



OCCASIONAL PAPER 5

WHOSE PLAN IS IT, ANYWAY?

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First, my disclaimer. I am not a planner. I am a historian with a twist. I am convinced that the study of the past ought to lead to something more than nostalgia, something other than a confirmation that we are the wisest, most sophisticated generation ever to roam the planet and that we have progressed further than any before us. Not only do I believe that people in the past had faculties and capabilities just like ours; I believe that people in the future will, too. An astute anthropologist once observed that history is a wonderful discipline, provided you get out of it. He meant that we ought to draw useful conclusions from past human behavior. And so I have been involved in mass transit advocacy, downtown planning, park planning, civic improvement, city government reform, and environmental issues, although I am certainly not expert in any of these areas.

For me, history is a process of sorting out what we have done well and what we have done poorly. If we can just respond appropriately to those questions, we will be well on the way to finding answers. We know what our problems are and we know the range of useful solutions. What we lack is the determination that can only proceed from a base of public, not professional, consensus around both the precise natures of our problems and specific remedies for them. So I am going to offer a few observations on city and regional planning based principally on my experience in St. Louis.

Historically the St. Louis metropolitan area is about as well-planned as it could be. There are plans in desk drawers and filing cabinets everywhere, testimony to the efforts. I know some of these plans very well because I have been party to their development. But these well-intended, often intelligent efforts have been mostly futile, mere documents lying neglected and ignored in a bottom drawer. A big part of the problem is process and public expectation. Who in this region is authorized to implement a plan and who does the authorizing? Like many other regions we seem to have lots of chiefs, or wanna-be chiefs, and very few followers. The results are competing plans that fractionalize leadership and confuse the public. Failure of planning efforts has less to do with the specifics of any plan but rather with planning processes that do not galvanize public support either around problem identification or resolution. All those plans in file cabinets and desk drawers are the property of the planner or the committee that developed them. Often they have neither the public nor political support necessary to bring them to the light of day, much less to the community's betterment.

Part of the problem here is the rush toward professionalization in the past century. Every profession that includes planning has evolved a set of best practices that reinforces professional standards. Only those who meet those standards and adhere to best practices are admitted to the priesthood. It has happened in my business and it has happened in yours. We become the experts, the authorities, and the professionals; and of course everyone else is an amateur. Amateur once simply referred to someone who was involved for the love of it, rather than for pay. Now it means uninformed, inexperienced, and lacking true knowledge. The problem with our definition of professional is that it excludes the public. So we end up doing things to people instead of facilitating public process. Too often public process is whitewashing, something to be managed so that the result supports a predetermined course of action. No wonder public meetings are so rancorous and difficult. People know that they are being manipulated. We need to take a cue from doctors who worked harder than any profession to erect barriers in the paths of patients who wanted a role in their own health care. Now doctors and insurance companies are insisting that people accept personal responsibility for their own health and health care decisions. Can we also ask people to assume personal responsibility for the health of their neighborhoods and communities, the quality of the air they breathe, the purity of their water, the amounts of the taxes they pay, the costs of the automobiles they drive, the hours they spend commuting, crime in their streets, and the quality of their own lives? In short, can people become their own planning experts? Expertise is something you can bring to the conversation with fellow citizens. It does not set you apart nor does it give you a bigger stake in the outcome. There is evidence that indeed people will not have it any other way.

Professional planning grows out of the assumption that there are scientific and predictable ways, understood only to experts, to plan and direct people's lives and that, in fact, planning is so complex that it can only be left to experts. Planning by experts presumes a source of legitimizing authority, which traditionally emanated from corporate and political power structures.. That planning is not an academic process but a political one is a cliché but an appropriate one. The zoning ordinance, the legislation, and the appropriations are politically established. But we now live in a time when people mistrust both politicians and executives. Corporate executives are no longer attached to places as they once were, and more than ever shareholders insist on exclusive attention to the bottom line. So even if citizens were willing to authorize CEOs to make planning decisions, corporate executives see few rewards in considering community needs. Likewise, in our region at least, politicians have neither the power nor the authority to make planning decisions.

