SCHOOL PLANNING IN NEW YORK DURING THE 1950s

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I believe that the most useful work I have done, in terms of its contribution to human welfare, was in New York City school planning during the 1950s.

In the late 1940s and particularly in 1950, the New York City Planning Commission retained a substantial staff of professional city planners to work in the City Planning Department on a long-range vision of the city's future and to evaluate current proposals in light of that long-range vision. At that time the city's public school plant was in genuinely terrible shape, and the decision was quickly made to concentrate primary attention on its renovation and improvement. For example, some 300 New York City public schools were actually non-fireproof—and these were by no means the worst public schools in the city from an educational viewpoint; for some reason the older fireproof schools, built around the turn of the century, were much worse educationally.[1] Fortunately, this was one area in city public policy where the paralyzing dominance of Robert Moses[2] did not prevail; even though the school problem involved large-scale public construction, for some reason he took no special interest in it.

The decision to concentrate on schools was a wise one. The decision on where to put new public schools is of course one of the most sensitive parts of city public policy. It was rather surprising that so much of this power was turned over to a bunch of young city planners, who were ready

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1. The planning director at the Board of Education used to comment that the architects of the city's early fireproof schools (the so-called "A buildings") must have really hated children. Of course the serious school planning work was done largely by our school planning supervisors and their staffs. I was glad to see that two distinguished planners who served as such supervisors were able to attend the *Festschrift*—Sy Schulman and Dick May; I appreciated their coming.

2. *See* ROBERT A. CARO, THE POWER BROKER: ROBERT MOSES AND THE FALL OF NEW YORK (1974).

to assure everybody that they knew what to do.[3] The explanation was obvious: several other agencies had recently tried dealing with the school problem, with results widely recognized as disastrous; and the new help was actually welcomed.[4]

When the Planning Commission was set up in 1938, a principal aim was to limit log-rolling on the Board of Estimate (the city's governing body)—a previously prevailing practice, in which each Borough President would command the support of the other Borough Presidents to get through a favorite project. The Planning Commission's powers were exceptionally broad. In one of the most important of these, the Commission had the power for the first time to put up a proposed project for public hearing—and after that it was fairly difficult to remove that project from actual scheduling and construction. Since I was in charge of this planning staff, the result was an extraordinary experience in dealing with sensitive aspects of city public policy, providing a wonderful background for the eventual teaching of city planning principles. When the Wagner administration came into power in the mid-1950s, the primary emphasis on schools was considerably reinforced by real support from City Hall; and as a result the annual capital budget allocation for new and renovated public schools ran about one hundred million dollars a year through the mid- and late-1950s. In other words, in that decade approximately one billion dollars in proposed new school construction, for about 200 new schools, went across my desk.[5] That is real money. Quite a few projects in this period were intended to complete the City's

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3. The success of our school planning work was due in large part to the strong support of Commissioner Lawrence Orton, one of the leading planners in the country, who was one of Mayor LaGuardia's original appointees to the City Planning Commission when it was formed in 1938 and who survived miraculously, in the jungle of the New York City bureaucracy, until he retired in 1972.

4. Planning for public education in New York City in the 1950s depended on collaboration (and often conflicts) among three agencies: the Board of Education, which annually proposed a capital building program, and two other agencies which would review that program; the Planning Commission; and the Budget Bureau. The Board of Education, while represented by some good people (mostly reformed teachers who had taken a course in statistics), was notoriously subject to near-total confusion—no one knew what anybody else was doing—it was perhaps the worst city agency in this respect. Our part of the Planning Commission was staffed with professional city planners with a wide variety of skills, many with planning degrees from MIT and Columbia. The Budget Bureau, supposedly the Mayor's right arm, was in fact an independent political power in its own right, staffed largely by old-line city engineers with the right-wing biases characteristic of that type. (Thorstein Veblen's notion of engineers as the harbingers of the future was obviously not based on New York City experience.)

5. As it happens, by chance I was one of those who participated in setting the actual figure for the Wagner administration, at $100 million a year—in an informal discussion with the Mayor's chief educational aide, just as Mayor Wagner was about to take power.

conversion to a 6-3-3 system.[6] About half of the rest was for new buildings in rapidly-developing areas;[7] the other half was to replace some of the dreadful old buildings (including one from the 1850s).

