

LLOYD RODWIN

b. 1919, d. 1999, BSS 1939 City College of New York, MA 1945 University of Wisconsin, MPA 1946 (public administration) and PhD 1949 (economics) Harvard University; joined the MIT staff in 1946 as a research associate in city and regional planning; appointed to the faculty in 1947; professor of land economics, 1959–1973; Ford professor of international affairs, 1973–1987; emeritus, 1987; chair, faculty committee, Joint Center for Urban Studies, 1959–1969; founder and director, Special Program for Urban and Regional Studies of Developing Areas (SPURS), 1967–1988; head, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, 1969–1973; president, Regional Science Association, 1986–1987; Distinguished Planning Educator Award, Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, 1998.



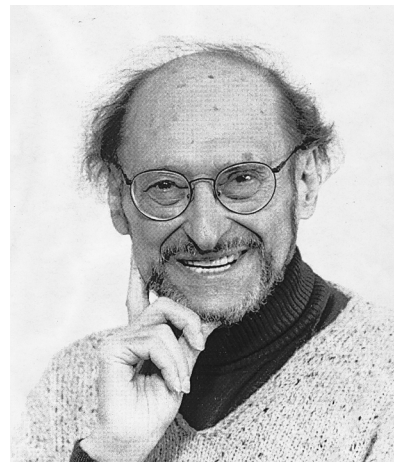
I grew up in New York City—in Brooklyn, to be more precise—and came from a working-class family. I had a father who was not well educated but an intelligent person, very strongly left-wing in his points of view. I was brought up in the belief that everybody was equal, and that one of the big sins in this world was to operate on a different kind of philosophy. That was a very important part of my upbringing.

I went to the College of the City New York. A free college, it left me with a permanent recognition of how important it was for people to get opportunities for education. One of the great problems of underprivileged groups is that they don't have a sense of how the world operates and how to manipulate the system. That was my situation when I was young. It was a great revelation to me to find out how people got things done, how people got ahead, why people are blocked, and so on. One of my cardinal beliefs is that everything that we can do to help young people generally—and underprivileged people in particular—to understand the world they live in, how it operates, how to negotiate the terrain, is critical for opening opportunities for them.

I originally was very interested in history and philosophy, and decided to go into teaching, since I was very “risk-averse” in that period (1935–1939). I planned to become a history teacher in the secondary school system. I cracked A's in practically all of the history courses I took, then had a terrible experience. To get into the school system one had to take an exam, given every two or three years. I took it and flunked. That was hard to

believe. So I checked on what went wrong and discovered that I was flunked on the grounds that I didn't know how to write English. At that time I was very much influenced by the writing of Laurence Sterne and his book *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne put a dash after every sentence instead of a period, and I put dashes at the end of my sentences instead of periods. Ergo, I flunked.

Now had I known how to negotiate the system, I could have raised holy hell—all the more so because the fellow who got the highest mark on the exam, I discovered, was a friend of mine, and I was convinced I did better than he did. I checked my score with his, and I was about twenty-five points higher. I had, in effect, the highest score in the city, but was flunked on this rather silly notion that if you don't put periods at the end of a sentence, you don't know how to write English.



Edited and excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Clarence G. Williams with Lloyd Rodwin in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 10 December 1996.

Anyhow, while I tried to figure out my next move I did chores during the summer in the garment district. Then I decided to take courses at the New School for Social Research. Since my resources were limited, I picked the cheapest subjects—one for ten dollars and the other for fifteen. One was a course in housing and the other a course in city and regional planning. I ended up with A's in both. One of the professors, Charlie Abrams, a famous housing expert, asked me to help him with a book that he was writing on the future of housing.