The future I think will be radically democratic. Over the past fifty years America has become democratic, and multi-cultural, in ways that the founders could not have anticipated. Women, minorities of all kinds, and interest groups of all stripes now insist upon involvement in decisions that affect their lives. Citizens demand to participate in all such deliberations and not just in a passive, reactive way. They insist on being at the table first, before the issues are defined and alternative solutions framed. From now on, experts will provide information and facilitate discussion, but they will attempt to pre-select options only at the peril of scuttling the plan. The process is becoming more important than product. The process is about trust and relationship building; and if we can create processes that build in ownership, then the product, or plan, will have the required support for implementation. Conversely, if the process is wrong, the plan, no matter how good it may be, is dead on arrival and will join other dusty blueprints in rarely opened desk drawers and eventually end up in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society with other good but unfulfilled ideas.

The positive side of all of this is that citizens will fill the leadership power vacuum left by corporate change, political suspicion, and governmental fragmentation. In democracy, as Alexis de Toqueville, an observant Frenchman who wandered America more than one hundred and fifty years ago saw it, individuals are weak and can accomplish nothing; but in association with one another, they can accomplish anything. The new authorizers and the new sources of power will be "we the people."

There has been a lot of theorizing in recent years about the putative civic disengagement of Americans, a notion popularized by Robert Putnam in his book, "Bowling Alone." Yet, while participation in bowling leagues and fraternal organization is down, the last few decades have seen the creation of a plethora of cause-oriented citizens groups focused on every imaginable issue: civil rights, freedom of speech, environmental concerns, water quality, farmland and wetland preservation, transit advocacy, neighborhood revitalization, and issues of every other brand. Some of them engage in the politics of obstruction and confrontation, but others have positive agendas. Juxtapose, for example, the political stance of Greenpeace with that of the Nature Conservancy. Currently we have an exhibition in one of our galleries organized by American Rivers, a group that promotes river restoration. A few weeks ago I attended the annual meeting of the Citizens for Modern Transit, a group that I once chaired which effectively advocates on behalf of mass transit, and particularly light rail, in the St. Louis metropolitan region.

You can all forget about effective planning if these groups and others are not included in the process. This doesn't mean to consult with them after most of the planning is complete. It means they must be at the discussion table at the first meeting when priorities are discussed. A friend of mine puts it this way: "Either we all get on the same train, at the same place, at the same time, or the train is not going anywhere."

A few years ago I served on a small executive committee charged with development of a master plan for Forest Park, this region's premier public park and home to most of its large cultural institutions. We endured hundreds of public meetings, close to 300 in total, with the involvement of thousands of citizens. Because of its popularity for dozens of uses, Forest Park's 1,300 acres is certainly contested ground. Some people threatened to chain themselves to trees. Some people insisted upon larger parking lots while some insisted on banning motor vehicles. Others wanted more wildlife habitat or bigger soccer fields or more golf holes, bike trails, jogging paths, picnic areas, tennis courts, and so on. I was initially skeptical that the process would produce enough consensus around any change to permit implementation of any plan. When the process came to its laborious and welcomed end, it was apparent that the process had discredited the extremes. Forest Park would not be treated as wilderness for trees and wild beasts, nor would huge chunks of it be paved with asphalt like the Galleria parking lots. Common sense prevailed. The process was an orchestrated free for all, and it was risky because even the range of possible outcomes was not predictable at the outset. But when it was completed, we had a plan and all the opponents on every side had had multiple opportunities to take their best public shot at both the process and conclusions. No one could say, "I wasn't allowed to express my opinion." So the plan was developed, and the process itself had elicited the public support necessary for its implementation. This is scary for experts because their opinions had to enter this fray on equal footing with the points of view dearly held by so-called amateurs and with no guarantee that expert judgment would prevail. While the process had the necessary support of the mayor, it was ultimately the public who gave the plan authority and credibility. Walk around Forest Park now. See the plan in progress and note the absence of effective opposition.

When I hear of planning efforts in the St. Louis metropolitan region, I am convinced that we do not ask the right questions. We plan highways, airports, downtowns, bridges, light rail, parking facilities, and all forms of infrastructure, public facilities, neighborhoods, whole communities. We worry about poverty concentration, air quality, commuting times, emissions control, urban sprawl, exurban spread, crime, safety, and sustainability. Some campaign for open space and green space, while in the City of St. Louis we have dozens of square miles of brown space. But do we ever add it all up? I fear not. I think that most of what we do is piecemeal. Do we really believe that population density is good or bad? We talk regionalism except when it comes to building affordable housing. We want good air quality but we are planning to widen Highway 40 and build more bridges while we have a nearly bankrupt mass transit system. We consider transit and roads and bridges as simply ways to allow people to travel between places without considering them as land use planning tools. And we do not consider the reciprocal relationship between a rotting urban core and escalating burdens of subsidized exurban development.

