

## PLANNING IN THE PROGRESSIVE CITY

### Abstract

Planning was a theme that ran through all cases of the progressive city, in part because progressive city activists knew that they could not rely on the private market arguments in support of their most important goals. But the market was an important piece of the culture of American cities, and the activists had to decide how to use plans and how overtly to use them. This is a review of how some cities used plans, in contrast to others, demonstrably progressive, did differently, or not at all.

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One reason to study the progressive city is the potentials it opens up for city planning. This was my main reason when I started such a study in 1981. I had worked as a city planner, and was tired of hearing “the planner proposes, the politician disposes,” putting down our best efforts. Then I read the political science of planning: concluding that – against the best planning schemes -- interest group politics provided wisest and best view of what the future might hold for any city.

But what if the politics was different, that at least some interests saw a different, more just city: less inequality, more public investment to make the city a better place? One device to accomplish this was planning – schemes that would alter the city as a whole and serve as a beacon, goals for the longer time frame while smaller battles were fought year to year and month to month. By the 1970s there were cases. Norman Krumholz had done the **Cleveland Policy Planning Report** that argued the city should favor opportunities

for those who had few. Berkeley radicals had written **The Cities Wealth** advocating a takeover of the electric utility, cooperative housing and rent control. Hartford's deputy mayor had sued the suburbs demanding they provide a share of the region's affordable housing needs. I decided to study these cities, especially to see whether the experience of planners was different, and if the plans were different, or even in public view.

Here are some major examples:

The *Cleveland Policy Planning Report* published by the City of Cleveland Planning Commission in 1975, still stands out. In a time when city planners focused on particular projects and seldom touched redistributive issues, it announced an overall policy that the city should evaluate its actions by a redistributive standard:

Equity requires that locally responsible government institutions give priority attention to the goal of promoting a wider range of choices for those Cleveland residents who have few, if any, choices.

[Cleveland Policy Planning Report, p. 9]

This theme ran through the Cleveland planners' positions on a series of controversial issues through the 1970s: spacing of transit routes through poor neighborhoods, retention of the municipal electric power company, subsidies for downtown office towers. Its authors, chief planner Ernie Bonner and Planning Director Norman Krumholz, were out of city hall by the end of the decade, but Krumholz went on through four decades of advocacy for "equity planning," and the Cleveland Policies Plan was the model for Chicago's effort a decade later, was recognized as a planning landmark by the American Planning Association and along with Krumholz' speeches and writing became central to further discussions as levels of inequality in the society and in cities became a national agenda after 2011. For his part Bonner, who left to become planning director in Portland, OR in 1973, memorialized the Cleveland Policy Planning Report in a website and collection maintained by the Portland State University Library – viewable at <http://www.pdx.edu/usp/planpdxorg-cleveland-policy-plan>.

*The Cities Wealth*. When Eve Bach, Ed Kirshner and three associates in Kirshner's Cooperative Ownership Organizing Project began to interact with Loni Hancock's

activities as a Berkeley city council member after her election in 1971, multiple avenues toward collective action appeared to them. Kirshner had read the work of Ebenezer Howard, the planner and activist responsible for the British garden cities of the first decades of the century, and the emergence of a citizen movement made Howard's actual and imagined innovations seem possible and worth writing about. The resulting short book, when published by the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policies in 1975, got local attention as an "economic plan for Berkeley," and buttressed the resolve of city council members supporting efforts and rent control and other initiatives.

*"Principles of Unity between members of the Santa Monica Renters Rights coalition"* (SMRR) (1981) qualifies as at least a partial plan. It stated substantive goals, committed the diverse members of the coalition to common purposes, and functioned as preliminary to more formal plans such as a new "Housing Element" in the state-mandated comprehensive plan.

*"Chicago Works Together" 1984 Chicago Development Plan* is notable for the persistence of redistributive themes ranging from a neighborhood based meeting prior to the electoral campaign of Mayor Harold Washington through campaign documents like *The Washington Papers* and the revision of the 1984 plan as a second document with further participation in 1987. These steps are traced in planner Robert Mier's retrospective volume *Social Justice and Local Development Policy* (1993).

