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Remapping the Midcentury Metropolis:  
The Ford Foundation and the Joint Center for Urban Studies of MIT and Harvard University

The Ford Foundation played a key role in identifying and responding to the nation's urban crisis during the long 1960s. As ever the Ford attacked the problem along multiple fronts, simultaneously plying policymakers while investing resources in programs for the poor and displaced as well as in vanguard intellectual movements at leading research universities. Believing that there was a direct connection between ideas and action, and that American research universities were the best site for the generation of usable knowledge on the city and its inhabitants, the foundation bet the future of the metropolis on the Joint Center for Urban Studies of MIT and Harvard University.

Established in 1959 with the help of an initial grant from the Ford Foundation, the Joint Center is one of the centers that I examine in my current book project, *Front and Center: Academic Expertise and its Challengers in the Post-1945 U.S.*, a study of interdisciplinary centers and the role they have played in connecting the social sciences and public policymaking in modern America. The book consists of a series of case studies that retrace the emergence of the team-based center model in World War II and the proliferation of different centers—and policy issues—that followed, from the birth of urban studies and poverty centers in the early 1960s; to the creation of ethno-racial and gendered identity centers later in that decade; to the formation of policy think tanks in the 1970s, when politically conservative experts created their own intellectual counter-establishment to combat the supposedly liberal university; to the expansion of the center model and the ascent of the “public intellectual” and “policy wonk” since

the 1980s. This approach will reveal the different types of centers that emerged as well as how the politicization of expert knowledge changed the nature of the work that center experts did: from so-called "objective" and insulated research during the cold war, to partisan "advocacy" research thereafter.

The brainchild of two young, ambitious "urbanists" and friends—Harvard city planner Martin Meyerson (age 37), and MIT land economist and regional development specialist Lloyd Rodwin (age 41)—the Joint Center's focus on "the problems and potentialities of urban areas and regions," represented something new in the center universe. With the assistance of Paul Ylvisaker, head of the foundation's Public Affairs Division, the duo agreed to locate the Joint Center in the heart of Cambridge Square, away from both campuses in the hope that its interdisciplinary discoveries would bridge the gap "between fundamental research and policy application at national and international as well as local levels."<sup>1</sup> Primarily run on soft money and contract work (like most centers in the Cambridge Complex) neither Meyerson, the Joint Center's first director, nor Rodwin, his reliable number two, was interested in running a consulting firm by another name. Their research on the problems of the city was in service to a larger mission: namely, to rebuild the hidebound field of city planning from the ground up, replacing it with the new field of urban studies.<sup>2</sup>

The Joint Center's theoretical map for urban studies called for integrating and synthesizing ideas from across the disciplines, especially from the social and behavioral sciences.<sup>3</sup> As a practical matter, this interdisciplinary approach, one the Ford was quite fond of, recommended a wholly new form of planning that placed the city in a total social and political context and paid close attention to the interaction of people and their environment. Unlike old-school master planners that treated people as mere abstractions (if they treated them at all), or latter-day advocacy planners that focused exclusively on planning's human impact, the Joint Center's "third way" urban studies ethos considered the people *and* the built environment constitutive parts of its "comprehensive planning" model.<sup>4</sup> The memorandum of agreement between MIT and Harvard, delineating the Joint Center's charge, made this point clear: "The purpose of the new Joint Center for Urban Studies will be to focus research on the physical environment of cities and regions, the social, economic, governmental, legal technical and aesthetic forces that shape them, and the interrelations between urbanization and society."<sup>5</sup>

Meyerson and Rodwin's commitment to "the people" had not been learned at Harvard,

where both men did their advanced training in the 1940s, but “on the job,” in planning offices in New York, Washington, Chicago, Philadelphia, and London. As members of the planning community’s postwar generation, they came of age after the failed promise of New Deal planning and at the front edge of the “urban crisis,” when tens of millions of mostly white, middle-class Americans abandoned the city for the suburbs.<sup>6</sup> To prevent the further erosion of the nation’s urban population, labor market, and tax base, the federal government enacted sweeping “urban renewal” legislation that energized local-level renewal agencies and empowered those agencies with eminent domain authority and money to remake the physical and human landscape of the American metropolis.<sup>7</sup> Whole city neighborhoods were leveled and more than 1.6 million inhabitants, a disproportionate number of whom were elderly, immigrant, or African American, were forcibly removed to make room for high-rise apartments, mixed-use developments, and the affluent consumers that these glistening destinations hoped to attract. While the economic impact of urban renewal varied widely from one city to another, there was little doubt as to the extent of the human wreckage left in the path of the “federal bulldozer,” convincing many young planners that a new tack was required.<sup>8</sup> The Ford-funded Joint Center was at the center of this revisionist intellectual and policy project to forge an urban studies model that factored local people into the planning process.

