

Spotlight on Careers with Dr. Lindsay McCunn

Intersecting Environmental Psychology, Architecture, and Climate

Q&A with Dr. Lindsay McCunn, an environmental psychologist and Professor of psychology at Vancouver Island University.

By Sarah Shawky

Imagine a space where you felt instantly comfortable, productive, and satisfied. Now, imagine a space where you have felt the opposite. Do you picture this “comfortable” space as sustainable? What makes up a sustainable space and how does it affect the way in which people behave, work, and feel? Here, Dr. Lindsay McCunn discusses the answers to these questions and the integral role of environmental psychology in design.



Dr. Lindsay McCunn received her PhD from the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, where she was also a sessional instructor in psychology during graduate school. In 2015, she became an Assistant Professor of psychology at the University of Washington Tacoma, USA. Two years later, she returned to British Columbia as a Professor of psychology at Vancouver Island University. She is also the Chair of the Environmental Psychology Section of the Canadian Psychological Association and the Co-Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. Finishing up a second Master’s degree in applied neuroscience, Dr. McCunn plans to explore important questions related to environmental neuroscience, like “what is happening in our brains when we feel place attachment, and how is this different from when we feel attachment to a person?”

What inspired you to pursue a career as an environmental/architectural psychologist?

What path did you take to get here?

“In undergrad, I studied psychology but didn’t know which psychology specialization I wanted to pursue. I took a lot of psychology courses, but always liked art and architecture. At a certain point, I took a 300-level course with Dr. Robert Gifford – environmental psychology – and I could not stop reading the textbook. It was like an electric light bulb went off; a perfect intersection between the rigorous understanding of the human condition, behaviour, and perception of stimuli, including light, acoustics, thermal and olfactory comfort—and beyond. It felt like engineering, psychology, and architecture were coming together to explain how we relate to different settings.”

Dr. McCunn initially came across environmental psychology by specializing during her psychology major; however, others are often introduced to the field after studying neuroscience or architecture first. With this newfound interest, she proceeded to complete her undergraduate thesis project with Dr. Gifford.

“I then took 5 years off after undergrad to work with the provincial government; this gave me a sense for how public dollars are spent and what motivations exist outside of academia that make research more prudent. At the same time, I was still working in Dr. Gifford’s lab when he advised me to consider graduate school.”

Dr. McCunn completed both her Master’s and PhD in Dr. Gifford’s lab at the University of Victoria. Alongside her research and courses, she took on consulting opportunities and a Mitacs internship to merge her learning with professional experiences.

“It was important to consistently keep one foot outside of grad school and make sure that what I was studying was relevant to building users... and to make sure that environmental psychology theories and principles turned into practice.”

In addition to maintaining industry ties, Dr. McCunn also recommended broadening ones’ advisory committee and seeking our interdisciplinarity. To ensure that environmental psychology can be useful in the real world, it’s important to have exposure in various fields, such as geography, history, or architecture; committee members may be resourceful with regards to literature.

“I also recommend that students interested in environmental psychology join a related division or section of the Canadian or American Psychological Associations (CPA or APA). These groups are very helpful for asking questions and making connections with like-minded scholars – it’s also useful for finding a role model or mentor!”

How might human psychology be integrated into sustainable design? Are these two factors correlated?

Dr. McCunn has completed research projects that integrate environmental psychology into acute care settings in hospitals, neighborhoods, and office designs. “In grad school, I did a study that assessed whether or not office sustainability had an impact on the way people felt and behaved inside those offices. You would probably assume that a “greener” or more sustainable office environment would mean greater productivity or satisfaction at work, but this turned out to be a far more critical question.”

Where would you say your research specialty lays? Or is it diversified?

“It is diversified with respect to environment, but the dependent variables that I study are common throughout the work that I do. I’m interested in a psychological construct called sense of place, which is a combination of emotional and cognitive behavior - things like place attachment, place identity, and place dependence. Our sense of place is how we feel bonded and well in and toward settings. I like to take this construct and test it in different environments.

You can think of this construct from the small scale—like a coffee shop—to the large scale, like a community or city. I like to find psychological patterns that work in different contexts and settings. Environmental psychology is so applied and can be used to solve a number of community problems.”

For example, with the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers found that people are more affected by their work environments than originally thought – not necessarily socially, but by the physicality, or habitual familiarity, associated with the workplace.

Dr. McCunn also describes another branch of environmental psychology besides architectural, and that is conservational. This aspect of environmental psychology involves the human behavioral and cognitive response towards sustainability and eco-friendly design, as well as the various problems of climate change.

“There are a lot of environmental psychologists who do research closer to conservation psychology and are interested in pro-environmental attitudes, eco-conscious behaviors, the impact of nature and how psychology can address climate change and sustainability. The field of environmental psychology is definitely growing.”

Can you tell me about a current research project that you are particularly excited about?

Dr. McCunn explains that her lab is currently working in collaboration with the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute on a community project funded by the Canadian Mountain Network.

“We’ve asked community members to self-report their sense of place and nature relatedness, and the hypothesis is that these two constructs are statistically related for residents of coastal, mountainous communities. We’re also measuring perceptions of walkable access to nature and views of nature from homes and adding that aspect into the correlation. We hope to give advice to municipal decision makers to increase accessibility to urban parks, based on evidence. We want to build on the knowledge that people benefit from nature exposure and advance public understanding that it helps mental health.”

Can you tell me a bit about your firm—McCunn & Associates – and how you integrate your research works with industry consulting?

Founded in 2018, Dr. McCunn began her consulting firm in order to conduct a series of pre-and post-occupancy evaluations for an architecture firm that she became associated with while working as an Associate Professor in the United States. Since then, she has worked and published with other firms in Canada, such as HCMA, and with PNNL in the United States.

“In my lab, I will run projects with a particular theory or hypothesis in mind, whereas in my consulting firm, I may be asked by an engineering or architecture company to help interpret research that they’ve already done, which doesn’t necessarily have a hypothesis. I may also help them with statistics, tweak research methods for the future, or write up reports in a way that can be widely communicated with social science in mind.”

To what extent do you believe current infrastructure considers human psychology and where would you say the greatest opportunity lays?

“I think that we could do more. There are a lot of architecture schools that consider environmental psychology, but many do not. Unfortunately, it’s not commonly taught as a distinct subfield of psychology, so it’s a matter of increasing awareness through more dedicated graduate programs and career opportunities.

A wonderful spot for this contribution could be during post-occupancy evaluations – this is where users’ needs and wants are assessed following building design implementation. It’s important to get the word out that there is a subfield in psychology that can quantify the human experience and help more with this step.”

To conclude the discussion, Dr. McCunn shared her take on the role of psychology in this year’s journal theme – climate change.

“Climate change is such a massive, multifaceted issue that it would actually be irrational to say that psychology isn’t part of the problem—and the solution. When I think about how individuals can help to address climate change, we have to be cautious about our approach because climate change can affect people in different ways – for example, depending on whether

one is introverted or extroverted, or more susceptible to anxiety or depression. We want to make sure that people are empowered to take productive action.”

Dr. McCunn explains how considering psychology at the level of the individual can be effective when people are willing to make a change. It is important to communicate that there is no wrong way to contribute, and to not discount the small changes that are made.

“Implementing low-impact changes make a difference to a person’s sense of efficacy, and I think that is wonderful and should be encouraged. If we lose that confidence, it’s hard to build it back up and make a bigger impact later on.”

As a significant factor in understanding how we can address climate change, Dr. McCunn explains that our success lays in considering human psychology and generating a balance between empowerment and worry, through innovative communication strategies, education, and self-awareness.