



The Rise & Fall of New Left Urbanism

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 The pillars of the "urban renewal order," shorthand for an interlocking set of social policies since the 1940s, were crumbling fast by the 1960s. Urban populations, especially in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada, suddenly no longer wanted the variety of once progressive-minded public programs it encompassed: highways through cities, demolitions aimed at clearing "blighted" or "gray" areas, redevelopment for public housing superblocks and other megaprojects. A slum in the eyes of a planner, it turned out, was often a resident's cherished homestead, and soon proponents of the City of Tomorrow ran up against increasing opposition. The fall of the urban renewal order was driven from below, to be sure; but the ideology of this grassroots uprising was not clearly drawn from the traditional left or right. Yet in its wake opened a fleeting conceptual space, where the fate of urban planning and policy – even urban life in general - could be debated and reconsidered, sometimes quite radically.

Striking experiments in citizen participation, or "advocacy planning," took root in Anglo-American urbanism in the 1960s and 1970s, often in the very neighborhoods that were threatened by "the

federal bulldozer." In districts like London's Covent Garden, Toronto's St. Lawrence Neighborhood, and New York's West Village, citizens attempted to make city planning – and by extension urban life - more democratic and equitable, putting forward their own proposals to counter the sweeping urban renewal plans imposed by government or private developers. Each of the counterproposals, while not always successfully realized, experimented with alternative methods of meeting urban challenges mobility, preservation, growth, affordability, and upgrading – and embodied the aspirations and ideals of residents who couldn't be easily ignored. Such residents rejected the authority of supposedly impartial experts and liberal policymakers, whose pursuit of modernization in the "public interest" seemed to come at the expense of urban neighborhoods.

Ad hoc grassroots organizing proved effective in stopping highway plans, "slum" clearance proposals, and redevelopment schemes. But such victories posed a follow-up question: must popular mobilization be only reactive? In other words, couldn't cities also be planned from the grassroots? At a time when the New Left was championing the idea that "the people with the prob-

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lems are the people with the solutions," an emergent "New Left urbanism" embodied hopes (in the end fleeting) for urban renewal with a humane face.

 ${f E}$ fforts to stop the construction of highways through cities formed the first significant wave of challenges to the urban renewal order. The second half of the 1950s saw successful grassroots opposition to plans for a freeway in San Francisco along the Embarcadero waterfront and a plan for a sunken artery through Washington Square in Manhattan, and by the 1960s, this "freeway revolt" had spread to many American cities. Robert Moses had predicted, during the policy discussions that preceded the national highway program, that the portions of the network in dense urban areas would be the most likely to stir resistance. After all, unlike rural and suburban ones, these urban freeways came at the expense of large numbers of residences and businesses, negatively impacting those least likely to use the new roads and igniting a cultural clash over an urban versus a suburban vision of American life. It, too, was a clash between those who saw themselves as needless victims – a contingent sometimes dismissed as NIMBY ("Not In My Backyard") obstructionists - and those who saw some local sacrifices as necessary for infrastructure meant to serve the larger public good.1

These sacrifices, however, weren't equitably distributed, with poor and minority urban communities facing disproportionately higher numbers of demolitions. In fact, Moses and other advocates didn't shy away from linking urban highway construction to another agenda within the urban renewal order: the eradication of areas planners deemed obsolete or "blighted." Slum clearance proposals frequently also

were based upon the undesirability of an existing neighborhood, which was condemned for its inherent characteristics, and not simply as a casualty of some larger public works project. It took longer for residents to develop the conceptual and tactical resources to challenge slum clearance schemes and defend neighborhoods on their own terms, to affirm their worthiness in the face of a rhetoric of blight. Yet this did happen, and by the early 1960s, pressure from residents in New York neighborhoods like Gramercy, Bellevue, and the West Village forced a shift in rhetoric from public officials, halted several specific slum clearance proposals, and facilitated the expansion of historic preservation statutes to protect entire neighborhoods. Unofficially, this heralded a larger cultural sea change in attitudes toward old neighborhoods, evident by the 1970s in phenomena like the revival of Brooklyn's "brownstone belt" and a growing enthusiasm for fixing up homes in Victorian districts more generally. (Incidentally, these trends were reflected, respectively, in two popular public television programs born during the period, Sesame Street, in 1969, and This Old House, in 1978.) Even the "ghetto" self-help philosophies promoted by some minority urban leaders at the time exhibited related themes of neighborhood defense and uplift.

