



Dr. Margaret Wilder Interview for the Winter 2014 issue of *e.polis*

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On a sunny, November 7th, morning I had the opportunity to sit down and speak with Dr. Margaret Wilder, the Director of the Urban Affairs Association (UAA). There were several questions that I wanted to ask, mostly pertaining to the field of Urban Affairs in general and the Urban Affairs Association and UWM's Urban Studies Programs in particular. After thanking Dr. Wilder for her time, I jumped right in. The first thing I wanted to do was understand what made Dr. Wilder interested in a career in Urban Affairs. As it turns out, her answer did not surprise me. Dr. Wilder came across Urban Affairs during her Master's studies in Social Work and, from her very first class in Urban Geography, she was hooked. She laughingly said, "I wanted to help people." And cliché or not, we know exactly what she means. Dr. Wilder explained further that it was in the field of Urban Affairs where her ideology that "Yes, people needed help, but were not helpless," truly fit.

When I asked Dr. Wilder about the main objective of the Urban Affairs Association (UAA), she explained that, similar to how the field of Urban Affairs has evolved and continues to evolve, so too has UAA. UAA's inception and mission in 1969 were a reflection of the interests of the institutions that established the organization—it was important to these actors to tackle the issues of "urban areas that were in the midst of crises." Even today, the UAA mission is reflective of the need for interdisciplinary collaboration. For Wilder, and others in UAA, the work that is being done most not happen in "disciplinary silos." Wilder explains,

Every social science and in some cases even humanities and sciences have individuals who have an explicit urban interest. UAA provides a context in which people can leave their disciplinary homes and come and meet on common turf. This is the common ground. So, that's what UAA provides, that interdisciplinary common ground for urban researchers.

Please continue to read further, as Dr. Wilder explains about her personal experience as the UAA Director, how UAA has become more internationalized, what UAA and UWM Urban Studies Programs means to Milwaukee, WI, and more.

Gestina Sewell: What has been the most valuable experience for you, leading this organization, as the Director?

Margaret Wilder: I think in many respects there are two personal experiences that I have had or maybe three. One is that I had the experience of being a member before I became director. So I grew up professionally in the organization. I mention that because I think my experience is not unique at all. I think it's the experience of an early career academic who is

interested in urban research and doesn't feel that my primary discipline is looking at those issues in the way that I want to. So, when I discovered UAA, It was like HOME! My people! I have found the place I was meant to be and so I found the research, and the conversations, and the interests, and the enthusiasm just welcoming. And the organization, and I'll say this because other people say it too, is that because of the size of the organization it was welcoming in that respect too. It wasn't so large and overwhelming. When you're early on in your career it's easy to be intimidated. So that was important to me. So personally, finding an organization that I could relate to and that was open and welcoming, very important to my professional development and to growth as a person.

The second significant experience I've had was when I first became Executive Director, the organization was actually going through a crisis moment and I learned a lot about the resilience of the organization and the loyalty of its members. Because, it's in the bad times that you learn what people really value and what they're willing to step up to the plate for. And so I learned a lot and I was impressed by the commitment of the board, by the willingness of the members to stick with the organization. I thought, okay, this is an organization that is worth every bit of my energy to put behind it because other people believe in it to; and I won't be doing this alone. There will be other people pulling it up, as well. So, that was a very important personal experience and it was a very positive one.

The third experience is what I'm having now, which is, that when you're the leader of any kind of organization, sometimes you get involved in plans and strategic planning for example, and goal setting, where you don't necessarily get to see those goals realized during your tenure. I'm getting to see some of those goals realized. And that's a really neat experience. One of the questions in your list here asks about the number of international scholars that were at the San Francisco conference, that change, that increase in the number of international scholars is the result of a strategic objective being set, and sought, and is now being realized. And to see that happen in real time is just fantastic. That I think is the third personal experience that I'm really jazzed by is that we set objective through strategic planning that is actually coming to fruition. So, to open the organization and encourage more international and global perspectives was a clear objective.

