The Tide That Took 8 Washington

Abstract

The 8 Washington case highlights an opposition coalition’s effective use of the planning theories of advocacy planning, framing, and the communal future to halt the development of a mixed-use luxury condominium project along San Francisco’s Embarcadero Freeway (see Appendix, Exhibits 1-4). The coalition, No Wall on the Waterfront, successfully lobbied with a referendum (Proposition C) to a Board of Supervisors vote granting a height exemption to the 8 Washington project. The rejection of Proposition C and a complementary developer-sponsored Proposition B stopped all plans to develop the project. The case involved multiple stakeholders in a high-profile decision that shaped the aesthetic, demographic, and socioeconomic makeup of the city.

Advocacy planning as elucidated by Paul Davidoff pertains to the 8 Washington case, as citizens supporting the “No Wall on the Waterfront” movement unified successfully in advocating for referenda on Propositions B and C (Davidoff, 1965). George Lakoff stresses the
importance of framing issues in politics to command an issue (Lakoff, 2003). From the very name of the coalition to issue sound bites, No Wall on the Waterfront’s effective framing of their opposition to 8 Washington ensured their success. The theory of community future over present individualism, as defined by Dowell Myers, shaped the climate underlying the arguments of ‘No Wall on the Waterfront’ (Myers, 2007). No Wall on the Waterfront focused its opposition to the negative communal effects of the 8 Washington project with the support of a diversity of interest groups and thousands of supporters.

**Background**

Eight years before Propositions B and C were overturned, the real estate developer and primary stakeholder driving the project, Pacific Waterfront Partners led by Simon Snellgrove, proposed developing the 3.2-acre parcel along the Embarcadero Freeway on 8 Washington Street. The swim and tennis club Golden Gateway Center owns about 80% of the parcel. The remaining 20% is a public parking lot under the jurisdiction of the City and County of San Francisco’s Port Commission (“Proposition B,” 2013). The project design required a height extension bringing the building height to 136 feet, 52 feet above the site’s 84 foot limit (“Vote Yes,” 2013). The San Francisco Board of Supervisors were major public sector stakeholders in the 8 Washington case. After seven years of community meetings, discussions with public sector representatives, and an environmental impact report, the Board voted 8 to 3 in support of the height exemption.

Opponents to 8 Washington quickly and effectively united. Led by the coalition “No Wall on the Waterfront,” this critical opposition stakeholder amassed over 30,000 signatures to get a referendum on the ballot (Proposition C) challenging the Board of Supervisors’ decision (Resignato, 2013). “No Wall on the Waterfront” was comprised of a diverse range of stakeholders over 50 interest groups, 50 former public officials, and other private developers.

Snellgrove and Pacific Waterfront Partners reacted by sponsoring a competing coalition called Open Up the Waterfront to support the 8 Washington project. This coalition successfully lobbied voters and obtained more than the 9,000 necessary signatures for a competing initiative, Proposition B, to allow voters to determine passage of the project as a whole (Cote, 2013). Additional public sector key stakeholders in support of Propositions B and C included San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee, City Controller Ben Rosenfield, and the City Planning Commission. These actors argued overwhelmingly for public benefits generated from the project in the form of tax revenues and $10 million to be paid to San Francisco’s affordable housing fund.

No Wall on the Waterfront’s efforts resulted in San Francisco voters’ rejection of Propositions C and B. On November 5, 2013, 66.5% of voters voted “no” on Proposition C, overturning the Board of Supervisor’s decision in June 2012 to grant the 8 Washington development a height exemption from the city’s 84-foot limit (Wildermuth, 2013a). Proposition B, which would have also allowed the property to be developed was defeated with a 62% vote (Wildermuth, 2013a).

**Key Issues**
The surprising inclusion of Propositions B and C on the ballot and their even more surprising rejection encapsulate the crux of the 8 Washington planning problem. Removal of the project appeared unlikely as ballot box-driven development decisions are extremely rare in San Francisco. Underlying the schism between supporters and opponents of 8 Washington is the issue of the waterfront’s aesthetic. The imagery of a ‘wall’ is reminiscent of the elevated and notoriously imposing Embarcadero Freeway (King, 2004). A second critical issue is the proposed development’s lack of onsite affordable housing. This absence glares even brighter with 8 Washington’s luxury condominiums catering to an upper class, symbolizing the city’s gentrifying trends.

