

THE GRASSROOTS ORIGINS OF THE DCRP

Francis Violich

Editor's Note: The following is a revised version of comments made by one of the key founders of the Department of City and Regional Planning, after a tribute to him on the occasion of the Department's Founders Day Celebration on September 6, 1997. In it, Francis Violich traces the intellectual and personal origins that led to the founding of the department. He highlights the sense of place and grassroots connections that served as the guiding principles in his own work, in the leadership of T.J. Kent, and the entire intellectual community surrounding them at the time.

In the spring of 1929 when I first entered this Old Ark — the original architecture building — never could I have imagined receiving such a tribute on this September day of 1997 for my role in launching the DCRP. I was then a young man of eighteen fresh from Lowell High School in crowded San Francisco. This inviting shingled building, designed by Bernard Maybeck only a few years before, stood as a product of the Arts and Crafts movement. Breaking with the rigid confines of the Parisian Beaux Arts doctrine, it became for me a pivotal point for understanding the campus as a whole and thus shaping my identity as a person. In developing my own thinking about local environmental planning, I learned how relating the built environment to its own unique native landscape served as an invaluable context for nurturing creativity in the minds of young people. The social and physical environment of the Bay Area at the time provided an invaluable context for those of us building the DCRP in those early years.

We were preceded by another young generation who were likewise shaped by the qualities of the Bay Area environment. In the 1890s, Maybeck, together with poet-scientist Charles Keeler, John Galen Howard, and others, formed the Hillside Club. This zealous neighborhood group established a street system and residential style that was blended to the rustic environment that gave all of Berkeley its own identity. Those beginnings led to Bill Wurster's Bay Area style, a concept which we founders of the DCRP extended out to the Bay Region as a whole as the focus of our activist teaching in the 1950s. We all became deeply aware of the Bay Area as a regional place. A mutual sense of connectedness led to a collective

Berkeley Planning Journal 12 (1998): 20-24

environmental identity that ultimately became the prime ingredient in what I now see as the unique grassroots origins of the DCRP founding.

Among us, the leading catalyst to institutionalizing these environmental beginnings was a young man who also came over to the Old Ark a few years after I did, also from Lowell High School. His name was T.J. Kent, Jr. He had a similar environmental exposure to mine: he had grown up in Frederick Law Olmsted's St. Francis Woods of the 1920s while I grew up in the endless grid blocks of the Sunset, softened by John McLaren's Golden Gate Park at my doorstep. Jack's family — headed by his architect father — had a house at Inverness while my favorite uncle — a spare time singer and painter — had a fishing shack near Vallejo to which our family went. Public streetcars took us both down Market Street past Daniel Burnham's Civic Center and down to the Beaux Arts style Ferry Building. Though we hadn't met yet, our youthful paths matched up.

I clearly remember the first day Jack and I met in 1938. I had gone to study at MIT — the first Californian to study City Planning there — and then expanded my visions by travels in Europe's cities and spending time in Dalmatia with my father's people. I then returned to the Bay Area and became Alameda County's first urban planner. Jack at that time was working with the National Regional Planning Board at our regional level. We met one day as I bent over the drafting table in the County Engineer's office. Jack had sought me out, and as I looked up, I heard him say "Hello, I'm Jack Kent. Tell me all about MIT." Since Jack was a native San Franciscan, who'd gone to UC Berkeley, had a recent European tour, and was a kindred disciple of Lewis Mumford, we clicked instantly.

Along the way our collective identity grew and we formed a community of like thinkers, including Corwin Mocine and Sydney Williams in planning, Vernon De Mars in architecture, Garrett Eckbo in landscape architecture, Gryff Partridge and other Old Ark rebels. Starting in 1939, we became the nucleus of a group known as Telesis, whose efforts over the next fourteen years played a lively role in the beginnings of the environmental planning and design movement in the Bay Area. It was a bold reaction by all of us against the sterile distance between architecture and the landscape, and from the city/region and its social/cultural and economic make up. Products of the Depression, stimulated by the potential of new technology and aware that all was not well in the world at large, we had singled out betterment of the physical environment and its social purposes as our mutual goal. Though our concerns were driven by broad visions of social reform, our focus was local. This

Berkeley Planning Journal

sense of local connection became the source of DCRP's drive for impact on our local region during its first decade of creative teaching and research.¹

Our circles soon expanded. In due time we counted among us Bill Wurster, whom I had come to know while a student in the early 1930s. Later Catherine Bauer became well known to us by her book *Modern Housing* that served as a guide to our European travel. When she appeared on the Berkeley scene in 1938, invited by the Social Welfare Department as a visiting professor, she stayed for two years and quickly engaged herself in both the local environment and its culture. We all spent lots of social time together. There were bicycle weekends from Sausalito to Inverness with swims together. Later, the Kent and Violich families built in the Maybeck neighborhood in Berkeley, where the Foleys joined us on Tamalpais Road. The first student parties in our homes later gave way to the Wurster's home when Bill and Catherine acquired the John Galen Howard house and later designed Greenwood Common. At times Lewis Mumford, our mentor in so many ways, joined in our local scene. To be able to work towards building the DCRP on such a warmhearted grassroots basis with such forward looking folks, has been, for me, a true source of privilege.

