

**Record: 1**

**Title:** Advocacy planning as a bridge between the professional and the political

**Authors:** Marris, Peter

**Source:** Journal of the American Planning Association. Spring94, Vol. 60 Issue 2, p143. 4p.

**Document Type:** Article

**Subject Terms:** CITY planning

**People:** DAVIDOFF, Paul

**Abstract:** Discusses the theories of Paul Davidoff on city planning. Use of political and legal analogies; Difference between legal advocacy and the process of democratic politics; Flourishing of advocacy in the process of planning; Citizen participation in planning; Importance of planners' skills.

**Notes:** Publisher Information: American Planning Association.

**Full Text Word Count:** 2317

**ISSN:** 0194-4363

**Accession Number:** 9411153407

**Database:** SocINDEX with Full Text

**Section:** LONGER VIEW

## **ADVOCACY PLANNING AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PROFESSIONAL AND THE POLITICAL**

City planning, Paul Davidoff argued in 1965, is contentious, conflicted, driven by ideology, class and interest, and the planner's role is to play the advocate especially for the poor and unrepresented, but also for a political party or a government or even a self-chosen ideal. This metaphor of planning as advocacy has resonated down the years, still the most persuasive-perhaps the only persuasive-idea of how a planner might reconcile professionalism and political engagement.[1]

But if you reread the argument of "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning;" you will notice that Davidoff uses, with equal emphasis, political as well as legal analogies. "The legal advocate must plead his own and his client's sense of legal propriety and justice. The planner as advocate would plead for his own and his client's view of the good society," he writes. But a page earlier: "The recommendation that city planners represent and plead the plans of many interest groups is founded on the need to establish an effective urban democracy, one in which citizens may be able to play an active role in the process of deciding public policy." At first sight, these two statements may look much the same, and I suppose Davidoff believed that they were different ways of expressing the same ideal. His argument weaves eloquently between the two terms of his title, advocacy and democratic pluralism. But in weaving it, he overlooks a central flaw in the concept of planning as advocacy. The resolution of conflict through legal advocacy is fundamentally different from the process of democratic politics. Legal advocacy takes place in a court, before a judge and sometimes a jury, who are responsible for reaching an impartial decision in the light of the evidence presented and the law. And this decision, if it is upheld on appeal, acquires the status of a precedent: it becomes the right answer to the set of issues raised in that particular conflict. But Davidoff asserts explicitly that none of these conditions apply to planning. He despises planning commissions-the only plausible equivalent to a judge-as elitist anachronisms; and he repudiates any suggestions that in policy formation there are either neutral systems of evaluation, corresponding to a body of law, or right answers, corresponding to a verdict. "We know today, and perhaps it

was always known, that there are no right solutions. Proper policy is that which the decision making unit declares to be proper." But if planning is to be a plural political process where there "is or should be a Republican and a Democratic way of viewing city development . . . conservative and liberal plans, plans to support the private market and plans to support greater government control. . . ," how is the choice between plans to be made?

Electorates rarely have the opportunity to vote on plans; and what would be the point, unless they also voted on the political candidates who supported or opposed the plans? Conflict over plans inevitably becomes subsumed under the competition between rival politicians who are their own advocates. The planner's role, by this analogy, is far less clear, less autonomous and prestigious than that of an attorney. It resembles more that of a legislative analyst, researcher or speech writer. On close reading, the reconciliation of professionalism and political activism that made advocacy so appealing unravels in ambiguity.

Davidoff wrote of rival plans, each offering a distinct ideology and vision, each defining the good of all from an interested point of view. But for the most part, advocacy has flourished in the process of planning, not in the competition between plans. The issues have been: Who was to be heard? Whose interests were to be considered? What criteria were to judge proposals? And what purposes were to be fulfilled? Planners engaged in advocacy by claiming the right of participation on behalf of their clients, and helped them prepare their submissions, researched facts and figures, interpreted for them the language of bureaucracy and the meaning of maps, and argued for principles and criteria. In these efforts the planners have been helped by laws that mandate citizen participation, and by a growing sense that plans and policies could no longer claim legitimacy simply because a democratically elected government acting within its jurisdiction had approved them. The right of the citizens who would be directly affected by plans, to be included in the planning process, began to be written into law. Rather than in some equivalent of a courtroom, or of a democratic election, advocacy has found its place in the process of planning itself.

