Collaborative Visioning or Urban Planning as Therapy? The Politics of Public-Private Policy Making*

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One aspect of a recent restructuring of urban economies, societies, and spaces has been a change in urban planning practice. Planning is increasingly privatized and decentralized in U.S. cities. Private planning consultants are often hired by public-private coalitions in order to shape the future of cities, while the planning processes they institute are frequently claimed to be consensus-based, collaborative, and inclusionary, rather than elite-centered and expert-driven. This paper discusses the use of "visioning"—an increasingly popular technique that develops goals for the future of a city through consensus-based meetings, open to all parties—as developed by New Century Lexington, a public-private planning initiative in Lexington, Kentucky. It argues that: (1) new public-private planning procedures, incorporating collaborative techniques, frequently become the institutional sites of political struggle over how future urban geographies are produced; (2) in order to understand the role of visioning in contemporary urban politics and in policy making outcomes, we must recognize the sociospatial context in which it is deployed; and (3) in the case of New Century, the way in which local elites controlled the mechanics of the visioning process made dissent difficult and, therefore, produced a vision of the future largely parallel to their standard economic development models. **Key Words: collaborative planning, urban policy making, urban politics, visioning.**

Introduction

Attempts to reinvent urban economies and landscapes have been a significant focus of recent geographical scholarship. Geographers have argued that the contemporary space economies of cities are shaped in relation to economic and institutional restructurings taking place at other scales. Cities are seen as increasingly entrepreneurial, in that the business and political elites who control urban economic policy have become focused on competition for investment from mobile capital (Harvey 1989; Leitner 1990; Hubbard and Hall 1998). This, it is argued, has led to a "new urban politics" characterized by increasing cooperation between public and private institutions, leading to the privatization of formerly public policy making activities (Harvey 1989; Stone 1989; Goodwin, Duncan, and Halford 1993). In U.S. cities, these changes have been manifested in, among other things, a threefold restructuring of space, economy, and institutions. Through this process, the geographical structure of local urban economies—their space

economies—are reshaped, as public and private institutions, from state agencies to corporations and civic organizations, are reoriented in terms of the social and economic functions they perform and of how they interact with each other (Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1989; Lauria 1997).

One crucial institution that is both agent and object of this threefold restructuring is urban planning (Dear 1986, 1989; Winter and Brooke 1993; McGuirk 1994; Filion 1996). Geographers have long recognized planning's crucial role in capitalist urbanization. Accumulation and social reproduction in cities can only proceed if the conditions for the production of the built environment are stable and relatively predictable (Clark and Dear 1984; Harvey 1985; Kenny 1992; McCann 1997). Planning—the state institution charged with managing existing space economies through land use zoning regulations and economic development policy and with envisioning future urban geographies—is also a crucial site of political struggle, particularly in terms of the discursive strategies employed by planners and interest groups (Kenny

1992; Hillier 1993, 1996; Laws 1994; Healy 1996). Elements of the recent restructuring of planning practice—specifically the privatization of services and a growing rhetoric of "inclusivity"[1] in decision making—have reemphasized the important political and policy making role of planning as a site of struggle in the production of urban geographies.

An example of this new form of planning was introduced to residents of Lexington, Kentucky on November 6, 1994, when the local newspaper announced the development of the "first-ever collaborative effort to mold a shared idea of what our community should be in the future" (Ward 1994, A1). The project, later called New Century Lexington, was to employ "visioning," an increasingly popular method of planning that develops goals for the future of a city through consensus-based meetings open to all interested parties. These goals (such as "we want to be a major center for amateur sports in fifteen years") are intended to be realized through traditional land use and economic development planning processes (Woodmansee 1994; Helling 1998). The article also introduced Robert Douglass, CEO of the Greater Lexington Chamber of Commerce, and Bradford Cowgill, a local lawyer, who were to lead the process on behalf of ten local organizations representing a cross-section of the city's elite groups.[2] Business elites were strongly represented, as were political and bureaucratic leaders, certain local charities and activist groups, and the city's largest employer, the University of Kentucky. Indeed, the original idea was said to have been formed at a breakfast of Central Kentucky's "movers and shakers" in the spring of 1994 (Ward 1994, A12). This meeting included the president of the university, the chairman of a major bank, the city's mayor, and a senior executive of Toyota Motor Corporation, owner of a plant in an adjacent county. The project's budget of $150,000 was shared equally between the chamber of commerce (which housed project operations throughout), Lexington United (a public-private economic development corporation), and the city government (Tolliver 1995). According to the leaders, however, this was *not* to be an elite-centered process, but rather one that would envision the city's future based on input from all interested groups. As the newspaper put it, "Organizers vow the project will be wide open,

