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KASIA TOTA

"Planning" continues to resist easy definitions and yet those of us who decide to pursue this path do so for some very diverse but clear reasons. I had my reasons, but it was a curiosity of a new place that brought me to Halifax in the fall of 2000. Having endured "the Toronto commute" for a year, shiny postcards of Nova Scotia's rugged shores offered the inspiration to pack up a few belongings and pursue a nagging interest in the study of "places."

There is something refreshing about going somewhere new to pursue a new direction. In a similar fashion I arrived in Hamilton in 1992 to study sciences at McMaster University, at a time when questions of sustainability and environmental protection were at the forefront of public debate. There was a lot of excitement and optimism. Grassroots initiatives were too many to count, and even the City of Hamilton led the way by introducing its municipal Vision 2020 Sustainability Scorecard. Involvement in some of these initiatives brought awareness of social issues and an interest in the work of local governments. This early experience created a natural orientation towards both environmental and social interests, and a realization that perhaps a career in a lab was not one of my callings.

A six-month internship in Delhi, India offered an incredible opportunity to explore these interests further. In 1998 Delhi was a metropolis of already more than 9 million people, among them countless rural migrants - turned urban homeless. In her streets and markets coexisted contrasts and contradictions, the deepest poverty along with glimpses of incredible beauty. The layers of history, culture, immense challenges, but also the dignity and humanity of my hosts, offered great lessons. When not walking the narrow streets of old Delhi, I worked

with a team of colleagues at the Tata Energy Research Institute on an urban transportation and emission reduction study.

Upon return, my intentions to pursue further studies were solidified and so I arrived at Dalhousie, welcomed by the radiant **Dorothy Leslie**. I was quickly impressed by the small class sizes, professors and colleagues passionate about their individual areas of study, and I sensed that what they all shared was a deep concern for the seemingly indefinable, yet deeply felt, "public good."

Some of the highlights from that time include organizing, with **Jennifer Meurer**, the "Breaking Ground" conference, as well as an opportunity to spend a month in Amsterdam. Graduate thesis work on collaborative planning between First Nation communities and local governments offered an opportunity to reflect on what it means to strive for inclusion.

In December 2002 I was offered a position with the Halifax Regional Municipality, initially in the role of coordinating a multi-faceted research project on housing and homelessness. The work built on previous community efforts to shed light on these issues in HRM. The "Homelessness in HRM - A Portrait of Streets and Shelters" was particularly well received in the community, while exploration of municipal planning tools and incentives for affordable housing informed the HRM Regional Planning process.

It's been only three and a half years since my graduation but the experience has already been challenging, humbling, rewarding. Planning and urban issues in Canada are enjoying a renewed level of interest, perhaps even a renaissance. I believe that this period of planning will be known for its efforts to create genuine, green, inspiring, and above all inclusive communities.

Kasia Tota (MURP 2002) was the recipient of the Canadian Institute of Planners President's Award, the Governor General Medal in Humanities and Social Sciences and the Community Action on Homelessness Community Recognition Award. Kasia currently works as a Planner in the Regional Planning office, is a member of the Halifax Peninsula Community Health Board and lives in north end Halifax.



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