That experience changed my life. I ended up in Washington, for a period of time, in one of the defense housing agencies. Later, when I got out of the Army, I got a research assistantship at the University of Wisconsin, where my French girlfriend and future wife was a teaching assistant. I wrote two papers for two of my Wisconsin professors, which they liked sufficiently to arrange for their publication. One of the papers caught the attention of two prominent people in the field. One was Catherine Bauer, the other was Lewis Mumford. They thought it important enough to criticize at great length. For a while I feared I was in great trouble, but my professors said that on the contrary, I hit the jackpot. The controversy went on in the journal for some time and I ended up getting a fellowship at Harvard University, and eventually a Ph.D. I got to be close friends with both Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer. She was teaching at Harvard when I came, and her husband, Bill Wurster, a famous architect on the West Coast, was dean of the School of Architecture at MIT. Even before I did my thesis, I was invited to consider a possible appointment in the planning department at MIT.

At first we had no intention of staying here. My wife and I thought Madison, Wisconsin, was Shangri-La, and we intended to go to the Midwest, or even West. Boston not only had a climate that left much to be desired, but was in the economic doldrums. It was constantly compared to the South or Appalachia. But for lack of a better alternative, we thought we might as well exploit the opportunities here. It didn't take long to appreciate the intellectual richness, sparkle, and challenge of the MIT environment. We fell in love with the place, and when the opportunity came to go out West, we never considered it seriously.

I came to MIT about 1946 and became professor emeritus in '86. I've been on the faculty forty years and around here for fifty-plus. From time to time, I still give special seminars. I gave one a few years ago, a special seminar for the faculty, and edited a book with Don Schon entitled *Rethinking the Development Experience*. I've been asked to give another seminar next fall on "the profession of city planning." It will deal with the big issues in the field and the way they have changed over the past half century.

I have done still other things in the School. In 1959, I set up the Joint Center for Urban Studies at MIT and Harvard University, together with Harvard's Professor Martin Meyerson, and I was head of the Joint Center's Faculty Policy Committee for the next decade. We had a considerable impact in spurring research at MIT and Harvard in urban studies.

Then Jerry Wiesner and Lawrence Anderson asked me to consider becoming head of the department. I deemed this a great opportunity, if I could get backing to do some things that needed to be done. I wanted more resources put into the urban field. The former department heads Fred Adams and Jack Howard were good people, but far too gentle. They never pressed the decision makers hard enough to increase significantly the resources in the field or to do other things that were necessary. Of course, the administration tended to say, "We don't like to be pressed into doing things with a gun to our head." But the old adage is also true, that the wheel that squeaks gets the grease. Back then our wheel wasn't squeaking enough.

Unless I got backing to really correct some things, it didn't seem to me a position worth taking. I liked teaching, writing books, doing research, and a certain amount of consulting. But I had just finished a rather exciting period in which the Joint Center helped to plan and build and write books about one of the biggest "new" cities in the world. This was Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela. It now has close to a million people, maybe more. It was a major enterprise—a national, regional, and local development strategy, with vast economic, social, and political implications. I had been in charge of this activity for the Joint Center and I was all the more ambitious as to what I thought the department ought to be doing.

Jerry Wiesner asked me to write a memo spelling out what I thought was necessary. I did, on

January 27, 1970. Among the things I asked for was a doubling or tripling of the faculty. I wanted more research, and especially opportunities for minorities—for the black population, in particular—to a much greater extent than in the past. I also wanted to increase opportunities for women, and a vast increase of funds for students, for our library, and for computers, and so on. I was pretty aggressive, perhaps presumptuous.

But Jerry Wiesner said that was where the Institute should be going and I was only pointing out particular ways to make the right things happen. With regard to blacks and other minority students, I had something very specific in mind. I had developed earlier a program based on my experience in Latin America and third world countries. One of the things I had done in the past was to spend a lot of time as an advisor to various organizations not only in this country but abroad, particularly in third world countries.

Maybe I should mention an amusing story on how I got involved in these activities. Some students asked me in the early 1950s to teach a course dealing with urban problems in third world countries. I said, "It's a great idea, except that it's not at all possible." They said, "Why not?" I replied, "I don't know anything about it. I've never been to such countries, so it would be silly of me to do that." They left and then they came back, saying they'd checked around and nobody else was able to do it, and they pressed me to reconsider. I did and said, "I couldn't really teach a course, but I'll do something else. I'll run an informal seminar at my home and we'll study the subject together. I just don't see how I could in good conscience presume to give a formal course on a subject I know so little about." They accepted and we met regularly for a year every Wednesday evening. I learned a hell of a lot just by talking with them and reading a lot. Later on, these students went back to their different countries, became important in their fields, and kept inviting me to help them cope with their problems.

