

Remembering Neal Peirce

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Neal Peirce. (With permission: The Washington Post Writers Group)

February 6, 2020 – We’ve always heard in the news business, “Blood leads” to sell papers. We recently lost a friend in the news business who believed and worked to tell us that good work leads. On December 27 Neal Peirce (1932-2019) lost his battle with cancer and there is a silence that his absence leaves us with.

For over fifty years Neal’s was, as many have said, a singular voice for livable, successful, beautiful cities. He is recognized with his first Washington Post article in 1975 that began his regular syndicated column with the Washington Post Writers Group a couple of year later that continued until 2013. His was a career of passion to tell us stories and provide insights into the ideas, aspirations and initiatives across the national landscape to create and develop healthy places for people to live, work and flourish. In our time, we have had insightful and thoughtful critics of the architectural and development scene – Ada Louise Huxtable, Wolf von Eckhardt and Paul Goldberger come to mind. But more than critic, Neal Peirce was a teacher, a visionary and guide to not only seeing problems but also exploring ways to solve problems too. In addition to his syndication in 50 major metropolitan newspapers and author/co-author of 18 major books and innumerable articles, Neal provided his constant presence and participation in conferences, workshops and events to advance the best of the development spheres inhabitant by the universe of Lambda Alpha International members. Along the way he served as editor of *Congressional Quarterly* magazine and was a founder of the weekly *National Journal*.

In these times of shouting headlines, provocative lead lines and offensive tweets, there has been a network of reporters and news people who have been proud to operate under the banner of Civic Journalism -communicating as educators rather than sensationalist. In this regard, Neal was

a recognized member of this community along with other brave voices such as Cole Campbell, David Merritt and David Mathews for instance with support from institutions such as Pew Center for Civic Journalism and the Kettering Foundation. Now, more than ever, we will miss Neal's civic voice.

In previous *LAI KeyNotes*, I have written of my interest in the emergence of urban planning, land economics and mass media in shaping our cities from the beginning of the twentieth century (see "Arts & Crafts: The Forgotten Legacy of Richard Ely" in last year's KeyNotes). In this tradition, I have long seen Neal as our most contemporary in a line of reporters who gained their voices as change agents and not merely as passive reporters. Included in this century-old lineage we have Charles Mulford Robinson (1869-1917) with his *The Improvement of Towns and Cities. Or the Practical Basis of Civic Aesthetics* in 1901; Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) and his prodigious writings including his "Sky Line" column in *The New Yorker* from 1931-1975; Rachel Carson (1907-64) with *Silent Spring*; William H. Whyte (1917-1999) with *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Jane Jacobs (1906-2016) and her transformative *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, along with Neal's Washington Post colleague Joel Garreau (born 1948) with *Edge Cities*. Their collective contributions as communicators to shaping our cities and communities should be humbling to us all – planners, architects, public officers and developers alike. And, it has been Neal who became a multi-media voice to take us into the 21st century online as well as in print.

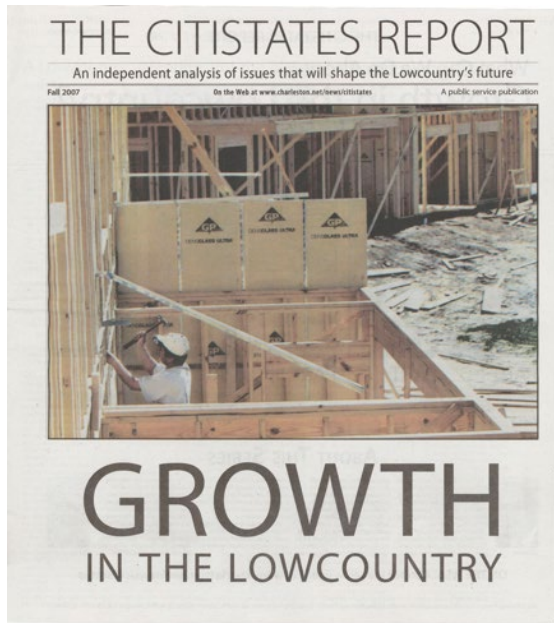
For many of us, Neal was more than a friend, mentor and champion to provide advice, contribute to a publication or speak at an event we were working on. For me this was always an honor and privilege to have him looking over my shoulder such as his introduction to the 1987 ICMA publication *Taking Charge: How Communities are Planning Their Futures* co-authored with Mary Means and Margaret Grieve where we were honored when he wrote:

POLITICIAN, MANAGER, CITIZEN-whoever you are, take heart. This booklet brings the best news about America we've heard in a long time. Not parboiled patriotism, not Madison Avenue hype, not some technical cure-all. But rather the message that Americans are returning to their taproot, moving to take control of their own destiny in the communities where they live and work and will share the future.

