

Viewpoints on Equity in Planning

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In this piece, two planning experts provide their views on the role of planners in promoting equity in the planning profession.



A Work Program for Equity Planners

Norman Krumholz

During the mid-twentieth century period of Title I urban renewal, planners operated in a field that featured big plans and bold projects. Urban renewal was an approach in which well-meaning people set out to clean up our messy cities and many of the people who lived in them through large-scale projects. This approach was supported by law and a general consensus that the demolition of substandard housing was a good thing. But, like the rest of us, poor people need housing too, and bitter struggles over urban renewal displacements forced politicians to end the program in 1974.

Today, few planners are involved in planning for giant projects. Unlike architects who see the city as a world of built forms, or developers who rarely see the city at all but see only packages of potential profit, most planners see a more comprehensive picture. The way planners see their cities is important, because of their power to influence land use decisions and because their code of ethics directs them to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of disadvantaged populations (AICP, 2010).

While urban renewal is long gone, the economic development model that now dominates the field is not much of an improvement. Whereas urban renewal skillfully

hid the economic interests that drove the projects, the economic development model of today appraises the entire city for its profit-making potential. Public-private partnerships are used to carry out projects with the public putting up most of the money and risk and the private partner maximizing most of the profits. In the process, the economic development model hides the drivers of the projects just as thoroughly as in urban renewal. But today this is driven, not by federal legislation, but by what we are told is “the logic of the market”.

We are told that the logic of the market makes some things inevitable. Here, in this economic development model, for example, is a rising market complete with rehabilitated loft apartments, historic street lights, and hanging plants. Only yesterday these lofts were abandoned warehouses and cheap rooming houses. On the other hand, here is a falling market where porches sag and houses are abandoned. Here the logic of the market dictates decline as inevitable—almost in the order of nature.

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But anyone involved in city building knows better. These two markets are neighborhoods and their economic strength or weakness is very largely dependent on the activities of government including loans, tax breaks, zoning variances, capital improvements and the investment policies of banks. Any successful, large development project is really a major political undertaking mobilizing power and support from many sources. What the economic model sees as “market forces” is in reality a complex system of power and vested interests. What it leaves out is any consideration of equity or a more just society.

For practicing planners who are interested in a more humane vision of the city than either the urban renewal or economic development models, and are motivated by the social justice principles in their ethics code, let me suggest a work program that carries with it the possibility of more equitable outcomes as well as greater power and responsibility than most planning agencies usually enjoy. This work program can empower the planners and the ordinary citizens of their communities. The program can be classified into five categories: (1) imposition of restraints; (2) creative investment proposals; (3) policies for constructive shrinkage; (4) strengthening of community organizations; and (5) regional collaboration.

In most cities, hardly a month goes by without some scheme to “turn the city around”. Some involve little more than a large construction project such as a convention center or a stadium; others involve major residential or commercial projects. All promise new jobs and taxes, and all demand a commitment of public subsidies before construction. When planners review these proposals they should ask three questions:

1. What is being produced?
2. For whose benefit?
3. At whose cost?

In those cases where analysis indicates that public costs are likely to out-weigh public benefits, or where the benefits are likely to accrue to those least in need of public support, planners should reject the proposal or modify it to make it more suitable. Where inappropriate subsidies for such projects are backed by overwhelming political power and planners must yield, planners could argue for linkage deals or community benefits agreements (CBAs). In these agreements, subsidies granted by the city are offset by special contributions from the developer for neighborhood development, low income housing, or public transportation.

In the second category, that of creative investment proposals, planners could seek opportunities to direct the city’s resources toward programs and projects that will result in long-term savings or make existing systems work better. Setting up a city or a county land bank would help shrinking jurisdictions recover and redevelop abandoned parcels, which would then become essential building

blocks in neighborhood revitalization. Reviewing the city’s capital improvement program to emphasize high-priority items and items, which would leverage a large state or federal contribution against a small local match, would also be creative. Planners might also participate in attempts to raise the incomes of workers in their communities through providing supporting analysis for living wage ordinances. They can provide this support by making sure that all residents eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit apply for it and by trying to keep commercial banking services in poor neighborhoods so that residents do not have to depend on same-day lending businesses.

In the third category, that of constructive shrinkage, planners can play key roles in designing plans and programs to ease the transition as some cities shrink from larger to smaller cities. They can play an active role in negotiating the terms and conditions for the transfer of some of the city’s facilities to higher levels of government where they can draw on a broader base for their tax and political support. Planners can also develop targeting strategies to make best use of the growing supply of vacant parcels in the city. Even as the city shrinks, the goal must be to provide the highest quality of life possible for those residents and businesses that remain—especially for the poorest residents who often bear the burden of both shrinkage and growth.

In the fourth category, planners can work to strengthen neighborhood-based community development organizations or CDCs. CDCs are grassroots, non-profit groups that sponsor and promote housing, commercial development and neighborhood revitalization in lower-class inner-city neighborhoods. CDCs often speak for the poor; provide a countervailing political force to the demands by downtown interests for capital improvements, and through their advocacy they not only strengthen democracy, but may improve the quality of city services. CDCs deserve the whole-hearted support of planners who are interested in a more equitable future for their cities.

My final recommendation is that planners should work toward regional collaboration. This would include four strategies:

1. Require “fair share” affordable housing in the suburbs;
2. Manage regional growth and investment to restrict urban sprawl;
3. Use federal transportation subsidies to connect inner-city unemployed to suburban job opportunities;
4. Link regional economic development programs to anti-poverty goals.

Such a vision would provide the proper, humane framework within which we might focus our practice as planners seeking a more equitable future.