So inadvertently, I had developed a specialty. And this may help to explain my notion that we ought to have a seminar and opportunities for people from poorer countries to come to MIT at least for a year. They could take particular courses here, subjects that would serve their interests. Or they could take very few subjects but spend their time in the libraries—which we had and they

didn't—maybe on a project or working with an organization. The idea was to have a program tailored to the interests and needs of these people.

I asked myself, "What would I want if I were from one of these countries? Well, I'd like an opportunity to be free to do what I wanted to do, not to take a prescribed program." I thought most of our prescribed courses were not too relevant and our target should be people with rich experience. Why worry whether they had formal qualifications—particularly prerequisites, undergraduate or advanced degrees? The main thing was whether they were mature, had experience, and could profit from what we had to offer. Our job would be to identify the most capable people. If we got good people, they could go back and use that background in all sorts of ways. It would be a great opportunity for them, and a great opportunity also for their countries to get some of their first-rate people into a very special, privileged environment and tap it for all it's worth.

I devised a program for this purpose called SPURS, the Special Program for Urban and Regional Studies of Developing Countries. It still is in existence. I set it up before I became the head of the department. First, I got some money from Max Millikan, then director of the Center for International Studies. Then I got more money from David Bell at the Ford Foundation. I served on one of his advisory committees when he was the head of the Agency for International Development (AID). With these funds, we set the SPURS program up on an experimental basis for two or three years. Then we incorporated it into our program at the school. It was easy to do so because I was the head of the department.

The main point I want to make is that SPURS was the model for the Community Fellows Program. My thought was that the SPURS formula had broader applications. Very able people who are underprivileged ought somehow to be able to get into the Institute without prerequisites. Why not have them come here and take courses that would serve their purpose? We wouldn't necessarily develop special subjects for them, except maybe a seminar that they could all take advantage of and share their experiences. I had no doubts that we could serve people in diverse ways—people who had the potential for being leaders in their communities.

Many of these ideas were in the memo I wrote to Jerry Wiesner. And he agreed. Then it seemed critical to get the right person to guide the program. So I spoke to several important black leaders. I felt strongly that whatever else we do, we shouldn't turn our backs on our home community, Boston. I preferred someone from Boston, but I especially wanted someone who would not be regarded as an Uncle Tom. He or she had to be known as a fighter, a person highly respected by the black community.

One fellow stood out. That was Mel King. It was not easy to persuade him at first. He was very resistant to the idea. I remember my going down there with one of my black students and being rebuffed by him. Mel can be very sweet, but he can also be very tough and rough. Mel was scornful, skeptical, perhaps even rather hostile. I understand—or think I understand—why blacks, for all sorts of reasons, are and even should be skeptical and hostile to whites. Mel didn't know who I was or where I hoped the program might go. I paid no attention to his rebuffs, and it was a darn good thing I didn't, because he came and did a first-rate job.

When I proposed Mel King to the administration, they were very skeptical. Mel had a reputation then of being a very difficult character. They asked, "Are you familiar with this guy and his behavior?" Most of them felt I didn't know what I was getting into, and that the whole enterprise would blow up in my face. They warned me against it. But I thought it was a risk worth taking because if it worked, it would work very well indeed.

Let me tell another story by way of illustration. When Mel and I came to our first meeting with the Institute's administrative council, Mel was asked to spell out some of his ideas. This was before the appointment was formally approved. And he said, "The first question we have to resolve is the question of power." Well, you could see the faces of those present blanch. A few of them asked curtly, "Well, what do you mean by power?" I jumped in and said I didn't think that this would be a fruitful discussion, that we ought to come back when we could explain in detail how the proposed program would work. Jerry promptly agreed. We were invited to come back in two weeks—which we did, spelling out some of our ideas and avoiding an explosive confrontation.

