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Communicative Planning Theory and Community Initiatives

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Communicative Planning Theory and Community Initiatives

The communicative approach to planning (especially represented by Forester 1985, 1989, 1993) has offered an alternative approach to practicing planners (Lauria & Whelan 1995) uncomfortable with an instrumental rationality that leaves values undiscussed or unspecified. By recognizing that all forms of knowledge are socially constructed it accepts that values are not predetermined but are established in the communicative process itself. The examination of what planners do has revealed the role that planners can play in facilitating or hindering such communication (Healey 1992, 1996, Innes 1995, Forester 1994, Lauria & Soll 1996). This body of work draws on insights gained by examining in detail the way planners communicate with other actors in their daily practice, through face to face interactions or through planning documents. In other words, the focus has been on planners and plans. Now it seems that a useful way of building upon this body of work is to decenter the role of the planner and the plan so as to appreciate more fully the dynamic role played by divergent “public” interests. It is this increasing recognition of diversity of interests that forces us to question our capacity as planners to maneuver sympathetically between substantially different codes of meaning. I suggest that one way of doing this is to pay greater importance to the construction of the discourse of collective actors who are not just passive receivers of information or misinformation.

To give emphasis to the role of collective actors, the new social movement literature (for example, Klandermans, 1988, Melucci 1989, Larana, et al. 1994, Johnston & Klandermans 1995) will be referred to. It shows how groups can challenge and modify dominant systems of meaning through framing processes (Snow and Benford 1988, Hunt, Benford and Snow 1994) or through the construction of collective identities (Melucci 1989). By such means, they are able to open the

way for the definition of alternative collective visions of what is desirable. Central to the formation of these movements' collective identities are activities that we would call planning - the collective definition of ends and means together with an evaluation of the environment for action (Mueller 1994, Gusfield 1994). This, in turn, breaks down the clear distinction between public and private spheres (Thomas 1994, 3), something brought home to us already by feminism's appeal that the personal is political (Calhoun 1995, Frazer & Lacy 1993). There is a need for planning theory to incorporate more fully these collective actors as protagonists and to pay more attention to their effect on practice (concrete intervention).

These ideas are illustrated in the present paper by examples of the way neighbors in New Orleans' French Quarter generate an alternative preservationist discourse that tends to confront the development interests of the local political regime. In these circumstances, the neighbors' collective perception of planners as closely aligned to, or submerged by, local political interests, stymies communication. Problems are understood, by local informants, in terms of more structural conflicts of interest where planners' potential for action is severely limited. This leads to the consideration that in this particular situation, the potential for communicative practices is substantially restricted. To understand the potential for establishing a communicative process and the extent of the difference in value systems, we need to carefully examine the way neighbors define their vision of a desirable urban environment and influence decisions that affect their living space, often at the margin of formal planning processes.

Communicative action approaches to planning

Judith Innes (1995) refers to communicative action approaches in planning theory as a new paradigm that changes the emphasis from the “should be” of planning practice to the study of what planners do¹. This is the base from which to reflect critically. From this perspective, theorists have examined how planners construct meaning in their daily practice (Healey 1992, Forester 1994, Hoch 1994), plans as a discourse (Healey 1996), and on the discourse during plan or policy formulation (Lauria & Soll 1996, Throgmorton 1992, Wilson 1995).

Underpinning the analyses of what planners do is the conviction that she or he is not just an agent who acts as an instrument of dominant interests, as some more structuralist analysis would have us understand. Planners can “find cracks in the structure where agency can survive” (Lauria and Whelan 1995, 8) through the exercise of discretionary power and by challenging “misinformation” (Forester 1989). Discretionary power allows the planner to confront the way powerful groups use information to perpetuate inequality.

For Patsy Healey (1992), this does not represent a return to idealistic individualism; rather it questions the rigid structure/agency dichotomy. Communicative acts are inserted in a context of ideological and political practices but nonetheless can modify this context and potentially challenge power structures. In studying the case of a particular planning officer’s daily interactions, she concluded that he could make a difference. He was “more than a skilled and ethical expert operating within a framework of rules and resources. He actively sought to change the framework by making local government more open and sensitive to all clients” (18-19).

