

Cities and rural areas around the world are facing big changes and big challenges. A lingering pandemic. Climate change. Access to the food, fuel and goods we depend on to live. Fortunately, forward thinkers are harnessing research and bold ideas to create better communities for all of us. What will the future look like where you live? The answer, as with our two stories, requires examining rural and urban issues alongside each other.

REIMAGINING CITIES

By **Gillian Rutherford**

SANDEEP AGRAWAL SMILES AS HE CLOSES HIS EYES:

"Let me stretch my imagination," he says.

I've asked him to envision the next 50 years for Canada's cities. There are so many challenges ahead — environmental, political, fiscal, demographic — it would be easy to feel discouraged. But Agrawal loves this part of urban planning and it's not a surprise, given that he is a professor and the first director of the University of Alberta's School of Urban and Regional Planning.

On social media, Agrawal calls himself "a common sense planner," but he recognizes it's also important for him and other U of A urban visionaries to dream big.

"Just imagining the future is very difficult, and yet, it is upon us," he says. "It has the potential to bring the most significant change that has ever happened to our cities, ever."

As he casts his mind toward the future, the very first thing that comes to Agrawal has a Jetsons ring to it: autonomous vehicles.

That one factor — self-driving cars — could address some of the daily challenges of city living. If your car can drive itself, there's no need to park it right outside your house or office. You can send ➤

83

The percentage of Canadians who live in urban centres

RURAL FRONTIERS

By **Robbie Jeffrey**, '12 BA

I STILL REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME A HUMMER H2

parked at my small town's hockey rink. That's what high oil prices used to mean for rural Albertans: good-paying jobs, new vehicles in the occasional garage, McMansions on freshly paved cul-de-sacs and more money in municipal coffers. During the oil boom of the early aughts, I grew up near Lloydminster, Alta., where Husky Energy's refinery and upgrader dot the border city's boundaries. The fate of the community was intertwined with the fate of industry, that was clear, and when oil prices rose, so did our quality of life, far beyond consumer goods. New hospitals, rec centres, schools. No one likes taxes, but we liked what they built for us.

The heady days of oil booms in rural Alberta — and Alberta, in general — come and go with uncertainty. More importantly, the fate of small towns and rural areas appears to have come untethered from the resource industries that for so long kept these places alive. Even when oil and gas prices are high, rural areas continue to decline.

Rural communities around the world share the experience of decline. Almost anywhere you live, you can see it on a drive outside the sprawling bounds of cities. What were once thriving rural ➤



Sandeep Agrawal, director of the School of Urban and Regional Planning, has studied cities around the world.

it a text to come get you when you're ready. Since most of us use our cars for less than five per cent of the day, it makes less sense for everyone to own one, meaning greater use of ride shares and taxis and fewer cars on the road. Suddenly you've solved gridlock, shortened commute times and reduced carbon emissions. Cities might even find they no longer need as many roads, saving tax dollars for other priorities and freeing up space for more housing, parks and walking paths.

It's just one of the many possibilities we need to consider now to plan for a future in which cities meet the many challenges ahead — and also meet our desire for livable, equitable, healthy spaces.

ACCORDING TO THE UNITED NATIONS, 68 PER CENT of the world's population will live in cities by 2050. In Canada, more than 83 per cent of us already do.

Cities are the crucible where many of society's problems come into focus. In Canada, one of the most pressing challenges is a severe housing shortage. Canada would need to build 1.8 million more dwellings to have the same number of homes per capita as the average of other G7 countries, according to a January 2022 report by the Bank of Nova Scotia. Home prices have fluctuated recently but continue to rise in most cities, putting ownership out of reach for many. Every Canadian city has witnessed an increase in homelessness during the pandemic.

These are the kinds of challenges Agrawal and his colleagues at the School of Urban and

“(THE FUTURE) HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BRING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE THAT HAS EVER HAPPENED TO OUR CITIES, EVER.”

