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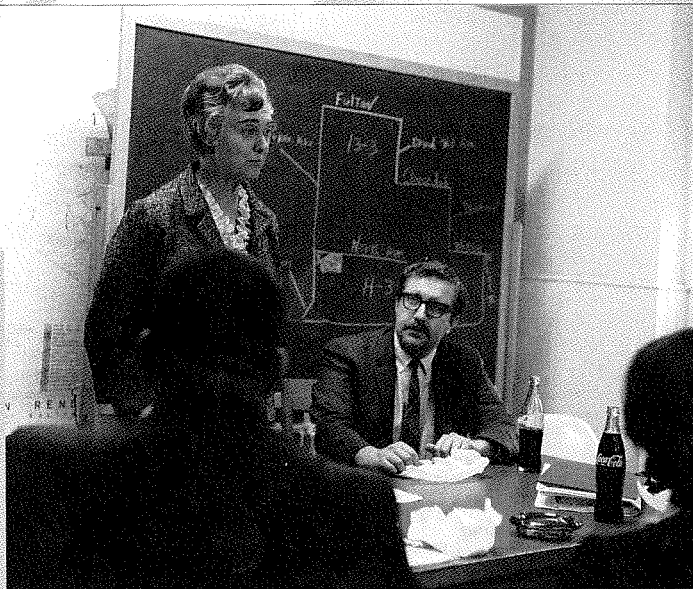Shiffman, Ron
Bressi, Todd W

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with Ron Shiffman

Ron Shiffman, Todd W. Bressi

Background and inset: **Organizational meetings leading to the creation of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation.**

Photos and graphics: **Pratt Institute Center for Community Environmental Development**

TODD W. BRESSI:

Describe your approach to advocacy planning.

RON SHIFFMAN:

Principally we are continuing to do what we started doing in the early 60s. We feel that there are groups of people whose voice is rarely heard when it comes to planning and development issues. And we feel

our earliest grant, we called our first two staff members "urban agents," based on that idea.

At the same time, one of my colleagues at Pratt, George Raymond, was concerned that communities needed better education in order for planning to take place in New York, that there was a lot of opposition to planning because people didn't understand it. He
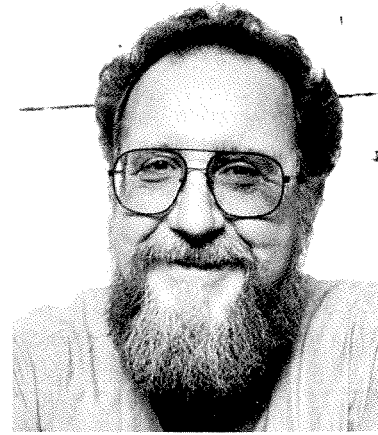
Left: **Organizational meeting for Greenpoint, Brooklyn, 197-a plan.**
Above: **Ron Shiffman.**

that it is incumbent on professionally trained planners, architects and urban designers to work with those folks in an honest way so their needs and their goals can be expressed. This approach is rooted in our belief in a multicultural and pluralistic society. Different groups have different needs based on income, class, race and ethnic background, and those needs have the same legitimacy to be expressed through the planning and development process as those of the middle class or the elites.

This is not an approach that says the since the community feels a particular way, that is necessarily the right way. Instead, what is right is to listen and to hear what people have to say. We view participatory planning as a way of people engaging in civil society.