My exploration of the Ford Foundation papers at the Rockefeller Archive Center in December 2013 has helped to clarify a number of points about the foundation’s role in urban studies research in general and in the Joint Center in particular. For one thing, Paul Ylvisaker played a greater part in the development of the Joint Center’s research agenda than I previously realized. Ford Foundation officers enjoyed broad discretion in choosing projects and shaping those projects from conception to operation.<sup>9</sup> Ylvisaker was a famously energetic officer, some would say meddlesome, whose role in creating the unique joint organizational structure of the Joint Center I understood from the holdings of the MIT Archives. He insisted on a collaboratively run center, and, since he held the purse strings, ended up getting his way. What I did not know was how much the Ford Foundation’s Public Affairs Division influenced the Joint Center’s research agenda beyond its formative period of development.

The foundation pressed the Joint Center to redirect its research agenda toward greater local engagement in the Boston and Cambridge areas. This occurred in 1961-62 time period when Ylvisaker dispatched a review committee to assess the Joint Center’s achievements and

future prospects, especially its financial viability. From the start Meyerson and Rodwin imagined their center as a global institution that would tackle urban problems around the world, not in their own backyard. But when the Ford's review committee, headed by Homer Wadsworth, learned that the Joint Center's global research agenda would not be enough to sustain the center beyond the original funding period, Ylvisaker and Wadsworth suggested the center conduct more research closer to home. The Joint Center's leadership, including the Visiting Committee, charged with advising the center director, initially resisted local work because they thought it would diminish the center's status. In the absence of additional big ticket projects like the design and construction of Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela, however, the Joint Center had little choice but to explore other research options. "Joint Center personnel and institutional representatives should be encouraged to curry regional support," advised Wadsworth in a memo to Ylvisaker, "and to consider ways of responding to regional interests and needs..."<sup>10</sup> Less than a year later, in March 1962, Wadsworth and his team approved the Joint Center's grant reauthorization request, applauding the center's decision to tap the local area for research projects. "It is unquestionably important," Wadsworth told Ylvisaker, "that the Joint Center develop a diversified pattern of support.... Some considerable part of this support can be developed in the Boston area."<sup>11</sup> For the rest of the 1960s, a majority of the Joint Center's contract work occurred in Boston and Cambridge, much as the Ford Foundation had hoped that it would.

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center also alerted me to the fact that the Ford's interest in urban issues in the early 1950s helped seed the professional network that led to the development of the Joint Center later on. A key point of intersection for young urbanists and the Ford Foundation was the American Council To Improve Our Neighborhoods, Inc. (ACTION)—a Ford-sponsored community action organization established in 1953 to cultivate a kind of grassroots participation in urban renewal planning. One of the major criticisms of 1949 Federal Housing Act's urban renewal programs was that they neglected to consider the people living in the neighborhoods being razed. Although it would be a stretch to say that ACTION sought out the participation of all homeowners, the organization did widen the debate by consulting with developers, labor unions, and community leaders in ways that did democratize the renewal process and that paved the way for true grassroots agitation, later on. The research director of ACTION was none other than Martin Meyerson, who, after a brief stint as a planner at Michael Reese Hospital on Chicago's Southside, took a faculty position at the University of

Pennsylvania, acquiring the ACTION research directorship along the way. Meyerson's work at ACTION combined with his prolific scholarly production in the mid-1950s significantly raised his professional profile, making possible his Harvard chaired professorship in 1957 and, two years later, the founding of the Joint Center.<sup>12</sup>

This brings me to the third and final discovery revealed by my work at the Rockefeller Archives Center: evidence of the intellectual origins of the humane urban studies ethos that was at the core of the Joint Center's institutional and intellectual mission. The existing scholarship, as I noted earlier, has tended to draw a stark divide between the old master planners, who removed people from the planning process, and advocacy planners, who made people's rights the focus of it. The comprehensive planning model that I have postulated was supported by the Ford Foundation and the Joint Center, the basic dimensions of which I have gleaned from the MIT and Harvard Archives and from the books and articles published by Joint Center members, has now come into much sharper focus. An unpublished research report written in 1959 by David Farbman of the Institute for Urban Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, entitled "A Description, Analysis, and Critique of the Master Plan," provides the clearest explication of the people-focused "third way" comprehensive planning model that was the stock and trade of the Joint Center.<sup>13</sup> Farbman called the work on the history of master planning "scanty" and then provides a fascinating critique of heavy-handed planning approaches. After taking to task master planners' "physical bias," their overemphasis on place rather than people, Farbman sketches out the contours of an alternative approach that is "value oriented" and that "translates the values of the community into the physical solutions recommended in the plan." It is a fascinating and important document that captures the intellectual work of urban studies innovators as they tried to devise a strategy to remake the modern metropolis in ways that satisfied policymakers, builders and developers, planners and everyday people.