This experience, of course, didn't make it easier to get approval. But we did. Jerry's role was critical. We couldn't have gotten it through without him, that's for sure. When eventually we had the appointment approved, Jerry turned to us and said, "Before we end this session, there's one thing which I want clear—we won't back away from this decision. I don't want anyone in the future to say, 'I told you so.' We all know there's a real risk, but we're going to back this to the hilt." And we all nodded.

Jerry had guts enough to say that, though.

Right. He was willing to take that responsibility. I must say that on almost every important issue laid out in my memorandum, he backed me. We increased the resources in the department by a factor of three—the financial resources and the faculty. I doubt if any department around the country had such an increase in so short a period of time. We got the money we wanted for the fellowships, for research, for the library, and for other programs.

During the first year, I met weekly or more often with Mel King and with Frank Jones, who was a Ford Professor. Frank came to our program from civil engineering. He was not too happy there. He wanted to be with us because the things he wanted I was ready to support. So Frank, Mel, and I spent the first year shaping the Community Fellows Program. Mel, of course, played the principal role. I was there primarily because Jerry felt, rightly I think, that Mel had no real knowledge of how universities worked or about MIT in particular, and that it was important for someone knowledgeable to work closely with him.

This almost created a bad relation with Mel during that period. Mel felt, rightly from his point of view, that this was a program for blacks and other minorities run by blacks, and that I shouldn't be there. Much as I agreed with him, Jerry wanted me there to be sure the program worked. My aim was to be as helpful as possible, no more. Most of the initiatives were taken by Mel and Frank. Every now and then I would suggest it would be hard to do this, or it's easier to do it another way or something of that sort. But I shared the view that it was Mel's program—and the quicker I got out, the better.

You were head of the department at that time.

Yes. Mel originally thought this program should not be linked to any particular department or

school, and I said, “Fine, if you can work it out. Where would you go? Who else wants you? Here you have a base where you’ll be appreciated. If at any point you identify another place in the Institute where you’d prefer to be, where you are wanted, I will never stand in your way. But for now you need a base and backing, and I at least can guarantee that you’ll get it here.” Mel never tried to go elsewhere.

The Community Fellows Program, I noted, was modeled on the SPURS program. That is still true, although the themes of the program have been changed and deepened. Mel is a charismatic personality and has raised money and attracted key Fellows of quality—vigorous leaders or potential leaders from Boston and around the country. I’m biased, of course, but in retrospect my impression is that what we did worked. It’s one of the things I’m kind of proud of, as former head of the department.

In terms of what has happened over the years relative to the presence of blacks and other minority folks here, could you outline what you have liked best and what you have least liked about MIT’s efforts in this arena?

As you know, MIT is a big and complex place. You say “MIT,” but you know there are a lot of different fiefdoms around here run by different groups. From time to time, there’s brilliance in one part and mediocrity in another, there may be very progressive attitudes in some areas and less progressive attitudes in others. My sense, in the period since I got closer to the administration, is that there is a heck of a lot of good will here, of wanting to do the right thing. Sometimes it came from the top. Sometimes it came from below, and the administration supported those initiatives.

Paul Gray was superb in this respect. Over the years, he handled these issues imaginatively at the Institute. A good deal also depends upon opportunities. That more blacks ought to be here, I am sure. But there’s a difference—in different fields—as to, say, the number of blacks who have the right background to qualify. The Institute, for understandable reasons, wants to attract top people in every field. People are right when they say it was in a number of ways easier for us to make these changes than for other parts of the Institute.

That’s not the whole story. A lot depends on how aggressively the people in charge search to provide opportunities. I can’t speak for other pro-

grams around here. My feeling—I could be wrong—is that much more can and should be done.

