



## Place-Based Responsibility

Context for a series of roundtables, walks, classes and gatherings

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*How are we, both as individuals and collectively, responsible to place?*

Through roundtables, guided walks, class activities, research projects and resource sharing, this project invites and explores a variety of forms of gathering, collaboration, and learning as we collectively take up this question.

Through place-based knowledge, “meaning is derived not through content or data, or even theory in a western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of that difference” (Simpson, 2014).

This work takes place on unceded Coast Salish territory, the traditional and ancestral land of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and Səlílwətaʔ Nations, where Emily Carr is located in Vancouver, Canada. We understand that in practicing place-based responsibility, we need to acknowledge and address the real, lived and material harms caused by colonial ideologies and educational institutions, and to understand the ways our actions and ideas can work towards just and sustainable ways of living.

## Contextual Grounding and Guiding Questions

We inhabit a moment characterized by the emergence of multiple, entangled crises: destruction of natural ecosystems, growing inequality, and the rise of toxic ideologies across the globe and within our own locales. Urgent steps are needed to slow and cease ecologically and socially destructive systems and redistribute power to those with place-based knowledge and sensitivity to contextual conditions.

Dissociation from place, that is, lack of connection to where we are, in the ecological, sociological and cultural senses, is a consequence of many mounting conditions and dynamics in urban centres. This dissociation can present in a variety of ways, including apathy for the environmental impacts of our decisions and actions; disregard, hostility or lack of trust for those around us; loneliness, loss of community or sense of belongingness; and lack of accountability to a meaningful community.

Some of the factors compounding this issue include:

Infrastructure that is more complex and more invisible: Goods, fuel, food and waste travel long distances through systems that are increasingly complex, invisible to lay-people, and not well-understood in a holistic way. Urban infrastructure largely shields us from environmental conditions such as heat, smoke, smells, and vermin. Complicated bureaucratic management hierarchies make attempted responses to these conditions feel increasingly abstract and inaccessible. We are not well-equipped to feel the effects or understand the consequences of our actions within these complex infrastructural and service flows.

Increasing reliance on technology and large-scale technocratic approaches to 'solve' climate change and social unrest: This approach feeds a stacking of precarious conditions, where heroic, top-down attempts to solve for one crisis compound the effects of another. This approach undermines responsibility of the individual, and takes agency away from those with place-based knowledge, who often live with the consequences of injustice, to actively take part in determining more socially and ecologically just ways of being.

A transition to more digitized communication: Digital twinning of face-to-face relationships – networks of people that really know and trust each other – diminishes our sense of belongingness and shared accountability to the places we inhabit. When we communicate remotely we are not inhabiting shared physical spaces, meaning we are not collectively experiencing the same environmental conditions. From a social perspective, "being present, face-to-face, is essential in building trust and accountability, empathy, and the ability to give each other the benefit of the doubt" (Simpson, 2017). This is compounded by COVID-19, and is particularly acute for those with limited access to technology.

Displacement and uprooting of community due to housing scarcity and employment precarity: Human movement, driven by crises of affordability and job precarity, uproots the formation of place-based networks of people in community, even when movement occurs within a district or region. These conditions have the compounded effect of drawing attention and energy away from community building, making it difficult to see our interdependence and act collectively. Consider a crisis such as a fire

or an earthquake – the neighbours in our immediate vicinity become the critical networks to meet our basic needs in the absence of normalcy.

Western ontology and colonial frameworks that form extractative and human-centred relationships to place: This ideology has informed both our societal infrastructure and the role design plays in society.

Designers are uniquely positioned in this area of urgent and emergent work: our role in society is historically complicit in contributing to the root causes of these problems, and we are also, through paradigm shifts in our approach, fundamental to meeting these challenges. Products, cities, clothing, digital infrastructure, service flows: everything that surrounds us is designed. Designers, post-secondary teachers and learners must continue to search for ways to make major shifts in design practices and education. Place-based learning is vital to this shift.

### **Gathering, Listening, and Being Led By**

So often, community leaders and members most impacted by harmful social conditions have already voiced their concerns and hopes for their community; and non-human stakeholders continually speak up through indicators that are willfully ignored. In practicing place-based responsibility – listening and actively engaging in processes that question, disrupt and slow down harmful systems – we can be active participants in building collaborative, sustainable, mutually-supportive networks.

Place-Based Responsibility begins this process by coalescing place-based knowledge holders with long histories of participation in this work for gatherings, walks, classes and roundtables in the spring of 2021.

