

Democratic Planning

Author(s): Paul Davidoff

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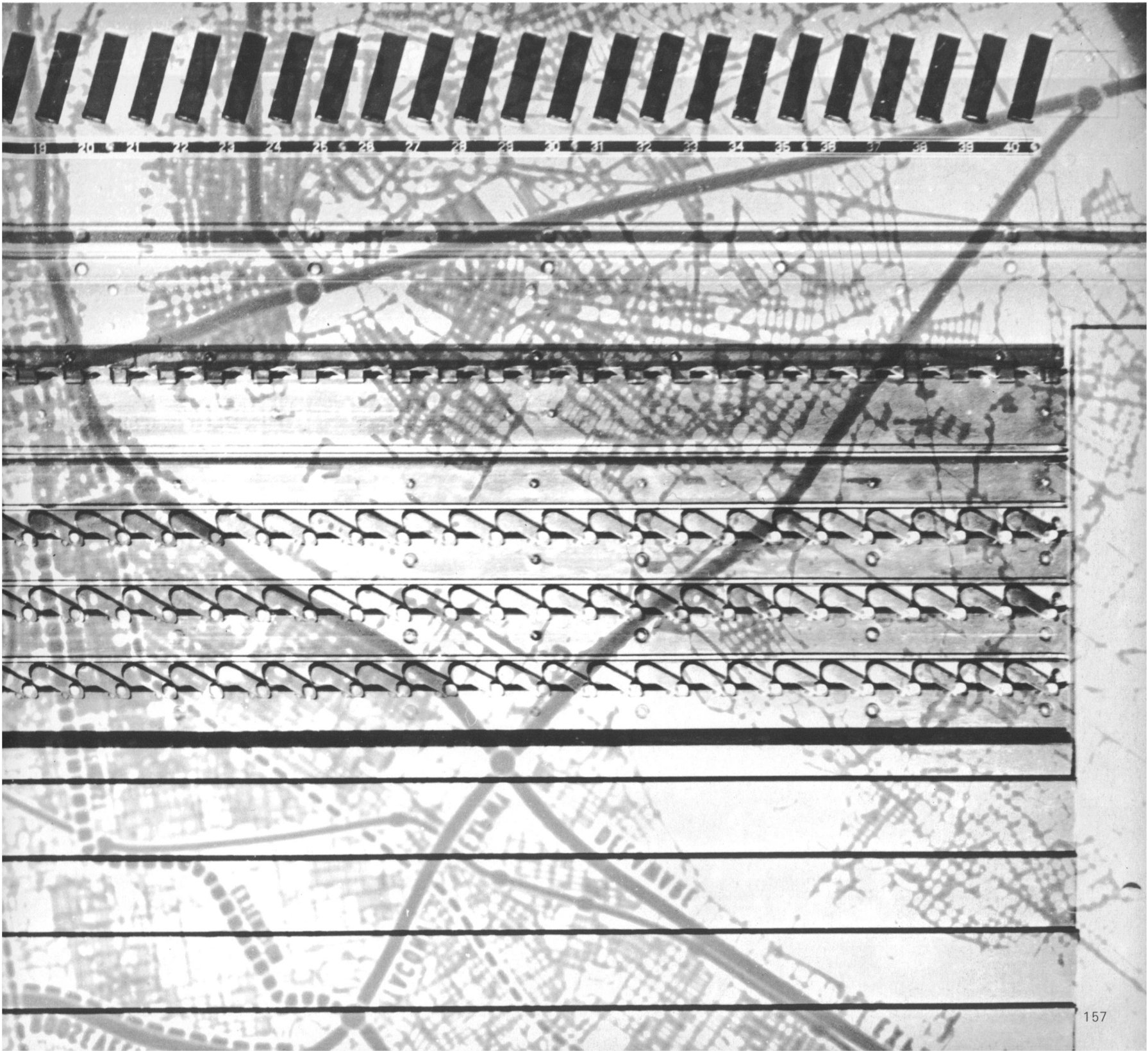
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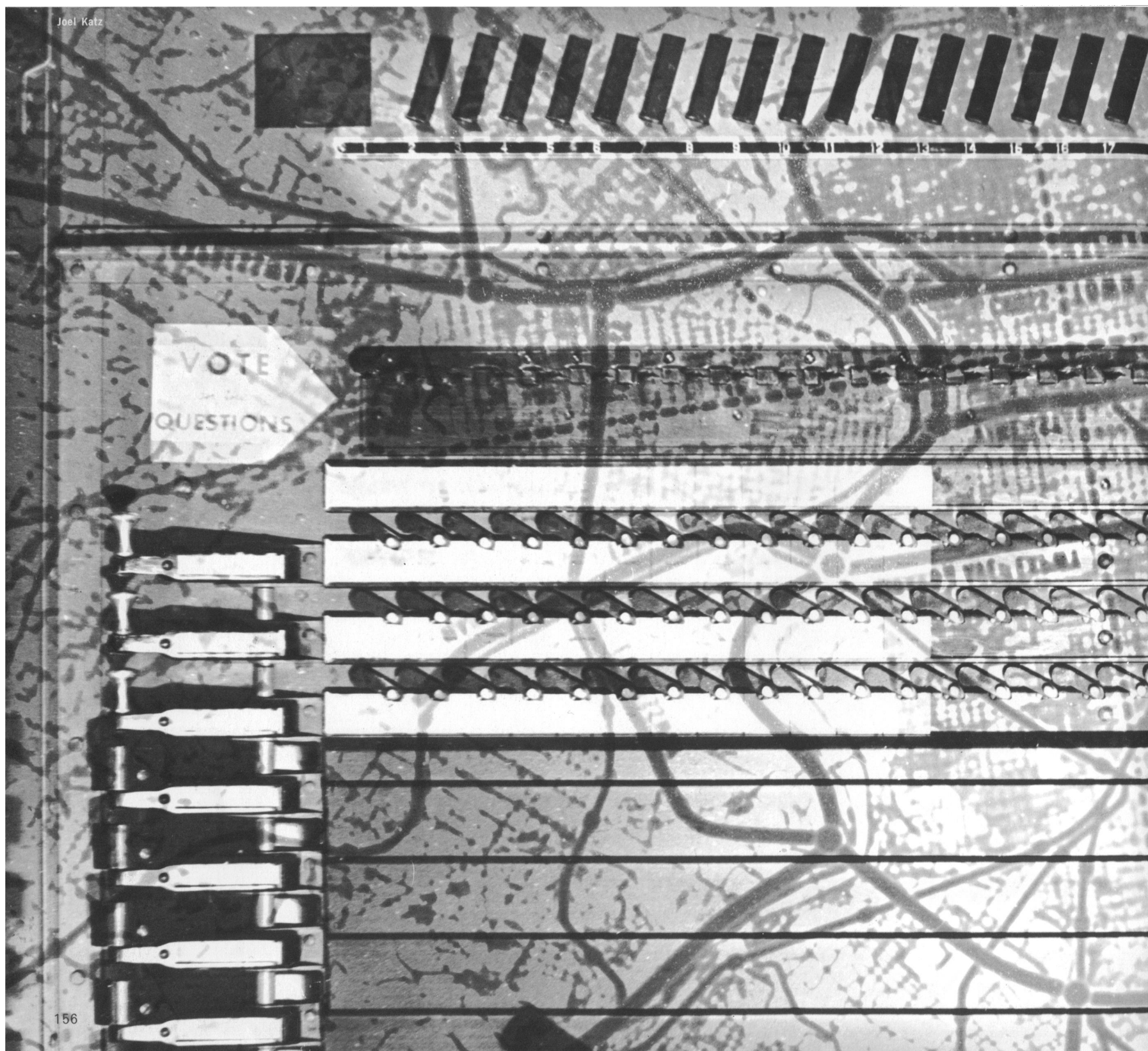
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The city planning process is neutral. It may be used in support of a number of different values. It may be used for Liberal or Conservative or Radical purposes. It may be used to support the status quo or it may be used to assist the development of social change along predetermined lines.

