



Reimagining Abandoned Cities into Sustainable Communities

Created by

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Grade and Subject Area

Grade 9

Duration

Three 75-minute periods

Hope Statement

Our hope for students participating in this lesson is that they engage with realistic sustainable technologies and practices that could improve existing cities, while understanding the social, geographic, and ecological complexities of livable communities. We hope that inviting students to imagine how sustainable solutions could revive abandoned communities sparks curiosity and inquiry, and by extension a willingness to lead meaningful change and critical thought.

Acknowledgements



This lesson was created by **teacher candidates in the Environmental Education concentration** of the Faculty of Education, Queen's University (2024-25), instructed by **Dr. Heather McGregor**. The lesson belongs to a set of lessons created by the class to demonstrate how teachers can be inspired in their climate teaching by youth-created art or stories. **The art and stories created by youth (grades 7-12)** and these lessons aim to help students imagine a positive future in the face of climate change—a future without the use of fossil fuels, where biodiversity is restored, and where humans live in caring communities. The art and stories in these lessons were created for the [Youth Imagine the Future](#) festival in Kingston, Ontario.

Thanks to **Jerri Jerreat and the Youth Imagine the Future team** for supporting this lesson plan initiative, and securing permission to use these art works and stories.

Thanks to **April McInnes** for designing the lesson plan template.

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We hope teachers will be as inspired by young people's visions of the future as we are!

Our Inspiration



Artist Statement “The Window”

By Teagan Amey

A solution for the abandoned buildings and cities across Ontario and Canada that have been devastated by war, floods, nuclear disasters, tornadoes, and other natural or manmade catastrophes. My goal is to illustrate how we can transform these hazardous spaces back into livable environments. This cityscape is lush with greenery; green roofs, moss-covered walls, community gardens replacing parking garages, and window sills adorned with plant barriers to large windows. Kinetic tiles on the ground create energy. A large skyscraper is covered in eco-friendly windows. By utilizing these sustainable resources, we can encourage the return of pollinators to these areas, which will in turn increase oxygen levels through plants and reduce carbon emissions. Furthermore, by including a diverse representation of people in my artwork, I hope to normalize various cultures, disabilities, customs, and relationships in our ever-evolving society.



Lesson Context

Guiding Question

How can we address the variety of social and environmental needs of communities in Ontario, in ways that are more sustainable?

Curriculum Objective

[Grade 9 Geography](#) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024)


E2.5 analyze innovative methods and practices being applied in the planning of communities in Canada and around the world that use culturally informed design elements to enhance the sustainability of these communities.

Our Environmental/Climate-focused Learning Outcome

Analyze and explain how innovative sustainability strategies may be used in planning sustainable communities in Ontario.

Preamble or Lesson Overview

This lesson plan engages students in exploring sustainability strategies for communities, through the reimagining of abandoned cities in Ontario. Students are introduced to the artwork "The Window" by Teagan Amey, as a form of inspiration for the inquiry. The teacher will present a lesson focusing on abandoned communities, and the historical and geographic factors that cause abandonment. Following an introduction to sustainable practices that could improve communities, students will conduct research into a particular abandoned city. Students re-design their abandoned city, using sustainable practices while considering human needs, nature and wildlife, as well as the location of the city. This lesson will culminate in a sharing session where students will present their group ideas to the class during a gallery walk.



Lesson #1

(75 mins)

Materials Required

- Chart paper and markers
- Projector + virtual copy of artwork “The Window”
- Timer on the board
- [Abandoned communities slide deck](#) provided
- [Youtube video about Sustainable Cities](#) embedded in slide deck
- Lesson 1: Exit Card (see [Appendix A](#))
- Electronic device, phone/tablet, or Chromebook cart.