requiring input from all individuals, organizations and interest groups. Hundreds are expected to take part" in shaping the future character of the city (Ward 1994, A12).

In this article I outline the contours of the restructured planning through a detailed case study of New Century Lexington. I argue that visioning, as deployed in this case, represents an attempt by local elites to negotiate the contradiction in contemporary urban planning between privatization, where control is being devolved from publicly accountable institutions, and a rhetoric of collaborative, consensus-based decision making, where all interests and opinions are to be weighted equally. Visioning's consensus-based collaborative structure is intended to foster alternative policy outcomes through the opening of planning to all groups in society. The frequently public-private character of visioning processes can undermine this potential, however, by allowing groups with entrenched power to co-opt the new language of inclusion while remaining in control of the workings of the process. In the following two sections of this paper, I suggest that the role of visioning in contemporary urban planning must be understood both in the context of changes in planning practice and in the sociospatial context of the places where this planning technique is used. Subsequently, I use a detailed discussion of the workings of the New Century process to argue that the question of who controls the organizational aspects of a visioning project is crucial to the outcome of a project. I then discuss the political struggle over the New Century vision by outlining its final recommendations and the opposition to them. I conclude by suggesting that, while collaborative visioning techniques can play a part in changing the nature of future urban geographies, the question of which interests have power and control over the processes themselves is crucial to the geographies produced.

A Note on Ethnographic Method

The research upon which this paper is based investigated how interest groups in Lexington used urban planning as an institutional site from which to articulate their views on the best future for the city (McCann 1998). This focus necessitated a deep engagement with the politics of local economic development and an attention to the practices and discourses of plan-

ning politics. The research primarily employed participant observation, a qualitative method central to ethnography (Burawoy et al. 1991; Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). This method permitted first-hand observation not only of how interest group positions were articulated, but also of how those positions related to each other in practice. Participation—ranging from attendance to direct participation and an organizational role—in over fifty planning meetings associated with four major planning processes in the period 1994–97 was supplemented by formal and informal interviews with various participants and an analysis of newspapers, government, corporate, and census documents. The study of New Century is one part of this larger study, and the conclusions at which I arrive are informed by the wider research project.

The New Planning "Consultocracy" and the Rise of Visioning

The planning profession in the United States has changed in recent decades. One aspect of this restructuring is an increasing permeability in the institutional boundaries of urban planning, characterized by an ongoing privatization of planning services and outsourcing of its functions to private consultants. This change is related to a widening definition of who in society has the qualifications and power to plan,[3] and has occurred within a wider context of political economic restructuring related to reduced fiscal resources at all scales of the state and a widespread popular critique of national state bureaucracies in favor of a rhetoric of "bottom-up" policy making. One aspect of this restructuring is an ongoing devolution and privatization of state functions at all levels (Swyngedouw 1992; Jessop 1994; Staeheli, Kodras, and Flint 1997) so that urban policy is increasingly left in the hands of corporate-supported organizations, while the nonprofit "shadow state" has grown significantly (Wolch 1990; Kodras 1997).

Since the 1980s, this restructuring has also produced a new dominant ethos in public administration. This new paradigm, termed the "New Public Management," has imported business management ideas of efficiency, performance, and outcome-oriented planning into the public sector, including city governments. It has influenced the provision of various public

services in numerous countries and can be seen clearly in the rise of a new urban planning "consultocracy" (Saint-Martin 1998, 321; see also Fordham 1990; Hood and Jackson 1991; Box 1999), in which consultants are hired as part of the privatization and outsourcing of planning functions. Their activities mean that planning—once seen as a local, public activity—is increasingly private and nonlocal, as private consultants now provide similar services to numerous cities. Visioning is an increasingly widespread and popular element of the private consultant's tool kit, and it has recently been identified by the American Planning Association as the profession's latest buzzword (Kennedy 1992, cited in Helling 1998, 335).

