Perspectives

Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos

Lanier Blum

"There is nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos."

-- James Hightower

The basic principles and functions of the planning profession are constantly challenged. Advocating the public interest, illustrating comprehensive interactions, and maximizing choices of future inhabitants are rarely like driving a straight, smooth, uncrowded, highway. On the contrary, planners often risk traveling in the fog amidst swerving traffic, going at break-neck speeds according to ambiguous rules, on twisting roads with broken signals and a few potholes. It is tempting to seek a safe haven in this career.

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I admire and appreciate planners and politicians who have been leading their communities and professions in democratizing policies and processes, and bringing to life rational, conservationist, equitable principles. It appears that these leaders spend much of their time in the streets; but they spend almost no time in the middle of the road.

Planners have unique positions of influence in government; we are well equipped to lead local efforts to improve the quality of life. Vision is an indispensable ingredient of leadership; planners help create and develop our communities' visions. Furthermore, we are trained to contribute to public decision making, and have expertise in analysis and presentation of issues. Our positions give us privileged access to information, resources, processes, and decision makers. Our full-time job is to analyze a city's physical and economic development in relation to the present and future residents, a rare opportunity for lay leaders. Yet in many communities, our profession has not realized its full potential to lead.

During my eight years as a planner in Durham, North Carolina, including four as a city council member, planners and politicians shared some heady times. Voters in Durham and neighboring Chapel Hill elected three other professional planners to local offices, and other candidates who enthusiastically endorsed planning issues led the ticket and were reelected. New priorities emerged, and plans and projects took form, promising to bring Durham's visions into clearer perspective and reality. This type of fast-paced progress has the power to renew our commitment to the visions, the process, our profession, and our allies. At the same time, failures and losses on major issues were discouraging, sometimes frightening. Even in the best of circumstances, each of us faces constraints to effective leadership in and for planning.

Should planners lead--or leave it up to elected officials? Our ambivalence about the proper professional role of planners diminishes our power. This ambivalence is exacerbated when we think in dichotomies, such as "leader" versus "follower", "advocate" or "activist" versus "neutral" or "objective", and "planner" versus "politician". Although this thesis may be an exercise in reconciliation of my term with a split planner/politician personality, I submit that these three are not very constructive dichotomies.

Leader vs. Follower

The roles of "leader" and "follower" wax and wane with every shift in perspective or scope. Even the great world leaders of history have followed in the footsteps of forebears. Certainly in practice, and in a democracy, "[b]oth

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leadership and planning are dispersed and convoluted. Those who lead on one subject follow on another, they lead today and follow tomorrow. Those who lead must plan, but most planning is done by followers, because those who lead have too little time to plan well. Thus planners often lead ostensible leaders, in a sense, even as formal leaders make more final decisions about plans than do planners."[1] Each one of us has a different scope of influence and expertise, yet each planner whose influence shapes priorities, strategies, and assumptions has power. As individuals and as a professional group, we can accept responsibility for whatever power we have, and use it to bring those interests to light in whatever aspect of an issue we address.

Advocate vs. Objective

What about the "advocate"/"objective" dichotomy? Planners claim the ethical responsibility to serve as "advocates" for the public interest and to maximize the choices and opportunities of disadvantaged populations and future residents of a place. How can we reconcile this role with our responsibility to make technically objective recommendations? Fascinating debates permeate the sciences and other disciplines on issues of objectivity and the appropriate uses of technical information or expert interpretations of facts. As a student of history, a planner, and certainly a politician, I question the goal of being "objective", because I doubt that

Yellow stripes and stuffed armadillo

it is possible for any human to be unbiased due to the limitations of his or her experiences. But we--and our adversaries--are capable of principled scientific inquiry and of learning from new facts and new perspectives. In the midst of controversies, experts can produce honest and credible analysis, and solutions.

Planners and politicians gain influence and contribute to solutions by being credible, not by being "objective". Credibility is the result of a thorough, open process of communication in which conflicting parties first agree on the facts; second, disclose roles, assumptions, relevant information, and interests; and third, use technical expertise. If planners uphold an open process and provide up-to-date, thorough, technically defensible information, those who disagree with their recommendations, and those who prefer less stringent analysis or less public scrutiny, can still respect the planners' role and expertise. In the absence of solid analysis and open process, does it matter that the blank-slate planners present themselves as "objective" experts? The sincerest of such claims will fall flat.

Planners vs. Politicians

The rational and scientifically trained planner, upon contemplating leadership opportunities, encounters a third paralyzing dichotomy--the division between planners and politicians. Planners are goal-driven, future-oriented, rational, ordered, and technical. Planners are not elected, and may not "belong" to the communities they serve. They distinguish themselves from politicians, who respond, often impulsively, to powerful interests, emotional appeals, biases, morality issues, personalities, and cultural assumptions, and who are elected by a constituency that presumably claims them.

