

INTERPLAN

APA

American Planning Association

International Division

Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the International Division of the American Planning Association

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4

CHAIR'S COLUMN

Michael Kolber

5

DIVISION INITIATIVE
UPDATE

**Japan Collaboration Group
Planifiquemos Project**

6

PROJECT EXHIBITION

**2021 International Planning
Award - Africa**

10

SPECIAL REPORT

**From MIT Humphrey-APA Collaboration
To International Development**
- An Interview with Prof. Bish Sanyal

16

BRING ME THERE

Greece and East Mediterranean
Niki Xenia Alygizou

19

MEMBER
PROFILE

Akshali Gandhi

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A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DIVISION
OF THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

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American Planning Association

International Division

Creating Great Communities for All

Well, the world is starting to reopen. It is cliché to mention it, and even more cliché to start an article with it, but that's where we are. For the Division, we are starting to work on our own return to normal. We are starting to discuss how to move forward with some of the activities that we could not do over the past year – regional meetups, student travel grants, an in-person National Planning Conference. For me personally, I am excited about the possibility of seeing some of you face-to-face again.

We have taken advantage of the time we have had over the past year to find new ways to serve our membership. We have purchased our own zoom platform, giving us the freedom to host meetings, webinars, and other events. We have started several new initiatives, including the Japan Collaboration Group, and Planifiquemos. Our Aging and Livable Communities initiative has transformed into the Aging and Resilient Communities Committee, while our Humanitarian Planning Committee is hosting webinars every other month. All of these programs are open to new Division Members joining and participating.

Perhaps most exciting is our new partnership with the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellows Program. As part of the Fulbright exchange activity, this program brings experienced professionals from developing countries to the United States for a year of professional enrichment. The SPURS-Humphrey program, hosted by MIT, hosts students with a focus on urban and regional planning. As part of this partnership, the International Division will seek to provide mentors and identify professional opportunities for the Fellows. In turn, Humphrey Fellows will participate in Division activities, including webinars and other presentations about their own experiences. This exchange strikes at the heart of the International Division's mission, and I am hopeful that our membership will be as enthusiastic as I am.

As always, I am excited to hear from Division Members, to build on our existing programs and build new ones. We are starting to put together our new workplan for the 2021-2022 program year. Please join us in September for our Fall Business Meeting to help us plan for our next program year.



Michael Kolber, AICP, is a senior planner for the City of Trenton, NJ. He worked for the NJ Departments of Environmental Protection and Community Affairs and served overseas as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Burkina Faso and as a Monitoring Specialist for the International Rescue Committee in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Domestically, Mr. Kolber served as a volunteer in the United Way of Greater Union County and the Manhattan Borough President's Office. Michael has an M.S. in Urban Planning from Columbia University.

Japan Collaboration Group

The Japan Collaboration Group (JCOG) was established in this March. Currently, the JCOG has 23 members including three representatives to Japan.

Two Projects

The JCOG is developing two projects: 1) the **Japan Planning 101**. It introduces basics about planning and urban development in Japan, and 2) the **Knowledge Sharing Series**. It shares the knowledge of planning in various subject matters. It has been identified in a survey that the group's top topics are disaster risk management and recovery, housing, and planning for aging communities, and sustainable development. The Series is focusing on risk management and recovery at the moment. The two projects publish one-page summaries to capture the essence of books, reports, and articles of interest.

Monthly Meetings

The JCOG holds monthly meetings at 8 pm EDT on the second Tuesday. We invite guests to the meetings to discuss subject matters. In the past months, we invited Ryoji Takahashi from the Oriental Consultants Global, Olesia Shapovalova from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine, Kanako Iuchi from Tohoku University, and Robert B. Olshansky from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Exploring Ideas

We keep exploring interesting ideas. One of them is a program to pair students in planning schools in the United States and Japan, through which participating students can exchange their learning experiences, do projects together, and know each other.

Get Involved

If you are interested in joining the group or having any suggestions, please email jingzhangaicp@gmail.com.

