

1-1-1999

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John Foley
University of New Orleans

Mickey Lauria
University of New Orleans

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http://scholarworks.uno.edu/cupa_wp/12

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PLANS, PLANNING AND TRAGIC CHOICES

John Foley
Universidad Central de Venezuela
Facultad de Arquitectura
Caracas, Venezuela

and

Mickey Lauria
College of Urban and Public Affairs
University of New Orleans
New Orleans, Louisiana 70148

PLANS, PLANNING AND TRAGIC CHOICES

Qualitative research utilizing conversations with neighbors in New Orleans' French Quarter (Vieux Carre), as well as documentary sources, demonstrate the limitations of communicative approaches to planning when conflict between visions exist. Antagonism between groups, some favoring preservation, and others development (visions not necessarily oppositional), creates animosities that are difficult to resolve through communicative processes. This results from the ongoing difficulty of dealing with the "tragic" choices (Healey 1993, 1997a) created where substantial differences in systems of meaning collide.

Additionally, the role of substantive normative visions appears unclear in communicative approaches. In New Orleans, public pressure has persuaded the City administration to elaborate a Master Plan suggesting the population's need to define what is desired for the city and its neighborhoods. The Plan is still portrayed as a way of confronting and resolving differences. Such faith in plans seems contradictory when residents frequently express distrust of the City Administration. For them any official policy document would be seen with scepticism. Residents, like planners, have realized that what is proposed in plans is never more than partially realized. Planning became an even more doubtful enterprise when the City is criticized for being unable, or unwilling, to uphold the principal instrument of planning, the zoning ordinance. Yet residents do not want to be left out of the process just in case it does have some effect. A role for plans, therefore, continues to exist, be it as an image of something to defend or as something against which to struggle. There is demand for a substantive vision around which to communicate, despite the conflicting visions that exist. What this paper proposes is that to call

this consensus is to hide

from view the continuing antagonisms between visions and the tragic choices made in any temporary agreements expressed in policy documents.

What is important, also, is the role of neighborhood movement organizations in the construction of visions of a desirable urban environment at the margin of the formal planning processes. The neighborhood organizations and individuals struggle continually over policy in the French Quarter, and in the city's political process generally (the day to day decisions that really determine the future of urban areas not usually connected formally to any "planning" process) as well as being involved with the more conventional plan-making process. All this confirms the need to examine the concrete manifestations of power, how these are expressed through social movement organizations, and how this is related to a broad conceptualization of the planning process.

Location in the Debate: Between Pragmatism and Critical Theory

Innes (1995) is frequently cited as proposing that communicative and interpretive approaches to planning can be seen as forming an increasingly dominant paradigm. The existence of such a paradigm has been questioned because of the persistence of other approaches¹ (Throgmorton 1999, 269). Similarly, the discussion within the communicative approach generates controversy (see *Planning Theory* 1977, 17). On one side there are the "pragmatists" (as represented by Hoch 1997) and on the other side are those tied more directly to critical theory (see Lauria and Whelan 1995, Feldman 1995, 1977).² Of course, such a dichotomous division is artificial but presents a

more compelling spectacle to a public weaned on controversy. For the

pragmatists, in any case, fundamental differences are not sustainable as incommensurability between communities is rejected (Hoch 1997, 22).

Assigning players to the opposing teams is, then, only for the intrepid. In fact many points of possible agreement emerge. First, the substantive elements of planning need to be considered (what sort of city/society is desired and how to get there). There is a consciousness that a “world out there” actually exists and this is not just a discussion between the members of a select club (Healey 1997a, 11). Generated from such a concern are calls for placing issues in their social context through grounded case studies (Throgmorton 1999, 270). The way power is distributed becomes a particular concern and Healey (1997b, 67) suggests that the micro-politics of power deserve particular attention. Few would deny the need for some regard to contextual elements, or structures, and the need to extend the usual US focus on philosophical and economic dimensions to include sociological and geographical elements (66).