In that specific study, a more detailed examination of the interests of other actors with

substantially different interests was not included. In fact there was no real challenge to the power structures, especially that coming from more antagonistic groups. One wonders if such a reassuring finding (for planners) would be equally valid in the midst of radical conflict over fundamental values by movements seeking a reformulation of the terms of the debate such as the women's or Afro-American movements. We have been taught that our good intentions are not enough and if we do not continually challenge the racist, sexist and homophobic values that underpin our discourse we can be dangerously perpetuating repression of difference. See how, for instance, Alma Young and Jyaphia Christos-Rogers (1995), point out that race and gender are embedded in social institutions. These institutions do not restructure themselves, they do so only as a result of the community 'throwing off' internalized oppression (i.e., creating another way of seeing themselves), and struggling with the powers that be to accept the community's definition of itself' (111). There is no doubt that sympathetic institutional actors do exist but it is more likely that they are shaped by institutional codes and meanings or are limited in their decision making options by structural constraints.

On the other hand, there is the tendency to underestimate the role of collective and individual agency. Healey (1992, 10) speaks of "ideological and political practices ... that confuse the powerless"(10). This appears to reduce the capacity of group and individual agency to reach beneath the dominant discourse and privileges the planner's position as pivotal in the process. As Innes (1995, 185) remarks, what ordinary people know is as relevant as the knowledge of planners. Knowledge gained in collective struggle can be particularly relevant and openly conflicts with planners knowledge, a position that Healey herself recognizes (1997, 29)

The difficulty of reconciling radically different world-views in decision making has been

pointed to by a number of authors more critical of the view that planners can rise above incommensurableness. Lowry, Adler and Milner (1997) invoke dramatically the incompatibility of different visions of reality by referring to disputes over the use of land, considered sacred, for geothermal drilling in Hawaii². Caroline Tauxe (1995) shows how North Dakota farmers and ranchers were systematically disempowered by a formal planning process that favored urban growth, leading her to consider that planning procedures “work to enforce dominant organizational, ideological and discursive forms” (472). Daphne Spain (1993) studying the process of gentrification finds that “[p]lanners typically find it easier to work with more politically sophisticated come-heres, whose interests may be closer to those of the planning profession” (168). Xavier de Sousa-Briggs (forthcoming) points to the problems of cross-cultural confusion and power relations in the planning process that can lead to confusion, distrust and resentment. All these authors recognize that planners tend to defend institutional and personal class world-views that make it difficult for planners to identify what is in fact ‘misinformation’.

Healey does not neglect the existence of different visions of reality (1996a, 285) and goes on to recognize “communities of discourse” and the fact that consensus is not always an outcome in the plan making process. There are matters of conflict that are not resolved, although plans should reveal the “tragic” choices made. Stable consensus are not achievable, there is only the possibility of “a temporary accommodation of different, and differently adapting, perceptions” (Healey 1996b, 244). Such an appreciation becomes even more explicit as she recognizes the potential difficulty of addressing differences in systems of meaning (Healey 1997, 57). In such situations dissenting views may be excluded for having world views that are unintelligible for

the defenders of the dominant discourse. This brings back the idea that the good intentions of planners cannot be assumed. She adds that the “danger with relying solely on theorizing-in-practice is that the ‘deep structures’ of power embedded in our ways of thinking and organizing, will remain unnoticed. Such a failure to notice could have the effect of unwittingly reinforcing the power relations and driving forces which are constraining the invention of new practices” (93).

This point can be further elaborated by reference to Craig Calhoun (1995) who revisits Habermas’s conception of the “ideal speech situation” seen as capable of propelling discourse toward truth and certainty, in a way which assumes universalistic values. For Calhoun the problem is that Habermas “has adopted a strong version of the widespread assumption ... that human beings naturally inhabit a single horizon of experience, a single social world at a time.” Hence consensus is logical. But if we inhabit multiple social worlds, consensus is not a desired outcome rather it is preferable to seek only an “adequate mutual understanding for the pursuit of various practical tasks in which we are jointly engaged”(51). Similarly, accounts that are based upon interpretation of communication tend to see inequalities and power only as intrusions and distortions. The problem is serious as “it simply poses an unrealistic notion that meaning can be separated from distorting influences rather than appearing always and only in relations constituted in part by power” (52).

