

The SEVENTH GENERATION

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."
- From the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

Wake-up Calls and Networking: APA 2005 in San Francisco

By Tom Angotti

The annual conference of the American Planning Association (APA) is usually a bit like those of the Elks, Lions and Rotary International: tables selling trinkets and tote bags, tours of the town, celebratory speeches, processed food service and plenty of awards. Add to that the giant exhibition selling GIS products, and it's a jolly time for the planners who can afford it or whose bosses will pick up the tab.

But this year APA seemed to offer more than the usual token fare of substantive content that challenges planners to look at the political implications of their work and questions of equity. I take my hat off to the organizers of this conference. Amid the usual nuts-and-bolts workshops like "Impact Fees and Environmental Protection," "Security Planning for Transit" and "Meeting the Challenges of Consulting," there were a good number of panels that broke the usual mold of narrow, self-serving, technocratic planning. On the frontier were the nine sessions on food systems, seventeen on minorities and social equity and five on ethics. PNers Leah Birnbaum, Karen Chapple, Richard Milgrom and Barbara Rahder ran a session on activism in planning and I was in a session that challenged planners to oppose the occupation of Iraq.

An important moment at the conference was the presentation and discussion of a report by the APA Diversity Task Force highlighting the low visibility of planning in minority communities, the high cost of APA activities, limited opportunities for advancement for planners of color and the lack of focus by APA on issues that matter to planners of color. It is certainly a good sign that APA is grappling with the concrete manifestations of racism as they affect the organization and its members, but there was a good deal of skepticism that the profession was ready to make a leap out of its historic passivity before racial injustice. Hopefully, this will be a wake-up call.

Also, among the mobile workshops that mixed tourism and local boosterism, there were a few tours that looked at the unseemly downside of official planning.

The PN Tour

Unmatched, however, was the Disorientation Bus Tour organized by the San Francisco Chapter of Planners Network. Starting in Nob Hill, we drove through the Tenderloin and Civic Center, stopped in the gentrifying South of Market and went through Potrero Hill to Bayview/Hunter's Point. There we got a first-hand account of the environmental justice struggles and community plans to improve this waterfront area. At the gates of the Hunter's Point complex we heard a fascinating story from two community activists: San Francisco Supervisor Sophie Maxwell, who also chairs the Board's Land Use Committee; and attorney/activist Karen Pierce.

Hunter's Point hosts a power plant, sewage treatment plant and wholesale produce market that attracts heavy diesel trucking. As a result, the largely African American neighborhood that abuts the area has the highest rate of hospitalization for asthma in the city, and a high rate of breast cancer for women under age 50.

Maxwell said that "the San Francisco Planning Department had plans for the area that were all housing, but there are businesses here." She has been advocating a plan that preserves jobs, provides at least 35 percent low-income units and is subject to approval by the local community. "I ran on planning, not banning," she said.

The PN tour ran on volunteer energy and public transit. It cost only \$1.25, the price of a bus ticket, a tiny fraction of the cost for APA tours.

ACSP and the Rebel Flag

Perhaps the lowest point of the conference came during the meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP). The elected representatives of this organization of plan- [Cont. on page 7]

no less vigorous than associational life in classic urban spaces; what is different is the level of specifically political activity.

The Construction of Self-Interest and the Sociological Imagination

A third possible explanation—advanced in different ways by political theorists such as Susan Bickford, Loren King and Margaret Kohn and consistent with previous research by Juliet Gainsborough—is that residents of sprawling areas come to construct their own political self-interest, as well as their image of social reality, differently than residents of urban areas. The intuition here is that inhabiting a privatized environment in which most publicly accessible spaces are oriented around shopping and the automobile might shape one's view of other citizens and of the nature of public goods in a way distinct from inhabiting a prototypical urban environment marked by human-scaled street life and non-commercial public spaces. In short, the built environment might affect the way residents come to think about the social world and their own place in it.

Further examination of the SCCBS provides substantial support for this hypothesis, beyond the observed relationship between sprawl and reduced political participation. Residents of sprawling areas are substantially more likely to be politically conservative than residents of urban areas (even after controlling for partisan composition within one's county), and such residents are less likely to report hav-

ing an Asian American friend (even after controlling for neighborhood racial composition). Suburban residents are also less likely to have a gay friend (though this may be in part a result of the clustering of gays and lesbians in cities). In short, it appears that sprawling spatial environments are correlated with a less expansive social imagination, which in turn may impact the propensity of residents to engage in political activity.

In my judgment, this sort of explanation and the relative hospitality of urban places to visible public activity are probably the most important factors in explaining the observed correlation between sprawl and reduced participation.

That judgment, however, is provisional. Much more evidence, including on-the-ground case studies and, if possible, experimental evidence, will be needed to flesh out both how and why sprawl is linked to depressed political engagement.

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ning schools voted 7-5 in favor of going ahead with plans to hold the 2005 annual conference in South Carolina, despite the NAACP boycott protesting the state's decision to continue flying the Confederate Flag. Conference host Clemson University then withdrew its offer to host, citing the split in the organization and the substantial protest among planning educators who said they would not attend if it were held in South Carolina. Plans are now being made for an alternative venue.

The ACSP flap should serve as a wake-up call for progressives in planning academia—educators and students alike. The academy is filled with too many self-professed liberals who think racism died with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, that it's only kept alive by a few recalcitrant rednecks and that we live in an enlightened, color-blind society. The reality is that minority enrollment at planning schools is not significantly better than it was forty years ago, advocacy/equity planning is still treated as an optional elective or historical curiosity in many schools and segregated communities are still the norm.

Networking and Planners Network

One of the best things about the Planners Network annual conference is that it always places issues of equity and advocacy center stage. There are no pretensions that networking among activists and professionals is our objective, while the other professional conferences leave networking to chance. And the PN conference is comparatively affordable.

But we're in no position to preach to the APA or ACSP. We can do a much better job of promoting concrete actions to turn the tide against racism in the profession, working with progressives in these other organizations. Our chapters should create environments in which planners of color and potential planners of color will participate fully. PN members who recognize the importance of racial equality should heed the wake-up calls sounded in the APA and ACSP and ask if we too aren't dozing and need a wake-up call.