

# **Advocacy and Community Planning: Past, Present and Future**

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The term advocacy planning was coined by Paul Davidoff in his famous 1965 article and is today required reading in planning schools throughout the nation. But to many students today, advocacy planning is a quaint and outdated notion, a product of the bygone civil rights era. We acknowledge Davidoff's critique of mainstream physical planning and its neglect of minorities and the poor, then move on to our work. The more neutral concept of "community planning" has supplanted advocacy planning. Community planning is the new mainstream approach that frequently submerges the progressive elements that emerged under the rubric of advocacy planning.

But advocacy planning is still the foundation for all progressive planning today. It is relevant because it allows us to distinguish between progressive community planning and the generic community planning. If we go back over Davidoff's ideas, we'll see how they have profound implications for planning practice today and far-reaching implications for the future.

## **Defending Communities from Destruction**

The condition for advocacy is the struggle to defend communities from destruction by orthodox urban renewal schemes. Such struggles set the stage for the long career in politics and planning of Boston's Mel King, who noted how "...somebody else defined my community in a way that allowed them to justify destruction of it." King's advocacy was based on firsthand knowledge of the rich and contradictory human environment and social relations that are the essence of community. These relations, not land, are what our neighborhoods and cities are all about.

While its philosophical roots can be traced to the Enlightenment and liberal economic theory, advocacy planning was an innovation of the 1960s, a direct consequence of the engagement of urban planners in the civil rights movement, the struggles against the displacement of low-income communities by the federal urban renewal program. It also stemmed from and fed the opportunities for innovation offered by the federal War on Poverty, including the Model Cities Program. The theory of advocacy planning arose not simply from Paul Davidoff's mind but from the multiple practices by community activists and professionals to redress issues of racial and class oppression. It confronted a planning profession that focused narrowly on the physical city, rationalized the destruction of "slums" by urban renewal and sided with powerful real estate interests, and that was overwhelmingly a club of white males who claimed for themselves a position of technocratic superiority over protesting communities. While advocacy planning was a prescription meant for urban planners, the theory applies to all professions and disciplines that confront the political and ethical dilemmas bound up in their practices—social work,

public health, public administration and all of the social sciences that deal with urban policy.

Paul Davidoff's "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning" appeared in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* in 1965. Its main points were:

- The planner isn't solely a *value-neutral* technician; instead, values are part of every planning process.
- City planners shouldn't attempt to frame a single plan that represents the "*public interest*" but rather "*represent and plead the plans of many interest groups.*" In other words, planning should be pluralistic and represent diverse interests, especially minority interests.
- So-called "citizen participation" programs usually react to official plans and programs instead of encouraging people to *propose* their own goals, policies and future actions. Neighborhood groups and ad hoc associations brought together to protest public actions should rightly do their own plans.
- *Planning commissions* set up as supposedly neutral bodies acting in the public interest are responsible to no constituency and too often irrelevant. There is no escaping the reality that politics is at the very heart of planning and that planning commissions are political.
- Urban planning is fixated on the *physical city*: "*The city planning profession's historical concern with the physical environment has warped its ability to see physical structures and land as servants to those who use them.*" Davidoff said that professionals should be concerned with physical, economic and social planning. In a line that was relevant to the founding of the Hunter College urban planning program, he said: "*The practice of plural planning requires educating planners who would be able to engage as professional advocates in the contentious work of forming social policy.*"

Davidoff's theory was matched by his practice. He founded the Suburban Action Institute, which challenged exclusionary zoning in the suburbs. He was a member of Planners for Equal Opportunity (PEO), the first national organization of advocacy planners.

Paul's legacy lives on in Planners Network, the successor organization to PEO that started in 1975, and its magazine, *Progressive Planning*.

### **Advocacy and Community-Based Planning in New York City**

Advocacy planning has strong roots in New York City, as this was one of the most hotly contested urban battlegrounds for civil rights and against displacement. Davidoff refers in his 1965 article to *The Alternate Plan for Cooper Square*, which was completed in 1961 in direct response and opposition to the Robert Moses proposal to wipe out eleven blocks in the Lower East Side. The Cooper Square plan was guided by Walter Thabit, founder and leader of PEO who passed away last year. It was the first community-based plan in the city, took forty-five years to implement and resulted in a phenomenal redevelopment

of the 11-block area with an unprecedented 60 percent of all housing units for low-income households. Cooper Square also founded the first community land trust in the city.

