



RESEARCH2REALITY

Shining a light on research & innovation.

Bringing the Country to the City

An Interview with Professor Sarah Burch, Cities Geographer
University of Waterloo

What is a sustainable city?

We're actually right in the middle of one of the biggest migrations in human history. So about 2008, 2009, more people started to reside in cities, than in rural areas, which is a huge change for human civilization as we know it. So that presents a whole suite of challenges, as well as some really interesting opportunities for how to develop those cities. And a couple of the biggest challenges are of course climate change, the emission of greenhouse gases, and other sustainability challenges, like water quality and biodiversity and social equity. So cities are where it all kind of comes home to roost.

What are cities of the future?

A couple of things that these cities of the future might have in common: we would see denser developments, so people living more closely together, and closer to their work and their play, so that they can use mass transit, rapid transit, active transportation like cycling to get between those places. We would also see our cities starting to use ecosystems, to use natural systems to do a whole lot of things simultaneously. So for instance, we can use wetlands to purify water, to protect the city from storms or floods, to create recreational opportunities, beautiful places where people can cycle and play, and do all of those things at the same time, instead of building a wall to keep out a flood or expanding our sewer system to purify water. So there are really creative strategies I think that we can use in cities to make them more sustainable on a variety of fronts.

What challenges do we face?

What we have learned is that the challenge of sustainability isn't so much a technical one, we have the technologies already at our fingertips with regard to renewable energy or transportation. It's actually implementing them in a way that we find desirable, so that is actually a social challenge and a political challenge, rather than a technical one. Sustainable cities are not a question of economy versus environment, that both can be done simultaneously if we plan cities in way that addresses synergies between economy and environment.