

Maya McManus

Maya McManus, 22, worked at Minto Group in Ottawa for 16 months from May 2023 to August 2024.

What did you do to find the placement?

I found the job listing on Carleton's co-op job board. After submitting applications to many positions, I was given the opportunity to interview with the Minto Group. At the same time, Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) contacted me. I was unable to interview with PSPC because Minto immediately extended a job offer and I only had 48 hours to accept. I had to decide whether to take the offer or risk trying to secure a position with PSPC. Minto and PSPC were my top two choices. I ultimately chose Minto because I had previously worked in the public sector and wanted to try working for a private company.

What exactly did you do in the office?

I was a project coordinator for the land development team. I worked with the four managers and the directors of low-rise and infill development. My main responsibilities were creating and editing concept plans for new communities. This involves starting a design from scratch or taking a pre-existing plan of a project and revising it to meet requirements (unit counts, parkland dedication, stormwater management ponds, etc.) or trying out different residential block and street patterns. From there, I would use the concepts to estimate the number of units that could fit on a site and the preferred mix of unit types (e.g., 40% singles and 60% townhomes).

I also helped create initial budgets and schedules for projects and fill out and submit development applications to the city. I attended meetings with consultants and city staff, and assisted management with day-to-day tasks. Eventually I was given more responsibility and started my own project. As well, the team hired three new project coordinators, and I was asked to help onboard and train them.

What was it like?

Overall, I had an amazing experience. I gained extensive knowledge of the industry and made many connections. I accomplished much more than I thought possible from a co-op position and would highly recommend the Minto Group to anyone.

What specifically did you learn?

I gained a lot of knowledge on various disciplines that contribute to the creation of developments. In general, how different departments like acquisitions, marketing, sales, product development, and construction play a role in the company. I was also able to sit in on many meetings with the engineering and planning consultants, and city staff. Although I was not there long enough to see a project from start to finish, I worked on every project at Minto, all in different stages of the process. I learned how to create concepts and site plans and became extremely skilled in AutoCAD. As well, how to read grading plans, landscape plans, reports, and other documents.

What's the biggest thing you learned that you didn't know going in?

The biggest thing that I learned was the length of time it takes for projects to be completed, and all the moving parts involved. There were some projects that my managers started working on five-seven years ago and are just getting into construction now. Even before the project started getting attention, the land for the subdivision could have been purchased outside the urban boundary 10 years ago and they were waiting for the right timing to launch.

What did you bring to the job?

I was the first student they had hired from the urbanism stream. They were impressed with the information I had already learned at school, including housing typologies, zoning, bylaw, official planning documents, and how to use GeoOttawa.

What was the most fun?

The team I worked for was a lot of fun to chat and have lunches with. We often had team lunches where we would go out to a restaurant to celebrate occasions. There were also company events and activities, like the annual Employee Appreciation event, Christmas party, Halloween, raffles, a visiting coffee trolley, and more. It was very much a collaborative and supportive workplace, that valued the well-being of their employees.

What was the least fun?

Some parts of the job were very tedious. For example, we received the civic addressing for a community in Barrhaven Town Centre called Anthem. Anthem consists of over 600 metro townhome units (stacked back to backs). I was responsible for matching the address for each unit to the numbering system we had used internally. This took hours, but I didn't mind it too much because I was able to listen to podcasts and music on my phone while I worked. Doing tedious work is common for everyone starting out as co-op students or new grads, and it is all part of the learning process.

What surprised you?

What surprised me the most was the general atmosphere and how well managed the company is. As I mentioned before, they had events and smaller perks on top of regular pay, benefits, and employee discounts. They even had a recognition program called Bravo, where you could send virtual awards and points to recognize co-workers who helped you at work, achieved a milestone, or for their work ethic. You could then redeem your points for gift cards and home, travel, or personal things. Management was very flexible and considerate when it came to work-life balance. There was hardly anyone in a bad mood, they all seemed to enjoy their job and

working for Minto.

In what way were you transformed?

Before starting co-op, I was unsure of my abilities and how I could contribute to such a large company. I was also confused about my plans following graduation. My time at the Minto Group with the guidance of my managers gave me the perspective and confidence that I needed. Their encouragement and support made me feel that the work I was completing was important and essential to the success of the team and the company. It was while working there that I became inspired to pursue planning and development.

What's an anecdote that encapsulates the experience?

In the last four months of my co-op, I was tasked to create plans for a site in Ottawa using the designs for a mid-rise building we had received from the Minto Calgary office. This became a project that was uniquely mine and the director of infill development's. During the design process, the director asked another manager and the vice president of construction for input. At one point, the three of them gathered at my desk to look over the plans. They spent several minutes going back and forth debating on the site plans and new changes to make. I appreciated the confidence they had in my ability to take their ideas and suggestions and make them into something tangible that could work on the site. As well, it shows the lighthearted and collaborative atmosphere that the office had. Regardless of seniority, every person there was personable and approachable. I never felt intimidated by anyone because of their rank in the company.

Have your feelings or ambitions for architecture changed as a result?

Before going into co-op, I was very much on the fence about whether I wanted to continue pursuing architecture after undergrad. I have greatly enjoyed my time in the architecture program at Carleton and I feel I made the right choice choosing urbanism over the other two streams. But, being an architect specifically is not my ultimate goal anymore. Instead, I hope to pursue a Master of Planning program to potentially become a professional planner, or I may return to development since I enjoyed my time at Minto so much.

How do you feel returning to school after co-op?

I felt extremely confident returning to school after co-op. I gained extensive knowledge and experience that I knew would help considerably in my last year of undergrad. What I learned from co-op has already been useful in studio and will hopefully help when I have to defend my project during the final crit.

What advice would you give students thinking about doing co-op?

I would highly recommend doing co-op to any students in university, and especially those in architecture. I find that at times, there is such a focus on conceptual and imaginative thinking that people within the program lose sight of reality and what could actually be built. While having

creativity is extremely important for designing brilliant and fun architecture, I believe that having real world experience from co-op gives a grounded perspective, helps with problem solving, and provides a more solid foundation to fall back on when defending projects and ideas.

Co-op opened many doors for me by being able to put industry-related experience on my resume and meet many new people and forming connections. I was also able to save up some money for my master's. Even if students are unsure if they want to do the co-op year and extend their degree, I still recommend signing up. A few of my peers did a four-month position, then decided they instead wanted to go back to school in the fall and were still able to register for courses.

For those doing co-op, I would highly suggest being open to everything and seeking opportunities within and outside of the workplace. Demonstrating that you're a hard worker, personable, and willing to learn will get you far. Signing up for the mentorship program and becoming involved in the Urban Land Institute became fun and amazing experience for me as well.