BRESSI:

What was the model for participation that you used when you set up the Pratt Institute Center for Community Environmental Development.
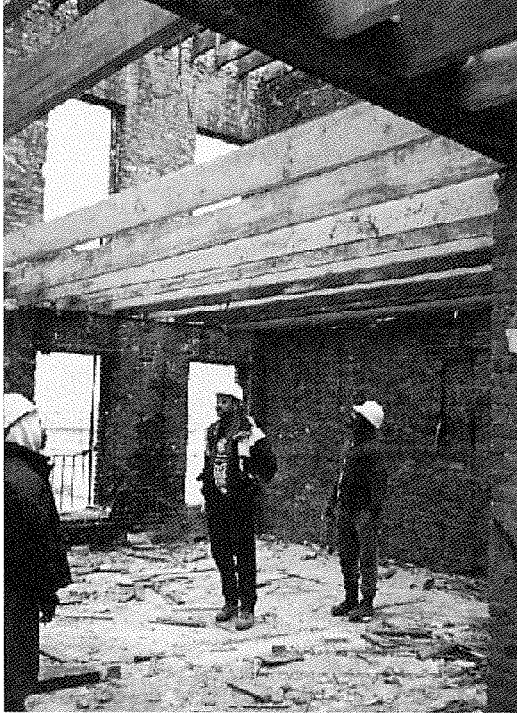
SHIFFMAN:

Our initial model was the writing of Paul Ylvisaker at the Ford Foundation. He was looking at the role of land grant colleges in working with rural areas, where they sent out rural agents to advise farmers. In

had more of a informational agenda in mind than a participatory one, or a mutual education process, or an empowerment model. He was a progressive planner and running into opposition on projects where he thought he was doing good.

Once we started, we quickly encountered the reality of the urban context, of people who had great deal of suspicion about how government had performed, people who were demanding their rights, particularly those who had been denied a voice for a long time and were saying that urban renewal programs and the ruling population of the city were ignoring their needs and goals. The education and learning process we experienced in working with people helped us formulate PICCED's three basic strategies:

One is direct technical assistance, providing expertise in analyzing statistics, coloring maps or carrying out day-to-day tasks of planning and development. Another strategy is training and education — demystifying what planning is all about, asking the simple questions people are afraid of asking, translating jargon and, most importantly, sharing other experiences with people locally — not for the purpose of copying it, but for the purpose of liberating people, so they can come up with their own answers.

tions that will sustain things over time. It's amazing to look at The Point [profiled in *Places* 10:3]. It has organized an environmental program and an asthma program; it has inspired a 197-a [community planning] program for Hunt's Point. Its cultural programs are so successful they are looking at renovating a theater. All of a sudden that little effort is starting to burgeon. It's husbanding, rather than constructing.

BRESSI:

What is your approach to working with communities?

SHIFFMAN:

Often planners or developers come with a preconceived plan or development, and they will try to engage people in a process primarily to sell what they are trying to do. There has to be a different attitude. You have to recognize that they are part of the team, as important as any trained technician, because they have an insight and perspective into the community, into the issues that affect the community, that is far different than you will get from any trained professional.

Planners tend to look at problems and how to solve them. But when you put things in a problem framework, you also put people into a situation where they need to be treated, rather than looking at how people can be part of the solution or the remedy — or how they can remedy a society that needs to be treated.

This doesn't mean that you abdicate your own opinions, your own training, because that would be as dishonest as meeting with a group and not listening to them, not really telling them what you're doing. So participation is a dialogue, between you and the people you are working with.

BRESSI:

How does this translate into a planning process?

SHIFFMAN:

There are certain fundamentals. The first one is to listen, be honest and engage people in a dialogue. You must realize that the process is going to take time; it's not a quick engagement and a quick release. If ideas are constantly challenged, that makes the process more dynamic.

The second is to engage people in a multi-level exchange. You're educating people that you work with, you're bringing them up to capacity to understand information from different perspectives. But at the same time, you're a student of theirs and you're learning about their lifestyle, their priorities, their needs.

If you truly look at it that way, without sacrificing your principles — issues of equity and certain other issues — you sometimes learn that what you think was

Community-based organizations have developed increasing skills at housing and economic development, but may be moving away from their roots in community organization.

The third strategy is shaping public policy. Sometimes it seems the work people want to do can't be done because the right policies, the rules and regulations aren't in place. But if people mobilize, they can initiate change. That has lead to things like the Community Reinvestment Act and federal programs that put greater stress on rehabilitating housing.