In fact, the universalism of Habermas, underplays the growing awareness of fundamental difference in world views and represents a particularly Eurocentric vision that ignores the tremendous contradictions that exist at the global scale. It represents a particular version of the consensus politics of the postwar period (Meszaros 1989, 24). In these circumstances it would

seem to undervalue both the diversity emanating from new social movement culture and the critical unresolved conflicts that have resurfaced due to fundamental global economic restructuring.

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is the methodological problem of considering the interpretation of discourse only through the study of texts or verbal communication. Feminist theorists have pointed to the need to neither privilege the material aspects of women's oppression nor the symbolic, as some cultural theorists have done (Frazer & Lacy 1993). There is a need to incorporate practice and in this sense it cannot only be the practice of elaborating documents but also the concrete interventions in the urban environment. David Wilson (1995) has made this point in relation to the limitations of emphasizing language and narrative over "the powerful materialistic forces and processes that course through the daily fabric of places" (98). Such analysis, despite illustrating the influence of language can be "narrowly focussed and at the worst reductionist" (111). This is a point made much earlier in the criticism that Lojkine (1979) made of Castells (1978) for concentrating only on the documents of planning and not on the relationship between them and concrete interventions. Documents incorporate both explicit and implicit policy formulations, some are put into practice and some are not, and so the real purposes of the documents can only be interpreted a posteriori in relation to interventions and their impact. Thus, to concentrate on communicative acts only during policy formulation may give an equivocal assessment of the value of planner/public communication.

Social movements

The social movement literature is relevant to this discussion because it puts groups and

individuals center stage as agents capable of achieving an interpretation of reality that differs in some respects from the institutional discourse. It recognizes that the “‘reality’ espoused in the mainstream of society is but one reality: a privileged reality that excludes and represses many others.” Changing this vision of reality does not just “happen,” it is “reconstructed by people in struggle” (Lofland 1996, xiii). We could say that neither is it provided by institutional actors as a service. While such a strict dichotomous separation between mainstream and “marginal” or “excluded” reality is questionable³ it makes clear the importance of recognizing the divergence in world-views.⁴ Nonetheless, as Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (1995, 6) point out, movements cannot avoid the influence of dominant culture and are formed within it. Nonetheless, by breaking with dominant cultural codes they can modify aspects of the dominant culture or consolidate an alternative vision.

Part of the break is a result of a questioning of a political regimes and their authority. William Gamson (1988) points to the uphill struggle involved in overcoming deeply embedded and well-defended “official myths and metaphors” that maintain public quiescence (219). Meaning systems are established on the base of some larger world views, what Gamson calls *cultural themes*, such as that of technological progress. This could be linked in the urban context to the way *growth machine* or *developmental regimes* represent a particularly dominating frame for formulating urban policy (Teaford 1990). Such themes can have differing degrees of salience and Gamson suggests that we best think of them as a dialectic between theme and countertheme allowing that considerable questioning of dominant themes may have occurred or that even the countertheme may take over. Again in the urban context, neighborhood movements organized around preservation or conservation themes placed in opposition to development may in certain

circumstances and instances, come to dominate (Stoecker 1994, DeLeon 1992). Institutional actors, such as planners, may have considerable difficulty in freeing themselves from the pervasiveness of the dominant theme although perhaps when it is substantially challenged “cracks” may appear that allow more flexibility⁵.

In this respect, Alberto Melucci (1994) warns against understanding changes in the political system only through the mediation of institutional actors. In “systems of high information density” social conflicts occur not just in relation to access to material sources but increasingly around production and appropriation of resources that are based on information. Opposition is then expressed not through the political system but through challenging the cultural codes and language used in the organization of information. Through such challenges, individuals and groups able to “reappropriate, self-realize, and construct the meaning of what they are and what they do.” They can create oppositional systems of meaning that confront the dominant codes through which meanings are constructed: systems of meaning “that run counter to the sense that the apparatuses seek to impose on individual and collective events”(102). By this means social movement organizations develop unique frames of understanding that are derived from a collectively shared sense of grievance (Taylor and Whittier 1995).