*Jobs and People: A Strategic Analysis of the Greater Burlington Economy*, Industrial Cooperative Association, 1984. Burlington, VT activists, following the election of Bernie Sanders as mayor in 1981, sought new approaches to economic development. They anticipated the closing of large absentee owned factories, were intrigued at the prospect of new worker owned and managed firms. Sanders, who had created a new Community and Economic Development unit, engaged two consultants, Chris Mackin and Beth Siegel. In their analysis and local discussions the planning group, facing resistance to the idea of employee control, instead proposed "local ownership" as an alternative, and the plan found a rationale for that. This theme permeated Burlington policy for several decades thereafter.

**Issues.** Looking at these plans raises questions that might surprise us. The experience

was different, but it also varied. Some planners fought bitterly against the new demands placed upon them by the progressive mayors and city councils. A planner in Cleveland was indignant at having to take time away from her professional work to walk the streets canvassing for Dennis Kucinich, a mayor whose aggressive advocacy won him a series of recall elections. Turns out under the old regime, planners had comforts they had to give up, working for progressives.

But at a different level progressive plans could be lightning rods for conflict when they supported positions that did not have consensus support. The Cleveland plan was clear in its relevance to issues like the maintenance of MUNY Light, which annoyed those with self interest or ideological interest in the fortunes of the private utility; its support for public transit serving poor neighborhoods and its opposition to subsidies for office buildings; and its failure to give priority to urban design considerations, so that when Kucinich was defeated and Krumholz left city hall in 1979, the incoming mayor was quick to hire a planner that took the city a different, developer-friendly direction.

Other cities – progressive ones in their policies – did not put forward plans as officially or forthrightly redistributive as Cleveland's. Santa Monica's central policy position was its rent control law in 1979, which through successful implementation and the periodic renewal of voter commitment through an elected board, led the city in progressive directions in other areas; and there was a notable new "housing element" of the city's master plan that followed in the early 1980s. SMRR's "Principles of Unity" was supplementary to that, and could be said to have provided some coherence to the city's policies and implementation that a detailed plan might have in other cities.

It is also a reasonable question whether we should give as much attention to cities' official plans, as to those formulated by social movement and political advocacy groups and parties. SMRR was the latter, but much of the support for Ray Flynn's mayoralty in Boston came in the context of advocacy from the citizens organization Mass Fair Share for "linkage" (which he ultimately implemented) and "neighborhood councils" which he implemented partially and with difficulty; and Flynn never did an overall plan. One could believe an argument for not doing comprehensive plans like Cleveland's

Great exceptions were Chicago and Burlington. In Chicago, economic developer

commissioner Robert Mier took the Cleveland experience as a starting point, and even expanded on it. He had been an innovative and unconventional faculty member at University of Illinois - Chicago, where he worked with as many neighborhood level organizations as he could, but rather than conventional land use planning topics, he sought out local economic development groups who were fighting plant closings. This put Mier into contact with a different kind of economist and activist than most planners – even those who worked with neighborhood groups — were used to. But he was good at it and when, in 1983 he became Harold Washington’s Commissioner of Economic Development, he was ready to expand funding to neighborhood groups, focus on “jobs not real estate” and lead the city into a Task Force on Steel that, with unconventional expertise, made the case that steel manufacturing – and by extension many other Chicago plants, could be saved.

In Burlington, **Jobs and People** likewise had consequences. The city updated it through three further iterations. They brought back Siegel for Jobs and People II in 1989 and III in 1994; then economists Nancy Brooks and Richard Schramm led a host of participants producing a fourth version in 2010.

These stories go on. No one has tracked the details of the planning experience of these cities and the difference progressive politics made in planning careers; what new methodologies they invented, what still remains to be done. The academy lags, as usual and perhaps proper – serious scholarship does take time. But there’s a need to take another look – theses and dissertations may follow, and that would be to the good.

Maybe we need to take another look at planners – now focusing on those who worked in cities that were willing to face down developers and the real estate lobby, and even – as in Chicago – go all in to an effort to retain manufacturing jobs and factories even in the face of a national consensus to simply retreat.