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NIP, Postmodern planning and NPI: Examining Citizen Participation.

1. Overview

The Neighborhood Planning Initiative (NPI) is a bold attempt to engage citizens in the policy decisions that affect their local community. Covering a plethora of policy arenas – from physical, cultural and health issues to economic and social goals – it is ambitious in scope. Filling the ‘democratic deficit’ and embracing ‘localism’ are only part of the motivations behind attempts to implement the NPI since the NPI, at its heart, is a means to better match citizen desires with publicly provided goods. Citizen engagement also comprises a central part of the Ottawa 20/20 plan, which is the base document meant to guide the city’s development.¹ Citizen engagement at the civic level, however, is not a new idea and while less intense in scale than the NPI, earnest attempts to engage citizens in the development of their communities were made in the 1970s. The Neighborhood Improvement Program (NIP) was a federal government-initiated program begun as an alternative to more centralized forms of urban renewal.

To better understand the challenges that face more participatory forms of city planning today, it is essential to examine the history of urban planning in Ottawa and in Canada, more generally. Analyzing the impact of the 1970s NIP program in Montreal and, more importantly, its influence, among other variables, on the political ethos of Toronto during this time-period, will provide some key lessons. It is equally important to appreciate the intellectual changes that have occurred within the planning community,

¹ The NPI is, to a large extent, derived from the 20/20 plan. The NPI is seen by many as the best way to go about implementing the 20/20 plan’s development goals.

and how they have (or have not) influenced the design of our contemporary urban landscapes. The disconnection between the ideas of the planning community and the implementation of urban policy is profound. Understanding the outcomes of previous attempts to engage citizens, and how the intellectual discourse of urban planning has changed, might help to focus attention on the potential political challenges that ambitious initiatives, like the NPI, may face in the future.

2. Context: Intellectuals and Ottawa City Planning

This section will outline a brief history of urban planning in Ottawa and the intellectual changes that have occurred in the urban planning discipline. In doing so, it will help to contextualize the intellectual roots of citizen engagement in Canada.

The Ottawa of the immediate post-World War II period was a dreary place. The government and its affiliated set of institutions were both relatively small. The city was surrounded by timber mills, with over a hundred trains daily passing through on level crossings, stalling traffic. Much of Ottawa housing was poor and inadequate. It had few permanent government buildings to house the burgeoning postwar civil service, and few foreign diplomatic posts (by the war's end there were only a handful). It had no air of distinction as a municipality, and was most certainly not the “Washington of the North.”²

Given this predicament, the federal government, under the direction of Prime Minister William Lyon MacKenzie King, set about making some fundamental changes to the Ottawa landscape. One of the most important of the changes introduced by King was

² Woods Jr., Shirely E. Ottawa: The Capital of Canada (Toronto: DoubleDay, 1980). See chapter 22 for a brief overview.

the appointment of Ottawa's first city planner, a prominent French planner named Jacques Greber. He would have a permanent and profound influence on the development of contemporary Ottawa. Very generally, Greber's plan for Ottawa called for the development of low-density suburban-type housing, surrounding a central-business core, linked together by an extensive road network (the automobile was to be the main means of transportation for the city), with most geographic areas serving one particular function (industrial, residential etc.), rather than multiple functions. His plan also included the establishment of a 'greenbelt' around the city to limit suburban development; the elimination of the many level crossings in the city (if you've ever wondered why the Ottawa train station is in Alta Vista, Greber is the one to thank) and the creation of an inter and intra-urban road network out of, most frequently, the old rail-beds. Greber also located many federal government offices in the suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s. This was part of Greber's attempt to decentralize the federal government, since he felt it prudent to locate jobs where workers might reside (in the suburbs).³

Jacques Greber epitomized the modernist-orientated city planners of the immediate post-war period. Confident in the ability of trained experts to design and implement civic planning policies, these modernist planners set about redesigning cities without public input. Vital decisions were generally made either within the city planning department or by politicians. It was an elitist and highly centralized decision making environment. In the Ottawa context, while not all of Greber's ideas were implemented (for example, he was unable to stop suburban development outside of the greenbelt and citizen advocacy for a 'Transit-first' suburban development strategy took root during the

³ Fullerton, Christopher. *A Changing of the Guard: Regional Planning in Ottawa, 1945-1974* in Urban History Review, Vol. XXXIV (Fall 2005).

1970s),⁴ for the most part his plan was realized by the city's political masters. If one looks at a map of contemporary Ottawa, his profound influence on the city is obvious.

