The Cities We Want & How to Get There

+ Alan Broadbent
  The Many Faces of Leadership

+ Jan Gehl
  An Interview with the Creator of Cities for People
“As well as inspiring effective leadership, our cities need the ability to innovate and experiment. We need innovation that breaks through legacy systems that are no longer serving us as needed. And we need organizations that can connect sectors, experiment with new ideas and drive action. Evergreen CityWorks is a much-needed investment in a more innovative and sustainable future for Canadian cities.”

Anne Golden
Co-Chair, City Building Institute, Ryerson University and Chair, Evergreen CityWorks Advisory Committee
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Welcome to our winter 2015 issue of Intersection. It has been a very interesting few months in the cities space: we have a bunch of exciting new Mayors across the country, a federal election looming and interesting city building projects popping up in cities large and small.

In this issue we focus on the theme of the cities we want and how we get there. We meet Jan Gehl, one of the world’s leading urbanists and author of the book Cities for People. And we chat with author Sasha Issenberg, who in his book The Victory Lab chronicles the amazing ability of the Obama campaign to identify and target supporters, and build a movement that led to his 2008 and 2012 victories.

Gehl and Issenberg gave a shared public keynote at Ryerson University and participated in our Cities for People Forum, which was comprised of leaders from across the country working to weave together a broad national movement to build more resilient and livable cities in Canada.

I believe we are at an important moment for the future of Canadian cities. Never have our cities been more critical for our economic and social prosperity, yet they continue to be hamstrung by the institutional structures that prevent them from having the tools to meet the needs of their rapidly expanding populations.

‘We Are Cities’ is the name of the campaign we are launching with partners and citizens across Canada to identify the key components of building the cities we want and the actions needed to get there. You will hear more about the We Are Cities campaign in the coming months as we traverse the country, creating a national urban agenda with the public and interested organizations.

Our end game is clear: build a unique agenda that Canadians buy into because they created it—and make it so compelling and so widely supported that governments of all levels have no choice but to respond.

So please go to www.wearecities.ca and join us in creating an agenda and a movement that will enable us to build the cities we know we need.

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By Alan Broadbent

it would be wise to look at the brighter side of the last four years in this city. While we would have garnered the perception that Toronto has fallen into deep dysfunction, reality couldn’t be more different. The city may have been mayor-less, but it definitely was not leaderless.

The election of a new mayor provides Toronto the chance for a fresh start. With leadership paralysis a thing of the past, Toronto Mayor John Tory and the newly elected city councillors have their task cut out to restore confidence in the administration. But before they set out to do so,
At City Hall, members of council and staff filled the leadership vacuum. Toronto’s non-partisan system, while messy, allowed it to function well despite the disruption. Council and senior managers found equilibrium on a wide range of issues, from transit and housing to electoral reform.

Another ingredient in Toronto’s success has been the city-building and civic leadership that has emerged from vibrant and innovative private firms, public institutions, non-profits and cultural sector organizations. Their efforts have helped place the city consistently among the world’s best in terms of livability, prosperity and attractiveness for businesses.

The financial sector has not only been critical to the city’s economic success, but has also contributed to its civic and social vitality. Less widely known organizations such as Eventi Capital have taken leadership roles with initiatives such as the Toronto Inner-City Rugby Foundation.

A number of civic and creative sector non-government organizations have been important in helping the city flourish. Organizations like the United Way of Greater Toronto, the Toronto Foundation and CivicAction have each established leadership niches and new initiatives such as Evergreen CityWorks bring together the public, innovators and decision-makers to build a better city.
A number of civic and creative sector non-government organizations have been important in helping the city flourish.

Local media like Spacing and NOW help readers discover their city and the achievements and pursuits of its residents.

Another example of local civic innovation is The Stop Community Food Centre, which started as a food bank and began collaborating with food bank users to advocate for healthy food policies and practices.

Toronto’s cultural scene has been revitalized in recent years with countless small arts organizations energizing the city’s arts scene. Many of them struggle financially, but thrive artistically. One interesting example of a cultural enterprise that is broadcasting Toronto around the world is JazzFM radio.

