



American Planning Association  
Making Great Communities Happen



WHAT IS...

## URBAN DESIGN PLANNING?

**The American Planning Association is an organization of planners and those interested in planning.**

APA defines the purposes of planning as:

1. Helping to create communities of lasting value
2. Offering better choices for where and how people work and live
3. Engaging citizens, businesses, and civic leaders to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people's lives.

The American Planning Association and its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners, help planners, officials, and citizens by providing research, educational resources, practical advice and tools, and up-to-date information on planning.

Urban designers combine skills in design and planning. Rather than designing a single building, they focus on the block, a neighborhood, new development, or even the redesign of a street. Many urban design planners focus on specific projects such as complex of new houses and how they relate to the larger neighborhood. Urban design makes buildings, streets, and public places function better and promotes more attractive communities.

Walk down any street. Did you know urban design is all around you? Look at the overhead lights, some communities design new lights in the style of historic lights to provide interesting character. See the flowers in the median of the street? Or, the benches on the sidewalk? Or, the bike stands outside a restaurant? Urban designer planners, perhaps working with landscape architects, created a streetscape design for plants, bike stands, and street furniture.

Urban design planners focus on the design of our communities. They need to know about environmental issues, historic architecture, transportation issues, as well as other aspects of planning, such as economic development. Even an understanding of social science is helpful. Urban designers also consider how people behave or interact in public places. For example, by placing benches and bike racks on sidewalks in a neighborhood, the design can help create a sense of community by encouraging people to stop, sit, talk with each other, and linger on the street.

Urban design planners can even help fight crime! Urban design planners use "defensible design" such as fences, landscaping, bollards, and even the layout of buildings to lesson crime. Urban design planners have also found that streets lined with buildings with windows and many doorways helps increase pedestrians and lesson crime. Urban designer planners are on the cutting edge of technology too. From creating cities that pollute less to neighborhoods safe from natural disasters, urban design is an important area of planning. Urban designer planners may deal with large issues, but they know that even small things like park benches can go a long way to improve a space.



# MEET THE PLANNERS



## Julie Donofrio, AICP, is a planner and urban designer for WRT in Philadelphia.

### 1. What is an urban planner or an urban designer?

Urban planners make recommendations and decisions that determine how cities grow and function. Though planning work typically focuses on cities and urbanized areas, many planners also focus on nonurban areas to ensure that natural resources are protected, or on the environment at large by monitoring air and water quality to protect our health. Planners can be employed by city departments, regional agencies, consulting firms (like I am), nonprofit organizations, or in government relations. No matter what, planners are always interacting with the community in order to ensure that plans that are proposed are consistent with people's desires for the place they call home.

### 2. What exactly does an urban designer do?

While planners can fill a variety of roles, an urban designer specifically thinks about the architecture of the city and elements and spaces that knit them together. Urban designers visualize how buildings form a block, blocks form a neighborhood, neighborhoods form a city, and cities form a region. They think about systems, too, so that all these distinct parts are tied together through streets, highways, and transportation systems, as well as parks, greenways, and natural elements. Urban designers help determine the types and sizes of buildings and streets that are appropriate for given areas of the city. They recommend the relative location and size of the city's built elements before the architect, landscape architect, or engineer take it to the next level of detail, and eventually it gets built!

### 3. Why did you decide to be an urban planner?

I was a history major in college and have always loved old cities and buildings and the stories they tell. I spent time studying abroad in college and loved the European lifestyle where people lived downtown, walked everywhere, and took pride in their cities as centers of community and culture. I wondered why cities in the US couldn't do the same. While I didn't immediately translate this into a career in urban planning, I discovered it as a career by way of considering going to law school. I found a few programs that offered joint programs in urban planning and decided—wait, that's exactly what I want to do. And the rest is history.

### 4. What is craziest or funniest thing you've seen on the job?

When I was working in San Diego, I was out doing a site visit on an undeveloped portion of land that was a potential impact area for a new highway. While assisting a colleague to document a sensitive bird habitat, which happened to be on a steep hillside covered in cactus, I lost my balance and fell into a cactus. (It hurt!) Later that day, we spotted a rattlesnake, a roadrunner, and got stopped by armed border patrol guards for suspicious activity. Just a typical day on the job!

### 5. How can a student get involved with urban design or planning?

As planning is always happening around you, you should first pay attention to the built environment and ask questions! What makes that building different from the one across the street? Why is the sidewalk this wide? Are people walking or biking? Are there trees alongside the street? In the world of social media, it is also easy to become involved. Many cities and agencies have dedicated websites, Facebook and Instagram accounts, and blogs that share updates on happenings in the city and public meetings about important issues. Finally, visit your good old-fashioned local history museum to gain an understanding and appreciation for your city, or check out a book about your city's history in the library! Great urban planning begins with an appreciation for the world around you and the desire to make it a livable place for all.

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For more information about planning for a youth audience, visit the American Planning Association's website at [www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity](http://www.planning.org/kidsandcommunity) and the *Kids' Planning Toolbox* blog at <http://blogs.planning.org/kids>.

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