We also wanted to grow the organization a little bit more. But grow it through diversifying the organization. And when we talk about diversity we really mean it in the broadest sense, in the most inclusive sense. There are lots of debates about the meaning of the word, and I always feel you can't go wrong with an inclusive and broad umbrella. So, I rather include someone than exclude anybody. That's how I look at it. So, that is happening along with the internationalization. I see more persons of color, I see more, different, perspectives, whether it's perspectives that have to do with sexual orientation, there is more diversity in terms of methodological strategies. And I think that is a sign of a healthy field, that we can incorporate and embrace that, and allow it to make it richer rather than it being problematized. That one group's fighting with another group over something. One of the things that I think is a part of the UAA conference culture is that we're pretty respectful of each other. Even when we disagree we don't feel the need to alienate each other. It's a pretty supportive and respectful group.

GS: Well, you kind of dipped into the next question a little bit about the international urban scholars who came in. You were saying how that was a strategic example of some of the goals that you've had. Just to finish up on that question, is this part of a global perspective of the UAA urban research, where individuals are coming in from different countries and speaking specifically about what is going on in their countries?

MW: And that's what we need. I think that within the field there has been a bit of compartmentalizing of international perspectives, in the same way that we have disciplinary silos, we also have global silos. Where often researchers within a particular region of the world are mainly talking to one another. Often this has to do with language barriers and the way in which conversations go on because discourse in most fields occurs either through printed or online content in journals or it occurs in a slightly less formal way within conferences. So, the more that we open up conferences and that we open up journals to perspectives across the globe the better. So we developed the way in which we implemented our strategic objective of internationalizing UAA was to begin to sponsor special tracks at the conference and that makes it easier for someone who may have never come to a UAA conference to say, "Hey, someone is opening a door and welcoming me in. I've never gone but it's clear that they're interested in what I do, so why not go and see what these people are all about."

And I couldn't be happier to see that that opening that occurred in San Francisco has had an impact. When I look at the paper submissions for this year's San Antonio conference I see some of the carry over and ripple effect from San Francisco. So it wasn't just a one shot experience, we're very pleased to see people came, they saw that there was something of value, and they're coming back. And this year we're using the same strategy having a special track on south and Central America and the Caribbean. So we will continue to think about ways to enhance and promote this particular objective. And at the same time it's not the only objective we have. We want to certainly encourage interdisciplinary study and reach out to other disciplines for example. One of the things that is really promising, it's just an example of how other disciplines are being invited in, is in the area of urban communications. About four years ago, at the New Orleans Conference, we had sponsorship from Gene Burd and the Urban Communication Foundation because there are people in journalism, communication, and media studies that are very interested in what is going on and they research and write about urban issues all the time. So this has become another way in which we have invited in scholars from another field that has not been well represented before. We're doing a similar thing this year with urban education. We know there are a number of scholars and practitioners who have this interest who may not know about UAA as a context in which to come to talk about their work. We're in the planning stages of a number of initiatives that will be increasing our welcoming of urban ed. topics. So those are kind of the new initiatives and things that we're trying and it's all with that mission of being interdisciplinary, being as global and international as we can be, and yet keeping the scale of the organization welcoming and manageable for people.

GS: Speaking of urban research, and I know this is one of those questions that are hard to answer, but I was wondering what do you think has been some of the significant contributions to the field of Urban Affairs?