Of course not everything is hunky-dory. Toronto is losing on other fronts. Its transit system has not kept pace with growth, there is gridlock on the roads and far too many people live in poverty and can’t find work or adequate and affordable housing. While these issues form a critical set of challenges for Toronto’s future, the building blocks are in place.

Municipal politicians and public servants should embrace and engage the powerful elements outside of City Hall. In return, city-builders in business, the arts and civil society should connect with City Hall more often. City leadership is most effective as a collaborative endeavor with many faces.

Alan Broadbent is Chairman and Founder of Maytree and Chairman and CEO of Avana Capital Corporation. He co-founded and chairs the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, Tamarack—An Institute for Community Engagement, Diaspora Dialogues and the Institute for Municipal Finance and Governance at the Munk Centre, University of Toronto. Alan is also the author of Urban Nation: Why We Need to Give Power Back to the Cities to Make Canada Strong.
Toronto Mayoral Debate hosted by Evergreen CityWorks and CivicAction that drew over 800 people to Evergreen Brick Works

Photo: Mike Derblich
Infrastructure is central to every aspect of life in Canada. It’s a key driver of productivity and growth in a modern economy and it contributes to the health and well-being of Canadian citizens. It is a method for enabling communication and sharing of information between citizens. It is a means for providing core services such as water, electricity and energy and is a shaper of how our communities grow and contribute to our collective social fabric.

On a daily basis across the country, Canadians are impacted by infrastructure that has failed to be maintained or that has not been built. This can be partly attributed to a major shift in infrastructure ownership and financing over the past 50 years. In 1955, the federal government owned 44 percent of public infrastructure. Today, that number is less than five percent.

Municipalities own over 50 percent of public infrastructure, but collect only eight cents of every tax dollar. On the other hand, the federal government has 50 percent of Canada’s fiscal capacity, but contributes only 12 percent of our infrastructure fund. Experts have noted that the federal government should be spending approximately two percent of GDP on infrastructure to enhance prosperity and maintain a high quality of life. The current level of investment is 0.37 percent of GDP.

In 2013, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce estimated that Canada’s infrastructure deficit could be as high as $570 billion. I’m sure you experience this backlog of investment each day—from potholes that damage cars and act as safety hazards while cycling, to the overcapacity of public transit systems and lack of affordable housing options for Canadians. We have a lot of work to do.

Equally concerning is the fact that our existing infrastructure is not equipped to deal with the reality of climate change and extreme weather.
Prior to 1996, only three natural disasters exceeded $500 million in damages. Since 1996, Canada has averaged one $500 million or larger disaster almost every year. On average, each natural disaster lowers GDP by approximately two percent.

In a paper I co-authored with Evergreen CityWorks Executive Director John Brodhead and economist Sean Mullin for Canada 2020, we called for urgent federal attention to this issue. Countries that exhibit best practices for infrastructure investment have decision-making frameworks driven by a strong central government committed to innovation and economic development. Within these frameworks, projects move forward based on multi-year forecasting and planning, establishing a platform for innovation, resiliency and prosperity. In Canada there has been an absence of a national infrastructure strategy and long decline of federal involvement in infrastructure spending has exacerbated Canada’s infrastructure deficit.

This challenge also represents a key opportunity for Canada’s federal government, as the economic benefits of investing in public infrastructure are substantial. David Dodge, former Governor of the Bank of Canada, has called on government to take advantage of the historically low interest rates as a way to provide badly needed stimulative effects in the economy in the short-term, and contribute to higher productivity and a more competitive economy in the long run. The current market conditions create a window of opportunity for decisive action by an active and committed federal government.

In the paper, we argue that it is time for the federal government to play a strong role in the planning and funding of infrastructure.
public infrastructure in Canada. A critical starting point would be the creation of a long-term National Infrastructure Plan. We outline several components of what this plan could look like, but a central feature would be a comprehensive multi-year plan that would prioritize infrastructure projects across a number of areas of national significance. This feature would include a 10-year project pipeline prioritized by status, updated at least once a year on a rolling basis to reflect the movement of the projects in the pipeline and changes in strategy or emphasis.