It was a tall order and the Joint Center never really figured out the best way to satisfy all these conflicting stakeholder demands. The Ford Foundation subsidized the center for its first decade, contributing over \$2.5 million during its formative period of development. In the early 1970s, after a number of raucous years that nearly witnessed the center's demise, the Joint Center retooled its mission, moving from an eclectic agenda to one focused exclusively on housing policy and on the support provided by federal agencies with a vested interest in such work. Renamed the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University in 1989, when MIT

finally begged off, the center endures to this day, producing top-notch research on U.S. housing policy that “helps leaders in government, business, and the civic sectors make decisions that effectively address the needs of cities and communities.”<sup>14</sup> Although the current Joint Center’s comparatively modest mission bears only a faint resemblance to its original charge to invent urban studies, that the field has been thoroughly institutionalized in the modern university speaks to the wisdom of the Ford Foundation’s investment in the Joint Center more than a half century ago.

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<sup>1</sup> *JCUS: The First Five Years, 1959-1964* (Cambridge, MA: April 1964), 53-54.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (1988; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 322. For general histories of city planning, see, for example, John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965); Mel Scott, *American City Planning since 1890: A History Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the American Institute of Planners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Donald A. Krueckeberg, ed., *Introduction to Planning History in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1983); Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver, eds., *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Jon A. Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). For several highly critical accounts of planning, see, for example, Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities* (1961; New York: Random House, 1993); Robert Goodman, *After the Planners* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971); Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1974; New York: Vintage, 1975); M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983); and Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Rodwin, “Images and Paths of Change in Economics, Political Science, Philosophy, Literature, and City Planning, 1950-2000,” in *The Profession of City Planning*, ed. Lloyd Rodwin and Bishwapriya Sanyal (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 2000), 3-23. The penetration of the “social sciences in urban and regional studies,” Rodwin wrote, “was the main reason for the organization, in 1959, of the Joint Center of MIT and Harvard University outside the city planning departments of either university” (19). See also “Lloyd Rodwin, 80, MIT urban studies professor, extended the field of planning to social sciences and the Third World,” *MIT News*, Dec. 8, 1999, available at <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/1999/rodwin.html>. Accessed May 23, 2013. Rodwin began thinking about the people’s place in city planning in the mid-1940s; see Lloyd Rodwin, “Garden Cities and the Metropolis,” *Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 21 (August 1945): 281.

<sup>4</sup> The existing scholarship has focused on master versus advocacy planning without adequately considering the ways in which comprehensive planning tried to split the difference between these diametrically opposed planning approaches. For a recent study that focuses on the fight between master and advocacy planners without any consideration of comprehensive planning, see Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*.

<sup>5</sup> *JCUS: The First Five Years*, 53.

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1996); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race, Industrial Decline, and Housing in Detroit, 1940-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> On the debacle of postwar urban renewal, see, for example, Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal, 1949-1962* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964); and James Q. Wilson, ed., *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the power of foundation officers, and why they tend to support research and programs that reflect their own class interests, see Barry D. Karl and Stanley M. Katz, "Foundations and Ruling Class Elites," *Daedalus* 116 (Winter 1987): 1-40.

<sup>10</sup> RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Unpublished Reports, Report 8329, Box 18878, Memo from Wadsworth Ylvisaker, May 18, 1961.

<sup>11</sup> RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Unpublished Reports, Report 8330, Box 18878, Memo from Wadsworth, Havinghurst, and Henderson to Ylvisaker, March 3, 1962.

<sup>12</sup> On ACTION, see RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Grants, #05500226, Microfilm Reel #0164, ACTION 1950s.

<sup>13</sup> RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Grants, #06000394, Microfilm Reel #0393, David Farbman, "A Description, Analysis and Critique of the Master Plan," Institute for Urban Studies, 1959-60, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/our-mission>. Accessed February 5, 2014.