Dealing with Diversity in Communicative Approaches

This paper is developed within this context and fits into the mold of a grounded study where the micro-politics of power relations are examined, particularly in relation to whose values are being recognized. While not denying the possibility of dialogue, we observe that because groups frame values in substantially different ways, struggles develop around values and antagonisms ensue which make consensus extremely difficult. Upholding such values is associated with the defense of the different types of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic - Bourdieu 1993)

accumulated by social groups. Overcoming significant conflicts of values and interests remains an unresolved problem in communicative planning approaches. Difficulties persist in accommodating diversity. Such diversity is not just something to be tolerated, or eliminated through the imposition of one homogeneous vision of desirable urban living. Nor is to be considered just a nuisance, something that no longer allows a much sought after “consensus.” Rather there is an “intrinsic advantage to the production of cultural variation as a source of possibility” (Calhoun 1995, 75). Precisely, it is such diversity that facilitates the development of the varied lifestyles which are part of late modernity and can be thought of as elements in the life style aspects of the new social movements (Johnston, Larana and Gutfield 1994) for individual or collective “life politics” (Giddens 1991).

Those who subscribe to a critical stance point to the difficulties of obtaining easy consensus where radical conflict occurs, for instance when social movements seek a reformulation of the terms of the debate, such as the women’s or African-American movements. We have been taught that our good intentions are not enough. If we do not continually challenge the racist, sexist and homophobic values that underpin our discourse we can be dangerously perpetuating repression of difference (Young and Christos-Rogers 1995). 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). No doubt 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.

The difficulty of reconciling radically different world-views in decision making has been pointed to by other authors within the planning literature. Lowry, Adler and Milner (1997) invoke dramatically the incompatibility of different visions of reality in the discussion about the use of land (considered sacred) for geothermal drilling in Hawaii.³ Caroline Tauxe (1995, 472) 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.” Daphne Spain (1993, 168) 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.” Xavier de Sousa-Briggs (1998) points to the problems of cross-cultural confusion and power relations in the planning process that can lead to distrust and resentment. He calls for renewed sensitivity to the culture and power relations embedded in communicative “events.” All these authors recognize that planners tend to defend institutional and (their personal) class world-views that make it difficult for them to recognize the validity of other visions.

Healey, in a later work, does not neglect the existence of different visions of reality (1996a, 285), and goes on to recognize “communities of discourse” and that consensus is not always an outcome in the plan making process. Some conflicts are not resolved, and plans should reveal the “tragic” choices made. Stable consensus are not achievable. Only possible is “a temporary accommodation of different, and differently adapting, perceptions” (Healey 1996, 244). Such an appreciation becomes even more explicit as she recognizes the potential difficulty

of addressing differences in systems of meaning (Healey 1997a, 57). In such situations dissenting opinions may be excluded for having world views that are unintelligible to 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 that 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. Nevertheless, 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). Hillier (1998, 15), in like manner, refers to the precariousness of commonality when difference may imply intractable disagreements over basic issues. Despite difference she also feels that there are possibilities for “contested by negotiable practical understanding” (16).

It is interesting that Lermert (1994, 100-4) puts Calhoun himself, as well as Giddens into a category that he calls a “strong-we-group” that speaks as if there is a universal human nature, even if avoiding a “we” exclusive to a White, heterosexual, European male. (Dare we say that the “pragmatists” tend to fall into this group because of their belief in a central core of certainty -

remember it “rejects incommensurable differences between communities.”) They use the universalizable “Self” and make assumptions about an ideal that are difficult to reconcile with actual life. There is still a sense of “humanity” as an identifying group. They are different from the “weak-we-group” who speak from their own experience but do not make this experience generalizable to all. As a group they tend to be somehow excluded, “dark in several senses of the word - including racial” (102). For them Self is not safely and certainly defined as it for the strong-we-group.

Despite all these doubts Judith Innes and David E. Booker (1999, 11) still believe in the “long-term effort to develop a shared understanding,” where the possibility of agreement on strategies, plans and actions in a process of “consensus building.” And in the section dedicated to plan making in New Orleans it will be shown as a concept which is still alive and kicking in the planning (and wider) community.

Conflict Between Development and Preservation Visions

New Orleans’ French Quarter attracts growing numbers of tourists each year. No accurate estimates exist but figures of between 10 and 20 million tourists are bandied about. Such a large influx of tourists puts great pressure on the residential activities from the point of view both of their conversion to more remunerative uses (residential to commercial uses or long-term residential to short-term, temporary accommodations) and for reducing the quality of life (through noise, traffic, tourist behavior found offensive to residents). At the same time, in a city with problems of poverty and unemployment, the development arguments are compelling and defended by economic and political interests. Development, in this sense, can be associated with

the common arguments managed by growth machines or developmental regimes (foment of jobs and tax base). New Orleans, in fact, has become dependent on tourism. One informant, Tim points to this fact: “if it wasn’t for tourism the city would be down the tubes, so they’re not going to totally bite the hand that feeds them.” Linking the development discourse with political interests, points the finger at those thought responsible for threatening the permanence of a diverse residential population and the integrity of the historical structures.