The creation of an alternative sense of meaning implies that the discussion of policy decisions cannot be delimited by the parameters set by, for instance, planners as institutional actors. Not only means need to be considered but also ends and values. This theme has been amply discussed in the planning literature, but questions remain as to the capacity of planners to work with substantially different world views especially when these are antagonistic to the institutional framework in which planners are inserted. In such situations what leeway do

planners, or other institutional actors, have to promote development of an alternative discourse? That is assuming that they have the capacity to escape from their own class and cultural positions. The following section illuminates the difficulty of this enterprise without being fully able to give definitive answers to these questions.

The neighborhood movements framing processes

The objective of this section is to show how the neighborhood organizations construct a definition of their situation with reference to perceived problems, identifies their causes and consolidates a collective, challenging perspective. Snow and Benford (1988) call this framing, construction of which is essential to the mobilization of support and the motivation of supporters. Restated in their terms framing consists of three parts: “(1) a diagnosis of some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration; (2) a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done; and (3) a call to arms or rationale for engaging in ameliorating or corrective action” (199). These three aspects have been denominated, respectively, “punctuation,” “attribution” and “articulation” (Lofland 1996, 104 - from Wilson 1973; Taylor and Whittier 1995, 168). From this we can see that it is similar to a classic problem solving procedure in planning. In other words, groups can be thought of as realizing their own definition of problems and strategies that can lead to vastly different conceptions of the fundamental problems and their solutions. As Snow and Benford point out, defining problems and their causes can lead to very different interpretations of what needs to be done. For instance, if neighbors see the solution to problems in institutional actions, say for instance in zoning modifications, this would suggest that there be space for discussion with

planning staff. If on the other hand, they see problems as a result of more structural causes such as a deliberate attempt by political and economic interests to impose their vision of development in a particular area, neighbors are likely to have little faith in public officials.

In the case of the New Orleans' French Quarter, problems are "attributed" to official indifference that compromises preservation by giving preference to tourist development. Residents perceive that City Government does not control development. Cathy, a long time activist, puts it in terms that indicate the threat she feels as a resident of being "squeezed out" of the French Quarter:

I have real concern that we are getting squeezed out as a living neighborhood, there is no question, the non-enforcement of all of all the ordinances that we have on the books. If there was enforcement, we wouldn't have a problem. ... I'm talking about in the Quarter you having a non-enforcement of law, and you are having people completely selfish... if they want to make a buck on it they don't give a damn. I think you have got an understaffed regulatory agency which do not do what they are supposed to do.

Beryl, a property owner elaborates on this theme and considers that it is not just by chance that this happens, but because of official neglect:

the City avoids finding out, believe me, all they have to do is have a big raid the first weekend of Jazz Fest. They could close them down [referring to illegal bed and breakfast establishments]. The city doesn't have any intention of doing this I don't think, because they don't care.

In fact, the whole issue of tourism and the type of tourism that builds upon the reputation of the French Quarter, and especially of its landmark Bourbon Street, in terms of a place where anything goes, is seen as promoted by the city. Residents of the Quarter do tolerate diversity, as will be stressed below, but there are limits to this tolerance. Betty adds:

People are fornicating on the street, it is so outrageous, I mean I have had gay people after big weekends call me and apologize and say I hope you didn't notice it because it was so disgusting and the city does nothing because the city doesn't care . . . you can't fornicate on one's street but you can on Bourbon Street, right? ...people think of Bourbon Street, they think of it as this really devil's den and there is a nice part of Bourbon Street that is very beautiful residential.

In these circumstances they see official positions of local politicians and their officials with skepticism. Deep felt feelings that support preservation translate into very strong animosities around those aspects considered detrimental to the preservation of this historic community such as noise, tourists and their lack of respect for the residential character of the Quarter.

These comments show that there is a common feeling that local political interests propagate an image of the French Quarter that debases historic preservation and establishes clearly the potential opposition between development interests and those who, although conscious of the inevitability of change, see the preservation of the Quarter as the first priority.

