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CEP FINAL REFLECTION
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Introduction

When I turned thirty one, I was working as a Registered Sales Assistant at Solomon Smith Barney in downtown Seattle. The job was pleasant but stimulating, and I was paid a salary, commission, and bonuses. My coworkers had second homes or kept apartments on nearby islands, owned horses, camped in yurts, and regularly went golfing. We dressed well, ate well, and played well, usually attending happy hour 2 - 3 times per week. And yet, for me, this seemingly perfect existence felt empty. It lacked soul and real purpose. Because of this, I enrolled in a Fundraising Management certificate program at the University of Washington, and upon completion I began what would become my true calling, public space development.

Unknowingly, I started a project that would lead me on a path of discovery. I formed Powell Barnett Legacy Project to make physical improvements at Powell Barnett Park. Over the course of 18 months, I raised \$1.3 million dollars and partnered with Starbucks Coffee Company to redevelop the park in just seven days. It was a resounding success and attracted more than 800 volunteers who contributed more than 3,000 volunteer hours. Upon completion, the park attracted visitors citywide and won accolades from local and national organizations. With the passage of months and now many years, I marvel at the effect my efforts have made on thousands of people. More than that, I am transfixed by the power of good design in the natural and built environment. Because of this and the tragic loss of my son, Jupiter, I wanted to pursue my lifelong interests in design.

Initially, I considered industrial design or textile design. From my earliest beginnings, I've been drawn to beautiful objects, clothing, and architectural design, but I was convinced by family members not to pursue such trivial interests. Instead, as a young mother, I worked in the field of financial services and wealth management for more than 15 years to provide for my son, Imani and me. This was a stable but passionless path that I never quite took hold to. Fast forward to my late thirties, I now I had the time and a reignited interests to pursue creative matters. Slowly, I allowed myself to think about returning to school and earning a college degree.

Junior Year (2016 - 2017)

After researching schools like Central Saint Martins, Savannah College of Art and Design, and the Rhode Island School of Design, it became very apparent that I was not financially ready to uproot my life to attend these schools. Furthermore, none of them offered the interdisciplinary structure that I was looking for (and had experienced while developing Powell Barnett Park). Looking closer to home, I discovered that Western Washington University offers a highly regarded undergraduate degree in Industrial Design, and following that line of thought, I looked at the same program at the University of Washington. By chance, I came across the College of Built Environments and studied its undergraduate offerings. Community, Environment, and Planning (CEP) within the Department of Urban Design and Planning seemed most suitable to my desired academic experience.

My first year in CEP, and at the University of Washington, went by fast. Our cohort consisted of late teens to early twenty somethings who had been lifelong learners. Countering that to my forty something and work, family, and social life of rich experiences, made me feel awkward. Just days before the CEP orientation, I hosted the unveiling of a Kevin Durant Charity Foundation basketball court at Powell Barnett Park, and now I was sitting in a classroom with giddy youth. This dichotomy of experiences remained the same during my entire time in CEP, and it was sometimes challenging to navigate both worlds. That said, my new existence as a student made its mark.

I was delightfully challenged in the first CEP class, The Idea of Community. We read great philosophical works and examined theories about community. The intimate setting and rigorous conversation of this class, was at once stimulating and calming. Our roundtable discussions, facilitations, questions, and sometimes deconstructed activities were invigorating. At the same time, the simple act of reading these works felt luxurious. We were the best men, the virtuous citizens with time on our hands to contemplate, discuss, and disagree about big ideas. This experience reinforced my romantic notions of "an education." I now had time to read and think, not rush to work in an endless cycle of banality.

Other highlights of my junior year include taking courses in urban planning, the urban form, and planning as a profession. These course subjects were the point of my

enrollment, after all. Unfortunately, their cumulative effect did just the opposite of igniting my interests in urban design, and my initial enthusiasm to become an urban planner was crushed. I was disenchanted by the actual work that planners do. And I was still yearning to do something more interdisciplinary, hands-on, and impactful.

Senior Year (2017 - 2018)

Over the summer, I planned and managed two public concerts at Jimi Hendrix Park, moonlighted part-time at Friends of Waterfront Seattle, and in mid-September, started an internship with the Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE). Therefore, I wasn't well rested coming into my senior year, and my disposition had altered from student to worker. Moreover, I wasn't quite sure how CEP would shape my future. Continuing the program enrolled in 16 credit hours for fall 2017.