**Introduction**

No Wall on the Waterfront’s use of the theories of advocacy planning, framing, and appealing to the City’s communal future united San Franciscans in their efforts. Despite the height exemption and luxury amenities of the project, many outsiders unaware of the City’s contentious relationship to development may not understand the uproar over the project. 8 Washington’s physical scale is relatively small when compared with luxury development projects rising higher and expanding farther across the City. This would suggest the schism or planning problem of a ‘wall’ or absent affordable housing to have minor impacts, and certainly not ones requiring seven years of hearings and a ballot process. With condominiums several times higher South of Market Street and a 22-story apartment complex adjacent to 8 Washington’s proposed maximum height of 12 stories, an outsider would likely be perplexed by the fervent opposition (King, 2013). The surprising tide-turning outcome therefore makes this planning case particularly informative.

Without such effective implementation of the above theories, the opposition coalition would not have secured their surprise victory in the overbearing shadow of plans for 8 Washington. The opposition’s efforts appeared insurmountable in the face of the Board of Supervisor’s decision and downtown San Francisco’s high rise development boom. Yet it was the opposition’s role as advocacy planners, framing their fight, and constructing their own communal future that surmounted the 8 Washington project.

**Advocacy and Plural Planning**

The fervent positions voiced by stakeholders in the 8 Washington case and their role in shaping its outcome are a manifestation of an advocacy planning process. Fifty years earlier, urban planner Paul Davidoff introduced and championed such methods of advocacy planning. Paul Davidoff’s opposition to value neutrality, and his belief that the planning process should incorporate a variety of positions to achieve an outcome more accountable to the public, mirrors the process undertaken in the 8 Washington case. Contemporary San Francisco’s real estate permitting process involves much of the plural planning championed by Davidoff. However, the 8 Washington case provides a deeper exploration of the tools and efficacy that advocacy planning can have.

The eight years of deliberations in determining the fate of 8 Washington is representative of Davidoff’s plural planning process. Central to Davidoff’s argument for advocacy planning is the inherent requirement for debate in a democracy (Davidoff, 1965). The seven years leading up to the 2012 San Francisco Board of Supervisors 8 to 3 vote approving the height exemption were
marked by extensive public participation with the developer. This included “community meetings, long discussions with representatives of the port and the city, an environmental impact report and heated hearings before the City Planning Commission” (Wildermuth, 2013a).

With many stakeholders involved in advocating for competing positions, the Board of Supervisors had to balance the arguments made in casting their vote. Davidoff writes that the government stakeholder in such situations must undertake this balancing act and inevitably have “to account for this unavoidable bifurcation of the public interest” (Davidoff, 1965). However, Davidoff argues that this deliberative process of incorporating the differing views of citizens and interest groups will result in an outcome that inevitably improves upon the original uncontested plan. Without such opposition, Davidoff writes, there is “little incentive to improve the quality of their work or the rate of production of plans” (Davidoff, 1965).

Finally, the 8 Washington case delves deeper into citizen advocacy as manifested in the California ballot process where both opponents and supporters of the project had measures added to the ballot and voted on their outcome. No Wall on the Waterfront advocated relentlessly to achieve its objective, believing as Davidoff wrote, “The right course of action is always a matter of choice, never of fact” (Davidoff, 1965). Their success marked the first time in 20 years a San Francisco Board of Supervisors decision had been overturned, and one of only seven times that it had happened at all (Wildermuth, 2013b). This critical opposition stakeholder collected 31,371 signatures to put a referendum on the ballot challenging the Board of Supervisors decision. The signed petitions filled 70 boxes and were far more than the required 19,405 signatures necessary for the referendum to be on the ballot (Wildermuth, 2013b). Their relentless advocating with “lively political debate” (Davidoff, 1965) and with political action by way of the ballot measures improved their effectiveness and empowered their voice.

