According to Stephanie Meeks, author of The Past and Future City and featured speaker at the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Fall Meeting in Los Angeles, “the urban America of tomorrow is made up of happy, walkable, equitable, sustainable, thriving, and yes, historic cities.” Across the country, communities of all sizes are searching for solutions to unprecedented challenges related to the built environment such as affordable housing, homelessness, and aging infrastructure. These challenges impact the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities as well as the vibrancy and resiliency of local economies. How can local leaders navigate these issues and prepare for the city of tomorrow?

At the ULI Fall Meeting, I had the pleasure of attending thought-provoking panel discussions and tours that explored these questions and more. At the Building Healthy Places Interest Forum, Christopher Smith, Senior Program Officer for the Colorado Health Foundation, encouraged attendees to ask: what would it take to create places of opportunity where all people have access to the resources they need to thrive? Juanita Hardy, ULI Senior Fellow, followed with remarks on how creative placemaking strategies can promote positive mental, physical, and social health benefits by bringing together a diverse range of community stakeholders to celebrate the unique strengths, history, and culture of their community. According to Hardy, incorporating the arts into community revitalization projects can help cultivate a sense of place. We then took a walking tour of Van Nuys Boulevard in Pacoima to see firsthand the power of murals to awaken the senses and evoke a sense of pride in public spaces.

Attending the Urban Revitalization Council (URC) Meeting was the most memorable experience of the trip. The URC meeting explored how real estate and land use decisions in housing, transportation, and community development impact quality of life. This session, which included leaders from the public and private sectors in addition to community advocates, challenged me to about how I can leverage my role as an urban planner to help municipal leaders evaluate the health and equity impacts of urban revitalization projects. In the afternoon, we toured the USC University Village, a 15-acre project that features 1.2 million square feet of commercial and other non-residential space and 663 housing units. Representatives from USC, the City of Los Angeles, and the local non-profits discussed the needs, priorities, and concerns of stakeholders in South East Los Angeles and the complex negotiations that were necessary to create a Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) that was achievable and responsive to the long-term needs of the community.

I’m honored to have been accepted to the inaugural class of mentees for the ULI/Randall Lewis Health Mentorship Program. Over the course of the week, I gained new insights about the effect of real estate and land use decisions in economic development, housing, and transportation on the health of people and communities. I would like to extend a special thank you to Randall Lewis, a ULI trustee, for his generous support of the program and to Clare De Briere, Founder of C+C Ventures, for her mentorship, leadership, and encouragement. I look forward to applying the knowledge, inspiration, and insights obtained during my experience in my professional and academic career.