This 'modernist' conception of urban planning dominated the formation (or often, more accurately, the reformation or renewal) of Canadian cities until the mid to late 1960s. At that point, however, a profound intellectual shift occurred within the discipline of urban planning. Its most famous proponent, Jane Jacobs, launched a whole-hearted criticism of the 'modernist' urban planning with the publication of The Death and Life of Great American Cities, which was published in 1961.⁵

Jacobs and others were sharply critical of the modernist/centralized ethos that had dominated urban planning (and many urban renewal schemes) of the post-war period. In their view, urban planners should embrace preexisting housing structures (Jacobs, for example, was ardently opposed the demolition of existing city housing to make room for urban renewal projects); encourage higher densities within cities (to stem suburban development); push for mixed use zoning regulations (so people could live and work in one community); facilitate the use of non-automobile dependent means of transportation; and, most critically, engage in meaningful consultations with local residents as to the future of their communities. The developments of strong, diverse urban-oriented communities were at the very heart of Jacobs' position. She and others who thought like her, most notably Toronto's John Sewell, were the first proponents of a 'postmodern' conceptualization of urban planning; one that openly criticized the value of expert-orientated, centralized urban planning and the plans created by individuals like Jacques Greber.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jacobs, Jane. The Death and Life of Great American Cities (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

3. a. Critical Issues and Cases (I): NIP in Montreal and Toronto.

The Neighborhood Improvement Program (NIP) of the 1970s and the intellectual shifts within the planning community that commenced in the 1960s are directly linked. The NIP began in 1973 and operated for approximately five years. It was a cost sharing arrangement between all three levels of government for urban renewal and infrastructure projects, with significant funds (\$300 million over five years) coming from the federal government. The federal government played a relatively limited role in the implementation and planning of individual projects, leaving these matters in hands of the municipalities. However, the money they provided for the program came with criteria or strings, one of which was to encourage citizen input. This had the effect of limiting the abilities of municipalities to adopt a rigid top-down planning procedure, even if they had wanted to. It also made the destruction of downtown housing (to make room for higher density apartments) more difficult. “The NIP assumed the form of a “cleansed” version of urban renewal, bereft of the adverse features of earlier programs,”⁶ thus symbolizing a more ‘postmodern’/Jacobsian attempt at urban planning. The NIP also coincided with the life of the federal government’s Ministry of State for Urban Affairs from 1972-1976.⁷

Montreal and Toronto had very divergent experiences with the NIP project. These divergent experiences serve to illustrate the differing institutional configuration of each respective city. In Toronto, where a citizen-orientated approach to urban planning

⁶ Filion, Pierre *The Neighborhood Improvement Plan: Montreal and Toronto: Contrasts between a participatory and a centralized approach to urban planning* in *Urban History Review* Vol. XVII, No. 1 (June 1988). p. 17.

⁷ Gerecke, Kent. *Thinking about the City* in *The Canadian City*, edited by Kent Gerecke (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991) p. 3.

took hold, many residents objected to the modernist planners' ideas of clearing land and building higher-density buildings. Instead, they supported the purchase of social and recreational infrastructure projects for pre-existing, urban communities. Interestingly enough, approximately 73% of the NIP funds went towards building social and recreational facilities while only .9% was allocated to land acquisition and clearing.⁸

However, such purchases, and the view that these purchases should be a priority, were representative of only one group of urban citizens; the urban, land-owning middle class. In many cases, this view was in contrast to that of tenants living in the area where these purchases occurred. The proposed redevelopment of Trefann Court in downtown Toronto, for example, pitted tenants (who supported the urban renewal scheme since they might get privileged access new public housing) against the land owners who faced expropriation of their homes; not surprisingly, the homeowners won out.⁹

The landowners had the support of a city council that had risen to prominence in the early 1970s, in direct opposition to the 'modernist' plan. This new era in Toronto's urban planning was best symbolized by the successful citizen revolt against the Spadina Expressway, a proposed urban highway project. Had it been established, the Spadina Expressway would have run through an old, established (and particularly middle-class) part of the Toronto. As a result of strenuous neighbourhood opposition, the Spadina Expressway project was cancelled by the province in 1973. In short, a land-owning, urban middle-class was able to translate its political will – its opposition to wholesale urban renewal – into political power in the city council, with the election of 'new guard'

⁸ Filion, p. 24

⁹ Filion, p. 22

councilors, who reflected ideological and practical views of the Toronto urban landscape.¹⁰

The experience in Montreal with the NIP was very different. Due to the specific institutional arrangement of the Montreal political landscape, the participatory criterion for the NIP was never implemented. Key planning decisions continued to be made in the upper echelons of the civic government, and individual citizens had little direct impact on the implementation of policy. This was primarily because there was no strong, land-owning urban middle class in Montreal, capable of and interested in opposing (modernist-type) municipal government redevelopment plans. In contrast to the situation in Toronto, the vast majority of the urban residents in Montreal (94%) were tenants. The result of this configuration (however centralized the decision making mechanisms) was that much more federal NIP money was spent clearing land (31%), and significant amounts of money were devoted to building new high-density neighbourhoods, instead of building or purchasing social and recreational infrastructure projects.¹¹ Interestingly, Montreal was not able to secure as much funding as Toronto. It only received 39.5% of the federal funds, versus the 45.2% that Toronto garnered.¹² These different outcomes reflect city-specific civic political institutional arrangements within these two cities. But, they also illustrate that, given the policymaking environment, strong citizen participation can influence policy decisions and that the outcomes often will suit the interests of the strongest set of voices within the decision making venue.

