The limitations of advocacy

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Advocacy has been limited to the neighbourhood level, and this is its singular defect. To become involved in deprived urban ghettos is to be concerned about the overall distribution of resources and power, about problems of social mobility and the gatekeeping institutions of our whole society. It is to be as concerned with the relevance of statutory instruments as with the girl with two kids and nowhere to go, with the mother who takes an overdose, vomits, and suffocates, or with the boy who decides that society is his enemy. In the widest sense, of course, all of society is underprivileged. It is dreadful how we waste man's unleashed capabilities. Today, to a most sinister extent, he is fettered and bound tight in the deprived inner areas of urban society.

My experience of voluntary programmes, of community workshops, and of official government programmes in America and Britain is one of heroic attempts to treat local sores without administering any systemic medicine. To a degree, advocates are part of both the system and the institutions which they seek to change. This gives rise to anomalies of a political, administrative, and technical nature that impose limitations on professional concern, which in an ideal situation should be limitless.

I live in a small urban district where residents can hire queen's counsel to complain about the possibility of a power station being built 50 miles away. I work in an area where it is damned difficult to stop the roof collapsing on one's family. While the QC can pocket his thousand guineas with equanimity, the professional advocate in the ghetto feels an implicit reproach for being there at all. When I went to work in Liverpool 8, I found that overnight my relationship with former professional colleagues underwent a subtle change. It seemed that one had developed both BO and halitosis, and would never again enjoy the Colgate 'ring of confidence,' because one had joined the 'other side.' Well, fair enough: spend some time working in urban areas of multiple deprivation and you will find that the problem has never been the underdogs. The problem has always been the overdogs, and it is a profession hired and fired by overdogs to which I am now speaking.

The environmental professions have always been faced by one sort of crisis or another, but within our own ranks we have never lacked educated and vocal critics to keep us on our toes. British institutions, including the RIBA, have an inherent stability: they are pragmatic, conservative, middle class, and are fundamentally rooted in democratic traditions. Indeed, that is what is so good about them. And advocacy planning is rooted in this privileged institutional context. It was natural that our liberal institutions would come to the conclusion that they should lend a few of their erudite experts to the underprivileged poor. It was as if they were saying: "If only we could find an effective way in which the deprived urban areas could voice their unspoken demands, then all would be well."

In Britain, both party political institutions and urban planners have laid great emphasis on 'public participation.' There was a long period when no political speech was thought complete unless it paid homage to the concept. It was the linchpin of the 1968 Town & Country Planning Act, of the 1969 Housing Act, and of most social theory of the last decade. Again, it was

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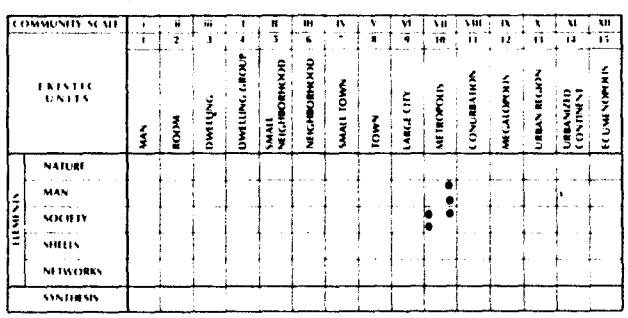

as if we did not already have a participatory democracy, with trade unions, development lobbies, civic societies, and voluntary advocacy groups of all shapes, sizes, and political hues, participating away like mad. And beyond this vast army of ad hoc lobbies, we have always had a political system which ensured that every urban ghetto had its democratically elected representatives to act as constitutional advocates of the people.

Today, we are witnessing another burst of enthusiasm, for consumer advocacy in the participating mass market. Society dashes to support those Galahads who will ensure that we get the best product for the fairest price, for if society wants a civilisation of gadgets, then each gadget must beat as it sweeps as it cleans. More power to the consumers of meritorious goods: but David Donnison brings us nearer home when he states, "Economic growth and urban development have deeply ingrained tendencies to inequality, to the segregation of rich and poor, to the exclusion of minorities, and ultimately to social disintegration — tendencies which have been suppressed, but not reversed, by modern planning and the welfare state."

So my main point is that public participation, as such, is bound to exacerbate the disadvantages of the disadvantaged. This is but one aspect of 'cumulative causation' which ensures that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. At present, to a serious extent, modern urban society consigns the latter to the urban ghetto, the twilight trap, thereby confronting professionals with a dilemma: if we decide it is necessary to find economic means for advocacy in the most deprived areas of London or Edinburgh, how do we limit the enormous professional resources of the Richmond Society in Surrey or the massive professional clout of Morningside, Edinburgh? And this dilemma is a symptom not only of the limitation of current styles of advocacy, but of the failure of the political process to reverse ghettoisation as an established trend. Indeed, in Britain, America, and most of the major cities of Europe, ghettoisation is a product of that process.

