



Speaking Truth to Power? It Takes a Coalition

Dr. Pierre Clavel

City planners, architects and their supporters often think of “speaking truth to power.” Typical examples are public works projects or real estate developments that look good on paper, but pose long run and less visible costs to a neighborhood or the city as a whole. Many note that speaking up in cases like this can be difficult, since their most important clients tend to have a lot of power, and can be selective in what “truth” they are able to hear.

This is a dilemma that has dogged planners for a century. The usual response has been to suggest courage and persistence, with guidance offered through case histories of remarkable instances where truth-telling actually had an impact. However, there are relatively few such cases.¹ In contrast, scholars have noted that the dominant “power” in cities in the past several decades is the “growth coalition,” consisting of real estate developers, architects, engineers, planners, newspapers and building trades firms and unions that gain from the construction and other accompaniments of “growth.” “Justice” is low on the list of priorities for these projects, or among the outcomes. Overall, the growth coalition is really, really powerful.

In the face of this combination of forces, the idea that individuals can make a difference by “speaking truth to power” is just optimistic. Briefly, my premise is that the only way to compete with the growth coalition is to create a different coalition, and to find grounds for support in fundamental forces within the economy. I illustrate this with a story of both (a) an organizer, who found a way to make a difference; and (b) the forces around her, that created a semblance of a coalition, so that her efforts paid off, at least for a few years.

The Organizer

The organizer is Donna Ducharme, who was hired in 1982 as the community development director for an expanded YMCA program north of the Chicago loop. She sought employment opportunities for neighborhood youth, and noticed that nearby factories were closing due, not just to general economic forces, but to real estate developers responding to market demand to convert loft factories to residential uses. Why not protect the factories, she reasoned, and satisfy the residential demand elsewhere? She hit upon a device, the “planned manufacturing district” (PMD) and promoted it to factory owners, neighborhood groups, and City Hall. It was difficult, she faced many obstacles but persisted. By 1986 and 1987, industrial displacement was threatening jobs in other parts of the city,

Ducharme was getting requests to speak to other groups, and to the idea of the PMD as a general piece of city legislation. The PMD idea generated support in several city departments as part of a larger administration concern with industrial retention.

In the fall of 1987, the problem had reached a crisis point. The growth coalition forces mobilized. The Chicago Tribune editorialized:

Mr. Washington has let his economic planners embark on a zany crusade to snuff out commercial and residential growth in areas that they – these insulated City Hall planners – have decreed should be reserved for manufacturing. Investors who want to convert abandoned old factory buildings into job-producing, tax-producing commercial complexes are told no, take your money to some other city. And don’t think they won’t, if Chicago continues this perverse ideological nonsense.

But there had been so much debate within city hall, and such development of the coalition of manufacturers, labor unions and neighborhood organizations supporting the larger PMD proposal, that Mayor Harold Washington came out with support within a few days. After a long silence, this seemed to cement the PMD policy.

The Coalition

The coalition transcended the individual. Ducharme’s efforts were heroic, but they occurred in parallel with the remarkable mobilization of the long repressed black population of the city around Washington’s mayoral candidacy in 1982, the ready response and support from a neighborhood constituency that had created major coalition units like the Chicago Association of Neighborhood Development Organizations (CANDO), the Rehab Network, and the Community Workshop on Economic Development (CWED), with many other supporting institutions and local foundations. These came into play during the Washington administration as several planning and development agencies, now headed by neighborhood friendly officials, distributed funding and authority to them and gave them seats on task forces and committees, while generally expanding a sense of participatory opportunity.

This atmosphere, if not the specifics of administrative control, continued beyond Washington and the interim mayoralty of Eugene Sawyer (1987-89) into the long term regime of William M. Daley (1989-2011) who, while he ran on a downtown growth coalition platform and specifically denounced the PMD idea, found himself catering to neighborhood interests and industrial retention policies.

Most visible was Daley’s turnaround and support for the PMD concept. Working with holdover elements in City Hall, Daley supported a set of “Industrial Corridor” studies, created an additional 12 PMDs on top of the one initiated in 1988, and in 1993 he hired Ducharme as Deputy Commissioner for industrial planning. Ducharme

embellished the PMD and the industrial retention idea by organizing: she created committees including manufacturers and neighborhood representatives, initiated joint purchasing and warehousing schemes, and promoted sectoral labor supply strategies.

Questions hung in the air as Daley relinquished the mayoralty to Rahm Emanuel in 2011. The Chicago industrial retention effort had been a textbook model, but did it matter? Part of the answer was in the continued vitality of the city's industrial sectors – manufacturing, while diminished within the city (and nation) was restructuring so as to play a continued role in the regional economy. And this had been despite Daley's sporadic support, which seemed diverted toward downtown offices, tourism and upscale near-loop residential projects after the mid-1990s.

But at a minimum, Ducharme and the coalition she helped create answered the “Speaking Truth to Power” question: it takes a coalition with an economic basis, and Chicago showed how to do that in the 1980s and 1990s. Chicago had an economic basis: Chicago was losing manufacturing jobs, but there were still 225,307 Chicagoans employed in that sector in 1990, at average wages well above what would be available to the unemployed. And surveys demonstrated that many of the manufacturing firms would stay in business if the real estate pressure could be relieved. Thus there really was “truth” to Ducharme's message – the function of the coalition was to mobilize it.

Endnotes

¹ Much of this is reported in the website: <http://www.progressivecities.org>; and see Pierre Clavel, *Activists in City Hall: the Progressive Response to the Reagan Era in Boston and Chicago* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010)

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