¹⁰ Sewell, John. The Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

¹¹ Filion, p. 24.

¹² Filion, p. 24.

3.b. Critical Issues and Cases (II): Ottawa, NPI, Postmodernism and Planning.

The Neighborhood Planning Initiative (NPI) in contemporary Ottawa, very briefly, is an attempt to include a wide range of interested stakeholders in the planning process in order to create urban plans that reflect each specific community's characteristics. The NPI process includes considering the physical, cultural, social and economic concerns of a neighborhood and incorporates direct citizen participation in the decision making process.¹³ As a program, it draws, intellectually, on a post-modernist framework in that it sets to limit the number of top-down, autocratic-type decisions made by planners and political elites.

Citizen engagement, likewise, is a critical component of the Ottawa 20/20 document that is (supposed) to guide Ottawa's urban development, and from which the NPI is derived. Like the NPI, Ottawa's 20/20 plan is a document heavily influenced by a postmodern/Jane Jacobs-type theoretical framework. The 20/20 plan, in short, advocates mixed land usages, higher-densities urban densities (to stem suburban growth) and, most critically, providing alternative means for transportation (walking, cycling and public transit), among other things. The NPI, thus, both practically (Ottawa's 20/20 plan) and ideologically (postmodernism) fits into this planning ethos.

The planning community has long since shed its modernist impulses - the Ottawa 20/20 plan and its predecessor plan illustrate vividly how the ideas of Jane Jacobs have inculcated the planning experts.¹⁴ However, postmodern planning ideals have not been implemented with the same amount of zeal as modernist ideals were implemented during

¹³ City of Ottawa, City Council Meeting Highlights, May 10, 2006 (<http://ottawa.ca/cgi-bin/printer.cgi>) p.4.

¹⁴ City of Ottawa. A Window on Ottawa 20/20: Ottawa's Growth Management Strategy (Ottawa: City of Ottawa, 2003)

the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, some academics have questions whether postmodernist planning ideals have had any significant impact at all; since the “Planning discourse is becoming increasingly disconnected from [its] implementation.”¹⁵ It is true that Ottawa’s downtown core is increasing in residential density (usually due to high-rise condominium construction), but the modernist impulses continue. Observable examples illustrate this phenomenon: the suburbs continue to grow; transit ridership rates are flat and fares continue to climb (twice in 2005); cycling initiatives receive paltry sums; and, above all, automobiles continue to be the main mode of transportation for Ottawa’s inhabitants. These trends mirror the trends observed in other Canadian cities.

Pierre Filion likens the postmodern planning discourse (and postmodernism more generally) to an ocean. Social advocacy, citizen participation and environmental concerns, as examples, have influenced discourse, changing its direction like waves in the sea. However, the underlying power structures of our political system remain unchanged. These remnants of the modernist era are like the underlying ocean currents that continue to be the principal channels through which power is exerted, and thus continue to largely determine how our society is shaped.¹⁶ Let us not forget where power resides.

4. Lessons and Recommendations: Middle-class Urbanites and Political Power

NIP planning outcomes in Toronto (in particular, the widespread rejection of modernist planning by urban Torontonians) illustrate how pivotal citizen participation

¹⁵ Filion, Pierre. *Postmodern Planning: All Talk, No Action* in Urban Affairs: Back on the Policy Agenda, edited by Caroline Andrew, Katherine A. Graham and Susan D. Philips (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003) p. 265.

¹⁶ Filion, p. 281.

can be in the urban political scene. However, it is important to remember that it was a particular type of urbanite – the land-owning middle class – that played the most important role in determining outcomes. Landowning, English speaking, educated, empowered, urban citizens (oftentimes women) are a political force to be reckoned with; they understand how the political system works and how to manipulate it for their own (and their communities’) benefit. In Toronto during the 1970s, this group of citizens was able to translate its political will into a tangible political force by ensuring that its views were represented within the councilor chambers. Other groups – more marginal groups – like tenants, immigrants, individuals with lower socio-economic statuses and future ‘potential’ residents (of new higher-density developments) may not be so empowered (or lucky).

Understanding where key decisions are made within the civic government, who makes them and the most pertinent criteria on which they are based are essential to implementing any type of policy. The will of the people is limited to those who can influence the key decision makers.

5. Discussion Questions and Critical Points:

This paper’s briefly examined the effects of the NIP in two Canadian cities and outlined a major intellectual shift within the planning community. This may offer some useful insights for those attempting to implement a program, such as NPI, where citizen participation is to play a pivotal role. Some important questions to be asked by those interested in increasing public participation in city planning might include:

- 1) Where are the critical policy decisions made? Who make them and what are the most important variables in their decision making formula?
- 2) What is the value of citizen engagement to the political decision makers? More importantly, what are its costs?
- 3) What groups influence the decisions of civic politicians?
- 4) Are groups solicited for input or who actively seek to influence the policy process representative of the community as a whole? Are they representative of the larger municipal, provincial, national or, even, the international whole?

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