Planifiquemos Project

Planifiquemos: Spanish and Involvement Handbook for Planners and Latinxs to Create Better Communities Together. The project was initiated in April and is developing two pilot sections: the transportation section and the public involvement strategy section. It follows the principles that sharing planners' knowledge with a community is as important as gaining input from it, and well-informed community members are essential to any planning process.

Purpose

The project serves three purposes:

1. Helping planners overcome language barriers when communicating with Latinx communities.
2. Advising planners on how to involve Latinx communities in the planning process.
3. Helping Latinxs know more about planning and have more influence in the planning process.

The project has two phases. The first phase is to develop a handbook for projects in the United States. The second phase is to develop a handbook that is more applicable in Latin American countries.

Get Involved

We need help from native Spanish speakers who can translate planning-related materials from English to Spanish. If you are able and willing to help, please email jingzhangaicp@gmail.com.

Community and Regional Planning

Project: Thompson & Grace Medical City Master Plan | Akwa Ibom, Nigeria

Recipient: Dr. Chanam Lee, Dr. Forster Ndubisi, Dr. Sinan Zhong, and the Thompson & Grace Medical City Master Planning Team

Institute/Firm: Texas A&M University



Akwa Ibom, Nigeria is a “healthcare desert” with its local populations bearing the highest disease burden in the world (e.g. 90% of all malaria cases). Children and women are at even higher risks with many preventable deaths each year. Among the contributing factors are the high rates of mortality, poverty, and crime, and the lack of access to health resources (e.g. hospitals, nutritious food, clean water), all of which can be improved through the provision of healthier and safer environments.

As the first-of-its-kind medical city, each planning step required innovation. Scalability and adaptability were the key due to the dynamic land assembly process resulting from complex land ownership structures, which led to the phased and scalable programming solutions for the master plan. Another novel approach was to incorporate the unique healthcare-seeking behaviors/culture, promoting both traditional and alternative, and preventive and curative approaches to healthcare.



Infrastructure Planning Award

Project: Liberia Municipal Water Project | Liberia

Recipient: Kate Kowalski and Thomas Keeffe

Institute/Firm: The U.S. Agency for International Development and Tetra Tech

As of 2003, Liberia was secure following decades of civil war. However according to the World Bank in 2007, the average annual income remained \$290 and life expectancy at 45 years. Access to basic necessities, like water, was a principle constraint to economic growth.

The Tetra Tech suggested regulations to protect the watershed area and a gravity main extension with a storage facility to provide water as quickly as possible. The medium term restored three pillaged water treatment plants with slow sand filters, chlorine, and solar-diesel hybrid system. Long-term projects include institutional capacity building to deliver, manage, operate, and maintain the new water systems with mentorship. To date, 20.8 miles of distribution piping and private connections, and 45 kiosks are complete and support clean water access for more than 30,000 people.



A public-private partnership that operates the water kiosks and promotes gender equity in the sector by hiring women



Tetra Tech delivered quick impact mini-systems that provided clean drinking water to each city in the near term



Tetra Tech planned, designed, and delivered three water treatment plants that have maintained clean water access for over two years

Advancing Social Equity Award

Project: Structural Plans for Mozambican Towns | Mozambique

Recipient: Filippo Imberti, Luca Eisen, Maarten Temisela, Valentina Travaglini, Graham Pugh, Andrea Fantin, Evandro Holz, and Liz Gauntner

Institute/Firm: TSPA and Vocação Técnica, LDA

TSPA, together with Vocação Tpcnica Lda, developed Structural Plans for Mozambique, a territorial management instrument which defined spatial organisation for the five municipalities of Alto Molocue, Boane, Gurue, Nhamatanda and Milange. The project responded to the institutional decentralisation of Mozambique undertaken in 2014 in a context of rapid demographic growth and scarce institutional control on regulated land ownership.

The Plan developed a vision for the city together with municipal authorities and local citizens through questionnaires, public audiences and collaborative planning workshops. The project identified geospatial data to then analyse and design planning tools with the local inhabitants. The approach of the project was to make use of citizens' knowledge as a source and we made sure to equip stakeholders with the right tools to effectively respond to future challenges.



