

Dr. Penny Gurstein (School of Community & Regional Planning)
Interviewed by: Theresa Harding, 1999

Professor Gurstein's article, "Gender Sensitive Community Planning: A Case Study of the 'Planning Ourselves In' Project," (*Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, Dec 1996, 15:2. 199-219) prompted the following questions which also relate to her current work.

TH: There are two purposes to this interview, one is for my Women's Studies course on feminist research methods, and the other is to produce a compilation of the interviews conducted by students in this course as reference material for students interested in applications and approaches to Women's Studies.

PG: I think it would be interesting from the perspective of both purposes to talk about participatory action research and "Planning Ourselves In" is a good example.

TH: Alright, so what do you mean when you say "addressing the present is important in community planning"?

PG: Planning is going through another phase, another paradigm shift. In terms of the way I teach and do research I'm relying on a variety of different ways of understanding the problem, one of which is to include the people and listen to them articulate their own issues before you start addressing them. So what I mean by "the present" is that you have to look at what the issues are now. Often planning has been done in a very mechanistic way: you look at population projections, you mobilise some kind of quantitative data and based on that you predict what might happen in the future. We then make plans for the projected future

TH: Is that called comprehensive planning?

PG: It is, but it's no longer an appropriate approach to planning. We really have to be dealing with some immediate issues now, in order to even think that we could have a good future. Some of my colleagues would say we only have ten years left - or even less - to effectively address some of these sustainability issues.

What I do in planning is address that from the social and community end of it. How do people start mobilising so that they can address their issues together? Through a community development process that brings together the voices of a community. They start with the present; you have to first address what is now before you can move on to the future.

TH: Do you have a sense of that future when you are working in the moment?

PG: If you actually plan for a good present then you assume the future would also be

good - if you are very conscious now. One of the things I'm also interested in is bringing in all of these elements, the social, the political and also the psychological elements - in terms of being present now, of being conscious now. You are conscious of being in the present - its kind of Buddhist. A spiritual way of looking at it too.

But it's very complex, you can have pitfalls every step of the way. One of the things I did in that article [Planning Ourselves In] was a kind of self-criticism, a self-critique of some of the problems. It was a mix of certain people and their availability and the project would not be replicated if it was another group. For example, at that time I didn't have children, now I have a child. I couldn't be as involved now in that kind of project. I'd have to say I can't afford that much time, I can't do all those things.

You know you have to be conscious of where people are at. If you are in a group and you're very privileged, often you don't understand the conditions of the members who are less privileged. You might have fewer time commitments and not understand people who have a lot.

TH: Right, and not only the situational differences, as in some are single parents, some are dual income and somewhat more comfortable, but also some people have a wholistic approach and some people have a single-issue approach.

PG: Right, right.

TH: Let's move to the next question, which is about a diagram in the article which illustrates the lines of communication and decision-making. There is an oblong and above it are five smaller circles. How does that diagram tell me something different than the standard rectangle with five boxes above or below it, or a circle with other small ones encircling it? Why was this configuration chosen?

PG: The circles imply self-containment. There's personal responsibility related to each of those circles. When you do a more hierarchical diagram - like a pyramid - with one person on top, that person has much more responsibility over everything. The circles imply that everyone takes their own personal responsibility. Someone is responsible for locating funding and they take on that responsibility and then each person brings their area of responsibility to the larger circle where they all meet as equals.

In some ways, it's how we've restructured the Centre for Human Settlement. It's not working perfectly because people are still very much used to having a Director, and the top down approach, but now we don't have a Director, we have an elected Chair and a management committee. Different people are taking responsibility for certain areas and we come together to reach decisions.

TH: That leads into the next question. Did the Forest Grove Project cause Burnaby City Planners to plan women in? This is a question about the lasting impact of the bottom up planning process. Does it actually have a structural impact? Was this project the start toward integrating the community in city planning?

PG: What this project did was put that community on the radar screen. It was overlooked before. One of the people involved in the project was a member of Burnaby City Council.

She supported the project and brought it forward to Council. It made the community visible to Council and that's very important, because its often invisibility that means neglect for a community. People were very proud of it and at the end of the project the community and politicians held a celebration. The Mayor, their MLA and City Council came, Svend Robinson, their MP came. It was an important event for them to be organising and participating in.

TH: Of course they are going to be applauded by the media and politicians, and so they should be. But I wouldn't be sentimental it about if I lived in Forest Grove. I'd want to see if the principle of community participation becomes an integral aspect to city planning.

PG: Well, what it might have done was get people thinking about how you involve people. That's a thing that Planners are just not very good at yet; there is resistance. Often the only time people get involved is when they are reacting to something they hear. Then they go to a public hearing to argue, for example, against a development in their neighbourhood. There's really very little proactive planning done.

I think the City of Vancouver is one of the few areas that has made a concentrated effort, and whether its been successful or not, people are taking it as part of the city planning process. There are certain groups of women that aren't included, as I mentioned in the article. Our project didn't get all the women we could have because of the structural barriers and barriers within the family, such as language.