City Planning in the United States has reflected the culture of which it is a part. It has been used to support economic growth and to maintain the present distribution of opportunities and of goods and services. Because the present distribution of such things as wealth, income, education, and health is unequal, city planning has supported the maintenance of such inequalities. Zoning and urban renewal have been used as a means of preserving the separation of income classes and racial groups. Planning has been employed for the purpose of maintaining segregated housing and segregated schools.

Historically, planners and those concerned with the planning process have not sought to make city planning a political device. **Political** is used here in the sense that the goals of public policy are open to debate through the political process. Rather than being open to public political debate, planning decisions have historically been made in the relative isolation afforded by the establishment of independent planning commissions. The commissions have been composed of the **good men** of the community, and have been expected to operate without exposure to the **corrupting** influence of electoral politics. City planners and city planning commissioners have not openly avowed a set of political, social, or economic goals. It has been assumed that the professional planner, an **expert** in the field, would conscientiously serve the public interest. It has not been assumed that the public interest consists of diverse interest groups with competing ideas of what public policy is best; instead, it has been assumed that the public interest is unitary, and self-evident, and that political bias would only distort its interpretation.

In most American cities only one agency, the Planning Commission, and its technical staff, the City Planning Department, have proposed plans for the community. As a result of this **unitary planning** communities are not in general offered a set of alternate plans representing different political, social, economic values; instead they are offered only one plan and then are limited in their choice to a yes or no vote.

I do not mean to suggest that we do not need recommendations from a central planning agency. Such direction is essential, but it should not constitute the only form of planning within a community. Plans representing the values of different interest groups in a community should also be made public. In a society in which political parties at the municipal level have differing concepts of appropriate public policy, the party platforms would themselves contain plans for the future development of the community.

Planning should be made a plural process, a process in which a number of competing plans are presented to the public. Rather than being isolated in a commission, the political forces that produce differing ideas about the form of a future community should be encouraged to work out differing plans, each supported by the technical expertise available to a skilled planning staff or consultant's office. This means that a new organization of planning practice has to come into existence, of a kind that has been called **advocate planning**.

