No Voice, No Choice: Community Group Involvement in London’s Metropolitan Strategic Planning Process

Judith Allen

London’s increasingly expensive land market has intensified demands on commercial and residential land both within and outside the city center. These demands have greatly affected the poor and working class. Recognizing that the current planning structure does not adequately address the needs of these groups, the Greater London Council in 1981 developed the Community Areas Policy, a metropolitan strategic planning initiative to involve them. The impacts of its efforts challenged the traditional planning structure, and in 1986 the GLC was dissolved.

Introduction

The struggles during the late nineteenth century for local democratic governments which would address the needs of all citizens illustrates one common origin of town planning in both Britain and America. However, the way planning has subsequently been institutionalized in both countries makes it difficult to meet these aspirations. In practice, planning is characterized by an internal tension between aspirations for justice and the need for a rational urban property market demanded by the development industry. Sometimes these two interests coincide, but the speculative nature of much urban property development means that they more often conflict.

Between 1981 and 1986, the last elected administration at the Greater London Council (GLC) addressed these conflicts directly in a radically new approach to metropolitan strategic planning, as part of a general libertarian political program aimed at empowering specific groups within London. The program initially focused on the unemployed, women, and ethnic minorities and was extended to a wider range of groups during the period of office. Charismatic leadership, and a budget which made it the “fourteenth largest nation-state in the world,” meant that the GLC had the resources to pursue these political commitments. It is commonly believed that the GLC’s effectiveness in mobilizing these groups threatened the conservative central government and was the political source for national legislation abolishing not only the GLC, but the six other metropolitan governments in England in 1986.

This article outlines some of the ways in which the GLC’s radical political program changed the practice of metropolitan strategic planning in London. In particular, it identifies how these changes in strategic planning processes represented a significant challenge to the conventional wisdom in British planning.

The Context: London’s Land Market

The speculative land market in London is extremely buoyant. Office-space rents in central London, for example, are higher than in any other city in western Europe. The buoyancy of the land market is supported by high levels of direct investment by the central government in urban regeneration programs which promote and support speculative commercial development. At the same time, deregulation of the stock exchange has placed London on a level with Tokyo and New York in the world financial market, leading to an explosion of demand for large (35,000 square foot) trading floors. This need is largely being met through new development.

London generally has a “traditional” urban structure, in which poorer working class residential areas surround the central commercial area. Consequently, the effects of enhanced commercial land speculation in the center spread rapidly throughout inner London. The demand for commercial development has also intensified demand for inner city luxury housing, and the price of residential land here now exceeds that for commercial uses outside the central core. Within the British planning system, increased housing demand is far more difficult to manage than commercial demand, since the system basically controls changes between land uses, and not within any one use.

The Community Areas Policy

This analysis of the speculative land market in central London informed the way the GLC’s general political program was interpreted in metropolitan strategic planning. The Community Areas Policy, a set of linked initiatives directly supporting communities threatened by commercial development, formed the centerpiece of the strategy. Fourteen local areas surrounding central London were
designated as "community areas." Within these areas, a wide range of groups could apply for capital grants to develop a variety of social and community facilities. Directing the money through community groups, rather than relying on direct public sector investment, was a major innovation in British planning.

Coupled with revenue support for community workers, the grants visibly linked the day-to-day concerns of community groups with wider planning objectives, thereby supporting the groups' participation in the revision of the metropolitan strategic plan. Thus, the grants helped counteract the tendency for participation to be dominated by metropolitan-wide interest groups and middle class "amenity groups."

**Revising the Strategic Plan**

The Community Areas Policy was further developed at the strategic level in the context of revising the Greater London Development Plan (GLDP), which was seriously out of date by 1981. A radical view of metropolitan planning generally informed the revisions, and the very high priority given to the Community Areas Policy strongly influenced specific policy changes.