BRESSI:

PICCED also devotes a lot of energy to helping create new community groups.

SHIFFMAN:

That's part of what I referred to as community assistance. We've helped nurture dozens of organizations. One thing that led to formation of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation was the issue of problem solving. If we didn't like what the city was doing, we had to come up with an alternative. Although our proposals went beyond physical plans and addressed social and economic issues, the answer from the city was no. Years later, when the Model Cities program came down, the answer from Washington was no, Harlem needs it. So we decided that if the government wouldn't do it, and the private sector wouldn't, we needed a third way, a new entity, one that was locally accountable. We enlisted Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and Bed-Stuy began to emerge.

We are still taking that approach with institution-building in communities, where people see a need for education, primary health care, day care or cultural institutions that are missing.

If you believe in empowerment, then you have to have a structure that can implement things, institu-

inequitable is somebody's fear, and you learn how to address that fear, and equity is easier to achieve.

The third issue is language. We planners and architects really need to demystify what we are talking about. We need to come up with language and concepts that can be understood by everybody in the room. That means picking concepts apart and not using the kind of language that gives different people the ability to have different images.

BRESSI:

Do you have a standard process that you follow?

SHIFFMAN:

When we work on planning issues, the first thing we try to do is expose the community-based group to the range of policies that exist. We discuss what we feel are the inequities are, what the benefits are; what they perceieve as the positives and the negatives. We train people in housing and community development processes and laws, through what we call the Pratt Community Economic Development

Internship. How are deals made? How do you build housing? How do they finance things? So people can really understand.

The other thing we do is bring people together to start talking about their goals and their visions. Where vision and the means of implementation diverge, we try to talk about programmatic and policy changes.

And we try to work the whole process as building the civil society. By that we mean that if people are going to engage in decisions, then they also have to have the power with which to influence those decisions. Not the control always, but the power to be part and parcel of the debate that leads to a decision — parity of power and parity of knowledge with the other partners that are at the table. Sometimes that means

working with people in caucuses or separately before they can sit down and enter into the dialogue.

BRESSI:

Does a citizen's ability to participate in planning and decisionmaking also come with responsibilities?
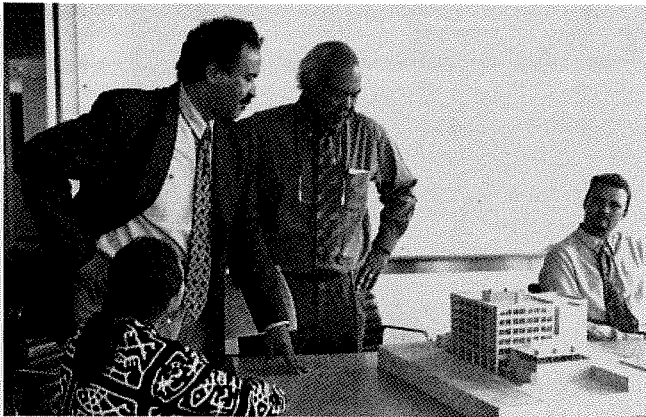
SHIFFMAN:

Absolutely. One is that people have to make sure that they don't speak for themselves, that they try to engage their neighbors in the process. There's an obligation to be consistent and to be engaged. You don't want people tuning in and out; they must be willing to listen to others the way they would expect to be listened to.

There are also prerequisites and values that people must have. One is that they have to live up to the letter of law, at least laws that are socially just. Of course, if people are discriminated against, if racism is involved, if there is gender discrimination or chioce issues, those things have to be confronted.

People also have to understand the value of what they value. A lot of groups come to the table angry because they don't feel people will listen to them, or fearful that they don't have much to offer. Really, they have absorbed in many ways the judgment of the majority culture, so that on one level they reject the majority's judgment but on another level they accept it. And in doing that there is a conflict within themselves and therefore they're uncomfortable around the table.