Irene punctuates clearly the problems and attributes blame:

The City, the way that the City deals with the French Quarter. ... The French Quarter provides..., a large tax base for the City, the revenues out of the French Quarter for the City and the State are tremendous, and the idea that we don't have enough police protection, ... even though we have garbage pickups every day, we don't have enough sanitation. The French Quarter is filthy. Literally filthy and very unhealthy. Sometimes the food that gets left on the street, and the problems of the homeless on the street that are not taken care of. It affects everybody, it makes us all susceptible to various diseases that are usually found in the homeless population like tuberculosis, and I understand that this is a big problem everywhere. You would think with as many people and as much

money that's poured into this place at that time of year, they could at least have sanitary conditions for people to go to the bathroom, because what happens is that urinating on the street, on people's houses. ... So, the way in which the City takes care of the Quarter, I think is deplorable.

The clear identification of antagonistic commercial interests, defended by a political regime sympathetic to development goals, is seen as the underlying cause of multiple problems. Glen, who lives in one of the most congested sectors of the Quarter again repeats the sensation of being “squeezed out” by “disneyfication” and clearly points her finger at who she sees as responsible.⁶

Everybody is working against us. All the commercial interests, want to turn this into Disneyland... and we feel like as residents of the Upper Quarter especially, we feel like we are being squeezed out, that the Mayor wants to rezone this whole area as an entertainment district and that's a frightening fact.

This loss of “authenticity” is a constant preoccupation for the Quarter's denizens: Hector, despite his own commercial interests, puts it lucidly:

You know the Mardi Gras everyday syndrome and I still feel that if we continue to move in that direction we are going ... to become Disneyland, a caricature of ourselves. And then we are going to lose the real reason the tourists want to come to New Orleans, it's because it is real. So all of these issues affect that on a long term basis. Unfortunately, we have a city administration and we have people in the tourist industry who don't understand that. They only see that... I do think the present people in City Hall are allowing this to happen, in part either [out of] ignorance [or] ... out of greed. They are not enlightened as to what this really is and how we should measure this treasure that we have.

So the way in which neighbors frame the problems in a context of antagonistic relations with local politicians is likely to color any processes of discussion in which residents are

involved. This is further complicated by racial aspects in a city dominated by Black politicians.

In the words of Betty:

There are many problems, one of the problems is that we are in a majority Black city now and the Black community does not see the French Quarter as any part of theirs, although there are Blacks who live here, it is not viewed with any great pride except as a place to make money for the Black community.

Hector again:

I think the Black governmental leadership, I think they have less..they don't understand, I do think that ... they really don't understand what this is. Sometimes they look at it in terms of the slavery issue and they think a lot of this was built by slave labor, which is not really true. I think a lot of this was built by free men of color who were artisans, craftsmen. And, but even it was built by slaves should be immaterial. They should take a pride in knowing that their ancestors did build this and did have the talent and the skills to do it. I think that we really need to educate those people on that level. I do think that the recent administration's, I really can't say whether it is a racial thing, I think they are trying to bleed the Quarter, they are not looking at the long term.

Through this analysis of the way residents frame their problems it becomes clear that communication with City government will be made difficult because of the way problems are seen in terms of the way underlying economic, political and cultural conflicts are defined. This does not make communication impossible but leaves public officials little room for maneuver, even assuming that they had the desire to take a more sympathetic approach to preservation in a political situation where the development theme dominates.

Collective identity and the pride in diversity

Collective identity is associated more closely with new social movements where organizing around identity predominates over class-based struggle (Taylor and Whittier 1995, 172). Such movements are linked to broader processes arising from political and economic changes. These, on the one hand, are very invasive of the private sphere (Melucci 1994, 101) but, on the other, present individuals with the opportunity to escape from this domination by developing distinctive life styles. Actions in everyday life come to represent a central concern because despite the seeming dominance of commodification processes, some form of mastery over life circumstances will always exist, even for those that are most oppressed - “the ethos of self-growth signals major transitions in late modernity” (Giddens 1991, 209).⁷

Through the formation of collective identity, groups can develop a shared system of meaning that give them a particular vision of the world that points them toward the definition of those aspects they consider problematic. It allows what could be seen as more deductive approach that, in the case of the French Quarter, derives from the theme/countertheme of preservation rather than from reactions to individual problems such as noise or crime.⁸ It also allows “the *politicization of daily life* through the use of symbols and everyday actions to resist and restructure existing systems of domination” (Taylor and Wittier 1995, 173).

