

The Seventh Generation

“In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”

—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

Black Lives Don't Matter in APA's Colorblind Planning *APA Rejected Legislative Policy Guide on Criminal Justice*

Jeffrey S. Lowe

THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION (APA) views itself as a membership organization that offers opportunity for education and advocacy on behalf of the planning movement. However, APA is more a trade organization concerned about standardizing the profession rather than challenging its members and the public through education and advocacy on the ability of planning to directly address race and institutional racism. Put another way, APA neither advocates nor establishes policy for the explicit benefit of the African American community. This explains why many mainstream planners and our premier planning association choose not to promote restructuring of the US criminal justice system.

With approximately 90 percent of APA's 40,000 members identifying as white, the association's leadership lacks the desire to nurture and the courage to challenge its members about the importance of taking a proactive stance and becoming professionally engaged in structural change of a criminal justice system where the primary beneficiaries of such efforts would be African Americans. Instead, in a profession in which less than five percent identify as African American, the typical white planner has no contact with him or her on a daily basis. The modus operandi is to tackle important challenges perceived to be universal and

colorblind (such as ageing in communities, homelessness), but where the beneficiaries are largely white. Needless to say, this contributes very little to eliminating the view of African American communities in a pejorative way. Also, it has resulted in a greater level of difficulty for many rank-and-file APA members to grasp how to carry out their professional practice in a way that demonstrates that “Black Lives Matter.”

For some, coming to terms with such a reality might appear extreme. Certainly, there are planners who share a common belief that colorblindness and race-neutral APA strategies should be pursued at every turn in order to ensure that racial distinctions no longer result in social inequality. For others, there is an understanding that acceptance of colorblind approaches to planning and public policy most often conceal inequalities harmful to communities of color. APA's Planning and the Black Community Division (PBCD), consisting of about 240 members, comprehended the latter. For five years PBCD brought attention to the need for restructuring the criminal justice system. This would be a restructuring that explicitly benefits the African American community and, as described below, bring the issue of criminal justice restructuring into mainstream planning as part of the profession's values, vision, education and advocacy.



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PBCD Proposal to APA

As an outcome of its 2002 retreat in Charlotte, North Carolina, PBCD decided to give attention to the

continued on page 18



7th Generation

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continued from page 2

serious and disproportionate numbers of incarcerated Blacks. PBCD members asked themselves a two-fold question: what are our responsibilities and what should we promote within our profession that would turn around the problem of a massive buildup of the prison industrial complex? PBCD made the connections between the prison industrial complex and employment opportunities (urban and rural), loss of voting strength and various environmental consequences.

The following year at the 2003 PBCD Conference, a symposium took place regarding planners and the Prison Industrial Complex. Presenters included Andrea Shorter, Deputy Director of the Center for Juvenile and Criminal Justice (San Francisco, California); Gary Cunningham, Director, Office of Planning and Development, Hennepin County, Minnesota; and Shane Price, Coordinator, African American Men's Commission, Hennepin County, Minnesota. In Hennepin County, the primary means that African American men interface with the criminal justice system was through traffic stops. This phenomenon was not uncommon in other places across the nation. Also, like the nation more generally, African American men in Hennepin County were worse off than others on practically every measure. Essentially, the presenters brought into focus that for many communities experiencing deindustrialization and defense downsizing, the prison industrial complex was viewed as sound economic development planning. Furthermore, for so many lower-income communities of color, the cost of the prison industrial complex came at a premium in the loss of productive members to family, community and society.

At the 2005 National APA Conference, PBCD sponsored a session entitled Young Criminal Justice Challenges: Theory and Practice, and the Prison Industrial Complex. Presenters were Rafael Sperry, Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), Gladys Inman, Inman and Associates and Sigmund Shipp, Department of Urban Studies and

Planning, Hunter College. They talked about the lack of local and federal resources for successful community-based recidivism programs. The bulk of funding (94 percent) was actually allocated for prison construction and building maintenance. Just as important, the session highlighted what planners working with the criminal justice system could do to enhance the community fabric by supporting family cohesion, ex-offender reentry and productive membership in society.

The following summer, at the 2005 PBCD Conference during a special conference symposium, Sigmund Shipp along with Rafael Sperry proposed that PBCD prepare a position paper for an APA policy guide that would spell out what planners could do to bring about positive structural change in the US criminal justice system. The overwhelming majority of attendees at the symposium approved and PBCD devised and presented at the 2006 National APA Conference a “Rationale for the Adoption of Criminal Justice as an APA Legislative Policy Guide” to the association’s Legislative and Policy Committee. As stated in its introduction:

“This [proposal] represents an initial effort to assemble ideas, data, and suggestions that would lead the APA to adopt criminal justice as one of its policy guides. The major premise of the [proposal] and our efforts is that the size of the problem demands direct action and that the range of skills that planners possess is well suited to resolve this complex concern.”

APA Rejects the Proposal

Officially responding to the PBCD proposal in January 2007, Mitzi C. Barker, FAICP, APA, Board Director at Large and Chair of the Legislative and Policy Committee, wrote:

. . . the issues of social equity and justice raised in the white paper are important; however, we feel that

the policy guide process as it is now constituted is not the optimal venue for getting them before the membership, much less a broader audience of public interested in planning.

She proposed instead the following:

Our recommendation is that the authors consider developing a scholarly article for publication in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* or *Planning Magazine*. Another alternative might be for the division to host a by-right session at the national planning conference featuring discussion and/or debate on the interface between the criminal justice system and the fabric of communities.

This seemed patronizing and disconcerting to the PBCD. The APA Policy and Legislative Committee’s letter lacked acknowledgement and implied an unawareness of efforts building up to the proposal for a policy guide at APA National and PBCD conferences, and the partnership with ADPSR and other like-minded organizations. Yet records of all PBCD activities were available at APA headquarters.

Now, eight years later, despite a growing movement against the massive incarceration of African Americans, planners find their largest professional organization still paralyzed. According to APA, “planning means communities of lasting value.” However, this 40,000-member education and advocacy organization, by its actions (or lack thereof) has reinforced the belief that communities of color need not last. Because planners fail to address the US criminal justice dilemma that primarily targets African Americans, achieving the goal of making great communities happen for communities of color will remain out of reach. **P²**