



Durham on the Rise

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Visions of Durham

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Cool Comes to the Bull City

By Jim Hughes

Metro asked me to revisit my hometown on the occasion of the magazine's 10th anniversary. Turns out, since I've been away, good things have been happening in the Bull City. A new-found spirit of energy, optimism and cooperation is taking hold, much of it emanating from the city's born-again downtown. If this keeps up, the region's erstwhile problem child could soon emerge as the place to be in the Triangle.

It's about time. On the surface, when the Triangle boom began in the late 1960s, it appeared Raleigh and Cary had left Durham in the dust. It was easy to see why. Durham has always been a city of multiple personalities in perpetual conflict with each other: Blacks and whites, business and labor, white collar and white trash, Marxists, misfits and academic crackpots. Lord, what a stew. And beneath a thin layer of Southern civility ran a seam of class conflict and racial tension that would occasionally bubble over and explode like a high school chemistry experiment. For years the city was basically ungovernable. While Raleigh and Cary grew and prospered, Durham fell into a deep and paralyzing funk.

Today, things are changing. Quietly, and with little fanfare, Durham has been gaining on its more celebrated neighbors. In some respects, it's sailed right past them. Restaurants? Magnolia Grill, Nana's and Revolution, the slick new hot spot down on Main Street, are considered tops in the Triangle. Sports? Durham has the Bulls, a slick retro ballpark and Coach K. Health care? Duke University Medical Center is famous worldwide. The arts? Durham has the American Dance Festival, a brand new Performing Arts Center, the Carolina Theatre and Royall Center for the Arts, and a growing arts community in the renovated Golden Belt complex — as hip as anything between Alexandria and Atlanta.

Durham has even made strides in correcting what was once its most glaring weakness. Its crime rate is dropping, and a tough new

police chief has the credentials and support to make the city even safer. And who would have predicted that Raleigh would shoot past Durham in homicides in each of the last two years?

Another of the city's strengths has received scant notice in the media. If Barack Obama's election truly does signal the dawn of the post-racial era, Durham is way ahead of the game. It is the only city in the state where no race holds a majority — whites and blacks make up roughly 45 percent apiece, Hispanics and Asians the rest. More than any other North Carolina city, Durham has had to learn the art of compromise and coalition-building, grudgingly at first, more willingly as the process has begun to pay dividends.

"When you look at Durham's history, we've always done better when we work together," said Carl Webb, a homegrown black business leader and partner in Greenfire Development, the force behind a \$300 million downtown vision featuring more than 1 million square feet of office, retail, residential and a boutique hotel. "As the next generation takes the reins, we have to be more focused on progress than issues of race. We want to rebuild a center of commerce where everyone can come to do business and realize a solid return on their investment."

Ascension Day

Durham rose and fell on a plume of smoke. After World War II, two-thirds of Americans smoked cigarettes and Durham was happy to feed their habit. The sprawling factories Buck Duke built ran day and night and employed thousands of well-paid workers. The pungent smell of tobacco filled downtown streets. It was the smell of money beyond imagining. I heard it said Duke was making a million dollars a day in 1905, right before Teddy Roosevelt busted the American Tobacco Company into five easy pieces.

In 1964, the Surgeon General said cigarettes were killing Americans. It was the death knell of cigarette manufacturing in Durham. Thirty years later, the last smoke rolled off the line at the old Liggett & Myers factory, but downtown Durham had been on life support a good while before that.

We can set with absolute precision the day downtown Durham hit rock bottom. And we can identify with certainty the man most responsible for bringing it back to life. The date: March 13, 1990. The man: James F. Goodmon, president of Capitol Broadcasting, based in, of all places, Raleigh.

It was on that date that an \$11.8 million bond issue to build a new baseball stadium and parking deck for the Durham Bulls baseball team went down in flames. The new ballpark was to be the centerpiece of an ambitious development package that included a \$200 million renovation of the abandoned American Tobacco complex and construction of an eight-story Class A office building next door.

