their households less than once per week.⁸ This situation became more acute during the pandemic, giving rise to what some health researchers have called the double pandemic of social isolation and loneliness.⁹

In recent years, countries including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan have made addressing social isolation and loneliness a national policy priority.

In Metro Vancouver, which has a more compact urban form than most parts of the country, less than 28 percent of homes are what we have traditionally considered a ‘house’ – more than two-thirds of households reside in attached and high-rise dwellings.¹⁰ The shift to higher-density living is associated with a number of risk factors for loneliness and social isolation also prevalent in Canadian cities: living alone, renting, unemployment, low educational attainment, and a social mix with high rates of older adults, immigrants, and those living in poverty or housing stress.¹¹ Survey research completed between 2021 and 2022 on apartment dwellers in BC found that 36 percent reported a worsening sense of social isolation during the pandemic. Those who spoke to their neighbours once a week or more were over twice as likely to report never, or seldom, feeling lonely. The overall impacts of social isolation and loneliness hide more pronounced negative impacts on Indigenous, racialized, disabled or LGBTQ2S+ communities, and low-income households.¹¹ High-density

communities have growing diversity, socioeconomically and demographically, and face different kinds of risks and structural barriers to neighbouring. Planners need to work through these to create more opportunities for sociability within high-density living.

HOW CAN PLANNERS TAKE A PRO-SOCIAL APPROACH?

Adopting a pro-social approach to city planning means applying a sociability lens to housing, neighbourhood design, and infrastructure choices; to tenure, management and maintenance choices; and to resident and neighbourhood engagement and programming.

Some of this work is already underway. Metro Vancouver's Regional Growth Strategy, *Metro 2050*, includes a new emphasis on social connections as key to attaining complete community goals, particularly related to multi-unit housing, neighbourhood identity, and design guidance. *Under Goal 4: Provide Diverse and Affordable Housing Choices*, member municipalities are required to identify policies and actions that contribute to increased social connectedness in multi-unit housing.¹²

In addition, new research and tools can support the implementation of regional goals in a more equitable way. One example is Metro Vancouver's 2021 *Inequity Baseline Data Report*. This set of forty-nine spatial indicators informs regional growth management thinking with quantitative dimensions of the relationship between different measures of social equity and social quality of life and city planning, including residential displacement and residential demolition rate, housing cost burden, and population diversity. These underlying factors shape the preconditions for social



Watson & Associates
ECONOMISTS LTD.

Providing solutions in **municipal finance, land economics, planning and education**, including:

- growth management strategies
 - employment land strategies
- demographic & economic forecasting studies
 - real estate market analysis
 - development charges
- municipal & school board financial planning
 - asset management
 - ward boundary reviews

www.watsonecon.ca
905-272-3600 | info@watsonecon.ca | [in](#) [twitter](#)

