Justin Brown
Reflections on the 2018 ULI Fall Meeting

As part of the ULI/Randall Lewis Health Mentorship Program, I was afforded the opportunity to attend the ULI Fall Meeting in Boston. I applied for the menteeship with the goal of advancing my knowledge of land development that serves the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit. I came to Boston with my background as civil engineer and master’s student in urban and regional planning. With this perspective, I had a pretty well-rounded understanding of the “people and planet” portion of that triumvirate but was lacking in my understanding of how developers and financiers see current trends in land development and construction. I had attended ULI engagements in the past, but I travelled to Boston assuming that developers generally only care about the dollar bottom line and everything else is “window dressing”. After my attendance at the ULI Fall meeting, I found this to be far from the truth.

The first day of the conference was an all-day small group forum on building healthy places. Speakers discussed wellness rating systems of WELL and Fitwel and metrics for measuring “wellness” of communities and building inhabitants. During the day we also visited the Arup office building that showcased many of these concepts of “wellness”. While I have researched and read plenty of material discussing “walkability” and community vibrancy, I was largely unaware of the wellness discussion. It was interesting to hear how demand for prime workspace is impacting employer decisions regarding office space amenities and employee health. Furthermore, I was surprised to learn that ULI had robust segment that was making the case for open spaces as a necessity for developers. Overall, I found my perspective illuminated on how the built environment affects the human physical and mental health.

A topic that heard over and over again that surprised me was inclusivity. One element of inclusivity discussed was the pursuit of ethnically and gender diverse staff. To me, this stood out not just as a PC “feel good” strategy, but a genuine attempt to employ persons with different experiences and perspectives. Another element of inclusivity discussed was local citizen engagement. Developers spoke of genuine efforts to understand what the locals want or need rather than designing a development in a vacuum. These discussions sounded like a genuine attempt to avoid tokenistic charrettes and truly understand the local context of a given project.

Another topic I heard discussed many times was “resiliency”. Where scientists and other professionals may speak of “adapting to climate change”, developers frame the issue of climate change as ensuring the resiliency of property investments. This is made very clear in a city such as Boston that faces real and present risks from extreme weather events. These events can inundate the coast and severely damage property. As these extreme climate events are expected to become the new normal, it makes sense that investors should heed the science of climate change and harden properties against damage. An example of this was project by the waterfront that relocated its critical electrical systems on the second floor of the building at great expense.

Discussions on Public/Private partnerships was another enlightening topic. From my work experience, agencies and developers can often have a difficult relationship. It was heartening to hear agencies discuss transparency of expectations that give developers a degree of certainty and predictability. Also, it was great to hear developers discuss incorporating agency requirements, such as open space, into the project as a strength rather than merely complying with a condition of approval. Furthermore,
developers discussed proactively incorporating these agency-required mitigation measures early on in the life of the project rather than “shoehorning” them in later.

Lastly, agency and developer representatives admitted that they both have many of the same goals and that disagreements mainly arise in how to execute them.

Lastly and most importantly, I am very privileged to have Chuck Schilke as my mentor for the ULI/Randall Lewis Healthy Places mentorship program. I am still pretty new to ULI and it was a great help to have him as a guide. He shared his experiences as a Real Estate Professor and as a ULI member. He spoke very highly of ULI as a research body that strives to remain “apolitical” and provide a “safe” middle ground for public and private actors to discuss land development. His high opinion of ULI has encouraged me even more to continue my relationship with ULI for professional growth.

Overall, I immensely enjoyed my time at the ULI Fall Meeting. It was a highly educational event that also allowed me to network with other professionals in the land development field. Hearing from professionals in architecture, planning, and real estate gave me a much broader view of the land development field than I had previously. The caliber of talent and professionalism that ULI brings to bear is inspiring to me as a young professional. I look forward to the 2019 ULI Spring Meeting and further involvement in ULI.