From MIT Humphrey-APA Collaboration To International Development

- An Interview with Prof. Bish Sanyal



Bish Sanyal is the Ford International Professor of Urban Development and Planning and Director of the Special Program in Urban and Regional Studies (SPURS)/Hubert Humphrey program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

InterPlan: What should U.S. planners know about the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program?

Bish Sanyal: The United States Department of State brings a dozen or so urban planners from around the world to the U.S. each year. The purpose is to give them opportunities to upgrade their skills, foster knowledge exchange, and most importantly, create institutional linkages between them and American planning institutions. In the long term, we hope the Program will help strengthen the relationship between the home countries of visiting planners and the United States.

The Humphrey Program was created in 1978 by President Carter and the US congress to honor Hubert Humphrey. It was a very interesting time as the Cold War was still on. I think President Carter wanted to create a program to demonstrate the goodwill of the American people towards the world and he wanted to do it in a very specific way: by addressing urban challenges of newly-developing nations. We know that there has to be a forum to actually bring people together to build good relationships among the people of the world.

All Humphrey Fellows are placed at MIT for an academic year. They can audit courses at MIT and Harvard University. They also spend a month or six weeks doing professional work in planning organizations across the United States. The fellows do not receive any payment for their professional affiliations since they already receive a stipend from the Program for a period of nine months. The Humphrey program also covers the air transportation costs for the fellows and provides support to get settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

After completing the nine-month program, the fellows return to their home to influence urban policies in their home countries with knowledge and experience of how urban issues are being addressed in the U.S. The goal is to create leaders around the world who share North American values of democracy and technological innovations.

In the process, the program also provides U.S. planners the opportunity to learn about urban planning challenges around the world and provide them a global network for cooperation and mutual learning.

InterPlan: Who are these planners from around the world?

Bish Sanyal: They are successful mid-career professionals in their country and have a considerable amount of work experience in their field. Usually, they hold important positions in their own organizations. We usually have 12 Humphrey fellows each year. They are selected through a rigorous process led by the U.S. Embassy in their country.

InterPlan: Do they apply what they learned in the U.S to their country?

Bish Sanyal: That's definitely one goal of the program, though many people think that the U.S and developing countries are so different that no knowledge is directly transferable. That skepticism is valid, but there is actually much knowledge that is useful across borders. This includes strategies for environmental sustainability and the role government, private firms, and communities can play in addressing urban issues.

InterPlan: What is your message to the fellows at the beginning of the Progra

Bish Sanyal: First, we want to make them comfortable

in the new setting. They are mid-career professionals, not students, with comfortable homes in their country. Some bring their family with them. They have to be comfortable in their new environment, then they can begin adjusting to day-to-day life in the United States.

Second, we introduce them to the wide array of courses offered at MIT. We ask them what they would like to do in five to ten years, after they return home, and advise them what it will take to reach that professional destination.

The third thing we do is to introduce them to American planning institutions. We seek to connect our fellows to professional organizations, like the American Planning Association (APA). This helps establish long-term connections between the fellows and their North American counterparts.

InterPlan: What is your expectation of the collaboration between APA and the Humphrey program?

Bish Sanyal: A two-way flow of knowledge is one of the fundamental principles on which the Humphrey program was created. Humphrey fellows can share with North American planners the urban problems they are facing in their home countries and how they try to meet those challenges. They can learn how US planners may have addressed similar issues at earlier stages of development. Such conversations can help American planners expand their networks overseas. These sorts

Humphrey fellows can share with North American planners the urban problems they are facing in their home countries and how they try to meet those challenges. They can learn how US planners may have addressed similar issues at earlier stages of development. Such conversations can help American planners expand their networks overseas.

of connections can be very valuable for planners who are interested in comparative approaches to urban development.

As for the Humphrey fellows, they benefit immensely by getting to know American planners. I hope that we can create a kind of buddy system to facilitate such interactions. We try to pair them with American planners who are interested in the fellows' native countries. Ideally, they can learn from their American colleagues about planning practice in the States and about North American culture in general.