MW: That's a hard question to answer not simply because it's a big question but because no matter what you respond you're going to leave out some important things. What I will say is that, and I'm not suggesting that these are the most important but I think they are among a group of really important conceptual developments that have occurred that have really pushed the field of Urban Affairs forward. There's a retrospective session being done this spring that is going to look at Urban Regime Theory. I think that's one of those examples, it's a good example, of how a discipline of political science really embraced this whole notion of how the urban context matters. That there is something unique going on and important, that is unique to urban areas that needs to be examined. And so the theorists who have worked around and the subsequent people who have applied that theory and done excellent case studies across the U.S. have really built up a body of knowledge that helps our understanding of urban power relationships and how elections and political organizations and institutions and communities all interact to yield certain outcomes. I think that's a very power conceptual model and it does what I think substantial models should do, it not only helps our understanding but it challenges theorists to enter into a thoughtful debate so that the folks who feel that there are severe shortcomings with that theory are going to be motivated to work that much harder to come up with alternatives to this. And so, I think that is a good example of how Urban Affairs discourse can be promoted through one set of ideas.

I do think there are some other concepts like urban social capital, the whole social capital discussion has waxed and waned now. But I think it has made a valuable contribution as well. Other things—there's so much work that has been done around urban poverty and welfare and the interactions of opportunity structures, whether or not public policies in the areas of housing and welfare-to-work has made an impact. That body of research has kept important issues on the table, even when researchers may have been frustrated by the ideological shifts in policy making; I think the work continues to be important.

GS: It is my understanding that your own research is based on neighborhood redevelopments, specifically in low-income urban areas. How has being in Milwaukee, Wisconsin impacted you and your research?

MW: Well, not in the way you might think because, in effect, I'm no longer a researcher. I'm a full time Executive Director. So I have to respond to that question differently. One of the things I was always struck by when I used to do field interviews in cities like Los Angeles, Atlanta, Chicago, San Francisco and New York, I was always struck by the difference in the perception of urban problems between the researchers and the people who live there. So when you talk to the people who live there, they have a different perspective. It's different in terms of understanding the dynamics in terms of impacts on people's lives. A researcher can spend a hundred years studying it and never understand impact the way the residents do. So that's always striking to me. So I've learned a lot about humility as a researcher

about doing field interviews. I know in effect that I'm speaking not only to people affected by issues in communities but I'm also speaking to people who have a tremendous amount of knowledge and wisdom and expertise, and some cases energy and commitment toward addressing problems. So the perspective that I've learned from my own research is that the way in which we capture our research problem and answers, the way in which we do it, is severely limited by the fact that we don't live those problems. That's just a basic limitation of all research and it should be something that all researchers internalize, to stay humble, and to stay respectful. And to not be blind to the knowledge that is embedded in the communities that they're studying.

GS: Speaking of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, how do you think the UWM Urban Studies Programs has impacted the community by being here?

MW: To be honest, I'm not sure I'm in a position to judge. I certainly see the faculty and the students being a very engaged group of individuals, and that there is a real history to that community engagement. Individuals from UWM Urban Studies, there was an earlier name that had to do with social institutions, there have been faculty from these programs that have been in engaged in community action since before universities started using the term engagement. They were out there already. And it wasn't necessary a university-wide agenda, it was a commitment on the part of those individual students and faculty to be engaged. To me, UWM, and particularly the Urban Studies Programs, they carry on a long rich tradition of community engagement. That was part of the reason why UAA was interested in partnering and coming here. We wanted to be hosted by an institution that basically walks the walk. Because there is a long list of universities that are doing community engagement and I think it's a matter of the degree to the commitment. I don't want to belittle other universities efforts, but your commitment to community engagement really is reflective by how central are your actual mission and resources—to what degree is your central mission and resources being allocated to support community engagement or is it just kind of a small one off thing. It makes a huge difference.

G.S: Well, you kind of went right into the next question about the connection between UAA and Urban Studies. Is there an influence between the two, bilaterally?

MW: I think so, particularly at the nexus of the graduate students' interaction with UAA. I see more UWM grad students being involved in our conference. They are presenting papers; they are getting the UAA experience and enhancing their own career development. And at the same time it's helping to build a bridge between the organization and the university so that we can learn more about each other. I think there is tremendous opportunity and still more potential for the partnership between UAA and UWM to develop more so. I have had some very promising conversations with the Director, Jasmine Alinder, about the ways in which we may partner in the future. She will be at our 2014 conference in San Antonio. And we're hoping through the Director to begin to reignite a conversation, a national and eventually international conversation, about urban studies programs as

academic fields, as the focus of research centers, to think about ways to promote and enhance those on-going initiatives.

