

Understanding the Importance of Place: A conversation with John Mollenkopf

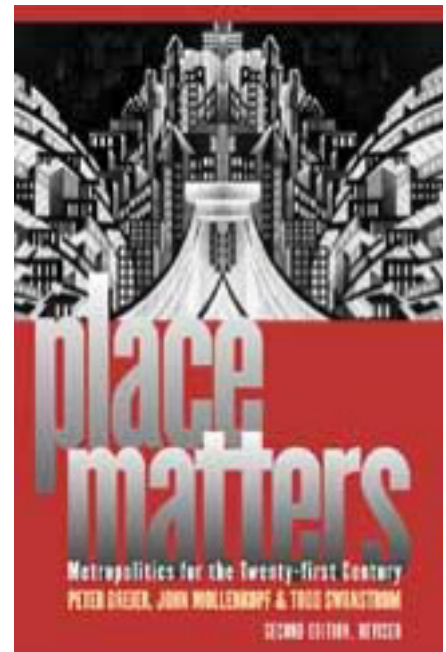
By Alexandra Iselin Waldhorn

John Mollenkopf is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology and director of the Center for Urban Research at CUNY Graduate Center. He has applied his research, which encompasses such subjects as urban politics and public policy, immigrant political representation and participation, to ten books he has authored or edited. Before his teaching career in New York, Mollenkopf worked with local government agencies and advocacy organizations on both sides of the country, including as director of the Economic Development Division of the New York City Department of City Planning.

His book, co-written with Peter Dreier and Todd Swastrom, *Place Matters, Metropolitics for the 21st Century*, won the Michael Harrington Award for “the book that best demonstrates how scholarship can be used in the struggle for a better world.” As Harrington’s *The Other America* roused the public to support and wage a War on Poverty, *Place Matters* also has also shown the ability to galvanize readers to respond to its argument.

In *Place Matters, Metropolitics for the Twenty-first Century*, the authors creatively attempt to refocus the national discussion on poverty into a new vein. The book, which has received great attention from city and regional planners, suggests policies to cope with the politically and socio-economically spawned urban sprawl that has resulted in residential segregation along income and race/ethnicity lines. This form of urban development has created two phenomena that bring inequalities in the United States into sharp focus. First, for many in the upper rungs of American society, auto-dependent and spatially erratic metropolitan growth has severed the social relationship between people and place. At the same time, Mollenkopf et al. show that those residing in inner city neighborhoods and older suburbs - often in the first geographic ring around cities, severed from the labor force, good schools, environmentally protected areas, political dialogue and representation, and socioeconomic infrastructure - are perpetually grappling with problems resulting from the isolated places in which they reside.

The book illustrates that obstacles such as federalism, separation of powers, and the creation of numerous special districts require a state and federal political solution. The authors suggest a number of policy innovations that could help overcome the isolation and lack of resources facing many low-income persons and they argue the time is right for the creation of new coalitions and a revision of social welfare programs to bridge the interests of the rich and the poor, the city and the suburb. Underlining the entire book is the new recognition that the most fundamental urban planning problems facing this country must be addressed by considering the importance of economics, politics, and place.



In this context, I posed the following questions to Dr. John Mollenkopf in a written interview:

AW: *I would like you to make some remarks about San Francisco, as it is one of the most liberal cities in the country - it has rent control, inclusive zoning, a somewhat humane homeless policy, a transit first transportation policy, along with a raft of other progressive programs. Of course, at the same time San Francisco has relentlessly become a city for the affluent. What lessons do you draw from San Francisco's experience, what might we do better, where can solutions only be addressed at the state and federal level?*

JM: San Francisco stands on the desirable end of the spectrum in terms of how much people would like to live there and how many opportunities and amenities it can offer. Because it has this kind of leverage it has also been able to adopt a wider range of local land use and development regulations than other, less desirable municipalities. Combined with the built-out nature of the city and the geographic limits on its expansion, this has produced some of the highest land prices and housing costs in the nation. Despite some protections from market forces, this has meant that, gradually, only residents who can pay can stay. Similar trends can be observed in large parts of many other cities, for example New York and Boston.