For example, we worked with a public housing project in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The residents were very annoyed that they weren't part of the process that was leading to a plan for that particular neighbor-

One of PICCED's strategies is to assist in the development of new community-based organizations, such as the El Puente Academy in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

hood. We also found they were afraid to be included because they felt once at the table their lack of education or whatever would hinder them from developing ideas. They felt that they misunderstood what planning was about, that it didn't appear that any of their ideas could be meaningful.

Within a couple of meetings, people began talking about this protest and that protest they had organized. So we asked, "Well if you had all these petitions and all these protests, why don't you bring them all out, let's look at them." We took the petitions and began to put them down on a map, to translate these ideas, these feelings, into place. Where there were locations we identified locations, where there were needs we started discussing those needs.

Too many kids hanging out on the street. Do you get the police to chase them away, or are there other places they can go? Well, there's no other places. What are the kinds of places kids like to go to? What if we had a couple of new ones — kids could hang out, listen to a jukebox, or go and do quiet study, or learn from peers? All of a sudden the idea of "Education Way" emerged, named after a series of things we plotted along it.

They wanted more access to the waterfront. So we asked where is there good access to the waterfront? Well, there's going to be a park at Coffey St. Maybe we need to create a priority path that would bring them through a neighborhood that was strange, a homeowner part.
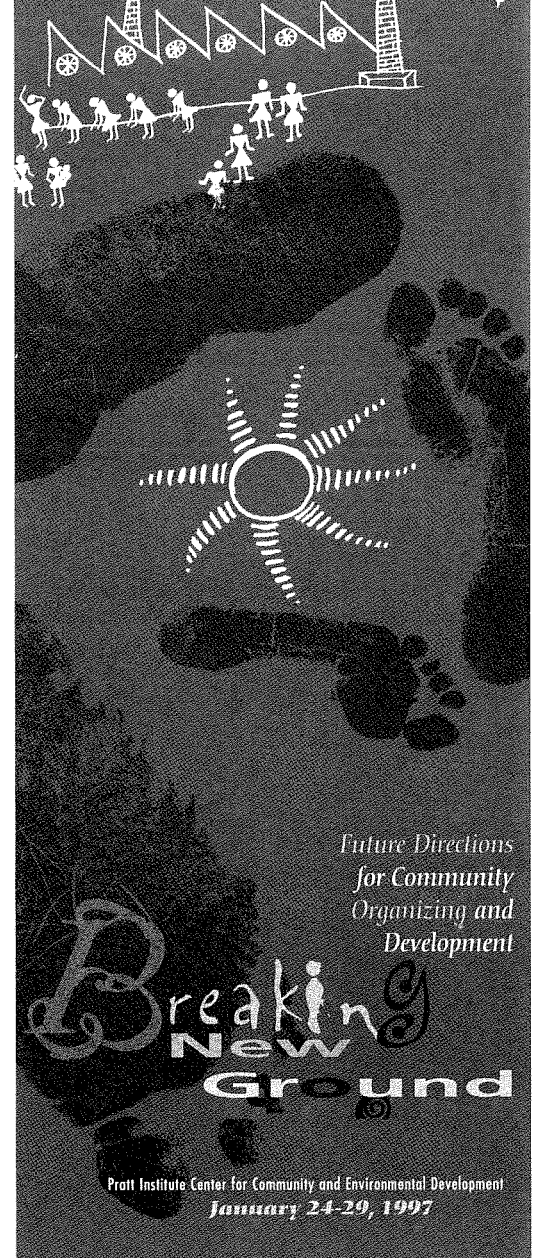
This whole discussion emerged from the petitions. Everybody at that table felt that like they designed it. And then they met with the community board, and their plan was almost adopted in its entirety. A big reason was that it seemed so natural. The community came to the same conclusion, maybe, that the board did, but they came from their own knowledge base.

