The 1960’s in America were a tumultuous time and the question of race, resonating in the streets did not escape planner’s attention. At around the same time that Paul Davidoff’s article “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning” called for a non-partisan approach to planning, considering the plight of the poor, John Kain’s work “Housing Segregation, Negro Employment and Metropolitan Decentralization” highlighted the dispersal of low-wage jobs to the suburbs away from poor central city residents. While both authors work have been instrumental in shaping planning, forty years after their release similar problems persist.

Over the last several years, I have been interested in the ways that public transportation might be able to alleviate the problems caused by the spatial mismatch and its more recent counterpart, jobs-housing balance. Examining the location of low-wage jobs and low-income housing in King County, Washington, I have found that, for the most part, it is not possible to make the journey to work trip using transit (Bassok, 2004). This finding is mirrored in other cities such as Portland or Atlanta (Sanchez, 1999, 2004, Taylor 1995).

As the trend of the suburbanization of jobs and the central city location of low-income and minority residents continue to be a vexing issue, solutions such as affordable housing or improved education, which confront the heart of the issue, seem out of reach. Though utilizing transit may fall under Peter Senge’s “Shifting the Burden” categorization by fixing a symptom as opposed to finding a solution to the root causes (racism and housing
affordability), there would be a missed opportunity in allowing increasing expenditure on transit for the sake of congestion relief to continue without considering accessibility. This paper specifically addresses the role of planners as advocates within the framework of spatial mismatch and public transportation.

Advocacy Planning:

At a time when citizen participation in the planning process was very low, Paul Davidoff’s 1965 article, “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning” called for a change in planning away from working on master plans and towards advocacy. His idea being, that as advocates, planners could develop multiple plans for communities that would compete with each other, as opposed to the top down approach of technicians handing a ‘solution’ to the city. This new role for the planner would shift the focus away from physical to social planning and induce public debate over the various opinions by informing the public and engaging in politics. Specifically, planners would represent the vision of low-income families or their own ideals, fight poverty and advocate for “what they deem proper.”

A 1993 session of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning revisited Davidoff’s article, with various commentaries published in a 1994 issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association. While all of the authors applaud his ideals they point out that planners are only effective in advocacy on the neighborhood or subarea scale (Krumholtz, 1994). This is partially true because people understand when you say 'the
neighborhood good’ while the good of the city is more abstract. Moreover, since planning events are fought over by politicians with their own objectives, the planner’s role becomes more of a technical advisor or researcher (Marris, 1994). This is reconciled when a planner represents a community in their action, which turns the focus into the process of planning rather than competition between plans. The process becomes a negotiation between competing interests but is not legally binding and thus faces the prospect of becoming simply planning for the sake of planning.

It appears that as advocates, planners are quite capable of affecting immediate change on specific projects such as designating the location of a waste treatment center or not having a new road cut through an existing neighborhood while bigger issues are left to the master plan. As citizen participation is increasingly codified into law, a larger number of planner are concerned with poor neighborhoods and government is more liberal, (perhaps the success of Davidoff’s work) it is argued that plans are not “very significant in determining how the critical urban and rural issues are being dealt with” (Hartman, 1994). The biggest strength of the advocate is to connect with communities while the pluralist nature behind the theory is set aside.

Advocacy, focusing on social processes largely ignores the impact of physical developments sponsored by government intervention (Hayden, 1994). Though city plans have influence in shaping the city, the effects of federally subsidized mortgages and highway construction shape suburban growth, inaccessible to poor families. By the mid 1990’s billions of dollars were spent on highways and mass transportation to subsidize
access to central business districts while only a few millions were allocated to connecting inner-city poor with suburban jobs (Cochran 1994).

Spatial Mismatch:

Post World War II highway construction and suburbanization created segregation in the housing market along with decentralization of employment centers. The impact of these changes instigated a situation by which minority and low-wage workers faced higher unemployment, lower wages and longer commute times. These combined effects became known as the spatial mismatch hypothesis. Initiated by John Kain in 1968, and continued by many researchers since, this has been a topic of much debate. Though housing and education policies attempt to address the problem, public transportation solutions seem to offer considerably more immediate relief in their ability to gain support public support. However, transportation strategies may only have marginal affects without at the same time providing affordable housing near employment, better schools, job training and easily available information about transit (Cochran, 1994).

Focusing solely on transportation may create a situation of shifting the burden. This type of situation is occurs when solutions are offered to symptoms of a larger problem, worsening the initial issue, (Senge, 1990). In this case, the problematic symptom is that low-income residents do not live close to low-wage jobs. The fundamental solution lies in a restructuring of housing, offering affordable housing in the suburbs that poor persons could afford and in improving the education system so that they may be able to obtain
better employment. However, as these types of remedies are costly, require institutional and social change and take long to implement they are not easily attainable. Instead, a symptomatic solution of improving transit is offered to improve access to low-wage suburban jobs. Unfortunately, this type of solution may cause negative side effects. As transit is improved, more poor people might remain in the city centers, while availability of employees could further drive demand for low-wage work in the periphery. If this were to occur, the situation of long work commutes for low wages will only worsen.