Minds On (15 mins)

- Organize students in groups of 4.
- Project the artwork “The Window” (without the artist’s statement for now).
- Within their groups, ask one student to write on a chart paper and the others to generate ideas about things they notice and questions they might have about the artwork “The Window”.
 - Put a visual timer on the board for students to refer to (~8 minutes).
- If your students need them, offer these prompts:
 - Observe the humans standing at the forefront. What do you notice about them?
 - Observe the background, what interests you?
 - Do you think the colours that were used are significant? Why or why not?
- The intended outcome of the brainstorm is to have students express curiosity or to initiate a deeper train of thought.
- With remaining time, invite report-backs using a carousel approach where each group has an opportunity to share if they wish.

Instruction (40 mins)

Read Teagan Amey’s artist statement (provided on page 3 of the lesson) and explain the significance of this lesson:

- To explore and discover sustainable approaches to city planning;
- To think about, what makes a city resilient?;
- To learn about culturally-informed design practices when planning communities; and,
- We will use abandoned cities as a way to learn more about these themes.

Present the slide deck provided: “sustainable communities and abandoned communities and factors that influence abandonment”

- Note, there is a video on sustainable practices included - ensure closed captions are on and sound is available
- Allow students a few minutes to brainstorm and discuss when slides include questions.
- End on the slide with the list of abandoned communities in Ontario.
- Leave this slide on the board while students transition into the consolidation activity.

Consolidation (20 mins)

- Support students to form groups of 3 for the purposes of the assignment.
- In their groups, students choose one of the abandoned communities in Ontario (the ones listed on the slide deck) to research and reimagine in the next lesson.
 - They should look up where the community is on the map. (Students can use their device/tablet/chromebooks if available).
- Students will choose one image of their chosen abandoned community from a reputable website, via a Google Images search. One student should email the image of the community to the teacher on behalf of their group.
- Distribute Exit Card: Lesson 1 (Appendix A) to each student and ask them to complete the card individually before leaving class for the day.

Lesson #2

(75 mins)

Materials Required

- Printed Images selected by groups the previous day
- [Abandoned communities slide deck](#) provided
- Magazines, scissors, glue
- Markers / other drawing tools
- (optional) internet devices
- Lesson 2: Worksheet (see [Appendix B](#))

Minds On (20 mins)

- Introduce the in-class assignment where students will reimagine the city they chose the day before.
- Suggested script:
 - Yesterday we looked at a few examples of abandoned communities in Ontario. Who can tell me some of the reasons why these towns became abandoned? (refer to slides).
 - Today we are going to be reimaging these communities with sustainable practices to bring them back to life. What were some of the sustainable practices we saw in our inspiration artwork “The Window”? (green roofs, moss-covered walls, community gardens, kinetic tiles, eco-friendly windows).
 - You will be creating art to add some of these sustainable practices into the abandoned city. As you choose which sustainable practices to select, discuss as a group how you will address the specific reasons why the community was abandoned, and what hazards it presents. You may use digital tools, markers, magazines, etc. to draw/collage directly on top of the image you selected of your community.
- Prompt students to consider the assessment description and criteria in the slide deck (slides 17 and 18) and ask them:
 - Why will your sustainable practices work in this location? Be place-specific (not art-specific)
 - Who will live in this community?
 - Even if it’s not repopulated by people or up to current standards, how can this community site be improved?
 - Looking at the artwork “The Window”, what makes this reimagined community a beautiful place?
- Hand out the art materials

Activity (55 mins)

- In groups, students will work on reimagining the abandoned community they chose using markers, magazines, or digital tools directly on top of the ghost town images.
 - *If groups prefer to express their ideas in another way, you can provide or approve alternatives (e.g., writing a story or poem, using more than one photograph, etc.)*
 - As groups are working, go around and discuss the previously listed questions and prompts with them.
- As they make progress on their art, provide students with the Worksheet in Appendix B. When their artwork is complete, they should use the Worksheet to list the sustainability strategies that are visible in their artwork, or that they selected for their community. For each strategy, they should list two reasons why they chose it, taking into account the class discussions you've had.
- Explain that this worksheet will help the audience for their artwork understand what they see and the thinking behind it.
- Each group should hand in their artwork and Worksheet at the end of class so that the teacher may prepare it for a gallery walk next class.