On November 24, 1970, you wrote a memo to Al Hill entitled “Minority Lecturers and Related Matters.” One of the things you wrote was, “We are also initiating a new program, described in the accompanying memorandum, intended to serve Community Fellows of minority background, mainly but not entirely blacks. The general intentions are spelled out in the accompanying memorandum. The program has just received start-up funds and will be initiated next fall.” And you cc’d Paul Gray. You said a lot of other things about what the department was trying to do, and you put it in writing.

I have no recollection of that memorandum. Maybe if I saw it, I would. But in any case, it sounds right.

The point I’m making is that what you’ve said to me very much reflects what you have in writing about things that you believed very strongly in. You didn’t just talk it, you actually went out and worked on it. What we see now, in the Community Fellows and SPURS programs and so forth in that department, happened only because some person believed that it was important to do it. That is what I think is very much missing in many of the other twenty-three departments.

I would qualify just a little bit what you’re saying, although I share your view. First, yes, I held these views strongly. These are basic values for me. But there were other people in the department, like Kevin Lynch, who shared these views. You’ve got to have not just a leader but other first-rate people around who lend support. As you know, some departments are benevolent despotisms and sometimes they are genuine group endeavors. Much depends on having at least a small core of people who feel these changes are important and push for them vigorously. It’s almost hopeless if you’re pushing from the bottom and many of your colleagues and/or your chief don’t share your views.

By the way, I just thought of something else you might want to know about. It has to do with the title that Mel got, adjunct professor. Mel felt and still feels—I think I’m reporting his views—that there was a certain amount of discrimination involved in his getting the title of adjunct. The explanation I gave never persuaded him. Either that or he didn’t want to be persuaded on this score, it’s hard to tell. But to bring up Mel King’s name for a professorship—given the criteria used,

articles produced and other credentials—would never have passed muster. I discovered this was a problem also in management and engineering. There were a lot of people with superb experience whom they wanted, who could contribute to their programs, and who could never get through the credentials screen.

So we invented or adopted the term “adjunct professor.” But we had a heck of a time getting it through the general faculty. There was terrific criticism. Many of my colleagues felt we were introducing a bad precedent. The term “scab” was used. It was said that people who didn’t have the qualifications would be slipping through a back door. People as eminent and as liberal as Professor Salvador Luria led the opposition, saying this was a dangerous and wrong thing to do. It almost looked as if we wouldn’t get it through. If you know anything about faculty meetings, they are dull affairs and when you get twenty or thirty people there, you’re doing very well. But these were meetings in Room 10-250, completely crowded, with people standing in the aisles. And we did get the damn motion passed.

If I understand you correctly on this, are you saying that as head of the department—and with other department heads—you helped to introduce the concept of adjunct professorship here?

Yes, but not without furious debates at the general faculty meetings. If I recall correctly, at least three departments pushed hard for it—management, civil engineering, and urban studies and planning. Each of the departments insisted they needed people with rich experience in the field and they had to have an appropriate title for them. We talked in terms of an extendable rolling appointment, say, for three or four or five years, with the possibility of extension beyond the initial period. That innovation enabled us to bring people here with valuable non-academic experience.

I bring that issue to your attention for a reason. You’re probably familiar with what has happened recently on the leadership succession for the Community Fellows Program. I tried to persuade Mel King he was making a mistake in fighting the department on this score. I did not succeed. I was on the search committee for a successor to Mel, even though I was an emeritus professor. Mel wanted me on that committee and so did Bish Sanyal, the department head. It was the depart-

ment’s view that the main candidate, recommended lukewarmly by the search committee, would never get through. Key people wouldn’t write a letter for him. They said if they wrote, the letter would not be favorable. And they were friends of the Community Fellows Program. There was a question, too, about the quality of the candidate’s publications. The department was willing, albeit reluctantly, to consider a non-tenured appointment, but they knew the candidate would not give up his existing tenured position. The department, too, was loathe to back something that would be shot down upstairs.