By March of 1943, after having undertaken a year of urban research in Latin America, my book *Cities of Latin America: Housing and Planning to the South* was published. With this speaking for me, Jack and I gained a toe-hold on the firing line of San Francisco's City Hall as the core of the staff resulting from our Telesis promotional efforts. L. Deming Tilton was the city's first planning director at the time. He was invited by the Public Administration people at UC Berkeley to be a lecturer, and he hired us to explore a potential curriculum from existing courses. Then and there the die was cast. Jack's skills and endless sources of ideas eventually resulted in his being named San Francisco's Planning Director in 1946, and many of his concepts of long-range comprehensive planning contained in his book *The Urban General Plan*, took route there.

So much for the ingredients of the half-century before DCRP I am grateful for having enjoyed. Now, to reflect on those inputs to start up the next fifty years, to look at what DCRP might in real life accomplish to celebrate in the year 2048.

I would set as a primary goal resolving the accumulated problems in the diverse region, once more adopting the Bay Area with its 90 municipalities and nine counties to focus on. It was from that collective regional identity that we secured our drive. Today, our

Bay Area has changed vastly to our benefit as a complex place to learn from. It could be adopted as a living laboratory replete with its accumulation of ongoing examples and accumulated experience. We can learn from what went wrong in planning in the area — such as the shambles of Berkeley's General Plan updating statutes, and San Francisco's too.

On the other hand, we have as resources a flood of volunteer organizations like Greenbelt Alliance, Urban Ecology and neighborhood grassroots associations to assure participatory planning. There are IURD's outreach in Richmond and Oakland, with Ed Blakely running for Mayor, the success story of San Jose and to the north, Portland. These achievements we can be proud of. Exposing students to these local failure and success stories will teach those who come from other parts of the country or world how critical is effective planning in operating from a base of identity with a given urban place.

As Dusko Bogunovich, IURD's Visiting Scholar from Sarajevo, recently said, "With all its connection and networks, the globe is no more than an infinity of local places, each with its own individuality and cultural identity." I say, therein lie the problems, the resources and the people on whom to test out our well advanced urban and regional planning capabilities gained over our first fifty years. No better place to begin with than right here in the Bay Area.

In this light, I am moved to close my comments by citing from Jack Kent's classic work, *The Urban General Plan*:

The fundamental purposes which the general-plan process is intended to achieve are as follows:

1. *To improve the physical environment of the community as a setting for human activities — to make it more functional, beautiful, decent, healthful, interesting, and efficient;*
2. *To promote the public interest, the interest of the community at large, rather than the interests of individuals or special groups within the community;*
3. *To facilitate the democratic determination and implementation of community policies on physical development;*
4. *To effect political and technical coordination in community development;*
5. *To inject long-range considerations into the determination of short-range actions; and*

Berkeley Planning Journal

6. *To bring professional and technical knowledge to bear on the making of political decision concerning the physical development of the community.*²

It was this concept that grew out of our first-hand experiences to become the main thrust of his leadership. It gave local planning in California a solid footing by rejecting the overbearing term *Master Plan* with one that clearly distinguished policymaking as a participatory and flexible government function. Built into San Francisco's Charter in the 1940s, and into planning practice in Berkeley in the 1950s, it served to provide structure and experienced know-how for our interdisciplinary formative years. Out of this came a sense of community and common purpose for our diverse faculty and student energies. Today, we have gained far more refined specialities and increased our awareness of their interdependent relationship. As these words from Jack's opus magnum suggest on careful reading, the concept of the Urban General Plan stands worthy of the DCRP's re-capturing and re-shaping to meet the younger generation's challenge of research, teaching and practice in the next fifty years.

¹ The full story of Telesis first appeared in Violich, Francis. 1978. The Planning Pioneers. *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*, 26 February. California Living Section, pp. 29-35. This will also appear in the forthcoming DCRP Portfolio.

² Kent, T.J. 1964. *The Urban General Plan*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing. pp. 25-26.