Residents feel that short term political interests, tied to development, take precedence over the long term preservation of the Quarter, which residents consider would lead to even greater generator of jobs (Reichl 1997). So preservation and development discourses are not intrinsically dichotomous, but in the conflicting visions of those involved they appear so. It is felt that the increased commercialization will reduce the long-term attraction of the Quarter as a tourist destination. Residents say they are threatened by the growing commercialism and clearly see the City as either supporting this or just being incapable of confronting it. Wendy, an assiduous defender of the Quarter, is “terrified” and “frightened,” and fears being “closed in” or “run out.” The City ignores “hotel expansion, businesses, bars coming in,” and instead of realizing it is against the law, looks upon it as an irreversible tendency and want to simple rezone everything commercial. Another activist, Victor speaks of a “free-for-all” which will “kill the heart of the Quarter” seeing it only as “something to exploit.” The City administration is seen as an antagonist. “Many of them think “if you don’t like it, get out.”” Andrew, another resident, puts it this way: “I think there are probably some people in the administration right now that would be delighted if the Quarter were totally commercial, you know if it were all places where tourists could go and kind of screw the residents, let them go and live somewhere else.”

The agenda of present Mayor Marc Morial and the City is viewed in terms of placating a Black population with short-term job generation. This sets up a racial tension between the needs of mainly White affluent residents and the Black population's need of decent jobs. Residents do not trust the politicians and presume they are planning large scale rezoning to facilitate the further commercialization of the Quarter. They perceive that as neighbors, they are not treated like others in the city because they are excluded from the decision making process. Such precedents set the scene for a profound skepticism that many residents feel in relation to the intentions of political interest regarding the Quarter. This seems almost paranoiac at times. Glen speaks of "everybody working against us," and returns to some repeated metaphors of being "squeezed out" by a rampant commercialism dedicated to turning it into a "Disneyland." Central to this project is the ever present figure of New Orleans Mayor Morial clearly identified as supporting tourist development interests and the "business circus." A Black resident sums up the situation in the following terms: "I think Morial feels that he doesn't need the Whites in the French Quarter, that he doesn't play up to them, and I think the Whites feel, OK, he doesn't feel like we are part of his constituency. He doesn't need us."

Here, any communicative processes are imbued with basic antagonisms due to differences in values and priorities. Any communication between City Hall and residents is likely to be tainted by a basic mistrust in the sincerity of any compromises made by the city administration. What is more the value of communicative processes in decision making have to be questioned when the City appears unable or unwilling to enforce regulations which severely limit such things as hotel expansion and the conversion of residential properties to commercial uses.

For Beryl, speaking of the conversion of residential to bed and breakfasts, “the city does not work very hard in enforcing the law⁴ . . . And the city hasn’t done anything, you know, or 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.” She does not see this as simple incapacity but as favoring development interests tied to tourism. Its indifference is seen as a bias in favor of economic development. In this sense, its development aims are aided by a legal and administrative system that appears to make any effective enforcement impossible.⁵ Only those people who still respect, or fear enforcement of the existing legislation, (or are not interested in converting their residential properties) are inhibited from establishing bed and breakfasts or other short-term rental accommodation.⁶ Those operators who do not have such scruples find ways of continuing and expanding the offer of overnight accommodation. Wendy tells how around her house there are an increasing number of hotels who use these units as supplementary accommodation. “We have watched hotels come in and we have seen them. The City does nothing about it.” Even a representative of the City administration admits that. “It is not under control yet. A lot of people are committing infractions.” Only “small scale” actions are being taken.

However, neighbors feel that non-enforcement cannot be seen simply as an administrative problem, though clearly this is an important element, but a problem of political will. They claim that the City is not enforcing the law because this is a policy that favors commercial interests. A professional in one City agency put this as politely as he could. “A cynic might believe that the City has no interest in enforcing it [the legislation] . . . and they would be just as happy if the whole of the French Quarter became hotels and rooming houses,

and alike. Someone slightly less cynic might say they care but they don't have adequate resources to enforce." Most of the residents are "cynics."

