

Exploring the Role of Place in Social Innovation with Dr. Tom Lawrence

[Dr. Tom Lawrence](#) began his talk by recalling Dr. Peter Jepson-Young's [inspirational story](#) of living with HIV/AIDS as a medical doctor, his struggle to raise awareness for HIV/AIDS patients and the eventual establishment of Dr. Peter's centre. With this initial backdrop, Dr. Lawrence clarified that social innovations are nothing, but novel solutions to social problems. Drawing on Thomas Gieryn's conception of 'places', Dr. Lawrence highlighted that a place has a geographic location, as well as a material form, meaning, and value. Places shape social innovations; for example, micro-lending in India and sustainable housing in Brazil.

To explore the role of place in social innovation, Dr. Lawrence studied two cases: the Tri-Cities Mat Program and the Dr. Peter Center, both located in British Columbia. These innovations were aimed at housing the 'hard-to-house' – those who have complex health and social needs and at risk of being homeless. The Tri-Cities Mat Program involves providing individuals with overnight accommodation in church halls, as well as an evening meal, breakfast, and a bagged lunch. This program was created and implemented in a suburb known as Tri-Cities. Locals there did not like the idea of homeless people travelling through their neighbourhoods to spend time at the churches. These problems were dealt with and ultimately, the program was a success as many individuals who accessed these services were able to get shelter and ultimately begin the journey to recovery. The Dr. Peter Centre is located in a residential area of Vancouver's West End and was Canada's first day health program and supported-living residence for people with HIV/AIDS. The inspiration for the centre was Dr. Peter Jepson-Young himself who shared his experience with the disease on prime time TV, in a program known as "Peter's Diaries". During the course of this study, Dr. Lawrence (and his coauthor, Graham Dover of Mindset Foundation) interviewed about 80 people, made numerous observations, and reviewed internal and external documents.

Dr. Lawrence argued that place (i) plays a mediating role in social innovation processes, (ii) helps to contain the problem(s), and (iii) adds complexity to social innovation problems. For example, in the case of Dr. Peter, his apartment played a mediating role as viewers became accustomed to watching him share his story from his apartment. It also provided constancy to viewers as they watched Dr. Peter's condition deteriorate. In the case of Tri-Cities Mat Program, place complicated the innovation because the location was close "Ranch Park", a centrally located neighbourhood in which the houses were located on a ridge and had an astounding view of the Fraser River. Residents of Ranch Park overall, felt safe and comfortable. So, when news of the proposed Mat Program reached many of them they rallied against it believing it (homeless people in the neighbourhood) would negatively impact them.

Dr. Lawrence's theorization about how places affect social innovation is of tremendous benefit to practitioners and academics alike who seek novel solutions to social problems. During the interaction with audience, several issues were identified as future research areas. For instance, how do social entrepreneurs who develop the novel solution adapt to place; how do virtual places that lack a geographic location affect social innovation; where do meaning and value reside; role of individuals in bringing together geographic location, meaning and value that are needed for a place.

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Dr. Tom Lawrence is the W.J. Van Dusen Professor of Management from the Beedie School of Business in Vancouver, British Columbia. Dr. Lawrence’s talk was based on his research contained in a working paper coauthored with Graham Dover entitled “The Role of Place in Social Innovation: The Study of Places in Housing for the Hard-to-House” (not yet available to the public). Dr. Lawrence’s talk at the University of Manitoba was organized under Stu Clark Distinguished Speaker Series. For more details on related activities, please visit the [Business and Economic Inequality Forum](#) (BEIF).