



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

A Kind of Genius: Herb Sturz and Society's Toughest Problems By Sam Roberts

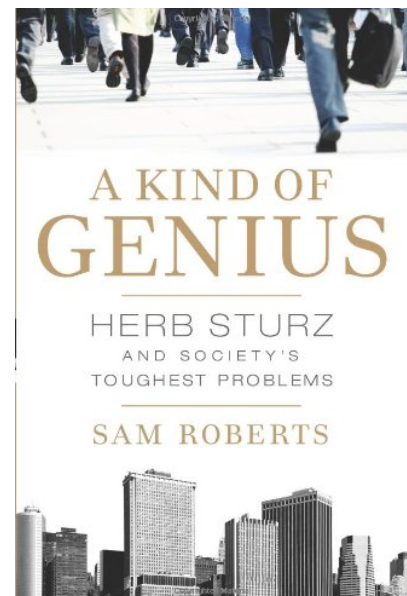
The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Oct. 3, 2024 to discuss *A Kind of Genius: Herb Sturz and Society's Toughest Problems*. The author, Sam Roberts, was the longtime urban affairs reporter for the New York Times.

This is a book about one of New York's greatest reformers and one of its least well known, Herb Sturz. From the early 1960s to the late 1990s, Sturz made an indelible mark on the city during some of its darkest days.

He changed how bail worked for indigent defendants and how alcoholics and drug addicts were treated. He focused the city's criminal justice system on victim and witness services and created New York's first "community court." He began the long and ultimately successful effort to rescue Times Square from crime, prostitution and pornography and make it again the crossroads of the world. He helped move development toward Manhattan's overlooked West Side.

What was most remarkable was how Sturz did this, with little or no formal power. He did not even have a background in criminal justice or planning. In the late 1970s, he did serve as New York's deputy mayor for criminal justice and then as chair of the City Planning Commission. But his most impressive work was done earlier, as head of a tiny nonprofit, the Vera Institute. As such, he had no power to dictate reforms or offer rewards to those who followed his advice. He had only his insights about how systems worked, a soothing manner and his powers of persuasion.

In our discussion, we focused on Sturz's methods, his position as an outsider, and what these things could tell us about successful reform in Urban Atlanta.



Three Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are three big ideas drawn from *A Kind of Genius* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. Reform is important to government and not just for the benefits it brings to citizens and taxpayers. Done right, it can also make life easier for public employees and bring credit to public officials.
2. In some cases, outside groups can be more effective than insiders at creating reform. That's because outside groups may be seen as more evenhanded, even as they advocate forcefully for change. Philanthropic support enables outsiders to take risks insiders can't.
3. The keys to outside groups' success are their methods and temperament. Outside reformers need a calm approach, rigor in finding opportunities and documenting results, and great political skills to identify and work with insider allies.

Note one: Reform from inside institutions can also work, as we learned from *Won't Lose This Dream*. It is a book about how Georgia State University became a leader in educating and graduating first-generation college students by making major institutional changes. The Georgia State reforms came about through insiders, not outside groups.

Note two: At their core, Sturz's methods were about not giving in to anger, blame-casting or easy answers. He saw human frailties as treatable diseases rather than fundamental flaws. He challenged conventional thinking in ways that did not create reflexive opposition. And he saw problems as complex and interrelated while not allowing the complexity to paralyze him or his work.

Why Do These Things?

Government reforms do not happen on their own. They require leadership, motivation, skill . . . and sometimes the assistance of outsiders. Are the outcomes of reforms worth their cost? We think so. Here's why:

- Reform can pay for itself. It is how governments can become more valuable to citizens (that is, more efficient and effective) and more humane for public servants.
- Reform can bring credit to public officials who champion it.
- Cities get better with reforms. Reformed governments are able to address long-term problems and sudden crises because they are newly focused on goals, outcomes and processes.
- The secret, though, is to know how successful reforms take place. This book and others we've read show citizens and leaders the road to reform.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. That's true even for things as important as government reform. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Change is hard. Governments, even more than private businesses or nonprofits, prize routine and resist change.
- Zero-sum thinking makes reform difficult today because it raises suspicion that, if it benefits some, it must cost others.
- This book makes clear how difficult successful reforms can be. Where can we find inside or outside reformers with the temperament and skills of Herb Sturz?
- There are no outside reform groups in Urban Atlanta like New York's Vera Institute.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:

- We need an Atlanta version of Herb Sturz, someone who knows how to make effective reforms over and over. And then we need many versions of this person.
- Philanthropy can play a role in reform by funding outside groups that practice the Sturz approach to reform.
- We need public officials who are willing to support reform and comfortable with outside groups being part of it.
- Challenging zero-sum thinking requires effective demonstrations projects, compassion and a willingness to take risks.

A Synopsis of *A Kind of Genius*

A Kind of Genius: Herb Sturz and Society's Toughest Problems is 324 pages, not including acknowledgements, source notes and index. There are 14 chapters, plus a prologue and an epilogue, in six sections.

