Practical Governance:
The Victoria Declaration and a Relational Approach to Housing and Support Services

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On January 31, 2024, I stood in front of about 50 people in a downtown community center and defended my PhD thesis. The official academic defence was on May 6, 2024. That one was important for ensuring I met rigorous standards from the perspective of an interdisciplinary group of academic experts. The community defence was equally critical. It was a moment to share with those involved how I'd represented and interpreted our work together. Sharing my conclusions also enabled individuals from the community to give feedback on what I wrote *before* it was finalized. It was a chance for accountability and reconnection with a diverse group of people who came together as part of the Home in the City project. Home in the City was the name of our shared project, involving around 70 people in total across four workshops that were the core of my doctoral field research. The focus of the project was articulating principles and processes for building equity in housing and support services.

Some community members attended because they were part of Home in the City (HITC). Others were not HITC participants, but had encountered the project on our public facing outcome *The Victoria Declaration on Governance of Housing and Support Services*. Participants in HITC were aware the project was "Renee's PhD research" as well as being a community initiative. In other words, the research was community-based as well as action-based—we aimed to achieve something through the project in addition to generating and exchanging knowledge. The shared purpose we developed as a group involved *building our capacity* to make governance decisions together, by *practicing* making decisions together.

The vision for the project came out of advocacy work I had done for almost a decade prior to starting my PhD. Before I applied for PhD programs, I spoke to a local committee on homelessness about my proposed project. I have this idea, I remember saying to the group, which I had been part of for years, what if I study how to do better at building solidarity? Could that help? Do we need another research project or has there been enough research?
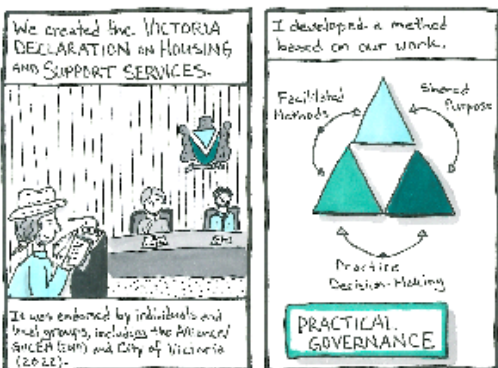
An outstanding scholar and artist, Dr. Danielle Taschereau Mamers, drew a comic summarizing my thesis, based on a rough high-level sketch I provided—and numerous text messages between us. There is a link to the full one-page comic below. I used the comic as a presentation guide in my community defence, which was generously supported by the Institute for Intersectionality Studies and the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Governance, both at the University of Alberta.

I met with a range of individuals and organizations before the first workshop and many people helped refine and develop the shared vision for the project. I started by approaching people with whom I had preexisting relationships. In my discussions about the project, I used a snowball recruitment method, asking who else might be interested in joining a conversation about housing service governance that starts with how we govern our relationships with one another.

I co-facilitated the workshops with Dr. Matthew Wildcat and facilitators from the Indigenous Law Research Unit at the University of Victoria. We wove together a range of pre-existing methods involving stories, focused conversations, and consensus building.

My thesis identifies learnings from the successes and limits of our efforts in advancing *The Victoria Declaration.* Drawing on the relational fieldwork, I introduce and analyze what I refer to as the *practical governance method. Practical governance* starts with relationships and "emplaced" understandings (Thistle,

2017, p. 7). Cree researcher and lived expert Jesse Thistle (2017) asserts in *Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada* that "emplaced networks of significance" are essential to all healthy communities (p. 7). If we want governance that can support healthy communities, it needs to be grounded in these "emplaced" networks.

The *practical governance method* draws on emplaced relational knowledges to support decision-making in housing services. *Practical governance* is a community governance strategy and an applied method of theoretically informed community-engaged research. Unfortunately, existing contexts of governance often replicate systemic inequities. In response to these challenging contexts, practical governance brings emplaced knowledges and lived experience into a process of collective meaning-making. Collective processes can help those involved to draw meaning from their experiences.

I hope practical governance can help expand the dialogue on lived experience in housing service governance, assist groups in navigating disagreements, and co-create new governance processes.

Home in the City PhD comic, Art by Dr. Danielle Taschereau Mamers [link to PDF of comic]

[Alt text: Photograph of a printed comic with large text reading "Home in the City" and smaller text "RENÉE MCBETH, Doctoral Dissertation, U of A. RAVENS inspired by Dr. Val Napoleon's Kokum Raven Series. ART by Dr. Danielle Taschereau Mamers." On the left there is a hand drawn map of Victoria's inner harbour area with Lekwungen place names marked in a few places and an arrow towards WSANEC and PKOLS. The comic is folded, and sitting on a table on top of a printed copy of *The Victoria Declaration*]

[Alt text: Photograph of people sitting at round tables in a large room lined with a mountain mural]

[Alt text: Two comic frames. The first is split in two with the text "To figure it out, I met with many people" above the head and shoulders of six hand drawn people. Below that text reads: "And read a lot" above two stacks of book with a person's head just sticking out a little over a book. The second frame is an image of a person looking at a computer screen with the text: "Eventually I had my research question." And a thought bubble contains the text: "How can our different lived experiences and traditions inform housing governance?"]

[Alt text: One long comic frame with drawing of workshop setting with two tables and multiple people talking, reading large pieces of paper and cards on the walls]

[Alt text: Two comic frames. One is line drawing of an image of Home in the City participants addressing Victoria City Council in the City Council Chambers. The second is a triangle shaped infographic with three linked triangles and the text: "facilitated methods… shared purpose… practice decision making." Additional text above and below reads: "I developed a method based on our work: Practical governance."]

[Alt text: Drawn image of three ravens and one is carrying a paper with a triangle infographic. Text at the top of the frame: "I hope this method will be useful to other groups in need of new strategic processes"]