Keeping Counterpublics Alive in Planning

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Introduction: Justice and the Public Sector

The editors of this volume assert that a just city -- the “path between the universal and the particular” that Susan Fainstein discusses in the book’s opening chapter -- can only be developed by participants in practice (Fainstein, p. 1). More than any ideological stance or unifying theoretical rubric, the goal of justice in practice defines what I will call here the activist or progressive wing of the city planning profession. A sense of the latent possibility that state institutions, responsive to the disadvantaged and vulnerable in addition to the powerful and well-resourced, might achieve something that resembles a fair distribution of opportunities and pleasures within urban places1 draws idealistic young people into planning in the United States today as it did in the Progressive Era and in the turbulent 1960s and 70s. Some proportion of planning school graduates – perhaps not a majority, but some – will enter professional life with the aim of justice in mind.

Many academic planners define and explore justice in theory. But part of what makes the profession of planning appeal to students is the practical and place-based nature of its search for alternatives to the social given. Of chief relevance to planning (in its conventional as well as its more radical forms) is what is happening in places and to people in places; it engages the everyday public sphere. Why did the little hardware store down the street go out of business? How can we make it easier to commute by bicycle?

1 Other contributors to this volume concern themselves with an exact definition of the just city. This one, though surely assailable on many counts, stands as mine.
What will the quality of place in this neighborhood be like once the proposed
redevelopment is enacted – and who, exactly, will be enjoying the quality of the
redeveloped place? Questions of justice are latent in all of these formulations, but the
problems they raise are also quite practical. John Friedmann recognizes this relationship
between practical and theoretical definitions of justice when he characterizes planning as
an attempt “to link scientific and technical knowledge to actions in the public domain”
(1987, 38) and when he highlights “the problem of how to make technical knowledge in
planning effective in informing public actions” (36).  

Friedmann’s clear view is that attempts by planners to realize justice – or as he terms it,
to make “social rationality” prevail over “market rationality” – require the state. He notes
that when public action involves the contravention of market principles in the name of
social interests, conflict ensues in the state domain that is often resolved in favor of
market actors. But in the context of wider political mobilization, he argues, planners,
including planners in government, can act in and on the public domain in ways that fulfill
the goal of creating more just places. This notion also lies at the core of the “equity
planning” and “progressive city” literature, which highlights the accomplishments of
public sector leaders who strive, within constrained arenas of power, to allocate resources
and make decisions as though the interests and rights of poor and working-class people
mattered (see Clavel 1986, Krumholz and Forester 1990, Krumholz and Clavel 1994,

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2 If this problem is not solved, argues Friedmann, “planners will end up talking only to themselves and
eventually will become irrelevant” (1987, 36).
In the two decades since Friedmann published *Planning in the Public Domain*, the state’s limited range of motion on behalf of broadly defined social interests (redistribution of income, environmental protection, a right to housing) has only been further curtailed, particularly in the United States. Work in geography, sociology and political science documents and laments the rise and hegemony of neo-liberal ideology as a guide for public policy and state action. The achievements of equity planners and progressive mayors are overshadowed by the work of the global vectors of capital accumulation,³ as well as by more local institutions – development authorities, for example – with the power to bypass planners and subvert public process. Yet every year, cadres of students who see city planning as a route to lessening urban injustice and misery enroll in, and graduate from, masters degree programs. Some of them go to work for “movement” organizations whose raison d’être is to shape public policy from outside, but most find places either in government agencies or in non-profit groups that rely on the state for survival. A central question for progressive planning, therefore, is that of how the state sphere, lying as it does at the conflict-ridden heart of the planning field, might be shaped (from without and within) in the interests of justice.

