

*Band*

Kennikat Press  
National University Publications  
Interdisciplinary Urban Series

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**URBAN PROFESSIONALS  
AND THE  
FUTURE OF THE  
METROPOLIS**

Edited by  
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1980

National University Publications  
KENNIKAT PRESS // 1980  
Port Washington, N.Y. // London

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### NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATION, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AND THE ASSUMPTION OF SCARCITY: The Problem of Equity and Justice

Just over a decade ago, the older neighborhoods of most cities seemed alive with signs of change. There were new federal programs, organizing activities, plans for redevelopment, and people with hope for a new future.

Today, it appears to many observers that the urban neighborhood is nearly dead. They report a sense of powerlessness, expressed in abandoned buildings and charred vacant lots. They note a frustrated anger in the soaring crime rates. And they see a resigned hopelessness in the long lines at the unemployment-compensation office.

If the urban neighborhood was the New Frontier of the 1960s, in 1975 the neighborhood is usually described as a devastated landscape characterized by impotence, anger, and hopelessness. While this popular view is accurate in some respects, it is also misleading because it suggests that the city neighborhood is dying while the rest of the nation is vital and growing. A closer analysis, however, suggests that the sickening symptoms of the urban neighborhood afflict the entire body politic of the country.

Who would say, after all, that most American people are without a sense of powerlessness? Most opinion surveys record a fast-growing sense of general impotence. One recent study, for example, finds that only one in four Americans feels she or he has the power to affect their own future.

Who would say that most American people are not angry? In the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, they have been plunged into something called "stagflation." To many people, the country seems to conspire against its own ideals and prospects. They feel betrayed and angry.

Who would say that most American people don't have a sense of hopelessness? The levels of participation in civic, governmental, and electoral activities appear to have diminished recently. We hear many people who were previously active citizens now saying, in resignation, "It won't make any difference."

It is important to recognize, then, that the very same malady that we note in urban neighborhoods is a national disease. It is unlikely, therefore, that we will be able to cure the neighborhood without looking at the problem of the entire body politic.

Perhaps the central fact that best explains the national disease is our belated recognition that there may be limits to growth. We are slowly understanding that we have limited natural resources, limits to the growth of our gross national product, limits to the benefits of technology, and even limits to the service economy. This recognition strikes at the heart of our traditional national assumptions. If the ultimate good is growth, then a society with limits is bad. No wonder many of us, rich, poor, and middle class, feel powerless, angry, and hopeless.

It is very difficult for political leaders to deal with our frustration in the face of limits. They, and we, are used to the politics of distributing more. We are now faced with the untried politics of dividing up less.

There are two critical issues that affect urban neighborhoods as we begin the politics of dividing less.

First, older urban neighborhoods are the homeland of people who have always had less. They are people experienced in dealing with limits. They have developed personal life styles and community networks that enable people to "make do." As a society, it may be that we should learn from the urban ethnic neighborhood how to conserve, rehabilitate, relate, and share. To do this, we may have to forego some of our commitments to growth-oriented planners and managers and reexamine the characteristics of older neighborhoods so that the proper policies for their support can be developed.

Second, as we engage in the politics of limits, the people in urban neighborhoods will be challenged once again to demand basic justice and equity. It was one thing for America to seek justice by distributing its *surplus* to the less advantaged. Programmatically, that form of justice was called the Anti-Poverty Program.

It is a very different thing to seek justice when we have limited resources. And yet, that is what justice is all about. It was never justice in the first place to deal with the disadvantaged by taking more for our-

selves and giving them a piece of the surplus. Justice is the equitable distribution of a limited resource. While our resources have always been limited, the ideology of growth denied that fact. We substituted surplus for justice. Now that we perceive the reality of limits, the people in urban neighborhoods are faced with a struggle for a real share of the society rather than the pieces of its growing edges.

It is clear that the people in urban neighborhoods have had enough struggle. They don't need more. But it is also clear that they must continue to struggle in order to survive—much less to achieve justice and equity. This reality is not news to them. It is an old story. Indeed, amid the prophecies of doomed urban neighborhoods, they have developed an increasing number of community-based efforts to survive and renew. Outsiders generally call these efforts self-help groups—a label that may mean that outsiders don't control, profit by, or understand them.

These groups, their activities and relationships, are not new. They are indigenous forms of asserting community identity and problem solving. What is new is the fact that some outsiders—governmental, business, and academic people—now see them because there is no longer a veil of externally imposed programs that masked the basic capacities of neighborhoods to persevere. As these neighborhood self-help efforts continue, it is important that they be understood in terms of their potential *and* their limits.

Their potential is related to two facts. First, they express the neighborhood's own problem definitions. Second, they represent the problem-solving creativity of neighborhood people. In both respects, they differ from the categorical federal, state, and local programs that define the problem and the solution from afar. These self-help efforts implicitly deny the expertise of planners and managers as central to problem defining and problem solving.

On the other hand, these neighborhood efforts have two critical limits—the *economic resources* and the *legal authority* to achieve their goals. These limits are no small matter. But they *are* the limits established and maintained by the very officials and businessmen who decry the decay of urban neighborhoods.

The hard fact of the matter is that if we are to enable the capacities of urban neighborhoods in a society of limits, governmental officials and business leaders will have radically to revise their assumptions and practices regarding the economics and authority of urban neighborhoods. If we do not have the wisdom to undertake the revision, then urban

neighborhood groups must struggle to change our minds. And if they fail, we will all fail.