In these circumstances, even given the possibility of reaching some sort of discursive compromise, the City is seen as incapable of confronting the tendencies of commercialization which neighbors feel threatens the diverse character of the Quarter and the permanence of its residents. The "tragic choices" remain relevant. The constant play of short-term versus long-term interests is ever present. What is most important, job generation now or the long-term preservation of the residential diversity in a mixed use neighborhood. As pointed out, the choices are never really in such dichotomous terms but the basic antagonisms paint them so. What is more the claims of either side cannot be "proven." Is tourist development in the Quarter the only alternative for generating employment and does the type of employment being generated really offer more than just low-paid service employment often with unsocial working hours, lack of benefits and little opportunity for advancement? Can it really be claimed that historic preservation offers better long-term job prospects? Finally, is there anything intrinsically valuable about preservation? Whose values are being protected through preservation? Buildings and physical artifacts do have profound symbolism for people and are intimately associated with dominant discourses. The French Quarter and its denizens symbolize both exclusion and inclusion.

Plans and Substantive Visions

In the communicative conceptualization of planning as an ongoing dialogue where there are no previously established goals, it is recognized that values are not predetermined but established in

the discussion itself. Despite this, it appears that some sections of the community in New Orleans still call for comprehensive plans that would create a clear context for decision making affecting all major sites and issues. They desire the establishment of a relatively long term image of the city to avoid decision making based upon expediency which appears to dominate land-use decisions in New Orleans. A return to the blueprint of the master plan seems to indicate a desire for a more rigid formalization of this desired long term vision.

Again, in the plan making process, tragic choices emerge when conflicts occur between the shorter-term developmental goals of the political establishment and the desire of a section of the community for the long-term preservation of large sections of the city. But it seems that both the planning authorities in their appeals to consensus, and the public in their faith in the master plan, believe that these conflicts can be overcome. Given the discussion in the previous section, which showed the cynicism of residents regarding the motives of the city administration and their incapacity to control development, residents call for a master plan consensus appears perplexing. Such contradictions are, of course, part of the planning process. One possible explanation is that participation has included only certain sectors of the population such that conflicts are not fully expressed. Those sectors who most understand planning concepts seek to maintain their influence and protect their capital even while skeptical of the effectiveness of plans.

For City authorities plans continue to be theoretical documents that can be used selectively. Participation is encouraged but there is no security that those parts of the plan that respond to residents demands will ever be put into effect. As such, all discussion in the planning process could just be so much talk. This is very relevant for communicative processes aimed at

some sort of correspondence between proposals and actions. In some ways the 1999 New Orleans Land Use Plan recognized this when it states that the balance between residential and commercial activities (referring here to the French Quarter) will be achieved “only if these recommendations

are reliably carried out by officials whose elected or appointed offices give them the requisite authority” (New Orleans Planning Commission 1999, 49).

Land use planning in New Orleans 1997 to 1999

The incumbent authorities recognized in 1994 the inadequacy of the existing comprehensive zoning ordinance dating from the early 1970s. The first of a series of plans aimed at realizing this revision was published as a discussion draft dated May 23, 1997. It was titled “Strategic Land Use Plan” although it aimed principally at the revision of the city’s zoning ordinance.

According to the authors this Plan would obtain a “community consensus on how development and redevelopment should be allowed in the future” (City Planning Commission of New Orleans 1997, i). Additionally, they felt consensus existed on the need for the zoning revision on the part of “citizens” as this was “the only way to protect neighborhood life and encourage economic development” (usually conflicting goals with which to start). Zoning was claimed to be useful in maintaining “harmonious” and “pleasing” neighborhoods, secure jobs, and that community life will be undisturbed. All this and the growth of the city’s economy (ix).

The Strategic Land Use Plan was “based on sustained and substantive public involvement” (ii). Focus was on a strategic plan as a framework for the revision of the ordinance.

The strategy was formulated using an existing land use plan on a block basis, and a very generalized proposed land use plan (both presented without any quantification). No attempt was made to present other data regarding population, economic activities, transportation, etc.

However, the purpose of this plan included the desire to build a “comprehensive vision” to guide the zoning revision. It was stated that “the strategies established here are workable and have immense public support” (xi). In fact the strategies were taken from a previous policy statement from the Mayors office, *New Century New Orleans Master Policy Recommendations*. These were:- Vital and distinctive neighborhoods.

- Well managed physical and economic growth
- Efficient and responsive services.
- A healthy natural and built environment.
- Expanded arts, recreational, and cultural opportunities.

