

Small Cities Lab

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Core Faculty

Kevin Lahoda, MFA (<https://aad.lehigh.edu/kevin-lahoda/>)
Assistant Professor, Department of Art, Architecture, and Design
Research interests: linkages between visual and written language, code, data, and culture.

Christina Zhang, M.Arch (<https://aad.lehigh.edu/christina-chi-zhang/>)
Assistant Professor, Department of Art, Architecture, and Design
Research: architecture and social justice, storytelling, memory-making, and built interventions in post-traumatic cities.

Mission

The Small Cities Lab supports scalable research that brings together university faculty, students, municipalities, nonprofit organizations, community stakeholders, and allied industries to create socially relevant research projects that link spatial analysis, planning, the humanities, design, and action. These projects yield dynamic outputs, including scholarly publications, community-facing educational resources, reports and knowledge-sharing initiatives, as well as actionable design and planning solutions. With its focus on the specific challenges of small cities nationwide, Lab-affiliated faculty and students build upon local knowledge in interdisciplinary teams to develop best practices, policy frameworks, and scalable solutions.

Research

Lehigh University's Small Cities Lab develops community-facing, action-oriented research projects centered on contemporary urban change in American cities with populations roughly under 250,000. Aiming to bridge the knowledge and resource gaps typically found in these cities, the Lab partners with communities to ambitiously imagine futures that are obtainable, inclusive, and just.

The Lab's research is initiated by coalitions of university, municipal, nonprofit, and community partners, who co-identify key challenges facing small cities and co-develop research questions, policy analyses, and pilot projects to address those challenges. This community-led, locally-focused approach contrasts sharply with top-down approaches and consultant-driven, pre-packaged solutions that often fall short in smaller, under-resourced cities. This work also engages undergraduate and graduate students at every stage, providing hands-on experience with community engagement, policy reform, design-build projects, and archival research and storytelling.

The Lab's work has been funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Congressional Appropriators, and the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.

Education

Students are central to the work of the Small Cities Lab. In affiliated projects, the Lab immerses students in real-world research tied to local decision-making, research that is integrated into existing courses or that students could focus on as part of a Capstone project,

internship, or summer research experience. Semester-long courses that range from Big Question Seminars (aimed at first-year students); to lower-level courses that introduce students to urban studies, policy and planning; to upper-level architectural studios, design studios, and courses on data visualization and design; to the interdisciplinary Fusion course or similar independent study or capstone projects. Across these various options, students from a range of majors—across the liberal arts, health, and business—engage in place-based research, participatory design, and the public policy process. Students also collaborate directly with non-profit organizations, residents, and local officials.