Grassroots self-empowerment was complemented by federal legislative changes – Congressional amendments to housing legislation in 1959 and 1965, and to the highway acts in 1962 and 1968 – which revised the definitions of urban renewal to include more resident consultation and more physical rehabilitation. However, more assertive citizen participation in urban planning was not welcomed universally. As groups became more savvy and effective at obstructing

proposals, unwanted projects could be deliberately bogged down, eventually killed, through mandated hearings and court challenges – some resulting from the very legislative changes and program initiatives designed to encourage inclusion; measures intended to defuse and incorporate opposition often, inversely, fanned it. Still, U.S. urbanites increasingly believed that the sweeping powers granted to government agencies under the rubric of urban renewal had authorized a kind of undemocratic monster. Vigorous opposition, even gridlock, seemed warranted to check such tyrannical abuse of power.

While increasingly successful at opposing outside plans, citizen groups were perhaps less vocal for measures they supported, and practically none could point to any successful proposals of their own devising. Defensive battles often obscured the real point: that neighborhoods wanted to gain some control to pursue their own constructive programs. In the early 1960s, the New York traffic commissioner expressed a common criticism of the negative tactics deployed so effectively by a West Village neighborhood organization: "I have yet to hear of anything in New York that that group is for!" Indeed, the group in question, led by Jane Jacobs, deliberately chose to shelve its positive goals until after renewal plans were defeated, for fear they might be co-opted as tokens of community participation. Some groups, however, did not wait for the dust to settle before devising counterproposals; they used them as rallying points against official plans. And many others took up planning in the wake of victories.

Community groups didn't invent the notion of democratizing the urban planning process. By the late 1940s and 1950s,

figures such as Paul and Percival Goodman, Peter and Alison Smithson, and adherents of the British "townscape" movement advocated a certain populism in design. Social scientists including Herbert Gans, Marc Fried, Michael Young, and Peter Willmott raised questions about how well the public was served by urban renewal. And Jane Jacobs's 1961 book, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, publicly challenged the expertise professed by credentialed urbanists; it granted a folk wisdom to the various preferences of average city dwellers, whose implicit ratification of what worked seemed at odds with fashionable planning prescriptions.²

The most relevant ideas, however, were those that emerged from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Fine Arts. Urbanists who studied and taught there in the 1950s were riven by tensions between advocates of social scientific methodologies and those who were concerned primarily with urban design questions. Denise Scott Brown, a graduate student who emigrated from London to study at the school in 1958, characterized the divide as "analysts" versus "artists." Those debates were suddenly complicated, even radicalized, by a newly aroused political sensibility and the more activist posture that accompanied it. Scott Brown recalled witnessing at Penn what would later be dubbed the New Left:

Here, long before it was visible in other places, was the elation that comes with the discovery and definition of a problem: poverty. The continued existence of poor people in America was a real discovery for students and faculty in the late 1950s. The social planning movement engulfed Penn's planning department.³

That "social planning movement" found its first systematic expression

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in Paul Davidoff, who came to Penn in 1956, initially as a planning student and then as an instructor. Combining training from Yale Law School with a passion for social justice, Davidoff saw urban planning as a power struggle, a scramble for scarce resources. In particular, he envisioned the planning process as something analogous to the adversarial system of jurisprudence. Planners, he felt, only deluded themselves by thinking anyone could objectively identify and pursue some sort of abstract public interest. Instead, Davidoff saw only contending forces – and often grossly unequal ones. The poor and otherwise disenfranchised groups lacked a strong advocate in planning deliberations, and to rectify this, Davidoff imagined an urbanist analogue to the public defender – "advocacy planners" – who would function more like community organizers, helping citizens of modest means to voice their concerns (usually their opposition) about proposals sponsored by politically or economically powerful constituencies. Davidoff consequently rejected fine arts training conventions, like the design studio, as overly concerned with aesthetics - as, in effect, too conservative or "imperial"; he preferred to sensitize planning students to sources of social conflict like police brutality. Together with his protégé, graduate student Thomas Reiner, he drafted a theoretical framework for a more politicized approach to planning, publishing a set of highly influential articles over the early 1960s in the professional journals read by urbanists.