Despite stating that there was a need to create a more focused vision around what are clearly very general goals, this plan continued to concentrate on zoning issues as a prelude to revision of the ordinance. Only, a proposed land-use map, very generalized, and maintaining existing land use patterns, was presented as a comprehensive strategy for the zoning revision.⁷

In fact, representatives of the French Quarter neighborhood were only invited to one meeting to discuss the plan (27 February, 1987). The proposals were presented by a consultant, from out of town, and a representative of the Administration was there only part of the time.⁸ Although the meeting included other areas adjacent to the French Quarter only about 20 people attended. The main concern of the residents was the lack of enforcement of the existing ordinances.⁹ They expressed little confidence in the effectiveness of any plan meanwhile the

issue of enforcement was not attended to. At an earlier meeting of one of the neighborhood groups, Mrs. Mary Morrison a long time neighborhood activist summed up what she thought of plans and the participation process: “Forget the City Plan that’s just a series of generalizations and it came to nothing. Now we have a zoning plan. What is it we are supposed to do? They ask you to go there and comment, but comment on what?”

What was clear from the public meeting were the differences in values of black and white residents (the black representatives indicating more tolerance of noise and mixed uses, in fact a desire to create employment opportunities in their areas) and the difficulty of accommodating these cultural differences in generalized ordinances.¹⁰ The white residents, as already seen, are highly cynical about the intentions of the Morial administration. The general attitude is that the administration is corrupt and anything can be obtained by those with resources. Finally, the professional representatives remain convinced that an adequately written ordinance can resolve difficulties and some ideal wording can avoid all conflicts of interpretation. Belief persists in a purely administrative process from which politics and politicians can be removed.

When the plan was unveiled, it was immediately subjected to a concerted criticism by organized communities, and noted local planners. The center of the criticism was that the plan did not contain the elements necessary to make it a “Master Plan” suitable as a guide the future development of a major city like New Orleans. As such there was no base for revising the zoning ordinance. Preservationists were particularly concerned that the protection of the city’s many historic neighborhoods was not adequately addressed. The incompatibility and lack of consensus were clearly expressed, particularly around the conflicting goals of economic development and preservation of neighborhoods. Immediately, the Master plan was held up as a

prerequisite for changing the zoning.

A difference in planning philosophies emerged as the Planning Director criticized such plans as requiring too much preparation time, and as inflexible in the long term. Others in the planning field, represented by the College of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of New Orleans, felt that the zoning ordinance revision should be dependent upon a previously prepared master plan as established by the local legislative statutes and grounded in its specific history of city planning. While recognizing that the Strategic Land Use Plan forms part of this process these university planners thought that critical components such as a major street plan, drainage plan, recreation plan, etc. were missing (University of New Orleans 1998, 2-3). These same planners argued that although public participation was proudly claimed in the Strategic Land Use Plan, the technical aspects of goal development are required to find a “critical basis foundation on which city planners can build consensus” (4).

These issues were raised in a public meeting of neighborhood groups from throughout the city on July 17, 1997 and generated great public interest. It was felt that the plan was just concerned with zoning but did not address the future vision of the city to which such zoning reform should respond. Again the idea of a master plan was raised as an opportunity for the population’s participation in the establishment of a more comprehensive vision. The response of the City’s Planning Director, Kristina Ford was that the New Century New Orleans was a master plan and this plan designated zoning revision as a first priority. She commented that she felt the zoning code itself could fill the role of the Master plan. She summed up her approach:

We are not data driven. I am a professor who used to teach this stuff. The data driven approach is 20 years old. It is applicable to cities in growth. It represents a mechanistic approach to planning. We wanted a value driven policy document. There has been nothing hurried. Consensus is what we have achieved.

Such comments reinforced the impression of the planning director as “somewhat autocratic” and seeming to lack sensitivity to the public’s vision of planning and the city .¹¹

Doubts were raised about the public participation process itself, one activist stated that the neighborhood groups had not been informed with sufficient notice regarding the public meetings, nor had other departments within the City administration been formally consulted. It became clear that consensus did not exist and neighbors constantly expressed concern about the pressures of development on their neighborhoods and the City’s lack of effectiveness in controlling development. They also seemed to want a return to the stable documents of previous generations although it should be added that it is difficult to ascertain if this were a real desire of the public or was motivated by a group of planners with that particular vision of planning. The more strategic, fluid, ongoing, and less formal types of planning seemed not to give the security desired. Clearly certain contradictions persist as many persons express great cynicism for the whole process of plan making, but at the same time seem to want formal plans, and certainly want to have their say during their elaboration.

