Until recently, much of the work that has sought to evaluate sustainable buildings and neighbourhoods has been predominantly preoccupied with quantitative measures of performance in the achievement of ecological and emissions goals. However, these have largely neglected the more qualitatively felt, experiential dimension of being in these environments, including the effects such projects have on the daily lives of their intended inhabitants.

My research uses an interdisciplinary framework that combines insights and concepts of narrative, social practice and place to explore the way sustainable communities are being conceptualised, built, and ultimately experienced. Drawing on Vancouver’s own Olympic Village, I explore the many narrative voices that have emerged from the construction of this unique neighbourhood to get a fuller picture of the many ways that sustainability is both defined and materialised.

Meta-narratives embedded in policy and planning express particular assumptions, prescriptions and problems with regard to sustainability and sustainable environments. These are materialised in the “real world” in the land use changes, infrastructure, action, and technologies.

These meta-narratives intersect both materially and meaningfully with the lived realities of individuals. As such, they are key in producing and reproducing the broader narratives that shaped them through the performance of our daily practices. These narratives are interwoven with the lived narratives of individuals who are key actors in the performance of certain resident practices, especially the achievement of carbon reductions.

The past 20 years of environmental policy making and city planning in Vancouver have seen a progressive shift in the way our urban environments have been envisioned. Separate and evolving visions of livability and low-carbon societies were merged in large part due to the process of planning and building the Southeast False Creek (SEFC) and the Olympic Village. The resulting conceptualisation of urban sustainability continues to influence municipal policy, including the Greenest City Action Plan under implementation today.

CONTESTED NARRATIVES OF A SUSTAINABLE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOOD

VANCOUVER’S OLYMPIC VILLAGE

Building managers, including building technicians, housing managers, maintenance coordinators and strata council members, are key actors in the Village unfolding. The experiences of those who manage and operate the Village have been critical in providing important insights into the neighbourhood’s performance. I explored the lived narratives of 16 Olympic Village managers with various roles to understand their roles, responsibilities, and daily practices.

• New and complex building systems are challenging for many managers to understand and maintain, especially for the many who are new to green building and sustainability. Many managers are unfamiliar with building technologies, especially the technical aspects that operate in the building’s background.
• Managers have mixed feelings about how support from systems engineers in navigating the learning curve. The emergence of information sharing networks within and between building managers is a growing social in the absence of broader coordination.
• Though all managers shared concerns over maintenance and material costs, most remained enthusiastic about the neighbourhood’s environmental and social potential. In some cases, negative media portrayals have tempered managers’ efforts to ensure the community lives up to the official narrative.

The residents of the Olympic Village are themselves of course one of the major beneficiaries intended with the Village’s construction. I conducted in-depth interviews to hear the lived narratives of 20 residents living in the Village, including the ways they have come to understand and experience the neighbourhood.

• Though all residents were aware of the neighbourhood’s official narrative, few believed that it would come to live in the Village or its sustainable features. However, prior experiences and expectations have played important roles in residents’ satisfaction, including frustrations when challenges are encountered.
• The selection of certain building technologies has promoted or inhibited the performance of certain resident practices, especially the achievement of the goals of sustainability. For example, slab hydronic heating and cooling have presented several technical and maintenance challenges.
• These challenges have contributed to a sense of community, particularly among Village “pioneers” who endured early system challenges. Social networks, education sessions and social media platforms such as Facebook are all encouraging residents to share experiences and foster a sense of place.

Media coverage adds an important narrative layer to the neighbourhood’s unfolding. As part of these ongoing discussions, rendering the Village a certain kind of place in the eyes of the city and its inhabitants. Much more than a simple urban development project, the Village has become the city to which the media and other narratives around governance responsibility, accountability, and housing affordability are tied.

Fifteen years of reporting on the Village also reveal the ways sustainability and sustainable communities have been defined and described. Though many have championed its merits, many critique the expense of “green” features and the inherent tradeoffs between social, economic and environmental values have often prevailed.