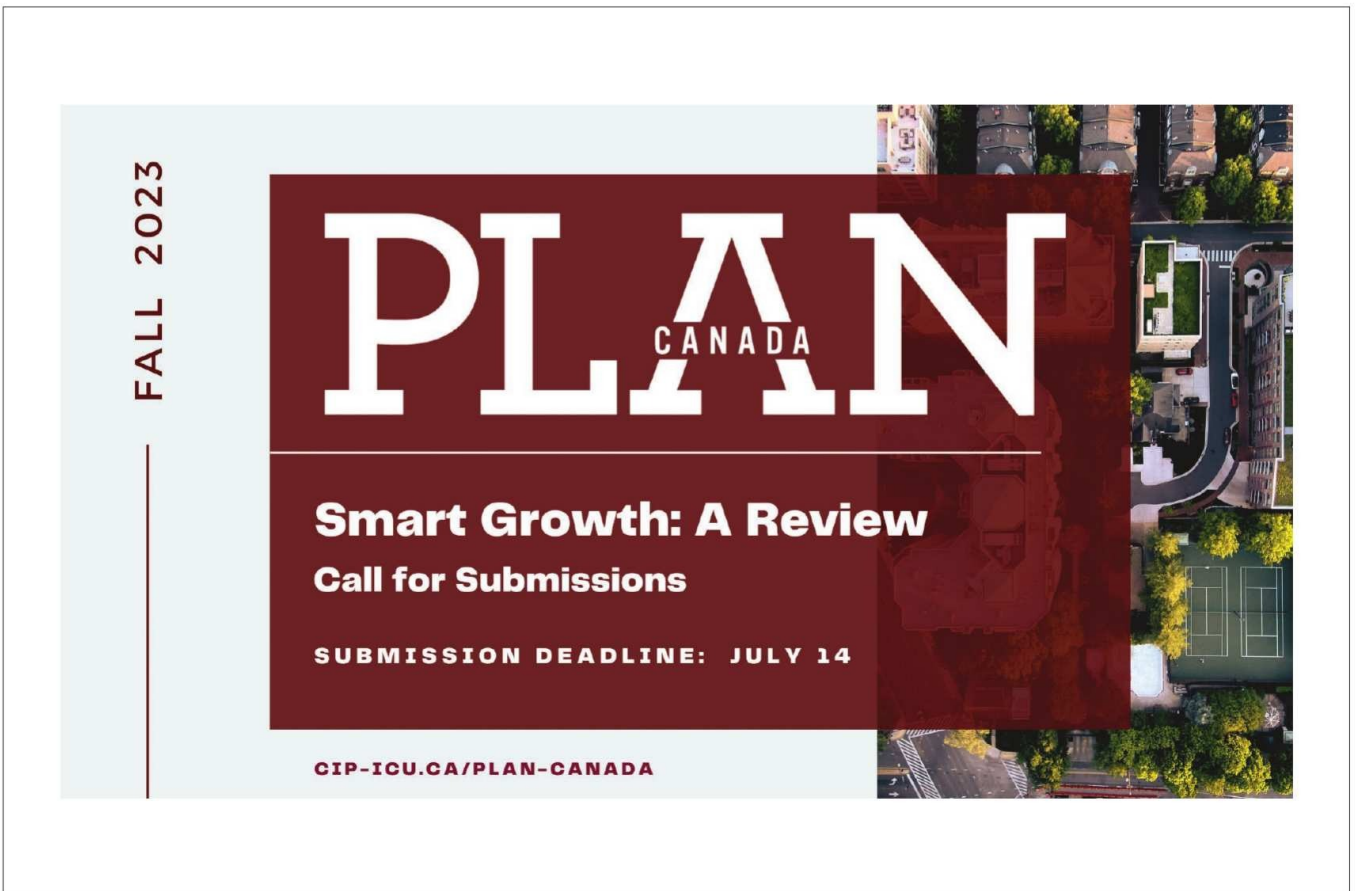


SFU
RESOURCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Accredited undergraduate and graduate programs specializing in environmental, Indigenous and community planning.



www.sfu.ca/rem/planning



FALL 2023

PLAN CANADA

**Smart Growth: A Review
Call for Submissions**

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: JULY 14

CIP-ICU.CA/PLAN-CANADA

connections at home. Mapping these trends shines new light on appropriate pro-social strategies and could set a baseline to measure progress and help identify the need for future policy interventions.

Design considerations specific to enhancing social connections opportunities among different demographics, like seniors, children, and immigrants, have also received growing attention. The City of Toronto's (2020) *Growing Up: Planning for Children in New Vertical Communities* strategy stands out for its extensive recommendations about building design, infrastructure, programming, and mobility that may improve the social life of children and their families in higher-density living.¹³

Pro-social urban and community planning is strengthened with quality programming. The Township of Langley (2022) includes within its *Social Sustainability Strategy*, actions to increase opportunities for neighbourhood social connections.¹⁴ In addition, the *Neighbour to Neighbour* program meets this same objective for the District of Saanich (2022), which seeks to link neighbours across social groups to resources and sites including emergency preparedness, climate-friendly individual actions, food security and nature experiences.¹⁵

THE HEY NEIGHBOUR COLLECTIVE

The Hey Neighbour Collective (HNC) represents an effort to connect planners with partners in social and health services, housing provision, research and advocacy, to grow collective impact for pro-social

planning and action. Intervention efforts that HNC and partners have examined include resident animator models, engagement in Connect and Prepare emergency preparedness workshops, photovoice community science models, and focus groups. Members of the collective also work to translate the mixture of experience, research, and policy and planning windows of opportunity into practice guides, research digests, and advocacy tools, made available on the project website.