The planning mechanisms were complicated. School construction decisions were normally started by a proposal from the Board of Education, but the final decision to build was in fact the result of a long negotiating process among the Board of Education, the City Planning Commission, and the Budget Bureau. In those days, the Budget Bureau was notoriously one of the strong points in the city government for the less progressive forces in New York—specifically, it was a center of power for the ward-heeling branches of the Democratic Party, together with the parochial school authorities.

A few specific instances will give some idea of the world in which I worked for those ten years. The instances reported here are among the more colorful ones, but I assure you that they are by no means atypical—they give a good idea of the political and social forces at work.

THE FLUSHING JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

In one of the more striking instances, there had been substantial new residential construction (mostly six-story semi-fireproof apartments) in the Flushing area of central and northcentral Queens—an area not yet converted to the junior high school 6-3-3 system. In this situation the appropriate move was obvious—to build a new junior high school, pull the seventh and eighth grades out of the elementary schools, and thereby accomplish two goals with a single construction project—to convert the area to the junior high school system, and to relieve the overload in the elementary and high schools. By then this situation was a fairly familiar one, and seemed perfectly straightforward. The Board's proposal to build a new junior high school in Flushing was thus generally agreed upon, relatively easily. The problem came in the second stage with the question of site selection. A quick first look at the situation made it clear that there would be an argument about the site, for in the general area there were two obvious potential sites located on still-vacant land. One was in the

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6. In a 6-3-3 system, the lower grades (1-6) are in elementary schools; grades 7-8-9, in junior high schools; and grades 10-12, in high schools. Building a new junior high school could thus relieve overcrowding in both an elementary school and a high school.

7. In previous decades the city had chased the flood of kids by building a lot of new schools in lower Brooklyn and in parts of Queens related to upper Nassau County. In the 1950s many of these schools were now under-utilized, as the population stabilized in the areas nearby, and the city shifted to pursuing the kids primarily into new areas of Queens.

center of the concentration of school pupils, and would be relatively inexpensive as New York City school sites go—perhaps costing something in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand dollars. The alternative possible site was a tract allocated to, but never developed for, public park purposes, so that it remained sitting there vacant and in public ownership—but far from the center of the school population. It did not require any serious experience to predict that the Planning Commission (and its staff) would advocate the first of these sites, and the Budget Bureau would prefer the other one, not involving any further cost to the city; and that lineup soon became clear. What was astonishing was the amount of attention paid by the Budget Bureau staff to this argument. Under our normal (and long-established) procedure, one member of each agency staff would be assigned to work on a specific school site. However, in this situation the Budget Bureau kept adding additional staff men, one after another, to carry out additional studies on the background of the problem and the site—in the process making several studies which had never been done before in other similar situations. (And usually doing them wrong—the Budget people were engineers, not statisticians—so that our staff would then have to do it over and show the Budget Bureau the right way to make such a study.) As the summer and fall of 1953 proceeded, the staff allocations from both Planning and Budget to that site study kept increasing, almost weekly; by the end of the summer, the entire Planning Commission school planning staff (five persons) was working on this one school site, making all sorts of not very relevant studies, and about half of our long-range land use planning staff had also been dragged into the argument. In other words, the debate on a single school site was dominating the entire long-range planning program for the city. We could not figure out what was really going on. By then we knew from experience that each agency had a traditional reaction to a particular type of situation; when one of the other agencies deviated from its normal pattern, that meant that some political fix was in, and we had to figure out what. But this performance did not make any sense by anything we knew. Normally in a situation like this, which was not really worth all that kind of energy, one of the agencies would have given up before things reached anything like this stage, and a decision would have been made. However, for some reason here the Budget people were willing to do almost anything to win; and because the Planning Commission then had a new Chairman, who was always expressing his puzzlement as to why his Planning staff was constantly in conflict with the Budget Bureau staff—which after all controlled their own salaries—it became a sort of grudge fight in which it was really important to win for prestige purposes.