Speaking Truth to Power? It Takes a Coalition

Dr. Pierre Clavel

City planners, architects and their supporters often think of “speaking truth to power.” Typical examples are public works projects or real estate developments that look good on paper, but pose long run and less visible costs to a neighborhood or the city as a whole. Many note that speaking up in cases like this can be difficult, since their most important clients tend to have a lot of power, and can be selective in what “truth” they are able to hear.

This is a dilemma that has dogged planners for a century. The usual response has been to suggest courage and persistence, with guidance offered through case histories of remarkable instances where truth-telling actually had an impact. However, there are relatively few such cases.¹ In contrast, scholars have noted that the dominant “power” in cities in the past several decades is the “growth coalition,” consisting of real estate developers, architects, engineers, planners, newspapers and building trades firms and unions that gain from the construction and other accompaniments of “growth.” “Justice” is low on the list of priorities for these projects, or among the outcomes. Overall, the growth coalition is really, really powerful.

In the face of this combination of forces, the idea that individuals can make a difference by “speaking truth to power” is just optimistic. Briefly, my premise is that the only way to compete with the growth coalition is to create a different coalition, and to find grounds for support in fundamental forces within the economy. I illustrate this with a story of both (a) an organizer, who found a way to make a difference; and (b) the forces around her, that created a semblance of a coalition, so that her efforts paid off, at least for a few years.

The Organizer

The organizer is Donna Ducharme, who was hired in 1982 as the community development director for an expanded YMCA program north of the Chicago loop. She sought employment opportunities for neighborhood youth, and noticed that nearby factories were closing due, not just to general economic forces, but to real estate developers responding to market demand to convert loft factories to residential uses. Why not protect the factories, she reasoned, and satisfy the residential demand elsewhere? She hit upon a device, the “planned manufacturing district” (PMD) and promoted it to factory owners, neighborhood groups, and City Hall. It was difficult, she faced many obstacles but persisted. By 1986 and 1987, industrial displacement was threatening jobs in other parts of the city,

Ducharme was getting requests to speak to other groups, and to the idea of the PMD as a general piece of city legislation. The PMD idea generated support in several city departments as part of a larger administration concern with industrial retention.

In the fall of 1987, the problem had reached a crisis point. The growth coalition forces mobilized. The Chicago Tribune editorialized:

Mr. Washington has let his economic planners embark on a zany crusade to snuff out commercial and residential growth in areas that they – these insulated City Hall planners – have decreed should be reserved for manufacturing. Investors who want to convert abandoned old factory buildings into job-producing, tax-producing commercial complexes are told no, take your money to some other city. And don’t think they won’t, if Chicago continues this perverse ideological nonsense.

But there had been so much debate within city hall, and such development of the coalition of manufacturers, labor unions and neighborhood organizations supporting the larger PMD proposal, that Mayor Harold Washington came out with support within a few days. After a long silence, this seemed to cement the PMD policy.

The Coalition

The coalition transcended the individual. Ducharme’s efforts were heroic, but they occurred in parallel with the remarkable mobilization of the long repressed black population of the city around Washington’s mayoral candidacy in 1982, the ready response and support from a neighborhood constituency that had created major coalition units like the Chicago Association of Neighborhood Development Organizations (CANDO), the Rehab Network, and the Community Workshop on Economic Development (CWED), with many other supporting institutions and local foundations. These came into play during the Washington administration as several planning and development agencies, now headed by neighborhood friendly officials, distributed funding and authority to them and gave them seats on task forces and committees, while generally expanding a sense of participatory opportunity.

This atmosphere, if not the specifics of administrative control, continued beyond Washington and the interim mayoralty of Eugene Sawyer (1987-89) into the long term regime of William M. Daley (1989-2011) who, while he ran on a downtown growth coalition platform and specifically denounced the PMD idea, found himself catering to neighborhood interests and industrial retention policies.

Most visible was Daley’s turnaround and support for the PMD concept. Working with holdover elements in City Hall, Daley supported a set of “Industrial Corridor” studies, created an additional 12 PMDs on top of the one initiated in 1988, and in 1993 he hired Ducharme as Deputy Commissioner for industrial planning. Ducharme

embellished the PMD and the industrial retention idea by organizing: she created committees including manufacturers and neighborhood representatives, initiated joint purchasing and warehousing schemes, and promoted sectoral labor supply strategies.

Questions hung in the air as Daley relinquished the mayoralty to Rahm Emanuel in 2011. The Chicago industrial retention effort had been a textbook model, but did it matter? Part of the answer was in the continued vitality of the city's industrial sectors – manufacturing, while diminished within the city (and nation) was restructuring so as to play a continued role in the regional economy. And this had been despite Daley's sporadic support, which seemed diverted toward downtown offices, tourism and upscale near-loop residential projects after the mid-1990s.

But at a minimum, Ducharme and the coalition she helped create answered the “Speaking Truth to Power” question: it takes a coalition with an economic basis, and Chicago showed how to do that in the 1980s and 1990s. Chicago had an economic basis: Chicago was losing manufacturing jobs, but there were still 225,307 Chicagoans employed in that sector in 1990, at average wages well above what would be available to the unemployed. And surveys demonstrated that many of the manufacturing firms would stay in business if the real estate pressure could be relieved. Thus there really was “truth” to Ducharme's message – the function of the coalition was to mobilize it.

Endnotes

¹ Much of this is reported in the website: <http://www.progressivecities.org>; and see Pierre Clavel, *Activists in City Hall: the Progressive Response to the Reagan Era in Boston and Chicago* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010)