

*Crossing Paths Crossing
Perspectives: Urban Studies in
British Columbia and Quebec*

Meg Holden and Sandra Breux

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WHILE many are familiar with Hugh MacLennan's characterization of Canada as "two solitudes," when it comes to our cities the country is fragmented into many more than two solitudes. This insularity is encouraged by the fact that many professional programs in urban planning and planning associations are focused on their provincial context and, typically, on the main city or cities in each province or region. The result is a degree of insularity that can limit learning across provinces and from the wider world. Meg Holden and Sandra Breux's *Crossing Paths Crossing Perspectives* pushes back against this trend and draws comparative lessons in urban studies from British Columbia and Quebec. The book is most successful when it explicitly steps into this much-needed comparative role, with chapters on bike sharing, social housing, and food planning. In an era when the local scale holds increasing prominence in the study of cities, the book's comparative perspective is a refreshing change and, hopefully, a harbinger of more explicitly comparative research to come.

All disciplines go through cycles, and urban planning and urban studies are no exceptions. One feature that ebbs and flows is the degree to which fields encourage comparison. For example, in

Canadian political science, scholars have sought to understand why the field moved from considerable insularity towards an emergent "comparative turn" in the early 2000s (White et al. 2009). Interestingly, Canadian urban planning and urban studies have moved in the opposite direction, with an increasing embrace of the local. This is surprising in some respects since these fields are closely associated with events that highlighted the value of comparative urban research and practice. Notable among these events was the 1976 UN Conference on Human Settlements hosted by Vancouver, which gave rise to the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). As a further result of the Vancouver conference, the Centre for Human Settlements was established at UBC. Mirroring the growing focus on the local, however, that globally oriented centre has faded into insignificance.

The turn to the local has been well documented in urban planning and urban studies. As Sue Brownill (2017, 22) observes, this turn can be seen worldwide with "the term 'localism' [coming] to encapsulate the most recent attempts to govern through community." In this context, Holden and Breux's book offers a valuable effort to take a wider perspective and inject explicit comparison into Canadian urban studies. This is important because even a focus on the local draws implicitly on comparative reasoning. This was recognized by Émile Durkheim (1895, 157) in his early reflections on the discipline of sociology when he wrote: "Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts." In essence, all urban phenomena – like sociological phenomena – are held to be similar to or different from others, which relies on a logic of comparison, even if it is

used only to argue that something is like nothing else. In this sense, all research is effectively comparative, and the only question is whether we choose to make this explicit or not.

The strong focus on the local in urban planning and urban studies is perhaps not surprising, particularly in British Columbia. Robert Merton (1938, 597) wrote in his influential "Science and Technology in Seventeenth Century England" that "the cultural soil of seventeenth century England was peculiarly fertile to the growth and spread of science," and, likewise, we should not be surprised that the intellectual soil of contemporary British Columbia has given rise to an often hyperlocal focus. Much of the impetus for this local view is positive, drawing on, for example, interest in community-led planning. Yet urban planning and urban studies can also benefit from greater attention to comparison and looking outwards. Critically, there is no need for the local/comparative tension to be framed as a zero-sum proposition; instead, a "Yes, and ..." framing offers a productive way forward. For forms of urbanism to develop in British Columbia that can sustain a diverse population in a globally connected age, the emphasis on the local needs to be put in better dialogue with explicitly comparative research.

Ultimately this valuable book provides a window onto the promise of comparative urban research. One hopes that it will lead to both more comparative scholarship and to the asking of important methodological questions about the role of comparison in urban planning and urban studies. While the authors describe urban studies as an "indiscipline," which has rabblerous appeal, it would be instructive to look to the evolution of other fields to see how they have sought to retain intellectual flexibility while also deepening their

analytic focus. One senses that as Canadian urban studies matures and moves towards an increasing focus on explaining the differences it observes, it may be able to put the comparative method to even stronger use, not only as a descriptive tool but as an analytic one. Happily, this book raises the possibility of placing the local and the comparative in much-needed conversation. Our cities will benefit from this effort and from the work of those who continue in this tradition, looking for comparative urban lessons across Canada and the world more broadly.

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