After this had been going on literally for several months, I remember deciding, late one night in Princeton, that we simply had to get the issue settled; as it was, everything was paralyzed. When I came into the office the next morning, I called in my staff man who was originally assigned to deal with this problem, and we spent about an hour going over all the figures, trying to figure out what on earth was going on. After working through all the figures *again*, I asked my staff man, "What on earth is this all about?" He shook his head sadly, and commented that none of this made any sense—there was no way to explain the bureaucratic behavior. All of the sudden it came to me: there *was* one possible situation, which—if it turned out to be the situation in this particular case—would at least explain the bureaucratic behavior. In those years we had a standard arrangement where annually one of our people would go up to the archdiocese and get a list of parochial schools under construction, or at least under active consideration by the parochial authorities, which of course could affect the need for a proposed public school. I turned to my staff man and said, "Look, do me a favor—run a check to see if by any chance there is a parochial school under construction in this area which we don't know about." My staff man gave me the typical staff-man look which said, "Well, if the boss says so, I suppose I have to do it." Half an hour later he was back, and that was the answer. Somehow that year our liaison man had missed the fact that there was a parochial school under construction in that area. The Budget people were expending huge amounts of city staff money (theirs, and also ours) in order to try to give the parochial school an advantage in competing for students, by quite clearly misplacing the public school in an area more difficult for pupils to reach. By sheer intuition I had guessed the correct answer to explain the whole situation. One day later, the Budget authorities threw in the towel and accepted the Planning Commission site. Apparently no one wanted a big public fight on that issue.

This was a remarkable example of an odd principle—that sometimes a public improvement (a school) can be found by purely deductive reasoning: the parochial school had to be there, because there was no other explanation for the bureaucratic behavior—and it turned out that it was.

JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL 159 MANHATTAN

In another extraordinary example of New York school planning, the Board of Education managed to get two sites cleared for a single school. This was an instance resulting from the annual battle over school capacity in East Harlem. The school needs there were simply enormous, normally requiring one new school almost every year, in part because of the

extraordinary concentration of big public housing projects—and therefore of potential public school kids—in one of the city's oldest and most worn-out areas. The Budget representatives would normally oppose such an increase in school capacity, with a series of obviously juggled figures, plus the argument that more school expenditures should go to "taxpaying neighborhoods," by which they meant non-minority areas. (The great needs were usually in those minority areas.) This instance involved what to do (replace or rehabilitate?) with Junior High School 159 Manhattan, the most loathsome building I have ever seen in my life; vermin literally oozed from every pore. It was technically one of the fireproof ("A") buildings, and therefore the Budget representatives followed their usual policy of arguing that these buildings should be modernized, not replaced. This dreadful situation seemed to present a principle which had to be fought out directly on the merits; we fought long and hard for a replacement school rather than modernization. However, this was one of the few major school fights which we ever lost. The Board of Estimate voted to modernize. Well, occasionally you lose one; there was nothing to do but to pick a site for a playground—of course JHS 159, an H-shaped building on an interior site, had never had one, and this was to be part of the modernization. In this situation there were by definition only four possibilities where a site expansion could be carried out. One of the four was chosen, primarily because it seemed to involve less relocation—only about 130 families, if I remember correctly. This expansion was approved and we all went about our business—and then a strange thing happened. We never knew how this occurred, but by an odd reversal we eventually won. Number one on the Board's construction proposal for the following year, agreed to by everybody, was a new school for JHS 159, instead of the modernization. We went around for some weeks trying to keep a straight face while we explained, "Yes, a new school there is a very well-thought-out proposal, we agree with it"; and a better site for the new school was chosen several blocks away, nearer the center of the school population.

Several more months went by, and then one night at home an awful thought occurred to me: I never heard of an actual cancellation of the clearance order for the school modernization at JHS 159. When I came in the next morning, I called in my school planning supervisor, and asked her what ever happened to the site for expansion of JHS 159 Manhattan. "Well," she said, "they canceled it." I inquired whether she knew for a fact on her own that they had canceled it; and she replied, "No. But they must have." "Oh, come on, you know the Board of Education better than that. You'd better check," I said. She went off, and half an hour later came back; one look at her face told me something awful had happened.

The fact was that the Board of Education had never canceled the site clearance for the school modernization; her understanding was that they had cleared both sites. With some considerable sense of the irony of the situation, I called an old friend who was then the new City Director of Real Estate, and asked him how he was doing up at JHS 159 Manhattan. He replied that he never could keep all these numbers straight, but he would let me know right away, and he called back half an hour later with the news. "Norm, I've got some good news for you. We finished clearing that site yesterday." When I explained what he had just done, he had the only civilized reaction possible—he simply burst out laughing. It was so preposterous.