Advocate planning implies the commitment of professional planners and designers to representing the interests of their client organizations. This commitment implies a willingness to take sides in political battles, rather than attempting to synthesize all interests into a **public interest** which is presumably served by a public plan. In many cases, this commitment is supplied by the convictions of the planners themselves, rather than by the fees which an organization is prepared to pay to a consultant. In recent years one group has begun to have its values represented by advocate planners. This is the group comprising the unrepresented in our society, the poor and the Negro. The advocates of the poor have in several cases been architects or architect-planners.

In New York City the Architects' Renewal Committee in Harlem, directed by Richard Hatch, has played a vital role in enabling community organizations in Harlem to participate more actively in the formulation of plans. In Boston the Urban Planning Aid under the direction of Robert Goodman and Dennis Blackett has played a similar role in proposing plans alternative to those prepared by the planning agencies in Cambridge and Boston. Another organization in San Francisco, PANR (Planners and Architects for Neighborhood Regeneration) played a similar role in that community.

One of the best known examples of advocate planning is the case of the alternative plan for Cooper Square in New York City, prepared by the widely known planning consultant Walter Thabit. Although at this time the alternative plan has not been accepted, it is quite apparent that the final plan for the Cooper Square area will either be the plan proposed by the residents of the community or at least a plan which recognizes the strong desires of that community not to have its present lower-class residents replaced by middle-class immigrants. It is true that these plans are in support of a particular part of our population. It need not, however, always be the case that only the poor are given the support of a professional planner working on a voluntary basis. Fee-paying organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, bank associations, supermarket chains, and taxpayers' groups are free to hire advocate planners who could plead their causes before central planning agencies.

While it is true that the unitary planning practice tends to diminish the political content of planning, a number of other factors tends to restrain city planning practice from dealing effectively with the nation's problems. The first of these factors has been planners' tendency to focus primarily upon the physical environment. This narrow perspective keeps the planner from seeing the city for which he plans as a system; instead he is limited to seeing only a part of the system, land uses and community facilities. Recently the American Institute of Planners has indicated that its concept of the range of planners' concern soon will be broadened to include consideration for economic and social as well as physical factors. If this change takes place it will be possible for planners to meet their aspirations for becoming comprehensive in their concerns. The Urban Planning Program at Hunter College sees City Planning as concerned with all areas of public interest, including the social, the political, the economic and the physical. While Hunter's is perhaps the first planning school to conceive of the role of the planner in such broad terms, it seems apparent that a number of other planning schools will follow Hunter in this view.

Perhaps the factor most limiting the ability of the city planner to deal effectively with problems in urban areas is the view that the basic problems confronting urban populations are such urban phenomena as congestion, pollution, and sprawl. These, while important, are secondary. The major problem confronting American cities today is the fact that such a large number of those denied political, social, and economic opportunities are residents of urban areas. The problem essentially is not an urban one; it is national and international.

Instead of seeking to create social equity, the present Administration, like earlier liberal Administrations, seems concerned only with assuaging the hurt of poverty. Rather than overcoming injustice, it seeks to mitigate pain. The War on Poverty is the classic example of the Great Society's inability to work for rapid large-scale social change. It might better be described as an alliance of the liberals with the oligarchs to minimize poverty sufficiently to allow the nation to pursue its course along accustomed paths. Instead of concentrating on its avowed goals of creating a Great Society, the Administration has chosen to focus its energies on destroying life and property in Asia.

Comprehensive planning in a democratic society would seek to redress the fundamental injustices of that society: inequality, prejudice, galling poverty. In our metropolitan regions, comprehensive planning would be aimed at carrying out federal requirements for equal participation by all communities in the solution of these social problems. As a precondition for receiving federal funds, a local community should be required to demonstrate that it is providing a fair share of the region's housing units and job opportunities for all classes of the region's population. Moreover, strong federal incentives should be offered to communities that participate in the establishment of educational, recreational, and other facilities serving the population of the whole region.

It is particularly important that each community demonstrate that it is contributing to solving problems of racial integration in its region.

At the federal level, it is necessary that provision be made for more equitable national distribution of income and opportunities. For example, it is necessary that instead of building only 20,000 public housing units a year, about half a million should be built. If the goal of providing a decent home in a suitable living environment for every American family is to be met in our generation, this is the kind of program magnitude that will be needed. At the recent Ribicoff hearings on city problems, estimates of upwards of a trillion dollars over a ten- to twenty-year period were made to meet the needs of the decaying central cities. At a time when our GNP will average about a trillion dollars a year, a one trillion dollar allocation for solving our social problems is not absurd.

Democratic planning, then, requires both the active participation of differing groups in the preparation of plans that reflect their interests, and the synthesis of these interests in broad plans for the nation and metropolitan regions that deal comprehensively with our social problems. The reconciliation of these two types of planning—advocate or plural planning and comprehensive social planning—requires the existence of a healthy political process, one which elicits strong leadership and one which is capable of generating and sustaining powerful challenges to that leadership. Planners and designers may, within such a system, act either as political men or as technicians whose skills reflect others' political interests, or both.