I don't want to belabour the collapse of the constitutional advocate, but until it is acknowledged, professional excursions into the area of the poor will remain more or less dilettante. At the bottom of the urban barrel, the poor too often savage the poor. Just as there is no hatred as virulent as one voluntary movement's for another, so there is no discrimination as vicious as that found within urban ghettos. The man with one foot on the bottom of the urban ladder will too often stamp on his neighbour who has no hope at all. Urban solidarity is a middle class luxury akin to the industrial solidarity enjoyed by trade unions. Thus, minority area elected representatives must usually make speeches after the caucus decisions have been taken: they are unable to be influential in terms of urban management or the allocation of resources. Too often they become voluntary case workers rather than policy makers, knowing that, in the last analysis, political parties will be guided by electoral mathematics and by the interests of the majority of ratepayers.

Inevitably, then, there is an astronomical distance between policy making and the reality of total deprivation. It has led to a breakdown of communication, the Them and Us syndrome, and cumulative deterioration. Eventually, conflict must come. As conditions in the inner areas of our cities become worse, symptoms of deprivation, such as crime and vandalism, assume exaggerated importance, and remedies move from normal municipal programmes to the imposition of law and order. In the end, we arrive at the paradox of using soldiers to keep the peace.

If a lever has to be applied to the political process, then it must be applied to the very bottom and the pressure exerted from the very top. Single minded willpower from national politicians is a necessary part of any solution. The same is true of professional intervention. Only at the top can one really resolve the dilemma of majority rule and minority rights. Professional advocacy must not lie entirely within the province of younger activists: it must be a matter of equal priority for the presidents and councils of our environmental institutions.

That such initiative has been lacking is all too evident. In general, we haven't even perceived the problem of urban multiple deprivation. The enlightened public is reasonably sensitised to individual problems: 'homelessness,' 'poverty,' 'unemployment.' But there is no clear public awareness that such deprivations become a different problem and assume an entirely new dimension when compounded in specific urban territories. It seems difficult for people to grasp a realistic image of urban multiple deprivation as a place and as a special problem. Pressure groups, charities, academics, and government intervene in matters as diverse as child care, housing, employment, and income maintenance, only to find that the collective pressures of inner urban areas negate the remedial effects of intervention in any one problem. Puzzled councillors sanction massive expenditures and end up with worse problems than they sought to solve. Society ignores or resents the apparent 'rejection' of assistance by the deprived, and the only prevailing concept of multiple deprivation is that of a sin committed by people unable to consume the special goods offered by professional caretakers.

I think the only real experience a professional can share with such people is a most profound sense of powerlessness. The revelation of working in deprived urban areas is to see supplementary benefit as a ceiling over the head rather than a springboard under the feet. Unemployment benefit sustains a man temporarily, but if his unemployment problem is also the school problem, the health, housing, poverty, and race problem, then that benefit is neither remedial, structural, nor adequate. Studied in depth, even public intervention can become a means of negative discrimination. The most conscientious officers can have a dehumanising effect on the poor.

So it's essential that, before proposing positive discrimination for such areas, we should recognise our

present negative discrimination against them. Perhaps it would be salutary to stop withdrawing essential services from those in greatest total need before exhorting them to 'help themselves.' I would be glad if 'participation' had taught the educated how they discriminate against those with no education at all: if, in our emphasis on 'self help' society, we would learn to stop putting every conceivable barrier in the way of the urban poor. And while, in the face of a total process of neglect, no one professional discipline can jump on its sovereign white charger and sustain an advocacy role, professional institutions do have a common language. They profess to care, so they ought to be able to find some common task on which to come together and lead.

Another major limitation of advocacy in urban ghettos is the absence of any relevant bureaucracy to deal with. The more innovative the advocate, voluntary organisation, action group, or official experiment, the less able they are to relate to local management structures. For the most part, the latter have evolved in functional departments with weak lateral communications to serve majority areas. And both militancy and complacency have diverted attention from local mismanagement. For example, extreme militancy makes the poor less politically invisible, but when it comes to institutional change, it often achieves the reverse, because it obscures the essentially nonradical nature of the solutions, and so has an inhibiting effect on relevant public action. Complacency, on the other hand, always carries the pious hope that poor people can transform themselves without disturbing the status quo.

Positive social planning is therefore the final duty of responsible management. But as J.K. Galbraith has said, "This is a responsibility that is now assumed meanly, reluctantly, and as something unnatural." Put on an old suit and stand in a queue for supplementary benefits, and you will get the same message. (Or to quote from SNAP case files: "We are not saying there is cohabitation. We stopped payment because the situation could leave the commission open to criticism") If social planning is the major modern responsibility of city management, then one must conclude that the social disintegration implicit in Munich, Liverpool, Brussels, and Belfast is a manifestation of the mindless mismanagement of urban affairs.

