

Interview with Norman Krumholz

Carolina Planning Editors with an introduction by Megan Lewis McConville

Norman Krumholz is a towering figure in the eyes of many planners. A proponent of equity planning—the term Paul Davidoff coined in 1965 to refer to planning for the whole city and prioritizing the needs of populations habitually excluded from the process—he pioneered approaches to improve the quality of life in disadvantaged communities. During Krumholz’s groundbreaking ten years as Cleveland’s planning director from 1969-1979, he put this theory into practice, later describing his experiences in a book entitled Making Equity Planning Work.

Krumholz visited UNC-Chapel Hill on Oct. 9, 2008, to deliver a public lecture titled “New Roles and New Status for Planners.” In the talk, co-sponsored by the Department of City and Regional Planning and the Center for Urban and Regional Studies, Krumholz described how the changing shape of cities poses new challenges for today’s planners. He dispelled several myths about industrial cities, including the belief that “the decline can be reversed and the cities restored to their former glory.” Instead of emphasizing greening efforts, New Urbanism, and blockbuster stadium projects, he said planners should focus on the basics: fixing cities’ schools, services, and safety. In an exclusive Carolina Planning interview, editors Wendy Baucom and Heather Schroeder sat down with Krumholz before his public lecture to speak about the biggest issues facing today’s planners. Given his track record, it may be no surprise that Krumholz encourages planners to continue breaking the mold.

If you were a planner today, where would you want to focus your efforts?

I think the biggest issue facing urban America is what to do with cities like Cleveland and 50 or 60 cities in the Rust Belt of the United States, how to revitalize their economies and how to get them – and particularly their people – back into the mainstream of the American economy. That seems to be, to me, the largest domestic problem we face today.

How does advocacy planning in a Rust Belt city compare to the American South, where we have a host of different problems? The number one problem we have here is sprawl, which is compounded by challenges like immigration and land use.

I think they’re all related, in one way or another. Sprawl obviously is a major land use problem, but to the extent that our cities sprawl, it seems to me that the people who are in the city are further trapped and isolated.

Do you think of sprawl as a racial issue?

Sure, I think there’s a racial dimension to sprawl. I think part of the reason for sprawl is to get away from African Americans, Latinos, and to feel safer with people of your own color and cultural affinity. But, to the extent that we have this untrammelled sprawl and no efforts are made to contain or manage it, the poor it seems to me are further and further isolated from the mainstream, and that’s unfortunate for our society.

Megan Lewis McConville recently graduated from the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill. Wendy Baucom has served as a Carolina Planning editor for two years. She has lived in Durham since 1995.

Heather Schroeder grew up in the Rust Belt city of Syracuse, NY. This summer, she is working for a traditional neighborhood developer in Durham.

The state is the key player in dealing with urban sprawl, and the state's got to say something like, "Here's our growth and development plan. If you build in these growth development areas that are high priorities, we'll help with infrastructure, with subsidies—we'll help in a variety of ways. If you decide not to, we'll tax you, or at least we won't help." Some kind of inducement arrangement, in other words, to try to discourage uncontrolled sprawl.

Can you think of any states that are doing a particularly good job of it?

No, not offhand. Oregon, of course, comes to mind immediately as the state that's the furthest thinking in terms of urban growth limits and sprawl control; and Minnesota, with their revenue sharing, had a good idea to reduce fiscal zoning and things of that sort. Periodically, some state under progressive leadership, like Massachusetts for a period under Dukakis, tried to focus on development in the core rather than on the fringe. And Maryland tried that too. But those are episodic, and when the governor who's sponsoring that leaves, that seems to be the end of it. We need something that's institutionalized.

This sounds like your writings recounting how the planning effort changed with the different mayoral administrations in Cleveland.

Well, that's the challenge, really, of equity planning—or of advocacy planning, however you want to refer to it: how do you institutionalize it? And it's not enough to have APA or AICP sanction somebody who's not doing the right thing or throw them out of the organization—they've never done that, and they never will. But that's not enough anyhow. The rewards have to be visible. I'm not saying dump big amounts of money on people doing that kind of planning—but the planner who is following the dictates of the ethical rules of his profession should be recognized. And, like I said, it doesn't have to be a foundation grant for half a million dollars or anything like that; just a certificate. Just have his peers have a little event—buy him lunch—and say, "Here's a paper certificate, thanks for the bold work that you did."

Do you feel recognized for what you did?

I don't think so. I think the reason that you know anything about me at all is because I wrote about it. But practicing planners—and I'm convinced many of them are involved in equity planning in one way or another—are not writing about it. And the academy, for whatever reason, is not doing the necessary research to get into that and write about it. There are lots of obvious reasons why practitioners are not writing: there's really no payoff to that. I don't mean in money again, I mean in terms of prestige or anything else. So it's a hard

thing to identify where practitioners are engaged in equity planning. But the academics are precisely situated to do that. And they get the rewards from writing and publishing. So there should be more of that.

