

Forum

An Interview with Harvey Gantt

Trina Gauld

Dale McKeel

Harvey Gantt, 1990 Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate and former Charlotte mayor, earned a master's degree in city planning from M.I.T. and was a lecturer in the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of City and Regional Planning in the early 1970s. Carolina Planning conducted the following interview in late 1989, just prior to Mr. Gantt's announcement that he would be a candidate for the U.S. Senate.

Q: *You once described yourself as "progressive-thinking." What does that mean to you?*

A: For me, that means always trying to improve on something that's there. Always looking forward, always looking at conditions, because conditions are always changing. Not becoming locked. It means remaining creative; always asking questions. To strive to improve, whether it's policy making or the policy of this [architectural] firm. Not trying to conserve things if they don't work as well. We are conserving always, and we try to protect that, but there are no sacred cows. It is always constantly evaluating yourself because you change everyday and because conditions are changing. That's what I'm talking about in terms of progressive.

Q: *How did your planning degree enhance your work as an architect?*

A: The training architects get, though it is changing quite a bit, can be pretty narrow. I'm currently doing a visiting lectureship at the University of Michigan College of Architecture and Planning. It's interesting to see the kinds of factors students now are taking into account when designing a project.

There was so much difference in my education 25 years ago. The plans I prepared then showed how wide the street was, how hilly the land was, where the housing project was located, and so on. It really looked great, but it bore no relationship to reality in terms of what it took to get that to happen, and whether or not it would be the appropriate thing to do.

The training of architects tends to be rather myopic. We are taught how to design buildings, but we are not taught the political factors that create physical environments. But

in planning school, rather than draw colored maps and do pretty pictures, I was quite substantially involved in housing issues, and gained a comprehensive understanding of how cities really work, as opposed to how to plan them. I learned that if you understand how they work, and the causal relationships at work, you could better plan for the future.

Q: *In 1973 you chaired an American Institute of Architects task force on planning and development in Charlotte, which concluded that the "public posture was reactive, not proactive, in terms of shaping development," and "that Charlotte's developers wield more clout in the city planning process than the city planners do." Do you feel that this situation has changed? Why or why not?*

A: This was done almost fresh out of planning school, a year or so later. We wanted to talk about the planning process in Charlotte, and the fact that we don't do much planning at all. We architects don't want to do much planning. Many were asking, "Why do you want to study it, and why do you want to look at it?" Architects as professionals were discovering how unprepared we were, and yet we ought to be the logical ones to sort of guide the whole building process as it occurs.

I think there has been a lot of change in Charlotte. We do a lot of things differently than we did back in 1973. I think the quality of the planning is much better. Some of the actors who play a role in what gets built in Charlotte have changed; the table has gotten bigger to accommodate some newer people in the process. Architects are more involved politically, and I think that helps. Architects can bring a lot

Trina Gauld and Dale McKeel are editors of Carolina Planning.

to the table. Planners can too. But architects bring their ability to visualize. If they understand the political process, then they are much better equipped.

I suspect what I am really saying is that twenty years ago we came out as designers, we understood how to bring things together to make compositions, and that's a great skill. It's valuable today. But we've needed to know a lot more than that, to have a better understanding of how the city works, and I think we are moving progressively to understand that better as a group. A lot of it has to do with getting our hands dirty in the political process.

We talk about things like growth management a lot more than we did in 1973. We do a lot more analyses of predicting what will happen. That is coming out of the planning department--but there are a lot of people out there who are sensitized to it. There are architects working in neighborhood groups now that have contacts with the architects and planners on the other side--with the developers. It is a nice arrangement, not quite as one-sided. But having said all that, it still comes down to the fact that bankers, developers, and politicians still have a lot to say about what happens.

A lot of planners are able to read the political landscape a little bit better than architects tend to, but in being able to read it, they perhaps aren't able to deal with design as well. I don't know, I don't want to make that generalization. In the planning area, over the past several years, the thing I'm proudest of doing is bringing Martin Cramton to Charlotte from Multnomah County [Portland, Oregon]. He's an outstanding planner who has a very good design sense.

Q: You once said that "politics... was one way to do things easier, to be at the table, to stir the soup a little bit." Would you elaborate on some of the experiences which led you to make this observation?

A: I really love this business of being right in the middle



HARVEY B. GANTT

BIRTHPLACE:

Charleston, S.C.