Gatherings will be centred around open-ended themes, and will bring invited knowledge-holders into dialogue with design students and faculty. These themes include:

The Language of Place  
Listening to Land  
Matriarchal Strategies in Design  
Permaculture as Method

Invited guests will focus on those living and working in ways that express care for place: Indigenous artists and ethnobotanists; community organizers, activists and social workers; gardeners and waste remediators; front-line workers in housing and housing advocacy; advocates for cultural labour); artists engaged with land and material.

Discussion of these themes will be used to explore some of the aforementioned questions in roundtables with students and faculty, and to provide a lens through which subsequent, longer-term collaboration may occur. Most importantly, these activities will initiate and strengthen meaningful relationships



between community stewards and knowledge-holders and the design community at Emily Carr. Without prematurely predicting outcomes, it is the centring of these relationships that will be most impactful in the long term.

### Place-Based Responsibility

“For as far back as we can remember, whenever we travelled the ocean or the bush, our teachers would often instruct us to ‘look back’. This wayfinding technique served the dual function of maintaining forward navigational progress, as well as remembering our way back home (gáííhák), where home is more than just a place, but a responsibility to bring forth our love, joy, and abundance” (Wilson and Nelson-Moody, 2019).

Place-based responsibility can be understood as processes that centre relationships with community and place. These approaches to collaboration:

- connect to and support place-based knowledge holders, recognizing their expertise and knowledge of place from their own perspectives and ways of living;
- engage in flexible methods of being “led by” and consensual opting-in, valuing self-determination for people impacted and targeted by harmful social conditions;
- support and actively participate in horizontal hierarchies and engaged, democratic models of equitable decision-making;
- develop projects from within relational networks, working towards shared values, ethics, and goals, resisting the impulse to participate in reactionary design solutions, instead understanding and building shared intentions and futures;
- ground projects and research within notions of mutual aid, asking how to help and finding ways to support each other, through methods and actions both simple and complex.

As artists and designers in learning-relationships with place-based knowledge holders, our work can be informed by Clare Land’s modes of action toward decolonizing solidarity:

- Critical self-reflection involves careful reconsideration of the impacts and unintended consequences of our work as designers: How are our own biases and lived experiences informing our work? What material sources and outputs are we contributing to? What are the metrics that are used to determine the ‘success’ of a project? In what ways might our work undermine or ignore the needs of place and community? What are the implicit power dynamics in our approach, and how are those dynamics colouring the participation of those most impacted by our work?

- Public political action seeks to explicitly communicate support for and follow the leadership of place-based knowledge holders through action that is legible to others.
- Personal-material work involves broadening a definition of capital to include social, ecological, experiential, intellectual, material and cultural value, and altering how these forms of value are redistributed through the work we do, including accounting for the personal benefits and forms of value we gain or give up.

In trying to understand what kind of infrastructure is useful or necessary to support this work, we aim to explore a model that can coalesce and disperse when needed, embracing the spirit of a collective: a flexible network of people with independent practices converging to create and/or produce a shared experience or intervention. “Collectives allow people with common goals to come together, produce, act, and then disband, reform or continue as needed” (Simpson, 2017). Through exploring, enacting, and connecting place-based approaches to collaboration, we are attempting to move from scattered fragments of siloed disciplines and projects, and black-boxed, bureaucratic hierarchies, towards a networked mesh of emergent grassroots relationships, knowledge and capacity sharing, and action.

### Works Cited

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Jean Chisholm (BA, BDes, MDes) is a designer, researcher, and educator. Her research explores place-based design practices and community collaborations that work towards relational, ecological and equitable ways of living, and has most recently been published through PDC 2020: Participation(s) Otherwise. She has experience as a graphic designer and art director, designing and overseeing production for printed, spacial, and digital touch points. Jean currently teaches at Emily Carr University.

The DESIS Lab at Emily Carr University of Art + Design supports research that advances design for social innovation towards sustainability.

DESIIS envisions a future of resilience, equity and diversity across human and ecological systems through social innovation, design and environmental justice.

Emily Carr's lab joined the DESIS Network, made up of 46 labs worldwide, in 2012 and is the only DESIS lab in Canada. Moving forward, the DESIS Network reaffirms its commitment to sustainability by pursuing three interconnected goals: (1) to publicly acknowledge the radical planetary interdependence and recognize social, cultural and biological diversity as vital resources to nurture and protect all living species and environments; (2) to learn how to see and act on the interdependencies between natural systems and our own lives; (3) to value the importance of the commons for the wellbeing of all communities as a starting point for designing.

DESIIS is supported by a volunteer steering committee made up of faculty and students.

#### For More Information

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IMAGE: FALSE CREEK SHORELINE, CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVES, 1904 (EST.)