The second possibility is to professionally affiliate the fellows with the organizations where APA members work. It is helpful if the fellows get the opportunity to observe how US planners do professional work for a month or two. As I mentioned, US planning organizations do not need to pay the fellows. The goal is to create a global network of like-minded planners and having professional affiliations may be the first step towards that objective.

A larger objective is to use the global network to address local instances of globally-connected problems. Such a forum is necessary for the kinds of problems we are facing around the world, including in the US.

InterPlan: So, Collaboration is the key to solving global problems?

Bish Sanyal: Right. Many of the problems we are facing now have emerged because of global

connections and cannot be addressed adequately by any one nation. Take the examples of environmental pollution, global migration, or global economic fluctuations. The idea that any one nation can handle those problems single-handedly is obsolete. I think Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State, said very well recently, that no

A larger objective is to use the global network to address local instances of globally-connected problems.

problem can be solved by any one country anymore.

What is a common misunderstanding or bias regarding international planning that young planner may have?

Bish Sanyal: Well, the world is very different from 30 years ago. China has been a huge success in terms of economic development. Even though it is not a democratic country, what it has accomplished is incredible. Other nations, like India and Brazil, have also moved forward in a significant way even though there is still widespread poverty. In general, many newly-developing nations have done reasonably well despite many constraints, financial and otherwise. However, North American planners tend to think that the international development

scenario has not improved significantly. They are often not aware that there are large variations in performance among newly industrializing nations.

There's also a huge mistrust of foreign governments, a general feeling that most governments are corrupt and that is why nothing gets done. This broad pessimistic assessment overlooks many instances of small successes in developing nations. Things do get done, despite many challenges. For example, food production has increased significantly in many nations, industrial production has increased, and some nations have implemented effective social policies to assist the poor.

It's frustrating that people are more inclined to look at what did not get done than what did. And when good results do become visible, people tend to attribute such success to individuals, not organizations. This attitude hurts the ability to replicate success because charismatic leaders cannot be cloned! In fact, no leader can be successful in every situation, no matter how charismatic they may be. The same leader who may have been successful in raising agricultural production might not be as successful to address urban problems. That is why it is important to carefully study the context for planning action rather than celebrating the charisma of individual leaders.

There are misconceptions about the U.S, as well. Many new fellows tend to think that Americans are very wealthy and are not aware that there is a considerable amount of poverty in both rural areas and

Building a learning environment that creates genuine common ground between people of different cultures and nationalities is not an easy task. We need to experiment with many forms of interactions, including the ones MIT and APA are discussing right now.

in some big cities. The fellows are surprised when they see homeless people begging on the street. On the positive side, the fellows also often assume that North America's advanced technology is the answer to urban problems. Certainly, some technological innovations can create opportunities to address old problems in new ways, but it is never technology alone that solves any problem. Technological knowledge needs to be used by flexible organizations that can learn quickly from mistakes.

A further misconception is that many fellows wrongly assume North Americans are overtly individualistic people who care only about their own ambitions. This sort of thinking does not help the fellows understand the complexities of how American families operate. It also ignores many community-based collective efforts at problem solving. To rectify such biases on both sides, there needs to be more conversations between international fellows and North American planners. This is one goal of our effort to connect more deeply with APA.

InterPlan: Is there is a lot of room to improve mutual understanding?

Bish Sanyal: Yes. I used to run a seminar at MIT for our fellows. It was called "Difficult Conversations".

To create a common bond among all of us, we need to ask each other difficult questions that do not have a clear-cut answer. For example, a North American student might ask an Indian fellow why India continues to be so poor. The Indian fellow might reply that mass poverty has been reduced significantly and that one can learn from what India has accomplished despite many constraints. Then, the Indian fellow may raise concerns about race relations in North America. The North American student may respond by pointing out varying successes in different states and ask the fellow to talk about "caste" in India. This sort of conversations can be hard to manage, but are necessary to transcend simplistic and biased views on both sides.

There are many such misconceptions that need to be cleared before we can create a global network of like-minded planners who are committed to work together. Building a learning environment that creates genuine common ground between people of different cultures and nationalities is not an easy task. We need to experiment with many forms of interactions, including the ones MIT and APA are discussing right now.