A National Infrastructure Plan, respecting provincial and municipal jurisdiction, would coordinate infrastructure efforts across Canada, take advantage of the federal government’s fiscal capacity, create clear, transparent rules for infrastructure programs, enhance transparency of infrastructure planning and prioritization and share best practices across Canada. Only the federal government has the ability, authority and fiscal capacity to play this role within Canada.

The state of Canada’s infrastructure represents both a crisis and opportunity for our country. Only by taking decisive action now, can the federal government ensure we collectively seize the latter and avoid the former.

To learn more about the need for a National Infrastructure Plan please visit canada2020.ca

Jesse Darling is an Urban Project Designer for Evergreen CityWorks. She has previously conducted research and policy analysis for the Martin Prosperity Institute and Harvard Graduate School of Design in urban affairs and municipal governance.
A cross Canada, cities and communities of every size have physical spaces that are the result of decades of collective investment, creating shared opportunities for local people to learn, create and pursue livelihoods. Together, these civic assets are components of a city’s civic commons—the backbone of urban life.

However in most cities today, many elements of civic commons are underperforming. In many cases, specific assets (libraries, community centres etc.) were initially conceived and designed for a different era of use, before development patterns and consumer preferences began to prioritize personal automobiles, backyards and other shared amenities. As a result, exiting civic assets are often not programmed in ways that meet the needs of a diverse mix of city residents.

With the return of greater numbers of people to cities, there is an emerging mismatch between the civic assets a city has to offer in its civic commons and what its citizens, economy and social life, actually need. To fill this gap, ‘hybrid spaces’ operated by the private, institutional and community sectors are emerging. Coffee shops and co-working hubs are now ‘third places’ enabling a wide variety of opportunities for urban dwellers to spontaneously interact in ways that are critical to fostering social cohesion, economic opportunity and enabling opportunities for innovation.

With the popularity of these other spaces with diverse users and the challenges facing the existing ones that are publically financed and managed, cities need to adopt a coordinated, integrated strategy that connects all of their civic assets, regardless of ownership, to create an
aligned and connected civic commons that urban residents can easily and productively navigate.

New technology has the potential to support this metamorphosis and enable the kinds of strategic and spontaneous interactions that generate wealth and civic innovation. A new paradigm of a connected civic commons that is funded, programmed and managed imaginatively across sectors has the potential to better meet current and future civic needs and catalyze the dynamism of contemporary urban economies.

With relatively modest investment and creative partnerships, city governments can take advantage of this transition and build a competitive advantage for their city, grow investment opportunities and attract and retain talent. Facing budget constraints, a connected civic commons offers local governments opportunities to economize across city departments, find efficiencies and even save public spending down the line by investing in these shared facilities that deliver multiple social and economic benefits.

Doing nothing will just exacerbate the growing gulf between what a city typically is able to provide to the public and what urban residents are now seeking. A deliberate strategy to harness all forms of the civic commons and leverage their full value will provide crucial opportunities to build social and economic capital that makes cities the true generators of innovation and wealth.

Mary W Rowe is a social entrepreneur, urbanist and currently Director of Livability and Resilience Initiatives at the Municipal Art Society of New York. mas.org
The Future of Urban Transportation

AT CITYWORKS we are fascinated by the role transportation plays in connecting people, places and things within the urban environment. Whether you get somewhere by car, using your feet or somewhere in between, we are continuously exploring the role transportation plays in everyday life. Urban transportation has evolved significantly since the horse-and-buggy.

In this volume of Intersection we wanted to profile cities that are leading the way in developing the next phase of urban transportation. >
**EUROPE**

**Helsinki, Finland**
Finland’s capital is developing a ‘mobility on demand’ system that integrates all forms of shared and public transport into a single payment network. The city-wide application will function as both a journey planner and universal payment platform, connecting everything from buses to shared bikes and ferries, into a single form of mobility. The goal? To eliminate the need to own a car by 2025.

**Oslo, Norway**
Despite the $100,000 price tag, Norway is the second largest market for Tesla Electric Vehicles. Large government subsidies made possible by oil export revenue allow Tesla vehicles to be priced much cheaper than the price of a similar gasoline powered car.

**Paris, France**
London, New York and now Paris have all reduced speed limits in the urban core. These cities have made 20 miles per hour the new norm in an effort to reduce pedestrian injuries and combat congestion and pollution. If these world cities can do it, who’s to say this is a trend that won’t continue.