Within that process, an idealistic planner can reconcile professional behavior with the championing of her or his ideals as long as the intervention can be represented as speaking for a community, even when the community is notional and contrived. For instance, in the process of redeveloping London's Dockland, the advocacy of Brawn and her collaborators on behalf of the local people rested most of the time on endorsement by a committee of half a dozen self-selected leaders. But as long as demonstrations of mass support could be mobilized when needed, the planners could legitimate their activism. And after a while the institutional participants -- the National Government, the Port of London Authority, the London Boroughs--were relieved to have an articulate, informed, professional opposition with which to bargain. Advocacy planning came to resemble, not legal action or political campaigning, but rather the negotiation of a trade union contract, where, spurred by the threat of disruption in the background, the parties bargain for the best deal they can make. Like a wage negotiation, the process involves both the exchange of rhetoric, and the eventual translation of that rhetoric into a mutually agreed-upon language, in which specified issues become amenable to resolution without compromising the irreconcilable remaining differences.[2]

But trade union negotiations are about tangible benefits--wages, pensions, health care, holidays and hours of work. For all the effort that went into making the Docklands Strategic Plan a document that responded to the needs of London's East End neighborhoods, nothing came of it. The recommendations of the plan were ignored, even by the Labor Government which had endorsed it. Soon afterwards, a new Conservative administration overrode both its spirit and its goals by instituting an autonomous Docklands Development Corporation, whose policies were frankly "market led." So, as Frances Fox Piven asked in a paper as resonant as Davidoff's original statement, in the end, whose interest did the advocate planner serve? Is advocacy planning, as Piven argued, only an insidious form of co-optation, giving the poor and left-out an illusion of influence that is all the more insidious because the planners themselves share the illusion?[3]

The Davidoff and Piven articles appeared in the aftermath of urban renewal, when cities were trying to reclaim the prosperity that was deserting them for the suburbs, when the civil rights movement had demonstrated the power of protest, and social services had been expanding rapidly. The new questions, then, were: How much of the growing wealth of the American economy might be channeled through government intervention to the increasingly impoverished inner cities. And did planning, as opposed to protest, have any useful part to play?

Piven's argument applied most forcefully to the comprehensive planning then in fashion. The problems of the city were to be tackled, not piecemeal; but by coordinating investment in schools, social services, business, police and probation, housing-every relevant agency, in a concerted attack on poverty and central-city decline. In the formation of community action and model cities programs, citizen participation was a crucial component, without which the comprehensive plans for deprived neighborhoods were not legitimate. But these were the hardest kinds of plans to carry out, because there was no actor powerful enough to impose the coordination they required; and they were drawn up with little regard for the actual resources that would be made available, whether private or public. In the event, when public and private actors did have resources to spend, they generally ignored such plans. The principal accomplishment of the plan was to show how the resources of the city could be brought to bear to reduce poverty and ensure a prosperous future, and so to restore faith in the city's viability. These programs of consensual, incremental reform, largely unfunded and endorsed only ideally and notionally by those with the capacity to carry them out, appealed most, I think, to idealists in the major foundations, who were constrained by their philanthropic status to be nonpartisan, and to federal officials, seeking a more credible urban policy in the aftermath of urban renewal.

