On Monday, September 5th, I made my way with other MScPl students to the West Coast where we encountered our first planning challenge as we travelled from the airport to an AirBnb in Oakland. After a great deal of time spent trying to learn the fare system and trying to navigate the multiple transit providers that brought us to our home for the week, we began to ask the questions that any planning student might ask: Why is the transit fare system so complex? Why are ticketing box operators unable to explain the fare system? Why is it so difficult to transition between different modes of public transit? Over the next few days, we explored these questions in our discussions with professionals as well as questions about housing affordability, activating public spaces, and ensuring resiliency, but within a policy and political context distinctly different from that in Toronto.

The group, joined this year by Adjunct Professor John Farrow as the faculty representative, began its formal itinerary on Tuesday with a walking tour of City Hall and the Civic Center, given by a local volunteer. These buildings speak to a San Francisco come and gone – both literally and figuratively. The original City Hall and Civic Centre were destroyed several years after their completion in the 1906 Earthquake, and were rebuilt to be earthquake-proof. The new buildings were inspired by the neo-classical architecture and baroque architecture of European origins, such as the dome of Les Invalides (France). The San Francisco we experienced is decidedly no longer merely echoing the greatness of its European counterparts, but instead is a leader in the disruptive technologies and change that speak to a city that has established its own ‘greatness’ on the global stage.

In the afternoon, following a break for some of the best burritos and horchata that San Francisco has to offer, we were welcomed into the office of Nelson Nygaard for a meeting with transportation planner Ben Kaufman. Ben shared a main objective of the firm’s work: to turn demand away from single occupancy vehicles by 1) improving public transportation efficiency, 2) reforming parking, and 3) improving performance metrics by reforming policy. The first ‘shock’ to the room occurred when Ben informed us that muni (San Francisco’s municipal public transportation system) is the slowest in the United States, travelling at an average speed of 8 miles per hour. What’s more, he informed us that the Bay Area has over 20 transportation agencies running routes. We finally understood why the fare system was complicated. We learned that the local government has made some important steps to addressing these challenges, but we also began to understand why Uber originated in the Bay Area!

Day two started with an immersive workshop with Daniel Homsey, the project manager of the Neighbourhood Empowerment Network (NEN). Homsey compared San Francisco to a cruise ship, insofar as it is a place through which residents pass on their way to their (individual) destinations with little consideration for their impact on the environment, and little development of the social capital necessary to survive natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, flooding, etc). NEN’s solution to this problem was based on the collective impact model, where common goals are found despite individuals’ differing trajectories. In a world where issues of climate resiliency and vulnerability are issues that can impact us all, this immersive workshop introduced us to a new way of leading change in our community back in Toronto in order to prevent, and where necessary, be prepared for, such events.

Our afternoon at the Department of Planning brought our attention back to public spaces and housing. Our meeting with Neil Hrushowy on turning ‘pavements into parks’ inspired us to think about how piloting temporary design opportunities can lead to important changes in the ways that people use and enjoy their city. He shared insights on how his team at the department of planning is working towards streamlining the permit process for approvals, and is creatively overcoming financing challenges, in order to convert more parking spots into parks.

Our conversation with Kimia Haddadan at the Department of Planning brought our attention back to public spaces and housing. Our meeting with Neil Hrushowy on turning ‘pavements into parks’ inspired us to think about how piloting temporary design opportunities can lead to important changes in the ways that people use and enjoy their city. He shared insights on how his team at the department of planning is working towards streamlining the permit process for approvals, and is creatively overcoming financing challenges, in order to convert more parking spots into parks.

Lessons in City Planning from the Bay Area

By Louise Willard
Planning helped us to understand why accommodation – even for a several night stay – in San Francisco was unaffordable. The second shock of the trip rippled through our group: the average monthly rental price of a one bedroom apartment in San Francisco is $3,670, and in Oakland, $2,190. This put our conversations around affordability in Toronto into a whole new perspective. Our conversation with Kimia also helped illuminate the challenges to building high-rise dwellings and apartments in the Bay Area. The photo (previous page) shows the lack of high-rise building in San Francisco, which is surprising given the high demand for rental housing in the city.

Our final day provided us with an opportunity to develop an appreciation for the Bay Area, and specifically, Oakland. Our morning started with a discussion on how inclusive and equitable planning can take place through participatory budgeting. Ginny Browne, the project manager at the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), told us about how the PBP team engages residents and helps build new leaders amongst groups who are typically underrepresented in planning processes. Robert Ogilvia, Oakland Director of SPUR Ideas + Action for a Better City gave a compelling talk, followed by a walking tour, on the potential and challenges for developing downtown Oakland. Robert gave us a background on the unique policy and political context in the Bay Area, and how SPUR uses its board of directors to build a vision for growth in Oakland with buy-in from multiple sectors. He showed us some of the early signs of growth and change in Oakland with Uber’s investment in a new corporate headquarters (see photo below).

In the moments between scheduled activities, the group enjoyed the opportunity to explore a multitude of unique districts and sites, while building new and deeper relationships. Seeing planning in a new context gave us an opportunity to reflect on who we want to be as planners, to be inspired by new parts of planning that were previously unknown to us, and to develop a contextual understanding of the urban dynamics that are shaping cities across North America. We are all especially grateful to the Planning Alumni Community for their generous support in funding the trip and continuing to fund the experience as a meaningful component of the Master’s program. All who attended would like to express their gratitude to John Farrow for constantly providing insightful questions and valuable perspectives on the planning issues and great spirit in coping with our group of 16 women!

Lastly, a very special thanks to the three student organizers Aviva Coopersmith, Minha Hassim, Keegan Butler – thank you for giving up so much of your summer and taking so much care to organize an inspiring and educational trip.