



## In First Place...Michael Barker

By Sylvia Lewis

A new executive director takes the helm at APA.

*Mike Barker in APA's Chicago office for a get-acquainted visit in November. He assumed the position of executive director on January 1.*

Some people have the knack of being in the key place at the key time, and Michael Barker, AICP, apparently is one of them. He was on the streets of South Central Los Angeles during the riots of April 1992. He was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley during another upheaval, the Free Speech Movement of 1964. He organized R/UDATs (rural/urban design assistance teams) for the American Institute of Architects at a time when urban design was becoming a prominent discipline. And he has spent the last nine years as a consultant in Vermont, one of the nation's planning hotbeds.

A man of action, his friends say; someone who likes to be in the thick of things. And that is where he has landed—again. Barker takes office this month as APA's executive director at a time when the organization is larger than ever, with 28,000 members and a budget of about \$8 million, but also at a time of uncertainty, when APA is redefining its own goals and those of the planning profession.

Barker, who turns 56 this month, is returning to the hubbub of Washington from rural Vermont, leaving a solo consulting practice—and his favorite ski runs—to undertake a high-profile job in a low-profile profession.

He didn't make the switch for money, power, or prestige, he told the APA staff during a get-acquainted visit in November. No, he said, the APA board chose him because "planning requires self-sacrifice and they thought I was having too much fun."

So why has he taken the job? And, now that he's back at the Center of the Universe, is his glass half empty or half full?

To understand the answer to the first question, you need to know something about the man. But there's no doubt about the answer to the second question. Listening to Barker, you get the impression that his glass is just about brimming.

"We're a small ship in a big, stormy sea," he says, "but I fundamentally believe that this organization and this profession can make a difference. I believe it's possible to improve communities physically, socially, and economically. I want all of us to have that feeling—of what planning can do."

### Eternal optimist

Seeing possibilities where others see problems is one mark of an upbeat nature—"I'm an optimist," Barker says, stating the obvious. But another mark is choosing the right mentors, and eventually becoming one yourself.

Born in Bakersfield, California, Barker earned an undergraduate degree in architecture at the University of California at Berkeley in 1963 and entered the graduate program in city planning that fall. There he met T.J. Kent, Jr., who had served as the planning director of San Francisco in the 1940s and founded Berkeley's department of city and regional planning in 1948. Kent's renowned book, *The Urban General Plan*, was published in 1964, when Barker was studying with him.

"One of the things that Jack Kent taught me," Barker says, "is that you will not

always be successful . . . but if you have a basic belief in a concept and purpose, you can prevail in the long run. Jack Kent was never defeated by adversity in his life. He was the Billy Graham of planning for me."

Another teacher was Catherine Bauer Wurster, who did pioneering work on housing reform in the 1930s and, later, on metropolitan planning. It was during the fall of 1964 that the planning department moved into its present quarters in Wurster Hall. That fall, too, the campus was mesmerized by the Free Speech Movement, during which hundreds of Berkeley students were arrested for defying a university ban on political activity. Barker and other graduate teaching assistants went on strike.

Barker had other priorities, though. He took on adult responsibilities early; his father died in the 1940s and his mother in 1959, leaving him as the guardian of five younger brothers and sisters. "Growing Up in California," Barker's memoirs of his boyhood during World War II (for which he is seeking a publisher) is filled with anecdotes about his talented parents. In the 1930s, his father was the host of a radio variety show, "Barker Frivolities," broadcast on San Francisco station KYO. His mother, a Berkeley graduate, was one of three singing sisters who performed on the show.

During his last summer in Berkeley, married a year and a recent father, Barker rustled up extra cash as an assistant planner for the city. He helped design part of Berkeley's portion of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system as an underground line.



(Subsurface planning is a theme that comes up again in Barker's career; he has chaired a committee on subsurface planning of the International Tunnelling Association since 1979.)

"We always had him pegged as the one most likely to succeed, and he did," says Paul Sedway, AICP, who taught at Berkeley in those years and is now a principal of Sedway Cooke Associates, a San Francisco consulting firm.

After earning a master's degree in city planning in 1965, Barker spent two productive years in England. He first worked for the Greater London Council and later as project director for a massive urban renewal and reconstruction project in the crumbling industrial city of Warrington, between Liverpool and Manchester. He was a planner, he was from Berkeley, he knew computers. What else mattered? Surely not the fact that the British considered Warrington a hard case—one of the worst remnants of the industrial revolution.

