



Planning in an age of overwhelm

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Resilience is defined as an “ability to cope with stresses, shocks, and change.”¹ A resilient system – human-made, ecological, or a human being – is able to withstand uncertainty and volatility. A sense of overwhelm emerges when one’s resilience is tested and becomes fragile, and in turn, calls for a new way of measuring both functionality and success.² As a global pandemic that has infiltrated so much of how we live and connect with each other, COVID-19 has shed a light on what had not been working in society, testing long-standing personal and familial beliefs and systems, and pushing people into a state of overwhelm.

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If we as planners are going to be part of the fight for a future that serves and honours diverse and vulnerable publics, then we need to foster resilience in ourselves and in others.

As Ontario undertakes a regional approach to economic recovery, “risk habituation” can become a real problem for everyone, not just for those whose privilege can feed both ignorance and a false sense of personal infallibility about the realities of a deadly pandemic. Risk habituation affects everyone, as it is a “necessary aspect of our brain maintaining its survival focus.”³ Risk habituation manifests over time, when the human brain, faced with multiple stressors, cannot sustain the protective flight or fight alert response system indefinitely. Consequently, the human brain, in order to focus on everyday needs and to sustain its energy, gradually reduces its alert responsiveness to previous, and in some cases, never (or not as yet) realized threats, such as those associated with COVID-19.

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For example, people who are getting tired of social isolation and physical distancing stop these effective practices even though the actual danger of contracting COVID-19 has not changed; this creates problems in overall risk management in our communities. The potential for risk

habituation associated with COVID-19 is especially a cause for concern in communities that have relatively fewer recorded cases of the virus and zero deaths (which at the time of writing this article, included Kingston, Ontario, where I live).

Many people of colour, Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+ persons, and especially those with compromised immune systems, remain hyper-aware of what makes their communities and their own bodies safe or unsafe and secure or insecure, and this remains especially true in this time of COVID-19. Any attempt to sustain such a level of hyper-awareness of COVID-19 threats among many other threats, including societal, race-based, and domestic violence, is physically, psychologically, and emotionally damaging to individuals and to communities. Maintaining an awareness of risk habituation and being honest about one’s vulnerability requires self-awareness and courage, especially when among those who don’t share the same feelings or parameters of risk.

In order to create spaces that are inclusive, and that offer sanctuary to those living in everyday situations that feed their hyper-awareness, if not overwhelm, a human-centred approach to planning and design is needed – one that is grounded in a critical assessment of the impacts of long-standing histories of exclusion, racism, and struggle. With empathy as its starting point, human-centred planning and design invites meeting people where they are at,

personally, contextually, emotionally, and even spiritually.

Planning in the midst of and after the COVID-19 pandemic requires planners to rethink how planning is practiced, digging more deeply into our humanity, and ultimately, building resilience in ourselves, supporting resilience being fostered in others, and managing the ebb and flow of collective feelings of overwhelm. Realistically, this also requires serious reflection upon present and past planning practices, as well as priorities, and a willingness to design system changes. ♻️

¹ No More Normal. Editorial. *The Lancet*, Vol. 396, July 18, 2020. Accessed July 20, 2020: [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31591-9.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(20)31591-9.pdf)

² van Dernoort Lipsky, Laura. 2018. *The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

³ Bosch, Donald S. n.d. Risk Habituation: The Next COVID-19 Danger. Headington Institute. https://headington-institute.org/files/aa--risk-habituation_31645.pdf



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