— SANDEEP AGRAWAL

communities struggle to sustain or grow their populations, provide basic services and upgrade infrastructure. People leave for the cities, seeking education and the “knowledge economy” jobs that, for the most part, aren't available in rural communities. Parents who want their children to take over their farms, homes or businesses also want them to have better lives, so they help their children move away and roll the dice on whether or not they'll return. Population decline means fewer workers and customers, a smaller tax base and less-viable businesses. The average age of the population increases, putting pressure on the few services — say, long-term care facilities — that still exist. It all contributes to a downward spiral for communities that can't find a way to remain viable.

Yet, paradoxically, researchers and other experts will tell you rural areas will — in fact, must — play a growing role in their countries' development.

According to the United Nations, rural areas are where “synergies between major development factors” such as migration, energy, health care, water and food security, climate change, and poverty will be realized. Already, among the 38 countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, between 20 and 60 per cent of renewable energy investment is located in rural areas. Rural communities are on the front lines of catastrophic climate change, affected most immediately by drought, flooding, crop failure and wildfires, notes a 2021 report by Natural Resources Canada. Rural areas have an outsized influence on conservation efforts and policy, too. Above all, there are people behind these policy and development issues, and the question of what happens to rural areas is, at its core, a question of what happens to rural people.

One of my favourite songs from the Albertan rancher and country singer Corb Lund is called *This Is My Prairie*.

“I'll make my stand here, and I'll die alone,” he sings.

DRIVE DOWN SOUTHERN ALBERTA'S COWBOY TRAIL, OR Highway 22, and you won't just see the cowboy-country landscape, like the Rockies in the distance, historic ranchland on either side, or the rolling foothills and woodlands. You'll see rural mythmaking, too. A self-consciously rural esthetic reveals itself in neon silhouettes of pensive cowboys, ranch resorts, trading post landmarks and rodeo murals painted on the brick walls of pit stops. More than almost anywhere in North America, the cowboy style, which underpins rural mythology, is alive and kicking in Alberta. But the reality behind the myth is evolving, say U of A researchers.

“The nature of agriculture has really changed ➤



Regional Planning examine to help municipalities and other levels of government prepare for unprecedented—and unpredictable—change. The school, in the faculties of arts and science, conducts research and provides policy direction on everything from climate adaptation to citizen engagement to transportation safety. Agrawal, who moved to Canada in the 1990s, has travelled the world to hunt for solutions, from India to the United States, United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Sri Lanka and across Canada.

He knows that the solutions we come up with now will shape how we live, play and get around in Canada's cities over the next half century.

TRULY VISIONARY URBAN PLANNING LOOKS AT THE BIG

picture. It has to include transportation planning and land use as well as economic, environmental and social goals. Edmonton is a leader in North America with its city plan, a blueprint for how the city will grow over the next 40 years. Spearheaded by U of A grad **Kalen Anderson**, '02 BA, '04 MA, the plan plots the path toward a city of two million residents, double the current population, who will need 1.1 million more jobs. It's an aspirational document that aims to honour the values of today—economic diversification, social inclusion, environmental responsibility, artistic opportunity—and build a community that feels like home to all residents.

“Long-range city planning is more like casting a spell than writing a prescription—everyone has to buy in and believe and work hard to achieve the vision,” says Anderson, who is now executive director at the developers' group Urban Development Institute – Edmonton Metro.

Like most cities across North America, from Winnipeg to Escondido, Calif., Edmonton has made it a top priority to reinvigorate the city's downtown. A strong downtown matters to everyone in a city, whether they live or work downtown or not, because it's often the economic heart. As of March 2022, there were 261 jobs per hectare in downtown Edmonton, and though the core accounts for only one per cent of the municipality's land base, it generated 10 per cent of the city's taxes.

A vibrant downtown requires more people: something like 30,000 more in Edmonton's case, Anderson estimates.

“We need to build a truly vibrant downtown that is full of people 24/7, with a diversity of housing—from the \$10-million penthouse to the most dignified supportive housing we can create—so everybody lives well and people aren't unhoused on our streets,” she says. ➤

20-60

The percentage of renewable energy investment estimated to be in rural areas of the world

over the last three or four decades,” says Clark Banack, an adjunct professor at the University of Alberta and longtime rural Albertan. He's talking about farm communities along the Cowboy Trail, such as Longview and Cochrane.

“There's been a real consolidation,” he explains. “The size of farms is growing exponentially, which means there are far fewer farm families living in rural areas. In addition, provincial government investment in rural communities has been in decline across Canada for decades.”

