

Paul Davidoff: American Planning Scholar and Activist
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Paul Davidoff was born in New York City on February 14, 1930. He and his younger brother, Jerry, were the children of Dr. Bernard and Sarah Davidoff of Sunnyside Gardens, Queens. The child of progressive Jewish parents, Paul completed primary school at the Little Red School House and its affiliated secondary school, Lois Erwin High School, in Greenwich Village in Manhattan in 1948.

Paul then went on to Allegheny College near Pittsburgh, PA where he earned a degree in political science in 1952 while participating in collegiate athletics and writing a regular column on international affairs for the school paper. Following his graduation from Allegheny where he developed a strong interest in international affairs, progressive politics, and Civil Rights, Paul entered Yale Law School.

After taking an urban planning class during his first year of law school, Paul decided to interrupt his legal studies at Yale to enroll in the Master of Regional Planning Program at the University of Pennsylvania where he studied with legendary planning scholars Martin Meyerson, Charles Abrams, Britton Harris, and Ian McHarg. While attending UPENN's planning program, Paul completed his law degree. Following his graduation from UPENN, he accepted a position as a planning consultant for the firm of Voorhees, Smith and Walker who were providing planning services to cities and counties throughout the northeast. One of the major projects he was involved in while working for Voorhees, Smith and Walker was the update of the Comprehensive Plan for the City of New York in 1960.

Following his stint as a planning consultant, Paul accepted a teaching position in the graduate planning program at UPENN where he and Martin Myerson involved their students in a series of "hands on" community planning studios in economically distressed inner city and first ring suburban communities. Two of the distinguishing characteristics of these efforts was the degree to which they engaged local residents and leaders in identifying the current challenges and future development opportunities confronting their communities and the extent to which their planning recommendations transcended the then accepted bounds of land use and urban design.

As a newly-appointed UPENN professor, Paul began publishing both single and jointly-authored articles in leading planning and legal journals in the early 1960s. In the summer of 1965, he published "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning" in the Journal of the American Institute of Planners which challenged the most important theoretical and ethical claims of the Post-War planning profession in the United States and shook the foundation of the then dominant and rarely questioned rational model of planning taught in the vast majority of U.S. planning schools.

This article questioned the existence of a unitary “public interest” in American urban planning and politics. It argued for the existence of multiple “public interests” representing the racial, ethnic, and class groups comprising America’s increasingly diverse cities and suburbs. In this article, he argued that centralized planning agencies tended to represent the interest of downtown development interests which Logan and Molotch later referred to as the “Urban Growth Machines” at the expense of low-income communities, especially those representing African American, Latino American, Native American and new immigrant communities.

To address this problem, Davidoff encouraged individual planners and the planning profession to embrace a new form of practice which he referred to as “advocacy planning”. In the future, Davidoff argued that economically, politically, and culturally marginalized communities should have access to well trained and highly skilled planners who would work with them to produce alternative plans based upon the often-ignored hopes, aspirations, and values of these communities. When municipal planners present their proposals for the stabilization and/or revitalization of these communities, advocacy planners working in these neighborhoods would present their independently developed “oppositional plans” offering City Planning Commissions and City Councils the opportunity to weigh the often-hidden assumptions, theoretical frameworks, empirical basis and development arguments contained in these documents. Davidoff believed the development, public presentation, and community debate of competing plans for local communities would dramatically improve the quality, fairness, and equity of American city planning.

The publication of this article had a profound impact on American city planning and Paul Davidoff’s life and career. Following major addresses at the 1966 and 1967 Annual Meetings of the American Society of Planning Officials (now known as the American Planning Association) focused on the ethical and political responsibilities of planners in a democratic society, a group of planners inspired by Paul’s original advocacy planning article and conference presentations formed Planners for Equal Opportunity (PEO). Between 1968 and 1974, this national organization representing some four hundred citizen activists, professional planners, and elected officials: produced advocacy plans to advance the interests of work and working-class communities of color, organized direct action demonstrations to encourage planning agencies to abandon their urban renewal schemes and to diversify their staffs, and undertook law suits aimed at eliminating segregation in education, housing, and employment.

The recognition Paul received as the initiator of the nation’s increasingly popular advocacy planning movement prompted Dr. Ruth Weintraub, then Dean of Hunter College’s School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, to recruit him as the Founding Director of the school’s new Graduate Program in Urban Planning. Recently married, Paul and his wife, moved with their three small children to suburban New York in 1966 enabling him to assume his new academic post. Soon thereafter, during a family trip to President Kennedy’s Arlington Cemetery Gravesite and Colonial Williamsburg Paul, his wife, and his two oldest children were involved in a devastating automobile collision that resulted in the loss of his wife and young son – Adam. A year later, he married Linda Greenberg, an outstanding UPENN planning graduate with whom

he had two children, Daniel Kirk and Thomas, whom he worked with on many progressive planning initiatives in NYC and elsewhere.

Within two years of the creation of Hunter's Graduate Program in Urban Planning as the nation's first professional program committed to equity-oriented planning, Paul left the University when his vocal support for student anti-war protesters blocking an administrators' entrance to the University, prompted the Hunter administration to relocate the program within a larger academic unit whose new director could limit the impact of Paul's increasingly progressive actions on his students and the University. While on the Hunter College faculty, Paul launched a U.S. Congressional campaign running as a peace and justice candidate from Westchester County in 1968 which he lost. In 1969, Paul left Hunter to launch the Suburban Action Institute, a new 501c3 organization, committed to removing the barriers, primarily zoning reinforced residential segregation, that prevent poor and working-class families of color from pursuing the increasing number of living wage jobs being created in the inner city suburban areas surrounding America's rapidly declining central cities.

For nearly fifteen years, Paul and his Suburban Action, later renamed Metropolitan Action Institute, colleagues produced research, wrote articles, filed lawsuits, and proposed land developments aimed at advancing the economic status of poor and working-class families of color by providing them with access to living wage employment, high performing public schools, and decent affordable housing. Among the landmark legal struggles Paul was involved in was the Mt. Laurel zoning case, the Yonkers school integration case, and the Ramapo Mountain Garden City development project. Paul Davidoff passed away after a long struggle with cancer in New York City on December 27, 1984.

Widely recognized as an outstanding planning scholar, professional educator, practicing planner, and life-long advocate for racial equality and social justice, the American Collegiate Schools of Planning give out a bi-annual award for the best book addressing social justice and human rights in planning called the Paul Davidoff Book Award. In addition, Queens College gives out the Paul Davidoff Award for Social Action to the student whose work best reflects Paul's commitment to civil and human rights. More than fifty years after its publication, Paul's classic article "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning" remains one of the most often cited, read, and downloaded articles in city planning literature.