

SENSEMAKING: IF SOCIAL WORK HAD A SKYLINE

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"Just after Christmas in 1648, John Aubrey, out hunting with some friends, rode through the Wiltshire Village of Avebury and there saw a vast prehistoric temple, the greatest of its age in Europe, which up to that time had remained undiscovered. It was not hidden in some remote or desolate spot, for a thriving village stood within its ramparts, nor at that date was it particularly ruinous, yet, Aubrey was the first of his age to notice it...

Before Aubrey's visit, untold thousands had passed and lived within the walls of the Avebury temple without noticing in its fabric anything more than a random assembly of mounds and boulders. But the moment Aubrey saw it, it became visible to all. Now every year, crowds of visitors marvel at the huge scale of the work, the size and precision of the great stones, which three hundred years ago were considered merely an impediment to agriculture and were broken up to clear the ground." 1

Avebury is a stone circle, similar to Stonehenge, and possibly the largest in the world. No one saw it because it had vanished from the skyline.

What if, metaphorically speaking, social work had a skyline? What might it look like? Where are its towers? How has it changed? What's on the drawing boards? Who are its architects?

Skylines and death were linked in my mind by the events that changed the skyline of Manhattan. They flashed into my head by the death of Richard Cloward.

His death created a sense of dread and of

loss which ejected me into a mental trip to New York, the deaths there and the loss felt by New Yorkers following the destruction of their towers. Interviews on television and in the press talked about the dreadful loss of life but also of the change in the skyline. People noted the empty space. Things would never be the same. Even now there is talk as to whether the towers can be replaced and what might take their place. I and many others feel the same about our profession's loss. We have lost a towering figure.

Our social work skyline has changed. A wonderful architect of social justice is no longer there. Richard Cloward may represent one of the last National Treasures in our great skyline. That structure can't be replaced, but like many people in New York City we can come together to make a shining landscape for our profession. Our profession has held many conferences and made many plans about what the future skyline might look like. Yet I am not sure if any of these have gotten off the drawing board. I have had many students who have wanted to build a more just society. Most have gone into public agencies and very few into social action. My students can't name any current "great" social workers. I don't know what has become of us and where we are headed. Does our profession make sense any more? Does the way Cloward and Piven were treated make sense (see Josh Miller in this issue)? Did the attack on Harry Specht for saying our profession had lost its way make sense?

What I do know is that our skyline has less striking impact because of the loss of Specht and Cloward, and Tim Samson, a social work educator and social activist who would

have added his comments to this issue but died a few months ago.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the fact that the judges in an architectural competition in Southern California could not select a winner because the quality of the entries was below par; they awarded five honorable mentions to some of the better works. In a portion of the judge's responses, they noted that none of the architecture seemed to make a statement of what the unique pattern of architecture should be for Southern California. There was nothing distinctive. Noting that many projects were conceived as "oases," one judge commented, "An oasis in the desert. Is that what you want to say about Orange County? Plan this place? The developers are planning Orange County on a piecemeal basis, and the architects are not saying what is our concept for the whole of this place?"²

In years to come, will people be asking the same questions about social workers? Are we just an oasis? On a journey to where? Where is our skyline? Why didn't anybody plan... "for the whole of" our profession?

A city is often known, recognized, and judged by its skyline. And cities pride themselves on how big and, at times, how beautiful their skyline might be. Often a city can be identified by the silhouette of the skyline, even when darkness muddies the distinctive characteristics of individual buildings.

What kind of outline would social work make against the sky if we had a skyline? Would the best we could come up with be some honorable mentions, or would there be a prize or two? How would we be judged for our response to the problem of the homeless, programs to fight prejudice, dealing with teen gang warfare, advocacy against the destruction of the mental health programs? How will we be judged for supporting antiquated and often questionable programs? Would we have a 21st Century look, or would the skyline of Chicago in the early 1900's overshadow our current structures compared to the dynamic welfare architects such as the Abbot sisters, Jane Addams, and numerous other architects of our profession? Where are the structures aimed at building the communities and strengthening

their ability to work and live together?

Will we just produce rows of flats, slums, tacky containers, or worse yet Hoovervilles? Will we embrace the glitter and glitz of the shining but cold immense reflecting glass boxes which chameleon like, change their colors with the weather? Or will our architectural legacy be a wondrous creation that honors the human potential?

How is it that social change efforts of our profession, like the ruins at Avebury, are becoming invisible? Who will notice and raise the temple from the ruins? If social work is once more to have a skyline that lights up the sky, we will have to accept and demonstrate with vigor our dual function and historic commitment to both individual and social change. Both provide the synergy that can complete the capstone of social justice built on the heritage and foundations of our professional canon. Not an oasis, not an honorable mention. The prize is in the process of creating. The prize is in the change. The prize is the tower that can shelter us all.

For all those who remember.

"There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole."

¹ Mitchell, J. (1972). *The View Over Atlantis*. N.Y. Ballantine Books. P.1.

² *Los Angeles Times*. (Orange County). August 1, 1988. Part VI. P. 10.

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