In 2001, a group of us launched the Campaign for Community-Based Planning, which advocates for all of the things Davidoff called for. Today there are over seventy community plans in the city, many of which were produced by advocates, not “value-neutral” technicians. Many of the plans were led by folks like Yolanda Garcia of the Bronx, a woman who never had any professional training. Many of the plans evolved out of protests against official plans that were supposedly in the “public interest” and introduced social and economic issues into the heart of the planning process when the official plans ignored them. For the most part the community plans are inclusive and respect a plurality of interests (though not always). This flurry of community-based planning, which has outdone the city’s official planning body, is living proof that the planning commission is irrelevant. What remains to be done is to legitimize this pluralistic planning, a task which our campaign is now undertaking.

### **After the 1960s**

Advocacy planning doesn’t have to be a fossilized concept from the 1960s. Though the civil rights movement has ebbed, black-white divisions are complicated by a new array of ethnic divisions and identities. During the Nixon years the War on Poverty was subverted and during the Reagan years Reagan unleashed a counter-revolution that undermined critical public policy instruments for achieving racial equality and equal economic opportunity. Under Reagan, affirmative action became reverse discrimination, poor people were blamed for poverty and public assistance was cut back—even as tax cuts and subsidies continued to flow to the rich. With the collapse of the socialist camp, neoliberalism became religion and Margaret Thatcher’s brag that “There Is No Alternative” was internalized by many, including activists and professionals. And perpetual foreign wars, now an indefinite war against “terrorism,” have long been diverting resources needed to solve solvable urban problems.

But throughout the U.S. and world, new social movements have arisen since the 1970s. These movements, with both their practices and new theories, have proven that “Another World Is Possible,” to use the phrase of the World Social Forum.

In the U.S., many progressive professional planners went to work in public agencies and became quiet advocates from within. Norman Krumholz popularized the term equity planning based on his own practice as planning director under Cleveland Mayor Carl Stokes, the first African-American mayor of a major U.S. city. Feminism had a profound impact on planning by uncovering the many and diverse practices of women that have shaped cities and neighborhoods. Leonie Sandercock’s *Making the Invisible Visible* is but one expression of this, and it was a woman, Jane Jacobs, who produced the classic critique of physical planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. The environmental movement also brought forth many advocates of radical change, but more on that later.

These and other developments have produced what today we call “progressive planning.” In my view, this is more than just the sum of all of these theories and practices. An indispensable part of progressive planning today is the focus that advocacy planning started with—opposition to the conditions that produce and reproduce the inequalities of race and class. Without that, advocacy would be just a conservative appeal for pluralism—everybody do their own thing and don’t challenge existing relations of economic and political power. Sit in your “value-neutral” cocoon and watch the world go by.

It is no coincidence that one of the new, invigorating sources of progressive planning around the country and in New York City is the environmental justice movement. It is no coincidence because environmental justice brings together once again a concern for the physical environment with a commitment to social justice. There would be no environmental justice movement if the traditional environmental organizations had incorporated social justice into their missions, just as there would be no progressive planning movement if the establishment organizations truly became advocates for social justice. Like planners, the mainstream environmental groups deal with environmental issues as strictly in “the public interest.”

The latest generation of community plans in New York came out of environmental justice campaigns, including plans for: Williamsburg, Greenpoint, Red Hook and Sunset Park, all in Brooklyn; the deconstruction of the Sheridan Expressway; the Bronx waterfront; West Harlem’s waterfront; and citywide waste management by the Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods. Planning for environmental justice reunites the latest generation of physical community planning and social justice.

Another set of community plans are bringing us back to the place the Cooper Square plan started—the struggle against urban renewal powers that favor upscale development over community preservation and development. The Melrose Commons plan in the Bronx is one of the best known, but there is also the West Harlem Plan, an alternative to Columbia University’s land grab, and the UNITY Plan, a community-based alternative to Forest City Ratner’s Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn. These struggles against displacement and destruction of communities, embodied in these plans, are giving rise to a whole new generation of advocacy planners.

In conclusion, there are strong connections between advocacy planning yesterday and today. I’ve emphasized the connections and not the disconnections—the latter of which there are many. It is easy to overlook the profound historic changes that have taken place in the political world, the changing nature of cities, the limitations of the advocacy framework and the need to reframe and redefine advocacy. But there are some sobering facts that suggest that the agenda of advocacy planning and the civil rights movement from the 1960s has yet to be fulfilled. Today the proportion of people of color in the planning profession is still inadequate, and it is shocking that the proportion of African Americans in graduate urban planning programs hasn’t changed substantially and is still less than 3 percent nationwide. This suggests that advocacy will continue to come from

outside the profession, even if everyone in the profession has to read Davidoff's landmark essay to get a degree.