Responding to public criticism, some members of the Planning Commission reiterated the need for the completion of other elements associated with the traditional concept of a master plan. While maintaining the position that a Master plan was not necessary in an old, developed city where land use trends were well established, the Planning Director accepted that such a plan could be assembled while the zoning ordinance is revised. Planning officials responded to misgivings of neighborhood and preservation groups but continued with the study process involved in the revision of the ordinance. It seemed that, while accepting that the department should respond to public criticism, the priorities of the administration would not be changed.

Some critics maintained their demands for a Master plan. One William Borah stated “Why this compulsion to revise the zoning ordinance, without a master plan . . . it’s the cart before the horse. It does not make any sense” (quoted in Warner 1997).

As far as French Quarter residents’ reaction was concerned, the same conflict between goals of development and neighborhood preservation were shown to be present. Similarly, to residents in other parts of the city, they feel that the problem is one of enforcement, not of new ordinances. Some want far stricter controls than those simply of a normal zoning ordinance aimed at making living in the Quarter more agreeable and thus stemming the tide of residents leaving the Quarter. Controls on traffic, making street parking available only to residents, stricter controls on short term lettings, and other measures that contrast with the image of the Quarter as the “economic engine” of the city.

In November 1997, Mayor Morial aimed at cooling the controversy by calling for the creation of a committee to draft a city master plan. An advisory committee was proposed of 40 people including neighborhood representatives. Dr. Fritz Wagner, Dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs at the University of New Orleans who had previously publicly called for the master plan, and the Dean of the Tulane School of Architecture, Dr. Donald Gatzke were named technical advisors. Morial considered, however, that the zoning ordinance still requires certain urgent modifications that could proceed without the master plan. And the planning director still pushes forward the zoning plans. The master plan committee was, in six months, supposed to review all the documents related to a master plan and bring it together as a master plan document. Ford thinks that this material exists but not in an integrated plan—not a unified plan

(transport, housing, environment, policies driving city development). According to her, what needs to be done is to complete the master plan. It would then be subject to two year revisions.

Despite the continuing controversy over the master plan, the Planning Commission approved the Strategic Land Use Plan in December of 1997. The approval was disputed and gained over a narrow majority who thought that zoning revisions should depend upon a master plan. Those in opposition considered that the Planning Director was only paying lip-service to the idea of the master plan and had often spoken of the irrelevance of such plans for the planning process in New Orleans. A Times Picayune editorial called the Planning Commissions decision an “ambush” (December 19, 1997). Elaboration of the Zoning plan went ahead and in March of 1998 consultants were hired to do this zoning revision. Only in May 1998 was the master plan panel consolidated. Scepticism remained that the City Authority was not really compromised with the Master plan and that zoning changes would go ahead independently of it.

There was a call to neighborhood groups for nominations to this committee. The Vieux Carre Property Owners, Residents and Associates (VCPORA) suggested certain names but these were not accepted and the Mayor chose another person. The opinion of VCPORA expresses the previously expressed dualism of not having confidence in the planning process while not wanting to be marginalized from it. A member of VCPORA board commented: “We don’t believe this will resolve everything, we are just going along. It’s good to know what is going on.” Meanwhile another board member recognized that this master plan commission was a result of pressure from the neighborhoods and that the process was heading in a more constructive manner: “The ‘participation’ before was just complaining.”

It was on the zoning ordinance revision that neighborhood organizations were asked to

comment in July 1998. Ten workshops were held in which interested parties could express their ideas on what vision they wanted for the areas which concerned them. Participants from the city's neighborhoods overwhelmingly defended the continued residential quality of where they lived,

showing antagonism to mixed-uses and large-scale developments. Some more central areas did, however, indicate a greater tolerance to mixed uses.

This input was an important part of the first Draft Land-Use Plan elaborated for the further discussion and a new series of workshops. It responded to earlier criticisms that the previous plan had not been specific in relation to certain areas of vacant land or large sites where change was likely in the near future. Neighbors' concerns for the residential quality seemed to be incorporated and there was a general feeling that they were being listened to. At the same time, this plan was simply denominated as part of a master plan without it being clear how such a plan was to be incorporated and what hierarchy of plans should exist. The negative reaction to the first Strategic Land Use Plan appears to have made the planning authorities more sensitive to the need for neighborhood involvement but still it steams ahead with its original goal of reformulating the zoning ordinance.