The details of the Bronx Terminal Market case elucidated by Fainstein in her chapter for this volume suggest the enormity and complexity of this task. In the Bronx, city government actors, in the name of public-serving redevelopment, denied a group of wholesale merchants and their four hundred employees both their means of livelihood and recognition as legitimate stakeholders in land use determination. This and other

³ Krumholz’s home city of Cleveland, for example, has experienced devastating employment loss and increases in poverty and inequality since his *Making Equity Planning Work* was published in 1990.
examples lead Fainstein to concur with Friedmann that social mobilization has a critical role to play in justice-oriented planners’ ability to exercise influence on the state:

The movement toward a normative vision of the city requires the development of counter-institutions capable of reframing issues in broad terms and of mobilizing organizational and financial resources to fight for their aims. (p 26)

As Fainstein recognizes, issue-framing capabilities within the dominant public sphere are limited, as are resources for marginal groups. The Bronx Terminal Market merchants were unable to prevail in court or convince the City Planning Commission or City Council to take them seriously, both because they lacked influence and because they were unable to counter “the logic that the new mall represented necessary modernization” (p 7). Yet in invoking both the social movements of the 1960s and contemporary living wage movements (p. 25), Fainstein reveals faith in the possibility that urban social movements might still be capable of influencing public policy, implying a need for progressive planners to strategize both about mobilizing resources for such groups and about reframing urban issues in public discourse.

It is the question of issue-framing that engages me here. The remainder of this essay is dedicated to exploring how “marginal publics” or “counterpublics,” in the parlance of communications theory, do rhetorical work that advantages the interests of marginalized groups with respect to the dominant public sphere and the state. I argue that city planners have a part to play in the formation and support of counterpublic discourses which, in
dialogue with the state and from within the state, influence public and social policy relevant to cities and their inhabitants.

**Defining Counterpublics**

The use of the terms “public” and “counterpublic” varies among scholars. The concepts originally derived from Habermas’ account of how a “bourgeois public sphere” arose alongside modern constitutional government in 18th and 19th century Europe and North America as a milieu in which people debated the activities of the state (see Asen and Brouwer 2001, Squires 2002). Alternative conceptions of the public sphere were soon proposed by theorists who criticized Habermas for idealizing a construct that excluded women, most persons of color, and the working class (see, e.g., Fraser 1992). Gradually a notion of multiple and competing public spheres emerged. Central to this is the idea of a dominant public sphere that expresses the social and political hegemony of dominant class social interests, surrounded and interpenetrated by subordinate or “subaltern” public spheres in which marginal groups consolidate oppositional identities and circulate alternative interpretations (both positive and normative) of the world. A counterpublic sphere, as a space of conversation, performance and argument rather than concerted action, is not the cradle of a social movement. However, in many scholarly accounts, counterpublics provide crucial vocabularies and framing devices which social movement actors carry into the world in order to articulate their interests and needs before dominant publics and the state.

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4 Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere subsequently declined amidst the contradictions of industrialization and the modern welfare state.
A counterpublic discourse documented by communications scholar Devorah Heitner in her work on Black public affairs television is embodied in the show *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*, produced in New York City from 1968 to 1971 (Heitner 2007). The program, a news magazine about the historically African-American neighborhood (with a population of 400,000 that encompassed poor, working class and middle class households), was brought into being through a collaboration between the local television station WNEW and newly formed community development group, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC). Inside Bedford Stuyvesant was created in a political milieu that had been heavily influenced by Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s Report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* as well as the 1968 Kerner Commission report. Contemporary government discourse on urban African-Americans centered on their pathology and that of the “ghetto” communities in which they lived. Hosted by BSRC Associate Director James Lowry and television personality Roxie Roker, the show countered these recurrent public themes by documenting Bedford-Stuyvesant itself (the episodes were filmed in the community, often outdoors) and amplifying the voices of concerned, active African-Americans of diverse philosophies and priorities who lived in and cared about the neighborhood. The program served as a venue for commentary and debate on local and national politics and culture by figures as diverse as Harry Belafonte, 

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5 Perhaps significantly, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, which sponsored the show, was in part the outgrowth of a neighborhood planning effort undertaken in 1964 to evaluate a city-sponsored proposal for the Fulton Park Urban Renewal Area. The planning effort, whose sponsor, the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council, drew the attention of the Ford Foundation and Senator Robert Kennedy, culminated in the founding of BSRC – the first federally-funded community development corporation – in 1967. While the corporation’s The founding and history of the group have been documented by Johnson (2004) and by Ryan (2004). See also the Pratt Center for Community Development CDC Oral History Project (http://www.prattcenter.net/cdc-bsrc.php). Heitner notes, “The BSRC’s mission to rehabilitate housing and stimulate economic development in Bedford-Stuyvesant did not prevent [Inside Bedford Stuyvesant] from hosting guests who were critical of some of the effects and methods of redevelopment there” (86).
Sonny Carson, and Amiri Baraka as well as local “experts” whose recognition derived simply from the fact that they lived in the neighborhood and had a stake in its future.