Other innovative policy changes arose from the GLC's commitment to the development of planning policies relevant to all the groups included within its general political program. As with the Community Areas Policy, the planning work was facilitated by grants and broader policy programs directly supporting these groups. Much of the participation program associated with the revisions was organized around these groups, contrasting with traditional approaches which reflect either specific land uses or spatial subareas. At the same time, the "spatial visions" expressed in the revised GLDP grew out of this socially-based approach.

Thus, the strategic planning process as a whole was strongly integrated into the GLC's general political program.

**Challenging Conventional Wisdom in Metropolitan Strategic Planning**

Conventional wisdom arises out of a set of interlocking factors. By and large, it reflects what is feasible within a particular administrative structure, set of professional interests, broader political environment and social structure. These views then become embedded in the personal attitudes, values and approaches of members of the political system. The processes which institutionalize conventional wisdom become self-reinforcing and obscure the possibility of developing radically new approaches to meet wider social objectives.

It is significant, then, that the radical innovations in metropolitan strategic planning implemented by the last GLC administration had their roots outside the formal structure of the GLC and in the planning section of the 1981 London Labour Party manifesto. The process of writing the manifesto had been highly consultative, and was based on the London Labour Party's need to build a new electoral coalition in response to changes in the demographic composition of London. This coalition was largely built on addressing the needs of specific, but already relatively well-organized groups in London—the unemployed, women, and ethnic minorities. "Community groups" in London pushed their demands within this broader context, and the manifesto's planning commitments reflect the high level of politicization of "local planning" issues which had characterized the 1970s. The manifesto did, however, address for the first time the strategic dimension of these demands. The manifesto outlined the general political program of the last GLC administration and provided a broad framework for a radical approach to metropolitan strategic planning. A new kind of planning process was developed which emphasized five strategies focusing on key problems, immediate implementation, direct implementation, containing commercial development, and legislative barriers. This new process challenged the conventional wisdom about metropolitan strategic planning in ways that were not predicted in 1981.

**Key Problems**

The last GLC administration saw planning as focused on solving specific, immediate key problems. This raises the questions, "whose problems?" and more importantly, "who must be satisfied with the solutions?" These are political questions, and the answers were clear within the general political program of the administration. The clarity of the subsequent links between specific social groups, their problems, political support and planning policies facilitated widespread participation in metropolitan strategic planning.

The strategic planning approach which emerged from this process did not aim to be comprehensive, but it did aim to be comprehensible to the groups whose needs formed its basis. It consequently exposed the way comprehensive planning obscures effective political priorities.

In contrast, the conventional wisdom in Britain sees the planning system as one of "plan-making plus the control of development." Because all proposed changes in the use of land require specific planning permission, the plan-making process is dominated by designing a set of criteria against which specific planning applications will be judged.
The "development control dominated" planning process generally has only very attenuated ideas about a desirable future pattern of land uses; this is all that is practicable where virtually all development is undertaken by the private sector. The overall pattern of land uses emerges from the application of these rules over a substantial period of time. Moreover, the land use pattern is to some extent unpredictable, depending on developers' decisions about which sites to develop and how to develop them most profitably. In the face of severe restrictions on public expenditure, public infrastructure investment tends to be dominated by private sector development decisions. In the process, investment in community facilities "gets lost." As a consequence, it is often argued that the main function of this type of planning is to remove key aspects of uncertainty from competition among developers.

The "development control dominated" approach to writing plans also leads to unfocused and ambiguous plan documents, since the planners attempt to anticipate all possible problems and considerations in the early stages of plan development. Such comprehensive plans are incomprehensible to all but the professionally initiated. The mystifying planning process then inhibits participation.

Planned Action "Now!"

The incoming Labour administration was committed to coming up with speedy answers to the key problems. The GLC was politically marginal. The fact that control alternated between the Labour and Tory parties at virtually every election clearly challenged the conventional wisdom that metropolitan strategic planning should be long-term in orientation. The GLC felt it was absurd to wait 20 to 25 years for solutions to the urgent problems of today, especially when they knew that the next elected administration would reverse many of their key policies. The commitment to planned action "now!" required developing strategic policies which could be implemented immediately. The Community Areas Policy exemplified this approach.