Although I combined the two roles during my council term, this remained a difficult issue for me. I wanted to cultivate sensitivity as a "politician" and at the same time realize my "planner" traits. I wished passionately that some other politicians would act predictably on their "planner" traits. Instead they exercised the "political" aspects of their roles and judgement. Other planners--and some other politicians and citizens--shared my despair.

Planners as Leaders

But instead of simply contrasting the characteristic approaches of politicians and professional planners, let's consider their synergism. Leaders in planning use and share power to initiate purposeful changes and to help representatives formulate priorities. To do this requires, in part, the development of constituencies by empowering them with valid information, which is a "political" "planning" function. A politically attuned planner can develop a useful understanding of a community's diverse cultures and constituencies and greater respect for their validity, values, and visions. If planners want politicians' approaches to be more rational or farsighted, step one is to recognize the power of their approaches. Step two is to understand their motivations. With this preparation, planners take diversity and multiple interests into account. The resulting proposals will be more strategic, more creative, and more workable.

Political activists' work is strategic, goal-oriented, and explicitly cognizant of power relationships. In most jobs, planners avoid appearing partial or partisan in their professional dealings. Activist planners guard an open process, treat all groups and people with attentiveness and respect, and strategically apply their political/power insights to the goal. Keeping partisan aspects of politics off the job and guarding our public roles in open process leaves most of us

out of proverbial smoke-filled rooms. Nevertheless, the results of any planner's work influences politics. Even

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The dispersal of power in government sometimes makes the decision process institutionalized

"[p]assivity itself is political...it supports the politics of the status quo, and it supports the politics of the special interests which influence the status quo. There should be no self-delusion that passivity is the logical equivalent of political neutrality."[2]

If Not Us, Who?

Alan Jacobs, director of the San Francisco planning department for seven years, reflected that "the best 'politics' is top professional work, forcefully presented and defended."[3] He also credited "continuous, direct contact with neighborhoods" as the "the greatest asset" in that planning department's effectiveness. To elicit broad substantive participation, to communicate planning principles and issues, and to create solutions that will be tried requires the activism of strategic, politically attuned work.

Eternal optimism is required of each of us in public service. In reflecting on the course of political change in my beloved and contentious hometown during the last seventeen years, I hope that as planners respond to political factors, we will *not* compromise our unique role and perspective. In relatively short spans of time, the ebb and flow of politics changes what is "possible". Because we look to the future, planners need not allow current political "reality" to constrain vision and goals. When the political climate is hostile to a community's vision, or when resources are scarce, planners can sow the seeds of progress through incremental changes at strategic moments, without modifying or losing sight of the community's goals. As politically attuned as we need to be, we need not compromise our best professional advice. Even if the politicians don't bite, we can continue to communicate and illustrate alternatives. Neighborhood groups, political organizations, and business interests often have limited views of long-range, or citywide/regional issues, and of the impacts of their proposals on more vulnerable and less powerful people. Although these organized constituencies represent the city's lifeblood, planners are entitled and expected to represent comprehensive, long-range perspectives. If not us, who?

If Us, How?

If planners *should* lead, how can we? We work in environments where power is dispersed. Priorities allow focus but preclude acting on competing opportunities or needs. We have trouble dealing with conflicts. We aren't all blessed with charisma. Power increases our responsibility and requires higher levels of commitment. We can make the commitment and lose--with long-range consequences.

anarchy. In the absence of consensus, multiple interests and fragmented responsibilities are barriers to purposeful change. This has been particularly true in North Carolina cities, where the state constitution embodies a thorough suspicion of political leaders, and in Durham, where the charter restricts the mayor's role and ward representatives are elected citywide. Although the dispersal of power dictates incremental change, it hinders *both* sides of any controversy, thus slowing change to a rate that more often allows for planning. Also, the checks and balances on local officials can serve the long-term public good. (For example, the conservative rules of the N.C. Local Government Commission have precluded some of the creative financing options other states' planners have used for local economic development and housing. Yet municipalities have this skeptical conservatism to thank for the state's having avoided tax abatement giveaways, many abuses of industrial revenue bonds, and catastrophic local debt since the LGC took command.)

Priorities are the hard facts of planning. It is immeasurably easier for a planning process to formulate priorities than it is for elected officials to stick to tough choices. My council colleagues and I discovered it takes enormous resolve to set limits even when we participated in forming them, and even more to uphold controversial priorities of former councils. In times of crisis, priorities change, but even in times of plenty, politicians do not want to say no; they want desperately to be all things to all people. Nevertheless every city's resources are finite and so is every council's attention span. Priorities--stated or not--narrow the agenda. A city leadership team that can set and stick to priorities, saying no when necessary to achieve their goals, is actually quite common. Plenty of towns have effectively denied low-income people's needs for generations while tailoring their plans to meet the demands of well-financed businesses or property owners. But priorities that redistribute and conserve resources are very hard for political leaders to sustain. Planners can make enormous contributions to progressive priorities by describing redistributive or conservationist programs and policies as options and by illustrating the long-range and incremental impacts of alternative design, construction, land use, and financing choices. Even if the majority says no, it advances the agenda for change when a progressive option is articulated, finds its supporters, and is denied rather than never having been considered.