**London, England**
A piece on the future of urban transportation wouldn’t be complete without...
“A London based company is already prototyping drones equipped with a secure storage box and sensors to make door-to-door delivery a reality.”

A mention of drones. Hold the eye-roll. Drones, as a solution to improving congestion, is not so far fetched. With the surge of online shopping, delivery trucks that double park have become a target for commuter frustration. Drone delivery service is a way to get these trucks off the road and get traffic moving faster. A London-based company is already prototyping drones equipped with a secure storage box and sensors to make door-to-door delivery a reality.

**NORTH AMERICA**

- **Mexico City, Mexico**
  9 million vehicles try to navigate Mexico City’s inadequate road network daily. The average speed of these vehicles is 6 km per hour. To solve this congestion
nightmare, city planners have put their faith in a comprehensive, real-time traffic data management system based on information from city departments, private companies, anonymous personal data, Twitter and Foursquare. The operating system aggregates data to identify problem areas in the traffic network and provide alternatives routes.

> **Boston, United States**
Cities such as Boston, Helsinki and even Toronto are experimenting with crowdsourcing as a means to provide public transit for the 21st century. Travellers can input their location and destination of choice into a mobile application, and the app aggregates millions of data points with other travellers to determine the most efficient and cheapest route by picking up other travelers along a semi-structured route.

> **Medellín, Colombia**
Medellín is responsible for launching the gondola renaissance. Back in 2004, the creation of a gondola linking poor communities on its sprawling hillside with the Metro network was a game-changer for the city. This innovative approach to urban transportation has spread to Portland, Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, London, La Paz and Toulouse. It’s safe to say that gondolas, whether you like them or not, are here to stay.

> **ASIA**

> **Gumi, South Korea**
Gumi’s transit system has expanded its fleet with the addition of electric buses that draw power from the road. The road network has electric cables embedded into the asphalt providing power to vehicles travelling on its surface. Say goodbye to bulky overhead trolley lines and hello to a sleek renewable way to travel on public transit.

> **Hangzhou, China**
In seven years, China has expanded its public bike share program from zero stations to over 650,000—boasting the largest bike share network in the world. Hangzhou’s public bicycle system is one of the densest networks and most extensively used, largely because of its integration into public transit. A single card grants access to bus, subway, ferry, taxi and the bike share system.

> **SOUTH AMERICA**

> **Curitiba, Brazil**
Most cities are struggling to provide accessible public transit, especially as populations begin to age. Curitiba is demonstrating that sometimes when planning for the future, the best solution has been with you all along. 100 percent of its bus rapid transit network is equipped with ramps or lifts making it easier for people with disabilities or impaired mobility to get around.
Urban gondola inspired by Medellín, Colombia

Photo: Natta Summerky
For over 50 years, Jan Gehl has studied the relationship between public life and public spaces, consistently pushing the boundaries of planning and design to create urban spaces that are magnets for human activity.

His work has enabled hundreds of cities around the world to realize the traditional ways of building cities are not working and that the best way to create places where people meet to exchange ideas, trade or simply enjoy themselves is by looking towards a city’s greatest asset—its people.

Jan came to Toronto to give the keynote address at our Cities for People Forum in November 2014. We sat down with him to discuss his work, his inspiration and his hopes for Canadian cities.
Your PhD, published in 1971, explored how to create cities that are sustainable, equitable and inviting in a period of rapid urban growth. Why is it that 40 years after your first publication there is so much interest and desire to change the way cities are being built?

The way cities are planned and developed has dramatically changed character over the span of half a century. It’s been fascinating to watch. For years, city building was grounded in two paradigms: modernism and car invasion. Theories and ideology began replacing tradition as the basis for development. Modernism’s grand vision of massive buildings devoid of life and separated by function became the norm. At the same time, a new group, the transportation planner, began designing and building highways and freeways. Their primary purpose was to ensure that cities had the best conditions to accommodate one thing—the car.

The combination of these approaches created unlivable spaces. For years, planners failed to put city space and city life as a priority in their plans. There was a lack of knowledge and data showing the relationship between the built environment and human behavior. But now, the faults of planning cities around the personal car and mono-function are evident. We have extensive information about what can and should be done to make people-orientated places. At the same time, cities and their residents have become very vocal in crying out for people-orientated planning.

