



THE LANGUAGE OF URBAN PLANNING AND THE ADVANCED CAPITALIST CITY

Michael P. Smith of the Tulane University Department of Political Science has recently completed a book, "The City and Social Theory," to be published in the fall by St. Martin's Press. He also has collaborated with Hermann Borghorst of the Free University of Berlin on a research paper, "Toward a Theory of Citizen Participation in Urban Renewal in Two Federal Systems." Professor Smith here extracts from these works one facet of U.S. urban renewal politics: the use of the language, symbols and accoutrements of technology to deflect consideration of citizens' needs in the arena of urban planning.

Daniel Burnham, the turn of the century Chicago architect, introduced his Master Plan for Chicago with the exhortation: "Make no little plans," for they lack the "magic to stir men's blood." This statement, along with the self-justifying rhetoric of the planning profession about the need for "strong statements," "rational-comprehensive land use controls," and "objective planning" by centralized urban designers have helped perpetuate a mythical image of urban planning.

It is the image of rational-comprehensive planning advanced by planning theorists as an ideal model, but taken by many critics as an actual picture of the way urban planners function in the real world.

According to this model, the planner is the value-neutral architect of "orderly development." The planning process envisaged in this model is a centralized process of urban design and execution by technical experts philosophically committed to their vision of the general public interest. In calculating public costs and benefits such central planners employ the most advanced rational methods of data gathering and analysis, simulation models, and systematic evaluation of all possible ends and means.

Ironically, it is Richard Sennett¹, the chief critic of rigidified modes of thought, that contributes to furthering a stereotype of planners as autonomous technocrats pursuing apolitical goals. Like sociologist Daniel Bell² and social critic Theodore Roszak³, his analysis furthers the illusion that "knowledge elites" are converting their expertise into an autonomous power base. The realities of planning practice in urban design do not support this view.

Planning is a value-laden activity. Value choices affect what planners define as "problems", the type of data they gather, the standards they use for interpreting their data, and the very aims of their research and analysis. In capitalist societies, urban planners have tended to serve the values and interests of corporate capitalist city builders and suburban developers rather than to make key land use decisions themselves. Theodore Roszak in fact acknowledges, but treats as a temporary condition, the fact that planners work within limits set by those who can pay their bills. Their chief political function is to cloak the major private beneficiaries of the land use and investment decisions that have shaped contemporary American society, justifying profit seeking behavior as beneficial to the larger public interest.

The American planning profession grew out of turn of the century urban movements for housing and recreational improvement for workers, "settlement houses," and educational reform. Subsequently, public land use control through zoning regulations became the focus and rallying cry of professional planning work; architects and engineers its major practitioners. The thrust of the early movements was middle class conservative reformism.⁴ Their aims were to pacify and integrate the urban worker, to depoliticize public service delivery and make it more "businesslike," to build "model tenements" as a means to achieve social control over the immigrant slumdweller. They planned for such relatively limited goals as civic beautification, public parks, housing code enforcement, and municipal zoning.

In practice, urban land use planners have lacked the political skill and social power to even fully realize these limited goals. Historically, American city planning has stressed civic beautification and public investment in monuments, parks and later subsidized highways and urban renewal, rather than public *controls* of private investment and development decisions. In thus defining their mission narrowly, land use planners have accepted as a "given" the basic economic structure of American capitalism. Working within these boundaries, both early and more recent land use planners have defined problems in ways that contributed to the system's smooth functioning. They have assumed that economic growth was an unmitigated benefit to "the community as a whole". They have worked to reduce the unpleasant visual blight that might be interpreted as a negative consequence of the economic organization of advanced capitalism. They have planned parks explicitly to "tranquilize" the factory laborer out for a day in the open air so that he might gain "the recuperation of force" needed to perform his job efficiently.⁵ They have resisted the "politicization" of decision-making processes that built "office park" cities and suburban shopping centers.