InterPlan: What skills are essential for planning international

development successfully?

Bish Sanyal: The first skill that comes to my mind is the ability to negotiate. This is important because the globally interconnected problems that we are dealing with have no clear cut, black-and-white solutions. Multiple stakeholders need to be at the table to negotiate any long-term settlement. Sometimes a technical solution may appear adequate for the task at hand, but eventually, all solutions need to be politically executed by creating a consensus among groups with varying interests.

The second is understanding how to bypass financial constraints. How do organizations or government agencies operate with limited budgets? Where does the money come from? How do you attract investments, both private and public, to generate revenue? In this regard it is important to remember that generating new revenues is more difficult than using old revenues in new ways!

The third aspect of development planning that is often ignored are skills necessary to address implementation challenges. Why don't good plans get implemented as envisioned? We always hear about good plans that were badly implemented. But a plan is no good

if it cannot be implemented. I think there's a huge need to learn from past experience why certain elements of past policies or projects were easier to implement than others. The skill necessary is asking questions regarding the basic assumptions underlying past project/policy design. One needs to have an open mind to ask the question: Did we make wrong assumptions? This is not easy, which is why it is so common to hear broad-brushed assessments that projects failed because of "systemic corruption. "Of course, corruption exists, but the essential skill is designing projects and policies to minimize the scope for corruption. It is also a skill to identify which part of projects/policies worked better than others and why, rather than either dismissing any project as totally failed or glorifying one as it was a total success.

The fourth essential skill is technological savvy. Technological change has always been a major social force. The question is how to use it appropriately or, in other words, how not to misuse it. Planners should take advantage of information and communication technologies without being obsessed with it. It is customary to hear folks who believe that technology will solve all problems. In contrast, others argue that technology will solve nothing. The answer is in between and impacted by some factors outside the control of urban planners.

- *Ability to negotiate and resolve conflicts*
- *Knowledge of finance*
- *Ability to develop implementable plan*
- *Ability to use technologies*

InterPlan: What is your general advice to planning students who are interested in international development?

Bish Sanyal: International development remains a major field of expertise and knowledge. Even though some of the original ideas regarding growth and development have been revised over the last 70 years, international development has returned as a key issue in discussions on how to achieve environmental sustainability and income equality. We need to constantly revise the dominant paradigms based on changing circumstances.

Another thing to bear in mind is that the problems we are facing have emerged because of intertwined causes across the world. No one country can solve such problems by itself. We need a global network of like-minded nations to collectively address these problems.

Lastly, to bring peoples around the world together, knowledge of any one language is not enough. One needs to speak languages in addition to the ones they grew up with and thereby understand different cultures. We need to better understand cultural differences and seek overlaps to create social consensus. There was and still is a point of view that North America is the best nation in the world. Even though the US has many positive attributes, this attitude of superiority has to change. The United States is definitely a prosperous and dynamic nation, but there are many other nations that are doing innovative social experiments. We need to work with them instead of distrusting them. This is why a Cold War mentality won't solve our current problems.

Essential skills for successful international development planners

InterPlan: President Biden said during his recent address on Capitol Hill that we have to prove democracy still works. How can planners prove that democracy still works?

Bish Sanyal: This is a very important question. First of all, as planners we neither define problems by ourselves, nor assume that we can devise solutions without consulting various stakeholders. The democratic approach is based on the premise that there may be multiple and conflicting views of the problems to be addressed, by whom they should be addressed, and in what ways. It is widely acknowledged that good outcomes emerge from processes that are inclusive and fair. This is true for both North American urban planning and international developmental challenges.