Direct Implementation

The GLC was committed to directly implementing its own plan. Metropolitan government in London was a "two tier" system. The GLC was responsible for providing a strategic planning framework within which the 33 second-tier boroughs could pursue locally adapted planning policies, as long as they were consistent with the GLDP. Boroughs thus held the main development control powers and were also free to develop formal local plans. The local government and planning system operated under the assumption that the bulk of public sector investment, outside of major metropolitan roads investment, would be undertaken by the boroughs. The GLC retained residual development control powers, mainly over very large developments and development affecting metropolitan roads. It also maintained a large public sector home-building program.

The division of responsibilities within the system was fairly sensible in a period of expanding public sector expenditure and relative political consensus over the use of public sector investment. Nevertheless, strong political divisions between inner and outer London always limited access to land and housing to solve inner London problems. From the mid-1970s on, fiscal crises in the inner London boroughs enhanced the importance of direct GLC investment, but there was substantial disagreement over whether to discourage speculative development in central London. Some of the inner boroughs were desperate for the increased property tax revenue generated by commercial development.

Thus, the GLC's commitment to the Community Areas Policy—interpreted as "no go" areas for commercial development—was not merely contentious; it could not be fully implemented without the cooperation of the boroughs. The grants program was welcomed by the boroughs,
because they could not afford to invest in community facilities themselves. More importantly, the grants raised significant community opposition to commercial development within these boroughs. Thus, the commitment to direct implementation by the GLC challenged an unspoken assumption, written into the very structure of London government, that the GLC would not become directly politically involved in "local" or borough planning issues.

Commercial Development

The last administration at the GLC was primarily concerned with the detrimental consequences of commercial development on inner London communities. The conventional wisdom of metropolitan strategic planning in the sixties and seventies emphasized organizing a broad pattern of land uses to facilitate private sector development by designating areas for future development. Within this context, the GLDP provided a framework for coordinating public sector infrastructure investment with private sector development.

The revised GLDP proposed a tightly drawn Central Activities Zone, within which commercial development would be contained. This zone was surrounded entirely by a Community Areas Ring, in which commercial development was largely prohibited. The administration accepted that this policy would increase land prices within the Central Activities Zone, and lead to increased speculative pressures around its boundary. Nevertheless, they argued that strong and clear strategic policies would facilitate control over these pressures. This strategic view of the relationship between the land market and planning policies underpinned more detailed policies throughout the plan.

Legislative Barriers

The final challenge to the accepted planning practice was of a different order. Revising the GLDP to meet the GLC's political objectives exposed many of the detailed ways that the institutional and legislative framework for planning facilitates the interests of developers as a group, while failing to provide protection for those who bear the social costs of development. By the time the GLC was abolished, work on a new legislative framework for planning was proposed and this concept gained momentum up to the general election in 1987.

By attempting to meet four apparently simple demands on metropolitan strategic planning, the GLC fundamentally questioned the conventional wisdom written into the legal and administrative framework for metropolitan strategic planning.

It is important to realize that these basic challenges to the conventional wisdom would not have led to a radically different kind of plan and planning process if they had not been closely linked with wider practical initiatives enabling broader general political participation in London. The next section examines the way this wider context affected participation in the metropolitan strategic planning process.

Challenging Cynicism: participation in metropolitan strategic planning

Organizing effective participation in metropolitan strategic planning is difficult at the best of times. During a period of economic recession, it becomes an even more challenging endeavor.

Three interrelated problems inhibit involvement by disempowered groups. First, their knowledge of London tends to be localized, reflecting spatially restricted access to housing, jobs and transportation. Second, particularly in a time of economic crisis, problems such as unemployment, inadequate housing, maintaining a household and raising children are of more immediate concern than commenting on issues about the long-range quality of life throughout the metropolitan area. Finally, the generally legalistic and bureaucratic ways of planning inhibit those who are uncertain, inarticulate and those who have been socialized to accept that they have no choice but to
acquiesce to the vagaries and whims of those with power, money or education.