So here planners should understand that each group develops a particular identity that needs to be recognized in all discussion. Again we return to the danger of adopting universalistic values in a situation where diversity is increasing. Many instruments of planning, such as the application of zoning ordinances, are based upon such universalistic thinking. There is a need to distinguish between weakly bounded spaces in which social mixing and difference are tolerated (Sibley 1995, 81) and those with strong boundaries where diversity is seen as a

threat. The former areas are more usually inner city areas, the latter suburban areas. The Quarter would seem to be an area where there is a tolerance toward difference. Initial impressions indicate that the white middle class individuals who dominate the neighborhood organizations do demonstrate an unusual level of tolerance when confronted with situations such as drug distribution and challenges to the moral order, not normally experienced by suburban residents (although some care should be taken with such dichotomies and as we have seen there are boundaries to what -and who - is tolerated).

Preservation, as Cathy puts it “is not only the bricks and the mortar but it’s the issue of diversity.” The continuity of a diverse neighborhood is seen as integral to this aim, and in fact residents take great pride in their tolerance and find diversity to be an advantage for them. Beryl expresses it this way:

It’s very much a mixed community and always has been a very diverse community, because originally it was the whole town, everybody lived here, rich, poor, blacks, whites, everybody lived in the French Quarter. And I think it has retained this quality of diversity, there are vastly different people in the French Quarter, you really can’t stereotype what sort of person drawn to the French Quarter because you have really conventional Junior League types, you have very far out drag queens and you have everything in-between. You have the richest, the poorest, the whitest, the blackest, ..everything, but one common thread that I believe that you have is the people, that live here, value diversity and don’t feel threatened by it, and I do think also that people who live here feel a sense of community, of place. They love this place, maybe for different reasons.

Such sentiments show that it is a milieu that allows some minority cultures to flourish, for example the gay community. Returning to the always succinct words of Cathy, for the

people of the French Quarter the presence of a high profile gay population; “was never an issue.” In fact the gay community has strongly influenced the preservation of the area. When Francis was asked about the neighborhood’s relationship with the gay community, she answered:

I think that it is certainly very tolerant. I think to the extent that the stereotype is correct that gay men tend to have the ability to make something beautiful that was rather so so. ... I think they tend to take excellent care of the things that they own. And certainly Clay Shaw, singlehanded, saved numerous buildings in the French Quarter, through his effort and that effort should be more greatly recognized for what he did. ... There are a few people, I am sure who don’t like gays but it is not something that comes out very frequently. It is certainly that something that you have to be able to adjust to if you are going to live in the French Quarter.

Such is the integration of gays that according to Andrew “they are so integrated into the community that ... there isn’t a need for a separate organization to represent them.”⁹

On a more instrumental level, there is also a desire to maintain mixed uses, in a controlled manner. Elizabeth once again:

But I am so glad that the Market is there and open 24 hours a day because that activity in the neighborhood keeps it safer. I have a friend who lives around here on Burgundy Street and she’s the daughter of a man who was governor of Mississippi, and her parents were down here visiting her and she told them that you can go back to Jackson, Mississippi and you saw my house and I live across the street from a 24 hour deli and two doors from the bar. And everybody in Jackson will be absolutely aghast. But they like Cosimos being on that corner. And we like the Verte Mart being there.

The politicization of daily life is illustrated by the proactive role of residents. Living in a

neighborhood where other residents “look out for each other,” for some implies a responsibility to be active to confront what they see as the constant threat of commercialism. No surprisingly such organization is seen in terms of struggle. As Elizabeth emphatically states:

It’s just a lifestyle you realize that you have got to protect this area, and we have had friends down here who have left because of crime or whatever, and my feeling is that I’m not going to let the criminals or the grungies or any of those people run me out of my neighborhood. I’m going to protect it and run them out.

In conclusion, residents defend a particular lifestyle through living that lifestyle. In its defense, diversity is valued, and a collective identity emerges. Such an identity points to the importance of certain strategies of preservation such as the need to maintain a diverse neighborhood base as well as protecting the general quality of life. Neighbors appear united behind these themes that influence their stands on issues that defend neighborhood quality against what they see as official indifference to the incursion of commercial uses and the consequent diminution of residential property accommodating of a diverse population.