Though transportation solutions by themselves are ill equipped to deal with equity issues, there are several things planners, as advocates can do to improve the situation. First, there should be an insistence for consistency between suburban and urban plans on a regional level. While each jurisdiction, with its own interests, can not be forced to zone higher density housing and will not be easily swayed to do so, it is the role of the planner to point out the regional benefits of cooperation since “regional income equity coincides with prosperity, whereas high central-city poverty coincides with low metrowide economic performance” (Sternberg, 2002). Second, as is the case under the Washington State Growth Management Act, concurrency between facilities and new development should include consideration of proper transportation for those traveling without automobiles. Finally, citizen participation should be increased to involve considerations of type and location of services instead of just focusing on where not to place a new service or the impacts that service will create. It is precisely this role of the planner as an instigator of citizen participation that may empower poor people to understand the
legitimacy of the process and begin to combat the problems they are faced with (Arnstein, 1969).

Though advances in participation and awareness of the spatial mismatch may make current conditions better than they have been in the past, the issue is still very much alive today. In “Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism & New Routes to Equity,” published earlier this year, the editors preface suggests that:

Not having reliable public transportation can mean the difference between gainful employment and a life of poverty in the ghettos and barrios. Since most do not have cars, transportation is even more crucial for the vulnerable population that is moving from welfare to work. Training, skills, and jobs are meaningless if millions of Americans can’t get to work. Of course, it would be ideal if job centers were closer to the homes of inner-city residents, but few urban core neighborhoods have experienced an economic revitalization that can rival the current jobs found in the suburbs. Transportation remains a major stumbling block for many to achieve self-sufficiency. It boils down to “no transportation, no job,” and, more often than not, public transportation does not connect urban residents to jobs.

Though much work has been done to contradict the hypothesis, it remains supported by numerous studies. Leonard (1987), Jencks and Mayer (1990) among others support the notion that the restriction of minority and low-income housing to the central city limits those workers choices of employment. Holzer (1991) and Ihlanfeldt (1992) examining national employment data over a decade, found that job access to minority and low-income workers is considerably more limited to those living in a central city versus those in the suburbs. Their studies further find that low-skilled jobs receive higher wages in the suburbs than in the city but real wages actually lower due to high travel costs.
Taylor, (1995) noticed considerably longer commute times for persons with low income attributed to a reliance on public transportation and a lesser need for educational attainment in low-skilled jobs. Alexis and DiTomaso, (1983) discovered that access to public transportation markedly hindered low-income workers from attaining employment. Their findings indicate that access to an automobile is the primary factor in the mismatch. That is, low-skilled workers with access to an automobile could find and retain a job while those who had to do so utilizing public transportation could not. The notion that the spatial mismatch has considerably more severe impacts for those relying on public transportation is further substantiated by Gordon et al (1989), who found little variation in travel time by automobile across racial and economic classes.

Taking Kain’s work a step further, recent authors have left the racial tones of the spatial mismatch hypothesis behind and have started working on the concept of jobs-housing balance. Cervero (1989, 1996), suggests that by having people live closer to where they work there will be a noticeable decrease in vehicle miles traveled. The implications of this concept are that there will be a reduction in air pollution due to fewer tailpipe emissions and a reduction in traffic congestion.

The main crux of the jobs-housing argument is that the mismatch is less attributed to employment and more to housing. Levine (1998) argues that the low-density zoning practices held by many suburban communities are the root of the problem. While he acknowledges that not all people would be interested in living in high density urban
centers, he believes that if this kind of development was encouraged, the transportation systems in place would be able to function better, thereby reducing the mismatch.

Recent studies on affordability and mixed use housing suggest that while affordability would be an issue, this strategy could improve the mismatch. Burton, (2003) shows that mixed use developments reduce poverty and segregation and increase access to public services. Affordable mixed use developments have also been gaining support. In Portland, acclaimed architect Frank Gehry designed a 180 unit development while Ted Smith designs ‘go homes’ that share amenities, (Libby, 2001, Landecker, 1993).

The real costs of transportation vary by a person’s income level. For those with low incomes the costs of transportation may become too high in respect to both time and money to travel from the city to the suburbs. In a study regarding travel time perceptions by unemployed workers, McQuaid et al (2001), found a high degree of variance between the willingness to travel longer, type of jobs and demographics. The main finding was that certain types of people, namely those that were female, had children in the household or lived in high unemployment areas were less willing to traverse long distances to work. While it is relatively easy to attribute the attitudes of mothers to a responsibility to the household, the attitudes of workers living in areas of high unemployment are associated with discouragement or lack of belief that there would be employment elsewhere.

Though not explicitly stated as such, Kain’s work clearly falls within the realm of advocacy planning. Davidoff, (1965), suggests that physical planning is not the only role
of planners, who should also be concerned with social issues. Spatial-Mismatch brings up the debate over the effects of physical planning, (building housing and road networks) on a specific minority. Much of the analysis over the mismatch has remained in academia. However, some specific work stemming from it has directly benefited disadvantaged populations. Sawicki and Moody (2000), found that Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants in Atlanta were not able to find jobs due to lack of access to transit. Their work utilized demographic analysis and GIS to show the precise locations of welfare recipients and associated jobs to offer route and small vehicle concepts for a jobs access/reverse commute program in Atlanta.

Building on this type of work, the role of an advocate transportation planner should focus on bridging the gap between affordable mixed use development and equitable transit systems. At the same time, planners should continue to be technicians analyzing the effects of the spatial mismatch and understanding the locations of low-income housing and low-wage jobs. As new public transportation projects are designed, they should fight to include the needs of the poor as well as get poor communities involved in the process.
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