PROFESSION:

Partner, Gantt Huberman Architects

PUBLIC POSITIONS:

Member Charlotte City Council, 1975-79; Mayor Pro Tem, City of Charlotte, 1981-83; Mayor, City of Charlotte, 1983-1987.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS:

UNC-Chapel Hill Department of City and Regional Planning, 1970-72, lecturer; Clemson University, 1972-73, visiting critic.

EDUCATION:

Iowa State University, 1960-62; Clemson University, 1963-65, Bachelor of Architecture, with honors; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968-70, master's degree in city planning.

of the soup. You have to have the temperament to want to be involved in change--to be the change agent--always thinking that there is a way for improvement. I have been involved in protest movements since I was a kid, and even with all the demonstrations and all the other things that have occurred, politics really is the place where you can get most problems solved and do the greatest good.

That's a trite way to look at it, but most of the folks that I have encountered in the political arena--regardless of their political persuasion--the reason they are there is that they have this desire to do good. Sometimes it's to do good to some specific population, some specific constituency, but it is that they want to do good. The quickest way to do that is in this arena where you bring people together, hash out ideas, come up with "solutions" to society's ills. In a large sense that's what politics is all about, and I'm very comfortable in an arena where ideas clash and where people are stimulated by policies that are instruments by which people's lives are improved.

I remember my first days on the city council in Charlotte back in 1974. The idea of a park in a certain part of town seemed so reasonable to me as a planner and architect. The process called for the park being evaluated to a certain strict procedure. Residents of the area kept coming down and asking the council to listen to them and kept making their case. I decided independently just to do some research on my own. I contacted the planning department to find out the incidence of parks versus

the population in that area of the city, where was the vacant land in that area, what would it cost to put in a neighborhood park, and what would be the logical, sensible thing to do. And the answers to all our questions came up in such a way that it made sense, so I then made the case before my other colleagues.

What was fascinating was that it hung together, it was so coherent, it made sense, and it was easy to do. The only

problem was that they were going to be doing it out of phase, so to speak; they were not going to be doing it at budget time. But we overcame that.

There was a need, why not address it? So it passed, and it got built. I'll never forget the feeling, "Gee, that wasn't too hard!" That was the first good feeling. The second good feeling was going out and seeing the park built. And the third good feeling was actually seeing people use it, and then remembering, "I was interested enough to follow up on these people's plea and it made a difference." When that happens to you, you start thinking of all the good you can do in all the different situations, and I suspect that's why some of us go into politics.

But I like the business. I'm not one to shy away from coming to the table and saying, "Let's solve it, let's work on it, let's find a way to do this." That's also why, had I won that last term as mayor a couple of years ago [in 1987], I would have left because I also think that if you stay too long in one particular location you start to become a conservative. That is, you start to protect that park that was built that may not be useful now twenty years later. You start to protect this kind of thing that you worked so hard to do.

Q: *As mayor, you earned a reputation as a moderator and consensus builder on divisive issues. What methods are useful in bringing people together? Is it possible to be a moderator without compromising your personal goals for the city?*

A: It is possible to bring people together and try to ferret out what their differences are and what things will bring them together in order to fashion a solution. What makes it tough is when you have your own opinion about what needs to be done or when you feel very strongly about what needs to be done. Then you must use persuasive abilities to get more people to line up closer to your ideas. If I had no views, if I didn't care about a particular issue, moderating a solution was always easier. There were some things that we dealt with that I didn't particularly have any axes to grind either way or any primary interest in the outcome. What's difficult is to have some strong beliefs about something while having to be a leader and moderator, and to have to come out with a solution.

For example, I recall the new coliseum in Charlotte. We were involved in getting that passed. Prior to the bond issue occurring, of course, we thought it was important for the citizens to know where the coliseum was going to be located. My planning background and all my instincts said that this facility ought to be in the center of the city. The center of the city ought to be the unique place where one can find the services which aren't offered in any other shop-

"You have to have the temperament to want to be involved in change--to be the change agent--always thinking that there is a way for improvement. I have been involved in protest movements since I was a kid, and even with all the demonstrations and all the other things that have occurred, politics really is the place where you can get most problems solved and do the greatest good."

ping centers in the city. A coliseum is a community's living room, and it should be easy to get to from all parts of the city.

One of my first acts as mayor was to say

that I didn't agree with the former mayor's position that it ought to be out on the Billy Graham Parkway. I tried to lay those reasons out. I sought to build support for it from the business community downtown and from the general community. If we put the coliseum downtown, we were going to have to spend some additional money on parking facilities, and the cost of that was going to make the downtown site cost about \$20 million more than the Billy Graham Parkway site. I argued that the land at the Billy Graham Parkway could some day be sold off or developed, and the proceeds could easily exceed the \$20 million difference of putting the coliseum downtown.