Other goals pursued by suburban planners—low density zoning, efficient service delivery, and better highways—also serve the class interests of middle class commuters, while implicitly denying housing, a taxation base, and mass transit benefits to those who were left behind in central cities.

Before the planning profession was rudely awakened by the neighborhood and poor people's protest movements of the late 1960's, they remained insensitive to the values and interests of non-dominant classes and subcultures. They supported the corporate economy's interrelated goals of growth, development, and "higher land uses," regardless of their social and economic costs to disadvantaged groups.

Wirthian urban sociology implies a general theory of society, namely that spatial forms engender social relationships and that the physical environment determines the cultural patterns of human communities. This sort of theory can become a powerful depoliticizing weapon in the hands of policy-makers and planning elites. As Manuel Castells has pointed out: "Such a 'theory' is extremely useful to ruling political elites inasmuch as it conceptualizes social organization as depending less on social data, in particular class relations, than on natural, spatial, technical, and biological data."⁶

In the American context many anti-urban planners operating from this perspective have sought to use environmental engineering to alter spatial forms in ways that could avoid the risk of systemic crisis and class antagonism, without changing the prevailing class structure in any basic way. This they did by building urban parks, enforcing residential zoning, and cooperating with the economic and political decisions that dispersed the once dense and heterogeneous urban population into separate residential enclaves throughout the metropolitan region. These measures offered those who were dispersed the illusory hope of escape from industrial life into an idyllic past. Yet no such measures can erase the very real social divisions inherent in a class stratified society.

Thus to further the illusion that social contradictions are amenable to spatial engineering, the specialized language of physical planning is invoked to mystify thought. As this language becomes further and further enmeshed in the technical vocabulary of the organization of space, social conflict groups are gradually disarmed. Technocratic planning displaces political struggle. What is more, the pursuit of profits is justified by reference to the spatial model. Often viable social communities are labeled "dense" and "crowded" slums. These areas are bulldozed, their land uses altered, and the class exploitation of displaced residents is disguised as a form of "help".

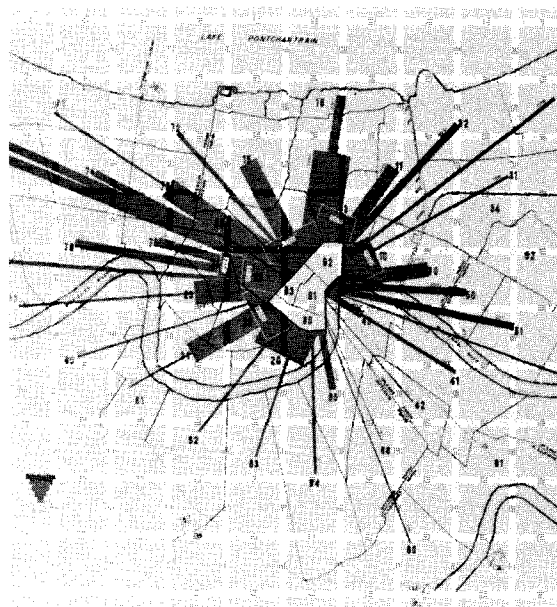
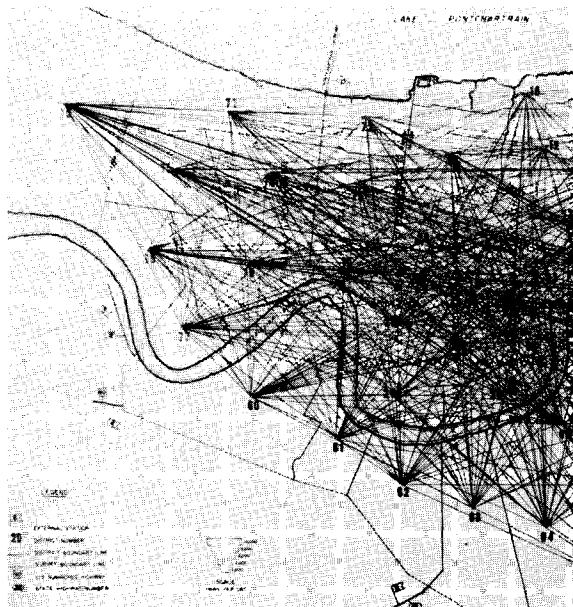
As Warner Bloomberg has put it:

Planners have thought in terms of industrial parks, not loft industry; of people who wanted backyards, not those who enjoyed streetlife. They have neither designed neighborhoods for poor people nor called for the economic programs which would minimize need for such designs.⁷

In part because of such mental blinders, in part because of the structure of the privately induced public policies within which they worked, in part also because of professional self interest, urban land use planners in the 1950's and 1960's often became willing tools in the hands of economic and political dominants. They "managed" the ritual of "citizen participation" in public planning to symbolize accountability and popular control of policy, while in fact shunting aside the residents of areas that were bulldozed to build highways, highrises, luxury apartments, office parks, and sports arenas. This role of city planners as supporters and legitimizers of private investment decisions is nowhere clearer than in the case of urban renewal policy making. Accordingly, it is to this facet of urban land use planning that we now turn to illustrate the foregoing argument in some detail.

SYMBOLIC DEFLECTION

In the early years of urban renewal implementation renewal elites often reacted to citizen group demands by symbolic deflection. As Murray Edelman has shown, the use of symbolic language and gestures detracts attention from tangible issues of resource allocation. Symbols evoke and reinforce abstract values, attitudes, and beliefs.



The use of public settings is combined with the ritualistic display of technical resources. Prior to public meetings “easy-to-read colored maps and specifications” of proposed plans are sent out to those likely to attend. At the meeting, blackboards, city maps, zoning plans, photographs, and models of future reconstruction are used as symbolic props. Often a staff of planning experts is introduced to explain different technicalities. Various specialists serve to reinforce each other’s public arguments because prior to public sessions advanced staff meetings are held to iron out possible technical contradictions and to agree to a common position.⁸ This is done so that citizen groups will be unable to detect and use contradictions among experts as a viable argument at public sessions. Expertise is thus consolidated to bolster public confidence in official plans. The impression is conveyed that urban renewal planning is being conducted by competent professional experts. Training credentials and professional experiences are invoked to reinforce this impression. If highly visible experts move to another city or public doubts arise, “new management teams” are introduced with much fanfare.

Outside consultants are used to shore up support and reinforce the “aura of objectivity” created by the consolidation of expertise. Consultants are used to conduct preliminary planning studies and economic feasibility studies which serve to legitimize massive land clearance. Well known and respected consulting firms, which may have been involved in past projects and whose work can be expected to be supportive of official agency goals are especially likely to be hired.⁹ Despite all of this technical showmanship, in actuality the lack of careful demand and economic feasibility studies in many U.S. cities has meant that land acquisition and clearance have moved considerably faster than project disposition, and ultimate completion.¹⁰ In the long run this gap between projection and realization has served to undermine public confidence in renewal planning elites.

In the context of public settings, technical and bureaucratic language styles serve several functions. City planners, renewal administrators, and outside consultants apply professional and technical jargon as a smokescreen to impress mass audiences with appeals for "good design features," "higher and better land use," and "non-amendable redevelopment packages." Technical jargon is used not only to impress but also to deaden critical moral and cognitive faculties. The expression "protected environment" has served as a planning code word for permanently removing a low income population from a renewal area and planning for peripheral construction that will seal off the redevelopment area, thereby "protecting" land investors from the "risk" that the former residents might relocate in or near the cleared area and drive down property values.¹¹

"DE-POLITICIZATION" AND DEFERMENT TO EXPERTS

Aware of general public attitudes toward "criticism for its own sake," protest groups are berated for wanting to "merely stop the bulldozer," without offering alternative planning conceptions of their own. They are accused of being "latecomers" who would negate the hard work of renewal elites and obstruct community progress.¹²