Visioning and Contemporary Planning Practice

According to Shipley and Newkirk (1999, 573), "[f]ew words have been used as widely and in such an array of contexts in planning in the last ten [to fifteen] years as the term vision." In their analysis of planning publications (Shipley and Newkirk 1999, 573), they identify a growing complexity of use in which "the noun vision has been joined . . . by the established verb, envision, and the relatively new action, visioning." The term is used in its weakest sense when cities simply rename their standard strategic plans "visions" (Helling 1998) or when people express vague dreams about the future (Shipley and Newkirk 1999). More concretely, and most relevant in this context, visioning is a term often associated with participatory, collaborative, or consensus-driven planning processes (Oregon Visions Project 1993; Woodmansee 1994; Walzer 1996; Shipley and Newkirk 1999; Luke Planning Inc. 2000).

In this sense, visioning involves three broad procedural impulses: to gather groups of "stakeholders" in order to identify issues of concern; to motivate those involved to think about problems in new ways and to galvanize action through team-building; and finally to generate solutions (Shipley and Newkirk 1998, 585–86). It differs from standard expert-driven planning in that the process of *constructing* a vision is intended to be open to all and the end goals are to be defined in concrete terms, rather than abstract or scientific ones.[4] Collaborative visioning's focus on consensus-building and broad participation means that it also differs from

standard planning, where opposing sides—often represented by lawyers—take oppositional stances in public hearings (Helling 1998; Myers and Kitsuse 2000).

The collaborative aspects of visioning are seen by its proponents to be its most valuable assets, since it is "particularly suited to addressing issues that . . . involve multiple interests, some of whom may be unorganized and poorly informed, and none of whom is powerful enough to impose a solution" (Helling 1998, 336; see also Gray 1989; Bryson 1995). Furthermore, advocates of visioning argue that its broad themes make it more responsive to new social and economic problems facing cities and allow emerging issues to be dealt with more efficiently than traditional planning. Critics of visioning, on the other hand, note that its focus on goals can be one of its greatest downfalls: "in the absence of strategies for achieving goals and the authority to implement them, visions risk devolving into inconsequential and expensive wish lists for the future" (Myers and Kitsuse 2000, 228). Furthermore, two other elements of visioning–consensus and the de-emphasizing of planners as experts—that are seen by its proponents as advantages are identified by its critics as major weaknesses. In her critical review of the Atlanta Regional Commission's "Atlanta 2020" visioning process (1991–1997), Helling (1998, 347) identifies these among a number of issues that were poorly dealt with, leading to a process that "yielded few clearly significant, immediate results from its list of action initiatives, produced no plan capable of providing 'a roadmap to the vision,' and required the commitment of $4.4 million in resources."

The way that visioning shapes the future of cities is tied to three factors: (1) interactions between the funders and the consultant they hire to organize and facilitate the process; the interests of the funders will be reflected in their choice of consultants, their particular brand of visioning, and the proposals produced; (2) the manner in which the consultant hired to facilitate a visioning process organizes its meetings and the degree of attention paid by the organizers to those in the process whose views about the future of a place are diametrically opposed to their own; and (3) the ability and willingness of various interests in the city to support, oppose, or participate in the visioning process. The central rhetoric of inclusion and collaboration in the visioning model necessitates some semblance of broad participation if its policy recommendations are to be regarded as legitimate. The wider urban political context—other foci of interest group activity, from neighborhood activism to development proposals—may reduce participation and undermine the project. In this regard, a discussion of a visioning project must recognize the sociospatial context in which it is deployed.