It seems like now, more than ever, the desire to create lively, sustainable and healthy cities is coming from both planners and city residents.

Copenhagen is consistently rated as one of the most livable cities in the world, but it has not always been this way. When did things begin to change? How did Copenhagen manage to change the way residents viewed the city?

Copenhagen has not always been a city that prioritized cyclists and pedestrians. Like most cities in the 1960s, the urban core was prioritized for the car resulting in heavy congestion and pollution. But lucky for us, we had visionary political decision-making and urban planning.

A turning point was when the city began to pedestrianize the main street—Strøget. This was done in phases. In 1962 the closure of the road to cars was only temporary. But the pilot phase proved to be a success. The area soon boasted more shoppers, more cafes, more economic activity, cleaner air and happier people. So in 1964, the street was closed for good. Copenhagen has been able to build on Strøget’s success and expand the pedestrian zone each year.

The phased approach to pedestrianizing the Strøget was effective in shifting attitudes and perceptions throughout the city. Not only can you see the positive results by simply walking down the street and observing city life, but it’s possible to also measure success using data. Over the past 40 years, people...
"It seems like now, more than ever, the desire to create lively, sustainable and healthy cities is coming from both planners and city residents."

Strøget seen from Gammeltorv/Nytorv
Photo: Nahid Vafaie, via Wikimedia Commons
using the area has more than tripled, making business owners, city planners and people all happy.

**How important is data and research to building spaces that prioritize people over other interests?**

Data and research is everything. For years cities didn’t have access to a base of knowledge that grasped how to design livable cities. It’s what contributed to the original problem of modernism and car culture. But now, we know better.

There are planning principles that make up crucial prerequisite for working with the human dimension. We know that mixed-use functions create social sustainability, versatility and a wealth of experience. We know that to create dynamic lively spaces we need to strengthen the invitation for people to linger, to sit and to observe by having interesting facades, places to sit-down, protection from the cold winds as well as the sun and heat depending on the season.

Planning for people as a professional field has evolved significantly since I first started. We now have a toolkit of research, case studies and data that can help cities apply theory to their local context. Evidence-based decision-making will only lead to better results and more animated spaces for city residents.

“Copenhagen has not always been a city that prioritized cyclists and pedestrians… But lucky for us, we had visionary political decision-making and urban planning.”
Any advice for cities like Toronto who are trying to improve the quality of life and livability but facing many obstacles?

My advice would be to create a campaign framed around the need for better pedestrian and public life conditions. The first step to upgrading might be to create an overview about how people use the city, including the underground spaces. And based on such knowledge provide a strategy on how to improve city quality for people. This is exactly how cities like Melbourne, Sydney, New York and Moscow have started their successful campaigns for making the cities more lively, livable, sustainable and healthy.

Another aspect of a city improvement strategy might be to look at improving bicycling in the city. The streets of Toronto are so wide that it would be easy to make room for bike lanes. The city is relatively flat and well connected that a high-quality bike network is possible. We did a similar exercise in Copenhagen—reducing street lanes from four to two in order to add more bike lanes and trees. Today, the city is more beautiful and much safer.

Jan Gehl is the author of the bestselling book Cities for People and is also a world-renowned architect. gehlarchitects.com
Independent coffee shops, streets lined with art galleries, the conversion of vacant buildings into creative co-working spaces. No, this is not Toronto, London or even Berlin. These amenities are now thriving in neighbourhoods scattered across the City of Hamilton.

Hamilton’s perception of being a steel-town is difficult to shed. The city will always be an industrial city, but the abundant opportunities that were once available in the manufacturing industry are no longer there. Today, the arts and cultural industry employs more people than the steel industry and is serving as a catalyst for urban development and regeneration that builds on Hamilton’s rich industrial base.

