

NEIGHBORHOOD FOUNDATIONS
MEMORANDUM #12

BIBLIOTECA
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WASHINGTON, D. C.

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SUBJECT: MAKING SENSE OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

I have an interest in the subject of urban development, but not as social planning and physical design; these subjects are academic because the urban planner has no power to effect his design nor political experience to inform its conception with practical judgement. Only reason is available to him as a principle of his work. Consequently, his plans are abstract schemes. This kind of occupation is neither the political avocation of a professional nor the professional vocation of a citizen. For urban development to be a real endeavor, it must mean more than its present academic usage indicates.*

Of what interest is urban physical planning? To the aesthetic temperament, there is too little beauty in the city landscape to inspire its further imagination. To the practical temperament, urban problems of density, congestion and transportation, etc., cannot be solved by abstract conception. Solutions must be performed by principles of political action. The planner's abstract solution cannot even inform practical action because they refer to the model city of his mind rather than the real city of his life. Nor does the real city have a humanistic base to ground the city of his mind; hence, his conceptions lack even idealistic appeal.

The urban planner in his profession builds piecemeal or grand designs only to be frustrated when his pieces are modified by cheap principles or when his whole canvas is acclaimed an utopia, then certified and shelved. His creative spirit is tapped by false commissions to draw a dream image, which only satisfies the city fathers who are content to praise their forward vision. They know full well who owns the landscape and for what financial gain. Creativity is debased because it is not commissioned by those who hold the real private power to

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**Current Urban Planning is held to be technical, but real technique rests on the power of purposeful action. Lacking this, urban planning is not technical but academic.

effect change. No do the real powers who can change the city have the inspiration of public commission to advance the city's life for the common good. The landscape moves by the undertows of finance, not by the public hand of art to fulfill the image of man. Today, even good intentions do not operate.

An indifference to the work of urban social planning and physical design can simply rest on one's wish to avoid being victimized by deceit. This does not mean that Marina Towers in Chicago will not be built, nor that the Savoy Plaza in New York City will remain standing. Such cases are accidents at our level of impotence and fierce decisions at the wondrous levels of financial power. How can our reason discern the appetities of great powers? Who can call the bests to order?

If urban development as a mere subject of social and physical planning seems a hopeless task, its real mission then futile? Let us shake up the term "urban development" in its narrow academic sense, which is removed from the active forces of the living city, and see that real urban development means the need to advance the people of the city for their common good. It is not futile when viewed as a movement of free citizens acting to shape the public space of the city. As this general impulse of political freedom and action, no one can deny the value of urban development or be indifferent to its direction. Within this greater latitude of meaning, a place can be found for each man to understand and act for his city. It opens urban development as the field of man's political freedom. Our thought can develop the meaning of the city and its development only as our action moves its reality. Real meaning must be grounded in our personal action. A real conception of urban development must be the gathering of a thousand moving conceptions.

The academic concept of urban development has denied this free impulse of political action in the city as the real meaning of urban development. Its professionalism has divorced its thought from this active impulse of freedom and rested it, instead, on speculative models of urban unity. The result has been an abstract knowledge of the city and to the extent that it has influence, a sterility of political action within it. Experts speak about and promote their urban models. When asked for strategies, they assert its key to progress and program its deductions: All parts of the city and all its problems aim toward solution at equal pace and in measured proportion. The city has become a specialty of metaphysics.

The real city is not a unit that must move to new wholeness. There is no one problem of the city. There are only the thousand problems and interests that men experience and think about, while living or trying to live in the city. Each problem confronts the one who has a living interest in it; and no one is obliged to face a problem which does not interest him. Meeting the problem of the city requires choosing its particular issues, and that choice reveals the man's interest, character, and spirit of freedom to change things. There are as many problems as there are men. No crisis in the city affects everyone at once in any actionable sense. Some can always escape to the twentieth floor, or to Westhampton in the summer. This is as true of pollution, which seems less obvious, than of housing. Our propaganda may propound the universal danger of pollution, but too many of us who can afford to mask its harm with aerosols, it is no crisis for which solution we would consent to bear a moment's pain. You may hate steel fumes; the steel mogul loves them at work -- and sleeps on the other side of town. There is no way to mobilize the city for a final solution of its problems. There is no key to urban progress. Total solutions require an Alexander and last only a day. All we can do, that makes any sense, is to forget the city as a total unit to be rationally ordered. We must pick the part of the city or a problem which effects our lives and desires. We must build our thoughts upon our feelings and seek the political power to act upon its issue.