Now, let's take a historical approach to the question. After World War II, a consensus emerged among US social scientists and policy makers that democracy and development go hand in hand - we need one for the flourishing of the other. It was based on the idea that individuals need to make choices for markets to flourish individuals and it is democratic political systems that allow individuals to make such choices. That theory came to be questioned in the 1970s when the majority of the capitalist nations in Latin America turned from democracies into authoritarian regimes led by the army. As a result, scholars began to question the relationship between political and economic systems, suggesting that perhaps there is no clear-cut connection between the two. Then, as the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 1980s, the idea that development requires democracy returned with a new momentum. By then, however, mainland China had begun to grow rapidly thanks to new trade connections between China and the rest of the world. Some interpreted the rise of China to a form of "State Capitalism," but China remains a nation with a strong communist party with a powerful central government.

Recently there has been a rise of autocracy in some parts of the world, ranging from Brazil to Turkey to some east European nations that were previously controlled by the former Soviet Union. As President Biden recently remarked, there seems to be a new challenge facing the

global community: which political system, autocratic or democratic, can lead to rapid and sustainable economic growth? If you consider the steady growth of the Chinese economy and the way it helped to lift billions of poor people out of poverty, then it will be hard to dismiss the Chinese system as if it is totally out of touch with its people and likely to eventually fail. National planning of the Chinese variety is attractive to many newly industrializing nations, particularly when China is willing to provide concessionary funding for developmental projects.

As for the United States, the national economy seems to be in some element of decline, particularly when compared to the rapid growth the nation experienced after the Second World War. Yet the notion that the US may be losing out to other global competitors is not new: you may recall the way American industries had reacted to the rise of Japan during the 1970s and 1980s! The bottom line is that the US is a very resilient nation that learns quickly from past mistakes and can be flexible in altering policies, in part because of its democratic system. Sometimes we lose sight of that strength as, say, when the nation initially failed to tackle the Covid 19 crisis. But eventually the vast infrastructure of scientific innovations and the nation's ability to quickly commercialize scientific research demonstrated that the US remains a leader despite the many mistakes made while China successfully clamped down with draconian measures to control Covid 19. Perhaps Sir Winston Churchill made the right observation: that the U.S. ultimately adopts the right strategy, but only after pursuing many wrong strategies! That is an indication that the nation can learn from its mistakes and its political system is flexible enough for continuous learning in a rapidly changing world. ■

Edited by Andy Cross

Greece and East Mediterranean

by Niki Xenia Alygizou



Athens, Greece photo courtesy of Pixabay / Suomi



Niki Xenia Alygizou is trained as an architect and an urban designer, holding a Masters of Urban Design from UC Berkeley. As an urban practitioner, she brings alternative design processes and urban storytelling to advance social resilience. She also explores urban development processes in East Mediterranean countries by looking at the intersection of preservation, culture, and development.

InterPlan: What are the overall characteristics of urban development in Greece and the East Mediterranean region?

Niki Xenia Alygizou: The urban development in Greece and the East Mediterranean has always been subject to geographic, demographic, and economic conditions. The region is diverse in culture, politics, and history. Because of that, its urban development did not follow a typical evolution pattern. Instead, it led to the unique image of the East Mediterranean and Greek cities as we experience them today - cities characterized by a distinctive, meandering, and compact urban fabric.

InterPlan: What is the cultural background? What is the feature of the urban fabric?

Niki Xenia Alygizou: The Mediterranean cities are known for their compact historic cores that hinder a multi-cultural identity. It has been exposed to various cultures including Roman, Byzantine, Lusignan, Venetian, Ottoman, and the British. In the East Mediterranean, we can find significant trade port cities of the high middle ages including Alexandria, Izmir, Beirut, Famagusta, as well as Constantinople Smyrna, and Thessaloniki during the Ottoman empire. Trading routes connected the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa for centuries and established the economic and social networks of exchange that we know today.

The traditional urban pattern comprises well-scaled narrow streets and cul-de-sacs, long commercial street bazaars, public buildings, and irregularly shaped public spaces at the intersection of streets or in front of public buildings. The density of population and the limitation of space generated a unique mix of urban activities - elements considered prototypes of good city design today.

Photo courtesy of the author

However, historically, the Mediterranean city has been used to illustrate the aftermath of political domination. From ancient times, the geostrategic importance of the Mediterranean sea has been claimed by different civilizations. It unified all these civilizations, who at periods have been condemned to living together, resulting in centuries-long periods of cohabitation. This coexistence, defined by cultural heterogeneity, mattered for the region's physical and social evolution and established a common language in terms of habitation, settlement arrangement, and traditions.