Neal Pierce expanded beyond a reportorial role to contribute as a development theorist and a proactive urban planner from 1985 when he discovered Curtis Johnson, coming from his innovative leadership in deliberative, participatory democracy with the League of Minnesota Cities in Minneapolis. Curtis would become Neal's activist partner and co-author over the next 30 some years, emerging with their notable publication in 1992 of *Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World*. With others, such as another Post colleague, Joel Garreau, and his *Edge Cities* – published the same year; Peter Schwartz's *Art of the Long View* in 1996; and Thomas Friedman's publication of *The World is Flat* in 2007, Neal would be one of those thinking writers who has helped us see and understand our changing world.

This Citistate label would become their banner projecting the important role of cities in shaping the future of national and global economies. With Curtis, , cities, towns and communities have benefited from this partnership with Neal that transcended almost any consultant, firm or institution to advance livable, sustainable places. Together they formed The Citistates Group in

1995 that for twenty years built a proactive bridge between journalism and urban development including 26 in-depth Citistates Reports in a co-creative partnership with the local newspaper and local government.



In 1994 in his column, Neal wrote of Mayor Joe Riley of Charleston SC (then in his 19th year of 33 as mayor), “(I)f you're looking for Mr. Riley's most distinguishing mark, you can find it in the title of one of his speeches – ‘The Mayor as Urban Designer.’ He believes ‘the lasting mark of a civilization is the city.’ Americans may have left cities by the millions, he notes, ‘but we need our cities more than ever.’” With 21st century growth pressures mounting on this fragile environment, the mayor brought the Peirce team to Charleston with a shared vision for the future of the Charleston region – built on its rich heritage and looking to an inclusive, dynamic, sustainable future.

The Citistates report. “Growth in the Low Country,” ran as a series of 5 features in the Charleston Post and Courier newspapers and was then compiled in a tabloid final report. The Peirce report covered issues such as “What’s all this debate about growth;” “The New Neck and the north;” “Road rage and what to do about it;” “The price of having it all;” and “A wondrous spot for having it all;” and included insightful graphics such as superimposing Manhattan Island over the Charleston peninsula – a memorable image indeed entitled “The New Neck.” Under Mayor Riley’s leadership as chair of the Berkeley, Charleston, Dorchester Council of Governments (the regional MPO), our planning team followed the Peirce/Johnson Citistates Report leading to the 2012 adoption of “Our Region, Our Plan” regional plan.



The Peirce Citistates Report “Growth in the Low Country” featured this map of Manhattan with its population of 1.63 million superimposing the Charleston’s peninsula outline with a population 35,000 on equivalent land areas implying the challenges facing this historic city and the growth pressures coming with it success.

In the Citistates reports all articles were co-bylined by both Peirce and Johnson with their candid and action loaded writing such as these short paragraphs that amount to a planning agenda that is often copious “official” pages of plannerize:

“There’s no argument: The fame of old Charleston is well deserved. Few other towns can even begin to rival the city’s rich architecture, distinctive arts, and the deep history of many different cultures on this continent. Old Charlestonians told us of their immense relief at the city’s dramatic recovery from the near-century of genteel decline it suffered from the Civil War into the 1970s. Who’d have ever thought it would become one of America’s best restaurant and shopping towns?

If anything, Charleston is too well loved these days. Many of its historic homes are so exquisite that rich outsiders buy them as a second, third or fourth home. Often the new owners visit only occasionally, with the result that old, once cohesive peninsula neighborhoods seem a bit deserted. A major problem is that many longtime lower-income residents, especially African-Americans, are finding themselves priced out of the city and forced to seek out less-expensive housing, especially in North Charleston. The city government is trying hard with a variety of housing assistance initiatives, but the tide of affluence is tough to fight.

Long a poor cousin, North Charleston is seeing strong investment in its airport-convention center axis and now ranks as a top South Carolina retailing site. In a seeming historic wink of an eye, Mount Pleasant has progressed from a single old village to a massive corridor of suburban housing. West Ashley, James Island and Johns Island have populations far beyond peoples' imagination a few decades ago. Now most significant residential growth pressures are focused on Dorchester and Berkeley counties, even while most jobs remain anchored south of Interstate 526.

Neal's writing also crystalized the unconscious thoughts many would have about a place and bring depth and understanding to those feelings such as this short paragraph from "Growth in the Low Country:"

Like many visitors, we were transfixed by the spires and dramatic sweep of the new Ravenel Bridge. To us, it suggests the dynamic, intimately interconnected metropolitan region this has become, now more than 600,000 people strong.

The Citistates report created a climate for and awareness in this Low Country region of the need for and purpose of the forthcoming regional plan. It mindfully prepared a regional community for a future of change with strategies in order to conserve what is loved. Consequently, virtually absent from the multi-year planning process was the all too common question of "Why Plan?" People – public and official alike - knew "Why Plan" largely due to the Neal Peirce Citistates Report. His voice will truly be missed.

For a thorough story on Neal Peirce's life and work see Washington Post https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/neal-peirce-urban-affairs-columnist-who-championed-inclusive-cities-dies-at-87/2019/12/27/a4c28722-0bb1-11ea-97ac-a7ccc8dd1ebc_story.html and New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/us/neal-peirce-dead.html>