BRESSI:
Should participatory planning be regarded simply as a set of professional techniques, or must it be motivated by deeper values about society and the built environment?

SHIFFMAN:
I cannot see this work proceeding without a commitment to economic and social justice. The work is not just technical, there has to be a value system implied; we are dealing with economic, social and environmental injustices. Unless we are concerned with environmental equity, our efforts are going to be very short lived.

Future Directions for Community Organizing and Development

Breaking New Ground

Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development
January 24-29, 1997

BRESSI:
But how can planners put their ideas and experience on the table, and talk about values, without leading the discussion, especially if you are dealing with people who may not have much confidence in their ideas in the first place?

SHIFFMAN:
In our case what leads the discussion, usually, is that we are asked by the community and help them with a problem. The Red Hook residents said, "Hey, there's a 197-a plan in this area. Can you help us think this through, can you tell us what it's about so we can participate?" So they have defined the problem. What we are doing is to help tease out the solution from them, or the ideas from them. Rarely do we come in with a preconceived development project, that we've developed or that a client of ours is developing.

When I go out the community I try to be more of a facilitator and less of a solver. We train people, the professionals, to ask the questions they feel people aren't asking themselves. People, particularly adults, are very concerned about looking foolish in front of other people. We don't want to put people in that position, we want them to relax. So if there's a meeting going on, people sometimes get annoyed at you because they think you know the answer, but at least you open up and set the tone for the meeting.

BRESSI:

Have there been times when the values you would like to advance as a planner squarely conflict with those of the people you are working with?

SHIFFMAN:

In one community where we've worked, many people feel the residents are racist or exclusionary. So we designed our engagement there not only to address their needs, but also to confront their fears. The community was white, so I brought in Latino and African-American trainers for training about how to undertake civil disobedience, on how to deal with power in relationships.

We ran into another circumstance once where we were very nervous. We had fought for replacement housing for everybody in one neighborhood. Now, there's a liberal perspective that if people are working class and white, then they are probably bigoted; in a lot of cases that is because those people are a lot more honest about the language they use. We felt that way about that community in the beginning; we thought that when we had to enforce the affirmative action rental requirements in some of these buildings that we would run into difficultly with the group.

So a half dozen or so Latino families applied for the 42 spaces, but not one of them was turned down. What happened was that people met people face to face — we did some careful planning about it, ori-

ented everybody to what the law was in regard to discrimination. In the end, the group was against only one couple, who were elderly and both Polish and Catholic, because they weren't married. And they didn't want to get married because they would lose their Social Security benefits.

BRESSI:

Have you ever by choice not worked with a group?

SHIFFMAN:

Yes. We will not work on anything that is exclusionary in its entirety. So we won't work on churches, religious institutions, nor will we work on housing unless they agree before hand there will be equal opportunity.

BRESSI:

Compared to thirty years ago, when you started PICCED, do you think community participation puts you in a better or weaker position to acheive the kind of social, political, economic and sustainability goals that you are working towards?

SHIFFMAN:

I think the situation is better today in ways. The processes are more sophisticated, our technical capabilities are better. But I regret that sometimes our desire to meet another goal sometimes doesn't directly engage us in the kind of participatory, community building processes that we want to. The need for the production of housing led to some of that, particularly for homeless families.

A few years ago we began to realize that and tried to put a stop to it. We needed to take a strong look at the processes we were involved in, whether we were contributing to the building of a civil society, whether we

PICCED works as an advocacy planning organization by helping New York City communities prepare neighborhood plans that can be adopted by the city council.

GREENPOINT 197- A

The Greenpoint Community Prepares a Draft Plan for Public Discussion

INTRODUCTION

Greenpoint located in the northernmost portion of Brooklyn, earned its name from the lush greenery covering its expanse before early nineteenth century development. It lies on a peninsula jutting northwest into the East River towards Manhattan, and is bounded on the north and east by Newtown Creek which separates Brooklyn from Queens. Greenpoint, only a short distance from the central business districts of Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan, has always maintained a distinctive small town identity. It has a history of neighbors knowing neighbors and a sense of mutual caring often not associated with communities in big cities.