Typically, in American local politics, technical and bureaucratic language serves to convert political issues into technical-administrative routines. Troublesome political conflicts are conceptualized and projected as problems of design, technical, legal, or economic feasibility to be solved by professionals rather than by political processes on the basis of political value decisions. When successful, such attempts to depoliticize the local political arena weaken the play of local forces in policy-making. But they do not necessarily mean that professionals are in charge. As Harold Kaplan has shown for urban renewal in Newark: "By a nonpolitical environment, Authority officials . . . mean that the cues of redevelopers and federal officials, rather than those of local interests necessarily govern . . . clearance decisions."¹³

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Under the rubric "planning with people" renewal agencies have granted technical assistance and "design concessions" to citizen groups who were willing to work closely with them. Such tangible concessions as the relocation of public facilities, stop signs, and minor design changes are exchanged for the support and legitimacy accorded to the land clearance and displacement activities of the agency by means of a plan's endorsement by neighborhood groups.¹⁴ In the main it has been others who have benefitted from this process at the expense of middle and stable working class renters and the poorer residents who are the victims of displacement. For example, in the South End Boston, an area regarded by some as a shining example of the success of "planning with people," thousands of low income people have been displaced. The "consensual" goal of upgrading the areas housing stock that emerged as a result of the technical assistance granted to neighborhood groups by the Boston Redevelopment Agency, has mainly benefitted interests seeking a new hospital complex as well as many upper middle class people seeking housing convenient to Boston's newer Back Bay office developments. The influx of new migrants has driven up rents, causing many long standing moderate income residents to leave.¹⁵ Some low income families were compensated by additional units of public housing level subsidized rental units, but not nearly in proportion to the number displaced.

Citizen survey research is another type of formal "participatory" activity sometimes used as a substitute for citizen influence. To create a sense of involvement, members of citizen groups are invited to serve as unpaid survey interviewers. Under the rubric "City Hall comes to the citizens" even public officials themselves have distributed questionnaires directly to households in urban renewal areas. Using sometimes doubtful "one shot" questionnaires and closed-ended interview techniques, renewal elites try to determine "officially" the interests, needs, and priorities of residents. While data is being obtained citizen groups can be placated with assurances that the situation is under study. Once hard data is obtained, whatever its shortcomings, the interpretation of survey results is discussed with citizen representatives both to heighten their feeling of involvement in policy-making and to guide them toward interpretations favorable to agency priorities. If such gestures fail to placate a neighborhood group, the agency is still in a position to discredit the group by skillful use of survey data to challenge the group's representation of citizen attitudes. Michael Lipsky has observed that defusing an issue by using survey research initially serves a procrastination function. Once a citizen survey is completed it

also can function as a potent symbolic weapon, insulating elites from outside pressures inconsistent with survey results and enabling them to lend legitimacy to their own priorities which coincide with broadly defined goals (e.g., growth, prosperity) supported in citizen surveys.¹⁶

However, a crucial contradiction remains. The successful acquisition of formal decision making responsibility by neighborhood protest groups may actually obstruct rather than facilitate the realization of self-determined goals. This is because the very formality of the access granted to previously dissident groups blurs adversary relationships in the eyes of potentially supportive reference publics. Instead, formal access symbolizes the "fairness" and goodwill of renewal elites, and the "openness" of the citizen participation process. Attention is thereby focused on the form rather than the content of political life. Public opinion which might focus on the substantive demands of protesters is reassured by the very existence of a formal channel which suggests that the grievances of the powerless are being considered in policy making. As Murray Edelman so perceptively cautions, the danger is that

by focusing upon popular participation, by clouding recognition of adversary interests, by presenting authorities as helping and rehabilitative, [formal politicization] symbolizes the construction of elite power within narrow limits. Public attention then focuses upon procedures rather than upon their outcomes, so that the power to coerce, degrade, and confuse dissidents is greater.¹⁷