PUBLIC SCHOOL 103 MANHATTAN

Another example of 1950s school planning, also from East Harlem, will shed further light on the nature of the work I was involved with for ten years. This involved PS 103 Manhattan, a school near the northeast corner of Central Park, not far from the Guggenheim Museum. We had always heard that this was one of the worst school buildings in the city. One day we happened to be in the vicinity with some time to spare, and we decided to go and have a look at it. The actual situation turned out to be a familiar one; a group of elderly lady teachers really knocking themselves out to try and give some sort of a decent start in life to the mobs of children in a crowded area, but working against innumerable obstacles, some quite inexcusable. The school was of course on double session—in those days schools in those areas always were. The lady principal took us around the building, and on the top floor I was surprised to notice that one classroom was locked up and barred off from use, which seemed curious in a school already on double session. When I inquired, the lady principal's face fell about a foot, and she said, "Well, maybe I made a mistake there. I finally gave up." The problem was that there was a large hole in the roof, so that every time it rained, the kids got wet. It turned out that (as everyone knew) there was a substantial sum of money in the capital budget for minor school repairs where needed—i.e., for exactly this situation—but that here the budget examiner assigned to that school refused to approve the spending of such money—and under the charter his consent was obviously necessary for any actual expenditures. The principal explained that she fought with the budget examiner literally for months to get approval for so obviously necessary a repair; but he refused to give the approval—apparently figuring that this was an area which could not bring political pressure to protect itself—a point on which he turned out to be correct. Finally the principal gave up the fight, and

decided her time was better spent coping with other educational problems, of which there were plenty. She simply stopped using that classroom, thereby presumably putting more classrooms on double session.

If we had been new in the city government, we would have assumed that of course this was a misunderstanding, and refused to believe her. By that time we had ten years of experience in dealing with these various agencies; all I could say was that this sounded all too familiar—though perhaps a rather extreme case.[8]

I went back to my office, and, as I had my sandwich for lunch, I got madder and madder as I thought about the whole situation. Clearly under the charter we had no power to make the budget examiner release the rehabilitation money which was designed for precisely such a situation. But after I thought about it for a while, I realized we did have power to do something much greater—to promote a PS 103 Manhattan replacement to the top of the priority list for the next year, and thereby give these people a brand new school in a year or two. Obviously this would be at far greater cost than merely repairing a leaking roof—but I felt that by now they had earned that somewhat drastic relief. I accordingly checked with my school supervisor and with Commissioner Orton. I told him I thought that in this situation we should simply see to it they got a new school as soon as possible. Commissioner Orton was delighted with the suggestion—as he pointed out, for once we would be a little bit ahead of the situation, instead of always trying desperately to catch up. So as of that day, it became Planning Department policy (as staff to the Commission) that PS 103 Manhattan was to be replaced as quickly as possible—presumably by "a money" for site acquisition in the next year, followed by construction money the following year.

As it happened, that was the last decision I ever made as a city official; unexpectedly, I was forced out of my position at the end of the same week, in Spring 1960. It has not been easy to find out what subsequently happened, but we have finally tracked it down.[9] The replacement school, called PS 79 Manhattan, went through without delays,

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8. The very able director of the New York City redevelopment agency at this time once told me that if he had ever understood the difference between (a) a city staff agency subject to Budget Bureau control and (b) an independent agency such as the Housing Authority (where he had previously worked), nobody would ever have been able to persuade him to take the city redevelopment agency job under any conditions. He learned the hard way. His comment was that, if on any given day which he spent with the Budget man assigned to his agency, the Budget man did not go to sleep on him, he regarded this as a pretty good day.

9. Nothing is more typical of the New York City Board of Education than the fact that it has taken discussions with nearly a dozen people from three agencies, over several months, to confirm that the new school was actually built. Obviously things have not changed much.

as if someone were pushing it. It was approved for site acquisition ("a money") in the next capital budget (of 1960), and for construction money in the following year (1961).[10] This new school (re-using plans made for another new school!) was opened in 1963, and accommodated most of the huge number of students enrolled from the old PS 103. The latter building was used (until 1966) as an annex to other nearby schools, and was abandoned shortly thereafter. In other words, our snap-judgment decision prevailed; the net result of all of this was the good people at PS 103 got a new school instead of a new roof. And a thousand ghetto kids had the opportunity to get a better education.

10. This was the normal procedure: it usually took a year to acquire and clear a site in built-up areas.