As Davidoff was setting forth his radical theoretical analysis in Philadelphia, pragmatic citizen groups in New York City were finding their own routes to something remarkably similar. Jane Jacobs was a key figure in this respect, and by 1962 she had already made three dis-

tinct, significant interventions on the urban scene: releasing her controversial book The Death and Life of Great American Cities in 1961; organizing her neighborhood in opposition to a slum clearance proposal for the West Village in 1961 – 1962; and leading, beginning in 1962, a citywide coalition to defeat the lower Manhattan expressway plan. These three dramatic strokes were each of lasting importance for New York City, and perhaps for urbanism generally. But all of them were *reactive*, defensive maneuvers against threats posed by unwelcome policies. In a letter congratulating Jacobs on her victories, Lewis Mumford warned her against "improvising the means of democratic expression each time, at a heavy cost," urging instead "a more permanent local organization" than such ad hoc opposition could supply. Other city residents also sought more durable protections, and they were increasingly willing to take proactive, preventative actions against perceived threats to neighborhood stability. The historic preservation statutes being enacted by the mid-1960s offered some protection, but it was relatively superficial – that is, exclusively architectural. The time had come to offer some concrete alternatives on the social, economic, and political fronts as well.

Jacobs and her like-minded neighbors formalized their ad hoc opposition (the Committee to Save the West Village) into a permanent neighborhood association, which allowed residents not only to set their own priorities, but also effectively advocate for them. Most of these goals proved relatively modest; among five subcommittees listed in a 1962 newsletter were garbage clean-up, tree planting, and property improvement. But tucked innocently within this list was a more ambitious aim: the creation

of a working group to look into the possibilities for low-cost "experimental housing." Including this project announced that the group intended to take neighborhood development into its own hands, challenging for dominance both private market forces, like real estate speculation, as well as those public agencies hitherto delegated the authority for making planning decisions. The committee also pointedly adopted a set of inviolable principles in an effort to pursue housing alternatives without engaging in the standard operating procedures of urban renewal: Title I "write-downs," eminent domain, condemnation, and relocation.

The West Village boasted residents with eclectic skills – from poets to longshoremen – and some of these proved relevant to such a project. Jacobs herself was certainly well-acquainted with the politics and considerations involved in planning, and her husband was a practicing architect. Nevertheless, the West Village Committee eventually turned to the architectural firm of Perkins & Will to give final form to the residents' ideas. Indeed, technical skills and professional expertise, not to mention other key resources like outside financing and official approval, were all necessary for the ultimate success of any community proposal. Yet the participatory process fundamental to the West Village Committee ensured that residents' goals and concerns were incorporated into the project from its inception. This was a direct challenge to the urban planning status quo.

After a year of preparatory work, the committee's proposal was unveiled on the front page of *The New York Times* in May 1963. The plan for "the West Village Houses" envisioned a series of buildings scattered along Washington Street sites, where stretches of the elevated freight

tracks (a.k.a. the "high line") of the New York Central Railway had been demolished. It proposed a handful of small, five-story walk-up apartment buildings, with orientation and scale meshed with existing buildings, and with mixed retail uses at street level.

There were similar stirrings among neighboring community groups on Manhattan's East Side. The Gramercy Neighbors successfully rebuffed a slum clearance proposal promoted by Robert Moses in 1956, by advocating for rehabilitation instead of demolition. After Moses shifted that scheme to a neighboring community, the Bellevue South Preservation Committee sought to replicate his defeat, and local architects, led by Mitchell Saradoff, drafted an elaborate counterproposal that emphasized infill construction with minimal clearance. (In spite of this, the city condemned the Bellevue neighborhood in 1964.) Residents affected by an East Village slum clearance proposal formed the Cooper Square Committee in 1959. Echoing the West Villagers' refusal to be displaced, the group developed an alternative plan over the 1960s, with consultation from MIT-trained planner Walter Thabit.

