Towards Effective Environmental Intervention in Cities:
Roy Lubove’s Evolving Critique of Urban Planning

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Over the years since I first became impressed with Roy Lubove’s writing, I have thought of him especially when showing the film “The City,” a pioneer documentary produced by the American Institute of Planners for the 1939 World’s Fair in New York. There is no record in his published work that Lubove ever viewed the film himself, but I can envision his positive reaction to a pivotal scene depicting the impoverished lives of industrial workers in their squalid quarters perilously perched on Pittsburgh’s hilly terrain. In words clearly derived from his landmark 1938 book, *The Culture of Cities*, Lewis Mumford, as the film’s narrator, vividly condemns this exploitation, in saying: “Smoke makes prosperity, no matter if you choke on it.” Lubove did not need to see the film. As a chief chronicler of modern Pittsburgh, he was well aware of the way smoke played a central role in defining the city’s image.¹ As one of the first historians to recognize and embrace Mumford’s contribution to regionalizing urban planning and making environmental amenities one of its central goals, he would have been sympathetic to the film’s proposed alternative to the degraded industrial

center: planned satellite cities offering workers decent homes in clean environments with easy access to employment. Urban planning, as Mumford illustrated, served as a promising agent of reform, but, Lubove contended, its record of accomplishment faltered over time.

Lubove credited the World Columbian Exposition of 1893 with instilling in the nascent city planning profession a compelling vision of the city as "an organism of interrelated, interdependent parts whose efficiency depends upon planned and orderly growth." Drawing the parallel with social reform efforts at the time, he compared the planner's belief in civic art to Jacob Riis's faith in the redemptive power of nature, "as a moral force able to elevate the character and ideals of those touched by its magic wand." More than "a mere cosmetic over a leper's sore," the planner's commitment to environmental comeliness "was endowed with moral and social significance," achieving in such civic centers as emerged in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh "an archetype of responsible capitalism and entrepreneurship, expressed in the neo-classical architecture which had dominated the Chicago Exposition." Both planners and housing reformers considered the city as a single, if fractured, organism that required purposeful intervention for its restoration. Their efforts, Lubove was among the first to note, converged around the issue of congestion at the first city planning conference, held in Washington in 1909. Shortly thereafter, however, mainstream planning formed its own institutional base and, lacking either the power or the will to pursue its earlier comprehensive approach to city regeneration, limited its efforts to the largely technical elements of physical development. Relying on the restrictive powers of zoning – comparable to regulations in the housing field that had been instituted in large cities like New York early in the century – planners missed the chance to reshape the environment. While the planner of the period may have

been at heart "a social reformer anxious to improve housing conditions...", he pursued an approach "which proved ultimately ineffec-
tual."6

Against this mainstream tradition Lubove cast the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), a group of a dozen or so architects and intellectuals brought together from 1923 to 1933 through a mutual interest in improving the design of urban communities. In a series of articles and in his book *Community Planning in the 1920's*, Lubove traced the RPAA's several roots to the New England village; to utopian communities as formed in the mid-nineteenth century; to Ebenezer Howard's Garden City ideal formulated in England at the end of that century; and even to some of the more progressive company towns in America, such as Pullman, Illinois, which built affordable housing and parks into their plans as amenities for their workers. Anti-speculative and communitarian in their orientation, members of the RPAA attempted to foster urban environments that could nurture a healthy civic life by accommodating basic needs in a convenient and aesthetically pleasing fashion. Their efforts ranged from the planned residential communities that Henry Wright and Clarence Stein pioneered in Sunnyside Gardens, Long Island, New York, and Radburn, New Jersey, to the neighborhood unit plan formulated by Clarence Arthur Perry, and the communitarian approach to public housing publicized and worked for by Catherine Bauer.7

Central to Lubove's study of the RPAA was his account of Lewis Mumford. Noting the influences on Mumford of the Scottish planner and biologist Patrick Geddes and French regionalists, with their emphasis on the possibilities of cultural and administrative decentralization, Lubove unveiled the origins of Mumford's innovative regional orientation to planning. That approach, so forcefully portrayed in the film "The City," might well have been incorporated in a landmark regional plan issued for New York with great fanfare in 1929. According to Mumford, however, that plan missed the opportunity to challenge metropolitan centralization and the hegemony of existing socio-economic institutions. It was the RPAA's contribution, Lubove concluded, to pose

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a more comprehensive and environmentally sound alternative, made possible through innovations in site-planning and housing finance to allow the planned development of whole communities.  