As Banack explains, since the Second World War, the industrialization of agriculture and the globalization of agri-food systems have marginalized small farmers and reshaped rural communities. But rural isn't synonymous with ➤



Clark Banack heads the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities.

But it's important to get urban density just right. Too dense and it feels frenetic; in fact, it can be unhealthy. Not dense enough and the community isn't complete and can't sustain itself.

AGRAWAL HAS SEEN THE EFFECTS OF unchecked density first-hand in the small town of Ranchi, India, where he grew up. Having been away for 30 years, he set out to find his childhood home one sunny day. After searching all afternoon, it was dusk before he found it.

"The place had completely changed," he remembers. "There had been large green fields all around my house when I was growing up, and a river flowing nearby, but I couldn't see any of it. It was absolutely unrecognizable."

What was once a sleepy town is now a bustling state capital of just over a million inhabitants, an industrial heartland due to its proximity to mineral reserves and forest products.

Canada doesn't have quite the same issue with urban sprawl as does India, where Delhi almost doubled in geographic size between 1991 and 2011. Still, over the past 20 years, Canadian cities have grown by 34 per cent, while population density has fallen by six per cent, according to a CBC analysis in 2022 based on satellite imagery and artificial intelligence. Every day in Ontario alone new subdivisions eat up the equivalent of a family farm.

Agrawal and other planners agree that urban sprawl is likely to be reversed over the next half century. Places like Vancouver and Montreal are simply running out of room to expand, and there's a growing recognition that ever-bigger cities are too expensive to maintain. In 2018, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development estimated that urban sprawl triples public service costs, and it tags Canada as one of the places where growth should be checked.

Agrawal says Canadian cities must get denser, not larger. But greater density doesn't necessarily mean more skyscrapers. It means condos, townhouses, low-rise apartments and duplexes that house more people on the same plot of land than ►

30

The per cent of Canada's GDP contributed by agriculture, energy, forestry, mining and other rural industries

3

The factor by which urban sprawl is estimated to multiply public service costs

agriculture: the number of rural workers employed in agriculture is declining in almost every OECD country. These broader trends of decline persist even in non-agricultural communities.

John Parkins, '97 MSc, '04 PhD, a professor in the Faculty of Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences, has researched rural development for more than 25 years, especially in forestry towns. "In forestry, it's the same thing," he says. "You can explain it with labour-shedding technologies and capital investments."

Another factor is consolidation of ownership, Parkins says. "Being competitive requires a certain scale of operation, and that has implications for the number of owners and where the benefits flow. Historically, the fortunes of industry and community were closely connected. Now it's the opposite. For the industry to maintain its competitive international position, to be efficient and produce for global markets, it needs to reduce costs. In contrast, communities need better livelihoods."

Banack heads the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities, a joint initiative of the university's Augustana Campus and the Faculty of Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences. While plenty of non-profits and universities study rural development, the centre is focused on fusing research with local outreach. The goal is to improve the sustainability of rural communities by connecting the U of A's resources with rural organizations, researchers, students, policymakers and others who can create the needed changes. Rural resiliency, the thinking goes, depends on engaged, informed citizens, and the U of A holds a vast amount of knowledge that can be deployed outside its walls.

In the past few years, the centre has worked on projects related to inclusivity, park management, entrepreneurialism, food security and the health impacts of resource development.

One project underway is working to improve rural broadband in Alberta, a service that's universally recognized as a precondition for rural resiliency but is still unavailable to many rural communities around the world. In Canada, only 54.3 per cent of ►

U OF A SUPPORTS SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

THE U OF A RANKS 11TH IN THE WORLD AMONG POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS IN SUPPORTING sustainable cities and communities—one of the goals measured by the 2022 Times Higher Education Impact Rankings. This goal measures universities' efforts to make cities more sustainable through research. The impact rankings are based on the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals to be achieved by 2030. In all categories combined, the U of A placed 11th in the world and third in Canada. (See more on page 8.)