British architects Michael and Inette Austin-Smith took a chance on a mostly untested quantity and hired Barker to head up the Warrington New Town design team. At the time, the city housed about 122,000 people; at buildout in 1991, when he returned for a visit, its population had grown to the planned 210,000, Barker says—and the new parts of the town looked pretty much as the initial designers had imagined they could. Cities *can* be designed and built, he notes.

Switching gears, Barker returned to the U.S. in 1967 and signed on as a planner for the upscale city of Palo Alto, California, seemingly as far from Warrington as an urban place could get. He undertook a study on the city's abused baylands, a large part of which had been used as a garbage dump. The study made a case for looking at the baylands as an asset for recreation, and that's ultimately what happened—in the form of nature walks and other reclamation efforts.

Barker also oversaw the production of the "Palo Alto Foothills Environmental Design Study," by consultant Lawrence Livingston, AICP. In a novel twist for that era, the study concluded that it would be cheaper for the city to buy certain land for open space than to allow development.

### Parallels

Twenty-five years have passed since Barker left Palo Alto to organize urban programs at the American Institute of Architects in Washington. But the parallels with 1994—and APA—are remarkable.

"There were riots in cities and the architects wanted to do something," Barker recalls of Washington in 1969. "But the AIA had very little internal capacity. So we developed an urban policy and ultimately [put together] multidisciplinary teams that looked at urban problems in a more comprehensive way."

Now Barker is taking the helm of APA—two years after the Los Angeles riots and just as APA is completing its own post-riot policy document, "An Agenda for America's Communities." Scheduled for publication this spring, the agenda contains a vision statement and over a dozen position papers on topics such as affordable housing and crime prevention.

While the agenda is a good start, Barker says, APA now must make a sustained effort to reach out to needy communities. When he was in South Central Los Angeles, helping a son's friend to videotape the riots for Mexican and French television, he says he saw professionals of many stripes being interviewed as experts, but no planners.

"We need to move in with some positive ideas about how the worst conditions can be addressed and come up with proposals for government as well as private action," he says. "We need to plunge into the fray, and we need to ally ourselves with advocacy groups. We need to do something more consistently and patiently, involving ourselves with these

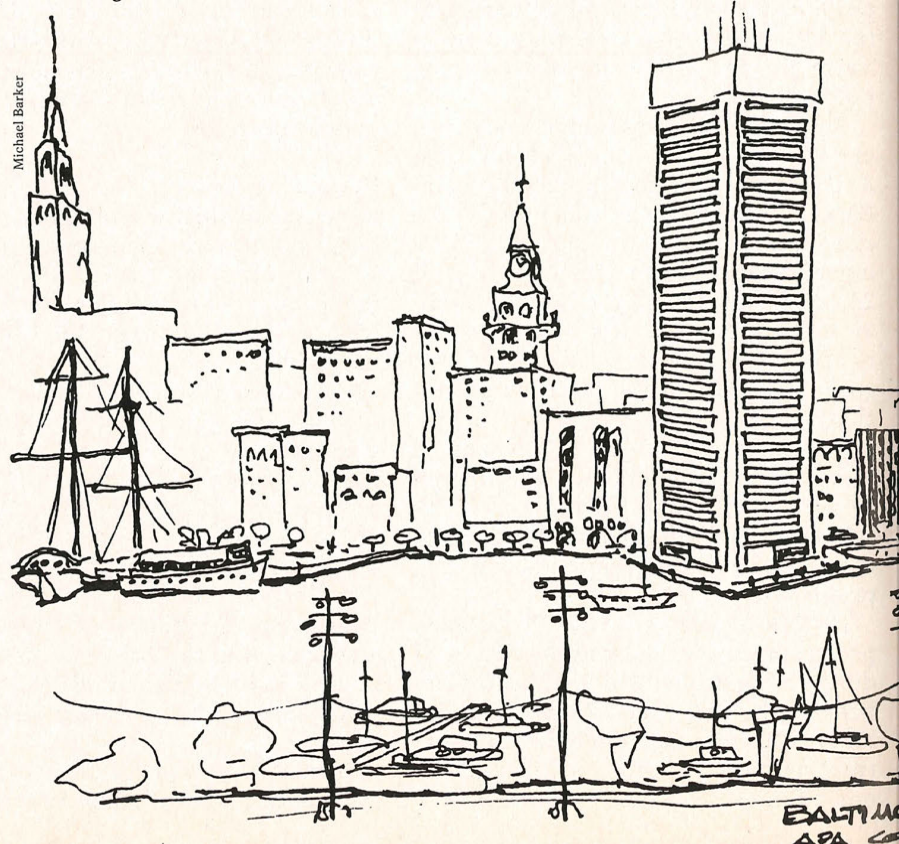
groups with more tenacity . . . and not just respond to emergencies."

