

## Obituary for Peter Marcuse

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We mourn the loss of Peter Marcuse, Professor Emeritus of Urban Planning at Columbia University, who was a co-founder and immensely cherished mentor and collaborator of the Transatlantic Graduate Program (TGK) at the CMS. In 2004, Peter was part of the group of urbanists from Berlin and NYC universities to apply to the DFG for the Transatlantic graduate program “Berlin-New York” on the History and Culture of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Metropolises. He subsequently served as board member representing Columbia University for all the iterations of what later became the International Graduate Program (IGK).

His vast expertise in urban and planning issues on both sides of the Atlantic – as well as his experience gained from multiple involvements with local urban politics – were an invaluable asset in the learning and exchanges between Berlin and North American universities. Students and fellows treasured both his expertise and his inspiring and generous intellectual spirit.

As German-born American planner and urban scholar, he played a pioneering role in critical urban studies in the US, Germany (West and East), and many other countries. His contributions to international, interdisciplinary social science research and his interventions into planning debates and public policymaking are too broad and impactful to summarize. Hence I focus here on his unique way of connecting social justice to urban planning, a perspective which suffused much of his thinking and research on cities and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

I had the opportunity to experience this approach – his way of articulating a Frankfurt School legacy to urban contestations – up-close while co-teaching a graduate seminar with Peter and Neil Brenner on the urban question under conditions of globalization in 2006. The collective work that developed from this class led to a conference to address questions in critical urban theory that we had found unresolved. The conference, held at the CMS in 2008, was also a way to celebrate Peter’s approaching 80th birthday in Berlin: his birthplace in 1928. Its topic – ‘The Right to the City: Prospects for Critical Urban Theory and Practice’ – inspired many to join in vibrant discussions. Then, in our edited volume *Cities for People, not for Profit* (2011), where some of these contributions were further elaborated, Peter began to expound the motto ‘Expose, propose, politicize!’ as a watchword for critical and engaged scholars everywhere.

Peter brought to bear his father Herbert’s insights and legacy in many other realms of his work, whether in his on-the-ground work as planner, lawyer, and holder of various public offices, or in his engagements in a variety of civic urban activism. All of these served him not only to creatively theorize contemporary forms of urban (in)justice, but also to explore and envision, and to struggle for alternative, more just ways of organizing and providing housing, space, architecture, planning, and cities. He exemplified in his work how to use scholarship as tool for emancipatory social change. Not just with his support of engaged associations such as

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information see In Memoriam Peter Marcuse at Columbia University’s GSAPP <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/in-memoriam-peter-marcuse>, Peter Marcuse’s blog <https://pmarcuse.wordpress.com>, and the page on the Marcuse family website, updated until 2018 <https://www.marcuse.org/peter/#top>

Planners Network or in his writing for magazines such as *City Limits* and *Shelterforce*, but through his own very practical engagements.

Whether pushing for better solutions on Community Board 9 in New York City, or serving on the City Planning Commission of Los Angeles, whether as member of the City Council (in Waterbury) or as teacher (at universities around the world), whether drafting district voting legislation with the ANC in South Africa or doing Charter revision work in NYC, whether analyzing the 1975 fiscal crisis of NYC or the global one in the wake of 2008, or working on and critiquing the plans for Ground Zero: in all this work he revealed how the crises of the day and their 'management', how deprivation and poverty, are not "natural" but "man-made". Thus, over the decades, he became not just the 'conscience of the field' of urban research, but also widely seized upon as an inspiration to urban activists themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, he has also brought politics – already in times when it was not chic -- into the classroom: through the practices on the community planning board in the Columbia area, by supporting studio work in which students went into communities and talked with residents about their needs, or by helping develop openings where democratic practices could occur as when he introduced the little-known at the time 197A process in the Charter of the City of New York. At the same time, he encouraged and would work with his PhD students, to tackle challenging publishing projects, such as the wonderful co-edited volume *Searching for the Just City: Debates in Urban Theory and Practice* (2009).

Peter's curiosity and interests could not be constrained by the disciplinary boundaries of planning and urban studies. His interests led him to linguistics and the language of globalization, into history and the story of Red Vienna, and the splits between the health and housing movements in the 1900s in the United States, to real-existing socialism in the former GDR and the possibilities after 'die Wende' (the fall of the Berlin Wall), to insightful commentary on art and architecture, and so many more topics. To his last year, Peter commented not only on questions of critical planning, but on contemporary politics, providing depth and posing hard questions on his blog [Critical Planning and Other Thoughts](#).

The impacts of Peter Marcuse's contributions are immeasurable. He has trained and influenced generations of students in planning, public policy, and urban studies in North America, Germany and around the world. His academic impact was made not just through teaching and academic publishing, but also through the various editorial boards he worked on. More, going beyond academia, he affected, both by his writings and the countless consultancies, public offices, and advisory boards that he served on, housing, social, and urban policy, and not only in a handful of US cities. Obviously, he was a much sought-after keynote speaker at professional association meetings.

Those who were at the 2015 RC 21 Meeting in Urbino will remember his contribution to the panel 'The ideal city: Between myth and reality.' His sharp analysis so clearly showed why we need imagination in order to create a world that is utopian only for those who do not engage in social change.<sup>3</sup> It is this blending of critical analysis and inspiration for non-reformist reforms, which Peter Marcuse developed and applied so uniquely to the urban field.

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<sup>2</sup> We can still watch some of his talks, for example this in the context of Picture the Homeless, in 2007: 'Empty buildings, crowded shelters,' on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIWim4f2a1A&feature=related>.

<sup>3</sup> This too can be viewed online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czr6Nw\\_2uFo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czr6Nw_2uFo)