

File under
"miscellaneous
memos, L.J.F."

M.I.T. AS AN URBAN UNIVERSITY

Leonard J. Fein

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

1967

At a time when a quantum jump in the level of our concern for urban affairs is at least a possibility, it may be useful to attempt an institutional selfconsciousness which the press of daily affairs normally inhibits. In particular, we may ask whether a program built on our present structure and understandings, modelled, that is, after one or another of our successful undertakings of the past, is the best we can do. The thrust of these comments is that for universities which are a part of the cities they seek to aid and change, the peculiar character of the urban problems we face will require new forms and new understandings.

What is the peculiar character of the urban problems we face? As distinguished from more conventional problems, the very goals of work on urban affairs are unclear. It is not sufficient to say merely that we seek to improve the quality of urban life, for there is precious little consensus as to what the components of quality are. Fundamental values are at stake in almost every facet of the urban condition. Moreover, the urban client is amorphous. Depending on the light in which he is seen, his face is that of bureaucrat, leader, resident, infant yet unborn. These peculiarities do not make our efforts futile; they do distinguish the problem from that, say, of developing radar.

To the amorphous world of urban affairs we now propose to address our vast institutional resources, which include, preeminently, our institutional tradition. Efforts to define "the M.I.T. style" are necessarily doomed, since one pervasive characteristic of the Institute is that it is not encumbered by a monolithic style. Yet I think it fair to say that our history has been, among other things, one of commitment to the impossibly volatile combination (according to some, miscegenation) of scholarship and problem solving. That history is distinctive not only in its success, but also in its intent. Few universities have dared to become involved with the sometimes complementary, sometimes competing, demands, with the always delicate confrontation, of scholarship and problem solving.

At its best, that confrontation can be synergistic, lending a peculiar potency to the end product. But it can never be without problems. When the shelter is removed, the groves of academe may look, and feel, like just another clump of trees. When the protective moat is bridged, the ivory tower may find itself more a base of operations than a community of scholars. Where that is a tendency, the discrepancy between our traditional commitments, as teachers, and our newer involvements, as men of affairs, may sap our special strength, which is to blend the two.

This introductory rhetorical excursion sets the stage for the central assumption of these remarks: Scholarship/problem-solving are not only our stance, but also our educational mission. No radical distinction is necessary, and none desirable, between our own intellectual pursuits and our educational task. Now, then, to make of ourselves something different from a base of operations on urban affairs, which we might well be, and be well, to make of ourselves a community of scholars and a ready resource for those whom we presume to guide?

The direction of the answer lies, I believe, in exploring several questions. First, who is our proper clientele--whom do we teach? Then, how do we teach them? And finally, of course, how do we decide what to teach, and how do we insure that we will, in fact, come to know things worth teaching to others? The substance of what follows depends upon an understanding of these questions as overlapping, handled discretely for purposes of the discussion, but enjoying a conceptual unity which needs to be reflected in our organizational forms.

1. Whom do we teach?

We have always taught more than our own full-time students. In a variety of programs, we have held special courses for select clienteles, ranging from Sloan fellows to city planners to disadvantaged high school students. Moreover, a good deal of teaching has necessarily occurred in the course of our dealings with professional (non-student) clients. Finally, because of our special prestige, we have served as a model, hence teacher, of other teachers.

In the developing field of urban affairs, several circumstances suggest that traditional distinctions among degree candidates, part-time students, professional clients, and the community at large, are no longer very useful.

- a. In training students with special competence in urban affairs, a major obstacle is the very substantial gap between the social backgrounds (and hence values) of our students and those of the people with whom they will be dealing. The importance of such a gap to the social science major is evident. It is less apparent, but hardly less true, that technological efforts to deal with inner city problems will be poorly informed except as they are rooted in some awareness of the life styles of the people they affect. Reading about such people is not a sufficient way of coming to know them, both because the communities are so volatile and because the development of channels of communication may, after all, be more important than the substance of the communication.

- b. If we are to deal effectively as an educator of people working in urban affairs, we must try to give them more than ad hoc answers to ad hoc questions. We must attempt to train them in that sort of systemic analysis of problems which so marks our own work but which is rarely a part of the intellectual stance of the laborers in the vineyard. This is so whether we have in mind police chiefs or civil rights leaders. Except as we can succeed here, we may find that our best research efforts have no takers, since they will not be understood.
- c. The concept of the maximum feasible participation in the planning process of those affected by the plans has now gained wide, perhaps even irreversible, currency. The structures for such involvement are by no means fixed, nor is the rationale for the involvement consensually understood. Nevertheless, communicating with those who shape and are shaped by the cities can no longer be viewed as a simple matter of transmitting information between people with a common understanding of their problem. We can no longer be certain that our elite status will command the attention of the audience unless the audience has helped to shape the play; more, we can no longer be certain that our elite status will merit the attention of the audience unless the audience has helped to shape the play.