In the United States, 'model cities' have been the most dramatic attempt to make city management more relevant. The significant failure of this official advocacy has been its inability to relate successfully to city management structures. In Philadelphia 'demonstration area,' I found complete lack of coordination between federal and city agencies, between city agencies themselves, and between federal agencies themselves. Millions of dollars in easy profits had accrued to speculators through federal guaranteed mortgages. Far from spectacular progress being made in improving devastated areas of human suffering, residents have been exploited. In Washington D.C., 'comprehensive code enforcement areas' have become a joke. And in New York, Lindsay's model cities have had to fight the inertia of Lindsay's majority administration. The biggest model city budget in America has been unable to command the dedication of existing departmentalised structures. In the light of the obstacles encountered by model city directors, what chance has the architectural advocacy of small local community design workshops?

In brief, to solve one problem in the urban ghetto is but to succumb to another, and this intractable interaction baffles the bureaucratic mind. In such areas, the case for project management structures with strong lateral communications is overwhelming, but city management has no compelling reasons to establish these while the wider electorate finds things ticking over reasonably well. So everywhere the problems continue to worsen, and local advocacy cannot find a coherent interface with local bureaucracy. As John Dyckman says, "The dilemma for social planning leadership is clearly not bureaucracy or grass roots, but what bureaucracy?"

Because of these political and administrative difficulties, urban advocacy has been forced into 'low impact' neighbourhood schemes. A disappointingly large part of advocacy planning has been confined to the execution of projects at the bottom of the scale rather than at the top (where impact could be made on public policies, legal enactments and executive decisions), and this has limited their success. At the American Institute of Architects, the community services department exists more as a sop to younger members than as a firm guarantee of institutional commitment. To be sure, architects, planners, doctors, and lawyers are now in the ghettos, in small numbers, doing what they can. But it is not too harsh to suggest that advocacy, to date, has done more to ennoble planning schools and enliven professional magazines than to deliver the goods to those in real need. And this state of affairs will continue until the enthusiasm and energy shown by younger professionals coincides with moderate impact programmes and high impact policies at city and national level.

The urban crisis is also a crisis of technology. So, finally, we have to face the technical limitations of professional advocacy. The fact is, there are no technical means of arriving at absolute conclusions. Architects, for example, are expected to build safe and pleasant structures, and the rudiments of micro environmental plumbing are clear enough: we can make useful correlations between overcrowding, basic amenities, and other aspects of social malaise. But in the widest sense, the relationship between built environment and human behaviour is bound to remain a thimbleful of guesses. And in the last analysis, housing has little to do with arbitrary standards inherited from medical and engineering traditions. It has everything to do with who occupies it — or, more precisely, with whether the occupants are winning or losing in their search for wealth, or power, or prestige.

The basic problem in making improvement legislation work has little to do with strictly architectural techniques. It's excellent if physical artefacts are beautiful and sound, but if they don't form part of a social ladder, they have failed the purpose of the advocate. All social legislation (including housing acts and planning acts) is useful only to the extent that it facilitates mobility. In so far as housing and physical planning strategies, and the whole range of welfare benefits, subsidies, and social services, do not structurally combine to alter the prospects of the trapped urban poor, then we remain advocates who treat symptoms rather than disease.

I conclude that the real limitations of advocacy planning in deprived areas are technical, administrative, and political. Technical, because we use artefacts, statutory measures, and arbitrary standards of doubtful relevance to problems of social mobility. Administrative, because advocates can rarely relate to any bureaucracy relevant to the special needs of areas of multiple deprivation. Political, because we have demonstrated an unawareness of the seriousness of the problem and a total lack of will to resolve it.

Each one of us will find different answers. At SNAP in Liverpool, we have promoted a corporate planning process from which health, education, housing, and employment programmes reach out to involve every man, woman, and child from month to month and year to year. We have advocated a more relevant bureaucracy, with project management structures tailormade for interactional problem solving. We have pushed forward schemes to involve political heavyweights in inner areas. And we have made detailed proposals for linking inner and outer local agencies to take some of the burden of innovation from the ratepayers.

In the end, the ghetto must be seen as a problem of our total urban culture, and the advocate must achieve solidarity with his fellow professionals and plead at each level of decision making. So many say that historical and political circumstances are so different in America that we can draw no lessons from the plight of its ghettos. But everywhere I have travelled in the last two years, I have been struck by the similarities of actual experience. And after returning home to the obscenity of our own urban junkyards, I compared the political squabbling of the 'great debate' on Europe with the reality of experience: regardless of cultural traditions; languages, and national frontiers, for many decades capital and labour have been moving into an area between Birmingham, London, Paris, and Hamburg, a megalopolis now even more important than that between Boston, New York, and Washington. This urban complex promises the same beauties and the same infinite horrors of the post industrial American city. It is to this self same supranational pit of core cities that our final losers are consigned. While we can foresee solutions for the Mezzogiorno and the Highlands and Islands, no urban policy exists to alleviate the misery and reverse the social disintegration of major cities.

The limitations of advocacy are a measure of the force of current political trends. The more formidable these become, the greater the challenge will be. It is one challenge which this Institute, as a whole, and our society, as a whole, must not fail to accept.