The Sociospatial Context of the Visioning Process and Its Organization

In the previous section I suggested that private-public collaborative visioning projects are crystallizations of a general restructuring of the state. Despite this, visioning has not been implemented everywhere. Rather, its implementation in certain places relates to specific economic, social, and political circumstances. These conditions shape how policies are developed and how future urban geographies are shaped. In the case of Lexington, New Century was one element of a larger political struggle over the future of the city's space economy and society, which entailed different interest groups inserting their stories about the future into various planning procedures.

Political Economic Restructuring and Social Protest: Lexington in the 1990s

New Century was partly focused on the future of Lexington's economy. The period 1989–94 had seen the decline of the city's long-standing branch-plant economic development model, based on a combination of light manufacturing—including an IBM printer and typewriter manufacturing plant—and the horse and tobacco industries, representing the investment of large amounts of international capital in the surrounding Bluegrass agricultural region. When IBM divested from the city in the early 1990s, at a time when the tobacco and horse industries were also in decline, local business elites began to rethink the basic tenets of their economic development plans. As an invited speaker at New Century's first meeting put it, "[Kentucky tends to attract] the lowest jobs on the economic development chain . . . we pluck other people's chickens!" rather than creating new jobs (McCann 1995a). At the same time, there was increasing unease about local elites' ability

to successfully shape a better economic future after they were seen to have been blindsided by IBM's departure. New Century represented an attempt by politicians and business leaders to find a new development model that overcame these criticisms by including their critics in the decision making process.

New Century's insistence on collaborative and inclusive decision making also indicated a second goal: to reassert stability and order in the city's planning politics. The planning process in Lexington during the early 1990s was in tumult. Two developer-sponsored economic development proposals—one to build houses and factories on farmland at the edge of the urban areas and another to cover a large area of open agricultural land within the city with dense retail, commercial, and residential uses—were met with strong resistance by a coalition of environmentalists and neighborhood activists. These activists used various political tactics to disrupt standard planning procedures and to question the financial interests of those public officials charged with adjudicating the proposals. By the mid 1990s, this challenge to standard growth-oriented policy making resulted in the politics of public urban planning deteriorating further into lawsuits, and a stalemate that hampered new investment in the built environment (McCann 1997). New Century was conceived partly as a privatized urban planning project where visioning techniques would "open up" the process to all interested parties, while the consultant's private-sector efficiency and "impartial outsider" standing would overcome the rancorous and time-consuming politics of the public planning process. As Bradford Cowgill put it, "We felt like there would be credibility and objectivity added by having a completely independent expert come into the community and see us in a way that may be more candid than we can see ourselves" (Tolliver 1995, B3).

A third impulse behind the New Century process was concern among political and business elites over a growing erosion of an officially sanctioned dominant ideology of citywide community cohesion in the city. From the 1960s to the 1980s, city leaders tied Lexington's relative economic prosperity and urban growth to a representation of the city as a good place to live for all its population and for companies to invest. This narrative was always ex-

tremely problematic; the 1994 shooting death of a young unarmed African-American man by a white Lexington police officer disrupted it further. The ensuing protests in late October 1994 centered on the larger issue of the social, economic, and political exclusion and spatial marginalization of Lexington's African-American population (McCann 1999). The myth of citywide community was no longer viable as part of a larger economic development discourse. Indeed, Cowgill noted (Bloch 1995a, A9) that "[t]he level of fragmentation within the community is increasing, and we want this project to revive a sense of common destiny," and Henry Luke, the Florida-based private planning consultant hired by New Century to facilitate the process (Luke, quoted in Bishop 1995, E1) characterized Lexington as a "closed community" with a "highly class-oriented society" in which class and race segmentation were equally problematic.

New Century must thus be understood in the context of the economic, institutional, and social upheavals taking place in the city during the 1990s. The motivations of its organizers were the products of increasing unease among elites over the future character of the city and their ability to shape the local space economy through the planning process. The protests heightened this nervousness. While the project had been conceived in the spring, in reaction to economic uncertainty and the already rancorous debate over urban development plans, the October protests focused elite attention on racism and social exclusion within the city and led to New Century's hasty introduction only twelve days later.

