

Conversations with Alumni Spotlight on Brianna Holan

Bachelor of Science in City and Regional Planning, Cal Poly, 2004

FOCUS: *When did you graduate from Cal Poly, why did you choose a planning degree in the first place, and why Cal Poly?*

I graduated from Cal Poly in 2004 with a BSCRIP and minor in Sustainable Environments. I chose to go to Cal Poly for its great academic reputation and incredibly beautiful location. I began my college career majoring in Biological Sciences, thinking I wanted to go into ecological field work. Although exposed early to the planning profession from my father who has been a city planner for most of his career, now a Community Development Director in Forest Grove, Oregon, my interest in the profession wasn't piqued until I started taking classes in sustainable environments and found an enriching way to apply my environmentalist and urbanist interests towards real solutions. Through this major, the sustainability course work, and studying abroad in Florence, Italy I found my love for design.

I worked through school gaining some early experience interning at a couple different governmental planning offices. Which gave me some exposure to the various types of public sector planning. I worked at the regional Caltrans office helping with environmental documentation of highway projects. I worked at the San Luis Obispo County Current Planning Office making maps and processing development permits. I also did a few small contract projects with the cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach that opened my eyes to the world of consulting.

FOCUS: *Tell us about life after CRP. What were the most rewarding professional experiences that you remember?*

After graduation I wanted to live in a city that had a good balance of career opportunities, both urban and an accessible outdoor lifestyle. I moved to Seattle, WA and have found it to be an amazingly dynamic place, as it has gone through incredible changes over the course of several boom and bust economies. I started working for the City of Bainbridge Island which required a 15 minute walk and 35 minute ferry boat commute from my Capitol Hill apartment. This first professional job was very enriching; I worked in both current and long-range capacities. I was involved in the city's Farmland Program, Non-Motorized Advisory Committee, Comprehensive Plan Updates,



as well as permit review. The permit counter work was among the most intense and memorable parts of my time at the city. There's nothing quite as educational as having to answer so many varying questions about the what, where, when, and how of the development review process. However, I found myself more excited with the implementation and design aspects of the job, working with committee members, creating maps, and even designing flyers for evening meetings. So when I was made an offer to work as an urban design consultant, I jumped at the opportunity.

FOCUS: *Can you talk a little about your current job? What gets you excited about your job? What are your responsibilities? Can you describe the most exciting projects you are working on?*

I currently work in the private sector as a planning and urban design consultant at LMN Architects, excitingly we were just named the AIA Firm of the Year for 2016. I've had the good fortune to work on a wide range of project types and in various geographic locations. From district/downtown plans for small towns to streetscape and pedestrian bridge design for large urban centers. I have enjoyed urban design work as it specifically deals with the physical context of our cities, how the buildings interface with the street and vice versa. It's fascinating to me how sometimes seemingly simple details, like the existence of an awning on a building can contribute so much to a street being an comfortable, inviting place to walk (especially in rainy Seattle).

I am currently working on a pedestrian bridge for the City of Seattle that will link an urban center around a future Light Rail Station to the North Seattle College and surrounding neighborhoods across I-5. The bridge will act as a visual gateway into the city and offer a unique user experience from within as it traverses distinctive contextual conditions. The bridge is planned to be constructed in 2018.

I have also participated in several art and temporary installation projects for Park(ing) Day and other art events as a fun way to engage the public and explore a specific urban condition.

FOCUS: *Do you like working for the private sector?*

Private sector work has advantages and disadvantages. I love being able to work on such a wide variety of scales and client groups. And there is a lot of excitement around chasing and

Editor's note: See some of Brianna's published work: Mark Hinshaw & Brianna Holan, "Rooming House Redux" in Planning, Nov. 2011.

getting new work. My role as an urban design consultant centers around concept development and implementation strategies, then the work typically gets transferred back to the client for the execution.

The challenging aspects of private work are the hours, travel, and constant need to think about “what’s next?”. I’m rarely ever working on just one project at a time and often the schedules are competing so its easy to get overwhelmed.

FOCUS: *Looking back to your planning education at Cal Poly, and from the perspective of a successful professional, what do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the department? From your perspective, what are the critical skills for young planners?*

My career path took me in a slightly different direction than Cal Poly’s planning program prepares one for. The BSCRIP is centered around the public sector planning practice in the State of California, where probably the majority of graduates end up working and are well prepared for the job right out of the gate. Where I feel I could have benefited more was individualized design and problem solving skills versus the considerable amount of group work the program tends to utilize. When it comes to an undergraduate education, fundamentals are the most important: being able to write well, problem solve, and present information in a compelling graphic format are key skills that should be overly emphasized in my opinion. The details of state regulation can be learned on the job.

FOCUS: *What was the most challenging aspect when starting your professional practice?*

Finding the right fit for my skills and interests proved challenging when looking for my first job. As I was more passionate about design and implementation than policy and permitting, I struggled early on to figure out the right approach of where I should be focusing my energy. That first job at Bainbridge Island ended up being an appropriate beginning for me as a professional because it gave me a variety of responsibilities to help build my experience in the field and test what aspects of the profession I found most compelling. That exposure is what led to engaging the consulting work I do today.

Figure 1: Brianna and a Park(ing) Day installation.



Figure 2: Brianna at the Corridor Study Open House, Shoreline WA.

FOCUS: *What do you see as planning’s big challenges over the next 5-10 years, and what does Cal Poly need to teach students so that can successfully engage in these challenges.*

Over the next 5-10 years the biggest issues on the table are climate change and the rapid growth in our cities. I suppose the overall approach is figuring out how we all live together with less of an ecological footprint, but more choices in our daily lives. These topics bleed into many aspects of the planning field from affordable housing to bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Our next generation of planners will need to address livability and sustainability with less resources, its a tall order, but I’m optimistic there are solutions out there. Its all too easy once embedded in a specific jurisdiction to focus on localized issues, but we need to keep mindful of how localized decisions effect the larger system.

Growth management strategies and implementation is an important topic for California planners to dive into moving forward. Planning students should be prepared with an understanding of regional and global conditions, how to access resources and to begin to address these issues; “what are the problems and who are the players that need to be engaged?”.

Moreover, it seems like every day there are new digital tools to analyze conditions and develop solutions being developed. The ability to collect, process, and communicate data, evaluate options, all with expanding community engagement has grown exponentially over the last few years. The next generation of planners should not only utilize, but play a role in developing these tools.

FOCUS. *Any final thoughts for our students?*

Be bold.