

Peter J. Park

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City of Denver, Colorado

Master of Architecture, Master of Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin, 1998

What is your job?

We have responsibility for the planning and permitting of development, as well as all the related inspections like construction expenses and property maintenance inspections. We also have the responsibility of staffing the Landmark Preservation Commission and the Denver Planning Board. We have a couple of other groups that we also staff.

So that's what we do in terms of facilitating the community conversation about what the city is going to be. That's most of our day. That involves significant community engagement. We plan neighborhoods and corridor plans. In Denver we have an expanding public transit system that is the largest in the country, so we're doing a lot of new station-area planning for transit-oriented development. We just finished the adoption of a new zoning code. It's a form-based, not a context-based, code. And it applies to the entire city, so it's a rewrite of the entire code and a remapping of the majority of the city using a new approach.

We also get involved in the planning and design of major projects, like our new Justice Center. And there's a major project in converting Union Station. It's an historic landmark, and it is being redeveloped to be the central hub of the regional transit system. There's an expansion of Denver International Airport planned, and Santiago Calatrava has been hired to do the design.

I spend about half my time working on a project level, depending on the particular project. And the other half is dealing with more strategic initiatives, like budgeting and organizational structure and how we manage relationships with our customers.

What are the most important things you learned in your graduate school program?

In graduate school, I had the opportunity to do a joint degree program: Master's of Architecture, Master's of Urban Planning. So I think for me, that was quite an ideal background. I was exposed to both the policy side of the world as well as gaining an emphasis in something I am very interested in, which is design, architecture, and physical planning. There are many programs now that have a joint degree similar to that. I think it prepared me well for where the profession itself has progressed, to a higher emphasis on physical planning and design.



Particularly at the University of Wisconsin, there was an emphasis on methods on the planning side: planning policy analysis, decision analysis, strong analytical and decision-making methods. That was a good way to exercise both sides of my brain, because I had architectural and urban design studios at the same time. So I feel very fortunate to have been able to participate in a program like that, and also have great faculty who were involved in practice. I had a chance to work with one of my faculty members after I graduated, and actually joined him in business as a partner. That connection to academia and real-world practice was very valuable.

What advice would you have for a person who is considering applying for planning school right now?

Go into it with as broad a base as you can. Planning as a profession really bridges politics, sociology, economics, engineering, and architecture. Ultimately what you're talking about are policies that affect the physical environment and affect people's lives. And so I think the broader base that you have, the better.