Heitner argues that *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* portrayed the neighborhood’s residents “as citizens for whom political ideas for transforming the space and community are omnipresent and debated” (90), as against the image of apathetic ghetto dwellers projected in the dominant public sphere. In no sense was the program affiliated with a particular social movement or political stance; in fact, it painstakingly presented a variety of perspectives and consciously made itself palatable to a general audience through such strategies as choosing “ambassadorial” hosts with “middle-class linguistic styles and appearance” (61). However, people who contributed to and watched the program and identified with its agenda participated in social movements (for instance the Black Arts Movement, the welfare rights movement, and the community development movement) that helped to reframe mainstream both attitudes and policies affecting the city’s African-American communities. As they were nourished and inspired by alternative portrayals of their own community, activists in Bed-Stuy and their counterparts in other neighborhoods found that the show helped to increased receptivity in the broader public arena to their policy goals.⁶ During this time period, community development activists (including staff and board members of the Bed-Stuy Restoration Corporation) helped to shift New York City housing practice from one of condemning blocks and demolishing abandoned buildings in “slum” neighborhoods to one of supporting local non-profit organizations in

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⁶ While the effect of a television program would ordinarily be a matter of inference, in this case a rare collection of letters from viewers housed in the archives of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and reviewed by Heitner provides evidence of the program’s influence on a variety of viewers: members of the community, viewers of color from elsewhere, and whites.
rehabilitating housing and developing vacant property. Also during this time, activists a
successfully campaigned to redraw Brooklyn’s congressional district boundaries, a move
that resulted in the election of the nation’s first Black Congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm,
to represent the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood.

A Planning Counterpublic

Another counterpublic discourse, also drawn from the Brooklyn of that time period but
more directly connected to the city planning profession itself, can be found in STREET
Magazine. STREET, with a circulation of 5,000 throughout New York City but mainly in
Brooklyn, was published roughly quarterly by the Pratt Institute Center for Community and
Environmental Development from 1971 to 1975 and directed to an audience of both
professional planners and activists (see Wolf-Powers 2008).7 The publication was conceived
and created in a time when many planners were countering mainstream practice, drawing
on the alternative visions of society that were was animating the civil rights and
economic justice movements. Inspired by critical scholarship documenting urban
renewal’s impact on the poor (Gans 1959, Marris 1962) and by the revelatory literature
on inner-city poverty that had influenced the Kennedy Administration (see Lemann 1991,
Halpern 1995), they espoused a vision of planning that encompassed the entire society,

Many within this new wing of the profession, like the so-called “social progressives” who
had been prominent in the city planning movement in the early 20th century (see Peterson

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7 The staff of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development printed 5,000
copies of each issue of STREET. Two thousand went by mail to neighborhood-based planners and
community organization staff and leaders who had participated in the organization’s seminars, trainings
and conferences. Staff dropped off the remaining three thousand copies at the offices of local anti-poverty
agencies, community organizations and community facilities like public libraries.
2005), saw planners as a movement group whose members might seek to uproot poverty and challenge inequitable social arrangements even as they worked within existing legal and institutional contexts (Davidoff 1965, Rein 1969, Clavel 1986, Krumholz and Clavel 1994). For example, in the context of a burgeoning national environmental movement, STREET published reports and bulletins on national and state legislation and summaries of research findings on pollution, but differed from much contemporary environmental discourse in that it presented the environment as an urban concern and drew connections between race, class and neighborhood environmental quality (Figure 1). It also emphasized neighborhoods and households as sites for the expression of social values, reporting homegrown efforts to encourage recycling, alternative transportation, urban agriculture and the consumption of local food.

