

Katrina, Race and the Sorry State of the Planning Profession

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Racism. If there is one thing that explains the post-Katrina catastrophe, it's race. We all know about the gross incompetence and insensitivity of FEMA and state and local government. We all know that the federal government has failed to allocate sufficient resources for housing, cleanup and recovery. We all know about the lack of good planning before and after Katrina. But these are effects, not causes.

If the most devastated areas had been white and wealthy, no doubt there would be a Marshall Plan for New Orleans that by now, almost one year after the disaster, already would have been implemented. Instead, most of those who are poor and black and lost their homes are still waiting. Government at all levels has allowed the lily-white suburbs in the New Orleans region to keep their doors shut (during the storm, some police even prevented fleeing blacks from exiting the city). The mostly white homeowner neighborhoods in New Orleans are doing OK.

To use the phrase made popular by Cornel West in his book of the same title, "race matters." Indeed, racism is at the heart of the Katrina disaster.

But if race is so important, it is the one issue that planners have avoided in the storm of rebuilding activity. The planning profession was slow to take action on the pathbreaking issues of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and it is virtually missing in action today. Planning's chronic color blindness goes much deeper than Katrina and plays a pernicious role in the more "liberal" planning academia. As Planners for Equal Opportunity (the predecessor of Planners Network) did in the 1960s, progressive planners, including Planners Network, need to speak out more forcefully and start a national dialogue on race in the planning profession.

Professionalism and the American Planning Association

To its credit, the American Planning Association (APA) was quick to move into action after Katrina and offered help to federal and local governments. APA co-sponsored the November 10-12 Louisiana Recovery and Rebuilding Conference and sent a Planning Assessment Team to New Orleans. APA's Executive Director Paul Farmer testified before a Congressional subcommittee, recognizing the Katrina challenge as "the largest and most complex planning effort in our lifetime." Farmer laudably stated that "the rebuilding process requires ongoing participatory planning that involves all community members, regardless of their current location." But this statement that obliquely acknowledges the marginalization of the black and the poor displaced by Katrina is buried in a mountain of APA rhetoric obscuring the fundamental issues.

The official response to Katrina by APA's leadership is mostly a vehicle for promotion of the planning profession, as if the main problem were competence and professionalism and not racial inequality. APA advances good urban planning as essential to the rebuilding process and underlines the importance of comprehensive and participatory planning, but the organization foregoes the more expansive views mentioned by Paul Farmer in his Congressional testimony and narrows its focus to building the capacity of the local planning administration. APA's Planning Assessment Team offered many good recommendations for improving local zoning and master plan practices, and even reported that they heard claims (without verifying them) that local planning was "not inclusive." But in essence, what the team proposed is to strengthen the capacity of local institutions that have proven themselves incapable of democratic and equitable planning.

The report from the Louisiana Recovery and Rebuilding Conference, which also involved the American Institute of Architects, National Trust for Historic Preservation and American Society of Civil Engineers, is filled with many of the platitudes that have historically obscured the racial and class biases underlying the theory and practice of planning. The report proposes that everyone "speak with one voice." This kind of call for harmony typically comes from groups in power and only helps to drown out the voices of those who are left outside. Every professional group and elected official is quick to call for "racial equity" and "diversity" in planning, but this has become a politically correct cover for policies that are effectively exclusionary. It conceals the nation's racial "blind spot," which allows us to see everything except race as the problem. And, as Jon Powell points out in his article in this issue, racism is easily discarded as a major issue by reducing it to a matter of individual and personal discrimination.

In sum, APA's post-Katrina response feeds into the myth that the basic problem is lack of competence, and all that's needed is professionalism.

Planning Academics Drop the Ball on Race

Planning academics, including many of those who are quick to look down their good liberal noses at the unenlightened local planning practitioners that make up the base of APA, are no less challenged when it comes to dealing with racism.

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP), the main North American organization of faculty members at planning schools, needs to come to grips with its own racial blind spot. Last year, ACSP failed to heed the NAACP's boycott of South Carolina and went ahead and scheduled its annual conference there, then was forced to relocate it after an outcry from the membership. Now, ACSP is proposing a ranking system for planning schools that it claims would help schools gain prestige and funds. In the absence of other measures to even out the inequalities among regions and schools, such a system is bound to favor the larger and wealthier schools. While adopting the obligatory declarations in favor of equity and diversity, ACSP would be reinforcing the nationwide drift towards the commercialization of education and the quantification of performance standards, forcing planning schools to compete with one another to earn scarce resources, and placing those that already have more at a distinct advantage. We need an ACSP that

can stand up for the principles of academic freedom, intellectual experimentation and racial equity independent of the educational marketplace. Unfortunately, ACSP's annual conference is as much a showcase for the production of papers and academic entrepreneurs as APA's is for the buying and selling of professional products. Self-promotion is the unifying principle, not professional ethics or equity.

The ACSP leadership was also caught napping when the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) recently issued new guidelines for accrediting planning schools. Michigan State Professor June Manning Thomas, co-editor of the book *Urban Planning and the African-American Community: In the Shadows*, noted that the PAB guidelines exclude criteria about diversity and the social dimensions of planning. She was seconded by many other academics. The new PAB guidelines would take us back to the days before the civil rights movement and Paul Davidoff's critique of a purely physical planning that was emblematic of the profession's racial blind spot.

It wasn't too long ago that the PAB, with support from ACSP, struck any mention of affirmative action from the guidelines, following the advice of those fearful of a legal challenge from the right. And here we have the tragedy of planning academia. At a national level, the proportion of African-American students in planning schools is still under 3 percent, just about where it was forty years ago. The figures for Latinos aren't much different. Affirmative action was a victory of the civil rights movement and meant that planning programs should aggressively seek minority students and faculty. Although it is still on the books nationally, affirmative action has been crippled by court challenges, white claims of "reverse discrimination" and the general right wing campaign to roll back the gains of the civil rights era. Our mostly white planning faculty, most of whom no doubt find racial discrimination abhorrent at the personal level, have a collective blind spot because they can't see the immense institutional barriers to racial equality that surround and penetrate the schools where they teach. What, we have to ask, are ACSP, PAB and APA doing to change the exclusionary character of the profession they purport to represent? Affirmative action isn't about filling quotas or meeting quantitative goals, it's about recognizing the fundamental issues of social justice and quality of life in our diverse communities of color and advocating for changes in the political, social and physical environment that help wrest power from those who continue to benefit from racism as an institution.