Promisingly, the HNC saw an increase in residents' willingness to get to know their neighbours more, from 58 percent to 66 percent between 2020 and 2021 (see Figure 1). What's more, interest in survey participation in our surveys continues to rise as housing providers have begun reporting back to residents about their achievements, as a result of what tenants have shared.

THE LIMITS OF NEIGHBOURING TO SOLVE THE EMERGING ASOCIAL SOCIETY

Although the work of the Hey Neighbour Collective and other city planning approaches has been promising, challenging an increasingly asocial society is a monumental effort. Often, loneliness and social isolation are symptoms of structural inequalities and a narrow focus on sociability and neighbouring risks demanding more vulnerable households to stretch their already strained, and often invisible, support structures, rather than offering equitable opportunities in the social welfare system, overall.¹⁶ Explicit attention

to sociability and neighbouring should be complementary rather than a replacement for investments in core community housing, and social and health infrastructure. At the same time, by reasserting pro-social professional objectives within the work of community planning, planners can contribute to community connections that matter in so many ways.

Housing provides the basic needs of safety and refuge and acts as the scaffolding around key social and health services and community planning priorities. When planning recognizes the role housing plays in fostering social connections, residents are protected from having to face crises in isolation from one another.

Meg Holden, MCIP Candidate Member, is a Professor of Urban Studies and Resources and Environmental Management at Simon Fraser University. Her research and teaching are in the domain of urban and regional planning and policy, sustainable development and well-being, and pragmatic philosophy. **Robyn Lee** is a research assistant with the SFU Research Team for the Hey Neighbour Collective. She is pursuing a Master of Urban Studies at Simon Fraser University. **Sara Emami** is a research assistant for the Hey Neighbour Collective working towards her Master of Urban Studies degree at Simon Fraser University. Sara also holds a Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in urban

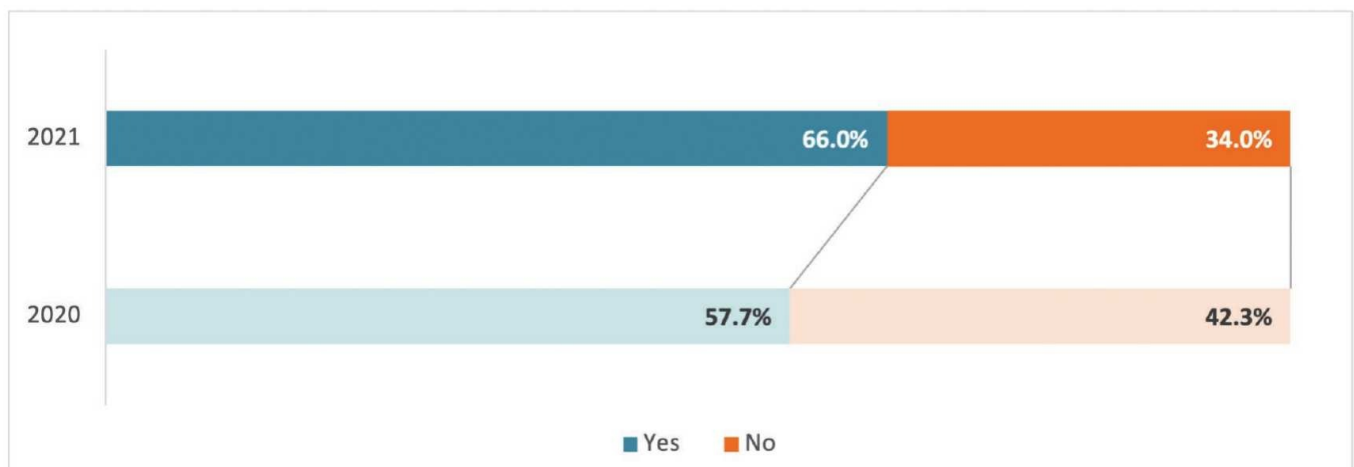


Figure 1: Willingness to get to know neighbours better (HNC Resident Survey 2020 and 2021)