The biggest environmental debacle is not contaminated industrial sites, poor air quality, wetlands destruction, or radioactive waste; rather it is the prodigal waste of existing infrastructure combined with the simultaneous investment in new infrastructure on the fringes of the region. The City of St. Louis once had more than 750,000 residents and the infrastructure to support them. Now it has just over 300,000 people, with rotting infrastructure and a tax base too small to maintain what remains. Yet all of those abandoned or underutilized streets, sewer pipes, water lines, utilities, sidewalks, business blocks and industrial facilities, schools, houses, and neighborhoods represent an extraordinary investment in both renewable and non-renewable resources, the energy to make them, and the tremendous human labor required to build them. But we abandon an existing investment and then replicate the whole thing somewhere else. How can we make any claim to be environmentally responsible and behave in such a profligate manner? I think that we have papered over the escalating infrastructure costs with taxes for almost as long as we can, and we have unnecessarily depleted the earth's finite resources. Unfortunately the future will pay the price. One of the moral imperatives of humanity is that we must never behave in such a way that we dump those kinds of mortgages on people who are not yet born. It is like writing a bad check that won't clear until after we are dead, or taking out a loan with no principal payments but with a huge balloon payment 75 years from now. We cannot be intergenerational deadbeats.

I hope that you don't think that I blame all of this on poor planning. The fault is all of ours, but I do believe that as people who are paid to care about such things, you do have a special responsibility and I wonder about what happens next. You already know that I think our processes need to continue to involve in even more significant ways those who will be affected by planning decisions. But as I mentioned earlier, I also believe that we need to think more clearly about what the attributes of a good community might be and how best to achieve them. I think that instead of asking people what kinds of roads, houses, and schools they prefer, we should ask them what kind of lives they want and discuss their ideas of the attributes of ideal communities, knowing that there may be different answers for different people. But we need to guide the conversation, not control it.

We already risk a whole generation that neither knows nor cares what a community of place is. I was very startled a few years ago by a bright young man in a seminar at the Architecture School at Washington University. I was discussing community as a place of neighbors with mutual interests in the common welfare of the place. The young man politely raised his hand and exclaimed, "Dr. Archibald, I think that your definition of community is obsolete. I don't associate with the people who live next door. My neighbors are the people that I choose to associate with by driving in my car, using my cell phone and e-mail, or by hopping on an airplane. I create my own community, either by travel or through electronic communication. The people who live next door to me are not my neighbors." And he concluded, "It doesn't matter where I live." Frightening. There is no community of place or common good here. It is just pure self-interest. I have interviewed suburbanites who are empty nesters. They admit, with some embarrassment, to routinely voting against school taxes. "We do not have children in the schools, and we don't know the neighbors' children." Now I know that we all live in multiple communities and always will. It has always been that way since humans walked to the next village or sent the first mail, but people do travel now more often, faster, and farther than ever before in human history, and we have ever more sophisticated communication at our fingertips. However, as long as we have three-dimensional bodies we will have to put them some place. No matter how much we might wish it was otherwise, the quality of our lives is going to depend in part on the people with whom we share that place. We depend upon each other for our sense of safety, streets and sidewalks, fire and police protection, garbage pickup, water and air quality, and all of those other attributes of a decent place to live. And we had better know our neighbors. Evidence suggests that the best indicator of a good place to live is not income level or real estate values or educational achievement. It is a measure of how many people know each other's first names. Unless you want to be wired in a test tube, we will never be virtual creatures, no matter how attractive the notion might seem. We are unequivocally and irrevocably each other's keepers. And whether we like it or not, as the living generation, we are also responsible for the future and the life quality available to all of the yet unborn who will inhabit it. So as you plan, think about first names and then think about where to put things.