At the same time, during a period of severe disinvestment and distress in New York’s working-class and low-income communities, STREET offered upbeat and defiant counterpoint to official narratives of decline, chronicling both formal neighborhood-based planning efforts and informal citizen-initiated activity. Features depicting Brooklyn residents going to church, attending block parties, building sweat equity housing, maintaining small businesses and caring for their families and front yards link STREET to the more widely consumed Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant as a force of counter-representation (Figure 2). Features criticizing Federal Housing Administration policy and New York City’s allocation of Community Development Block Grant funds and applauding state representatives who had introduced anti-redlining legislation positioned STREET as a forum for serious discussion of public policy.
Because STREET was connected with a planning technical assistance organization, it fed and documented advocacy work more directly than *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*. For example, articles in Issues 9 and 14 of STREET reported on a lawsuit that a group of block associations had filed seeking a judgment against the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requiring that it study the potential harmful environmental impact of its “delivered vacant” policy. This was a policy requiring that federally insured buildings whose owners had defaulted on their mortgages be vacated of tenants and stripped of value in order for lenders to collect government-issued insurance. The “delivered vacant” policy, litigants argued, not only prompted the eviction of indigent tenants; the improper sealing of the vacant buildings encouraged vandalism and destabilized conditions for families who remained in the neighborhoods on his and other legal action ultimately succeeded in forcing HUD to change its protocols (see also Kramer 1974). The counterpublic stance of STREET, which had consistently questioned the policy logic and the morality of federal housing policy, in this case nourished local residents’ effort to confront HUD and galvanized the lawyers who filed motions on their behalf.

STREET both reflected the emergence of an “activist turn” in city planning and provided the planners in its audience with images of themselves and a picture of the world that helped solidify their identities as oppositional actors. Because STREET’s public included many key actors in New York City’s neighborhood environmental and housing movements, the magazine helped reframe neighborhood development questions in ways that arguably had an impact on public policies. For example, over the course of the 1970s,
mainstream city government institutions gradually embraced the role of community-based organizations in developing and managing low- and moderate income housing, making CDC and CBO involvement virtually an article of faith in the system of social housing production (Goetz 1996, Rosen and Dienstfrey 1999). The magazine thus made a small contribution to a counterpublic discursive arena in the field of urban redevelopment. But the magazine’s more effective “counterpublicity” related not to dominant understandings of urban development but to the dominant understanding of the goals of city planning. Along with others in the progressive wing of the profession during this time period, STREET’s creators countered contemporary understandings of what constituted an adequate professional response to disinvestment from central city neighborhoods, what planners could and should do with their professional skills, and who could legitimately plan.

Looking Ahead

We are no longer in that era. The legacies of the alternative conception of city planning promulgated by progressive forces in the era of Inside Bedford Stuyvesant and STREET can be found in the continuing engagement of some planners with environmental justice, place-based community development and progressive regionalism; but in comparison to what existed in the 1960s and 70s, activist planning looks anemic. Justice-motivated planners lack the infrastructure of federal funding for and endorsement of urban community development and anti-poverty initiatives that supported their project four

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8 Pratt staff ceased to publish STREET in 1975 but worked with three neighborhood housing movement group to launch the independent publication City Limits starting in 1976. City Limits chronicled and informed New York City’s neighborhood housing and community development movement for the next 30 years.
decades ago. In many cities (though certainly not all), the political-economic context of housing and planning has also changed; Bedford-Stuyvesant still struggles with poverty, but it is market-rate reinvestment and predatory lending rather than property abandonment and the urban renewal bulldozer that pose the greatest displacement threats to vulnerable residents. Finally, community-based planners, perhaps by necessity, now have a different relationship to the local state. In the early 1970s, when federal funding was more plentiful and both local government and finance capital appeared to have given up on central cities, activist planners thrived in a position of relative autonomy from local bureaucracies, forming renegade organizations that built and managed housing, created public spaces and mobilized neighborhood residents in local politics. Community development has now been assimilated more fully into the state’s purview, and the tools embraced by those individuals who created and consumed STREET magazine are more difficult to put into play (See Stoecker 2003, Stoecker 2004, Lander 2005, DeFilippis et al 2006, Marwell 2007).