**Issue Framing**

Opponents to 8 Washington named their coalition “No Wall on the Waterfront,” immediately creating a powerful frame evoking negative aspects associated with a wall. For persuasive messaging, cognitive linguist George Lakoff stresses the importance of framing issues to create an environment or “mental structure” (Lakoff, 2003) that influence support for the message’s objective. Lakoff cites the phrase “tax relief” (Lakoff, 2003), introduced by the Bush administration as a frame that effectively persuades readers or listeners to make negative connotations with taxes. “Relief” is associated with rescuing and therefore the phrase implies that “tax relief” is a rescue from harm or “taxes” (Lakoff, 2003). The listener is immediately influenced by the message underlying the frame.

Similar to the negative associations of taxes created by the “tax relief” frame, the “No Wall on the Waterfront” frame associates the 8 Washington building to a wall along the water. Additionally, the height exemption emphasizes the building’s physical state as a wall towering above. These combining factors evoke images of intrusion into the natural environment and create a frame negatively associating the 8 Washington development with a wall.

A frame often carries much more persuasive weight than an issue’s details. As previously discussed, 8 Washington is not relatively tall when compared with much newer developments in San Francisco. Furthermore, a neighboring apartment complex set back from the 8 Washington site rises 10 stories above the 8 Washington’s proposed height. This demonstrates the power of successful negative framing of the wall; as with Lakoff’s example, regardless of the tax’s actual
benefit or harm, one is influenced by the frame “tax relief” and considers the tax harmful (Lakoff, 2013).

The No Wall on the Waterfront frame is further strengthened by city’s contextual history. The Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 damaged the original elevated Embarcadero Freeway. This provided an opportunity for its demolition and a breaking down of its wall-like status that impeded views and access to the waterfront. The “No Wall on the Waterfront” framing of the 8 Washington development as a reprise of the notoriously elevated Embarcadero effectively unified its broad base of support. Echoing this wall-demeaning frame, a former San Francisco City Planning Director writes that the height exemption is “more than 50 feet higher than the torn-down Embarcadero Freeway that walled off this section of San Francisco’s waterfront for decades” (Jacobs, 2013). The fact that the elevated Embarcadero Freeway was far more expansive than the 8 Washington project is deemphasized by the effective framing that shapes and persuades the issue’s discourse.

To market Proposition B with little time to spare, the developer-sponsored Open Up The Waterfront campaign circulated an online advertisement framing the opponents as the “1%” or “superrich” (Dage, 2013) and encouraged a vote affirming the initiative. To lessen the voters’ characterization of the developer as a self-interested voice the advertisement’s egalitarian frame aimed to appeal to San Francisco’s progressive audience. The “1%” frame recalled the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement emphasizing the country’s wealthiest one percent and its growing wealth inequality. The online advertisement did not mention the luxury condominium project, but simply read: “Stop the 1%. Don't let the 1% prevent open access to the waterfront” (Dage, 2013). Omitting the luxury condominiums revealed a framing strategy focused on the “1%” sound bite and the project’s public sector benefits.

Although Proposition B reached the 9,000-signature threshold, the proponent’s “1%” frame appeared hypocritical to opposition campaign leader Jon Golinger. Golinger stated: "A corporate developer is posing as an Occupy activist and attacking the millionaires he is trying to build his luxury condos for" (Dage, 2013). Open Up The Waterfront spokesperson David Beltran responded, emphasizing the project’s public sector benefits that included $10 million for off-site affordable housing, 140 permanent jobs, and 250 construction jobs that were estimated to create over $100 million for the city (Dage, 2013). In defense, Beltran argued that 8 Washington opponents are sacrificing these benefits “to protect the status quo: an asphalt parking lot and a private club that provides zero benefits to working families” (Dage, 2013). With such competing arguments, the “1%” framing clearly highlights its framing purpose to persuade, as argued by Lakoff. In the developer’s Proposition B campaign, the details were secondary to an effective and persuasive framing of the issue in favor of the 8 Washington project.