This is not a cavalier attitude toward the crisis of the city, but suggests only that real problems must be faced by the real people they touch. Only man's desire, thought and spirit will solve the problem, if it is to be solved at all. If a man's problem involves the public space, then it is shared by others, and only their common effort toward political action and its force can move the issue and create a change. We can only move with others in these struggles or act alone. Professional urban development expertise is not an effective option for real change. It is only an academic observation. As for the outcome, who knows its shape? Problems are eternal, and cities are not. Some of the best have been known to go to pot. Jungle green cracks and covers ancient Mayan cities. Disaster is terrible, but not impossible. Reason cannot save it. Only the political actions of free men facing their problems in the city can keep the city alive.

Forgetting the total city is a load off our chests. It is better to think about and act toward the public things we deeply desire. However, this very motion drives us up against the wall, because we have no power to make public decisions and thereby shape the public space in which we move. This is a real problem. Strictly speaking, it is not a problem of the city, but of the men in it, who, without power, are trying to be free -- to decide what their eyes see, their minds think,

or their spirits seek. There is more agony in our powerlessness, in our illegitimacy to govern our public place of life in community than there is in the distant danger of unchecked pollution. This is the source of our endless real problems. As we move in the public space of our community, our bodies, minds and senses are bombarded by things we, as citizens, never authorized. We stumble before private forces that rule the public space. For years we have accepted this helplessness; today we demand new legitimacy to rule our community. The people must make the law of the public space. Public law can no longer be the province of private power.

We would love to decide the public matters that excite us and build our community with a touch of ourselves. This unfulfilled love of public decision is the sadness of the city. Without the power of decision resting in and acted out by the people in common assembly, there can be no public condition of our humanity. We are without political experience and its knowledge. We are lost and hungry in the woods. Without the power to decide the everyday shape of our community, we cannot even discern whether our felt problems are public or private. Without this power of direct decision, no forum exists to articulate public issues. All problems are mixed and helpless. The fact that one may reason that a given circumstance is a public problem, does not make the problem a matter of public thought or action. It only marks it as an opportunity for private gain. Urban renewal is profiteering!

How can the people of the city gain the power of public decision to shape community? This would make urban development a real public energy. But it means the people must gain the power to make law, rather than be content to choose an elector to whom they can submit. Who wants a better master? Instead, we seek a city democracy and our freedom in that democracy to define and decide the real problems of our life. The people must govern the public space of their community. We must have the direct power to make law in assembly for our community. Correspondingly, the community of our life must be a jurisdiction of our self-government. Once done, we would have a city of culture, not just the civilized responses of slaves!

The people are moving today to solve this problem of powerlessness, of illegitimacy. Old objections to direct sovereignty in the people are falling aside as we see the vital emergence of a new public space which can be self-governed. This is the neighborhood community. The nation and city are too large for direction decision and require representation, but the neighborhood is not. It can be a jurisdiction of self-government based on assembly of its citizens to make law. Their action in neighborhood assembly will shape a community that will reflect their image and be responsive to their lives.

Further, community self-government will develop in them a political judgment based on experience that can ground and guide their choice of wise national leadership.

The same impulse of liberty that once called for American independence and political freedom, now calls for the right of self-governing neighborhood community in the city. The town meeting of that day must now recur in today's neighborhood community. It is the space of new democracy and self-determination.

In every city, community action is demanding the legitimate power to effect neighborhood decision. The neighborhood community is the only unit of interest that can carry the force necessary to gain popular power. Correspondingly, it is the proper space in which that power can be freely exercised to reflect the image of free men, and from which political experience can build a public knowledge and responsibility. It must become the basic self-governing unit of our republic. As Jefferson said, "Divide the counties into wards. . .", we must today divide the cities into ward governments.

This is the real mission of urban development if it is to relate to the active forces of real people within the real city. If we shake out the academic constrictions of urban development, then a simple truth is released: since the city is where the people are, the city is the only place where we can pursue what Rousseau called the two objects of good government: liberty and equality. What more can urban development mean?