

Progressive Planning at the Border

Peter Marcuse

The following is from Peter Marcuse's closing plenary speech at the PN 2014 Conference in Ciudad Juárez.

THE BASIC PROBLEMS we have seen here include low wages, poverty, poor housing, insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, inequality and corruption. What are the causes? They heavily involve the economy's dependence on *maquiladoras*, and the domination of foreign capital, which relies on a differential wage structure.

This is in turn enabled by the existence of a heavily policed border separating Ciudad Juárez from the stronger and wealthier power to its north, the United States. It is a border legitimated by a natural boundary, the Rio Grande River. But a boundary such as a river is not a border; on the contrary, a river is a natural geographic reality that historically brings people together rather than dividing them as, for example, in cities such as London or Paris, or nations such as Egypt. A border is artificial, made by humans, and imposed as a result of conflict to oppress or defend against oppression. A border is a wall reinforcing differences; a boundary is a seam, a melding of differences. A border is an exercise of power; a boundary is a peaceful transition.

The Rio Grande has clearly been made a border, and reflects the exercise of political and economic power. Whose power, and at whose expense? Good planning

has to answer that question, if it is to be implemented. In this case, to put it crudely, the border benefits capital, largely outside capital, permitting it to exploit the workers of Ciudad Juárez, paying them less than they would earn north of the border. The workers of Juárez pay for the existence of that border and capital north of the border benefits.

There are non-spatial borders involved here as well, divisions within each side of the border, that need to be examined to get clear on who benefits and who pays, thus who is on what side in the conflict over power. The walls and the borders run not between the peoples, but between, above and below them. And there are certainly sharp lines of conflict between those who benefit and those who suffer. The conflicts are between forces on opposite sides of the border, and within each side as well, conflicts that need to be frontally faced and dealt with.

The ultimate solution needs to be the removal of the wall that borders create, and a change in the power relations that both produce it and use it to further their power. That won't be done overnight, it will be a painful process and it is understandable why it is not highlighted in much that we have heard. We say glibly "we" should do this and "we" need do that, but we is not everybody; interests conflict sharply along the way to resolution. Not all sectors of society will be happy with any given solution.

Real change also involves changes at the national and maybe international level, as well as – in fact much more than – changes at the local level. But planners operate overwhelmingly at the local and regional level.



Peter Marcuse is Professor Emeritus at Columbia University in New York City.

So what can planners, and Planners Network, propose that would make a difference, and point toward that ultimate goal of eliminating that wall, recognizing that the first priority must be dealing with the critical, immediate problems? If the cause of the problems is an imbalance of power, what power do planners have to influence that imbalance? Indeed, what can any group of the less powerful do by confronting those with more power?

Two things are needed to produce major changes from below: the *desire* to make changes and a *position of strength* from which to bring it about. Thus, there are subjective and objective prerequisites to making fundamental change. I deal with the subjective for planners here.

The desire to make change is an internal matter for planners including their own consciousness of the problems, the sharpness of their analysis, the composition of their own profession (which needs to include far more Spanish-speaking, immigrant, and women planners, reflecting the diversity of their constituents), and their collective commitment to an ethics of social justice underlying their work. They need to do the analysis that exposes who is doing what to whom, who the supporters of change are and who the opponents are: who is the 1% as well as who is the 99%. They need to adopt a code of ethics that mandates a commitment to make the issues of inequality, injustice and oppression a priority. That commitment is at the heart of planning and is what Planners Network has been dedicated to from its origins.

Seven Tasks for Planners

I can see seven critical tasks facing us as we pursue the necessary changes.

Task 1. Clean our own house. Strengthen within planning itself the commitment to social justice and the desire and will to bring about fundamental change. We need to be in Ciudad Juárez with our colleagues and friends in planning. We need to help them organize, support their efforts and, specifically, work jointly day to day with them to deal with those problems the borders create for them and for us – problems

which, after all, were largely created on our side of the border, not theirs. A Planners Network chapter in Ciudad Juárez might be one possibility.

Task 2. Deepen our analysis of the nature of the problems faced here, specifically those created by the border, for which, after all, we have some responsibility. In the last few days, I think we've all become aware of the complexity of the problems and the questions that remain unanswered. We might help address these questions:

- Exactly how do the economics of the border work?
- What profits are made from its existence, and precisely by whom?
- What changes could be made now, within existing border arrangements, and what changes depend on changing or eliminating those borders?