Urbanists in academic and professional planning circles rushed to get behind these grassroots developments, with Paul Davidoff's ideas providing the rationale. 1964 proved to be a critical year for this shift. Beginning that year, Thomas Reiner devoted some of his Penn classes to the plight of a Philadelphia neighborhood facing destruction by a crosstown expressway along South Street. (In 1968, that same community provided Denise Scott Brown's fledgling design firm with its first commission: the firm served, essentially, as the advocacy planners for the opposition groups.)

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Meanwhile, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, planning student Chester Hartman, sympathetic to Davidoff's critiques of the overly aesthetic focus of studio training, had left the Harvard Graduate School of Design to research a PhD on slum clearance in Boston's West End. In 1964 he became involved with several Boston-area community groups opposing the Inner Belt highway through Cambridge and urban renewal projects in Allston. He set up Urban Planning Aid, Inc., a pro bono advocacy planning practice with Lisa Peattie, Robert Goodman, and others. This "counter-planning force," in Hartman's words, assisted neighborhoods including Roxbury and the South End.4

Also in 1964, C. Richard Hatch organized the Architects Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH), a neighborhood-based advocacy planning firm led by young African American urbanists. Hatch was soon joined by J. Max Bond, a Harvard-trained architect with previous experience in France and Ghana, and eventually the staff grew to over a dozen. The group's initial projects included advising tenants on their rights and surveying the neighborhood's housing stock, promoting both rehabilitation and infill housing. Davidoff sat on the ARCH board, a connection which the organization's publications made explicit:

We at ARCH believe strongly in the advocacy planning concept. We believe that neighborhood involvement coupled with technical sensitivity to community needs is essential to the planning process if it is to be at all relevant to Black and Spanishspeaking people.⁵

One of ARCH's leaders, Arthur Symes, put it this way: "Architecture and planning are just too important to be omit-

ted from the lives of people who happen to be poor."

hese assorted experiments in New Left urbanism flourished not only because of a shift in the Zeitgeist, but also because of the support of powerful patrons (at least for a time). Private philanthropies, particularly the Ford Foundation, provided early seed grants for ARCH and other urban neighborhood organizations. And from 1964 onward, under various Great Society initiatives to tackle poverty, civil rights, and urban problems, federal funds supported the activities of numerous community organizers via the Labor Department's Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) or the Model Cities program of the newly formed Department of Housing and Urban Development. When New York City elected the liberal Republican John Lindsay as a reform-oriented mayor in 1965, he championed measures to devolve power and accountability to "neighborhood city halls," and he lent his support to the West Village Houses in particular, helping the community group obtain permits from unsympathetic city officials.

Just as New Left urbanism gained powerful political patrons at the local and national levels, it also became ensconced in the major institutions of professional urbanists as well. In summer 1964, a group of activism-oriented urbanists founded Planners for Equal Opportunity (PEO). Charter members included Paul Davidoff, Herbert Gans, Chester Hartman, Marshall Kaplan, and Walter Thabit. PEO immediately began to agitate professional organizations, training programs, and planning practitioners for greater inclusiveness. 6

In 1964, the planning program at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute gave community advocacy its first permanent institutional role through a program, funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, to consult residents in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. By 1965, Penn had abolished the traditional studio method from its planning curriculum. In 1966, Harvard decided to incorporate advocacy planning into its curriculum, and the Graduate School of Design asked Chester Hartman to return as a faculty member and set up the Urban Field Service, a student version of his Urban Planning Aid practice.

Thus radical "anti-planning" advocacy, once avant-garde, came to be seen as mainstream, as traditional technocratic expertise in urban policy fell into disrepute. This paralleled, and even slightly anticipated, the eroding support for the foreign policy of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Washington's "best and brightest" - no surprise then that the student movement, so galvanized by antiwar sentiment, took up community planning as a complementary cause. As sit-ins on campuses nationwide expressed grievances related to Vietnam, curricula, and governance, they also frequently included the plight of poor and minority residents from their respective college towns. Advocacy planning, with its theoretical roots in graduate schools of fine arts, and its practical beginnings in disparaged neighborhoods, made its way into the moral consciousness of the collegiate middle class.

