

Scholar Profile

Christopher De Sousa

Associate Professor and Undergraduate Program Chair

In Fall of 2007, the Geography department at UWM offered the course *Challenges to Urban Sustainability*. Led by Dr. Chris De Sousa this rousing seminar was filled with students from all different backgrounds and disciplines. Geographers sat next to Urban Planners who were next to Urban Studies students. The class became an important place to share ideas about development in Milwaukee, a place where all could hash out a plan for the ultimate goal: a Great and Green Milwaukee. There was also a field trip to Chicago with a pizza party. Chris De Sousa provided the guidance needed to make sense of it all.



Professor Chris De Sousa received his Ph.D in Geography from the University of Toronto in 2000. His interests include brownfield redevelopment, urban environmental management, resource conservation, and green building. His research has brought him out of the classroom and into the community through the

Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative and as a member of the City of Milwaukee's Green Team. Chris has also worked with the UW-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development, authoring *The State of Milwaukee's Environment and Residential Development Activity on Urban Brownfields in Milwaukee and Chicago*. Serving a dual role as an associate professor within Geography department and Urban Studies Programs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Chris De Sousa works to maintain a balance between academia and application. This makes him an important partner within the community, as Milwaukee continues to create innovative policies for sustainability and brownfield redevelopment.

Interviewer: You began your career as a planner in Canada what spurred your move into an academic career?

De Sousa: I didn't know if I wanted to go into academia but I knew that I wanted a more professionally oriented Master's. I had work experiences throughout planning, and one was extremely miserable, it gave me that kick to continue to pursue my PhD. I then took time off to work as a planner full time during my second year. It was a great job and I was almost at a point of not finishing my PhD. I was doing a lot of interesting comprehensive planning and research-based planning so it wasn't routine. I was developing brownfields inventories, and looking for sites that the city could redevelop. It was more comprehensive-oriented planning, visioning, which is extremely exciting. I was also enjoying my Ph.D. research, so it was one of these "what should I do with my life" moments. If you like being a student and doing research, academia is the perfect gig. Plus you don't have to do the same things all the time, you can change topics and the questions are never ending.

Interviewer: You have done quite a bit of research on brownfield redevelopment. Can you talk about this? Have you done any work in Milwaukee?

De Sousa: Initially, when I started my PhD, I was going to focus on watershed management. It was an interesting issue, but it wasn't really moving forward. The personal connection was really with my interest in brownfields. I would drive by these areas on my way to school and wonder what could be done with these things? After doing environmental studies for so long, brownfield redevelopment also brought in economic development issues. It wasn't as much of a cultural issue, it was more of a mix of real estate, economic development, and environmental management all rolled into one. It was very exciting to learn more about how these things interact.

I had one of these moments in graduate school taking a class where I was forced to think like a developer as opposed to an environmentalist and that is when it really hit me that we have these real financial issues in profit making and unless I was going to address those, and incorporate those, I was never going to manage the environmental problem effectively. So my initial research questions were: What are the costs and risks associated with brownfield projects from a public and private sector perspective? What are the outcomes of such redevelopment? How can we apply public policy to make these projects feasible? What are the socio-economic and environmental benefits to society? I think my time in the planning department made me realize that you have to show people the money. What is the financial benefit of a policy, program, or development? Not just a cleaner environment, there has to be some value there in order for the government to justify putting money into it. Whether it was developing a policy or literally providing funds to develop a facility.

So, that's how my early work went, and a lot of it was doing public policy comparisons between Canada and United States. As a dual citizen you always have to make sure you have both the U.S. and Canada well represented. So, my dissertation was very diverse. I did the three paper option, which allowed me to be a little schizoid. One paper compared brownfields policy in Canada, the US, and Europe, another focused on private sector costs and risks, and the third examined public costs and benefits.

I then started working on brownfield to parks when I came to UWM because I needed to put a little green back in my diet. I was getting too much into economic development. I received a Research Committee Award to start my greening work, which then led to several additional grants from the Forest Service. A grant from the Center of Economic Development allowed me to start work on brownfields in Milwaukee. I have to admit doing research in Milwaukee has been great because the DNR and the City pretty much open their doors and welcome you in. Since then I have expanded to include Chicago and Minneapolis as well. So I have several projects on the go. One that I am working on now is with Dr Changshan Wu and Dr. Lynne Westphal looking at the surrounding property impacts of publicly-assisted brownfield projects.

The Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative is probably the best example of work that has allowed me to link research and practice. The Valley has been good because a lot of people have become engaged in doing something relevant for the community or the BID. My co-advisor Virginia Maclaren was the one who introduced me to sustainability reporting and since then I have been very interested in linking brownfields and sustainability. I have been working on a book, due out next month, which links brownfields and sustainable development. In essence, it looks at how brownfields are being used as spaces for developing an array

of residential, recreational, and employment-oriented projects that have breathed new life into the urban environment.

Interviewer: What obstacles have you faced in beginning your research, and what avenues have opened throughout the years?

De Sousa: From a student point of view, no one on my committee specialized in brownfields; in fact, our Chair at the time gave me a couple hundred bucks to go to a small brownfields workshop in Chicago. Chicago was really leading the way at that time, so I went to learn more about it. My committee was strong in environmental management and urban development, but no one was really a brownfields specialist, so that was probably one of my early obstacles. It was tough at the time, but it turned out to be a blessing because I had to focus and become the expert on it. It empowered me to read everything and become the “brownfields person”.

Another challenge was when I started talking about redeveloping brownfields for parks or housing. When I initially proposed it many thought I was wacko. Since then you have seen a plethora of projects, particularly for housing. I have to admit that it has been very nice to see brownfields redevelopment move from a complex novelty to common practice in just a few short decades. Various stakeholders have worked together successfully to move the issue forward. So, I am at that point where I am thinking it is more of a standard real estate issue now, as opposed to a contaminated land issue. So do I move on to another environmental issue that is at the early stages, for example green infrastructure, green building, green development or some other environmental issue? Issues that are not being addressed, but can be moved forward with good research and effective public policy.

The other thing I see in terms of barriers in my development as a scholar is that my work has always been very applied and engaged.

I guess I am seeing other scholarship becoming more theoretical and less engaged and it is tough, because if you go to an academic conference and they are talking about theory and you are saying, well lets just go outside, there are a lot of problems to deal with out there! There is a lot of academic cliquing around theories and it becomes more about the theory and less about the problem.

Interviewer: Do you have any words of wisdom or advice for graduate students?

De Sousa: I suggest picking a topic that you are really committed to, to help keep you going and focused on really addressing it and digging into it. A lot of academia is doing research that really digs deep into a specific aspect of an issue, and I think it is much easier to do that when you are seriously committed to that issue. Try to do work that has clear and direct benefits outside of academia, but that can also fit into academia. There is this excitement when you know your research is being used outside by policy-makers and practitioners. It's a real thrill to know that someone at the DNR is looking at your results in order to formulate a program or a policy. It is exciting because I know someone is using it. But at the same time it has to be well grounded theoretically and have a solid methodology.

I also suggest a mixing of methods because it allows you to see your issue in different ways and helps you understand the issue better. So, I always recommend people mixing qualitative interviews along with some kind of data analysis. It just really makes you understand the problem in a more complete way.

Dr. De Sousa will be leading a course trip this summer to Vancouver to examine sustainability and development. If these ideas excite you, stop by the Geography department for more information.