

OUR GRADUATES

Hilary Holden is Associate Director at Arup – a global firm of consulting planners, engineers and designers. Currently based in Toronto, Canada – Hilary heads up a team of transport consultants providing advice to both the public and private sectors.

I graduated from the University of Cambridge with a degree in Geography and no intention of undertaking further study! Through pure serendipity, I found myself working as a graduate transport planner in a consultancy in my home town of Manchester. My career began archiving in the basement of an engineering firm the summer after graduation. One day the Director in charge came down to see how we were getting on and asked me what on earth was I doing stuck down in the basement? He arranged for me to chat with the environmental and the transportation teams upstairs and transportation felt like a good fit for me.

After a year, I was inspired to study again and when I saw what was on offer in Leeds I was hooked. The course was very good – hugely challenging. I found the pace of the course demanding, and the skills being tested very broad. There was a large range of subjects to choose from and many of the short modules proved to be really useful tasters. For example I took a short module in Project Finance and it gave me a good foundation to which I still refer. It was a great eye-opener to the different aspects of transport planning.

I liked Leeds so much I stayed for over 10 years! The city is fun and affordable and a good place to be a student. The University has a great campus feel. All the staff in the Institute for Transport Studies (ITS) were so friendly and approachable – they have the right people in the right roles, with dedicated teaching and research staff. I remember going on a week-long European field trip with Dr Paul Firmin and it was so inspirational. Getting to see everything we had learnt about in action; tram systems, bikeways – that has stayed with me.

ITS is a hotspot for inspiration and a great community. That carries on after you graduate because although everyone spreads across the industry and the world, you find you meet up at industry events. It's nice for alumni to feel like they are still part of something successful that is striving to make the world a better place.

After completing my Masters I went straight to work for Steer Davies Gleave, a small transport planning consultancy with an office in Leeds. They had good links with the University and I stayed there for seven years. In 2006 I moved to Arup, a larger, multidisciplinary consultancy with an office in Leeds. Nigel Foster was the reason I moved, because he headed up the transport consultancy business in the UK, Middle East and Africa from Leeds. To learn from Nigel was a great opportunity, plus the corporate values of Arup really appealed to me. The business is a partnership, like the John Lewis partnership, so we all have a stake in the success of the business. We do business in an unconventional and friendly way and bring people from different specialisms together to tackle real-world problems.

Eighteen months ago I saw an internal advert for a job leading the transport consulting business in Canada. I called the office leader and had an informal chat about the role; within a month, the day after my son's first birthday, we were on our way to Toronto! I love doing what I do. Transport planning isn't just about the dimensions of road junctions – it is keeping people at the centre of everything. That social aspect is very important to me. And the joy of consultancy is that you have power over your own destiny, but don't go into transport planning if you want an easy life! As with anything, you get out what you put in. My day never finishes how I expected it to and one phone call can refocus my whole week.

My advice for a successful career is to make sure you enjoy what you do, have a purpose and be confident. Confidence is key. You don't specifically need to have a Masters to do my job – but lots of people do, and I'm grateful for the foundation it gave me. During my time at Leeds I feel like I was given a taste of the whole picture. So now, I can manage a team and understand the fundamentals of what the members of my team specialise in, such as transport modelling. That level of understanding allows me to work through problems that arise and be an effective leader.

I don't like the phrase work/life balance – it suggests you don't live your work. What I love is that I have been able to progress in this industry and remain true to myself and my values. A career in transport planning speaks to what motivates me; improving the environment we live in and connecting people to places.

Hilary is pictured close to Arup's Canadian office in Toronto.



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