Is there nothing at the APA level? There's the Davidoff Award...

There's a Davidoff Award, and there's an AICP award for best book of the year that's published, and all that sort of thing. But that's about the extent of it.

What settings today do you think are ripe for equity or advocacy planning? What's the ideal situation in which a planner can go in and represent a community, or does it have to be from the bottom up?

Well, it should be bottom up, obviously, but equity planning clearly is much easier to do, and is much better received, in an administration of progressive thought. It could be an African-American mayor or an African-American leader, or it also could be a white guy who is more progressive in his ideas. But it doesn't have to be limited to that. It could be done in situations where you'd least expect it, because for one reason or another, the mayor, or the city manager, sort of has an insight which fits with equity planning. And you never know what the insights are until you test them out and try them.

That's one of my main gripes of my profession: planners typically don't try enough. They're not bold enough to suit my notion of what would be better practice. They worry about being fired or being disciplined by their superior if they get too far off the reservation. But the reservation, unfortunately, doesn't necessarily include equity as a consideration.

Do you have any more tips for people who are just entering the planning field?

Among other things, we've been too timid; planning, to a large extent, is whatever planners do. As Alan Altschuler, one of my gurus from my graduate studies, pointed out a long time ago, planning in the United States is "an exercise of extreme administrative discretion." What that means is you can do what you want to do, within certain limits. And if you test that, you'll find that that's true. But nobody in City Hall, or few people in City Hall, really know what the planners are up to. They've got some kind of connection with planning and zoning, but beyond that, there's not much understanding. So, to a large extent, I think planners can define their own work process, and that's something very few planners do, I'm sorry to say. At least, defining a way that's oriented toward equity.

How do you think that equity planning has evolved through the years? What is the current level of acceptance for it?

Well, it's very hard to say. I've been involved with APA and AICP for 20 years or so, in pretty high positions—board member and president. I've gone around to many, many planning chapters around the country. My sense is there's an awful lot of equity planning taking place, much much more than is being reported, but it's relatively unknown—it's under the radar. And maybe that suits the practitioners for a lot of good reasons, but we don't know about it. Pierre Clavel and I wrote a book about equity planning [*Reinventing Cities: Equity Planners Tell Their Stories*], and we found undocumented equity planning in a variety of American cities. That's why we wrote that book. We didn't want to give anybody the idea that all this stuff in Cleveland, for better or worse, was done by a man on a horse in a highly idiosyncratic condition. What we wanted to do is demonstrate what's going on among the cities, although not many people were reporting it.

Do the roles of developer and planner tend to work in concert, or against each other?

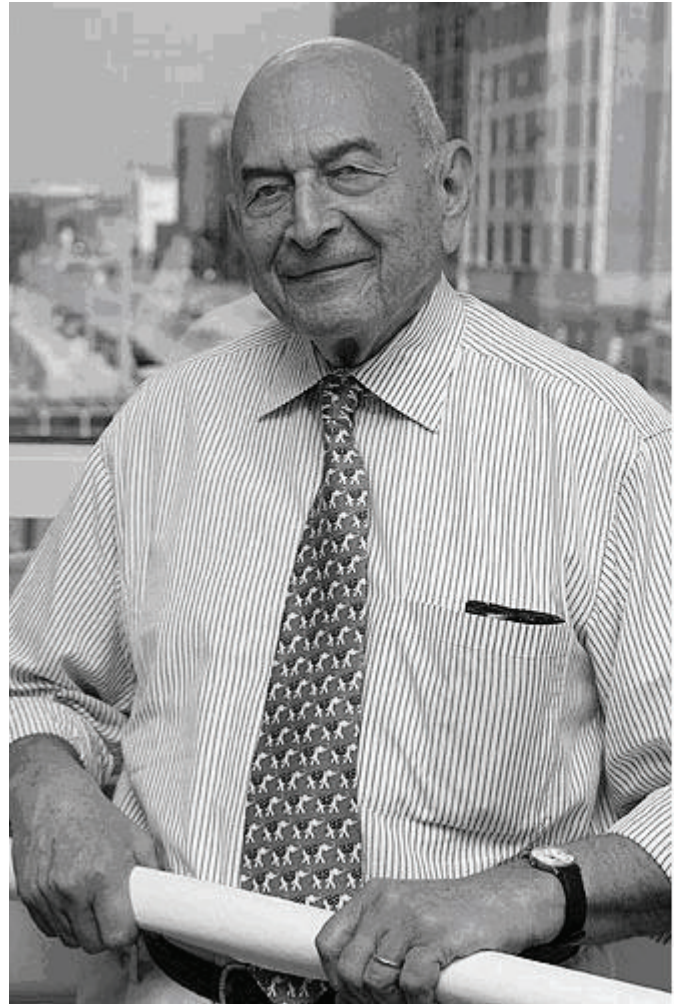
Again, it depends. Many planners work for developers, as you know, and many planners are more enthusiastic about development than developers are. So, there's a wide variety. But generally, I don't think you can get away from the fact that, at its root, planning is a critique of capitalism. It's a critique of development taking place on an ad hoc basis. Otherwise, why would you need zoning, why would you need planners, why would you need people who raise questions about what developers want to do? So there is kind of that root of critiquing; sometimes we lose sight of that. But the oath you swear when becoming a planning director promises to do the best thing you can for the city, and all the people who live in the city—all the people who live in the city, so you're not just working for a developer.