One way to do that, Barker believes, is by means of multidisciplinary teams like the 60-some R/UDATs that he and his staff organized during the 16 years he was director of urban programs and administrator of design at the AIA. These intellectual SWAT teams, consisting of architects, planners, sociologists, economists, and others, fly into cities for week-long brainstorming sessions at the invitation of local leaders to address problems that local people find intractable.

R/UDATs weren't Barker's idea—he credits Boston architect Robert Sturgis for the concept—but he was their team captain and cheerleader during his years at the AIA.

One R/UDAT that sticks in Barker's mind took place in Butte, Montana, where copper mines were encroaching on the city's neighborhoods. The team's surprising suggestion was to rebuild the threatened neighborhoods at a safe distance from the mines—and that's what ultimately happened. Other R/UDATs during those years addressed growth problems in burgeoning suburbs like Redmond, Washington, and economic development strategies in places like Knoxville, Tennessee, site of the 1982 world's fair.

Barker suggests that something similar—"Plan/DATs"—could work for APA. He doesn't want to reinvent the wheel, though. Instead, he wants APA to take





## Up close

In person, Barker is a square-shouldered, rather intense man whose handshake is just as firm as you'd expect from someone who is an equal whiz at competitive sailing, tennis, and skiing.

As a professional planner, Barker speaks of teamwork and collaboration. But at play, his friends say, he can be a demon competitor. APA staff members got a hint of that during his November visit, when he asked about potential tennis partners.

Barker owns a Tartan-34 fiberglass sloop, which he has raced on Chesapeake Bay and elsewhere—successfully, says Mark Maves, a colleague at the AIA and now director of urban planning at Florance, Eichbaum, Esocoff & King, a Washington, D.C., architecture firm.

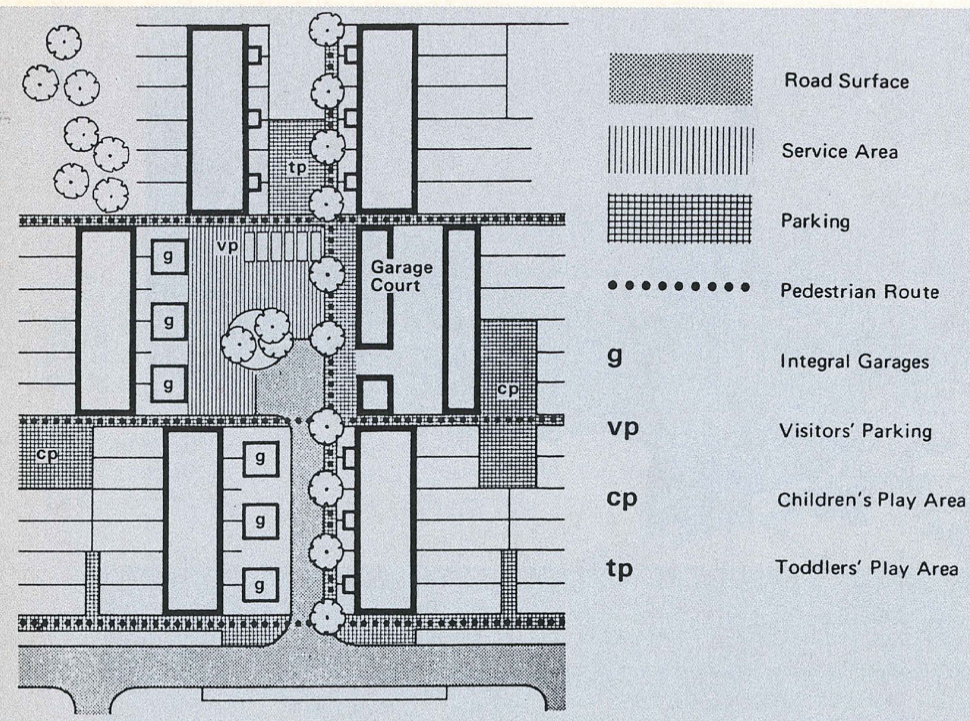
"He's an avid and competitive sailor, but he was always willing to share," Maves says. "And his interest is infectious. Three of us [in Barker's crew] wound up owning sailboats."