Lesson #3

(75 mins)

Materials Required

- Artwork and Worksheets produced by students
- Lesson 3: Exit Card (see [Appendix C](#))

Activity (35 mins)

Students will participate in a gallery walk around the classroom to view the art pieces of the reimagined communities created by their classmates and discuss the sustainable solutions put in place, as described in their corresponding worksheets.

Discussion (25 mins)

As a class, discuss which sustainable practices were adopted most frequently. Discuss why that practice fits or doesn't fit with human needs and environmental needs. Discuss how some strategies may work better in some communities, versus others.

Conclusion (15 mins)

Lastly, students will individually write a brief reflection as an exit card answering the following questions (Lesson 3: Exit Card in Appendix C):

- List 2 reasons why you would you want to live in the city you reimagined.
- If you were going to live in this sustainable community, what changes would you need to make to your own lifestyle?

Assessment

Assessment Description

In groups, you will select an abandoned community in Ontario and create either a physical or digital re-imagination of how this city could become a revived and sustainable environment. This can be any form of visual representation. You will overlay your sustainable designs on an image of the abandoned community. This re-imagination should be creative and realistic, introduce sustainable strategies, and consider tying in a human element. For example, what are the people living here doing? What does their lifestyle look like? Consider natural elements beyond human-made solutions, such as wildlife inhabiting the city. Do not worry about the way your art looks, what's more important is finding a way to communicate the possibility for these communities to be revived in a sustainable way.

Success Criteria

- I can apply my knowledge of environmental sustainability to propose solutions for abandoned towns
- I can understand what factors contribute to towns being abandoned and why that is an environmental issue
- I can reflect on sustainable practices that I can envision for the future and start implementing now
- I can demonstrate active participation and collaboration within my group, contributing ideas, insights, and skills to create a comprehensive re-imagining of the community
- I can showcase creativity in proposing innovative, realistic, and human-centered solutions that belong with the natural environment and promote long-term sustainability
- I can assess the feasibility of the proposed designs in real-world applications, considering the social, economic, and environmental implications

Accommodation

Accommodation Suggestion

This lesson can be easily adapted for other grades and age groups, or for a longer lesson sequence. To make it more challenging, groups could write a report on the sustainable practices they used in their cities - including human and environmental considerations. To make it less challenging, the lessons can be spread out over multiple days and in more gradual stages. Or, the activities can be done as a larger group or whole class, rather than small group or individual assessment.

Students may create their art piece digitally or physically. Instead of visually representing the community, you can also write up your ideas.

- Students should be provided with learning environments conducive to group work (consider table set up or booking additional spaces to suit all student needs).
- Digital Art Creation:
 - Software - ensure access to programs like canva, powerpoint, other platforms, etc.
 - Devices - provide computers, allow phone use
 - File sharing - google drive, any dropbox for sharing and collaboration.
- Physical Art Creation:
 - Materials - provide materials to create such as paper, writing tools, magazines, scissors, glue, etc.
 - Eco-friendly - outside fallen bio materials, etc.
- Written Submissions:
 - Writing instead of visual creation, can ask them for a brief report or creative narrative detailing their sustainable community.

Appendix A

Name: _____

Lesson 1: Exit Card

What city did you decide to reimagine? (Select one image and have a group member email it to your teacher)

What sustainable practice interested you the most?

Appendix B

Group Names: _____

Name of your Community: _____

Lesson 2: Worksheet

Below, list each sustainable practice you added to your community, and two reasons why you selected it for your community. (This should help explain your artwork to your classmates and teacher).

Appendix C

Name: _____

Lesson 3: Exit Card

List 2 reasons why you would you want to live in the city you reimagined.

If you were going to live in this sustainable community, what changes would you need to make to your own lifestyle?

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