

Elizabeth Van Horn
2018 ULI Fall Meeting Reflection

When I learned of the ULI/Randall Lewis Health Mentorship Program, I was thrilled that such an opportunity existed, and to find that others were interested in health and the built environment. I applied with the hopes of exchanging ideas with experienced professionals and building my professional network. The reality of my first meeting far exceeded my hopes and expectations.

In many ways, the mentorship was not what I expected. From past research experience I anticipated a rich discussion of the social and environmental determinants of health, which there was, but the speakers and ULI members in attendance worked on a breadth of topics far beyond this. During the Building Healthy Places Interest Forum two speakers discussed their healthy building certifications – Fitwel’s Joanna Frank and WELL’s Rachel Gutter. It was incredible to hear from these women about the meaning and power of their certifications, and then to discuss their work with them personally. The importance of healthy buildings was reinforced during a sustainability tour of Harvard with the Sustainable Development Council. The University’s chief sustainability officer gave us a tour and offered insight on the decisions made regarding design, healthy building materials, and healthy furniture.

The combination of events for the Building Healthy Places Initiative and the Sustainable Development Council (SDC) complimented my academic studies perfectly. I was able to discuss with planners and developers on the SDC the ways in which they incorporate sustainability into the plans for their developments, and more importantly, how they were able to finance such plans. Funding emerged as an issue with many projects focused on sustainability, health, or equity, but I came away from the experience feeling positive. Everyone I spoke with expressed their desire to invest in sustainable practices and their determination to find lower cost ways to do so in order to improve equity. I was inspired by the work of ULI members across the country, and particularly those projects I was able to observe first hand in Boston.

I left the conference with an abundance of new knowledge and full of ideas of my own. I am already looking forward to connecting with ULI members, new colleagues, my mentor, and the other mentees again in Nashville this spring. Overall, the conference was an incredible experience and I’m very grateful to Randall Lewis and ULI for making it possible.