REIMAGINING CITIES

a single-family dwelling, no matter what part of town you live in. The current buzz name for the best in urban dwelling is the “15-minute district.” It’s a riff on the garden city movement first promoted back in the early 20th century in England to make industrial cities more livable. The goal is to find everything you need to live a good life—food, health care, work, exercise and entertainment—within a 15-minute walk, roller-skate, skateboard, bike or transit ride from home.

“It’s the reformulation of a very old idea,” says Anderson, noting the concept is a key part of Edmonton’s new plan. “People have always wanted to live in complete communities. The language has changed over time, but the idea is not new.”

According to a 2021 Statistics Canada report, only 20 per cent of Canadians live within that kind of proximity to the services and stores they need on a daily basis, so there’s plenty of scope for improvement. The 15-minute district concept has taken off in places as varied as Paris, Melbourne, Shanghai and Portland. In Vancouver, old-school shopping malls near SkyTrain stations are being replaced with new shops and denser housing developments. In Paris, the focus is on new bike lanes and better parks. As the pandemic has shown, we can’t always depend on global supply chains, so part of the appeal of a 15-minute district is that it is built around local businesses. Another key element is planning for more green space, not less—and many of us came to appreciate green space during the past two-plus years in a way we had not before the pandemic.

GROWING UP IN ST. ALBERT, A SUBURB OF EDMONTON, Karen Lee could never have imagined life without a car. Then she moved to New York City and, as a public health physician, contributed to creating health-promoting amenities along one of the best-used bike trails in the United States. The Manhattan Waterfront Greenway is a 52-kilometre trail that wends its way around the island. At certain times of the day the path is crowded with people with briefcases strapped on the back of their bikes, heading to work, stopping for coffee or a meal along the way, jostling with tourists snapping shots of the river views. People can stop to play basketball or tennis or go for a quick paddle in a kayak. Rather than a path to nowhere, this trail was built purposely to take people places they want to go.

For Lee, finding the perfect balance of urban density is a passion. Now director of the U of A’s Housing for Health project and author of *Fit Cities: My Quest to Improve the World’s Health and Wellness—Including Yours*, she has devoted her



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rural residents have access to the minimum broadband speeds set by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. The Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities has a tool called the Rural Broadband Portal, which compiles hundreds of resources related to the socio-economic impacts and economic opportunities of broadband. It curates the literature and makes policy suggestions so policymakers can easily access the kind of insights that otherwise would be arduous to collect.

The U of A is behind other broadband projects, too. The Alberta Rural Connectivity Coalition, founded by U of A digital technology experts Rob McMahon and Michael McNally, is a forum where communities share insights to help make informed decisions about broadband.

Another project underway at the rural sustainability centre looks at how rural co-operatives—a business model that democratizes ownership and decision-making—can improve economic development. That model has had success in rural Alberta, in the past and today. “In rural areas, co-operatives became popular 100 years ago because it was essentially ‘co-operate or don’t succeed,’” says Banack, who hosted a webinar in 2021 called “Old Solutions for New Problems: Why Alberta’s Small Towns Need to Consider Cooperatives.”

“They were an act of self-reliance. They had to co-operate to make ends meet, to acquire their farming goods at a reasonable price and to get a reasonable rate of return on the grains they grew.” The United Farmers of Alberta co-operative, for example, eventually formed government in the province and is still active today. Electricity and gas co-operatives have also played an important role in rural Alberta, and electrification programs carried out by co-operatives once provided about 90 per

“THE NATURE OF AGRICULTURE HAS REALLY CHANGED OVER THE LAST THREE OR FOUR DECADES.”

—CLARK BANACK

career to promoting health.

She cites growing evidence that our built environment — the homes, streets and communities where we live — can actually make us healthier.

Lee encouraged health-supporting amenities along the Manhattan Waterfront Greenway when she was the inaugural director of New York's Healthy Built Environment and Active Design Program and deputy to the assistant commissioner for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control. The greenway is recognized as a prime example of urban planning that meets goals in transportation, recreation, economics and health, all at once.

The New York City team also introduced other health interventions such as mandated nutrition labelling in restaurants and minimum active playtime for kids in daycare. And they gathered data to prove it made a difference: better chronic disease outcomes, more active New Yorkers and lower obesity rates in children. New Yorkers' lifespan even increased faster than the average across the country. Traffic fatalities dropped for both pedestrians and drivers, and retail sales went up in many areas that had been improved for walking, cycling and transit.