The Mechanics of New Century's Visioning Process

Political turmoil and policy-making paralysis do not create a welcoming business environment for potential investors. In this context, it is clear why local elites felt that a rhetoric of inclusion was necessary in New Century. However, the inclusive rhetoric was tempered by the need for a strictly enforced set of procedures in the planning process. Therefore, while the sponsors framed their visioning process in terms of "collaboration" and "inclusion," the workings of the process were tightly controlled by the consultant, leaving little room for alternative visions to be negotiated. It would be more accurate to

characterize the process in terms of speed and generality.

After being hired in early 1995, Luke began mustering, with the help of the chamber of commerce, over one hundred and fifty "task force members" who agreed to meet weekly over the following months to develop a "vision of Lexington in the next century as well as a strategic plan for strengthening the [city's] economy" (New Century Lexington 1995a, 4). The vision would provide the structure for detailed strategic planning initiatives by business, government, and volunteer groups over the following fifteen years. The initial "Stakeholders' Summit"[5] was a meeting attended by approximately 400 people. It outlined the visioning process and what Luke and other invited speakers saw as the main themes of that process: quality of life, economic development, education, infrastructure, government, and leadership (McCann 1995a).

Four "Task Force Vision Sessions"—meetings at which the broad themes of the vision were to be negotiated among the selected task force members—were held in the next month. These meetings represented the core of the first stage of the project.[6] The first vision session was held in Pleasant Green Baptist Church, which Bradford Cowgill reminded the task force members, was one of the city's oldest African-American congregations.[7] This was a significant choice for the first meeting in the context of the racially charged protests six months earlier. The point was underscored by the church's pastor, who opened the proceedings with a prayer in which he asked God to help the task force members and the whole city population to "become one" (McCann 1995b). After these preliminaries, Luke—whom Cowgill introduced as the man who could "change the destiny of this community"—outlined how the vision sessions would be organized. He reminded the participants that the visioning process was not about what they *wanted to do* but was, rather, about what they *wanted to be* (McCann 1995b). In other words, it was more about words and ideas than actions. Given this stipulation, the rest of the session moved swiftly, since all questions about implementation and concerns about conflicts in the individual vision statements were deferred to the later stages of the process, labeled "strategic planning."

The first vision session exemplified the speed at which the process worked. Gathered task force members took only twenty-five minutes to analyze a series of spreadsheets containing data on twelve characteristics of Lexington's population and economy, including comparisons to fifty similar U.S. cities. In the next thirty-five minutes the participants were asked to vote for which of the indicators they saw as being most important to the future of Lexington. For example, "earnings per job" was voted to be important while "net commuting times" were not (McCann 1995b). The people who attended these meetings represented a cross-section of Lexington's population, from corporate executives and lawyers to representatives of church congregations, social service agencies, and activist groups. The breadth of attendance meant that most of the task force members had little formal experience of economic development planning. This is a key principle of collaborative planning initiatives, which are intended to break down the veneer of the expert and to truly broaden participation in decision making. The speed of the New Century process, however, did not allow for the group learning necessary in a collaborative process. Instead, attendance was taken for participation.

In the second hour of the meeting, Luke used flip charts to encourage consensus on goals for each of the indicators (e.g., "become one of the top five places of similar population size in the U.S. in terms of earnings per job by 2015"). The decisions made on the basis of this two-hour cursory analysis set the agenda for the next three vision sessions at which the goals would be fleshed out and, by extension, for the next fifteen years as New Century implemented its vision (McCann 1995b). These statements formed the basis for what was hoped to be "a community dialogue designed to evoke a *unifying vision* of the future" (Tolliver 1995, B3; emphasis added). At this first meeting it became clear to many of the attendees that, while New Century espoused a rhetoric of inclusion and collaboration, the power to control the trajectory of decision making was in the hands of the same groups who had controlled the city's economic development for decades (interview with activist 1996). The outcome of the tightly ordered process was a document that portrayed a *single* vision based on a circumscribed form of consensus decision making, and the reactions to it by those less than sanguine with its precepts revealed the continuing contentiousness

at the heart of the city's planning politics and the problems with the notion that consensus-based planning can produce a unity of purpose.