North Carolina has one of the fastest-growing Hispanic populations in the country. The cities are struggling to balance the needs of a new and growing minority group with the established African-American populations.

Well, I don't think you can distinguish between the "downtrodden" in general—I hate to use that word. The people who are generally not included in the city decision-making—I think they all have to be considered as equally deserving. And parenthetically, if you could figure out a way to send some of your documented or undocumented Mexican-Americans to Cleveland, that would be very nice. We'd be very happy to get anybody.

Why do you think that Cleveland has been "missed" by Hispanic/Latino immigration patterns?

Jobs. I think that's it, in a word, in a nutshell. And, when you come right down to it, the people who came



Norman Krumholz. *Courtesy of Norman Krumholz.*

to Cleveland from Eastern Europe in the 1880s through 1920, when Cleveland was the fifth largest city in the United States, came there not because of amenities or growth management or clean air or raging surf; they came because they thought they could get jobs and work and live, and have a chance at the mainstream -- buy a house, provide for their children. And that continues to be a meritorious objective. So, I think we'd get all the immigration we'd want if we had a big pool of jobs, similar to the one we had in the last century.

In the '70s, did you believe that Cleveland would just continue shrinking, or was there a thought that this trend could be stopped and even reversed?

It was very very clear that what was going on was a major long-term trend. In the '70s, the trend of decline had been going on since the '50s. Now the trend has been going on for 60 years, so it's not a blip on the radar screen. And you could see who was leaving, and who had money, and who was staying and didn't have money, or affluence, or power.

Do you think that equity planning is still one of the best ways to address urban racial issues?

No, it's just the best way I know. It would be nice if there were no such thing as anti-black sentiment. That would be terrific if no one was racist, and it would be particularly nice if, in our system, CEOs and corporate executives and mayors and presidents and all those people actually practiced what they were preaching; that would be very nice indeed. But, that's not my business essentially; my field is planning. And in that field, that's the best thing that I know to do.

Were you ever tempted to go into politics instead?

No. You need a level of ego—I have some ego, but not that much ego.

As you look back at your experience in Cleveland, is there anything that you would have done differently during your years in the planning office?

I don't really think so. I think the kinds of things that we were doing during the '70s when I was planning director were really right on the money, and I think the city should have done more of those afterwards. What the city has done, instead, has been to turn away from concerns about the basics, which are fundamental to the whole city—not only to the poor population, but to everybody in the city. "The basics" means better safety services, better educational services, better garbage services—the stuff that makes the city run. And instead, the city has invested a lot of money in downtown big-bang projects—stadiums, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and stuff like that. I don't think that was a wise expenditure of public money.

What legacy is left from your tenure?

Some things, I think, have been retained; for example, almost all of the city's \$26 million Community Development Block Grant goes to the neighborhoods. And the neighborhood organizations, which have become CDCs, have become pretty proficient—many of them are as good as any development company you'd want to see. And there's a structure there, an industry, that includes the CDCs, the intermediaries—like Enterprise Community Partners and LISC—and the city and the community are very supportive of them. And we, my staff and I, did a lot to help nurture that complex of neighborhood organizations. So that's something to feel good about. And the notion that you could give money to CDCs and it made sense to incorporate them into the planning and the development of the general plan is, I think, an important legacy. So there's something.

Given how big an issue environmental concerns are for planners today, how does the concept of "going green" fit in with equity planning?

One of the things that advocacy planners try to do

is keep the landfills from ending up in the black neighborhood, and a whole variety of locally unwanted land uses ending up in minority communities. So there's a big role for advocacy in the situation. And obviously other issues related to equity and the environment include sprawl and the side effects of sprawl, the need for new roads, infrastructure, the water pollution and the air pollution that goes on through sprawl.

Do the typical greening efforts serve a different audience than equity planning does? So many initiatives are targeted toward middle-income home owners for energy-efficient appliances or solar panels. Does that lessen the emphasis on serving other groups?