8. Community Planning in the 1920's, p. 125. Subsequent work on the RPAA has been generous in citing its debt to Lubove’s pioneering study. See Edward K. Spann, Designing Modern America: The Regional Planning Association of America and its Members (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996) and Kermit C. Parsons, “Collaborative Genius; The Regional Planning Association of America,” American Planning Association Journal 60 (1994): 462-482. Lubove’s understanding of the RPAA was informed by Mumford’s careful and sometimes lengthy responses to his questions. See the Mumford correspondence in the Roy Lubove Papers.
appreciated *Culture of Cities* as well as *Technics and Civilization* (1934) and emerging trends in urban analysis stressing social ecology and environmental themes. In contrast to Mumford's broad cultural approach, however, Lubove constructed his own tightly-bound vision of urbanization as a "city-building process over time" linking social experience and the built environment. Stressing the importance of concrete decision-making, he focused particularly on what he came to call "environmental intervention" as a lynchpin to corrective urban policy.9 His book, *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh*, originally published in 1969, provided the canvas on which to fully demonstrate his approach.

That book is many things, but at its heart it is Lubove's broadly conceived evaluation of urban planning in the modern city. Too long unplanned and unregulated, Pittsburgh by 1900 cried out for environmental intervention to rectify the imbalance between modern corporations and the residential as well as work conditions their industrial workers were forced to tolerate. The formation, in 1911, of the Pittsburgh City Planning Commission extended early municipal planning functions from parks alone to the broader physical environment. "Decision-making," Lubove reported, "was centralized in a single mechanism," surely offering the opportunity for comprehensive planning. But because the City Planning Commission was limited to an advisory role quite apart from municipal political and bureaucratic power, it lacked the means to compete with private business interests. In Lubove's graphic phrase, it became "an administrative eunuch — independent, uncontaminated, and thoroughly impotent."10 Seven years later a voluntary association, the Citizens Committee on the City Plan (CCCP), formed to take up the work of the "moribund" City Planning Commission. Under its ambitious director, Frederick Bigger, it sought nothing less than the establishment of new legal and economic norms enhancing public control over land, the distribution and density of population, and the use and occupancy of private property. Although the Pittsburgh City Council adopted two CCCP reports in 1922 as a "guide in the expenditure of public funds," in the long term the recommendations were ignored. The reason for that failure, Lubove charged, was once again planners' inability to act effectively within interest-group politics.11 The most effective planning project of the period, Chatham

Village, drew as consultants RPAA stalwarts Wright and Stein. Although it provided a brilliant experiment in residential site planning, its marketing by the sponsoring Buhl Foundation to largely affluent buyers kept it from serving as a strategy for mass housing betterment, demonstrating, in Lubove's words, "the bankruptcy of voluntarism."  

Lubove reserved his greatest contempt for Pittsburgh planners in their failure to shape the Renaissance process generated by the Mellon banking family and its business associates in cooperation with Mayor David Lawrence. Describing the transformation of the shabby central business district into what is now known as the Golden Triangle as "welfare in reverse," he demonstrated the way public power had been utilized exclusively to advance private interests. Through the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, business interests marshaled the essential technical and professional skills needed for effective plan-

12. Ibid., pp. 81-82.
ning that other civic organizations, especially neighborhood civic groups, lacked. The result was a common one nationally: the restoration of the downtown at the expense of viable social programs desperately needed in residential areas. Lubove illustrated that conflict most effectively in describing how a pet business project, the Civic Arena, was used to extend the downtown by clearing out a deteriorating inner city neighborhood. With land that valuable, business interests sought a "better" use, fortifying the arena from the neighborhood still existing nearby, and angering the resident black community in the process.