InterPlan: How is this feature as of today?

Niki Xenia Alygizou: This cultural construct could not retain its hybridity during the emergence of new urban models raised by globalization. From the 1980s and 1990s, national and international competitiveness was reinforced through urban policies, pushing urban development beyond local controls. In attempts to capitalize on the lucrative Mediterranean culture, the coastal area has been interfered with by infrastructure, roads, tourist facilities, leisure marinas, and skyscrapers. Thus, urban development in the Mediterranean has shifted away from cultural prototypes — the active



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streets, the openness of public life, the compact housing blocks, the proximity in uses, and the meaning of walkability. It has landed in a model that is creating new spatial identities, far different from what East Mediterranean cultures have experienced.

Nowadays, Dubai-style urbanism poses a solid challenge for the Mediterranean urban form and introduces a new paradigm on urban living that disconnects the user from the physical environment by introducing a separation of activities. In the southern countries, like Cyprus and Greece, the effect has been particularly obvious. Soon after the countries acceded to the EU, geopolitics and capital markets started controlling any aspect of economic expansion and urban growth, like tourism and especially housing. In Cyprus, housing development is even more subject to the influence of the international market, as it largely depends on international investment programs.



Photo courtesy of the author

Photo courtesy of the author



InterPlan: What do you find the most fascinating in urban planning?

Niki Xenia Alygizou: I was always interested to understand how things come together - how urbanization occurs through its form, history, local ethnography, and sociodemographic changes. Sometimes, organic community developments contribute to an environment that supports the distinctive lifestyle of local residents. Other times, a small intervention, a spontaneous planning idea, or an architectural expression can spark urban activity and create a sense of place. For me, the underlying mechanism of those changes is most fascinating, and holistic analysis is a getaway to understand these phenomena and to examine how urban development can create or destroy the meaning of places. ■

Q&A with Akshali Gandhi



Akshali is a Transportation Planner in King County Metro's Parking and Mobility Hubs team. Her experience covers multiple aspects of transportation and mobility, from long-range planning to parking management. She is originally from the Chicagoland area but now resides in Seattle, WA. Akshali speaks Intermediate Spanish and one day would like to work on urban mobility initiatives in Latin America.

InterPlan: What is your experience since graduating from planning school? Has it been what you planned?

Akshali Gandhi: I was lucky to have a range of experiences within the transportation field after I graduated from my master's program.

I started out doing development review and some long-range policy work for the City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After some time, I wanted to experience living in a bigger city and try out the private sector. Washington D.C. was the closest big city to Pittsburgh, so I moved there (via Amtrak!) to work for a boutique firm that specialized in long-range transportation planning. We had a really small office, so I got to work on a variety of different projects ranging from large transit strategic plans to smaller parking and TDM studies. My fiancé was still back in Pittsburgh, though, so after we got married that summer I shifted back to Pittsburgh and worked for a civil engineering firm on their traffic team. Since it was an engineering firm, I ended up learning a lot more of the technical and operational side of transportation engineering, like editing traffic control diagrams and

writing engineering reports. My office barely had any transportation planners, however, so after some time I decided to try something else.

I had always wanted to move to the Pacific Northwest, so when I came across a job posting with King County Metro, I jumped at the chance. Luckily, my husband's company wanted to open a satellite office in Seattle, so it worked out for both of us. We are now happily settled here. Although my early career was a bit of a whirlwind, it came fairly close to what I had planned! I really enjoy trying new things and working in different settings, so I am glad that I got to spend my twenties experiencing various parts of the transportation planning industry.

InterPlan: Throughout your practice, what do you found most useful that you learned in school?

Akshali Gandhi: Both my undergrad and graduate programs in planning were very broad and general, which, looking back on it, has helped me better understand the multi-faceted nature of issues facing communities today. It also helped me gain exposure to

MEMBER'S PROFILE

all the various career pathways within urban planning. Even though I have always worked in transportation, nothing happens in a silo - my classes in economic development, urban design, and international planning helped me understand the bigger picture. At the end of the day, I think we all want to help improve the built environment around us, and there isn't only one way or one path to do that.