A high-water mark in popular support can also signal the start of a receding tide. Any full account of the major social movements of the 1960s – student, antiwar, women's rights, and civil rights – must incorporate the powerful backlash that their more radical wings provoked. Dramatic campus sit-ins, for example, hardened ideological lines and alienated

many liberal faculty members from students, and many whites took violent urban riots as justification for abandoning any sympathy for the plight of poor blacks.

Advocacy planning was swept up in the same shifting tides. There were certainly lasting achievements, large and small: Mayor Lindsay endorsed Walter Thabit's Cooper Square alternative plan in 1968; it was officially adopted by the city in 1970. The Pratt Center's community work under Professor Ron Shiffman continued uninterrupted for decades. Other outcomes were more ambiguous: ARCH helped organize opposition to Columbia University's plans for redeveloping Morningside Park into a campus extension; the protests succeeded in stopping the project, though large-scale counterproposals that ARCH developed were never constructed. The West Village Houses finally broke ground in 1974, but official foot-dragging and rising construction costs had stripped the project down to bare bones. Bankrupt by the time the project was completed, the community organization lost control of the development it had planned as the city foreclosed and passed ownership to outside investors.

In Philadelphia, the South Street expressway proposal was eventually dropped. Denise Scott Brown's role as a consultant for the community's anticrosstown fight had consisted primarily of promoting appreciation for that neighborhood's messy vitality; in public forums she prevailed on policy-makers to see the area as something to be preserved rather than eradicated. She did so by executing hardly any design and very little planning, despite her fine arts training. Of such advocacy planning she said, "Although it underrates both artistry and analysis, it is really the only moral method of planning

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and I have tried to follow it as a practitioner." However, almost no comparable opportunities surfaced subsequently, and her firm ultimately made its name through designs for high-profile private clients like Ivy League universities and major cultural institutions. Neighborhood groups, at least those in poor areas, simply did not command the resources to retain professional planners.

Just like public defenders, advocacy planners, as Davidoff envisioned them, would need to rely on the commitment of public funding to sustain their activities on any permanent basis. Initially, such funds were available as a result of various Great Society programs. But policy intellectuals like Daniel Patrick Moynihan soured on the ideal of "maximum feasible participation" that had animated the OEO's support for neighborhood initiatives. Sporadic riots, sustained rises in crime, and accompanying fears of social decay helped feed a sense of crisis and despair. Moynihan, along with other influential "neoconservative" social scientists, including Edward Banfield and Martin Anderson, suggested that issues surrounding racialized urban poverty might fare better under a policy of "benign neglect." President Nixon obliged, declaring, in 1973, a general moratorium on public housing outlays and related urban spending, and, by 1974, ending programs like Model Cities and the OEO. Some urban aid continued in the form of "block grants," but advocacy planning initiatives could no longer count on significant federal funds. Meanwhile, Mayor John Lindsay's proposals for empowering neighborhoods through "little city halls" were consistently frustrated by resistance from traditional partisan power centers in New York politics, and they did not survive after he left office in 1973.

This political sea change had analogues in the urbanist establishment. Paul Davidoff left Penn in 1965, teaching briefly at Hunter College before turning from 1969 onward to independent work on racial integration in suburbia. Chester Hartman, after vocally supporting the Harvard student strike and criticizing the administration and his planning faculty colleagues, was fired in 1970 through an acrimonious process that rejected his teaching approach as "political strategy more than ...city and regional planning." And what of the PEO's attempts to shift the professional establishment? One of the PEO's founders remarked at the sudden demise of an institution "that had been an important force in planning issues ... but which essentially had withered away by the early 1970s."8 Advocates of New Left urbanism found themselves, after a brief moment at the center, at the margins once again. And U.S. city residents, having pressed for a more humane strategy of urban renewal, were left instead with basically none at all.