Task 3: Go public and publicize our work. We need to recognize that the desire and the necessity to change need to be understood and owned by more than just planners themselves; ultimately, only the power of the 99% is strong enough to produce the kind of change that is needed. So whatever conclusion we come to with our analysis, we need to document it, explain it, go public with it, and publicize it. But we can't believe that just because we've presented a compelling logical argument for change, change will occur. Real change cannot rely on the benevolent understanding of those in power to accept changes that will very often be against their own self-interest.

So we need to go public with our analysis and our exposés. We have to use the media, work with all segments of the public we can reach, inform, spread the knowledge of alternatives and help overcome powerful forces that impose their will and benefit from the supposed apathy of the majority. And we (planners) need to reach those we disagree with, such as the Tea Party in the United States, as well as in Mexico.

Task 4: Support change. We should use whatever power we have, as professionals, even as outsiders, to support change. In the course of ordinary events this may include: public hearings, expert testimony in lawsuits, public speaking and consulting reports. We

need to be clear on the big picture, the ultimate objective, and shape immediate proposals to be transformative so that every proposal ends with what more is needed. In other words, all plans and proposals should be transformative and lead to the ultimate goals.

Task 5: Joint U.S.–Mexico work. For those of us in academia or connected with it, we should propose joint work between U.S. and Mexican planning schools and urban programs, joint statements of our professional associations (a policy statement formulated after this conference and signed by both sides might be a first step).

Task 6: Go global. We can help put urban issues back on the agenda of international NGOs and global institutions, where others at this conference have shown them to be virtually absent.

Task 7: Look at some wild ideas! We could really do a visioning exercise that imagined a single city comprising Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, with no borders between them. This could be a joint planning studio. It could propose how the city could be laid out, what uses encouraged, what regulated, how decisions could be made, people involved. It could look at what funds might be made available by the disappearance of the border. This may be a vision, perhaps a utopia, but it could make clear the cost of having the border. Another possible project could be to analyze the impact a minimum wage law in the state of Chihuahua might have on employment in the *maquiladoras*, and help a move towards the equalization of wages on both sides of the border. This could be an eye opener to wider alternatives. Also, we could study real estate transactions and prices, see what role they play in attracting businesses to Ciudad Juárez, see if real property taxes accurately capture the true value of real estate and are sufficient to meet the service needs created by new investment and suggest changes.

We do not as planners have much power, but neither are we powerless.



7th Generation: Social Justice at the Borders

By Tom Angotti

continued from page 2

economic benefits and led to substantial deficits for Mexico's urban and rural populations.

- In Mexico, “free trade” opened the door to powerful corporations from the North that flooded the Mexican market with cheap goods and drove many Mexican farmers and small producers out of business. Many of the displaced immigrated to the North, providing an abundant source of low-wage labor that lacked access to many services and basic human rights.
- With the contraction of the U.S. economy after the financial crisis of 2007, Mexican and other immigrants from Latin America faced an even more precarious situation and while some returned to their nations of origin, many stayed and faced a xenophobic, anti-immigrant climate that went from demonization and racial stereotyping to detention and forcible repatriation. Spurred on by a right-wing nativist campaign, documented and undocumented workers and their families became scapegoats for the ills of an ailing U.S. economy. In response to this situation, Planners Network issued a statement in 2010 in opposition to Arizona's draconian law that targeted immigrants (www.plannersnetwork.org/2010/04/arizona-immigration-law/).
- After the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, U.S. immigration policies became even more heavily militarized than before. Along the border with Mexico, and at enormous expense, giant walls, buffer areas, surveillance equipment and heavily armed border guards became the norm. At the same time, changes in the geography of the drug trade and the ever-ineffective “drug war,” dramatically increased the level of violence and crime in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Ciudad Juárez became one of the most violent places. It became a battlefield that resulted in the kidnapping and murder of innocent people who became collateral damage. This included women and children on such a scale that many speak of *femicide*, *youngenicide*, and *genocide* in Ciudad Juárez. The violence has ebbed in large part because of the grassroots organizing and resistance by residents, who reclaimed their city from the armed com-

P2