For me the first issue in planning must be not what should it look like or where and what should it be, but rather what values must it uphold. So the heart of the question for all of us, whether citizens or planners, is what makes a good community. Sometimes I imagine that I am not an earthling and that I am perched high enough in the air to have a birds-eye view of any American city or town. I look down and try to make sense of what I see. At first glance, it appears that the planning axiom down there is: Make it as convenient as possible for cars. The arrangement of homes, schools, libraries, businesses, and shopping is intentionally organized so that none of it is accessible without automobiles. It is very car-friendly, but not at all people-friendly. As far as I can tell, the preeminent value upheld by planning in most American communities is that whatever allows more cars to travel greater distances faster is good planning. The clogged highways, the neighborhoods without sidewalks, the acres of black asphalt baking in the summer sun, the periodically poisonous air, the enormous land consumption and destruction, and the inability to walk anywhere that matters are not good for people living or unborn and they make communities of place nearly impossible to develop.

Now I know that all of this is not the fault of planners and that politics, development interests and highway construction interests, among others, influence planning or support the lack of it. But still, I think that all of us have failed to enunciate a vision for the future of our communities. We miss the point that arrangement of space is a principal determinant of the kinds of potential relationships that can exist within that space. The cheapest short-term solution, like development of the least expensive real estate on the periphery, may be the most expensive option for our children and their children. If we decry the isolation of the individual in our world, if we wonder what happened to communities of place, and if we are aghast at the single-minded pursuit of self interest that is so often a hallmark of our times, we do not need to look for deep-seated common angst. All we need to do is examine the way we have arranged our spaces in our neighborhoods and around our places of business. As if by intent we have made relationships between people difficult. There are fewer neighborhood churches, libraries and schools than there were. Drive down any neighborhood street in the City of St. Louis and you will see where all of the small storefronts were. They are closed for the most part and in the more recently constructed suburbs they have never existed. Category killer stores combined with zoning restrictions have destroyed neighborhood shopping. Everyone in this room has stepped out onto an asphalt parking lot on a hot summer day. You know that it is no place for people and that it doesn't have to be like that. As you know better than I do, there is a price to be paid for zoning that segregates by use and by real estate values. You all see the new home section in the weekend newspaper. "Homes from three hundred thousand dollars," the signs proclaim. Those are cookie-cutter houses, with double, sometimes triple, garage doors as their most prominent features. Aesthetically they are junk. The only virtue of many of these costly new homes is that they are huge. Since when did gargantuan or expensive equal beauty? You and I know that beauty does not have to equate with cost or size. And ugliness assaults the human spirit. It diminishes life, crushes creativity, and encourages unhappiness.

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Look around this region and scores of others and tell me where you find beauty. It does exist but mostly we must seek it out instead of surrounding ourselves with it. There is no beauty around the bulging freeways. They are tunnels of no man's or woman's land, strips of dangerous ugliness that assault the human spirit. I know from nine years of living in a house right by I-270 that the incessant noise and spewing fumes spread out over acres of land in every direction. Have you ever heard a semi truck jack braking in the middle of the night? I sometimes lay in bed wishing I could find the fools who built these things and let them try to sleep near their gateways to the great suburban dream. Did someone really plan

this, or is it just like the lobster in the slowly boiling pot; you're dead before you can realize that it's hot. Now I live in a quiet city neighborhood. One Christmas Eve, just after I moved, I woke up late and thought something was terrible wrong. I listened for a moment and then realized that I was hearing silence.

You all know the suburban office parks. There are even some of them carved out of vacated areas of the city. They are isolated self-contained islands. All streets are internal; there is no shopping or walking or sidewalk socializing. Employees arrive in automobiles in the morning and leave in a rush in the evening and know they are home when they slip cars into their triple-doored garages. And even the tall downtown buildings are just vertical office parks with internal parking garages, no stores facing the street and no need to go outdoors. We don't need to force people out of doors to shop, but just give them opportunity to escape from daily monotony and maybe to see each other as fellow citizens with at least the place in common. People do not thrive on monotony, homogeneity, and constant humdrum. Why oh why do we design such places, and if we are to have zoning laws, why do we permit such places?

But there is beauty. A few weeks ago I attended one of the previews of the new Pulitzer museum in Grand Center. The architect is Tadao Ando. What a wonderful package of light, water, exploration, surprises. I don't know how anyone could be unhappy in such space. And the Eads Bridge! Certainly an engineering marvel, but it is so beautiful. Or the new bridge to Alton. Or even consider Soulard as a counterpoint to a suburb: well-maintained closely packed housing, tree-shaded sidewalks, places to walk to that do matter, nearby entertainment, and the market. Soulard is not everyone's ideal home but it is people-friendly, relationship-friendly.