CEP460, Planning in Context was a rousing disappointment. This course is intended to provide professional experience, problem-solving, and product development related to the planning profession. In our reality, however, the course fell short of these goals and only marginally contributed to my education. On the contrary, my internship with OSE went from zero to sixty in a matter of weeks. The Resilience Director, for whom I worked, resigned and I (along with one other intern) was left to complete a Preliminary Resilience Assessment for the city of Seattle. It was daunting, but we were challenged to make it work (and we did).

I learned so much about the multifaceted concept of Resilience, worked with 100 RC and AECOM staff, developed critical thinking skills, and gained insight into the hierarchy of city government. It was truly an enriching experience. A course on graduate preparation was also useful. In GRDSCH 200, I was challenged to think critically about my academic future. Would I attend graduate school? If so, where and why? What did I want out of graduate school? What did I truly want to do in my career? Additionally, we were instructed on the hard skills of writing a personal statement, researching graduate schools, selecting a mentor, and requesting letters of recommendation. I did a lot of soul searching and reflecting on how I want to live. In fact, my entire senior year feels like a mindful exercise in intention. What do I intend to do and why. What is the purpose of my degree in CEP and how will it shape my future.

Unexpectedly, I crashed in winter quarter 2018. I went from 16 credits to 13, but I was still overwhelmed with my workload. I was simply unable to do the work, and for the first time in my life, felt inadequate. Not knowing the source of this feeling, my attempts to pull myself together fell short. Much later in the quarter, a guest speaker in GRDSCH 200 spoke of a similar experience when she was between her third and fourth year in the PhD. program. She diagnosed this experience as “imposter syndrome,” a psychological phenomenon in which one doubts their accomplishments and abilities. I also suffered from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to the death of an aunt which triggered feelings and memories relating to my son’s death. In essence, I was in a stupor and somewhat depressed but unable to move forward. Luckily, come spring quarter, my condition lightened and I became more confident and productive.

Working on my capstone project forced me to be active and to shake off my daze. The project was also a reminder of what excites me about urban planning. “Forming Identity Through Memory and History: Revealing the Historic Landscape of Seattle’s Central District” is the title of my project. It is a reaction to and a prescription for the effects of rapid growth and urbanization. Through this project, I studied theories about place and identity, phenomenology, and the role of storytelling in planning practice. In addition, I conducted an online survey and eight in-person interviews, and connected the dots between theory and reality. Overall, my capstone project saved me from despair, and it saved me from falling out of love with urban planning by sparking an interest in research. My sensibility and appetite for learning for may indeed be suitable for a future in research.

Conclusion

I am a soon-to-be graduate of the University of Washington, but I feel exactly the same. I am still seeking information about the built environments and design. I still desire to build things that make a big impact, and I am still seeking knowledge about a myriad of interesting things. My bucket list is long and my intention is to learn and develop new skills while enjoying the process.

My educational journey in CEP has reignited my passion for learning. Although every class wasn’t as valuable, the entire experience has been enriching. I am more

aware of who I am, what I want, what I am capable of, and a little less jaded. The enthusiastic innocence of my cohort has inspired me to dream big. Dreams that as an adult one casts aside in favor of practicality. Today I am open to new adventures and would certainly consider moving to embrace a new experience. My next chapter is unclear but I infinitely more confident that anything is possible. For I am free of my chains of habit and casts aside any disbelief.

I face my future a bit worried because the idea of returning to work is scary. The idea of work, as I have experienced in the past, is seemingly what a college education is about. Go forth and prosper, compete, make money, and live a good life! The problem is, I've been there and making money alone does not make a good life. I am seeking joy, meaning, contentment, and excitement. I am admittedly lazy, but desire to test my abilities to their fullest potential. I do not wish to be small, but to make a great impact on the world (or at least for many people). For me, a good life is one lived for pleasure, the benefit of others and to realize the highest good. Although I am naturally an introvert and prefer my own company, it is important to me that my actions benefit others. In short, I want to live well by doing well.

My short-term plan is to "find a real job" and to study for the GRE. Long-term, I would like to attend graduate school, invent and trademark an impactful idea, write a book, travel more, attend the US and French Opens, and follow my bliss. As said by James A. Baldwin, "Be careful what you set your heart upon, for it will surely be yours."