GS: What do you think have been some issues that Milwaukee—and maybe even other cities—faces that the Urban Studies Programs has been active in engaging the community?

MW: I think there are some initiatives here that could be particularly replicated in other cities. And that's one of the ways in which UAA could help because I think the ability of other communities and other researchers to learn about Milwaukee-specific initiatives, UAA can provide another conduit for getting that Milwaukee experience out to a larger audience. And that's one way to do it. So, I don't want to spot one or two initiatives per se, but I think the larger question is that there is room for elevating Milwaukee's experiences. There is one that comes to mind, and that's the Growing Power Initiative. That has already gained some national attention.

I think one of the things that the city of Milwaukee can do would be to kind of—it's always politically sensitive to kind of identify some key initiatives because you by definition leave some out—but I think that the advantage is that if you identify a short list of things that are representative of the innovative thinking and the can-do attitude and the abilities of people to address current challenges in urban communities, that's an important message to get out, that here are initiatives, and programs, and efforts that have worked, are working and can work in other places. So, researchers at UWM can help to get that word out and they are. But I think the city of Milwaukee can play a role as well. And I have no doubt that when the mayor goes to the annual mayors' gathering that he's talking about the things that they're doing. There's also a role—I've seen this work very effectively in other cities—there's a role for the philanthropic community to play. They can often help support this kind of awareness and raising the profile of the city's initiatives just by providing the resources that allow a greater dissemination of the projects and outcomes to be had. I notice in my own work, even if you look at large urban areas, I would sometimes find myself interviewing someone in one part of San Francisco or L.A. or Chicago and they are talking about an initiative that they have going that is working really well in the neighborhood and I'm saying "you know so-and-so across town in such-in-such neighborhood really might benefit from knowing about." "Oh, really, I didn't know about that other organization." I think cities often suffer the same thing, that there may be a number of things going on cities where there really is a need for disseminating out not just problems and problem definitions and analyses, we get a lot of that, but disseminating ideas that are actually working on the ground

GS: Are there any issues that you see that have not been engaged with communities that you would like to see more of?

MW: I think this is going to be personally relevant real quick. I don't think that cities, and I travel abroad quite a bit, I don't think cities globally for the most part have come to terms

with what it means to have a significant proportion of seniors living in cities. There's a real unevenness to the awareness and to the policy and programmatic responses to the needs of people who are seniors—there was just not a baby boom in the US, there was a baby boom across the globe as WWII ended. So we have huge cohorts of people in this baby boom generation who are aging now and one of the clear impacts is that they are more likely to want to live close to services, health services for examples, and cultural amenities and so forth are centralized within cities. So the housing needs, the health needs, the recreational needs, of these individuals, I think are not attended to. There is a real level of need to “ratchet up” the amount of thought, of planning and implementation in that area. I think what is in place right now it just isn't adequate to the size and complexity. One of the things that is more complicated about this group, and I'm a member of this age cohort, is that we're going to work longer. We're not as prone to want to retire and do the traditional, or stereotypic I should say, sit in a rocking chair and knit kind of thing or play golf. We're not those types of retirees. We're, first of all, we're not retiring as early. So we're working longer. And when we do retire, we are often shifting into a second career, another job field. So the way of life because of the needs of this very sizable age cohort, the way of life in cities is going to be impacted.

I think the other thing that is a huge challenge to cities is the incredible mismatch between the unemployed and underemployed and the opportunities to make a living wage. That is just a hugely important issue. So until we're able to come up with some effective solutions—and these problems are so highly concentrated and have been highly concentrated for decades in cities—that's another big issue.

This ends the interview with Dr. Margaret Wilder. For more information about Dr. Wilder's work and the UAA, visit www.urbanaffairsassociation.org.