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Your Start-Up Life with the Woman Who Remade New York

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Your Start-Up Life is a business advice column by [Rana Florida](#), Author of *Upgrade* (McGraw-Hill, September 2013) and CEO of the [Creative Class Group](#). In addition to answering readers' questions, she features [conversations](#) with successful entrepreneurs, creative thinkers and innovative leaders. Send your questions about work, life and play to rana@creativeclass.com

[Amanda Burden](#) has reshaped New York City for the better, introducing top-notch new architecture into neighborhoods while preserving their historic character, expanding the city's parks and green spaces, and spear-heading such game-changing projects as the [New York City High Line](#), an aerial greenway atop an abandoned elevated railroad right of way which transformed its disused neighborhood into a cultural, architectural, retail, and residential hot spot. The honors she has received run the gamut from topping the [Best Dressed list](#) since 1996 to receiving the [Urban Land Institute's](#) prestigious [J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionaries](#).

It's no surprise *Vanity Fair* calls her "[Princess of the City](#)"; she comes from an eclectic family of super-achievers. Burden's father, [Stanley Grafton Mortimer, Jr.](#), was an heir to the [Standard Oil](#) fortune; her mother was Barbara "[Babe](#)" [Cushing Mortimer Paley](#) ("Mrs. P. had only one fault: She was perfect; otherwise, she was perfect," Truman Capote wrote of her), and her stepfather was CBS Founder [William Paley](#). She has been married twice, to S. Carter Burden, Jr., a descendent of Commodore Vanderbilt, and the late [Steven J. Ross](#), the head of Time Warner, and is now the longtime partner of news giant, [Charlie Rose](#).

For all her social pedigrees, Burden is no dabbler. She earned her Masters Degree in urban planning at [Columbia University](#) and as Chair of the City Planning Commission and Director of the [Department of City Planning](#) is, as *Vanity Fair* put it, "arguably the most influential figure in New York City government, next to Mayor Bloomberg." Not one to sit in the ivory tower, *The New York Times* wrote, "Whether walking up and down 368 blocks in Jamaica, Queens, to see which streets can accommodate 12-story buildings, or grabbing a tape measure from her desk to set the dimensions of seating in public plazas across the city, Ms. Burden is leaving an indelible legacy of how all five boroughs will look and feel for decades to come."

We met over dinner in London where I learned about her about her views on work, her heroes, and most of all, her incredible passion for public service and cities.



Q. What was your first job and what lessons did you learn?

A. After I graduated from [Sarah Lawrence College](#) in 1976, I began working with [William "Holly" Whyte](#), the great urban anthropologist and author of "The Organization Man." I spent my time with him conducting research on how people behave in public spaces and what makes those spaces fail or succeed. I learned that it doesn't take a complete overhaul of the design of a space to make it inviting and well-used; rather, it's small things like moveable chairs, sun and shade, and ground level plantings that draw people to a space.

One example of public space transformation is [Bryant Park](#). In the 1970s, Bryant Park was an infamous New York "Needle Park" which was rampant with drug dealers. It was an elevated park, making it difficult for people on the street to see into or for people in the park to see out. People were so afraid to use the park that it became a perfect place to sell drugs. Holly Whyte suggested that the park edges be lowered and moveable chairs be added. Suddenly visible, the park was immediately filled with people, which attracted even more visitors. It is now not only one of the most beloved public open spaces in the city, but it has also revitalized the entire area and stimulated private investment.

This illustrates an important lesson about public open spaces. If they are designed well, they bring enormous social and economic benefits. Great public spaces keep people in a city. If designed poorly, however, they can be a blighting influence.

Q. Who would you identify as an inspirational leader and why?

A. One of my greatest heroes is [Robert F. Kennedy](#). It wasn't until he ran for the U.S. Senate, when I knew him, that he came face to face with realities of inequality and oppression. At this point, he shifted his life's direction. He spoke out vigorously and eloquently against injustice and inequality. He truly believed in changing the world. The force and power of Bobby's personality and aura has not been met since. I was extremely fortunate to have been a close witness to his last years, which certainly played a role in my own dedication to public service.