TH: In both your articles you talked about "bottom up". Bottom-up sounds to me like there's always going to be this top and bottom, and the bottom is always going to be pushing, like a calf for milk. Do you think communities will continually need to push for inclusion? Or do you see the bottom-up-effect eventually becoming a more free-flowing inclusive exchange?

PG: It's always shifting - attitudes, values, opinions. Bottom-up is a way of conceptualising planning, its also a method of doing planning. As a Planner, you can't assume to know what a community needs and then dictate how planning should be done. Bottom-up recognises that the people involved in the process have to also be the one's articulating the problem.

That can be very difficult at times. It's not easy to know your role as a planner. Is it to educate, to give a different opinion, a different way of doing things?

TH: Would bottom-up be synonymous with community-based planning?

PG: Yes, and you can see it in the co-housing movement. People first put their financial resources together, making a solid commitment there. They are involved in the planning, initiating and managing of their housing project.

TH: I think there's one in Langley.

PG: Langley, and another in North Vancouver.

TH: You touched on something that I wasn't able to articulate into a question but seems really important. What if the group of women in Forest Grove were, just for the sake of a simple argument, mostly fundamentalist, Christian, REAL women, now how would a feminist approach to gender sensitivity work there? I've lived rurally probably half my life, and most of the women I met in the rural areas didn't have a problem with the gendered activities at home or in public.

PG: It's a problem and I think you have to be clear about your values and recognise incompatibilities and sometimes I'm not sure how the process could evolve positively. But even some women with the most fundamentalist Christian values, when they start talking, you hear resentment and anger about how they've had to live.

My experience from growing up in a small town in Saskatchewan is that you can learn a lot from listening to people tell their story. They have worked incredibly hard all their lives on their farms, and now they might be consumed with bitterness. Your role there is to be an active listener. I think that's important in planning as well, active listening, because then it lets them feel acknowledged, it sets some basis of trust between you and them and from that some real dialogue can happen.

TH: Would you say that's what happened in the first stage of the Forest Grove Project?

PG: Active listening, yes.

TH: This parallels the community effort that I was involved in to bring a community centre to the centre of the City of Richmond. A group of women, many were mothers, I was the only single mom and there were some very involved women elders. Your description of starting the Forest Grove project was how the Richmond group started and planned. Now we have a community centre.

PG: I think that a lot of projects like that can be done in community groups and this has been important to communities for years. One of the things I've always admired about farm women is the way they've organised themselves. Its no accident that Saskatchewan was where Medicare started, and automobile insurance.

TH: The Farmers Union.

PG: Farmers Union - all sorts of things came out of there because people knew that they had to stand together and there was a greater sense of community. It was primarily women doing all this, regardless of their religious orientation. I'm not sure if that's the case now, I haven't lived in Saskatchewan for a long time, and even though they have an NDP government, I'm not sure how the government and local communities influence agribusiness. There's far fewer small and family farms and I don't know if they still have those strong community organisations.

Planning in the 60s really talked about community development a lot, but there wasn't enough experience to support the vision. Maybe there's enough experiences now and maybe we can do it in a wholistic way.

TH: I remember reading a few months ago about Banff trying to incorporate more business space and the community saying we want park space. I think it settled with a compromise of the two, which nobody seemed very happy with.

PG: (Laughing) yeah.

TH: On to the next question. What is the role of the white-middle class feminist regarding inclusivity, which you talked about at the end of your Forest Grove article.

PG: We're just one of many voices. We have to be making real alliances and dialogues with people. I've been doing this internationally and making linkages, understanding people's different perspectives. In Canada we have this amazing opportunity because we are one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. Earlier today I went to WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women) with a Brazilian delegation visiting UBC. The majority of the people in that office and the people we met with were women of colour and varying ethnicities. I think this is Canada and this working together, as we saw at WAVAW, is the way it should be.

TH: Inclusivity can pose an awkward role for a Planner. You have the position to initiate a project and you are in a position to reach out and bring people in to your vision and encourage them along to the point where they can carry out the project themselves. Then you have to step back. In all that, are there risks of dependency, hierarchy, authority and such things?

PG: It's never going to be easy, but if feminism is going to survive as a viable way of looking at the world it has to be inclusive

TH: So you have to go through the sticky stuff and make lots of mistakes and learn from them?

PG: I think if you keep within a framework of seeing feminism as a vehicle for action you find possibilities for alliances and inclusivity. My understanding of feminist theory is that it comes from experience. Talking and writing about action are not substitutes for doing it.

TH: What you were saying earlier in the interview about active listening and having the women define their needs sounds like gender sensitivity, but is it not necessarily feminist? To use Forest Grove again, what's feminist about their project to install a water fountain in the park?

PG: What's not feminist? It's something they identified as something they needed because all the women in this group had children and it was very practical.

TH: Right, it was practical, it was gender sensitive, but how was it feminist?

PG: The women now have experience in organising and maybe they gained confidence and recognise that they could be leaders, or active agents for change. I see that as very feminist response.

TH: Yes, I see it now, thanks! OK, that's our time up, thank you very much.