InterPlan: What made you join the International Division? What is/was your expectation?

Akshali Gandhi: I joined to learn about transportation and infrastructure work happening in other countries (particularly Latin America and South Asia), and to meet planners who work on international projects or who work abroad. By joining the division, I hope to learn how to eventually segway my domestic experiences into a career that is more globally focused on urban mobility and road safety. Super excited to help with the Planifiquemos project as well!

InterPlan: How would you compare your experience in private sector and public sector?

Akshali Gandhi: My private sector experiences were both in consulting, while my public sector experiences were both in local government. The biggest difference I noticed was that in consulting you tend to do shorter term projects that have a clearly defined scope of work for a clearly defined length of time (say, 1 year). Once the project is over, you move on to something else. Whereas in the public sector, it's not so project based - a lot of my work in the public sector deals with day to day operations and program management and there isn't as clearly defined beginning or end. In my experience at least, private sector and consulting work was a lot more technical and project focused, whereas working in the public sector focuses a lot more on management and capacity building. I think it's really important to get both experiences, and more and more I see people switching back and forth between

multiple segments of the industry. Consulting and local government are not the only options either - they're just more common. People also work in non-profits, advocacy groups, tech companies, real estate, think tanks, at the state and federal level, or in academia.

InterPlan: How are you preparing for a transportation planning career on the international stage? You mentioned before that you have been learning Spanish recently. Is that part of your plan?

Akshali Gandhi: Good question. In addition to strengthening my Spanish skills during quarantine, I've been looking into different fellowship and bridge programs that allow for individuals to conduct an independent research project abroad. Nearly all of the Americans who I've talked to who work in international planning participated in some sort of year-long fellowship program abroad such as Fulbright, Peace Corps, Luce, or something similar. So I'm trying to find the right fit for me. I also joined some Facebook groups to keep up to date on what's happening in the transportation field abroad and am looking into online courses and trainings as well. Once travel opens up post-COVID, I'd love to take some time off to work or intern abroad for a couple of months to experience what it's really like on the ground to work in a different culture. We'll see, it's a long-term goal - I have to balance that with the reality of where I'm at in my life right now as well. I'm currently writing to you from Querétaro, Mexico, where I'll be working remotely from for the rest of July!

InterPlan: What are the things that you most want to learn from planning in other countries?

Akshali Gandhi: I am fascinated by how capital projects and road safety projects work in other countries, since I haven't gotten a chance to do that kind of work in the U.S. During the pandemic, we saw several cities and countries around the world (especially in Latin America) dramatically increase access to walking and biking

through tactical urbanism pilots. I saw how a program which would normally take years to develop in the U.S. get rolled out fairly quickly in other countries. I'd love to learn how municipalities, NGOs, and the business community can work together to make roads safer for people walking and biking. As our workforce diversifies, I think it's also very important learn about how different cultural norms impact workplace practices. And finally, quiero mejorar mi español.

InterPlan: What advice would you give to American planning students who want to work abroad?

Akshali Gandhi: Be curious, be open-minded, be humble, and be resourceful. Start the process as early as possible and take advantage of the resources that your university offers. If you took a foreign language in high school, continue taking it in college even if it's unrelated to your primary major. It can only help. See if you can

study abroad, preferably for a semester or longer – and preferably to a non-western country – so that you can be fully immersed in a new culture. Attend lectures from visiting faculty and area studies departments. Make friends with international students. Apply to research programs, or ask your professors who teach international planning if you can help them with their research. Find ways to volunteer or intern abroad through programs like Engineers Without Borders or Architects Without Borders. Apply for funding to offset the cost of these experiences, like the APA International Division's Study Abroad/Research Grant program. I wish I knew I wanted to go down this path when I was in college– it's very hard once you're out of school to gain international experience or get access to the same sorts of resources because everything builds on itself. The building blocks for a strong international resume often starts in college or planning school. ■



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