

Snapshots of Non-Traditional Paths to Careers in Commercial Real Estate

An interview with

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Please provide a brief description of your academic history. What was your graduating major in Undergraduate school and in Graduate School (if attended)?

Bachelor of Arts double Major in History and Political Economics, University of California, Berkeley, CA
Master of City Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MA

Did you practice professionally in the degree that you first majored in? If yes, how many years of experience did you gain before your move to a career in RE?

I came out of graduate school during a recession, so I started my own practice and then worked for consulting firms for 8 years providing services for regulatory approval on large urban projects to cities and private developers.

What prompted your move into Real Estate development?

While I was working as a senior planning consultant for EDAW (a planning and landscape architecture firm now part of AECOM) I was hired by one of their Clients, the Mixed-Use development arm of Prologis called Catellus – to work as Director of Planning for the 303 acre Mission Bay project in San Francisco. I stayed in that position for 3 years before moving to Colorado as VP of Acquisitions and Development for Catellus' corporate office. I found that I was much more interested in being the client and leading the development effort rather than being an advisor to developers.

Did you have to take any additional courses of study specializing in RE to enhance your knowledge in this field?

I did not take any additional courses of study in RE investment and planning and learnt on the job.

What was your very first position/ role when you began your career in RE? Could you describe your day-to-day responsibilities and tasks at that time?

I worked for a year with the San Francisco Housing Authority to provide administrative services for

a large projects. I found at the time that my soft skills served me very well. I was good at managing budgets, schedules and teams, and also have strong communication skills which enabled me to interface with cities and public agencies as well as work with community groups, all of which were essential to get through the public hearing and approval process for complex projects.

Later as SVP of Mixed-use Development at McWhinney I had two distinct roles i) contribute to Planning and Design and the Entitlement process to which I applied the skills I had honed from my previous work experience and ii) to identify and underwrite new urban infill development deals.

Early in your RE career, what type of projects did you find most fulfilling?

Highly complex urban and TOD projects with politically difficult entitlement, planning and infrastructure, bringing together design expertise, operational expertise, community groups and stakeholders. My public speaking skills helped me in articulating goals, concepts and methods to the different groups who were part of the process, while my writing skills helped in responding to RFPs, writing reports for the Planning Commission and City Council and preparing internal reports for my employers.

How has your role or area of focus in RE evolved over the years? In what ways did your experience and knowledge in your previous professional degree bring value to your role in RE?

My role early on was primarily a manager of people, along with the responsibilities of maintaining schedules, budget and reports that came with it. In my last role as Senior Vice President at McWhinney leading their Mixed-Use Development group I was responsible for identifying, structuring, managing the design and the entitlement process for new mixed use projects as well as acquiring urban infill real estate throughout the country that present unique long-term value opportunities and outstanding placemaking potential.

It was during my undergraduate years while traveling in Europe as a History student that I was introduced to Architectural History and was drawn to the world

of Built Environment. This led me to study Urban Planning in Graduate School which underpinned my grasp of the development process.

On the other hand, my undergraduate Major in the broad field of Politics provided me with a holistic understanding of how all the parts fit together.

**How many years have you been in the CRE space?
What are the most rewarding aspects of your work?**

I have been in CRE for 25 years. What I enjoy most is leading teams, working with great design consultants to create an exceptional vision for the community.

What is the one piece of advice you would give college students today?

Real Estate is a very broad field with lots of areas of subspecialty. If you are interested in a career in real estate, go get some work experience in any aspect of the field that you can so you will be exposed to a variety of these fields. Then choose one and work to hone tangible skills that will be valuable to the type of employer you are interested in working for.

Also, join your local ULI District Council for exposure to a wide range of experienced professionals.

Thank You!