Who is the audience? Unless it includes a diverse array, ranging from high level planners to neighborhood leaders, it will not serve our purpose, nor we the broader purpose.

The argument will be made that this is an elite institution, whose formal educational clients must remain the intellectual elite of the nation. There are two responses: First, even if we are committed solely to working with the intellectual elite, there is no reason for us not to cast a broader net in order to identify them. Second, it is simply not true that we have dealt only with the intellectual elite. That is true only for our degree granting programs. In other programs, we have sought out members of diverse power elites-- and the correlation between power and intellect is, at best, imperfect. What is required of us, then, is merely that we broaden our definition of power elite to include those who hold power in areas beyond our traditional ken. There is no intrinsic reason for us to invest educational energies in the lieutenant of industry and to neglect the master sargeant of a community action program.

The argument then is that new educational clients need to

for the benefit of our regular students,
be defined, for their own benefit, and in order to give
bite to the research endeavors in which we shall be engaged.

2. How do we teach?

I have argued that in addition to the conventional analytic skills which we seek to develop in our students, commitment to work in urban areas requires that special attention be given the development of communications skills. I am not talking simply about mastering the art of rhetoric, but about overcoming the noblesse oblige posture which so often infuses the scholar in his worldly activities. Both sets of skills--and perhaps they are better thought of as abilities more than skills--can best be developed through a very direct involvement in action research. "Messing around in the laboratory", which appears to be a healthy way to come to know something about physics, has as its analogue here messing around in the city. But because the city is somewhat more overwhelming than the lab, and because people are almost never inert, the messing around in the city needs to be structured somewhat. Students--and I speak here of all our students, not just the degree candidates--must come to see data in everything, must come to feel the system of the city instinctively, must know, as very few people know, that planning for pluralism is extraordinarily difficult. Such skills as these are likely to be increasingly required of those who would address their traditional skills to urban problems, and such skills, even more than the traditional skills, are best acquired on the scene.

Again, it is only through action research that students can come to recognize interdisciplinary work as a way of life, rather than merely as an intellectual commitment. What we should be after, in short, is the development of new models for educational training, models based on more imaginative and more rewarding formats than the simple system of setting students and teacher in a room together for several hours each week. If we have the opportunity, because we are about to embark on a new undertaking, to reexamine our pedagogic tactics, we would be remiss were we to forego innovation through inertia.

3. What do we teach?

It is evident that there is some strain in commenting on the substantive question of what we ought to be teaching. The traditional view is that we recruit the most able people we can find, and then turn them loose on whatever problems they choose to explore. The competing vision holds that we ought to identify a set of problems which, for one reason or another, we think we may be able to work on effectively, and then recruit people who are interested in those problems. To some extent, the disagreement

is unreal, since proponents of the first view must finally define "best" with respect to certain issues, and advocates of the second view must define issues with respect to available personnel and their interests.

It is clear that no listing of content should be taken as closed. It is, and ought to be, substantially amendable as time passes. Yet we need to ask, even if the answers are necessarily tentative, what skills we feel our students ought to be expected to master, and what sorts of major research efforts will likely constitute the best vehicles for our teaching and community impact together.

We are still, quite properly, in the business of producing highly skilled people. Their skill depends upon their substantial expertise in relatively limited areas. It is folly to suppose that we can expand the scope of expertise ad infinitum without sacrificing its quality. The civil engineer needs to know some sociology, and the political scientist some city planning, and so on, but our expectations for interdisciplinary competence must, necessarily, be rather modest. What we should be after is a sensitizing process, a process through which the master of a field will know enough of other fields to recognize the kinds of questions his own work raises and cannot answer. That degree of thoughtfulness is needed which will prevent our students from imagining that they alone can "solve" a problem, and that degree of training is required which will show them where to turn for help, as well as how to judge the help they get.

To some extent, these needs are met by permitting students in the urban field to take related courses in other departments. That itself is obviously insufficient. Some special interdepartmental courses may need to be developed, going beyond the initial modest efforts in this regard now being undertaken by the Departments of City Planning and Political Science. But the critical effort, once again, it seems to me, must be in the direction of so structuring the research experience of our students that the lessons become an inescapable part of their pre-professional experience.