The federal support that funded the emergence of counterpublic voices in Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant and STREET (and that often financed the activists they informed) is absent from the current urban political economy. Nevertheless, city planning’s traditional emphasis on the local, the concrete and the here-and-now can be a source of strength to activists attempting to assert the needs of disadvantaged groups in the context of the “market rationality” of conventional urban development. In contrast to the past, when

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9 The Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, which helped produce Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant, was funded by the U.S. Departments of Labor and Commerce. STREET Magazine was funded by a grant from the Office of Environmental Education in the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.
staff of the Pratt Center pasted together issues of STREET by hand and the producers of Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant shouldered huge cameras, the variety and accessibility of the media advantages the issue-reframing narratives of counterpublic discourse. One example in contemporary New York City is the profusion of websites and blogs -- such as Norman Oder’s Atlantic Yards Report -- on which people debate the impact of redevelopment projects on both quality of life and the distribution of wealth.10

Another strong suit of planning goes back to Friedmann’s conviction that in the actually existing political economy of our society, justice requires the state. Counterpublic strategies in planning are by definition opposed to the patterns of thought and habits of mind that characterize much urban development and policy. Because of our role in the creation and transmission of action-oriented knowledge (Friedmann 1987, Forrester 1988, Hoch 1994, Throgmorton 1996), and our proximity to the public domain, city planners are in a good position to “shake things up” both by offering expertise to social movement actors and by introducing alternative visions of the city into the dominant public discourse.

Planners, well-acquainted with the analysis of political power in local government settings, are also cognizant of what is possible and achievable in the context of existing societal relations. Social criticism that takes public sector institutions to task for their loyalty to “market rationality” inspires important questioning and protest. But the critique

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10 This should not be exaggerated; media access continues to be skewed toward the wealthy, as demonstrated by the large number of sites and blogs that focus almost exclusively on development’s aesthetic and congestion-related impact (as opposed to its effect on the poor). A notable exception to this trend is the website of the organization Good Jobs New York.
is not enough. One recent example of incisive but ultimately damaging critique is Walter Thabit’s compelling book *How East New York Became a Ghetto*, which tells of his experiences as a planner in eastern Brooklyn in the 1960s and 1970s. While Thabit bears painful witness to the calamity that befell the community and its residents during this time, he offers few clues to readers who want to understand how different actions, choices or institutional arrangements in the public sector might have led to different outcomes. The book simply excoriates government for its indifference and venality, providing ballast for the arguments of market fundamentalists for whom government failure is the only explanation for urban decline.

Progressive planners inside and outside of the public sector must consider how, in the messy reality that is a city, planners can nudge, prod or drag government institutions to create policy mechanisms by which resources and opportunity are more equitably shared. The “equity planning” literature of the late 1980s merits an update; perhaps its focus today would not be the previous accomplishments of enlightened leaders but prospective strategies to consider under current circumstances. Work on equitable development being undertaken by groups such as PolicyLink provides a way forward nationally; many cities and metropolitan areas also have “action research” agencies or “think and do tanks” concerned with promoting just planning and development in the political economies of particular places, Strategic Action for a Just Economy in Los Angeles and the Philadelphia Unemployment Project being just two examples.
Well before the counterpublic discourses discussed in this essay had taken hold in city planning, a cartoon by Saul Steinberg, picturing a man on a winged horse riding on the back of a slow-moving turtle, was reprinted by Professor George Raymond, the first Chairperson of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Pratt Institute, in Volume 1 Issue 4 of a publication called the Pratt Planning Papers (Pratt Planning Papers 1963). Raymond added the wry caption, “We continue our inquiry into the nature of the planning profession.” One interpretation of our jobs as planning educators is that we cement our students to the turtle’s back. I prefer to hope that we help them infuse the brain and legs of the pragmatic turtle with the horse’s intelligence, imagination and will to flight.

Works Cited


11 The Pratt Planning Papers were published by Pratt’s planning department from 1963-67 and had no direct connection to STREET Magazine.


Figure 1: Cover of STREET Magazine Issue IV
Figure 2: An article in Issue 7 of STREET featured these and other images from a block party held on Park Place between 5th and 5th?? Avenues