Whose City? Whose New Century? Contesting the Vision of Lexington's Future

*A VISION OF LEXINGTON IN THE NEW CEN-TURY: A technology and knowledge based community providing health and prosperity for all it's [*sic*] citizens.*
— New Century Lexington (1995b, 2)

On June 15, 1995, local organizers arranged a public meeting, poorly attended (McCann 1995f), to introduce New Century's thirteen-page "Vision Statement" (New Century Lexington 1995b), consisting entirely of "themes and sub-themes" (Table 1). These themes emphasized business goals and sentiments that provided an extremely broad vision of the future. According to the New Century framework, it was up to a select group of "strategic planners," drawn mostly from the original ten organizations, to work out the details of implementation.

The manner in which the strategic planning phase of New Century was conducted could not have been more different from the initial visioning process. While the meetings facilitated by Luke were public and media-oriented, the strategic planning process since summer 1995 has been shrouded in mystery. After the announcement of the vision statement, the Chamber staff and some of the project partners decided which goals, or subthemes, to pursue. As the New Century organizers put it,

> While that report [i.e., the New Century Lexington Vision Statement] presents a breadth of approaches to achieve the community's envisioned future, not all of the proposals have been or can be initiated immediately and simultaneously. Some lack ready organizational sponsors; others call for significant and as yet unidentified monetary and human resources; and yet other proposals depend upon the results of preliminary studies or data gathering efforts. (New Century Lexington 1996)

By December 1996, the project partners had engaged with only six of the twenty-one goals listed in Table 1: one quality of life goal (A), three economic development goals (A, B, and C), and two education goals (B and C). These goals were traditional local economic development concerns. All of the unattended goals related to infrastructure, government, or leadership, despite the fact that these themes included every statement about diversity, "reinvented" government, and inclusiveness—themes that

Table 1 *A Summary of New Century's "Vision Statement"*

Theme	Subthemes
Quality of life	A. Healthy community, healthy people B. Arts, cultural, and recreational opportunities for all citizens C. Preserving the best of what we already have
Economic development	A. Harnessing the brainpower of our universities B. Globally competitive manufacturing and high-technology businesses C. Retaining and expanding the best of what we have D. Economic expansion that benefits everyone
Education	A. A career focus in K thru [*sic*] 12 education B. Lifelong opportunities for skill development C. Excellence in the education process D. Make the Lexington community responsible as the primary advocate of the region's world class cluster of colleges and universities
Infrastructure	A. State of the art communications and industrial infrastructure B. Integrated transportation system C. Geographically dispersed, diverse housing D. Clean and green infrastructure
Government	A. A "reinvented" government B. An empowered government C. A forward-thinking government
Leadership	A. Private sector initiative B. A new tradition of inclusiveness C. Leadership development

Source: New Century Lexington (1995b, 5–13).

were central to the early New Century rhetoric of late 1994 and early 1995. The vision of the future was being shaped, not by the vision process, but by the business and political elites who controlled the strategic planning stage of the project.

Criticisms of New Century and Alternative Visions of the City's Future

Concerns over this situation were evident in criticisms leveled at New Century as the process went on. The criticisms tended to be leveled by environmental activists and others not associated with the major institutional sponsors. Furthermore, most of them were articulated in the local newspaper in the form of letters to the editor and opinion pieces or in public comment sessions during "showcase meetings" that began and ended the process. Although there were some attempts to critique the structure of the process during the four vision sessions themselves, the fact that this behavior seemed to be considered inappropriate is a further indication of the strength and importance of procedural control in New Century. The criticisms of New Century can be grouped into three categories: (1) a concern that the project represented a new procedural façade for the dominant entrenched interests in the city; (2) a skepticism over whether any of the visions could actually be implemented; and (3) an unease about the model of economic development that was implicit in the vision from the beginning.

