



Western
Centre for Urban Policy
and Local Governance

SPRING 2026 GRADUATE RESEARCH SHOWCASE

Wednesday, April 29
9:30am – 4:00pm
Social Science Centre, Room 7200

SCHEDULE

Time	Event
9.30-9.45am	Opening remarks (Martin Horak, Director, Urban Centre)
9.45-10.45am	Opening keynote Léa Ravensbergen (McMaster University) 'Planning the just cycling city'
10.45-11.00am	Coffee break
11.00am-12.30pm	Session 1: Urban Governance and Political Processes 1. E. Victoria Bomberly 'Urban Governance & Indigenous Urban Leadership: A Case Study of Hamilton, Ontario' 2. Reforce Okwei 'Governing the Ungoverned? Community Leadership and Informal Governance in Old Fadama, Accra' 3. Lindi Jahiu 'Everyday surveillance in the city: The semiotics of urban surveillance signage in Toronto'

	4. Katharine McCoy 'Mind Over Matter: The Role of Place Identity in Economic Voting'
12.30-1.15pm	Lunch (buffet, served in SSC 7251)
1.15-2.45pm	Session 2: Urban Environments and Food Systems 1. Kristen Zinger 'Beyond the campus gates: An audit of place connections in environmental higher education' 2. Leanne Ferguson 'Reimagining the Everyday: Urban Agriculture's Contributions to Prefiguring Value Beyond Capitalism' 3. Olivia Caruso 'Examining disparities in the accessibility of unhealthy food vendors in school neighbourhoods across Ontario: Would the implementation of new distance-based regulations improve equity?' 4. Josh Grignon 'Who Is Responsible for Building Climate-Resilient Cities?'
2.45-3.45pm	Session 3: Critical Perspectives on the City 1. Riley Buist 'The Ghosts We Perform With: Queer Trauma and Urban Haunting in Toronto' 2. Luis Patricio 'Critical Mobilities: Youth Experiences and Perceptions in mid-sized Cities in Southwestern Ontario' 3. Chenyang Zhou 'Precarious Housing and the Geography of Educational Achievement in a Large Urban Center'
3.45-4.00pm	Closing remarks: Zack Taylor
4.00pm+	Networking social and refreshments at the Grad Club

ABSTRACTS

Session 1: Urban Governance and Political Processes

1. E. Victoria Bomberly (PhD candidate, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Science)

Title: Urban Governance & Indigenous Urban Leadership: A Case Study of Hamilton, Ontario

Abstract: This session presents in-progress doctoral research exploring the critical role of Indigenous urban leaders in shaping the cultural, social, and political conditions necessary for the health and well-being of Indigenous urban communities. Drawing on interviews with current and “retired” Indigenous urban leaders I argue that Indigenous urban leaders practices of relational governance and cultural stewardship contribute to environmental repossession in urban spaces - the reclamation of land, identity, and culture. Through community-grounded leadership and vision, their efforts have established Indigenous-led infrastructure, embedded Indigenous rights in municipal processes and fostered a sense of community and identity, which has collectively and individually shaped opportunities for health and wellbeing in Canadian cities.

2. Reforce Okwei (PhD candidate, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Science)

Title: Governing the Ungoverned? Community Leadership and Informal Governance in Old Fadama, Accra

Abstract: Informal settlements across cities in the Global South often operate outside formal planning and administrative systems, creating service-delivery gaps. Yet, in many of these contexts, locally embedded institutions emerge to regulate social life and mediate relations between residents and the state. Drawing on qualitative interviews with local chiefs and opinion leaders, this study examines the role of informal leadership structures in governing everyday life in Old Fadama, an informal settlement in Accra. The findings show that informal governance structures fill institutional voids left by the settlement’s lack of official recognition. However, lack of legitimacy challenges due to the absence of formal state backing limits their ability to enforce critical community development initiatives. This study challenges the governance-vacuum narratives in urban scholarship, which portray informal settlements as spaces of governance absence, chaotic, and socially fragmented environments.

3. Lindi Jahiu (PhD candidate, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Science)

Title: Everyday surveillance in the city: The semiotics of urban surveillance signage in Toronto’

Abstract: This paper engages surveillance signage as an urban object that pivots from its intended function of notification and into a medium that remediates other urban politics circulating throughout their surrounding built environment. Focusing on Toronto, I examine surveillance signs encountered in three neighbourhoods experiencing neighbourhood change: Parkdale, Regent Park, and Moss Park. By analyzing the semiotics of select surveillance sign-public surface pairings, I identify and draw attention to how surveillance materialities (signage and the surfaces to which they are bonded to) are discursively enrolled into neoliberal efforts to secure intra-communal division, including on the basis of housing tenure, and facilitate external interventions, such as law enforcement, in and across the city.