Q. What skills are needed to motivate teams, partners and constituents?

A. It starts with being able to articulate a great vision. People respond to ambitious, transformational ideas. However, to be realized, a bold vision must also be supported by implementable plans, developed through consensus. An example is the High Line. This beautiful, unique public space was, in its wild state, easy to dream about as a public space that people might use and enjoy. However, winning control of this urban artifact and turning it into a park required accommodating significant development for a variety of reasons. Getting to an agreement involved listening to all sides and fielding various perspectives from passionate advocates, community members, developers, property owners, elected officials, and other stakeholders and crafting strategies to accommodate those points of view. [The High Line](#) was able to become a reality only because we were able to win approval for a complex plan that reflected all of these interests. The final zoning plan ensured natural light and air around the High Line, and that adjacent buildings related respectfully to the park. At the same time, the plan allowed the owners of properties underneath and adjacent to the structure to realize the value of

their property by allowing them to sell their development rights to sites along the avenues. The High Line is a great case study of the relationship between a great vision and actionable plans reached democratically.

Ultimately, the simple lesson is that one must spend time, to listen and to let others know they have been heard. Planning is the continual process of juggling the myriad needs and desires of all members of a community or region - residents, other citizens, community groups, business owners, elected officials, governments and agencies - to create a feasible implementable vision of that community or region that will make peoples' lives better while serving the broader and long-term needs of a city at large.

Q. What advice would you give college students looking for jobs today?

A. Look for opportunities to garner real hands-on experience, whether that experience is through internships, mentoring programs, or apprenticeships. Only through working hard on a project can you discover what you're truly passionate about. Through that exercise you will learn tools and gain knowledge that will serve you well in the future.

Q. What traits do you look for in collaborators?

A. We look for people who are smart, hard-working, and dedicated to doing the very serious tasks required in planning the future of the city. We ask that our collaborators share our passion for the city and each of its unique neighborhoods.

Q. How do you get others to rally around a vision for the future?

A. We walk their neighborhoods; we talk to the communities; we listen to the communities; and we base our proposals and work on these interactions. Most importantly we show them that we respect both their ambitions and concerns. Ultimately, through a lengthy and iterative process - literally hundreds of meetings for our larger plans - we build consensus around a vision of the future, always fine tuning plans to demonstrate our responsiveness. Another key element is helping local stakeholders visualize planning proposals, which we do through drawing and modeling what the neighborhoods will look like, not simply providing flat zoning maps.

Q. How important is the right city to business success?

A. It's essential. A city must show it is open to change and dynamic. Business never succeeds in a vacuum. It requires diverse surroundings and neighborhoods that provide a range of opportunities and activities. That means that it's the responsibility of the city and in its economic interest to provide places that people want to be, including well-designed, welcoming public spaces with a variety of modes of transportation to reach them: walking, subways, trains, buses, bicycles, and automobiles, as well as vibrant tree-lined streets with continuous and varied retail, and public spaces that will attract people and allow businesses to thrive.

Q. How do you handle failure?

A. Absolute failure is unusual in our line of work. We work tirelessly with communities, walking block by block, fielding inquiries and requests from stakeholders, in order to achieve consensus. If we encounter "near failure", it means that there's a flaw in our plan and our review process allows us to amend and resolve outstanding issues. In short, we rarely face a situation in which we have failed because our process seeks holistic resolution.

Q. When do you know it's time to walk away from a project?

A. We have received private applications from developers that may be incompatible with citywide needs or are completely out of context with a given neighborhood. We strongly encourage applicants to do the kind of listening and research that we do. Absent engagement with communities, developers will be hard-pressed to craft an application that wins favor and is ultimately adopted by the City Council. There's no point in investing time and money in a proposal that will fail for lack of support.

Q. What is the best advice you ever received?

A. [William "Holly" Whyte](#) told me, "You can measure the health of the city by the vibrancy of its streets and public spaces." That has been the fundamental guiding principle in my life as a planner. I realized then that the only way to approach studying and planning cities is at the human scale. Beyond sharing his knowledge and techniques, he gave me a passion and love for city planning. I feel and express this same sense of passion every time I walk a neighborhood, not only to study it, but to understand its DNA, its unique characteristics, its inhabitants, its opportunities, and the best options for building on its strengths. This intimate and visceral method of planning is not simply a school of thought; it's an imperative.

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