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WHO PLANS THE U.S.A.? A COMMENT ON "ADVOCACY AND PLURALISM IN PLANNING"

In 1965, when Paul Davidoff wrote his influential essay, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," he was confident that "The society of the future will be an urban one, and city planners will help to give it shape and content."[1] He argued that his concept of advocacy could reinvigorate city planning in three ways. First, advocacy could provoke public debate by replacing a single city plan with plural plans representing the interests of different groups such as neighborhood organizations, real estate developers, or Republican or

Democratic voters. Second, advocacy would widen the role of the planner from that of supposedly neutral technical expert advising a supposedly nonpartisan planning commission to that of skilled advocate promoting the interests of community organizations. Third, advocacy would shift the orientations of planners from physical to social and economic priorities: Davidoff even suggested that the AIP drop the phrase, "the comprehensive arrangement of land and land occupancy and regulation" from its charter to signify this shift. Complaining that physical structures and land are merely "servants to those who use them," he criticized planners' obsession with physical blight, to the exclusion of social and economic conditions.[2]

Davidoff's ideas have been taken up in one way or another by planning practitioners and educators for nearly thirty years, with a strong cumulative effect. Many graduates of planning schools now go to work for community organizations, and as Peter Marfis' essay notes, social and economic development planning are two important areas in the field. Nevertheless, from the perspective of 1994, we can also see a complex set of issues that Davidoff did not fully anticipate, many of them concerning the relationship of physical planning to the other areas. By turning his back on physical planning, Davidoff weakened the concept of advocacy in some significant ways.

Davidoff looked for city planners to reshape the urban world; yet in the last five-and-a-half decades, federal interventions in the production of urban space have been far more influential than city plans. The federal interventions were not called plans, but were planned nonetheless, combining spatial, economic and social regulation in the form of such legislation as the income tax rebate for home mortgage interest (currently worth about $50 billion per year, almost twice the entire HUD budget) or the Interstate Highway Act. As a result, people and economic activities have made their way to new terrain increasingly distant from older urban political jurisdictions and the city plans made for them. The national economy has been reconfigured around the production of such places, call them suburban sprawl, subtopias, or edge cities. Or call them landscapes of white assimilation, whose houses, jobs, schools and shopping malls are frequently inaccessible to the poor in central cities.

Since its formation in the mid-1920s, the real estate development lobby, with its allies in banking, automotive, and manufacturing areas, has grown in influence at the local and federal levels, influencing first Republiclan administrations (getting a good push forward under Hoover, thriving under Eisenhower, and enjoying intense support from Reagan and Bush). But Democratic administrations don't say no to the developers' lobby, either. Is it true, as Davidoff thought, that Republican and Democratic urban plans look different? Do Clinton, Cisneros, and Shalala have a coherent urban policy?

Certainly Davidoff saw that suburban issues were critical. After 1969, when he founded the Suburban Action Institute (later called Metropolitan Action Institute), he spent much of his career fighting inequality in the suburbs.[3] Perhaps he recognized the unprecedented physical scale of the federal role, as it was spurred on by the development lobby. He hinted at this when he acknowledged that not every interest group would want to commit itself to a plan; ". . . it may be simpler for professionals, politicians, or lobbyists to make deals if they have not laid their cards on the table."[4]

From the perspective of 1994, the development lobby held a royal flush in 1965, and they continue to deal themselves winning hands without inviting many players to the table. Norman Krumholz's essay runs through the depressing city scenario with a growth lobby leaning on a Democratic mayor: "equity planners" get to do some important, small, under-funded neighborhood projects, while developers have the big budgets sent their way. Krumholz then asks, can equity planning move the center of city politics in its direction, and can it move the center of the planning profession? To answer in the affirmative, it is necessary to reclaim physical space.

The area of physical planning is one that Davidoff should not have abandoned so quickly, arguing that "physical relations and conditions have no meaning or quality apart from the way they serve their users. . . .

High density, low density, green belts, mixed uses, cluster developments, centralized or decentralized business centers are per se neither good nor bad. They describe physical relations or conditions, but take on value only when seen in terms of their social, economic, psychological, physiological, or aesthetic affects upon diverse users."[5] Here is Davidoff's ultimate refusal to accept environmental determinism. Yet Da-vidoff substituted one kind of determinism for another, when he denied that built space could have any political or cultural meaning.

Urban space is a complex social and economic product. The production of space is at the heart of the economy as both process and project. Built space is an expression of material reality. It is a commitment to a certain way of organizing both economic production and social reproduction. Space is not a "servant" to a "master:" this is the creed of planner as apolitical technical adviser, which Davidoff otherwise repudiated. Rather, space is a medium, used by those wielding economic, social, and political power in constructing both a material and an ideological world that constrains its inhabitants.

Today, after forty years of sustained spatial, social, and economic reshaping of the American urban landscape, planners and citizens alike can see that economic inequality and racial segregation as well as profitable investment can flow from physical reorganization of the urban realm. This physical reorganization has occurred under the pressure of a conservative coalition of political and economic forces, able to mobilize vast governmental resources through tax subsidies and public works. The cards are not on the table, and most taxpayers would not be able to describe just where their taxes go. It is a high stakes game, played with a marked deck.

Planners might consider ways to reinvigorate debate that involve renaming the game and identifying the players, on the way to changing the rules. Physical analysis can show how today's spatial divisions interlock with some of the most problematic social divisions between men and women, whites and people of color, affluent and poor citizens, and how those divisions leave inner city spaces with the fewest resources and the greatest needs. (Malign Neglect, a recent look at homelessness by geographers Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch, is a good example of work of this kind.[6])

In the aftermath of the suburban splurge with taxpayers' dollars, equity planners who care about public culture, affordable housing, public transportation, racial and gender equality, or any other cause inspiring advocacy will find that the spatial problems are as weighty as any economic or social problems, because they are tied to both production and reproduction. And, as Chester Hartman suggests, it is necessary to organize nationally as well as locally to create the broad political coalitions that might be able to change spatial patterns of federal investment, redirect resources to the inner city, and address conditions of poverty, joblessness, homelessness, and the lack of adequate public infrastructure. That would be progress in the activist tradition that Davidoff helped to define.

NOTES

1. Paul Davidoff, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," Journal of the American Institute of Planners 31 (November 1965), 331.

- 2. Ibid., 336.
- 3. Linda Davidoff, Paul Davidoff, and Nell Newton Gold, "Suburban Action: Advocate Planning For an Open Society," Journal of the American Institute of Planners 36 (January 1970), 12-21.
- 4. Davidoff, "Advocacy," 334.
- 5. Ibid., 336.
- 6. Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear, Malign Neglect (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).

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