**Promoting the Community Future in the Contest with Present Individualism**

The theory of community future over present individualism as argued by Dowell Myers (2007), continually shaped the climate underlying the arguments of “No Wall on The Waterfront”. Opponents of 8 Washington framed the project as one driven by greed, reflected by the project’s absence of on-site affordable housing or public open space, and by the slick glass design for multi-million dollar condos, many of which were selling for upwards of 5 million dollars (Wildermuth, 2013a). Opponents argued that such a plan focused on the self-interest of a wealthy elite while neglecting the community’s wealth inequalities that would only be further
exacerbated in the future. The project’s absence of public open space was conveyed by opponents as robbing the community of a common space to be shared in by future neighbors and communities.

No Wall on the Waterfront argued that their community’s future would be jeopardized by the self-interested present individualism of the developer. Myers writes that “The essential task of planning, its heroic challenge, it to build a bridge from present individualism to community future” (Myers, 2007). These opponents to 8 Washington successfully built this bridge by unifying with an extremely diverse and large coalition of interest groups, public officials, and San Franciscans. To build this bridge, Myers argues that the planner must appeal to the public’s future concerns, such as their family legacy, environmental sustainability, and livability or quality of life (Myers, 2007). The opponents to 8 Washington adamantly stressed the lasting impacts its wall-like structure would have, hindering the livability, open space, and degree of green space. Alternatives that 8 Washington opponents argued for included converting the city-owned parking lot into public open space with “low rise uses such as bicycle rentals, cafes, or restaurants and recreational activities” (Wildermuth, 2013c). These efforts revealed the importance of these particular amenities to the community.

By effectively utilizing the two theories of advocacy planning and framing, No Wall on the Waterfront was equipped to appeal to the public’s future concerns. According to Myers, making this case is often difficult because the future is unknown and the community often disagrees (Wildermuth, 2013c). Despite disagreement across No Wall on the Waterfront, the planning case was defined by the disagreement between the supporters and opponents of the 8 Washington project. Myers writes that present individualism is more attainable because the present is known and the individual needs to only agree with him or herself when making a decision (Wildermuth, 2013c). However, despite being more attainable, the decisions based in present individualism often lack long-term foresight and could negatively affect communities in the future. It was this potential harm that opponents emphasized repeatedly through framing, advocacy efforts, and gaining a diverse network of supporters.

Conclusion

Despite overwhelming challenges, the opposition effectively utilized planning theory and leveraged the city’s long adversarial relationship to high-rise development to win a seemingly unwinnable fight. Leading the charge, No Wall on the Waterfront’s use of the theories of advocacy planning, framing, and appealing to the City’s communal future united San Franciscans in their fight. The result was a surprising victory with dominant majorities overturning both Propositions C and B. In jubilation, No Wall on the Waterfront’s campaign manager, Jon Golinger exclaimed: “We are San Francisco and you just heard us roar!” (Jones, 2013).

References

“Proposition B: 8 Washington Street—Initiative” City & County of San Francisco Department of Elections-Ballot Simplification Committee. http://d3n8a8pro7vfhmx.cloudfront.net/nowallonthewaterfront/pages/31/attachments/original/1380311715/Prop_B_Ballot_Question.pdf?1380311715


Appendix

Exhibit 1

The Proposed site of the 8 Washington complex is home to a private tennis and swim club and a parking lot. Photo: Lea Suzuki, The Chronicle

Exhibit 2
Rendering of 8 Washington. The structure comprises the first two rows of buildings. The taller complex is a preexisting 22-story building.
(Image credit: “8 Reasons Voters Rejected 8 Washington” San Francisco Business Times)

**Exhibit 3**

Current site: Members-only club and asphalt parking lot surrounded by fence that blocks public access to the waterfront.
(Image credit: “Proposition B: 8 Washington Street—Initiative” City & County of San Francisco Department of Elections-Ballot Simplification Committee)
Exhibit 4

Proposed 8 Washington project with height extension.
(Image Credit: “Prop B Legal Text” City & County of San Francisco Department of Elections-Ballot Simplification Committee)