Careers in Planning and Historic Preservation: Panel Discussion Organized by Career Services

Wednesday, February 25, 12:15-1:45 pm, Meyerson Hall, Room B3

All speakers are PennDesign alumni

Karen Thompson, MCP Planner/Project Manager at Delaware River Waterfront Corporation

While completing her undergraduate degree in history, she became interested in historic preservation. Through her volunteer work with a preservation advocacy group and eventual job as a historian working on historic districts, she became interested in urban planning and the role that policy plays in shaping the physical design of cities. She earned an MCP at Penn with a concentration in Urban Design and a certificate in Urban Design in 2011.

Between her first and second years in the MCP program, she began an internship with the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation, working on different aspects of the Master Plan for the Central Delaware. After graduation, DRWC hired her full time. Her volunteer background gave her experience working with neighborhood and community groups and guiding stakeholders to agreements on decisions and this experience was key to her work on the Master Plan and other waterfront projects. Since the completion of the Master Plan, she has managed a variety of projects, from design to construction, as well as an archaeological dig. She believes her experience with public outreach and her urban design concentration has enabled her to understand a variety of planning projects, from traffic studies to large-scale public realm design. She also found that the property development courses she took while in the program were invaluable to her current work and were an excellent complement to her urban design courses.

Advice: When hiring, she looks for candidates who have experience working with people, diverse groups and communities, and doing different types of outreach, even if not in an urban planning capacity. She likes to see a wide range of experiences in applicants because many skills can be transferable to project management and planning, particularly the types of projects her non-profit does. She strongly recommends that planning students find the time to attend a variety of public and neighborhood meetings while in school to understand community concerns and fears about development, how to effectively communicate planning concepts to citizens, and how see decisions get made at a hyperlocal level.

Jonathon Snyder, MCP, Program Manager at City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce

His undergraduate degree is in history. Before coming back to school, he had several jobs including being a manager in the retail coffee industry. He started wondering why his hometown of Cleveland wasn’t bouncing back like Philadelphia was, and decided to study city planning to understand why some cities prosper while others stagnate or decline. He had an internship in the Department of Commerce and one at Scenic Philadelphia, and then was hired by Commerce. He works on commercial corridor revitalization and specifically on two programs - the Storefront Improvement Program and the InStore Forgivable Loan Program. He does place-making strategies and business strategies.
Advice: Your resume and experience get you through the door but soft skills -- being on time, being friendly and displaying confident humility -- get you the job. You are learning the hard skills now. It’s important to be able to communicate to a community group and to a board of director; to be able to talk about the broad picture and about details. Have a portfolio of projects you have completed.

Moira Nadal, MSHP, Historic Preservation Assistant at the State of New Jersey Historic Preservation Office

Moira earned her MSHP in 2013. Her undergraduate degree was in the Growth and Structure of Cities. She opted out of a PhD. Currently she has two jobs. In addition to her job at the State of New Jersey Historic Preservation Office she also works as a consultant for Heritage Consulting Inc.

She felt the only shortcoming of her academic program was that Preservation students may not get enough architectural survey experience: she believes the students should gain more exposure to the discipline so that they can read and evaluate buildings and know when to apply the skills that they learn in other classes. She did get good technical skills at Penn. She interned with the Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust and then worked for an architectural salvage company (where she learned to work with demolition people, a great skill). She has conducted a lot of community engagement and does that for Heritage. She also serves on the Board of a local historical society.

Advice: Do volunteer work for the learning experience and to make connections. She directed a residential community (and got free room and board). You may find yourself working a couple of part-time jobs.

Mary Alfon Tinsman, MSHP, Senior Associate, Cultural Resources Manager, Johnson, Mirmiran & Thompson, Inc.

Mary earned her MCP in 2000. She did an internship for the National Park Service and after graduation worked for them full-time until they lost their funding. She then worked for a small company till that position ended and she now works in the private sector for a large company, Johnson, Mirmiran & Thompson, Inc. They have eight cultural resources professionals.

The bulk of her work is in compliance, Section 106. Some clients are HUD and FCC.

The economy is turning around. Be flexible and be willing to move out of Philadelphia. When she posts a job she receives 90-120 resumes. Jobs are open for approximately 2 weeks due to the volume of applications received.

Advice: Typos in application materials are a red flag as are letters that are generic. They want people who can write, are organized and willing to travel. Travel can be fun. You learn about different areas and get to see different parts of the country. They want people who are familiar with GIS, can speak to the public.

There are many opportunities in Philadelphia to network including Young Friends of the Philadelphia Cultural Alliance and Women in Transportation.
Hasan Zuhairy, MCP, Associate Developer at Pennrose Properties, LLC

Pennrose Properties was founded in Philadelphia in 1981. Still headquartered in Philadelphia, there are three additional offices in: Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Chattanooga, TN. The bulk of Pennrose’s development activity is in affordable housing, utilizing the low income housing tax credit as well as other soft funding sources, and frequently partnering with Cities, Housing Authorities, and non-profit entities to develop affordable housing. In 2013, Pennrose launched a market rate platform, which is experiencing growth.

Hasan studied architecture as an undergraduate and during that time was focused on the formal nature of buildings. Post-graduation, he worked with an architect/developer in Portland, OR, and during that time shifted focus to looking at the built environment in a broader, more economically comprehensive manner. In the Penn MCP program he concentrated on PPD and completed the Real Estate certificate. He had a summer internship at Campus Apartments, gaining valuable experience with the RFP/RFQ process for development.

Advice: Pennrose, when evaluating applicants for open positions (internships or permanent), looks first and foremost for financial acumen. Also important: a passion for affordable housing, an understanding of basic real estate and urban development mechanics, ability to process data and communicate it succinctly, and an enthusiasm for working in the industry.

Question and Discussion

The Value of Certificates

- PPD (the course, Public/Private Development) was part of the Urban Design certificate.
- A certificate gives you more marketable skills
- It’s an opportunity to specialize and it give you language of a field.

Will some firms pay for attending conference, certification and continuing education?

- Many large firms will.
- Some government offices have small budgets for conference attendance.

Informational interviews are great

- Conservation jobs are hard to get. Basically you should see if you can work on one project at a time so your work gets known.
- They can help you understand office/firm politics

Question on repaying student loans

- Use the 6 month deferment but pay yourself each month
- Don’t be afraid to negotiate your payments
- Overpay when you can
- Don’t stop payments
- Live poor while you’re in school
- Go after the GA jobs

Use your projects as work experience