In his last chapter, "The Social Dimensions of the Renaissance," Lubove described the belated efforts to institute improvements in distressed neighborhoods, especially in housing. Although he linked activist James Cunningham's organizing effort with RPAA member Clarence Arthur Perry's neighborhood unit planning ideal, he made clear that Cunningham's formative role in the privately funded organization, ACTION-Housing, proceeded independently of Pittsburgh's city planning agency. Out of a partnership with the Homewood Community Improvement Association, a plan emerged to revitalize one of the city's predominantly black and poor older areas. Approved by both the City Council and the Planning Commission, the plan nonetheless resulted in little more than modest material improvements, including some new parking facilities, the removal of abandoned cars, and increased street maintenance. ACTION-Housing pioneered an urban extension program with Planning Commission support in several other neighborhoods, but again, Lubove concluded, with only modest results. Whatever promise the city showed, then, the story Lubove told of Pittsburgh ended tragically.

What a surprise it was, then, to read the second volume of Lubove's Pittsburgh history when it appeared in 1996, shortly after his death. The Pittsburgh Lubove now described was dominated neither by smoke nor by the exploitation of its workers. Lubove was sensitive to the effects of disinvestment, what he called "a wrenching industrial revolu-

13. Ibid., p. 110.
16. Ibid., p. 163.
tion in reverse.” Still, he described the city as successfully transforming itself “from a production-oriented community to one that offered an agreeable way of life” through economic diversification and modernization. Pittsburgh, he declared, “had become the yardstick for other cities stricken by industrial decline.”17 The key to that success — Renaissance II — Lubove emphasized, was not publicly-oriented planning but private leadership. Having once attacked the Allegheny Conference on Community Development as elitist, he now identified its emphasis on public-private partnerships as the driving force of recovery. His activist colleague Roger Ahlbrandt might once have yearned for “for grand planning in response to the economic breakdown.” But wisely, Lubove asserted, Ahlbrandt “abandoned expectations of centralized economic and community planning in favor of an emphasis on the Pittsburgh partnership tradition as the basis for regional reconstruction,” acknowledging “that grand visions and plans might not be necessary after all.”18

Even the once marginalized neighborhoods gained a central role in Pittsburgh’s recovery. But Lubove did not credit their recovery to Peter Flaherty, who as mayor from 1970 to 1977 shifted resources to inner city neighborhoods following the April 1968 civil disorders. Flaherty, Lubove asserted, compromised his effectiveness in favoring neighborhoods at the expense of the downtown, thus shattering the civic-business coalition. It was up to his successor, Richard Caliguiri, to restore the balance, doing so especially by directing the city’s Urban Redevelopment Authority, revamped to facilitate a more centralized development process, to work in full harmony with downtown business interests. Residential recovery, Lubove then suggested, followed not from expanding the community planning functions Flaherty had favored, but through directing funds to community development corporations, which had the advantages both of flexibility and nonpartisanship. Indeed, when he bothered to mention planners at all, Lubove was scathing, describing them at one point as “exhilarated by prospects of traffic counts and zoning arcana, not demands to transfer initiatives and power to neighborhoods.”19

17. Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh, Vol 2, pp. 11, 58.
18. Ibid., p. 27.
Towards Effective Environmental Intervention in Cities

Much had changed in the quarter century between the appearance of Lubove's two Pittsburgh volumes. To some degree, Lubove was merely reporting alternative policies to those that dominated intellectual circles in his early career. Anti-poverty government programs as well as urban renewal had been widely discredited when he last wrote, and even liberals embraced community development corporations as an alternative. But if urban policy analysis had changed, Lubove's perspective had shifted even more. While he acknowledged more sharply critical interpretations of Pittsburgh's recovery, most notably those that extended, with an explicitly Marxist bias, his own earlier criticism that business had dictated the course of development, he sharply rebuked such work. Dismissing these studies as reductionist and hallucinatory, he stressed repeatedly that Pittsburgh's business-dominated approach was the only "realistic" solution to the economic challenges facing the city. When neighborhood initiatives worked, they did so by avoiding "mushy idealism." Most important, community development corporations worked because they offered a great advantage over conventional redistributive welfare: "Answerable neither to voters nor shareholders, they can innovate, experiment, subsidize, or penalize with relative freedom."22

