Chapter 11

Not a Career
A Life

Lisa Redfield Peattie, Ph.D.

Introduction to Lisa Redfield Peattie

Trained as an anthropologist, Lisa Peattie became a community planner more by accident than by design. Her most formative experience was as a resident anthropologist in a squatter community on the margins of the “planned” industrial city in Venezuela, Ciudad Guana, with her first husband and their four children. In planning circles, she is especially well known for her writings on community advocacy. These, as indeed all of her writings, are grounded in first-hand observation; they are iconoclastic, critical, and compassionate.

During her distinguished career at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she has also been distinguished professor at the University of California at Los Angeles; visiting professor at the Centre for Urban Studies and Urban Planning, University of Hong Kong; United Nations expert in Bangkok, Nairobi, Lima, Bogota, and Mexico City; consultant to the World Bank on the urban poor

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in Cartagena, integration of marginal areas in Colombia, and squatter upgrading in El Salvador; consultant on design of housing in Egypt; consultant to US-AID on metropolitan planning for Quito; consultant on planning for Bogota; lecturer at Instituto Brasiliero de Administracao Municipal in Rio de Janeiro and at Beijing and Kunming for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; and chairman of the Forum on Social and Physical Environment at the 1970 White House Conference on Children.

A long-time advocate of the peace movement, she has been arrested several times and has tried, unsuccessfully, to defend herself in court. Now professor emeritus and senior lecturer in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she continues as a peace activist and is working on a book about social movements, dividing her time between Cambridge and a cottage in Vermont.

Recently, in presenting an award to a colleague on behalf of a professional organization, Peattie acknowledged her own debt to feminism and commitment to the struggle for women’s equality. She praised the recipient’s work in pointing out the disadvantaged position of women in professions, and in asserting that their “complicating and demanding domestic lives” provide a distinctive women’s perspective on the nature of work, and commented on the recipient’s “woman’s skill” of parenthetically slipping in a “crack” about how little male colleagues know about working life, “just as a woman who is simultaneously cooking and discussing the aldermanic election may still see the cat sneaking up on the butter dish and give it a smack.” For Peattie, women have a unique and valuable contribution to make: “I hope that as women move toward equality in the profession we do not lose that special sharp eye. Let’s not become another set of ‘the boys.’”

Although I have been exceedingly well treated by the university in which I have worked for twenty years, I have never felt at home there. I have felt like an outsider. It can be argued that my department, urban studies and planning, has such a mixture (a couple of economists, an historian, architects, besides persons with degrees in planning and public policy) that there is no mainstream and that it is easy for anyone to feel marginal. Some male colleagues complain that they feel this