As surprising as it may seem to those who sit through the meetings, politicians, like many other people, usually prefer to avoid confronting conflicts and conflicts of interest.

Elected officials, like most people, want to believe what they hear, and they want to hear what they believe. They want to enjoy camaraderie, without disagreements. These human traits can obscure a clear recognition of colliding interests. Instead of defining and respecting each person's role as advocate for a potentially separate and conflicting interest, political representatives often deny the conflict and play down the roles of other congenial actors, even when the actors are attorneys hired to present the case of one side.

As a council member, I learned that asking anyone to articulate their interest in a matter was often perceived as a suspicious insinuation instead of the first step in negotiation and problem solving. It was frustrating to me when this boosterism or wishful thinking among council members led them to act on the claims of attorneys, advocates, and experts hired by others with profoundly separate interests, instead of taking the advice of the city's own staff, usually much less dramatically presented. It was equally frustrating to see our own staff rely too willingly on the interpretations and analyses of experts who were by no means disinterested. Articulating public interests without alienating politicians will always be a challenge for planners.

I suspect that our past intrudes here--it is the legacy of the New South to assume that what is good for the town's biggest business owners is what's good for all "our" people. I cannot imagine a Southern planning director characterizing the Chamber of Commerce as an "out and out enemy" of planning as did former San Francisco Planning Director Alan Jacobs. "Development, development, development - that was the name of the game," he recalls. "That, after all, is why the Chamber of Commerce exists. It might publicly express a concern for quality development, but every private proposal must have been just fine because I don't remember the Chamber's ever being opposed to one."[4] Similarly frank statements of conflicting goals are rare in North Carolina governments. Representatives tenaciously prefer to claim unity of purpose and intent, especially in public.

The Great Man Theory

Another legacy of our past intrudes on planners' leadership potential--the theory of the Great Man. Generations of historians focused on Great Men as agents of change. These were men who by the force of their ideas, and by virtue of their powerful circumstances, personal strengths, and persuasiveness, shaped the future. More recent social historians credit less famous, privileged, and powerful people and groups in history with such effective forcefulness and determination that they too, even more improbably, shaped the future. The theory of the Great Man constrains our understanding of our present at least as much as our past . . . for it is a thoroughly intimidating theory to the average person. How can we mere planners lead? What if we are

not charismatic, persuasive, or inspirational? What if we feel uncomfortable assuming power, especially when it comes to us as a result of the apathy or weakness of others? What if many of our ideas are mundane? What if we are just a cog in the wheel? What if we are not Great Men? What if we are not men at all? These are serious questions because self-confidence is an indispensable prerequisite to leading. If we wait for a Great Man to lead us, we will miss today's opportunities. We will lose the potential and visions of all the rest of us who have tremendous gifts to offer.

Leadership roles are fluid. Advocates can be credible. The abilities of planners and politicians are synergistic, though they have unique roles and responsibilities. If planners who seek to be leaders can build their practice on these assumptions, we have negotiated some obstacles on the route to equitable, purposeful, conservationist community development. Then our task is to incorporate the best insights and visions of great leaders, other experts, and the people in our communities, and to bring them to life. Unfortunately, though, leading isn't the same as winning, and losing hurts.

Losing is part of the risk of working for change. Planners sometimes take risks and embrace unpopular positions when we articulate comprehensive interactions, issues whose constituencies are future generations, and the public interest. Sometimes the position is perceived as extreme instead of in the middle of the road, which can be lonely. In politics and planning, we need to support and encourage each other, and be trustworthy. Public leadership at the local level is only sustainable as a form of fellowship, not as a form of personal achievement and greatness. Working in a group with shared vision and multiple talents is the easiest way to grow as a professional, and to develop as a community. The fun and common commitment sustains us through tough times. When we develop strong relationships with colleagues and community members, we create leadership as fellowship and sustain it. ∎

Notes

1. William Lucy, *Close to Power--Setting Priorities with Elected Officials* (Chicago: APA Planners Press, 1988) p. 5.
2. Lucy, p. 4.
3. Alan Jacobs, *Making City Planning Work* (Chicago: American Society of Planning Officials, 1978) p. 33.
4. Jacobs, p. 145.

Bruce W. McClendon and Ray Quay's book, *Mastering Change: Winning Strategies for Effective City Planning* (Chicago: APA Planner's Press, 1988), generated many of the ideas and assumptions in this article. The quote by James Hightower is also taken from this book (p. 69).

Helga Pratsch of Houston, Texas kindly allowed *Carolina Planning* to reprint her photo of an armadillo (p. 9). She notes that "owls are considered symbols of wisdom. If owls had to walk for their food as armadillos do, however, they would suffer the same fate as armadillos--for both owls and armadillos are night hunters."