

Chapter 1

Decentralization and Regional Planning

Practical and Ideological Problems

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1921 and 1936 planners, landscape architects, business boosters, and automobile and tourism advocates planned for, built, and attempted to institutionalize regional parkways as major recreational and travel arteries for Americans. Prior to this period parkways existed within cities and early suburbs and had roots in early urban reform. Their use as facilitators of suburban development grew in the first part of the 20th century. The period between 1921 and 1936 saw the introduction of the automobile into the countryside and revealed a broader debate over development in the region. Two conflicting visions of regional development characterized this debate – called in this work the “regionalists’” vision and the “metropolitanists’” vision. The debate continues today and is expressed in two ways. One is the debate over metropolitan sprawl, loss of farmland, consumerism, and what constitutes appropriate road planning. The second revolves around the very core of the planning profession: Should planners work to present visions of future social and economic development or should their work accommodate the market and tweak it only when seriously needed?

The purpose of this study is to explore in detail how the two planning ideologies shaped the parkway in the region. Previous histories have focused on design, use, and, to some extent, the institutions and ideology. These histories leave out the social consequences and portray the regional parkway as a benign intervention into vacant landscapes. The regionalists and the metropolitanists made attempts to structure the decentralization of

congested urban areas. The conflict between the regionalists and the metropolitanists shaped the form and meaning of the regional parkway during the 1920s and 1930s. This is the story of that conflict.

1.1 The Regionalists

“Regionalists” describes a distinct group of regional planners – really regional visionaries – primarily associated with ideas that evolved out of the work of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA). They believed that regional planning in a capitalist democracy required the vision to look beyond the conventional logic of the city and the market. This vision required planning tools specific to the region and its component parts, as well as the cultural and political will to fundamentally break from the dominant economic forces. Unfortunately the regionalists’ vision was not always the practical path towards reform but it did present an alternative to the path facilitated by the metropolitanist planners.

1.2 The Metropolitanists

“Metropolitanists” attempted to plan regionally by facilitating the expansion of the market. They employed the tools available to city planners on a regional scale and attempted to accommodate (rather than fundamentally reform, as the regionalists did) the inefficiencies associated with regional urbanization (or metropolitanization). The metropolitanists were business boosters, developers, and planners interested in tweaking the market so as to interfere only minimally with its logic.

2. PREMISES FOR THE STUDY OF THE REGIONAL PARKWAY

During the years between World War I and World War II automobile travel on the regional parkways (and later freeways) in the United States supplanted rail and foot travel as the dominant mode of access to the regional landscape. The builders and supporters of the regional parkway (that is, the metropolitanists) included planners, landscape architects, automobile enthusiasts, business interests, some environmentalists and conservationists, and many local, state, and federal officials. The regional visionaries, on the other hand, viewed the introduction of the automobile as antithetical to the pursuit of regional culture. Given the terms of the debate, the regional parkway left its mark on indigenous communities, the

conceptualization of the natural environment, regional planning theory and practice, and the landscape itself. The history of the regional parkway indicates that early parkways, such as Skyline Drive in Virginia, evolved out of a closed planning process without public input. Later parkways, like the proposed Green Mountain Parkway in Vermont, had a more open, institutionalized structure, but supporters of the parkway could not gain the political support for its implementation. Many of the issues that confronted proponents of the regional parkway came back during the 1950s and 1960s in the form of controversies over the construction of the interstate highway system. Moreover, contemporary planning issues such as sustainable resource use, conservation, smart growth policies, and environmental protection on the one hand, and property rights, deregulation, and subsidized sprawl on the other are the updated form of the conflict that shaped the regional parkway between 1921 and 1936.

This study demonstrates that even during an era when regional planning had a national constituency, problems with implementation still existed. In order to create a successful initiative, visionary planners had to try to develop a constituency of supporters who believed in reformist goals. Benton MacKaye, one of the leading regionalists, believed that the construction of the Appalachian Trail by middle-class professionals would lead to a “social readjustment,” with the same professionals leading the charge. Instead, these middle-class volunteers put completion of the Trail ahead of reformist goals (most had previously rejected the “social readjustment” goals anyway) and a segment of these volunteers saw no need to hold out against the parkways to save the primacy of the Trail on the ridgeline.¹

The history of the regional parkway and its evolution from the conflict between the regionalists and the metropolitanists can provide us with practical knowledge about the current state of the planning profession. It suggests that neglecting a progressive vision for the comfort of market facilitation is too easy and often dangerous, because too many people are left out of the market. Much of what we value as a society is similarly left out. This study presents to planning professionals a picture of progressive planners as visionaries or leaders in a field often filled with market facilitators. Moreover, by restating and broadening the 1932 debate between Lewis Mumford and Thomas Adams over the Regional Plan of New York and its Environs, this work re-examines one of the essential ongoing debates in regional planning.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-7104-1>

Regional Visionaries and Metropolitan Boosters
Decentralization, Regional Planning, and Parkways
During the Interwar Years

Dalbey, M.

2002, XI, 202 p. 4 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-7104-1