Lee is now working to demonstrate how these ideas can work in Canada. She came back to Alberta in 2018 as associate professor of preventive medicine and adjunct professor in the U of A School of Public Health. She's pulling together 200 people from across the country — city planners, health professionals, developers, architects, academics, even community league volunteers — anyone with an interest in building healthier communities. They're working to produce the Canadian Healthy Community Guidelines by early 2023.

Lee says it doesn't cost extra to plan for health from the beginning of a development. First, it's important to select a location that's close to grocery stores, recreation, schools, jobs and active transportation options. Then make sure sidewalks and crosswalks are wide enough so that all residents, including those in wheelchairs, can get around safely. Next, design buildings so the stairs are the most obvious option for those who can use them instead of an elevator, and make sure the stairwell is clean, brightly lit and finished with paint so it doesn't feel like an afterthought. And even affordable buildings should offer fitness facilities. In one of ➤



cent of Alberta farmers' electricity. In Smoky Lake, Alta., parents spearheaded a co-operative daycare, and in Saskatchewan there are more than 100 preschool and daycare co-operatives.

URBAN CONNECTIONS

Three of many U of A projects

Applying AI: The Faculty of Engineering's Autonomous Systems Initiative is using artificial intelligence to improve everything from robot-assisted surgery to urban transportation, including a project to optimize self-driving car routes and reduce emissions.

Partnering with Businesses: The Centre for Cities and Communities in the Alberta School of Business fosters urban research and community partnerships such as the Digital Economy Program, where students help Edmonton-area businesses build their online presence.

Disaster Proofing: Climate change is leading to more fires, extreme heat waves and flooding. Engineering professor Stephen Wong is studying "resilience hubs," places where people could seek temporary shelter from a natural disaster. ➤

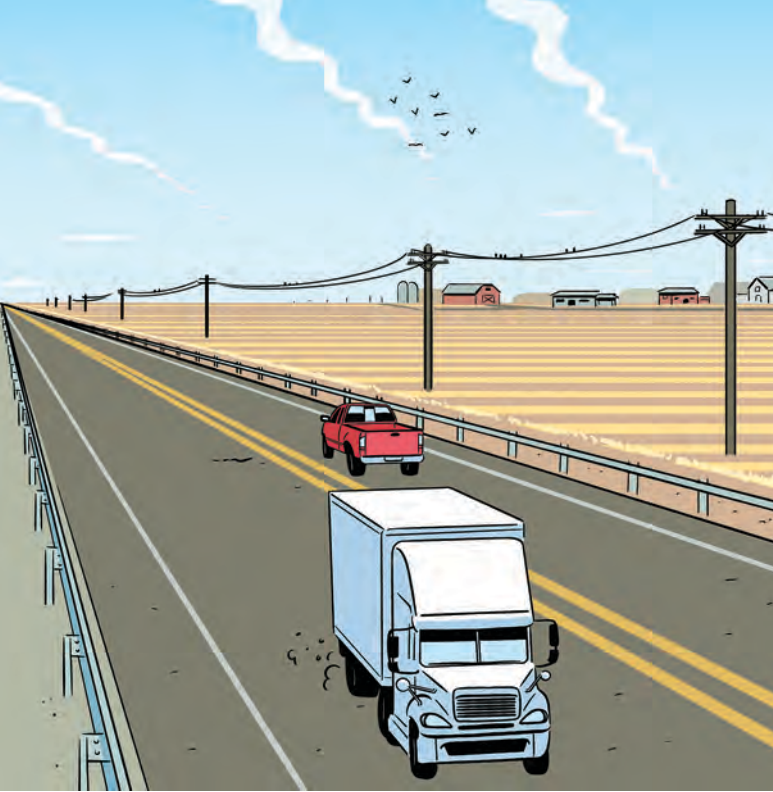
BANACK AND PARKINS BOTH STRESS THAT RURAL

decline has no easy solutions. Many rural communities weren't built to last; they were service centres for economic organizations, specific industries, companies or settlement objectives that don't exist anymore. Look no further than some of Alberta's ghost towns: Coalspur, Coal Valley, Mercoal. Notice a theme? The challenge for many rural communities today is creating a future that moves beyond their origins — a stable future meant to last.