But if the poor had little to gain from these ambitious exercises, they were nevertheless constantly threatened by concrete actions that could hurt them, and were occasionally faced with opportunities they might be able to exploit. So it is still worth asking what planners have to contribute in these situations, for better or worse. The professionalism of planners lies in the ability to gather and synthesize a great variety of relevant information to support or oppose a proposal-information that may be social, economic, legislative, political, fiscal, historical, architectural, geographic. Neither politicians nor community leaders have the time or skill to do this for themselves. And academic experts lack the necessary breadth and readiness to improvise answers with imperfect data. The planners' skill is valuable, because facts and figures are the everyday rhetoric of political argument, in evidence before committees, in legislative debates, in public commentary, and as ground for the moral force of opposition. To prevent a municipal incinerator from being built in a poor neighborhood; to save publicly owned rental housing as a tenant-owned cooperative; to defend the homeless against persecution and the erosion of their meager supports, you need broader support than those immediately affected can provide. You need media attention, political allies, access to resources. To use these effectively, you have to expose false assumptions, bogus statistics and fiscal miscalculations, and thus vitiate your opponent's claims, and then you must provide the detailed analysis that upholds your own position.[4]

In the examples I have just given (which come from Los Angeles), something was achieved that would not, I believe, have been possible without the help of planners. The incinerator was abandoned, the environmental claims for it were discredited. The Department of Transportation was induced to sell land and housing below market value to a tenant's cooperative after long and complicated financial and political negotiations supported by patient, but frustrated community organizations. Facilities were built for the homeless that reflected research on their patterns of life and networks of support.

This kind of advocacy is more entrepreneurial than legal-more open in its framework of assumptions, more creative in its solutions, much broader in the kinds of understanding it tries to synthesize, more interactive and responsive. It is less confrontational than the legal process, less bound by precedent and constraints upon evidence. And it is more substantial, technically sophisticated and detailed than the broad promises of political campaigns. But it embodies the spirit of Davidoff's vision. He would, I think, feel vindicated now that there are

far more planners trying to help poor communities that there were in 1965. These planners have fewer illusions about the ability of planning to redistribute resources, but they are also less anxious about justifying their professional status. In a time of impoverished governments, faltering urban economies, Federal neglect and political impotence, I suggest that planners, paradoxically, are freer to build alliances and propose their own solutions without worrying about their right to do so, because everyone is looking for workable proposals. Embattled city agencies begin to reach out to allies against whom they used to defend their jurisdictional autonomy. Local capital and local unions come together to save plants and jobs. Desperation opens school systems to ideas of reform they once excluded. In these circumstances, Davidoff's ideal of planning as an instrument of redistribution expresses itself less as advocacy than as entrepreneurial networking, forging links among the organizations that might collaborate to make the most of the resources they can tap.

So the question of how to reconcile professionalism and partisanship, with which I began this reflection, seems less troubling now than in 1965, even if it is still unresolved. We no longer believe that expertise can ever be truly impartial; and the issues are differentless the deployment of Federal funds than the deployment of local resources. But Davidoff's underlying question, how can planning serve as an instrument of redistributive justice? is as urgent as ever. Examples like those I have cited suggest that it can so serve.

Other examples from Los Angeles, just as recent--such as Rebuild LA, and the downtown strategic plan--seem to repeat the characteristic faults of pretentious and largely ineffectual symbolic exercises. In planning education and research, we must pay more attention to the political, social and institutional settings in which any attempt at planning takes place, asking insistently who will carry out whatever is decided, how, when and where, and what the sanctions are against default. Once these questions are asked, the issues of authenticity and justice begin to emerge, as Paul Davidoff believed they should.

## NOTES

1. Paul Davidoff, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 31:4 (1965): 331-8.
- 2. For the story of the Docklands Strategic Plan see Peter Marris, *Meaning and Action*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).
- 3. Frances Fox Piven, "Whom Does the Advocate Planner Serve?" *Social Policy*: 11 (1970): 32-5, 37.
- 4. For the story of the Route 2 Cooperative see Allan Heskin, *The Struggle for Community* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

*Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Spring 1994. American Planning Association, Chicago, IL.

~~~~~

By Peter Marris

Peter Marris is Professor Emeritus of social planning at the University of California at Los Angeles.

---

Copyright of *Journal of the American Planning Association* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.