

The Priorities of Ontario's Next Generation of City Builders

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It's no secret that recruitment and retention of young talent is a priority for Municipalities in Ontario today. With cities anticipating a sizable chunk of their workforce retiring in the next five to ten years, attracting young talent feels almost urgent. While this might be a major challenge for our municipalities, it also presents an opportunity to tap into the insights of our emerging urban professionals who will be leading the charge in how our future cities will be shaped. In this piece, we chat with three rising city-builders who share insights into their visions for communities and why they consider inclusion, cultural vibrancy and sustainability as foundational pillars to creating healthy cities.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Latonya Ludford, Program Manager, The Shift

Latonya challenges the traditional narrative of city building, asking a fundamental question: "Who are we building our cities for?" Her vision centers on creating cities that are safe, accessible, sustainable, and economically empowering for everyone. In her ideal world, public participation becomes a human right, ensuring diverse voices are heard in all decision-making processes.

Latonya emphasizes, "what motivates me to foster diversity and inclusivity in cities is the desire to ensure that the cities we create are safe, accessible to all, sustainable, resilient, and able to advance economic and social rights so that everyone can live a safe, dignified life."

While Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) have become an emerging priority for municipalities, and progress has arguably been made, challenges persist. Latonya notes encountering resistance in her role, stating "as a young, racialized female trying to navigate the different spaces and systems in the housing and human rights field, I do come up against skepticism, resistance, and in many cases gatekeepers who view inclusivity and diversity as a threat."

Despite the challenges, there is optimism and hope. After speaking with Latonya, it is clear that equity and inclusion will remain a priority in her growing career and any role or project she undertakes. When asked to comment on her optimism, she notes "what gives me the strength and deter-

mination to keep promoting inclusivity in urban planning is the understanding that if I want a seat at the table, I have to carve my own space."

Cultural Vibrancy

Jananee Savuntharanathan, Senior Consultant, Global Infrastructure Advisory- Cities- KPMG

Jan is a quintessential city dweller, having lived, worked, volunteered and studied in the same city. Upon completing an undergraduate business degree, her curiosity about urban spaces led her to the Master of Urban Innovation program, graduating in 2023. For Jan, a great city must focus on intentional placemaking, arts and culture. Cultural vibrancy, while we all know it is important in fostering community, can often feel elusive. Jan has a vivid idea of what it means to her: "cultural vibrancy is when we plan our spaces and infrastructure with people in mind. When we do this, we create happy spaces - spaces people go to when they want to experience joy, safety and comfort".

Jan shares a recent experience that encapsulates her definition. After a recent trip to Europe, settling back into routine and home felt dull. This changed after a spontaneous visit to Mississauga's Streetsville Village Square. Jan describes the vibe: "the streets, closed off to cars, were bursting with energy as a free salsa dancing night took centre stage. Latin music played, drawing people from all back-grounds to stop and even join in. The street square became a dance floor and the atmosphere filled with a buzz. It was a testament to the power of arts and culture to engage a community". According to Jan, this is the purposeful inclusive community programming that cities need more of.

Jan is very clear in what an ideal community looks like, however she also understands that this doesn't happen by accident. She believes policymakers and urban planners should be actively involved in the communities they work in. Relaying her own experience, "when I travel, I often like to walk the streets to get to learn about the culture of the city I'm in. The same applies for my city at home. Taking time to walk the streets in my community and gather in public spaces helps me get to know who lives in my community and often I engage in a conversation with a community neighbour that enlightens me in many ways". As Jan emphasizes the importance of such firsthand experiences, it becomes evident that to her, grassroots and community awareness is fundamental.

Ultimately, Jan envisions more deliberate programming in public spaces- year-round programming that's inclusive, vibrant, reflective of the community's identity, and fosters connection among residents, brining into essence, a livable city.

Sustainability

Gagan Batra, Manager, Business Support and Sustainability, City of Brantford

For Gagan Batra sustainability extends beyond caring for the physical environment. For her, a truly sustainable city encompasses economic stability, equity, diversity, and inclusivity. "Sustainability broadly means the whole human



Gagan, Jan, and Latonya share their insights into the future of Ontario cities.

experience and environment that's created to make the city livable for all," she emphasizes. Gagan believes sustainability should focus on the intersection between environmental and social equity. As an example, she notes that encouraging active transportation and investing in green alternatives not only benefits the environment but also fosters a more inclusive city, breaking down barriers for those without personal vehicles. In the same vein, Gagan acknowledges the urgency of addressing climate change as the repercussions of it such as flooding, heatwaves and extreme cold affects certain members of the community more than others, for instance, those who don't have access to air conditioning or funds to protect their homes.

Gagan acknowledges the challenges in promoting sustainability, especially when met with resistance or skepticism. Navigating the economic considerations of sustainable initiatives becomes a balancing act, requiring the use of community champions and effective communication tailored to diverse stakeholder priorities. She emphasizes the need to convey not just the environmental benefits but also economic advantages, such as lower utility bills and enhanced efficiency in retrofits. This 'what's in it for me' reframing can be an effective and speedy catalyst for positive change.

Looking ahead, Gagan is hopeful for cities to focus on the long-term impact when prioritizing sustainability. She

believes that rather than continuing to build our communities under siloed themes of environment, economic, community etc... future generations will benefit from enhanced, more holistic definition of sustainability and urban development as a whole.

As these ambitious city-builders share their insights, a collective vision for Ontario's future cities emerges. Latonya's call for systemic change in inclusion, Jan's emphasis on cultural vibrancy, and Gagan's comprehensive approach to sustainability converge on the idea that city building requires a complete, people-centric perspective. It's about weaving together equity, cultural richness, and sustainability into the very fabric of urban planning and development. With the likes of this trio at the forefront, Ontario's communities stand poised for a bright and ambitious future ahead.