"Communities need a strategy if they want to define their own successful forms of rural development," say Kristof Van Assche, a professor of planning, governance and development with the Faculty of Science. His research spans Europe and the Americas to Central Asia and Africa. He has written nearly a dozen books and countless publications.

"It requires tough self-analysis from those communities. What do they want? What do they have? What's possible? They need a shared vision, then they can develop the policy tools and the autonomy to make bigger decisions. Often, there's more creativity possible than people think."

In a recent guide Van Assche co-wrote, *Crafting Strategies for Sustainable Local Development – A Community Guide*, he describes how there are no blueprints or silver bullets for moving small ➤



RURAL FRONTIERS

communities in new directions. A community is a complex system, and the infinite interactions between its components make the future less certain.

“Rather than predicting a future and organizing ourselves from there,” he writes, “it is possible and much more desirable to envision a future and from there a set of goals.”

Across the world, some of the most exciting success stories merge economic growth with conservation efforts. In Norway’s Morsa watershed, a collective of farmers and municipal governments demonstrates exemplary water governance. In Mexico, a community forestry enterprise called Palo Seco boasts outstanding environmental management, which helps create long-term local jobs while funding infrastructure.

This is where the rural ethos of rugged individualism can serve communities well: as a survival mechanism.

“The rural virtues of strong individualists can be productive,” Van Assche says. “If people feel like their family made this farmland and has been here for generations, or that they have worked together in this hamlet, it can be a strong safety net against the disintegration of rural areas.”

But he says rural communities may have to accept the need to form bigger units. “If many of these places are played against each other, if they’re just made to compete against each other for grants or for companies to settle there, that doesn’t help. Nobody can really survive by themselves.”

HOW DO YOU QUANTIFY THE SOOTHING glint of first light on a foggy harvest morning? The euphony of birdsongs and tranquil whispers of wind? Sometimes it’s hard to articulate to outsiders why rural life is worth fighting for.

Roger Epp, ’84 BA(Hons), has a gift for making those ineffable qualities clear. A professor of political science at the U of A, Epp is a native of rural Saskatchewan and a former newspaperman, which may explain why he writes so stirringly about rural issues. Parkins, Van Assche and Banack all cite Epp as an influence. He co-edited *Writing Off the Rural West*, a tome of great significance in Canadian rural studies.

To Epp, the way we define rural — as abstract as it seems alongside cold, hard economics — is no trivial matter. In fact, he considers it essential to imagining ➤

REIMAGINING CITIES

Lee’s projects there’s a golf simulator right next to the exercise room.

Lee says that as we adopt new technologies like self-driving cars it’s important that cities prioritize opportunities to walk, cycle and use public transit — options that are affordable, accessible and promote social, physical and mental health.

“These daily things that we add to our lives, like walking around our neighbourhoods, running into a neighbour, using the stairs in our work and home buildings, can actually make a big difference to our health outcomes,” she says.

That includes supporting people to stay healthy, mentally and physically, as they age. Nearly a quarter of Canadians will be over 65 years of age by 2051, according to Statistics Canada. That presents all kinds of challenges.

“If you have to leave your neighbourhood as you age, it means you’re leaving your neighbours and friends and support systems,” says Lee.

“We want to age in place in all of our neighbourhoods, but to do that, we have to create neighbourhoods where we have the option to walk to amenities or take transit if we’re going further. That means we have to think about different types of housing typologies in multiple neighbourhoods, not just downtown.”

CANADIAN CITIES ARE NOT EVEN MENTIONED IN THE Canadian Constitution; they are creatures of the provinces. And yet they have the responsibility to tackle some of society’s biggest challenges at the level closest to our everyday lives: our ➤

RURAL CONNECTIONS

Three of many U of A projects

Career Training: Researchers from the School of Public Health are examining the implementation and outcomes of a zero-fee tuition initiative in Drayton Valley, Alta., that enables rural residents to train for new careers without having to leave their communities.

Remote Rehabilitation: The Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine’s Tele-Rehab 2.0 connects Albertans in rural areas to specialized physiotherapy care using wearable sensors, cameras and custom motion-capture software that collects data for physicians.