Even at the best of times, participation at the metropolitan level tends to mobilize groups with a clear metropolitan-wide interest. In London, the roads lobby and private developers have always been prominent. Economic recession enhances their interest in planning as they try to increase their access to scarce resources. With access to resources to pursue their interests, these lobbyists can easily obscure the interests of less powerful groups. In this situation, planners are often left to defend the disempowered with very little political support and within an administrative framework which enjoins them to be “politically neutral.”

This critique of planning participation is well known. However, without considerable political and administrative resources, individual planners are powerless to correct it. In practice, planners have responded to these problems with a deep cynicism, reflecting an attempt to maintain their democratic aspirations within an institutional framework which frustrates their achievement.

Narrowly conceived “professional interests” often reinforce this cynicism. Making planning a technical exercise enhances the power of professional planners within political administrative systems, usually to the detriment of elected members and the public. The GLC’s political marginality further reinforced these processes, as planners avoided implementing policies which were politically contentious in order to avoid undoing their own work after the subsequent election.

Personal cynicism results from the placement of political administration within a broader social structure. It is not the result of the (in)competence or apathy of individuals, but rather the limits on what individuals can achieve within the broader system. The final administration at the GLC expanded these limits by developing the planning participation process within a general political strategy which addressed social structural issues. This departure from standard procedure generated enthusiasm among planning officers for participation, and involved previously excluded groups in the participation process. As a result, the extensive direct contact between officers and members of these groups mobilized officers’ professional commitments to fair, just and democratic planning, and helped them overcome much of their cynicism.

The lessons that one can learn from this experience can usefully be analyzed in terms of the ways that narrow professional interests interact with personal cynicism to distort the participation process. The most direct way to do this is to reformulate four questions that cynical planners often ask about participation.
Willingness to Participate

The first question cynical planners ask is: "Are people willing and able to participate?" The experience of the GLC poses a far more disturbing question: "Is the local authority willing and able to participate?"

Three aspects of the GLC’s participation program support this reformulation. First, the program was based on direct consultation with the specific social groups included in the GLC’s general political strategy. These groups were in a position to respond positively and creatively because they were supported by broader grants and policy programs. Second, groups were encouraged to talk about their general concerns very early on in the planning process and were not restricted to simply commenting on "planning matters" as defined by planners. These general discussions often originated in policy work outside of the planning department and provided an important basis for developing specific planning policies addressing broader concerns. For example, the women’s unit in the director general’s department identified a series of specific planning problems associated with setting up women’s centers as part of their general grants and policy work. Finally, the speed of the planning process itself generated a momentum which sustained interest in participation. In these ways the general political strategy of the GLC supported a planning participation process which led to innovative planning policies specifically addressing an increased scope of issues and problems for a wide range of disempowered groups.

Representation

Second, cynical planners ask: "Are local organizations representative of the urban poor?" The experience of the GLC’s political commitment to specific social groups exposes the fallacy in the way this question is posed and suggests that it should be rephrased: "Is the local authority representative of the urban poor?"

In general, the narrow pursuit of professional interests within political administrative systems succeeds partly because it neglects to analyze the mobilization of bias within interlocking political, electoral, administrative and technical processes. This silence reinforces cynicism about participation, because it implicitly denies the existence of alternatives.

The GLC deliberately sought to mobilize bias in favor of disempowered groups. Participants in the metropolitan strategic planning process clearly derived their credentials and legitimacy from these broader political and democratic processes, not from the technical and professional preoccupations – or even aspirations – of planners. Without this strong political commitment, very little would have changed.

Organization

Third, cynical planners ask, "how should participation be organized?" Usually they mean, "should we use questionnaires, postal surveys, public meetings or exhibitions?" The experience at the GLC shows that the question must be linked to political and social organization generally, and the techniques used must support, and not undermine, broader social organization. Thus, the question can be reformulated: "How does the participation process fit into the wider social organization of the area?"