From early 1995 onwards, the local environmentalists, who were also opposing major development proposals in the public planning process, treated New Century with suspicion. One argued that "[t]his could have good results, but to call it a community vision would be misleading," given that it was created by the chamber of commerce (Talwalker, quoted in Bishop 1995, E1). The character of the visioning meetings did not diminish this concern. Indeed, it was heightened when, during the second meeting, a task force member questioned the use of words like "everyone" and "participation" being treated lightly in the development of the vision. He asked whether everyone *does* or *can* participate in decision making on every issue. His question was met with silence from the consultant, who then moved the dis-

cussion on to another issue (McCann 1995c). A comment session at the end of New Century's meeting to announce its final vision statement provided another opportunity for criticism. It was noted, for instance, that the room contained 104 people and that only 35 of those were not members of the core groups within New Century. One activist argued that this was indicative of the "old paradigm" of decision making. Again, his comments were met with silence (McCann 1995f).

Concerns over Luke's insistence on *goals* rather than the *processes* needed to achieve them also permeated a number of discussions.[8] For example, in one vision meeting a participant asked the consultant how New Century would be able to convince the public that its visions were worth funding with tax revenues (McCann 1995d). As the local newspaper put it, "Luke told the group it was something that would be accomplished in phase two of the project over the next 15 years [after his direct involvement had ended], drawing laughter from the crowd. 'I've been doing this for 15 years and what you people decide gets done,' Luke responded" (Bloch 1995b, B4).

A third object of criticism was the model of economic development at the heart of New Century. From the early meetings, at which invited business leaders emphasized the need for the city to position itself correctly for future high-tech and biotech investment and the consultant situated Lexington on a series of rankings and emphasized how the city must compete with similar places, it was clear that a certain competitive, neoliberal model of local economic development was being taken for granted among the project's sponsors (Peck and Tickell 1994). Not everyone in the city was comfortable with this. In a letter to the editor, one resident expressed disappointment at the unchallenged assertion at one meeting that Kentucky must become a "right to work" state. In an opinion piece written after the first stage of the process, the director of a local nonprofit organization criticized the notion that New Century could develop a consensus-based vision that would promote the wellbeing of *everyone* in the city, and that the good of all could best be promoted through economic competition with other places. While proposing what he called "cooperative economics" as an alternative, he argued that

[c]ompetitive economics is a prison. No amount of adjusting, reforming, or changing it around will truly help. Well-intentioned efforts like New Century Lexington improve prison conditions at best. Instead, why not think in new ways? In other words, let's break out of the prison altogether. . . . Only then will we emerge into the new century with a truly improved quality of life. (Fogler 1995, E3)

Discussion and Conclusion: Collaborative Visioning or Planning as Therapy?

With a little skill it's not too difficult to create a burst of good feeling. The trick is to make it accomplish something.

— Bradford Cowgill
(quoted in Ward 1994, A12)

Since the end of 1996, when the project organizers decided which visions to pursue, there has been almost complete silence about the organization's activities. The New Century website has not been updated since 1996; the organization's email bulletin board—which was billed as a way for citizens to keep up with the latest happenings in the strategic planning process—is off-line. In the only extended public discussion of the process, a columnist for the *Herald-Leader*, who had originally been hopeful about the project's potential, expressed skepticism: "New Century Lexington published a book of goals, statements and visions. The report was a cocoon of good intentions and promises, and when New Century was through spinning out the pages, the organization crawled into the report and lay dormant" (Bishop 1998, A13). From this perspective, Cowgill's statement above contrasting the ease of "feel good" planning processes and the hard work behind those that achieve their goals seems prescient.

A more generous view of New Century might be that it was always conceived as a fifteen-year project, of which the initial visioning stage was a short but very important component. This position was expressed by New Century's organizers in all the meetings in which I participated, and in other settings. Given this long-range perspective, it is too early to evaluate the success of New Century in getting its visions implemented through the public policy process.

However, the process is significant in the larger urban political context in Lexington dur-

ing the 1990s. This context suggests that New Century's lack of results and growing silence represent a well-worn strategy on the part of local elites to maintain their control over the future of the city by deploying a rhetoric of inclusion within an increasingly privatized, tightly controlled planning process. In an interview I conducted in late 1996, a local environmental activist, who characterized his inclusion in the New Century process as mere tokenism, took this position (interview with activist 1996). He argued that all of the ongoing experiments with new planning techniques in the city were not intended to promote true participatory decision making, but were instead nothing more than "exercises in appeasement" and "public education," in which citizens were given a public forum to express their views about the future in order to feel better about themselves and to bring them into a context where they could be (re)educated by elite experts (interview with activist 1996).