If we are to alter our course so that we enable the capacities of urban neighborhoods, the revised agenda for governmental leaders requires two major changes:

1. The process of metropolitan growth must now be recognized as a negative factor in a zero-sum game. Every new shopping center, industrial park, and new town on the edge of the city is a use of limited capital that guts the city and hastens urban abandonment. Urban governmental leaders must now use all their powers to insure that any further peripheral growth has a positive tax trade-off for the city—or fight against the development process. A good model for urban politicians is the elected official from rural America. He or she has been a master at trading limited political power for the advantage of rural people—7 percent of our population.

The urban governmental leader must also get tough about using his or her political capacity to stop the flight of job-creating enterprise and investment capital from the city. This is a serious business that requires not only incentives but probably demands restrictive legislation.

2. We must seriously experiment with relocating some of the legal authority of city governments so that local neighborhoods have some of the powers now assigned to city hall. We have widespread evidence that the citizen-participation model of centralized governments has intrinsic limits in producing involvement and responsibility at the neighborhood level. We need something like neighborhood governments if the self-help capacities of neighborhood people are to be effectively developed. This is not to say that all powers should be localized, but the legal power to control basic services and land use may be essential to enabling neighborhood capacity. As the state and city divide their authority for the commonweal, so it is time for the city to divide its authority with the neighborhoods if the city is to survive. Once again, this decision requires us to depend much less upon growth-oriented planners and managers who are trained in ideologies that require centralized systems in order to reach so-called economies of scale.

If the business community is to enable viable urban neighborhoods, at least three basic revisions are necessary:

1. Financial institutions will need to allocate a significant percentage of

their resources for neighborhood and subregional urban development. The problem with this proposal is clear—there is not an adequate return on investment in these neighborhoods. But as we see decreasing demand for capital in the suburban periphery, the new market potential of a society of limits can be the renewal and maintenance of existing neighborhoods and subregions. If this prospect is not developed by the business community, then we can expect more government control of capital flow. Indeed, the current federal and state legislation requiring disclosure of the source of deposits and location of mortgages made by savings and loan institutions may be the precursor of increased regulation over all financial institutions that fail to foresee the importance of conserving neighborhoods.

2. As suburban growth slows, business leaders must recognize that their manpower and markets are no longer at the edge of the city. In a society of limits, they will have to deal with limited manpower pools and markets. So the city and its neighborhoods and schools must be viable, or their future will be limited. Businessmen need productive systems for markets. But if markets are not expanding, then their self-interest is in the redevelopment of market capacity in previously neglected areas—urban neighborhoods.

3. The business community has based much of its growth upon the development of consumer technologies. We have used little of our inventiveness to develop technologies for neighborhood maintenance and development. We have provided people television and gas-cataling autos, but we have not developed technologies to maintain urban housing, create cheap solar-energy heating systems or urban systems for food production.

Both business and governmental leaders must also intensify one item on the old agenda if urban neighborhoods are to survive. As a nation, we officially recognized in the 1960s our tragic history of racial exploitation. We enacted laws that could make a difference. Nonetheless, we have begun to ignore them as our limits become obvious. There is no possibility for urban neighborhood renewal in most cities if we revert to institutional racism "as usual." Indeed, the *most* critical issue in maintaining or redeveloping many urban neighborhoods is insuring a just income for minority people. Once again, the critical issue we often face is justice—not planning, programs, or services.

Finally, it may be necessary for the people in urban neighborhoods to consider two questions that have not been readily apparent as they have attempted to help themselves.

First is the lure of services. In many urban neighborhoods, where people are poor, individuals find it difficult to help themselves because they have inadequate incomes. Therefore, they are often sick, ill educated, and unemployed. The traditional response is to provide more services rather than a decent income. Sometimes, neighborhood people see their self-interest as having more services in order to treat their poorness. The ultimate expression of this response is the multiservice center. Understandable as it is, the poor basically need income, not more services. One is not a substitute for the other, unless the poor are *employed* by the service system rather than *reated* by it.

Second, the residents of urban neighborhoods may not recognize the fact that there is the possibility of a new political alliance. The people who live in urban neighborhoods are usually tied to the city. For them, the suburb is not an economic possibility. Because of the developing limits of our economy, there are increasing numbers of middle-class people who are also tied to the city, but tied by their *jobs*. These people include city employees, such as teachers, policemen, and firemen. They now have much less chance to change jobs because the economy isn't growing. But their income is tied to the tax base and general viability of the city. These groups are politically powerful and could soon be important allies in the political struggles to stop the flight of jobs and capital from the city. These groups also have multimillion-dollar pension funds that represent important investment capital which could be used for neighborhood revitalization that could increase the tax base for their own salaries. Indeed, it was the New York City teachers' pension fund that recently bailed out the city because the teachers recognized that their income was related to the city's future.

In summary, we are a society of limits. Our frustrations are not limited to urban neighborhoods. But we are in great danger of killing the city because our governmental and business leaders are so hooked on growth that they can't adjust to the new America of limits. On the other hand, the people in the neighborhoods have lived with limits all their lives. They need leaders who can enable their capacities. Their basic problem may be government and business leaders who aren't prepared to face the new frontier of limits—a frontier that has long been the home of the people who live in urban neighborhoods.