A Work Program for Equity Planners

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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.