Greenpoint has a variety of neighborhoods tied together by a sense of community identity and a common future. They share a vibrant and active commercial strip that reflects the diversity of Greenpoint's ethnic populations. The Manhattan Avenue commercial

The Greenpoint 197-a Plan offer recommendations for the entire Greenpoint community which include East River, Bushwick Inlet, McGuinness Park and Newtown Creek. It is a residential area, industrial zone, commercial strips. The Plan addresses all major aspects of Greenpoint's focuses on the area's demographics, labor force, housing, industrial, commercial uses, its environment, open space and the facilities, services, infrastructure it offers to the people who live and work there.

The Plan outlines the many opportunities that exist to preserve and enhance what is good and to revitalize what is weak. The major objectives listed are aimed at strengthening and diversifying Greenpoint's economy, its historic and cultural base and integrating Greenpoint into the broader New York City community. They are

were doing things the private sector didn't do. By that I mean the private sector isn't necessarily going to include a diverse group of people in decisionmaking, it doesn't deal with issues as agressively around class or race that we know are all critically important.

We recognized that as our organization shifted from being funded by general support funds, which enabled us to respond to requests from local organizations, to being funded by contracts, that the contract began to take you away from the advocacy. Now we're trying to build our general support to the point where we don't turn down someone because they can't pay and the issue may be more important than the contract.

BRESSI:
Are there any changes in national or local development politics, or the economy, or the ways in which our cities have evolved, that make grassroots organizing and community building more or less difficult?

SHIFFMAN:
Obviously, these last ten years were the first time in New York that we had city, state and federal governments that were all conservative. You used to have enough differences between the city and state and federal levels that you could play one power off another. If the feds weren't accomodating, you always had the state. If the state wasn't accomodating, you always had the city. Now you have the three, but they all think alike. It's a lot harder to operate in that venue.

In fact, external factors — changes in the economy that make communities more dependent on the corporate, private sector, and changes in governmental attitudes — have in many ways weakened the structure of social change organizations. Foundations don't recognize the value of organizing and community building and engaging people in their own lives. The welfare system is very corrupt in terms of being dehumanizing; where there's reform it makes the system further dehumanizing. The level and incidence of poverty continues to grow while wealth continues to grow; its a contradiction in our society. It makes everything a lot more difficult for us.

BRESSI:
Over the last thirty years, what changes have you seen in community development organizations and participatory planning?

SHIFFMAN:
One thing is that more community groups have become development oriented as opposed to policy oriented. The problem is that some community-based organizations engage in doing commercial

revitalization, rebuilding housing, and then all of a sudden we are launched into a franchise project — a Pathmark, McDonald's or whatever. There is no planning or strategy, they go after the deal, and the store opens up five or six blocks away, unanchored from the commercial strip they are revitalizing.

So now we take this up in our training. Are we just following the resources, or is there some overall strategy? Is revitalizing the strip just fixing up the facades, or do you repopulate them? We need to raise questions about the quality of that development; too often people see the quality of development the way society as a whole sees it: if it's development, it has to be good — without making any qualitative judgment about the development.

This is an example of how planners also have to have a strategy, and have to put what they know on the table, with their design values and their aesthetic. These ideas may be rejected, but at least out of the debate, something better will come.

BRESSI:
You've also mentioned that community groups have largely abandoned the work of organizing.

SHIFFMAN:
For a long time, there was a belief that there was a linear process from organizing and action to economic development, that was a growth pattern. I think that's absolute hogwash. You always need organizing and animation around particular groups that are disenfranchised and those that are poor. Without struggle, we aren't going to get any kind of social change. We haven't reached the point where we don't need to continue to have social change.