In an announcement was made close after voters had rejected the Mayor's proposal for a \$48 million property service fee, City Planning officials stated that the master plan work assigned to the Advisory Committee only would require \$1 million to carry out the research necessary. This was a clear message as to the priorities given by the administration.

In February 1999, a Land Use Plan was published which paid attention to the input of

neighbors and other interested parties. It was claimed that this plan represented an intent to involve the public in an “interactive participation process” that differed from previous plan making processes. By this means people were said to have communicated with each other rather than be talked to by public officials. Because of this, the plan “was written from consensus”(New Orleans City Planning Commission 1999, 2). It includes a general overview of development in New Orleans and more detailed proposals for each of the thirteen planning areas into which the city is divided.

In the first presentation of the plan on February 2, 1999, the planning staff, and their consultants, showed great pride in the plan produced, particularly of the participation process where it was said that 1400 people had been involved. As a result it was claimed that “neighborhoods feel empowered,” the process was one of “documenting the community vision” and that the New Orleans planning process would be “a model for US planning.” The planning director called it a “wonderful moment,” the “presentation of a dream,” and “an outstanding effort.”

Despite their optimism, in the case of the French Quarter’s VCPORA, they still could not understand the relationship between the different types of plans and how the zoning reforms could go ahead in the absence both of an overall vision for the city based upon more detailed sectorial analyses. They continued to be convinced that nothing would change the planning director’s emphasis on the zoning revision and lip service was still being paid to the master plan. When referring to the definition of problems, the neighbors stated their appreciation of the opportunities of participation offered. However, they found that while expressing those problems raised by participants it was not a comprehensive account. It seemed that the participants input

was replacing the required interaction between professional analysis and public input. Instead of “dialogue” there was an incorporation of the problems as defined by a small group of residents. Other information was found incorrect. However, the planning director took immediate action to both correct these errors and to clarify her position regarding the controversial mixed-use categories in the Quarter.

Plans: Hopes of consensus?

Examining this short episode in the process of plan making indicates the contradictory nature of attitudes toward plans in New Orleans. On the one hand there is faith in both the planners, and some sectors of the public, that despite conflicting goals, consensus can be achieved. At the same time the tragic choices are not eliminated. Conflicts persist in whether to pursue short versus the long term planning aims, or whether development should have priority over the preservation of residential neighborhoods. During the process considerable antagonisms are created between groups. However, the preoccupation remains that long-term planning itself may represent a particular set of values and does not fully incorporate all groups.

To close

Much of planning theory is based upon a pluralistic notion that interests of participants in the democratic process have basic common interests and that, although differences exist, a good deal of compromise can be reached. The social movement literature paints another picture where basic differences in values lead groups to organize when they feel that their rights are not being defended within the representative democratic ideal. In fact, they may hold values that are not

within the mainstream discourse supported by the rule of a majority selected by electoral processes. For urban planning, whose decision making depends on somehow finding compromise positions, the existence of radically different value systems represents a significant challenge. This challenge has been recognized by the communicative approach to planning, as has the differential access that groups may have to the decision making process because of their political, social and economic capital. However, until recently, there has been an unwillingness to accept that radically different values may exist in the culture of abundance supposed to typify the major advanced-economy countries.

What seems clear is that contradictions cannot be eliminated. Presented here is the outline of basic antagonisms which are subject to struggle. In struggles over determined values, for instance those of preservation, there is a defense of various forms of accumulated capital. Such capital is not given up without fight and depends on upholding certain values. To pretend that there is a consensus, and that some tragic choices have not been made, is to hide these antagonisms and ignore the existence of “darker” currents of thought. Consensus is only obtained by marginalizing different world views. The idea of “an adequate mutual understanding for the pursuit of various practical tasks” seems a far more adequate description of the planning process.

Part of this adequate mutual understanding would be nuclei of discussion represented by plans. Clearly many residents of New Orleans feel the need for these types of substantive references. The Plan still clearly plays a big part in the mystique of planning and it still is held as a panacea for resolving disputes by both authorities and their opponents. However, the

question as to the generalizability of such a statement needs further discussion because perhaps the sectors of the population currently involved in the participation process are those with more belief in the need for the long term protection of the different types of capital they possess.