The conservative answer about how to counter these forces does not seem plausible. It seems unlikely that enough market rate housing will ever be built – or be allowed to be built – to drive down prices. Alas, the liberal or left answer also seems unlikely to work – it is hard to see how large enough parts of the housing stock could be taken out of the private market to ensure that most people of modest means would have a decent place to live. (Not

only would this be quite expensive, given that current owners would have to be compensated at market rates, but it would also raise the thorny question of how to decide who should be entitled to this housing).

So, as long as these cities continue to have strong corporate and high level social service economies, with lots of professional jobs, and as long as they remain attractive to people who hold these kinds of jobs, the trend toward gentrification and the slow expulsion of the poor and working class is likely to continue. This is of course a problem that city leaders and even neighborhood residents in many places – like Newark or Detroit – would like to have.

Within these general constraints, however, the city's citizens have the potential power to tax themselves to provide non-market amenities that make the city a more just and humane place to live, and to provide as many protections against the inroads of market forces as the citizenry can afford.

Larger interventions would really require regional, state, and national regulation over metropolitan land use patterns and the creation of funds to support the development of owner-occupied, but still not private market housing, such as limited equity arrangements. We have not had a new moderate-income housing program in the U.S. for more than a quarter of a century. The stress has been on promoting traditional home ownership while ignoring the costs of sprawl and reliance on commuting by auto. It is time for a new national land use, housing, transportation, and public amenity development program where the parts are designed to fit together in a different way.w

AW: *The argument in your book, Place Matters,*

shows how detrimental or beneficial one's residence is, especially for low-income persons. What are the most important steps to be taken to diminish the disparity in America?

JM: We call for ramping up mobility programs that help the central city poor disperse themselves throughout the other parts of the metropolis, away from the old neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. If all parts of the metropolitan area pitch in to do their share and the overall scheme is designed and managed properly, this can be done without harming any of the places receiving the center city poor. The whole region will gain. Obviously, creating a jurisdiction that could capture some of these regional gains and plow them back into undertaking the process would make sense from a public finance perspective.

AW: *Do the recent elections show that new political coalitions are forming around cities?*

JM: In all the polarized elections of the last 40 years, cities have been Democratic and rural and far suburban areas Republican. In the past, Republicans were able to bring much of the suburban vote to their side, making the city line the main front of the political battle. Now, that line has shifted outwards into the suburbs, and many of the older suburbs have become fairly solidly Democratic. A lot of the old cleavages around race are subsiding somewhat. This offers fertile ground for creative thinking about designing a new federal agenda for metropolitan policy and building new metropolitan political alliances to enact it.

AW: *How do your book's findings apply to the Bay Area where there are pockets of low-income people concentrations—such as East Palo Alto in the center of Silicon Valley.*

JM: Unfortunately, the low-income people in

places like East Palo Alto are experiencing a serious squeeze too. That is why regional or metropolitan development planning is needed, with a clear emphasis on regional housing equity.

AW: *How can neighborhood groups and non-profits in communities be strengthened?*

JM: Well, this is an age-old question in American society. There has been much discussion of the “decline of social capital” in America, especially in big, diverse cities. It seems to me that forming cross-race and cross-ethnic political alliances – finding ways to work together for the common good, learning to see each other's points of view – lies at the heart of this challenge.

AW: *In the conclusion of your book you call for an array of steps to encourage the integration of America's impoverished populations. What will it take to galvanize the greater public about confronting poverty in the United States?*

JM: Poverty isn't really the right lens from which to look at the problem. It is only a consequence of the more general ways in which we organize society. Income distribution has been growing steadily more unequal, and the way things have been going has placed increasing stress on families in the middle as well as the bottom. If we build a majority coalition to address the fundamental reasons why this has been happening, that will help the metropolitan poor as well.§

References

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