I he paths of similar movements abroad led in both overlapping and divergent directions. In London, resistance to the urban renewal order appeared at least as early as the 1959 plan to redevelop Piccadilly Circus, which was delayed and eventually dropped. A more systemic freeway revolt was manifested citywide by the late 1960s, under the banner of "Homes before Roads," and gained traction within the Labour ranks by 1971. When that party won control of the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1973, the new official policy became "Stop the Motorways."9 This shift abruptly halted work on the West Cross Route, notably leaving the section of the M41 begun near the Shepherd's Bush area of London with an elevated highway spur to nowhere. All of this paralleled NIMBY-style developments in the United States.

By the mid-1970s, though, community groups were poised to move beyond NIMBY opposition, and advocacy planning began taking hold in the United Kingdom just as its influence waned in U.S. cities. For example, residents opposed a redevelopment plan for London's Covent Garden neighborhood. A lead planner on that very redevelopment proposal, Brian Anson, with strong attachments to the workingclass community, defected from the GLC and organized residents to develop alternative plans for their neighborhood. He brought together locals with students from the Architectural Association to make counterproposals for reusing abandoned industrial buildings. After the national government intervened to stop the clearance scheme and provide historic preservation designations, the GLC incorporated some opposition group members into a citizen participation body, and in 1979 the redevelopment of a former printing factory closely followed the ideas developed by Covent Garden residents. 10

More extensive examples flourished in Canada, particularly in Toronto. There, practically the entire civic reform movement could be understood as a largescale experiment in New Left urbanism, encompassing consecutive municipal administrations that gained power throughout the 1970s. Once again, freeway revolts provided the spark: the rejection of Toronto's urban renewal order was catalyzed by an expressway proposal for the Spadina Road corridor, which prompted a grassroots rebellion that included Jane Jacobs, who had recently immigrated to Toronto. In contrast to U.S. examples, however, scattered opposition groups citywide united,

even crossing class lines, behind a slate of nonpartisan, anti-renewal candidates. While such alignments formed in U.S. cities only as fleeting ad hoc opposition to specific projects, the Toronto reform movement gained a foothold on city council in 1969 and soon came to dominate, capturing the mayoralty by 1972 under a slogan of "community organizing." This urban regime change empowered a series of administrations to transform – not just oppose – traditional urban policies; a primary objective became preservation of the character of Toronto's "core area" against threats from both destructive public policies, as well as private market forces. The new planning ideals were demonstrated most clearly in a forty-five-acre public/private redevelopment project for a former industrial area near the waterfront. The St. Lawrence Neighborhood, largely redeveloped between 1974 and 1979, featured new construction that extended Toronto's traditional street grid, mixing uses, building types, and incomes, while avoiding displacement and demolition. The experiment went a long way toward realizing the sort of humane urban renewal that citizen groups had advocated in New York.

Contrasts within Anglo-American urbanism should not be overdrawn, particularly in the long view. Just after the Covent Garden episode, grassroots planning was completely marginalized in London's Docklands, the signature redevelopment project under Margaret Thatcher, whose administration was even more hostile to leftist urbanism than Nixon's had been. Toronto's reform movement eventually dissipated back toward traditional party rule. And by the 1980s, preserving neighborhoods – not just architecturally, but by assur-

Not coincidentally, Jane Jacobs was a

key advisor to the project.¹¹

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ing affordability for a mix of income groups – was difficult all around; communities in London, Toronto, and New York all wrestled with the challenges of gentrification. Nevertheless, each of these cities witnessed vigorous expressions of a more democratized urban politics through the advocacy planning initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s. Those experiments with New Left urbanism, some modest, others more ambitious, have left behind tangible legacies in the built environment of these cities.

ENDNOTES

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- ² Christopher Klemek, "Placing Jane Jacobs within the Transatlantic Urban Conversation," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 73 (1) (2007): 49 67.
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- ⁴ Chester W. Hartman, *Between Eminence and Notoriety: Four Decades of Radical Urban Planning* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, 2001), 6, 18 20.
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- ¹⁰ Brian Anson, I'll Fight You for It: Behind the Struggle for Covent Garden (London: Jonathan Cape. 1981).
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