ABSTRACT

City planners (including e-planners) have at times sought to “speak truth to power,” as when the interests of poor neighborhoods’ needs to preserve jobs and housing confront real estate developers promoting urban renewal schemes to replace existing homes and factories with upscale apartments and shopping malls. The planners have tools – writing, speaking, and the array of ICT devices they can employ. But they face powerful forces – not only developers, but builders, investors, professionals, city officials, and media. This article – set in 1980s and 1990s Chicago – presents the story of an alternative approach – an organizer who built a coalition of neighborhoods and employers that prevailed over a period of years. It may be a metaphor for more contemporary times. Can e-planners learn from such an example?

Keywords: Advocacy, Coalition, Equity Planning, Growth Coalition, Justice, Power

INTRODUCTION

At a recent conference on “power” many of the speakers – mostly architects, real estate developers, and city planners – spoke of the need to “speak truth to power.” Most noted that this could be difficult, since their most important clients tended to have a lot of power, and could be pretty selective in what “truth” they were willing to believe or hear.1

The usual response to this dilemma has been to suggest personal courage, stubborn persistence, perhaps guile, with guidance offered through case histories of remarkable instances where truth-telling actually had an impact. Among the city planners there are many such cases. Paul Davidoff proposed “advocacy planning” where professionals would direct their services to poor neighborhoods facing issues – typically urban renewal or highway projects – and execute plans that could produce better outcomes. Walter Thabit founded “Planners for Equal Opportunity” which met for several years in the 1960s, and Chester Hartman followed with Planners Network in 1975, which was still operating in 2014. Norman Krumholz proposed “equity planning” for Cleveland as planning director with the Cleveland Policy Planning Report in 1975, and promoted it thereafter in books, articles, lectures, and seminars as Professor at Cleveland State University and offices at the top of the American Planning Association thereafter. Hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals have made serious efforts to change local policies since the 1960s, with some success.2

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THE GROWTH COALITION

In no case has this success realized its potential, a potential which now gets articulation as “the just city,” or even “the just metropolis” (Fainstein, 2010). In contrast, scholars have noted that the dominant “power” in cities in the past several decades is the “growth coalition,” consisting of real estate developers, architects, engineers, planners, newspapers and building trades firms and unions that gain from the construction and other accompaniments of “growth,” typically through projects like downtown malls and tourist attractions, sports stadia, “worlds fairs,” transit development like subways and highways. These tend to be inordinately expensive, oversold, and costly to middle and working class people throughout the city, and particularly those located near the downtown, or in the path of the proposed projects; “justice” is low on the list of priorities for these projects, or among the outcomes. Nor is the growth coalition confined to local issues. It has been able to generate subsidies and regulatory relief at federal and state as well as local levels, from elements in both Republican and Democratic parties, and has been able to coordinate support for projects across class and race lines, as well as across sectors of economic activity. Overall, it is really, really powerful.

In the face of this many-tentacled combination of forces, the idea that individuals can make a difference by “speaking truth to power” is, let’s say, optimistic. Briefly, my premise is that the only way to compete with a coalition, is to create a different coalition. I can illustrate this with a story of both (a) an individual, who found a way to make a difference; and (b) the forces around her, that created a semblance of a coalition, so that her efforts paid off, at least for a few years.

PLANNED MANUFACTURING DISTRICTS (PMDS)

The individual is Donna Ducharme, who had been hired in 1982 as the community development director for an expanded YMCA program north of the Chicago loop. She had been working in “youth development” in the area since graduating from Carleton College in the 1970s, then went to MIT to do a masters degree in city planning. She had made the connection (it was her MIT thesis project) between unemployed youth and the array of older manufacturing establishments in the nearby Clybourne Corridor northwest of the loop. Upon returning from MIT in 1982, she created the Local Economics and Employment Development (LEED) Council, a planning group that included area youth and others, but also a number of manufacturers. Their work was focused early by the threat of displacement of manufacturing establishments and jobs by upscale residential and commercial development, beginning with a project called River North. It was the first time such a diverse group had come together. Certainly businessmen had organized, even manufacturers had. And there had been organizing among unemployed youth. Putting them together around a common goal was what was new. And they fixed on the idea of the planned manufacturing district (PMD) a zoning device that would protect factories and jobs against proposals like River North, and which had been the outgrowth of Ducharme’s MIT thesis. The LEED Council began to organize to fight as River North and other proposals came forward, threatening to raise land costs from an average $6 per square foot to $12, or as much as $40, and to force longtime area employers and jobs out of business or out of town.

Advocates of the conversion process argued for the enhanced tax revenues accruing to the city; while opponents argued the costs of job loss in terms of income loss and added welfare costs and the costs of social disorganization. Ducharme’s organizing process went through a series of phases. The first, at the ward level, was entirely among the area’s businesses and residents. They discovered they opposed the zoning changes and that, though they represented disparate social groups, they had a common interest. The second was that as the
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