Hearing this, can we recognize the same Roy Lubove of his earlier work? Clearly his demand that idealists find effective instruments to achieve their goals remained. He applied the same standard to the RPAA in his 1962 book. But having once put his faith in the public sector, he subsequently became its critic. Twice in the second volume of Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh he chastised "zealots" in the Department of Housing and Urban Development for social engineering that would impose goals and regulations on city neighborhoods where they were


22. Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh, 2, pp. 93, 95, 97.
not wanted.\textsuperscript{23} While he could write admiringly early in his career of the initiatives of social progressives and planners to counter a culture of unbridled individualism, he subsequently asked pointedly in the subtitle to one article "whether one can be committed both to planning and the democratic principle of individual and group self-determination." \textsuperscript{24}

Lubove had signaled the shift in his thinking in his 1992 article on the effects of the City Beautiful movement in Pittsburgh. While recognizing this effort as elite-inspired, he nonetheless commended its vision for being "inclusive" and described its accomplishments as products of "responsible capitalism."\textsuperscript{25} So too, he could view Pittsburgh’s business community, when faced with its own financial collapse, acting responsibly to assure its survival. Capitalism, he asserted, can reform itself, especially if not coerced by government fiat. So in drawing on a usable past towards the end of his career, Lubove selected the Progressive’s pragmatism – what works – rather than its idealism. But how did he reconcile this view with his earlier desire for a comprehensive approach to cities that emphasized the quality of life?

The second volume of \textit{Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh} assured readers amenities lacking in the industrial era had been secured in the post-industrial age. But the narrative reads too much like a board of directors’ annual report to be fully reassuring. Never one to animate his narrative with close examination of the grass-roots experience, Lubove nonetheless in his later years appeared even more remote, emotionally as well as experientially, from the vicissitudes of residential living. Although he identified how community development corporations became part of a larger recovery strategy, he neglected to detail the inevitable clash of interests and the maneuvering that can make or break any community organization. Without providing a full assessment of this messy process, Lubove could not fully inform his readers about the underlying basis for lasting success at the neighborhood level, let alone what role planners might have played in mediating the historically-determined clash of interests Lubove so successfully described in his first volume. The second Pittsburgh volume stands, then, more as a tribute to Lubove’s encyclopedic knowledge of the city’s rebuilding process than as a full evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 92, 116.
\textsuperscript{24} Roy Lubove, “Planning and Pluralism in American Society,” p. 85. A reprint of this chapter was found in the Roy Lubove Papers, but it has not been determined in what book the chapter was published.
\textsuperscript{25} "City Beautiful, City Banal," 29.
Lubove's growing hostility toward planning in particular and government power more generally found widening support in the 1990s, as even critics sympathetic to neighborhood-based advocacy detailed the shortcomings of such efforts. Even as Lubove joined this revisionist tendency, he consistently tried, as proclaimed in his 1967 article on the city building process, to detail the decisions that shaped the contours of city policy. By foregrounding the role of elites over the city residents whose lives were most affected by such policies, however, he provided in his last book not just an incomplete but a distorted evaluation of the situation. Environmental intervention remains a powerful tool not just in revitalizing historic downtowns, but in the rehabilitation of older city neighborhoods. That Lubove would overlook the ways that the ongoing imbalance between corporate and inner city resources requires purposeful government intervention strikes me as a serious shortcoming. But I would not be continuing to examine such questions of modern urban policy myself if Lubove had not so effectively challenged my generation to take up the task some thirty years ago.