The crucial determinant of whether neighborhood protest groups are able to convert a normally detrimental formal citizen participation structure into a useful resource is the extent to which they are able to maintain their self-consciousness as "outside" adversaries and their image in the eyes of renewal elites as viable potential instruments of open resistance and disruption. Barring this, they lack bargaining resources and formal participation is more likely to sap their ability to make appeals for equity to outside reference groups than to yield political concessions. To operate effectively as an "insider" requires more than merely a formal seat at the bargaining table. It requires actual or potential power. Without such power the formal right to participate is likely to remain a distorting symbol that blurs the real influence enjoyed by those who do have the bargaining resources to shape policy outcomes.

¹ Richard Sennett, *Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Vintage, 1970).

² Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³ Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1973). See also Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969).

⁴ Warner Bloomberg, "The Goals," Symposium on Governing Megacentropolis, *Public Administration Review* (September/October, 1970), pp. 514-515. On the value laden aspects of planning see also Thomas Reiner, "The Planner as Value Technician," in H. Wentworth Eldredge, ed., *Taming Megalopolis: Volume I* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), pp. 232-248.

⁵ Christopher Tunnard, *The Modern American City* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1968), p. 32.

⁶ Manuel Castells, "Urban Sociology and Urban Politics: From a Critique to New Trends of Research," *Comparative Urban Research*, Vol. III, No. 1 (1975), p. 8; see also Castells, *The Urban Question* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1977), and Ruth Glass, "The Alarming But Tired Cliches About Urban Doom," *Times of London* (August 4, 1976), p. 5, for good discussions of the use of environmental engineering and technical jargon to depoliticize planning and zoning decisions.

⁷ Bloomberg, "The Goals," p. 515; see also Frances Fox Piven, "Planning and Class Interests," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* (September, 1975), pp. 308-310.

⁸ Herbert H. Hyman, *Organizational Response to Urban Renewal* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1967). p. 192. Despite such displays of technical competence, in actuality large U.S. renewal authorities often reserve a large number of staff positions for purely political appointments, to shore up political support from mayors and other political officials and groups. See, for example, Chester Hartman, et al, *Yerba Buena: Land Grab and Community Resistance in San Francisco* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1974).

⁹ For example, in San Francisco, "consultants selected are those who can be relied on to share the Agency's views, and under these conditions it is the rare outside consultant who will risk future contracts by producing a report sharply different from what is known to be the desired outcome." See Hartman et al, *Yerba Buena*, pp. 75, 80; see also John M. Mollenkopf, "The Post-War Politics of Urban Development" *Politics and Society* Vol. 5, No. 3 (1975), p. 290.

¹⁰ Scott Greer, *Urban Renewal and American Cities* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1965), p. 157.

¹¹ Hartman, *Yerba Buena*, p. 89; on the other uses mentioned above see Hyman, *Organizational Response*, pp. 188, 191; Harold Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics: Slum Clearance in Newark* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

¹² Kaplan, *Urban Renewal Politics*, ch. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Hyman, *Organizational Response*, pp. 69, 86, 185ff.

¹⁵ *Boston Sunday Globe* (May 12, 1974), p. A57; see also Mollenkopf, "Post-War Politics," p. 284; on these impact problems more generally see Martin Anderson *The Federal Bulldozer* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1964), p. 159f.

¹⁶ On survey research as procrastination see Michael Lipsky, "Protest as a Political Resource," *American Political Science Review*, 62 (December 1968), p. 1146. On involvement of citizens in administration and discussion with renewal elites of survey results see Hyman, *Organizational Response*, pp. 200, 353; on citizen surveys as priority setters see *New Orleans States Item*. (December 18, 1974), p. A3.

¹⁷ Murray Edelman, "The Language of Participation and the Language of Resistance," (unpublished ms., 1976), pp. 7-20.