Political versus technical decision making

In much of the communicative planning literature there is the assumption that the planning officials have some influence over events, and that the issues in which they are involved have some impact on reality. The effectiveness of planning documents is always in question and thus the impact of communicative processes in their preparation is always in doubt. In fact it could be a source of an even greater mystification or distortion of the real possibility of having some power of decision of urban intervention.

In the case of New Orleans, plans play a small role in the planning process. Currently

there is discussion of a strategic land use plan for the city but this consists mainly of an attempt to reformulate the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance. In fact there has been no previous public discussion of a strategic land use plan. The formulation of the new zoning plan has been subject to participation. However, in the public meeting to which the neighbors of the French Quarter were invited to discuss this plan it turned out that the project was being presented by a consultant contracted by the city council. A member of the planning staff who attended the meeting, without intervening, stayed only a short time. No political representative was present. In other words, on this occasion there was zero communication between local planning staff and local residents and one of the functions of such processes, which is supposed to aid communicative processes, has little effect because the consultant was not even local. And the more important issues regarding the future of the city are left undiscussed. In summary there is little forward planning carried out where there would be an opportunity for neighbors to communicate with planning officials their conception of the future of their area and the city.

When later this proposed plan was subject to further neighborhood organization scrutiny, the plan's stated "sustained and substantive public involvement" (City Planning Commission of New Orleans 1997, ii) was severely questioned. At a public meeting, called by neighborhood movements to discuss the plan (July 17, 1997) the effectiveness of the "public involvement" was challenged As one presenter put it:

As for public participation, there were 26 meetings but there was not direct input asked for instance to Department of Safety and Permits, Vieux Carré Commission¹⁰, or the Conservation Resource Center. Nor was there direct contact with neighborhood organizations. I revised the documents and only one was directly asked. I got notification only two days before. Not even planning staff included in the drafting of the

document. Most of them received the draft report when we got it. The document has been created in a void.

Such comments indicate the lack of communication not only between City officials and neighbors but that even the relevant departments within the City administration are not involved. In such circumstances communicative practice is seriously curtailed.

So most communication between planning officials and neighbors occurs when specific land use decisions are under consideration. In these situations neighbors complain that in many decisions are not taken on a technical basis but on a political basis. Thus, again the role of the planning staff is further reduced. This has two aspects. In the first instance, in the review process of planning applications some technical decisions are not respected. On the other hand political representatives express opinions without the input of technical expertise. For

Elizabeth:

That's another problem that I really had with the Vieux Carré Commission and some of these other commissions in the city ... the committee members are political appointees and they have very good staff, for instance the planning commission staff is top notch, Vieux Carré Commission staff is top notch, but the commissions themselves ignore what the staff recommends. They do whatever is politically convenient.

That is so often the problem, they are truly not interested, they're just political appointees, political pawns, if something important comes up the mayor can call and say "vote such and such" and that's the only time they go because they don't even go a lot of the times.

In addition, the authority of the Vieux Carré Commission can be questioned. At the present moment there is controversy over the construction of a fence at the Cabildo on Jackson Square. This building, which is considered one of the most important historic buildings in the

city (and the country), houses a museum administered by state authorities. They are refusing to acknowledge the authority of the Vieux Carré Commission, who oppose the construction of the fence, and the right of the city to control all construction in its jurisdiction. At a board meeting of the Vieux Carré Property Owners, Residents and Associates, who similarly oppose the fence, they asked a museum representative if the directors of the museum had ever discussed the possibility of public input in their decisions. His reply was that the board members think they have the right to decide without taking into account public opinion. In this case the state official justifies the modifications to the buildings because the “law charges me with protecting the building.” This case is used as an example of how far removed decision making can get from some form of communicative action.

