Henry Moore Building Communities in Savannah, Ga.

But wherever she works, Ross sees her job as basically the same, "helping local decision-makers do their work better," she said.

"The most attractive aspects of working nationally are the ability to look at an entire system, identify trends, pool resources and connect with some of the leading thinkers on an issue," she said. "So the core of my work is about helping practitioners at the local level by bringing those national resources and perspectives to bear."

She has maintained a laser focus on affordable housing, which Johnston pointed out is not just housing for the impoverished, but also includes housing in areas of the country where people who have stable, good jobs—such as teachers and police officers—can’t find housing to buy or rent in the communities in which they work.

Ross herself has a passion for mixed-income, mixed-use communities—that is, a living situation where people of all income levels can work, shop, educate their children and have housing options that are affordable in the neighborhood of their choice. She’s excited by the opportunity her new position offers to further the development of such communities nationwide.

The [Terwilliger Center’s] mission was expanded at the time of my hire, so it’s been fun to come in and begin to shape a new program," she said.

"I’m naturally a systems thinker, but my training as a planner helps me to think holistically about people, place, systems and programs, which is incredibly useful in shaping something new."

A very full plate

Her focus and notable organizational skills helped Ross juggle the multiple facets of her work. In a recent two-week period, her "to do" list looked like this:

- Write introduction and review upcoming book on innovative workforce housing developments
- Conduct interviews for new housing research director position
- Organize event for diverse group of people to help U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development develop its research agenda
- Represent Terwilliger Center in meetings at American Planning Association conference in Los Angeles and learn how communities are coping with the aftermath of the foreclosure crisis
- Organize roundtable discussion on supporting mixed-use developments (in partnership with Congress for the New Urbanism)
- Meet with potential funders in New York City to match the center’s priorities with those of foundations
- Organize event for diverse group of people to help U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development develop its research agenda
- Represent Terwilliger Center in meetings at American Planning Association conference in Los Angeles and learn how communities are coping with the aftermath of the foreclosure crisis
- Organize roundtable discussion on supporting mixed-use developments (in partnership with Congress for the New Urbanism)
- Write introduction and review upcoming book on innovative workforce housing developments
- Conduct interviews for new housing research director position

So while Ross puts in long hours, she says it doesn’t feel like work.

"I’m very passionate about this, so it’s easy to be focused on it. It’s not what I do. It’s who I am."