So in addition to constructing new, honest, and inclusive processes for planning, we need to debate a set of principles that define the characteristics of good places for people. First, acknowledge that we are not the pioneers; others like Jane Jacobs and now the new urbanists have already turned the ground. I think we need a conservation ethic that insists that we will build to last, that we will reuse, and that we will plan and build in the most sustainable ways possible. We need to understand that permanence and continuity are both vital to the human psyche and coincidentally the keys to a world that will be worth inheriting by the generations of the future. We must acknowledge that beauty contributes to human contentment, creativity, and happiness, just as ugliness dispirits us and encourages us to neglect our surroundings, and that beauty does not need to cost more. We must commit ourselves to the truth that democracy requires that people live a major portion of their lives in communities of place. Hence let us plan places that are conducive to interaction, casual social activities, scattered with "those third places" outside of work and home, like sidewalks, places to walk to that matter, and small-scale stores that encourage neighborly encounters. As de Toqueville observed, democracy depends upon the free association of strangers to get anything done. Let us make places that encourage the free association of strangers and preserve places of continuity and history that the attach us with those mystic chords of memory that Abraham Lincoln called up on the memorial grounds at Gettysburg. Insist upon good places for people. What social good is unshaded asphalt on a hot August summer day in St. Louis? And what good is a sidewalk that leads to no place? Or a park whose location requires driving instead of walking? And how diminished is the happiness and health potential of a home in which every member of the family, even those too young to drive, are dependent upon automobiles that whisk people away from the notion of a community of place to other tenuous, transient communities, and one-dimensional relationships with others.

And please may we all be reminded to be citizens first and experts second. You cannot plan without a compelling public vision that garners public support with the process that created it, the force and logic of its conclusions, and the encouragement it delivers to people's collective aspirations for a better place and a better future. Adhere to a vision that focuses on the quality of relationships, rather than size, travel times, population density, speed limits, growth boundaries, or even air quality and other quantifiable indicators. Good places that emphasize relationships inherently consume less and will leave something worth having to the unborn generations.

And this, my friends and colleagues, is our most sacred obligation. We do not really own our places. We just temporarily occupy them. We did not create them. All we can do is build upon what we have inherited. We do not have a right to obliterate what we were given. Just as we inherited this place from unknown generations, others we will not know will live with the consequences, good or ill, of what we do here. We will be accountable for how we leave our places, even if we leave them just as they were.

How we define progress in our efforts can be dangerous. More and bigger is not progress. Necessary or not, the widening of Highway 40 is not progress. Another bridge across the Mississippi may not be progress. Wealth is not progress, nor is segregation of poverty. Abandonment of the city and the decline of inner suburbs is not progress, and neither are the new suburbs west of now even Wentzville. Several years ago I talked with a 98-year old friend. We sat in the front window of what was her family's small-town store, left now with almost nothing to sell. Theresa still opened it from habits of her heart, and friends and neighbors still stopped by. It startled me to realize she had watched most of the twentieth century pass in front of this window. She watched the transition from horses and wagons to automobiles. She had seen the numbers of people on the street dwindle as business moved out to the highway. From her window she had seen the young people grow up and move away, weddings and funeral processions, world wars and astounding inventions like airplanes and television. So one day I asked her. "Theresa, what do you think of all the progress you have seen through these windows? Theresa responded with a dismissive wave of her hand toward the street beyond. "It is not progress," she murmured, "it is just change."

And so I leave you this morning with a final thought about the attachment of humans to a place, in the words of Wendell Berry from his book, "The Long-Legged House."

In this awakening there has been a good deal of pain. When I lived in other places I looked on their evils with the curious eye of a traveler; I was not responsible for them; it cost me nothing to be a critic, for I had not been there long, and I did not feel that I would stay. But here, now that I am both native and citizen, there is no immunity to what is wrong. It is impossible to escape the sense that I am involved in history. What I am has been to a considerable extent determined by what my forebears were, by how they chose to treat this place while they lived in it; the lives of most of them diminished it, and limited its possibilities, and narrowed its future. And every day I am confronted by the question of what inheritance I will leave...

...And so here in the place I love more than any other and where I have chosen among all other places for my life, I am more painfully divided within myself than I could be in any other place.

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LIVABLE COMMUNITIES DON'T JUST HAPPEN....

....THEY ARE CREATED BY THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THEM.