Three years earlier, Durham-native Thom Mount produced the hit film *Bull Durham*, bringing the city worldwide fame and sparking a modest recovery in downtown real estate. The failure of the bond issue stopped the comeback in its tracks. This was the last straw for Bulls owner Miles Wolff. In a fit of pique he sold the team to Goodmon, who announced plans to move it to a new ballpark he planned to build near Research Triangle Park.

Government leaders responded quickly with a plan to bypass voters and build the ballpark with revenue bonds. There was great public outcry, but it turned out to be exactly the right call. Goodmon was persuaded to scrap his park in the Park plan and keep the team in downtown Durham. The new ballpark — modeled after Baltimore's Camden Yards — came online in 1995 and was expanded to 10,000 seats for the 1998 season, allowing the Bulls to move up to the Triple-A International League. Now sold on Durham's potential, Goodmon took over the American Tobacco project and with his typical full-bore, damn-the-torpedoes style steered it to completion in 2000. His success there ignited the boom that continues to this day.

"Jim Goodmon was the catalyst for the positive things that have happened in the last 15 years," said Bill Kalkhoff, president of Downtown Durham Inc. since its founding in 1993 and who has played a big role in the downtown recrudescence. "It couldn't have happened without him. After American Tobacco opened in 2000, it set off a real estate buying frenzy like we'd never seen. All of a sudden there were developers from all over coming in here and snapping up everything they could get their hands on."

Goodmon landed several key tenants to anchor the American Tobacco project, including Duke University, GlaxoSmithKline and one of



his own television stations WRAZ. But the pivotal deal was the signing of McKinney, one of the country's top advertising agencies and a long-term fixture in downtown Raleigh.

"Getting McKinney out of Raleigh changed the whole perception of downtown Durham," Kalkhoff said. "It got the attention of the commercial real estate community. It was the proof we needed to show downtown Durham had arrived, that we could compete on equal terms with everybody else."

McKinney president Jeff Jones says the agency has been thrilled with the move and actively recommends Durham to others, frequently giving tours of their space to anyone thinking about following in their footsteps.

"There were some who questioned our decision, but that was over four years ago, and it's worked out very well for us," Jones said.

"Look, we have to compete for the best talent against other great shops across the country, and Durham can sometimes be a tough sale versus big cities or other creative centers like Austin and Portland.

"But there is so much happening in Durham in terms of culture, music, restaurants, arts — between American Tobacco and the overall downtown revitalization — and with the growing opportunities for urban living, we are super excited about the future of this city," Jones said.

Since McKinney's arrival, downtown Durham has taken off faster than even its biggest boosters could have predicted. In 2000, Kalkhoff prepared a 20-year development plan. The goals he set then have already been achieved. "In the one square mile that we identify as downtown Durham, over 3 million square feet of space has been renovated and occupied," he said. "We started with 3500 people working downtown, and today we have over 14,000. We've gone from 100 occupied residential units to over 1000. We've come a long way, but we're not anywhere near done. We've got a lot more left to do."

Right Man At The Right Time

If anyone knows just how far Durham has come, it's Bill Bell. He's served as the city's mayor for the last eight years and as a Durham County Commissioner for nearly 20 years before that. By all accounts, he's been a good leader, presiding over the city with a quiet, steady hand. He will be remembered as a principal architect of the strategy of public/private partnerships that have produced inarguable success in downtown and across the city.

One cold winter morning I visited him at his City Hall office, and we talked for nearly an hour about where Durham has been and where he'd like to lead it. Toward the end of the interview I asked him a couple of old-school journalism questions to flesh out this article.

Where he was from, where he went to school, that sort of thing. Here's what he told me:

He came to Durham in 1968 to work for IBM in the Park. He had a degree in electrical engineering from Winston-Salem State University. He and his wife had gone house-hunting and were just about sold on the Parkwood neighborhood near RTP. Their would-be neighbors weren't receptive to the idea. They held meetings to discuss what to do if this young black couple moved in next door. Eventually he and his wife decided it wasn't worth the hassle and found another place to live. He built a career, raised a family and got into public service.

I kept thinking about this story the whole time I was writing this article. And finally I thought, hell, if we could get past all that monumental stupidity and baseless hate, a little thing like steering Durham to its promising future in these difficult economic times should be no sweat.