The GLC’s participation exercise was based on clear political answers to this question. As a result, the single most effective, positive, and creative public meeting on the GLDP revisions was the women’s meeting. Two hundred and fifty women packed a county hall conference room, and spent an evening enthusiastically talking about the variety of ways in which planning could help them. The success of this meeting ensured that women’s issues were integrated throughout the revised GLDP. In contrast, later meetings organized around specific land use topics were desultory.

The GLC also developed a number of technical innovations. Meetings were tape recorded and oral comments were generally accepted as formal submissions. Copies of drafts of the plan, with people’s own marginal comments, were also accepted. Small discussion groups were carefully planned to ensure that articulate members of community groups were present to encourage the less articulate to criticize the successive drafts. Meetings were chaired by people who were not part of the GLC, and politicians and senior officers rarely spoke at these meetings. Platforms were carefully balanced to demonstrate the GLC’s commitment to particular groups. Documents were understandable, and available in a variety of languages.

It is necessary to explicitly design participation methods which provide details of the needs of specific social groups. Failure to develop this sort of approach suggests political failure, rather than the lack of appropriate techniques.

Data

Fourth, cynical planners ask, "what data is needed for planning and how is it to be collected?" The pursuit of professional interests suggests that answering this question is part of the planner’s technical expertise. However, rephrasing the question illustrates its relation to participation: "What demands are being expressed through participation and what new data sources may be needed?"

Two examples from the Community Areas Policy show why rephrasing the question in this way is important. The first example relates to "creeping conversions"; that is,
changes of land use without planning permission. Creeping conversions can have substantial and irreversible impacts on small areas over very short periods of time. Planners usually rely on administrative records of permit applications to determine trends in current demand for particular land uses. Only after community groups persistently pointed out creeping conversions did GLC planners admit that land uses could change without planners’ permission and begin to develop policies to tackle the problem.

The second example comes from the Community Areas grants program. After the first request for applications produced a totally unexpected flood of responses, one of the program administrators remarked, “I’ve been a planner for twenty years. I’ve always been told that it’s part of my professional expertise to know what the community wants. Looking at these applications now, I know for the first time in my career what the community wants.” The grants program enabled people to say in real and practical terms what they needed. Many of the groups who applied for grants would never have participated in a formal planning participation exercise, but their views about what they needed were integrated into the metropolitan strategic planning process from the beginning through the grants program.

The GLC’s planning participation exercise, because it was set within the context of a general program of political participation, brought to light how planners’ cynicism about participation is a consequence of power relationships in broader social and political structures. More importantly, it showed some of the ways that planning participation exercises can contribute to or modify these relationships.

Conclusion

The last GLC administration demonstrated not only how metropolitan strategic planning and public participation can be closely linked, but also how each is further linked to wider political and democratic processes. By developing an “alternative practice” which explicitly addressed questions of powerlessness within the wider urban society of London, the GLC exposed the ways in which “conventional” planning practice obscures power relationships.

The lasting legacy of the last GLC administration is not merely just that it provides a critique of “normal” or accepted planning practice. It also provides a way of thinking about planning practice which allows us to begin to develop equally creative and positive approaches in other political and social circumstances.

Many of the people associated with the last GLC administration currently feel tired and disappointed. But they do not feel that their efforts were wasted. To move so close to a vision of fair, just and democratic planning, to see what is involved in progressive social and political change, and to begin to understand how local authority planning can contribute to this change are inspiring. Indeed, many of the lessons learned from this experience have been adopted elsewhere in British planning. By giving an effective voice to disempowered social groups, the GLC showed that the structure of power within a society can be a matter of social choice.

Judith Allen teaches planning at the Polytechnic of Central London. She was involved in planning at the GLC between 1981 and 1986. She is a 1969 graduate of the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.