Yes it does; and to the extent that planners emphasize the environment over equity issues, and can't see a way to combine the two—that could also take emphasis away. That's always a danger, because ideas come along that sort of flash along the planning skies for a little while, and then they burn out. But some ideas, like improving the environment, I think will be a very long-lasting phenomenon. But to the extent that it detracts from equity issues, that's unfortunate. I still come back, again and again, to the fact that it's the equity issues that really plague our society. You've got to do something about the environment, clearly, but it's fundamentally the social issues—the issues of injustice and imbalance—that are most perilous to our representation of ourselves as an equal-opportunity society.

It's very hard for most people, I think, to say all men are created equal, and everybody should have an equal opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and see the evident discrepancy between the life chances of this person in this group and the life chances of that person in that group.

What kind of impact is the foreclosure crisis having in Cleveland right now?

Devastating. And, to an extent that I don't deeply understand yet, it's heartbreaking. As an example, there is a CDC named the Slavic Village Development Corporation, which has been operating for 25 or 30 years. Some of my staff members are involved there; some of our best students; some of the people coming out of the neighborhood itself are extraordinarily competent administrators. And Slavic Village is now the focal point for the foreclosure crisis in the whole United States. I mean, the extent of fraud and targeting of vulnerable populations that has taken place there, and hundreds if not thousands of homes are now abandoned there, many of which are going to ultimately end up being stripped, vandalized, and demolished—just a tragedy. But I had my neighborhood planning class in the spring working on Slavic Village, trying to do something that'll improve things.

Will the foreclosures lead to some redesign of neighborhoods?

No question. For better or worse, there's going to be more vacant land. There's a ton of vacant land already. And so, what you do with the vacant land becomes a major issue, a major design/land-use planning issue, and I expect there'll be a lot more community gardens, farms of limited acreage, paths through neighborhoods where vacant parcels exist; and a lot more divestiture of the city—of lots it takes into the land bank—to abutting property owners: “You live there, Mrs. Jones, you want the parcel next to you? Here it is, it's yours.” Other ideas that are maybe off the wall; for example, I think that one of the things that cities struggling from major disinvestments should consider is ways to sell off part of the city. I don't expect any mayor is going to take that kind of a proposal seriously, since we're all interested in growth, but the reality is if you've got thousands and thousands and thousands of vacant parcels, and they can be assembled in kind of a reasonable way, maybe you can make a case for taking those parcels and selling them to a developer, and saying “Do what you want with it” – essentially, “Buy the land from us, so that we can have some money to spend on the rest of the city, but develop it any way you want.”

I mean, the driving motivation for most political figures in our society is growth. So you've got to have growth. If you're not growing, you're declining; if you're declining, you're on your way to death. And nobody wants to die. We're all into youth and vitality and so on, but the fact is, you can't duplicate it over and over again. So the question is, “What do you do with all the vacant land?” We're just beginning to see the innovative uses of vacant land that are taking place.

You know when I was in your situation, in graduate school at Cornell, our teachers said to us, “You're the guys with the white hats. You control growth in the public interest, because these nasty developers in the black hats come in and try to rape the city and not pay any attention to the public interest, and you are the defenders of the public interest.” And that was very very nice, and we're supposed to restrain the developers. But nothing I learned in graduate school prepared me for a situation where there were no developers, there were no people who were interested in buying the land and developing. It's a different kind of situation.

KRUMHOLZ TIMELINE

1965	Earned his Master of City and Regional Planning degree at Cornell University studying under Alan Altshuler
1965-1969	Worked as planning practitioner in Ithaca, NY and Pittsburgh, PA
1969-1979	Served as Planning Director for the City of Cleveland under Mayors Carl B. Stokes, Ralph J. Perk, and Dennis Kucinich
1974	Finalized the Cleveland Policy Plan of 1974, which has been declared a “Planning Landmark” in American Planning History for its emphasis on equity planning
1977	Appointed by President Carter to the National Commission on Neighborhoods
1979-1985	Founded and led the Center for Neighborhood Development in Cleveland
1985	Joined the faculty of Cleveland State University's Levin College of Urban Affairs
1986-1987	Served as President of the American Planning Institute
1987	Awarded the Rome Prize in Urban Planning by the American Academy in Rome
1990	Published <i>Making Equity Planning Work: Leadership in the Public Sector</i> with John Forester; winner of the Paul Davidoff Award for best book of the year from the Associated Collegiate Schools of Planning
1990	Received the APA Award for Distinguished Leadership
1994-1999	Published <i>Reinventing Cities: Equity Planners Tell Their Stories</i> (1994); <i>Cleveland: A Metropolitan Reader</i> (1995); <i>Revitalizing Urban Neighborhoods</i> with Dennis Keating (1996); <i>Rebuilding Urban Neighborhoods: Achievements, Opportunities, and Limits</i> (1999)
1999-2001	President of the American Institute of Certified Planners
2003	Appointed a fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners