

Engaged Scholarship in the Context of Housing Insecurity and the Built Environment

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Article abstract

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Exchanges

In Exchanges, we present conversations with scholars and practitioners of community engagement, responses to previously published material, and other reflections on various aspects of community-engaged scholarship meant to provoke further dialogue and discussion. In this section, we invite our readers to offer their thoughts and ideas on the meanings and understandings of engaged scholarship, as practiced in local or faraway communities, diverse cultural settings, and in various disciplinary contexts. We especially welcome community-based scholars' views and opinions on their collaborations with university-based partners in particular and engaged scholarship in general.

In this issue, Wanda Martin, Kerry McPhedran, Shelley Kirychuk, and Lori Bradford, ESJ's editor-in-chief, explores the concept of engaged scholarship within the realm of housing insecurity and the built environment. They shared their insights and experiences regarding the challenges and opportunities inherent in engaged scholarship, particularly in addressing inequities in housing and the built environment.

Engaged Scholarship in the Context of Housing Insecurity and the Built Environment

Lori: We'll dive right in with our first question: How do you define or think about engaged scholarship in the context of housing and the built environment?

Wanda: It's never easy to define. I mean when you live it, when you're in it, it's hard to describe what you do because you think everybody does this, which is not true. But in the built environment, I mean I think being an engaged scholar means to be listening and to be flexible and to be nimble in response to what you're hearing. It requires adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness to community needs. It involves listening and collaborating with rights- and stakeholders to address housing challenges.

Kerry: From an engineering perspective, we tend to do a lot of research and work on *things* rather than *with people*. And so another way of thinking about it that we're working with people and outcomes that you have should be beneficial to everybody. I found working with the built environment team, and doing engaged scholarship made me not just worry about research outcomes that are good for the general population but instead come up with research outcomes that are beneficial directly for the people we're working with. That also becomes beneficial for us because we get more personal feedback on our work.

Lori: So, we've heard about adaptability, flexibility, this idea that isn't this what everybody does, and the benefit of personal feedback on our work, and we also think about who you're benefiting and how as well as we're being reciprocal. Do you have more to add to that?

Shelley: From partners, I've learned that engaged scholarship in housing focuses on reconciliACTION—moving research beyond academia to drive tangible actions and outcomes in communities.

Lori: Tell us more about that.

Shelley: Well, I think often research is conducted with and occasionally on rather than alongside. And then some actions come from the research that have an impact, more for an academic career, but not as much for communities. And so I think a lot of the work that's come out of the built environment group has instead had action items with it, which then is seen as impactful and they call it reconciliACTION. So not just doing the research, but it's about there being reconciliation in the actions. So, a colleague I work with, he calls it reconciliACTION. It's not just research, it's putting things into action. By that I mean sharing in the interpretation, meeting with community members regularly, developing the policy briefs and helping them develop the policy briefs, and being alongside them when they're asking for change related to the research.

Lori: Thanks Shelly, and you've already jumped into question number two about sharing your experiences as an engaged scholar. I know you've done a number of these policy briefs and they've had impact for indoor air quality in particular. Can you tell us more about your experiences engaging with non-university colleagues on issues around housing equality and the built environment?

Shelley: Well, I think we've all been part of it maybe in different settings, but I think I'm going back to Dr. Merle Massie's TEDtalk that everybody is a researcher and at least from my eyes, I am one type of researcher, I'm an academic researcher, but the members in the community that are engaged in the research that we're doing and the funding that we're getting, they are community researchers, and that's just a different term for the same thing. We are all researchers engaged in the same vision and mission and I think that's what I see as engaged scholarship from the work that we're doing. Engaging with community members as equal partners in research fosters mutual learning and impactful outcomes. It emphasizes the role of community researchers alongside academic scholars.

Kerry: My experiences in engineering often involve practical, hands-on solutions to housing and infrastructure challenges. Engaging with communities directly informs research directions and fosters meaningful collaboration. We do talk about equity and trying to get new housing, but a lot of the barriers that I deal with, with consulting and government as well is actually in keeping the housing that you have up to par. The infrastructure of

the power and water treatment plants and wastewater treatment and those types of things need work. So, a lot that I deal with in communities is getting support for the feet-on-the-ground, and fixing things rather than just the research aspects of it. Figuring out what needs to be fixed when is also research. So I always try and fit in the more practical, hands-on type of research and results. I go into the community with the curiosity of what can we do to help you first? And then I try and come up with kind of research after-the-fact rather than as part of it and talk with people. And I think that's a problem historically as researchers come in and say you want to do this research, it's for the better good. But it is kind of... hmm, it's for us, right? In the end, it's going to benefit us first, but if we think about how can we help solve the housing problems first, and the research is a side mission, that's more agreeable to me? My team's research is more to develop how we build houses, how we build them onsite, how we train people to do the maintenance, the wastewater treatment and how do we get them paid equitably. So it's such not a simple classical engineering problem to solve, but a complex human problem in a research context. A wicked problem. I'll use that term and embrace the complexity of it. When you work with people in a community, you encounter a level of complexity that differs vastly from the straightforward processes observed in a lab. While some of my colleagues in the lab simply add a different chemical to water and publish it, those situations rarely reflect real-world scenarios that I see. Dealing with complexity means being engaged with those people that the problem affects directly. It means understanding the nuances of human interaction and the dynamic nature of community dynamics. This understanding comes through experience and involves reciprocity.

Wanda: It's interesting to hear everybody's views, particularly Kerry's. I don't engage in conversation with you enough to understand the engaged engineering perspective. It's interesting to hear that because I mean Shelly and I are in the sort of medical and nursing world, so it's good to hear from across campus. When I consider my work, I think the term equity is a challenge. If we're going to talk about equity and what that means and what context includes equity versus equality, we have an agenda, there's a research agenda. But we recognize that we work with and for people who have other competing demands, and the academic stuff is not on high in their to-do list. So, as I wait and as I wait and as I try to contact and engage, I am wary of our funding deadlines, but also of respecting relationships. As a person who's newer into the relationship-building process, I sit here going, what more can I do? And I can't really do anything without somebody who has stronger relationships to start to move the dial because I can't just barge in and say, I need this done because I have a grant that has this timeline and I need to be able to go do this now because of things in my world. So the experience of waiting and of accepting that change for me is more of the struggle, and not just in terms of what's going on in reserve, and trying to connect with the industry folks who said that they were going to be supporting the research and recognizing they don't have the capacity either right now. So backing up and learning how to be patient with that is for me, an essential part of engaged scholarship.

Lori: Yeah, I can empathize with that waiting piece. Sometimes people are waiting on me and I'm waiting on community members to get back to me about something. There's a fine dance there to try to maintain all those relationships that I think a lot of people who don't regularly do engaged scholarship, or engaged research understand. Right now there are elections going on in some of the communities I work with and I can't be communicating with the people that I normally do. We normally communicate daily with texts, emails, or for signatures that need to happen on forms and applications. But right now we can't do that. And I feel a huge sense of responsibility to do that dance very well as an engaged scholar.

Lori: Lastly, what do you believe can be done to enhance engaged scholarship in addressing housing insecurity and the built environment?

Kerry: So yeah, what can we do better? That's a tough one. See, I tried to better balance our research with the actual needs and communities. And it is a challenge when you do have those turnovers with Band leadership too... reconnecting with them. And what we're trying to do with the new compendium is have the information available and have a bedrock thing where we could always go to and as a starting point with people, the same as new students. You got new students coming in, you take them to their new office space, give them a new laptop... it's a routine. And they want to work with Indigenous and partnering communities in this area and they don't know where to start. And I know where I started, but I don't know how to explain where I started or how to do it, right? I'm trying to do that introspection, of "this is how I do things", but if I tried to teach a course in engineering on how to do engagement, I don't know what that looks like right now. And so I've been trying to work on that. I think when we go a community, people don't know what our research looks like. They just think it's something in Ivory Tower. That's not what I do, but I'm not very good at describing my journey yet. Sometimes I send my students off to meetings for me, and I think that's good so they can learn too, but in the end, I'm missing out a lot of the experiences myself. So just going out there, being involved, and bumping into people is where it starts. It's not the meeting you're going to, it's the conversations you have outside of it. It's kind of cliché to say that, but that's where almost every one of my projects has started, not because of the meeting, but because of the conversations afterward. So as far as housing security and the built environment, I think a lot of it is conversations within this team. In engineering, I want to really get more people engaged in knowing what they can do. There's lots of research areas, there's lots of important work that you do in the end. But, publications aren't going to be the end-all and be-all because we're not going to get a lot of publications out in this type of work, but it's still rewarding in and of itself. We need to better balance academic research with community needs and experiences in our College. Creating accessible resources and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, to me, are key to solving housing challenges.

Shelley: Kerry brings up a very good point and I think what's so unique and important about the group that's working together right now in this area is that it's interdisciplinary and

there's so much strength in doing interdisciplinary work. It's the conversations and the information that's transferred between individuals during these meetings and between disciplines. It just takes everything so much further and I think just broadens the impact. Engaged scholarship should prioritize spaces for interdisciplinarity, accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that the research outcomes are relevant and beneficial to communities and includes ACTION!

Wanda: I think the thing that could be improved though, there's something that needs to be done in terms of the longevity, who's got the institutional memory, what has been produced and where is it sitting? And this has already been done and we've already gone through this. And if researchers go into a space and think that they're doing something novel somebody will surely sit around the table and say, we talked about this 15 years ago. So how do we make things produce something that is going to stick on the wall and sort of be a memory for someone to refer back to and say, we should look at that because here is an example of exactly what you're talking about and it's been sitting there for a number of years and maybe we need, how do we better build on what we've already done versus reinventing the wheel? Academic institutions should recognize the time and effort required for community-engaged research. Acknowledging the value of this work and supporting interdisciplinary collaboration will drive meaningful change in addressing housing insecurity.

Additional Insights: Balancing Academic Goals with Community Priorities

Lori: Thank you all for sharing so much with me today. I think the Engaged Scholar Journal has a role to play in this space in that we are going on 10 years, our 10th anniversary is next year. And I look back at some of the pieces that were published in 2015 and 2016 and think, wow, I wish I had read this sooner because it would inform what I'm doing right now, or I could have avoided a mistake had I learned lessons from that. So I think maybe one of the things that might help with that memory piece in the engaged scholar community is having journals like the Engaged Scholar Journal and Gateways and others that are out there of a higher profile and broadcast more and out there in social media and really putting us out there as the experts in this, but also having engaged scholarship and community engagement offices on campuses expanded and properly resourced. Pre-COVID, there was a big cutback to engage scholarship across Canada, but now we're recognizing the need for that institutional memory. I think about how many hours we could have saved on things like ethics applications had we known what Engaged Scholars went through a decade ago and how they got through things. So as we're winding up, I want to open it up for any last thoughts.

Shelley: Well, I do think that this team specifically does have that focus on producing things that are usable and memorable and brief. And that's something that we all need to learn to continue to try to strive for and remember how to do reconciliACTION, and be

serendipitous – take the opportunities presented to be interdisciplinary, be action-oriented, be there for communities.

Kerry: Yeah, I think we're going in a good direction. I'm still thinking of doing a micro credential three course kind of thing, and I'm sure I'm going to lean on this group pretty heavily for that. Especially for my profession, having that type of training where people go and get immersed in this kind of work, it also gives us a good reason to put some of our experience right in the course to teach the next generations. You have to do that and that's going to be the big part of that. And Shelly, I think it's serendipitous. That's a good way of saying that. I like that word rather than accidental. It's a nice word to say. Yeah, things work out, when we work together.

Shelley: It's true. I was just going to add that Wanda was using the word short or brief, but I actually think the right word is accessible. And that's the other part of engaged scholarship is that what we're returning to the communities or what we're sharing with the communities is accessible to them. And that means it's written alongside or with community members that it's what they would see as being useful in their community or might resonate with their community. So a graphic design or whatever it is that the community sees would help get the message across. But when they're part of the conversations all the way along, they're understanding the messaging, they can support the production of the message and get it back to community not as an end report, but as a continuous process of engagement.

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