Having thus spelled out a set of criteria for the judgement of substantive organizational proposals, I turn now to specific recommendations.

1. For these purposes, it is a matter of relative indifference which of the several action-oriented programs embodied in the proposals before us we actually opt to engage in. What does matter, in this context, is that students be provided opportunities to share in (at the least, to observe) the research planning, and to do this as part of their formal

educational requirement. Such a proposal is not quite so innocuous as it seems at first, since it implies a collapse of the traditional distinctions between course work and research, on the one hand, and between teaching and research, on the other. I have in mind, for example, that those faculty members responsible for shaping research efforts should be expected to involve students actively as participants in every stage of their labors. Further, in the same way in which we now frequently seek to provide our students with internship experience in "the real world", we ought to consider seriously providing internships within the university itself. Thus, for example, participation in the management of an urban data bank is no less valuable a training experience, for some people, than a summer at HUD.

Should such efforts to involve students seem inordinately difficult, as they may because of inertia, then (reluctantly) I would propose that an educational officer be attached to each major project in order to effect the intent.

2. Special institutes should be conducted for special clientele. These might be designed, inter alia, for middle-managers, for community action people and peace corps veterans, and for highly select groups such as transportation system managers. Educational programs for such groups will necessarily vary in length, but all should be so designed that the institute structure is not discrete--that is, to guarantee maximum interaction between special students and regular students, and to guarantee the broadest kind of exposure for special students. In order to maximize these goals, institutes should normally be of relatively prolonged duration.

One model for such an institute would be addressed primarily to teachers of urban affairs at underdeveloped colleges, who might come to M.I.T. for fifteen months (two summers and an academic year), during which time they could divide their work into (a) special courses designed specifically for them, (b) experience as part of an ongoing research team, and (c) where appropriate, teaching undergraduate courses.

3. An urban area analogue to an Industrial Liaison Office should be developed, which would provide faculty and students with access to urban institutions, and would provide personnel of those institutions with both a catalogue of our research endeavors and with structured access to our consultative resources. Lest we become totally bogged down in consulting activities, some institutional screening device seems indicated. Problems of conflict of interest, private entrepen-

eurship, and such will likely arise, and will, unless clear precedents are established at the outset, prove uncomfortably sensitive. Among the structural possibilities that should be considered is a regularized, Institute-wide quota, which would essentially allocate a fixed percentage of Institute personnel to major consulting efforts each year. We might, then, exercise some control over the amount of consulting commitment which could be undertaken simultaneously with other activities, with overloads handled on a released time basis under the quota system. Such a system should also be designed so as to provide an Institute imprimatur for public service activities of a less glamorous character than high office in Washington. Thus, for example, readiness to work for a year or two in a useful capacity at a Southern college should be interpreted as no less useful a scholarly activity than working for A.I.D., and probably is no less useful than spending a year at an exotic center for advanced study. (The assumption that the faculty member benefits intellectually is no less valid in the one case than in the other.)

4. Serious attention needs to be given to developing the Institute itself as a community resource. I take the Mario Savio non-student issue to be a serious and legitimate one, and while the issue may be particularly sensitive to the public institution, I would be loathe to ease off the hook on the basis of that distinction alone. The availability, in reasonable ways, of our physical plant to the surrounding community is not only a matter of good public relations, but a way of helping to relieve the uncomfortably accurate image of M.I.T. as an austere, patronizing, commentator on urban affairs. The Lowell Institute and our Upward Bound program are obvious parts of this general proposal, but they are clearly less than we might be doing. At the very least, studies should be made of physical plant utilization and availability. Beyond this, new building design should, where possible, include such flexibility as will permit community utilization of both buildings and grounds. Specific attention should be given the design of whatever shopping center comes to be constructed in the Eastgate-NASA area, to insure that it will offer a wide range of services appropriate to various economic groups. In general, Institute design should be so developed as to avoid for this area the danger (towards which we are clearly tending) of becoming a government center, bristling during the day and deserted at night and on weekends.

These several suggestions all have to do more with the environment in which other projects take place than with

the projects themselves. It is the environment, it seems to me, which will make the projects come to life or be sterile. For that reason, I would hope that the discussion of such questions, whether or not in the framework I have proposed, does not get lost as we invest our energies in more detailed project proposals.