

Progressive Planning in the American South

Pierre Clavel and Nichola Lowe

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IN JANUARY THIS YEAR North Carolinians awoke to their first legislative session in over 100 years with a Republican governor and Republican supermajorities in both houses. In short order they were presented with proposals to cut unemployment insurance by almost half, require voter identification, emblazon pink emblems on the drivers licenses of children of undocumented immigrants, institutionalize the state's existing right-to-work law and ban on public employee collective bargaining as constitutional amendments, and deepen regressive taxation codes through the elimination of the corporate income tax. This followed two years of agitation by these same majorities, constrained by gubernatorial vetoes from the outgoing Democrat. Progressive scholars, reporting to an assembly in Durham, said the week's showing was a textbook application of what the Pentagon had described as "shock and awe" in the Iraq War campaign of the previous decade.

Other Southern states have experienced a similar conservative push in recent years. Emboldened—perhaps also desperate—in the face of an African American president

and the prospect of widespread electoral defeat at national levels and in some states, southern conservatives have hunkered down in statehouses where they have secured majorities, making dramatic gains through a surge of voter sentiment, redistricting, voter suppression and other tactical moves over the past decade or so.

For progressives, and particularly for progressive planners, what is to be made of this political shift? Does it represent a momentary victory for conservatives that are growing increasingly out of touch with the region's diverse and growing population (their approval rating is now less than 25 percent in North Carolina)? If so, are we witnessing a pivotal moment during which Southern progressives can again regroup and push for deeper reform and change? Or are we instead seeing the end to progress made in recent decades and, borrowing directly from the definition of "shock and awe," the potential destruction of the will to fight?

We conceived this issue of *Progressive Planning* with the idea that despite a problematic past we would find rich examples

of progressive adaptations in the South that could potentially temper, if not overtly challenge, this conservative agenda. Our connection to and perspective on this region is as outsiders. One of us left the region in 1960 on the cusp of the civil rights movement and after a two year stint as a planning graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The other is a faculty member at that same institution and recent transplant from the West coast, though admittedly with plans to establish Southern roots and raise a family there.

In our reflections on the South, we noted a number of progressive threads and themes: the growth of a black middle class, the continued commitment of a generation of civil rights activists, and advances resulting from the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which led to the election of many black mayors and legislators. We sought evidence of political and administrative innovations that might have resulted from these trends. We hoped that as things thought to be “southern” began to diffuse throughout the nation these innovations might also spread more generally.

So how “progressive” is planning today in the South? Motivated by this question, we wrote a fairly structured “call” for articles in which we asked authors to look for two main qualities in planning: was it “redistributive” in intent, and was it “representative”—i.e. inclusive of the main interests and racial groups in the community? The short essays we received provide a snapshot of

a diverse, perhaps new, southern experience of city and regional planning.

The Progress and the Problems

In these essays and drawing from our own sources we see elements of progressive planning. But they also reveal problems that persist and thus highlight issues that need more focused attention.

- The political landscape has changed after more than four decades of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Blacks, comprising between 28 and 37 percent of the populations in the heart of the original confederacy from South Carolina through Louisiana, have made increasing inroads in local and state offices, and have influence by operating within Democratic party majorities. This has been threatened more recently as Republicans work to undermine these majorities, culminating in almost complete control of Southern statehouses by 2013. But blacks—and Democrats—still hold seats and enclaves in the cities and in majority black districts. The demographic trends are moving in their direction. Black middle class migration from Northern states is rising, and the number of Latinos as well. In 2012 the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies reported black mayors in 25 cities of 50,000 or greater population in the 17 state “South” census region, and there were similar gains in city and state civil service positions

and in some places department head positions.

- Thus progressives at least had footholds from which to struggle. Past experience may give us clues how these struggles might unfold. The administrations of mayors like Maynard Jackson in Atlanta (1974–82; 1990–94), Richard Arrington in Birmingham (1979–1999),

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and Otis Johnson in Savannah (2003–10) offer examples. Under Jackson, Atlanta instituted neighborhood planning units (NPU) that gave new voice to small district populations within their cities. At least as important was the similar neighborhood innovation in Birmingham that helped give voice to a black community that kept Arrington in office for 20 years, starting in

1979. Johnson pushed through the appointment of Savannah's first black city manager. And Harvey Gantt, Mayor of Charlotte (1983–87), went on to twice mount serious challenges to North Carolina conservative senator Jesse Helms in the 1990s.

- Southern cities, like the rest of the nation, tend to be run by “growth coalitions” of business elites: merchants, bankers, developers, and various professionals (particularly those involved in construction and selling the built environment); allies often include city planners and officials in city halls, and the appeal of the growth machine has tempted most mayors, black or white. But one sign of progress is the emergence of neighborhood-based coalitions that recognize the need to contest this. In Memphis, as Laura Saija, David Westendorff and Antonio Raciti report in this issue, the (black) director of the Housing Authority, declares that his ideal is the elimination of all public housing—a push now contested by a neighborhood coalition. In Chattanooga, Courtney Knapp shows how the city, while celebrating a diverse past, rides the boom in real estate prices that leaves a majority of neighborhood people behind, but there is an opposition constructing an alternative narrative. Atlanta organizers discovered that Maynard Jackson's NPUs did not create unalloyed benefits for poor neighborhoods, but instead established new terrain for debate.