I really felt strongly from a planner's perspective that having the coliseum downtown would give us a much stronger downtown--we call it uptown--community, and it would be a much stronger solution from a transportation perspective in terms of getting people to and from the coliseum. I had eleven council members who were looking at the dollar figures and were feeling that the mayor was not convincing them that the costs were really the same for both sites. So the council went the other way. I thought that the charitable, sensible thing to do as a leader was to pull back from my position, pull the group together as a moderator, listen, and move forward.

Q: *How did your involvement with the Soul City project affect your career and decision to enter politics? Who was your mentor at Chapel Hill?*

A: David Godschalk was my mentor at Chapel Hill. I was doing a visiting lectureship when John Parker was chairman of the Department of City and Regional Planning. John Parker was the first person to tell me that I looked like a natural to go into politics one day. I often refer to that comment, because at that time, in 1971, I had absolutely no thoughts of ever being in elective politics. As a matter of fact, I went to planning school with the idea that it would broaden my background and understanding of the city and the environment. I wanted to be in a position to influence the council member or governor or somebody. I saw planning education as being valuable in doing that.

The Soul City experience was an interesting one because it was kind of an idealistic notion about how to create growth centers. When I was in graduate school at MIT, we were looking for models of how to develop growth centers in rural areas. Floyd [McKissick's] model just came along, and I was very fascinated with that so I came down. There

was a wonderful synergy between Shirley Weiss and me at the Center for Urban and Regional Studies [studying new towns]. It was almost like a little lab in terms of things people were looking at from a planning perspective and what the academicians were doing in Chapel Hill. I was working three days at Soul City. A lot of that effort got Floyd McKissick started, but, as you know, it didn't go well.

Q: *Are there areas of city and regional policy that you feel should be addressed at the national level?*

A: Now you're getting to the current issues. Cities need help. We don't have a national urban policy, in my opinion, and I think Reagan made sure that we wouldn't have a national urban policy because it meant that he couldn't build up his military. We need one for a lot of reasons. Because the metropolitan centers are going to become so important, it is also clear to me that cities are not going to be able to finance all the costs of the infrastructure developments that don't stop at the city limit lines, that affect regional development. Charlotte impacts 25 counties in the state of North Carolina directly, and maybe as many as 40.

Transportation systems will become inordinately expensive to build without federal help. Waste management will become such a critical issue that it will require help from Washington. I think Washington can make some demands on cities and regions to make them eligible for the kinds of help they're going to be needing. Because the economic engines are going to be these MSA areas, there has to be that federal policy to nurture them. It's not a rural-urban conflict anymore. People are going to continue to live in small towns, but with jobs becoming more service-oriented and high-tech, an increasing proportion will work in the cities. I hope the manufacturing sector will become stronger in the future. Overall, I see most of the growth occurring in the MSAs.

One of my primary interests in going to Washington as opposed to Raleigh is that I would like to jump-start this process. I think states are doing a good job in developing a stronger relationship to cities, certainly better than they were doing ten years ago. After the next census, I suspect that urban areas will be even stronger in the legislature, and there will be more sensitivity to urban problems. If you're talking about the big bucks, we need to reinvest in infrastructure and to provide the kind of transportation systems that can deal with the environmental questions. It is important that we have a national urban policy.

"I was doing a visiting lectureship when John Parker was the chairman of the Department of City and Regional Planning. John Parker was the first person to tell me that I looked like a natural to go into politics one day. I often refer to that comment, because at that time, in 1971, I had absolutely no thoughts of ever being in elective politics."

Q: *Others have reflected that you were successful in educating Charlotteans on many city planning issues, and in identifying these as the central issues facing local government. Did you make educating the public on planning issues a primary goal?*

A: I did this as much as I could. I guess the thing that catapulted me into elective politics was that AIA task force study that discussed planning in Charlotte. I earned a kind of new-found respect when I got on council and could speak about planning issues with some knowledge. What started happening in Charlotte was the rise of neighborhood groups. They were concerned about and were reacting to the pressures of growth, particularly in southeast Charlotte. So they were open and receptive to ways to relieve problems of growth and to understand more about good planning.

All of my campaigns had as their centerpiece a discussion of how the city distributes its resources to discourage or encourage development. I am a big supporter of bringing into the community well-known urban designers and planners. While I

was in office, we held symposia on urban planning, growth management, balanced growth, and housing.