[There is] this view that exists among decision makers here of public involvement as therapy. . . . That we [i.e., those who oppose traditional economic development models] are ill and needing to be cured and the way to do it is to have this public involvement process whereby they can educate us on the error of our ways. It's as if we're too feeble-minded to know what's in our own best interests. It's not that at all, it's that we have a different idea of our best interests . . . (interview with activist 1996).[9]

Drawing on my participation in the visioning process, interviews, and analysis of published statements, I have discussed New Century as an example of the politics surrounding the implementation of new collaborative planning techniques. While the New Century process is intended to continue for a number of years, it is possible at this stage to draw some lessons about the role of visioning processes in political struggles over the future of urban space economies. First, struggles continually occur over the future geographies of cities. As urban planning has become an increasingly public-private institution, it has grown to be an important site of political struggle over the future of U.S. cities. Second, in order to understand the role visioning plays in the production of new urban geographies, we must recognize the importance of the sociospatial context in which it is deployed. Third, while visioning processes

can produce alternative plans of the future, in the case of Lexington the process seems to have been the product of attempts by local elites to negotiate the contradiction between privatized and nominally collaborative planning in a way that produced a certain level of consent for their vision of the future.

It is in this context that the restructuring of planning and the rise of visioning can be seen as elements of broader attempts to reinvent urban economies, societies, and spaces. These efforts entail a recasting of basic notions about quality of life, economic growth, and political participation through changes in urban policy. To a great extent, these changes are struggled over by existing elites and other activists with alternative visions of the future. While new planning processes such as collaborative visioning hold the possibility for some of these alternative visions to come to fruition, the case of New Century suggests that the groups that retain the power to control the mechanics of collaborative processes, to translate them into written documents, and to decide which parts of those documents to act upon are still most likely to shape future urban geographies in their own interests. ∎

Notes

[1] I use the term "rhetoric" following Dear (1989, 450), who defines the rhetoric of planning practice as "the voices and arguments employed by planners in defining and defending their professional realm."

[2] The ten organizations were: Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, the University of Kentucky, Lexington Community College, the Urban League of Lexington, the Greater Lexington Chamber of Commerce, Lexington United (an organization allied with the Chamber and engaged in attracting inward investment), Bluegrass Tomorrow (a well-established conservationist organization concerned with growth management and planning issues for the Inner Bluegrass region), Fayette County Public Schools, the Greater Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the United Way of Lexington.

[3] Other aspects of planning's restructuring include a decline in comprehensive planning concerned with the development of long-term plans for entire cities and based on rational, scientific models of policy making, and a related rise in the importance of plans concerned with specific places within cities.

[4] It is important to note that visioning processes tend not to deal with design; rather, they are focused on broad plans.

[5] The word "stakeholder" is widely used in planning and community development processes. It implies that each person or group's stake in the process is equal and that, as a result, every actor has equal ability to influence the process and responsibility for its outcomes. This problematic notion suggests that the term is worthy of critical attention.

[6] In what seemed to contradict the inclusionary rhetoric of the process, the monthly meetings were scheduled from 8am to 10am on Wednesdays, which effectively excluded many members of Lexington's population who could not rearrange their schedules. The themes laid out by the business leaders at the Stakeholders' Summit came to permeate the discussions at the four vision sessions, not least because a large proportion of the "stakeholders" at each meeting were business people with the ability to arrange their schedules around extracurricular gatherings on weekday mornings (McCann 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 1995e).

[7] The following meeting was held at a suburban church. The third and fourth were held at corporate offices.

[8] This is a central criticism of visioning in the urban planning literature (see Helling 1998).

[9] The activist draws the notion of "planning as therapy" from Sherry Arnstein's (1969) concept of the "ladder of citizen participation."

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