planning and design. Her interests pivot around finding creative ways of fostering positive change through communities and the built environment.

REFERENCES

- 1 Sones, Meridith, Caislin L. Firth, Daniel Fuller, Meg Holden, Yan Kestens, and Meghan Winters. Situating Social Connectedness in Healthy Cities: A Conceptual Primer for Research and Policy. *Cities & Health* 6.6. 2021. Pg. 1-14.
- 2 City of Barcelona. *Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness 2020-2030*. Barcelona. 2021.
- 3 Government of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. *Knowledge Synthesis Grants: Emerging Asocial Society*. December 2021 Competition.
- 4 Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1961.
- 5 Appadurai, Arjun. "Loneliness Is No Longer What It Used to Be". *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 88.3. 2021. Pg. 645-60.
- 6 Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- 7 Price, Matthew, Alison C. Legrand, Zoe M. F. Brier, Katherine van Stolk-Cooke, Kelly Peck, Peter Sheridan Dodds, Christopher M. Danforth, and Zachary W. Adams. "Doomscrolling during COVID-19: The Negative Association between Daily Social and Traditional Media Consumption and Mental Health Symptoms during the COVID-19 Pandemic". *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 14.8. 2022. Pg. 1338-46.
- 8 Angus Reid Institute. *Isolation, Loneliness, and COVID-19: Pandemic Leads to Sharp Increase in Mental Health Challenges, Social Woes*. Angus Reid Institute, 2020.
- 9 Holt-Lunstad, Julianne. "The Double Pandemic of Social Isolation And COVID-19: Cross-Sector Policy Must Address Both." *Health Affairs Forefront*, June 2020.
- 10 Metro Vancouver Regional District. *Metro Vancouver Housing Data Book*, 2022a
- 11 Nouri, Mohammad, Meg Holden, Meredith Sones, Meghan Winters, and Atiya Mahmood. *Knowledge Synthesis for the Emerging Asocial Society: Social Quality of Life in High-Density Built Environments*. Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 2022.
- 12 Metro Vancouver Regional District. *Metro 2050 Regional Growth Strategy*, 2022b.
- 13 City of Toronto. *Growing Up: Planning for children in new vertical communities*, 2020. Toronto.
- 14 Township of Langley. *Social Sustainability Strategy*. Langley, BC, 2022.
- 15 District of Saanich. *Neighbour to Neighbour Resilience Initiative*. Saanich, BC, 2022.
- 16 Joy, Meghan. "Neoliberal rationality and the age friendly cities and communities program: Reflections on the Toronto case", *Cities* 108: 102982, January 2021. ■

The banner features a topographic map background. At the top, the text reads "NAVIGATION 2023 HALIFAX HYBRID" in blue and red, with "JUNE 27-30" and "JUNE 28-30" below it. In the center is a portrait of Ramy Nassar, a man with short dark hair, smiling, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt. To the left of the portrait is the text "KEYNOTE SPEAKER" in red. To the right is "CONFÉRENCIER PRINCIPAL" in red. Below the portrait is the name "RAMY NASSAR" in large blue letters, followed by "1000 Days Out" in smaller blue letters. At the bottom left is the URL "NAVIGATION.CIP-ICU.CA/REGISTER" in white. At the bottom right are the logos for CIP-ICU (Canadian Institute of Planners / Institut Canadien des Urbanistes) and APIUA (Atlantic Planners Institute / Institut des Urbanistes de l'Atlantique).