We've learned a lot. We've learned how to negotiate, we've learned techniques of development, and technical aspects of economic development. We know how to innovate, we know how to come up with finance, we know how to solve problems we didn't know how to solve before.

Although we can probably do the same things we did thirty years ago, then they thought we were crazy. and now we can sit down in in the mayor's office or the governor's office and deal on behalf of our clients on a slightly different level. Before we had to stop traffic on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway for anybody to listen to us. Now we can just place a phone call.

There are far more community-based organizations that are self-sufficient in many ways, both financially and in terms of volunteers. And in contradiction to what I said before, there are many groups out there — so there is a constituency, and there are support institutions like the Local Initiative Support

Corporation, and the Enterprise Foundation, which have been very good in serving as a meeting ground where the private sector can come face to face with community-based organizations. These support institutions have brought to the table resources that we could never reach because members of their boards are banks and others.

BRESSI:

It sounds like community development groups have become part of the establishment.

SHIFFMAN:

In some ways the movement has become more of an industry than a movement for social change. So that has allowed us to move to scale and have more impact on one level, but on another level we're not engaging people the way we did before, leading in some cases to communities to look at some of these development corporations and entities as being as much a part of the problem as they are part of the solution.

And the field has become professionalized, so it's no longer rooted in the community, community-based people. We can't grow the expertise the way we did before. We don't have the Comprehensive Employment Training Act programs, the action programs, the anti-poverty programs, that allowed enough support to nurture somebnody from the street so they could participate.

BRESSI:

Randy Hester argues that advocacy planning and participation have backfired — empowering so many narrowly focused groups that all we have is participatory gridlock.

SHIFFMAN:

I don't subscribe to that. One of the real problems is that a lot of groups have abandoned their advocacy positions because they are afraid of losing their donor base. A lot of groups have become builders, not community builders in that they are feeding people into a civil society. But it's hard now for groups that do real community organizing, building broad-based coalitions, to raise money and sustain themselves, whereas in the 1960s the federal government had the VISTA program and universities trained organizers.

You move from period of action to period of consensus to a period of modeling; maybe there should be a new generation that gets back to advocacy. Some of the greatest energy we do see is in the environmental justice movement; those groups are going back to the people and energizing them around issues like environmental quality and health. The issues of welfare to work and equity in transportation are also helping.

BRESSI:

Citizen participation in community development has also been institutionalized in a number of administrative and political processes. Does that contribute to the sense of gridlock?

SHIFFMAN:

I have mixed feelings about that. If you hold public hearings that draw in different levels, people do come out and officials are expected to hear them. I think that works well and is important to do.

But if people believe that that is participation, they are wrong. Those are comment periods and should be looked at as such. They give the general public a chance to review what the participatory process wrought. There may be others in the community who were not involved and have the same right to speak out on the issue. One can't object to the process, but one should understand clearly its limits.

BRESSI:

It seems to me people can be frustrated by processes like that because it's not clear how their participation will affect the outcome.

SHIFFMAN:

New York City's planning department has developed no real working relationship with any community other than the business community, no relationship where they sit, roll up their sleeves — other than what took place with Nos Quedamos, a group in a Bronx neighborhood where an urban renewal plan needed to be revised. Some broader-based advocacy groups came together to support Nos Quedamos, and it became a vehicle through which the community could plan with the involvement of the city.

BRESSI:

But Nos Quedamos had a tremendous struggle at the planning commision, which tried to elminate all the design guidelines it proposed.

SHIFFMAN:

Well, when the plan went to public hearings, it became codified, with no obligation to implement. And it is only because of the struggle of the individuals who went through the process in that neighborhoodthat Nos Quedamos was able to sustain the identity of the plan, and to get the first projects underway. That's what I mean by the movement and the civil society: Groups in place who are able to carry out an agenda. You need to sustain that.