- Everywhere, there is the pain of change, predominantly a sense of unwillingness to accept progress in racial equality. W.E.B. Dubois predicted this and Gunnar Myrdal reiterated it in *The American Dilemma* in 1944. The sense of equality, imposed in formal terms since the 1960s by social movements and legislation, is unevenly accepted, and racial progress seems to grate at every turn.
- Communities and planners struggle to get past these dilemmas, sometimes in ways that will open our eyes. Glendora, with a population of 151 nonwhite persons in Mississippi's Delta region, confronts its legacy of the 1955 Emmett Till lynching by installing a technology center and broadband service along with an Emmett Till Museum (see the article in this issue by Joan Wesley and Daphne Foster). North Carolina, with an aggressive economic development operation, moderates the location and relocation of firms with workforce training, while Durham city officials and planners amplify the policy with local implementation (see the article by Clara Turner and Nichola Lowe). And in rural North Carolina, community activists find that whites, unwilling to confront race barriers in general, will help remove those barriers in the course of promoting agricultural economic development (see article by Gabriel Cumming and Dorothy Holland).

The Role of Urban Planning in the South

In this issue of *Progressive Planning* there are many examples of emerging progressive approaches to urban planning in the South. But what insights can we draw about the role of planning as a profession?

There is a legacy of the old, post-war planning tradition founded by Howard Odum and Jack Parker at the University of North Carolina, and by others at places like Georgia Tech and the Tennessee Valley Authority. In the 1950s the South could be a good place for a white liberal seeking to do good and perhaps eradicate evils in the name of progress. Planners like Chuck Lewis in Birmingham, and city administrators like Arthur Mendonsa in Savannah set a standard of concern. Mendonsa nudged local elites to worry about the “two Savannahs” lest they cease to sleep well at night. Institutions started in the 1980s helped develop civil society and political capacity; for example, white mayor John Rousakis and Mendonsa created Savannah Youth Futures, a political base for future mayor Otis Johnson in the 1990s.

In the postwar period and until the (delayed) effects of the 1965 Voting Rights Act became clear in the 1980s and 1990s, anecdotal evidence suggested that there was political pressure to create diversity in city administrations, including planning offices. Savannah's regional planning director reports the effect of a (black) assistant city manager who asked him at a meeting “aren't you embarrassed you have no staff who look like me?”

“I am,” he responded. Over time, one guesses whether this climate change in day-to-day administration will have an effect over a range of cities. The question is how long a time, and whether we will soon have national reporting that shines a light on the rate of change.

Unfortunately for the South—and the nation—the racial and ethnic composition of the planning profession is not known in any systematic, precise way. The American Planning Association does not provide periodic or locally specific data about the racial composition of its membership. Its predecessor organization used to, but the last published report on the topic was in 1974. A 2004 APA Diversity Task Force, after a one-time inquiry, reported 3.9 percent of the total membership as African American, roughly what the 1974 report indicated.

We have much better data about the composition of the professional planning schools. In this issue Jeffrey Lowe writes “the level of diversity in planning programs in the US South is deplorable.” The Planning Accreditation Board reports that the proportions of “other than white” full time faculty in accredited planning programs stood at 31 percent for all 22 programs in the “South” census region—a little greater than the 29 percent “other than white” national average. The fact that the percentage of black faculty in the South (11 percent) is relatively low compared to the overall Southern black population (20 percent) only reinforces that there is a representation problem for planning schools nationally. The comparable national

figure is 7 percent black faculty, only half the national black population—a matter of more or less pain and embarrassment, but statistically not one that is unique to this region.

Still, for Southern schools the non-white statistics are bolstered by four relatively small, historically black programs, whose faculty numbers add up to 3 white, 11 black and 12 others out of a total 26 full time faculty. Excluding these, and taking into account the 173 faculty in 18 other planning schools in the “South” census region, the “other than white” percentage drops from 31 percent down to 23 and for black faculty this drop is even more significant, declining to around 6 percent in a region whose black population is around 20 percent, and far higher than that in the five states stretching from South Carolina to Louisiana. From a racial perspective then, the South had essentially separate and different programs in 2009.

Professor William Harris, in his essay, thinks that whites can learn from blacks in the South “how to be progressive.” He provides a checklist: publicize the data, cause legislative hearings and, on occasion, court proceedings and suits. Deal with issues of violence, voter suppression, fair housing and health policy. Fundamentally, confront racism in one’s self and in institutions, to set the preconditions for these actions. It is, perhaps, a Pandora’s box. Planners used to debate the “scope” of planning, whether it ought to be limited to land use and zoning issues, or “as wide as the scope of local government.” Harris implies that there must be a wide scope responsive to the wider par-

ticipation now sanctioned by law.

One of the hopeful signs is the possibility that planning schools in the South can play a role by creating an alternative to the growth coalition. This has happened in Memphis, where the authors see the main hope for progress in an open debate over options facing the city. Better results may be occurring in Durham and elsewhere, some of it documented in these articles.

What’s True for the South is True for the North?

What do we take away from this discussion on progressive planning in the South?

In the abstract case, progressive means concerned with inequality (poverty, opportunity), and with “representation” (participation, inclusion). And in a pragmatic world, we want to see movement away from the worst injustices on either continuum.

In the South, it is apparent that most injustices stem from racial inequality: the drive to repress voting being the recent egregious example. These and many other cases of inequality seem to be on the increase nationally, and they are perhaps more obvious in the South. The legacy of racial inequalities makes all the others easier to justify and avoid fixing. So pragmatically, that should be the focus in the US South. The more profound truth would seem to be that what is true for the South is true elsewhere, just less obvious. Perhaps that is the lesson to take away here. **P²**