When I look back on those thirteen years of involvement in city government in Charlotte, there was not a lack of awareness of planning issues. There are many leaders out there in the community who are very well educated. The role that an architect/planner/politician can take is to raise the awareness level in the community. They may not always have the answers, but they can establish some kind of beachhead to provide access for others to come in. There was some concern when I lost the last election that there were some folks elected who were not considered neighborhood folks or were not too concerned about managing growth. Planning is a long-term process.

Q: *What are the major growth management issues facing Charlotte today?*

A: I wish so many people didn't drive so many cars! We're getting to the point that on average there will be three cars per household. The thing that threatens us most is traffic. I'm not convinced that the solution is going to be to feed the monster by widening and widening, and adding and adding. Although that is certainly a major part of the program, what I worry about is that we're not going to have the ability to address a comprehensive transportation plan which talks about getting people out of cars and into public transit of some kind, perhaps light rail.

I think we are addressing the issue of balance. A lot of growth has occurred in the northeast section of our city. That will continue to happen, as the northwest begins to grow. That will put less burden on the overall infrastructure of the city. Again, back to the question of what can happen at the federal level, one of the critical issues is whether cities are going to have the dollars to support quality growth.

Q: *If you had run for mayor of Charlotte in the most recent election [November 1989], are there any issues that you would have focused on that you didn't address before?*

A: I would focus on many of the same things I focused on before. There's the same need for being careful about how we manage our resources. Finding sources of revenue to support infrastructure. Convincing our legislature that there is no longer the great state of Mecklenburg. I'd work on trying to get an NFL team in Charlotte.

Q: *What are the successes and failures of the "uptown" revitalization efforts since, say, 1983?*

A: We have invested close to a billion dollars in uptown development over that period of time in construction of new buildings. We've seen about 150 stories of new construction going on. The problems we still face are that even as we've been able to bring in a city marketplace and an apparel center and a couple of new hotels, there's still not enough nighttime activity, there's still not enough housing uptown. There's a chicken and egg thing working here--if we get the retail to support the housing that's here, we can stimulate more housing to support the city marketplace, etc.

We've made quantum leaps from where we were in 1973, with uptown cultural facilities like Spirit Square, Discovery Place, and the performing arts center when it is completed a couple of years from now, but we still need to work on retail and housing. When we get that, I think we'll be there. We've got all the ingredients to make that happen. It takes a little leadership and a little push. I would like to see two to three times the number of housing units. We're better than a lot of cities in having good close-in housing and a diverse economic mix, but there needs to be more.

Q: *Do you have a favorite city?*

"There is a big difference between being a politician-planner and a planner. I always wanted the planning department to be professional. I wanted them to be sensitive politically to what was going on, but I didn't want political answers from them."

A: Actually, I've touted across the country that Charlotte is unique. It had its four wards, and it has maintained its third and fourth wards as residential areas. In this respect Charlotte is better

than most sunbelt cities, like Houston or Dallas or some of the others, where there is this forest of high-rise buildings and then a gray area in which there is nothing. Charlotte has many residential areas within minutes of the center city. So we have a tremendous resource base to build upon. What we really need are some high-rise apartments in the center city to support a population of some 60,000 to 70,000. I'm willing to bet that there are folks who would opt for an apartment a few blocks away from their office, as long as it had some nice facilities and services, rather than getting in a car and driving 30 minutes or an hour to a suburban location in southeast Charlotte. It's going to happen. I can see it down the road.

Q: *Any last comments?*

A: I think the one thing that I found to be important is that professionals need to get involved in and be sensitive to the grubby world of politics. They should always be professional. What do I mean by that? There is a big difference between being a politician-planner and a planner. I always wanted the planning department to be professional. I wanted them to be sensitive politically to what was going on, but I didn't want political answers from them. I wanted their best professional opinion, to let me as a politician decide policy based on the best advice I had from them as well as other considerations.

That's when planners really work well to serve their communities. Short of that, if you can imagine if that weren't the case, then you might have a planner who is simply oriented toward what developers are doing, or another oriented toward what neighborhoods are doing. I judge the process I was involved with by the number of people who were sometimes mad at the planning professionals. When I see both sides mad, at times, usually not at the same time, then I know we are doing something right. As a politician-planner--an elected official--you have the confidence that you're getting good information from professional planners. It seems to me that planners need to remain objective in a highly charged political environment. ■