4. Katharine McCoy (PhD candidate, Political Science, Faculty of Social Science)

Title: Mind Over Matter: The Role of Place Identity in Economic Voting

Abstract: This project asks if place identity and place-based resentment function as moderating variables in the relationship between perceptions of local economic decline and voting behaviour. I hypothesize that having a rural place-identity will increase the effect of perceived economic decline, meaning that the overlapping characteristics of considering oneself to be “rural” and from an economically underperforming place will have a larger effect on vote intention than simply being rural or being from an economically underperforming urban place. In 2018, Rodriguez-Pose published “The Revenge of the Places that Don’t Matter”, referring to the resentment motivated voting patterns found in “economically decaying” cities. However, when rural Albertans referred to Clark Bannack as “someone who mattered”, they were speaking about him as a contrast to their rural place-identity (2021). However, rural resentment has an economic aspect (2016). These concepts of rural resentment and urban economic deprivation are discussed using the same language, yet, to my knowledge, the relationship between perceived economic performance, place-based resentment, and political behaviour is yet unexamined. To explore this, I use the Canadian Political Development survey. I first match respondents with similar levels of perceived economic decline across place types. I then interact economic perceptions with place type and the importance of place type identity, to explore how these characteristics affect intended vote choice. Finally, I compare these results to objective measures economic performance, to see how these voter sentiments may over- or underestimate their economic reality.

Session 2: Urban Environments and Food Systems

1. Kristen Zinger (PhD student/candidate, Critical Policy, Equity, and Leadership Studies, Faculty of Education).

Title: Beyond the campus gates: An audit of place connections in environmental higher education

Abstract: There are a variety of pressures to re-think higher education teaching practices, chief among them the environmental emergency. Within environmental education, teaching and learning that foster connections to local communities and environments (referred to as ‘place connections’) are proven to be highly effective at encouraging pro-environmental behaviours like stewardship and care. Such behaviours are important for students to acquire as future environmental leaders. Yet, there is a disconnect between environmental programs and the place(s) in which they are situated. This research focuses on how university environmental programs across Canada are connecting students to place on and beyond the campus. In this research, I document and analyze the appearance of place connections in curricula and pedagogy, uncovering key components required for place connections to be fostered. A grounded theory approach using document analysis examines 156 environmental programs across 66 Canadian universities to identify if and how place connections are being fostered. The outcome of this study is an understanding of how programs are connecting students to place and which programs value and prioritize such connections. This will contribute to policy recommendations on changes to curriculum and pedagogy across the sector. In addition, it will lay the foundation for future research to examine the organizational structures of programs that successfully connect students to place.

2. Leanne Ferguson (MA student, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Sciences)

Title: Reimagining the Everyday: Urban Agriculture’s Contributions to Prefiguring Value Beyond Capitalism’

Abstract: This presentation explores urban agriculture (UA) as a space that fosters socio-emotional forms of value beyond capitalism’s logics of exploitation, competition, and individual gain. Often emerging in response to capitalism’s uneven distributions of wealth and power, UA functions through generative social and ecological practices such as collaborative leadership and agroecological methods. UA also operates as community infrastructure, offering opportunities for local engagement with socio-political transformation. Drawing on interview and observational data collected in partnership with three urban farms in London, Ontario, this presentation demonstrates how UA facilitates the unlearning of capitalist value narratives. As volunteers and staff advance alternative organizational relations, UA generates social value that emphasizes inherently meaningful labour and community care. To interpret the potential of UA’s everyday practices, I employ the concept of prefiguration which frames social transformation as a dual process of unlearning existing narratives and generating new understandings in their place. I demonstrate how prefiguration occurs across intra- and inter-organizational levels of UA, expressed through engagement dynamics, organizational cultures, and individual processes of meaning-making. Rather than consider these levels as isolated locales, I demonstrate that they are reciprocally engaged. I consider the complexities of prefiguration as efforts made to bring desired futures into the present occur within the very systems being challenged. While acknowledging these tensions, I emphasize the strength of prefiguration in UA as a network where different institutional and interpersonal value forms are

able to affirm, sustain, and empower each other, creating spaces for resistance to capitalism that proceeds directly from community-led transformation.

3. **Olivia Caruso (PhD candidate, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Science)**

Title: Examining disparities in the accessibility of unhealthy food vendors in school neighbourhoods across Ontario: Would the implementation of new distance-based regulations improve equity?