Culture is, in part, an industry which has been an aspect of Hamilton’s economy from the beginning,” says Anna M. Bradford, Director of Tourism and Culture at the City of Hamilton. “Yet culture also represents the character of a city and its people. Hamilton’s character, which is ambitious, innovative and open, has made the cultural renaissance we are witnessing today possible.”
The City of Hamilton recognizes creative industries as a key cluster in the city’s economy. As a result, the city’s plans and policies differ and take a non-traditional approach. Culture, which is defined broadly and encompasses the people, places and things that reflect local community identity such as festivals, events, heritage, spaces and facilities, is recognized as an important city building tool and a driver of economic development.

This position from local government has empowered communities, artists and members of the creative class to explore new possibilities. The results speak for themselves. Many storefronts are no longer vacant, but animated with an infusion of galleries and public art. A community mural has been designed in the downtown district that gives life to a former blank concrete wall. And Art Crawl, a monthly event with live music, programming and food, draws thousands of people to the streets of Hamilton.

The incredible synergy between manufacturing industry and cultural amenities is reinventing the City of Hamilton. This process has resulted in an influx of new residents, primarily young professionals and immigrants, who see the opportunity for home ownership, employment and high quality of life that Hamilton provides.

Hamilton has always used industry as a cornerstone for city building. What steel and manufacturing were to the city in the 1960s–1980s, creative industries are to Hamilton today. Hamilton’s cultural renaissance is breathing renewed life into the city, cultivating exciting changes to public spaces, restaurants, built environment and raison d’être.

Stewart Chisholm, Director of Partner Services, Evergreen CityWorks. Evergreen CityWorks is helping to accelerate the urban revitalization and cultural renaissance in Hamilton with our partners planningAlliance, the Hamilton Community Foundation and the City of Hamilton.

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The Top 10: Mapping Trends Across Canada

Co-Housing: Vancouver, British Columbia
Vancouver’s boom in co-housing is raising some eyebrows and highlighting an innovative approach to home ownership. With private bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms but access to shared facilities, co-housing demonstrates that less can be more.

Ultra-Fast Internet: Olds, Alberta
An unlikely Alberta town is investing in a community-owned fibre optic network in an effort to attract new industry and remain socially vibrant. This makes downloads about 40 times faster and uploads 170 times faster than those of the average Canadian.

Capturing Carbon: Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
In fall 2014, Saskatchewan made history by launching the world’s first commercial-scale carbon capture and storage operation at a coal-fired power plant. The facility estimates that the captured emissions are equivalent to taking 250,000 cars off the road.

The Conversion of Park & Ride Lots: Calgary, Alberta
A light rail station in a Calgary suburb is planning on removing 70 percent of its park and ride spots and converting this space into mixed use development. Creating walkable communities out of former parking spaces is an innovative strategy to provide more livable communities in suburban areas.

Pop-Up Restaurant on Frozen Assiniboine River: Winnipeg, Manitoba
Sub-zero temperatures can create something unique. A pop-up restaurant located in the middle of the Assiniboine River that happens to have award winning design is giving Winnipeg residents an opportunity to be outdoors despite winter weather.

Photo: Mike Derblich
“Smart” Snow Clearing: Montreal, Quebec
The City of Montreal hosted a hackathon for local startups and tech companies to build a snow removal application. The winning technology will let Montrealers know when and where snow plows will strike next—preventing cars from being snowed in.

High-Tech Parking Meters: Charlottetown, PEI
Charlottetown is retrofitting every single one of the city’s 800 parking meters with smart technology. This retrofit will allow people to pay for parking, monitor time remaining and add more time via smartphone application.

Community Planning Boards (CPB): Toronto, Ontario
Toronto’s Kingston Galloway neighbourhood has moved forward with the city’s first CPB. This method of community engagement brings local communities into the planning process and strives to create a more positive city building experience.

Library for the 21st Century: Halifax, Nova Scotia
Drawing over 60,000 visitors within the first two weeks, Halifax’s new central library is a game-changer for local communities. This facility is breaking conventional stereotypes with access to recording studios, 3-D printers and more.

City-wide District Energy: Guelph, Ontario
Guelph is the first city in North America to establish a city-wide district energy network. The new plan will have an interconnected thermal grid that will serve industrial, commercial and residential buildings across the entire city.
Q&A

The Secret Science of Winning
An interview with Sasha Issenberg

Sasha Issenberg is a contributor to Bloomberg Politics and the Washington correspondent for Monocle where he covers politics, business, diplomacy and culture. He covered the 2012 American election as a columnist for Slate and is also the author of the best selling book The Victory Lab about the new science of political campaigns.