We had some evidence of that likelihood. The chair of the MIT faculty had attended the meeting where the candidate talked. He thought the candidate was competent, but clearly not one of the ablest guys around. By the same token, the question for the department was—if you want this program to succeed, it has to get a director who will be very highly respected. It has to get an equivalent of a Mel King, or the professional equivalent of the distinguished black scholars you have at the Harvard program. Anything less and the program will surely die or languish. If the Institute has to cut budgets, as they will from time to time, they’re going to cut the things they don’t consider first-rate. The only way CFP can maintain viability is to have a first-rate director, someone who would attract the highest quality Fellows.

Reasonable people may differ with the decision of the department, but that was an honest decision made to enhance, not to kill the program. Mel and the Community Fellows alumni, in my view, have made a serious misjudgment in saying that they’re going to fight the decision no matter what, saying this is another example of Institute racism. It is anything but. Mel wanted this candidate and the department wanted to take another year to find someone much better.

Maybe one good thing came out of the protest. Mel and the CFP alumni made enough of a fuss that we now have a top-level commitment to appoint a director for the Community Fellows Program who is also a distinguished black professional and/or scholar. We had that commitment in effect previously, and now it is explicit.

We wanted to keep this disagreement quiet, because we didn’t want to say in public what was wrong with the candidate. That would be a disservice to him. The department has plenty of nega-

tive evidence. The fact is, he was turned down previously by the political science department here at MIT, not able to stay on at Harvard, and not considered outstanding for substantial reasons by senior faculty members who strongly backed the Community Fellows Program.

Can you reflect on the nature of your relationship with black professionals in the field? You've had a lot of connections, but can you talk a little bit about your experience in that arena? If you were advising a young black scholar coming into the field today, what would you advise him or her to consider as very important issues that he or she should really make sure to deal with?

You're talking about MIT or elsewhere?

Primarily here at the Institute, yes, and particularly in that department.

It's the sort of question that one really ought to ponder. I can and will give you an off-the-cuff answer, but one ought to think about it a little bit more. Maybe we might have another meeting sometime.

First, we live in a racist society. All of us, including blacks and other minorities, are racist in different ways. Yet I think MIT is one of the less racist environments I'm familiar with. We've built up our department with concern for minorities and underprivileged people. That's a very high priority in our values and goals. Most of the professors here, I believe, think of themselves in part as advocates for this group—that this is one of their key roles. It is a very important tradition developed in the last generation. I hope it can be maintained for a long period of time.

But it's very hard, it seems to me, for a person who is a member of an underprivileged minority to forget the way they've been treated over time. A friend of mine, Ely Goldston—now deceased—and I once discussed that. Head of a major Boston corporation, Ely was an extraordinarily dedicated person and head of the Community Fund for a period. Mel King once dropped garbage on the head table the evening Ely and the Community Fund were celebrating the successful end of a year-long fund raising campaign. Thinking of this, Ely said, somewhat bitterly, "Even a dog knows how to distinguish between a kick and a stumble." But his son shook his head. "That's true, Dad," he said, "but when that dog has been kicked a hell of a long period of time, you can understand why even

a dog may misjudge the situation." There was a brief silence, then Ely said, "I take it back."

It's important—especially in this society, such as it is—to recognize where you have friends, in contrast to others you have to be very careful about. My view is—I may be kidding myself—that there's a genuine concern for minorities of all kinds in the little subculture we've built up in our department. And I think many key parts of MIT share these values. And we can augment and spread them.

But there's a greater danger than I suspected: that things done with decent intentions can be misinterpreted, not always for good reasons. I'm distressed that the decision regarding the Community Fellows Program has been attributed to racism. People have different views that need to be argued, but to call the department's decision racism is not just wrong, but unwise—it misjudges the environment, strikes below the belt, and alienates genuine friends. I am Jewish. I know what it means to be subject to discrimination, and to react to it from your guts. But it's important that the coalition that blacks and other groups have built up over time should be reinforced and nourished. One of the things that's worrisome, that I would remind your young black scholar, is that this coalition could break up, and none of us would benefit from that.

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Reflections on the Black Experience at MIT, 1941–1999

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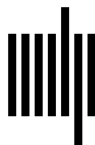
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