Conclusions

This paper has the intention of adding to the communicative planning theory discussion by pointing to the importance of the protagonists discourse in situations where significantly different visions of desirable urban policy exist. The use of the new social movements literature has introduced a way of examining more explicitly the differing codes of meaning developed by neighborhood groups. Such an examination is thought to be needed so that the implications of these different visions can be appreciated by planners willing to confront the “deep structures of power” that if unchallenged “unwittingly reenforce power relations.” One of the most difficult obstacles may be that the planner’s increased consciousness of the incommensurability of these visions will complicate the achievement of compromise and consensus in the policy making process. The improbability of consensus makes ever more questionable the view of the

institutional planner as a referee who can accommodate all value systems even though she or he is a representative of institutional values.

In the case of New Orleans' French Quarter, these opposing visions can be seen clearly: the development theme promoted by local political and economic interests stands counterposed to the preservationist countertheme supported by the neighbors. The preservationist vision implies a questioning of development interests and gives the neighborhood movement an oppositional character. Such circumstances limit the potential of collaborative relations between public officials and neighborhood activists. Simultaneously, the residents could be thought of as creating a distinctive collective identity. There is a desire to maintain a specific milieu in which diversity is tolerated. This allows some minorities to find a safe space for the construction of their identities and presents an alternative vision of desirable urban living. Conventional planning doctrines that favor overall homogeneity are not appropriate.

There is no doubt that local planners may be sympathetic to the preservationist discourse and the protection of diversity. However, care must be taken with good intentions and the impression that there are limitless possibilities for progressive planners. In many situations, and here I am suggesting that New Orleans is one of them, there is little room of maneuver for local planners due to the political nature of decision making and the little opportunity that exists for a useful discussion of future policy through plan making.

Perhaps this leads us to a certain healthy skepticism of generalizations about the transformatory power of communicative action, bearing in mind that planning too has been seen as political pacification (Friedmann 1987, 388). In determined situations, institutional actors cannot be relied upon to initiate and defend a communicative process that supports an

alternative or oppositional vision of what is desirable. Neighborhood groups and individuals need to be seen as protagonists capable of generating different ways of knowing not easily accessible to institutional actors. Such circumstances suggest that an advocacy role for planners, acting outside the institutional setting, continues to be an alternative.

Notes

1. Perhaps we should remember that this emphasis on what planners do is not new. A notable precedent would be Lindblom with his early assault on comprehensive rationality. It could be salutary to remember that they were criticized for converting ‘what is’ (the descriptive) to ‘what should be’ (the normative).
2. “In the fourth meeting one of the Hawaiians began to ‘talk story’ about his connections to Pele [a sacred figure in Hawaiian cosmology]... He described the sacredness of some places to Hawaiians and the importance of Pele in particular. Finally, with tears streaming down his cheeks, he announced that he could no longer participate in discussions in which a ‘violation of Pele’ was just another project the impacts of which could be mitigated” (Lowrey, Adler and Milner 1997, 186)
3. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandersmans (1995) put it like this: “To speak of a dominant culture fails to recognize that the codes, values and norms of behavior that from a distance appear to be widely shared are far from consensual and hegemonic when they are viewed from closer up” (4)
4. As such, questions of distortions or misinformation become more complex when there are multiple interpretations of reality. Labeling something a distortion assumes a normative position and implies that the person who does so assumes a position in favor or against a particular interpretation of reality.
5. “The lesson for challengers is to keep this cultural ambivalence or tension in mind. While authorities may invoke or exploit particular cultural themes in any struggle, one cannot invoke the theme without making the countertheme relevant as well, and therein may lie the opportunity” (Gamson 1988, 221).
6. Although this is an essentialist account that emphasizes the difference between the actors, the neighborhood group, at the center of this process, does not favor adversary strategies and prefers to maintain non-antagonistic relations with politicians and technical staff.
7. This appears as a different approach to those who see people as dominated by patterns of consumption as some of the contributors to the gentrification debate appear to do.
8. In fact these different approaches are a potential cause of conflict between groups in the neighborhood movement who are more concerned with the resolution of more immediate problems and those that concentrate on longer term preservation interests - even though it is clear that the two are inextricably linked.
9. This interpretation is supported by a similar conclusion made in a study of the adjacent Faubourg Marigny area by Lawrence Knopp (1989)
10. The first Vieux Carré Commission (VCC) was established in 1925 to oversee development in its jurisdiction. A new VCC was established in 1937 with enabling legislation that allowed it to

control modification to the exteriors of existing buildings and new construction.

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