Grazing Upgrades: Researchers in the Faculty of Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences are studying livestock grazing techniques to gauge plant diversity and build drought resistance in grasslands and breed more efficient livestock. ➤

PANDEMIC IMPACT

THE EARLY DAYS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HINTED

at a major shift in rural communities and cities, as people reportedly set out for country life in great numbers. As many began working from home, they pondered the new possibility of leaving the high costs of city living behind. In 2020, with the pandemic underway, a Re/Max survey found one-third of Canadians no longer wanted to live in large urban centres and would prefer to live in a rural or suburban community. In the U.S., Gallup polls in 2020 showed a nine-percentage-point increase in the number of adults who would prefer to live in a small town or rural area compared with 2018.

Statistics Canada noted that population growth in areas with a large share of rural lands near large urban centres was greater in 2020-21 than the previous five-year average. Some rural communities saw eye-popping real estate booms as urbanites fled expensive cities; east of Toronto, house prices in Prince Edward County jumped almost 80 per cent in 2021, straining municipal services and infrastructure. It's still not clear what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be; some say the trend was a blip that will reverse itself in coming months. But one thing is clear: it has made many of us think about how—and where—we want to live.

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neighbourhoods, our jobs, our homes and our families. It's a big, messy task, and the tools cities have to shape the future are awkward.

But if that seems daunting, think back to Agrawal's vision of autonomous vehicles.

The best guesses say it could be a few decades before autonomous vehicles rule our roads. For Agrawal, their potential is much like the quantum progress in telephone technology since he left India. In 1990, it was almost impossible for a family to get a landline. Now everyone has their own cellphone and those personal cell numbers have revolutionized society.

"Individual identity in India was formed by those cellphone numbers. That cellphone gave individuals the independence to talk to whomever they wanted," says Agrawal. "It helped them with employment. It helped them in their mobility," he adds. "It helped them in so many different ways."

He is hopeful we will see a similar leap forward in accessibility and equity as our cities of the future develop. His new book *Rights and the City: Problems, Progress and Practice* is about how cities can improve human rights, whether by removing discriminatory zoning rules that keep certain kinds of housing out of a neighbourhood or by keeping the price of a bus ticket affordable. For him, the autonomous vehicles and other changes coming at us so quickly have the potential to make our cities not only more livable, but also more equitable.

Agrawal sees that as the beauty and importance of considered, informed city planning. He believes necessity will lead to innovative solutions and that practical decisions informed by imagination will help us build safe, accessible, delightful spaces where everyone can find a home. ■

IN 2018, THE OECD TAGGED CANADA AS ONE OF THE COUNTRIES WHERE URBAN SPRAWL SHOULD BE CHECKED.

RURAL FRONTIERS

rural futures, a vital part of what he calls "the long road from dependence to self-definition."

One of the key elements to any viable rural future in the prairie West, he says, is an affirmation that rural is Indigenous space, too. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada noted, the work of building a different way of living together is most real and most urgent in many rural places.

"The insistence that Indigenous communities are rural is a way of saying to rural communities, 'Your closest allies, the people who live with the same distance and crappy internet that you do, and the people living next to extractive industries, are Indigenous. And you're stronger with them than against them,'" Epp says.

The rancher and country artist I mentioned earlier, Corb Lund, re-recorded *This is My Prairie* in 2021 to support environmental activism in the Rockies. The new version features an ensemble of country stalwarts, as well as lesser-known artists such as Nice Horse, an all-female country group, Armond Duck Chief, who's a member of the Siksika Nation, and **Sherryl Sewepagaham**, '00 BEd, from the Little Red River Cree Nation in northern Alberta. Sewepagaham has a singular voice, and she sings in Cree. At one point, the other vocalists go mute and her words take centre stage. The titular "My" is transformed from the voice of a solitary rural landowner to that of a collective that foregrounds women and Indigenous Peoples.

It's just a song, but it's also a possible vision of the future, one that creates common ground to solve not only rural decline but also some of the globe's great challenges.

"I'll make my stand here, and I'll die alone," goes the song. That's one possible future. Standing together is another. ■