Barker cheerfully admits he's fond of both cooperation and competition. He can't sail his T-34 alone; he needs a crew of three to five. And he can't undertake planning alone. It's a collaborative venture—although it can become competitive, too, as he has learned from his years as a consultant.

In Vermont, Barker, the divorced father of two grown sons, lives in a hill-top house in the town of Warren, just minutes from the ski slopes (he's keeping it as a vacation home). The house looks out on the peaks of the Green Mountains and on Barker's 14 acres of forest, where he cuts the wood needed to heat the place. He was a partner in Burley's firm until 1991, when he set up shop for himself. His own clients included the city of Rutland—he rewrote its zoning ordinance—and property owners affected by Vermont's Act 250, which controls developments of regional impact.

With Burley, Barker focused on planning issues while his partner concentrated on design—for such projects as Vermont's first underground parking garage (in Woodstock), the expansion of the Vermont state capitol complex, and a controversial project called Maple Tree Place, in the Burlington suburb of Williston.

Maple Tree Place is the second shopping center that the Pyramid Companies of Syracuse, New York, has attempted in this location. The firm owns about 70 acres there and first proposed an enclosed shopping mall in 1968—known among planners who hotly debated its merits as the "Pyramid mall." It never



*The scheme for a housing cluster shown above appeared in a 1969 draft master plan for Warrington New Town, a massive reconstruction project that Barker helped direct in England. Below: his sketch of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, drawn during APA's national conference in 1979.*

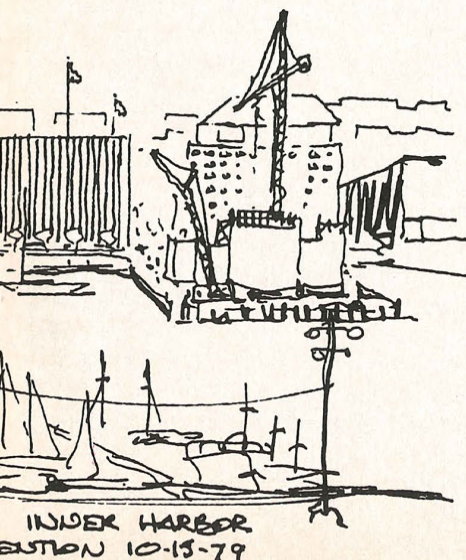
the lead in working with other organizations—the AIA, the Urban Land Institute—that address community problems.

"I'd like to see APA coordinate [onsite teams]," Barker says. "These shock troops can give planners more clout and more responsibility and more credibility." He adds: "We can claim the high ground in being generalists. The problems need a planning approach . . . a broader approach than the other groups can offer."

As administrator of design, Barker was one of half a dozen managers at the AIA—"a member of the college of cardinals" who reported to the executive director. In addition to his R/UDAT responsibilities, he staffed various committees (34 of them at one point), and he represented AIA's interests with the federal government, the construction industry, and other professional organizations. He also traveled extensively overseas.

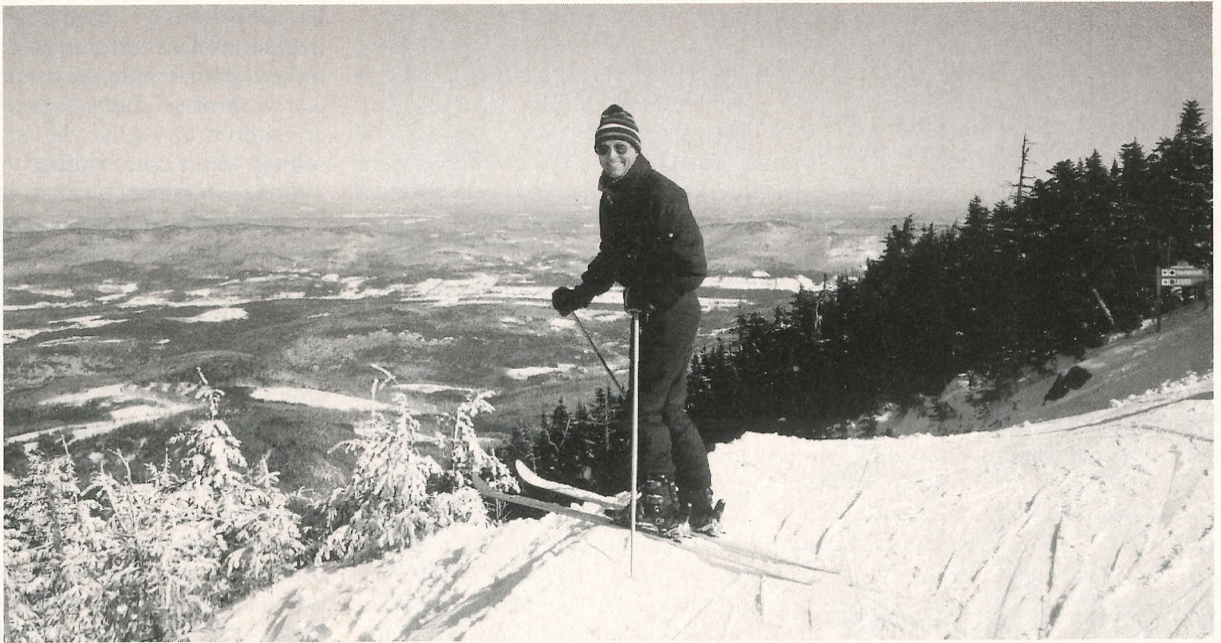
"He was very effective and highly regarded by colleagues," says William Slayton, AICP, who was AIA's executive director between 1969 and 1977. "He also has strong views and no hesitancy about expressing them."