Sasha came to Toronto to give the keynote address at the Cities for People Forum in November, 2014. We sat down with Sasha to discuss his work and insight into how behavioral science can influence the outcome of campaigns around a particular issue.
Where did the idea for the Victory Lab original come from?

As a political reporter, I had long been frustrated by the fact that campaign professionals would readily claim that a certain tactic “worked,” but when pressed would have nothing remotely like evidence to back up the conclusion. They’d have hunches, or anecdotes, or maybe some very circumstantial evidence that never, in my mind, justified their certainty about the outcome. When I stumbled upon a subculture of geeks who were bringing randomized-control trials to political campaigns, I found it fascinating. I wrote an article on this movement for The New York Times Magazine, which ran just before the 2010 midterm elections and by the time I was done with the piece there was still a lot more I wanted to report and write about the subject. That, I guess, is what books are for.

How did you get such deep access to the strategies employed by the Obama machine?

I was lucky to report the bulk of my book in early 2011, just long enough after the 2008 campaign had ended that no one who was involved could remember what was still a trade secret, but before many of them were locked into a 2012 campaign and the secrecy that comes along with it. One of the advantages of working on a book—as opposed to a newspaper beat,
blog post, or even a magazine story—is you can keep coming back to sources and build trust that you’re trying to write a credible, serious account. With time, people become invested in working with you to ensure that you understand things and can explain them properly.

What do you hope would be the key takeaways for people from your book?

For people within the political world, I hope the entire book is a reminder of how little we ultimately know about how votes are created and by extension, why candidates or parties win, where mandates come from etc. Political consultants, pundits and journalists benefit professionally by projecting authority and self-confidence about their understanding of this stuff, but we’d all be served by a little more humility.

For those who work in other areas, the big takeaway should be how much this is true, to some degree or another, in nearly every human endeavor. “Moneyball” did an excellent job of demonstrating this tension in sport—that expertise in a baseball front office was chimerical and how authority could be challenged by arrivistes who weren’t afraid of math. Every field could use more skepticism, especially if it’s backed with some scientific rigour.

“Every field could use more skepticism, especially if it’s backed with some scientific rigour.”
One of the experiments most illuminating was the impact of peer pressure on making people change their behaviour. What can we take from this generally?

I think we want to believe that people act rationally, especially when it comes to questions of political or civic engagement. But researchers have found, again and again, that you can increase an individual’s likelihood of voting not by reminding them—with various degrees of heavy-handedness—that you know whether or not they do and can judge them against their neighbours. Sending them information about the candidates or issues or parties doesn’t have any such impact. That conclusion may not inspire the most romantic notions of an active citizenry, but if you want to mobilize non-voters, you have to understand what actually drives change in behaviour. In this case, shame works better than argument.

What advice would you have for groups or organizations that are developing strategies for a national campaign to engage citizens on a particular issue?

Nearly every campaign, whether around an election or an issue, finds itself doing things for little reason other than tradition and inertia, or because it makes supporters or donors feel good. Every campaign tactic, from printing signs to making phone calls to writing tweets, demands scarce resources of money or time and before undertaking any of them, it should be questioned how they contribute to a strategic objective. Figure out what exactly you want to accomplish—and this is easier in electoral campaigns where you have to set a vote target—and then think through what exactly that tweet, yard sign or phone call will contribute to it. If you can’t tell a plausible story about a chain of events to shape an individual’s opinion or behavior, ask why you’re doing it. If you can find a way to test its effectiveness at a small scale, whether through a structured experiment or a more informal measurement, do that before making a larger investment. Be skeptical and ruthless about it.

“If you want to mobilize non-voters, you have to understand what actually drives change in behaviour”
We Are Cities is a new campaign to engage Canadians across the country to shape a vision and action plan for how we can build livable cities—healthy places to live, work and play.

Join the conversation at wearecities.ca
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Evergreen is a national not-for-profit that inspires action to green cities. Through Evergreen CityWorks, we are changing the way we plan, design and develop our urban areas to accelerate the shift to greener and more efficient cities.