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Building Knowledge, Connection, and Context: Reflecting on ULI's 2018 Fall Meeting

The Urban Land Institute looms large over my education as an urban planner. The organization comes up not only in courses on land use law and public-private development, but also those centered on transportation, health, and community development. Attending the Fall Meeting, it was clear why. I found a group of professionals working through challenges together, understanding that they had more in common than in competition. Through Fall Meeting, I was able to learn more about implementing new solutions, develop relationships with professionals around the world, and dig deeper into the Boston context.

Knowledge

I am often skeptical of the learning that can happen at large conferences, but I found myself pulling out my notepad often at Fall Meeting. In academic environments, I sometimes struggle to find implementation strategies. How does one prioritize various goals that do good? How does one fund and finance these efforts? How does one build a case strategically amongst a host of stakeholders? Through the Building Healthy Places Interest Forum and other sessions, professionals shared how they were going about these endeavors, how they succeeded, and how they continued to struggle.

Connection

ULI is its members. As an urban planner but not a real estate developer, I worried that I might feel like an imposter at an ULI conference. Arriving at the Building Healthy Places Interest Forum, I instead found a home: professionals passionate about precisely the same concepts that I am interested in. My peers in the mentorship program are grappling with many of the same challenges I am, but across the country. In my Healthy Places class back at Harvard, I am already referring to work shared by people like Stuart Levin in Raleigh's Blue Ridge Corridor and Joanna Frank at the Center for Active Design. Super-connectors such ULI staff and my mentor James Moore were helpful in knowing my interests and making connections for me. In between, many friendly faces and inquisitive minds floated through general conference sessions.

Context

Unsurprisingly, a gathering of place-based practitioners takes its site as a serious consideration. This was most impressive with the Urban Revitalization Product Council. Our first moments together were a walking tour through Boston's South End, absorbing decades of history through longtime local Ken Kruckemeyer. After a year of studying planning in greater Boston, I finally had the privilege of meeting Mel King, an activist and academic who has been a pillar of the South End. I realized the next day that every space had been carefully chosen to show us the breadth of Boston: from talking about the city's economic geography at a CDC-owned building in Roxbury to lunch at a curated development in Fenway to talking tech at the Seaport's Innovation and Design Building. We broke out of the confines of the convention center with good reason.