"He has terrific hands-on experience," adds architect Robert Burley, who was a member of several of those AIA committees in the 1970s and is now executive director of the Taliesin Preservation Commission, which is restoring the Frank Lloyd Wright home and school in Spring Green, Wisconsin. In 1985, Burley persuaded Barker to leave Washington and join his firm in Waitsfield, Vermont.





Sigi Haslinger



*On the ski slopes in Vermont, Barker's home for nine years.*

received the needed approvals and was abandoned in the early 1980s. Burley's firm got involved in the second attempt in 1987, when Montreal developer Ben Frank hired it to prepare an entirely new scheme.

Burley's response was a 400,000-square-foot enclosed mall, smaller than the original, surrounded by parkland, ponds, and trails, and designed with Vermont vernacular architecture in mind. Barker sought local and state permits—the latter under Act 250. In 1989, local approvals were denied, however, mostly because of anticipated increases in traffic and perceived impacts on the town's rural character, says Williston town planner David Spitz. Lacking local approvals, the project never progressed through the Act 250 process.

Burley says the defeat occurred despite Barker's "cool and level-headed approach, based on real facts and the merits of the case," including the fact that the site has been zoned for commercial development for over 30 years and that the proposed center would use about one-sixth of the land for the same commercial uses as the strips that were overrunning the area at the time. Now the developer is negotiating with the town and a local citizens group to salvage something of the project, says Spitz; and, he adds, "We have a reasonable chance of reaching a compromise."

Barker won't hesitate to celebrate if he's proven correct in Williston in the end. But meanwhile, in a typical gesture, he's looking beyond his own experiences

to find the general lessons that can be learned from particular events.

On a personal level, he says he's at peace with the consultants who have testified for opponents; on a professional level, he's concluded that even the best laws can be misapplied. It's apparent that he would like to make changes in the Act 250 process, for example—and, in fact, before leaving Vermont he worked on reform proposals as a member of the legislative committee of APA's Vermont section.

But most important of all, making connections—between people, between concepts—is a theme in Barker's life. And that, finally, is what he expects to do in his new job.

Sylvia Lewis is the editor and associate publisher of *Planning*.

## Bon mots

Here are some of Mike Barker's thoughts on the profession of planning and his place in it.

- "My view is there's room for many, many types of planning practice. It's a very broad field, and we can all fit into it."

- "I devoutly believe that planning is a body of knowledge, an art, and a science. Sometimes we move too far away from that and we get downtrodden and forget the powerful tools we have. We must always remember them and use them to make better communities."

- "I trained as a civil engineer and architect. I thought I wanted to build bridges and dams and buildings. But I realized I was more interested in urban design and cities. So I went to the real 'mother art,' just passing through engineering and architecture to get there. I wish more engineers and architects would get to the same point."

And here are some of Barker's goals for the American Planning Association:

- Expanding the membership, especially the number of minority members. "We need to let people know what kind of impact this profession is having on communities," Barker says. "We have to work with people in the inner cities and [increase membership] not by recruiting but by showing that we have something to offer. Young people will come out of those communities to become planners and APA members when we prove our usefulness."

- Reaching out to planners who work in the private sector—the people who "imagine and design and build," he says.

- Making membership a satisfying experience, for leaders as well as others. "The spirit of cooperation is very important to me," he says, "as important as keeping a clear idea of how the organization is to function."