Communicative planning then has to be seen in the context of both a substantive context for future action and the relations of power of those involved in the planning process. It is clear that neighbors feel that their interests in preserving residential neighborhoods takes second place to the developmental goals of the city administration. Professionals associated with city planning are perceived as having little independence from their political employers. No doubt the communicative planning approach pays attention to these circumstances, that sympathetic individual planners exist, and that there are potentialities in the interstices of the public administration to bring about some kinds of change. The question is when there is a deep questioning of established values, can the planning system respond especially in a situation like that of New Orleans where political decisions are made frequently at the margin of professional planning guidance. In part it does if neighborhood groups organize in a way that makes it impossible to ignore them. However, the City administration still has the resources to pursue its agenda as it did when making the revision of the zoning ordinance a priority over master planning. We could say that although undoubtedly participation occurred, the dialogue so essential to communicative processes did not occur.

The role of individual and group organizations to propose and defend certain positions is essential as a mechanism of pressure on the normal administrative procedures. It is difficult for institutional planners representing oppositional sectors of the population to incorporate their demands effectively. They are more able to do this, however, if legitimized by pressures from

the neighborhoods to which the political establishment is forced to respond to maintain its own legitimacy. Planning comes to be seen as far more linked to processes of neighborhood or social movement organizing. Communicative planning theory requires establishment of linkages between theory and the concrete manifestations of power. In the French Quarter, the role of neighborhood organizations has been an essential factor in maintaining a preservation vision.

Postscript

In a recent Times Picayune article (October 2, 1999: B1-2) titled "All Quiet on the Planning Front," it was reported that the Louisiana chapter of the American Planning Association awarded the planning director, Kristina Ford with a Distinguished Leadership Award "for making planning an effective voice in the policy-making decisions in the city." All this despite the fact that relations with part of the Planning Commission that oversees the Planning Departments, work are so strained that Ford is taking a leave of absence and spending a month in Montana because "I need a little break from all this." The political whispers are that after seven years the planning director may be moving on.

Notes

1. Throgmorton makes these observations as a result of the discussions generated in the Third Oxford Congress on Planning Theory in August 1998.
2. Yiftachel (1999, 267) makes a similar distinction when referring to the aforementioned conference and the need to question the hegemonic tendencies which stem from the positing of a monolithic paradigm.
3. "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)
4. Further hotel or bed and breakfast rooms are not permitted in the Quarter as regulated in a 1991 ordinance that specifically prohibits time share buildings and/or transient vacation rentals, bed and breakfast facilities, guest houses (Neu 1992).
5. When this is aligned to the amount of complaints received by the Department of Safety and Permits, on a city wide basis, it becomes apparent that the situation is, or could easily get, out of control. Janet Howard of the Preservation Resource Center has stated publicly that the Department has around 5000 complaints and that the City law department can only deal with 20 cases at a time and the rest are taken to adjudication. Furthermore, no computerized system exists for keeping track of the infractions. Information can only be obtained on an address by address basis and no overall data shows the infractions on an area basis. Officials admit that cases can remain undetected within the system leaving open the danger of prescription.
6. The conversion of residential to retail establishments is more tightly controlled because it is more easily detectable. Overnight, or short-term accommodations are more difficult to identify and subsequently prove the infraction.
7. In a report prepared for the Downtown Development Corporation by the consultant David R. Godschalk (3 July, 1997) he states that of the sixty pages of text in the Strategic Land Use Plan only one-sixth of the text is dedicated to land use matters and proposals, the rest concerns zoning ordinance matters. The consultant concludes that, "the published draft Plan does not meet the criteria for an adequate land use plan. It is too general and superficial to support the achievement of a desired future land use pattern for New Orleans. It will require considerable further analysis, planning, and public discussion to be suitable for such a task. (8).
8. I found it strange that it was a consultant involved in the 'participation' process without explicit support of administrative and political representation. Such processes thus do not incorporate two essential actors in the process and if I were a citizen I would be highly concerned about using time for facilitating commercial contracts, instead of participation being

an ongoing process where politicians and administrators - on the job - involved in the issues - are constantly incorporated.

9. The local newspaper, the Times Picayune reported that the meeting throughout the city “did little more than draw complaints about weak zoning enforcement” (July 7, 1997)

10. How would this be done? If predominantly black areas were treated more tolerantly could this be discriminatory? That is channeling all these uses into black areas. This is what some say has occurred already with contaminating industrial uses, “environmental racism.”

11. See the Times Picayune extensive story about the Director published November 23, 1997 (A-1, 19 and 20. “Planner hottest issue in zoning”).

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