Abstract: This study evaluates associations between school-level disadvantage (i.e., the relative socioeconomic circumstances of student populations) and the accessibility of unhealthy food vendors near secondary schools across Ontario, Canada. It also examines how vendor distribution would change following the implementation of distance-based regulatory policies. We identified all unhealthy food vendors within successive 100 m road-network buffers around secondary schools up to 1600 m and applied inverse distance weighting, assigning greater weight to vendors located closer to schools. We used the Jonckheere–Terpstra test to assess ordered differences and negative binomial regression to evaluate associations between vendor accessibility and school-level disadvantage, defined by the percentage of immigrant, non-English-speaking, and low-income students. We then simulated five regulatory scenarios by removing vendors within 100 m, 200 m, 300 m, 400 m, and 500 m of schools and repeated analyses for the broader neighbourhood food environment. Adjusted models indicate that unhealthy food vendors are inequitably distributed across school neighbourhoods, with more disadvantaged schools having significantly greater accessibility within most buffer zones compared to the least disadvantaged schools. These inequities persisted under all simulated regulatory scenarios. Distance-based regulations that restrict retail locations around schools may be insufficient to reduce socioeconomic disparities in unhealthy food accessibility or meaningfully influence adolescent dietary behaviours.

4. **Josh Grignon (PhD candidate, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Science)**

Title: Who Is Responsible for Building Climate-Resilient Cities?

Abstract: Climate change is placing growing pressure on the infrastructure systems that support cities, raising a fundamental question: who is responsible for building climate-resilient cities? International policy frameworks consistently present collaboration between governments and private firms as central to this task, emphasizing shared responsibility, procurement reform, and private-sector innovation. This presentation examines how these frameworks define collaboration and what roles they assign to public and private actors, and then considers how these expectations align with Canadian scholarly research. While international guidance portrays collaboration as a mature and effective governance approach, Canadian studies describe more constrained conditions shaped by fragmented governance, limited capacity, and inconsistent political commitment. The findings suggest that collaboration is widely

promoted but not always clearly operationalized, pointing to a need for stronger public-sector leadership, clearer resilience requirements in procurement, and a shift toward treating private actors as long-term partners in delivering climate-resilient infrastructure.

Session 3: Critical Perspectives on the City

1. Riley Buist (MA student, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Science)

Title: The Ghosts We Perform With: Queer Trauma and Urban Haunting in Toronto

Abstract: This research examines how histories of violence and trauma within queer community continues to shape the present through processes of haunting. Drawing on queer and geographic theories of space, memory, and temporality, this project explores how queer performance can function as a site where lingering histories are encountered, negotiated, and reworked. Focusing on artists associated with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto, this study investigates how performers engage with collective memories of loss, marginalization, and resilience within their artistic practices. Through archival work and interviews with queer artists, said research examines how performance spaces become haunted by past and present violences while simultaneously opening possibilities for community reflection, survival, and futurity. By conceptualizing performance as a haunted spatial practice, this research project highlights how queer cultural production makes visible the ongoing presence of histories that are often framed as belonging to the past.

2. Luis Patricio (PhD student, Geography and Environment, Faculty of Social Science)

Title: Critical Mobilities: Youth Experiences and Perceptions in mid-sized Cities in Southwestern Ontario

Abstract: This proposed research will examine how youth experience and make sense of everyday mobilities in mid-sized cities in Southwestern Ontario. While mobilities are central to contemporary life, unequal access to movement - and to the ability to remain in place - can undermine well-being, particularly marginalized groups. Youth aged 16-29 occupy a critical life stage marked by expanding mobility needs alongside constrained resources and limited influence over transport systems. Despite this, their perspectives remain underexplored, especially among low-income and immigrant populations. The main research question is: how do low-income and immigrant youth perceive and navigate their everyday mobilities? It aims to (1) document lived mobility experiences, (2) explore youth imaginaries of alternative mobility futures, and (3) examine how automobility structures both mobility practices and possibilities

(motilities). Methodologically, this research project draws on critical pedagogy and will combine participatory, mobile, and everyday approaches, including diary-interviews and focus groups and time geography for interpreting and analysing the data.

Importantly, this research is currently in the proposal stage and has not yet begun data generation. This presentation outlines the conceptual framework, research design, and anticipated contributions, inviting feedback on how to refine a youth-centered, participatory approach to studying mobility inequalities beyond dominant car-centric paradigms.

3. **Chenyang Zhou (PhD candidate, Faculty of Education)**

Title: Precarious Housing and the Geography of Educational Achievement in a Large Urban Center

Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between precarious housing and school outcomes in a large urban centre. Housing precarity is conceptualized as the confluence of unaffordability, residential mobility, and dwelling inadequacy. The study examines how these dimensions relate to school-level academic achievement using a unique dataset that links Census data, school characteristics, and school-level achievement outcomes. The findings indicate that precarious housing is associated with lower levels of academic achievement, confirming results from previous studies. Conversely, and also consistent with earlier research, schools serving more affluent neighborhoods, where students are more likely to live in adequate housing conditions, tend to demonstrate higher academic achievement. These results underscore the persistent relationship between precarious housing and schools' academic performance. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the impact of residential mobility varies across neighborhoods with differing levels of affluence. This study highlights the need for more substantive progress in addressing the link between precarious housing and achievement. Municipalities and education authorities must build stronger collaborations to enhance support programs for students living in precarious housing conditions.