

Lecture 6: Planning as Social Reform by Expert Designers

Class Business:

- Make sure your group signs up for a time to debrief. Videos of briefings will be online next week.

Presentation by Professor Larry Vale
The Rise and Fall of Public Housing as an “Urban Utopia”

Planning Traditions

- **The DESIGN tradition, grounded in the design and engineering professions, focused on creating more beautiful and functional cities (or “human settlements”) and, increasingly, on creating more sustainable ones too.**
- The DECISION ANALYSIS tradition: using rational knowledge and judgment to make “optimal” decisions under constraints, subject to specific criteria.
- The SOCIAL REFORM tradition, focused on social equity (who gains and who loses), accountability, and now sustainability.
- The POWER tradition, focused on winning support for good ideas, getting things done, dealing with varied political interests, managing both conflict and consensus—from grassroots mobilization to “grasstops” dilemmas about governing effectively.

Social Reform tradition in planning as “focusing on the role of the state in social guidance

- I. Public Housing as an example of rational planning and modernist design thinking (“urban utopias”).

Guiding Questions:

- a. High Modernist hopes through architecture – how can the architectural environment shape behavior?
- b. What is the urban utopia and what does it look like?
- c. How can design cope with the growth of the industrial city?

Two planning responses:

1. Utopia by decentralization
 - a. Frank Lloyd Wright – Broad Acre (1930)
 - b. Ebenezer Howard - Letchworth Garden City (1904)
- Welwyn Garden City (1920)
2. Utopia by centralization
 - a. Le Corbusier – Contemporary City for 3 million (1922)
 - b. Ville Radieuse (1925)
 - c. Voisin Plan (1930)

- II. Public Housing Pre-history and History--the cultural challenges of planning action on low-income housing in the United States--links between housing standards and moral standards.

Social reform by rewarding homeownership and individual initiative

- Based on assumption that renters do not feel the neighborhood is theirs
- We viewed a number of images indicating the value/importance of homeownership
- In the United States, public housing was viewed as a tool to help the working poor, who were upwardly mobile, but demonstrated "initiative"
 - a. eg: homesteading versus alms houses/large institutions
 - b. John Winthrop's sketch – house, yard, 1 acre – idealized home set
 - c. Renters were morally inferior
 - d. Housing viewed as a "right"
- Homestead Act of 1862 – Small homesteads available to working poor – 5 years of working the land brought ownership
- Almshouses were also known as "houses of industry" where the poor were given the "equipment" to work. These homes were more like warehouses of the poor.
 - Public housing inherits both facets (homesteading and warehousing) of the social Reform Tradition
 - See the B.O. Flower image (found in Prof. Vale's presentation) of the 3 types of poor people illustrates the different moral judgments underlying social reform theory

Utopia by Decentralization:

1. Frank Lloyd Wright

- modernism meets individualism
- Plans Broad Acre City (1930):
 - Integrated areas, no "zones"
 - Invents first shopping center
 - Adapts the great western traditions
 - Cars/motor vehicles would bring liberation
 - "countryfication" of the city

2. Ebenezer Howard

- Garden Cities: Finding a way to decentralize in a planned settlement
- Social reform, a move away from industrial landscape of London.
- Utilizes the "3 magnets" (town, Country, Town-country) to direct population away from the city, to the "town-country."
- Garden city phenomena is veiled as a critique of capitalist London
- Creates a structural plan, based on size constraints, accessibility to transportation, and separations in land use
 - Eg: Letworth and Welwyn

Utopia by Centralization

By reconfiguring the core of cities, social reform can be found, by opening up more homes to the light and area.

Cities can concentrate development, and free up more space for open space to create a greener city.

Reform French society – Le Corbusier – Voisin Plan for Paris (1925)

--Walter Gropius – pool open space, streets are the problem, previous neighborhood grid is obsolete

- The visible hand of the designer is intent to change not just structures but how society functions.
- Premise that social reform will happen so that new housing paradigm will be stable

III. The Evolution of the Boston Housing Authority as an institution.

- Founded in 1935
- demonstrates power and limits of social reform and environmental determinism
- evolution of troubled institutions (who is “the Authority”?)
- bursts of construction, takes neighborhoods that are “blighted” and begins “slum clearance.”
 - Slum clearance viewed as not only physical, but a moral and social cleansing of society
 - Early public housing was described with a vocabulary of optimism, opportunity, and openness
- Original 22 of 25 projects were built in white communities, with low poverty rates, and were actually requested/desired by communities.
- However, waitlists become more diverse than the neighborhoods that housed the communities
- In 1960, racial integration created great social tensions between public housing and surrounding areas

IV. The rise and fall of public housing redevelopment in two Boston neighborhoods.

West Broadway:

- Nearly all white in the 1980s
- Slums became “too expensive” to maintain
- Housing projects were replaced with much more expensive housing and more specific tenant requirements.

Columbia Point:

- Mid-rise/hi-rise housing
- Originally located across the street from city dump

V. Excerpt from a film, “Down the Project”