Roberts was the longtime urban affairs reporter for the New York Times. He has written a dozen books about current events or New York City, including *A History of New York in 101 Objects*.

As we said earlier, this is a book about a reformer in New York who made an indelible mark on his city from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, from criminal justice reforms to better treatment for alcoholics and drug abusers. Herb Sturz helped create New York's "community courts" and began witness and victim service programs. He began the long process of redeeming Times Square and directing development toward Manhattan's overlooked West Side.

And he did all this without any background in criminal justice or planning and almost no formal power. Mostly he worked through small, outside reform groups supported by philanthropy. Sturz's secret: He had a soothing manner, deep insights into how systems worked, and powers of persuasion.

The book tells the story of Sturz's life and accomplishments but focuses on why Sturz was so effective, and how he managed to get things done. In that sense, *A Kind of Genius* could be a guide for reformers everywhere, including Urban Atlanta. In our discussion, we focused on Sturz's methods—and what reformers and urban advocates could learn from them.

And what were his methods? Sturz summarized them for Roberts: "Surround problems. Talk with everyone, whether centrally or peripherally engaged. Test insights and facts against each other. Read. Observe. Learn by intervening. Initiate pilot efforts; most depend on both public and private sectors to succeed. Articulate goals in unthreatening language. Give credit to public agencies. They need it. That's where the dollars are."

His first reform, of the bail system for indigent defendants in the early 1960s, shows how these methods worked. Hired by a New York philanthropist who was interested in reforms, Sturz set about studying the bail system, interviewing everyone from judges and jail officials to lawyers and bondsmen.

He quickly saw the problems: About a quarter of all defendants in 1961 could not afford bail if it involved a \$500 bond, which meant the defendant had to put up \$50 in cash. And without bail, defendants sat in jail awaiting trial, sometimes for up to six months.

This was a problem for the city government and a grave injustice for the poor. At the time, 118,000 men and women who had charged with crimes but not convicted were incarcerated in New York City jails simply because they could not make bail, violating the fundamental principle of “innocent until proven guilty.” This came at a huge financial cost to the city. Defendants, too, paid a price since they could not work or actively assist with their legal cases.

There was an alternative: Judges could waive bail and release defendants on their own recognizance, a legal term meaning the person promised to return for trial. But were defendants’ promises good? Most arraignment judges knew nothing about the people appearing before them other than their names and the charges. No one wanted to be the judge who released a defendant who fled or, worse, committed another crime while awaiting trial. It was safer to jail them.

Sturz figured out that the answer was to treat each defendant as a person and provide background information on defendants that a judge could rely on to determine if this defendant was likely to return. This meant interviewing defendants on arrival at jail, verifying the information and making a written recommendation in a few hours’ time. (Most defendants were arraigned within 24 hours, which was where bail was set.)

But what information could accurately predict who would show up for trial and who were flight risks? And how could this background information be assembled—and checked—speedily enough to make the next-day arraignment?

The book explains how Sturz figured out how to do these things, with the aid of a remarkable assistant, Anne Rankin, and a team of law school students.

But here’s where the “genius” in Sturz came into play. Designing processes, he realized, was not even half the battle. The real struggle was convincing all the interests that these changes were not only fairer for defendants but better for everyone else.

So Sturz did an experiment. He had the law students interview and classify a large group of indigent defendants. Then he randomly divided them. For one group, the “experimental” group, the team made bail recommendations. For the other, the “control” group, the team interviewed and rated defendants but did not make recommendations. Then they watched and documented what happened.

What they found was that judges usually followed the recommendations of the Vera Institute team, releasing defendants it had rated as trustworthy 59 percent of the time. In the control group, with a similar number of trustworthy defendants but where no recommendations were made, judges released only 14 percent on their own recognizance.

There was another finding. Of the 215 defendants who got a Vera recommendation and were released, only three did not appear later on for trial, which was a lower percentage than for those who put up cash bails.

Two benefits, then, were immediately clear: Judges had confidence in the recommendations, and passing a background check was a better way of guaranteeing appearance at trial than cash bails.

But there was an even greater surprise. The Vera team followed the defendants through their legal proceedings. Nearly 60 percent of those who were released on their own recognizance were either acquitted or eventually saw the charges dropped. Of those who had remained in jail, only 23 percent were exonerated.

What did this show? That being free before trial helped defendants prepare their defenses.

When Sturz presented these findings, first to New York judges and city hall leaders, later to criminal justice professors and the federal Department of Justice, it made a big impact, creating a wave of reforms, in New York, other states and in the federal government.

Needless to say, this is not how reform typically happens. Public officials are used to being lobbied. What they're not used to is someone from the outside offering to study a public system, interviewing people at all levels, asking questions no one had thought to ask, and coolly subjecting ideas—their own and others'—to tests using rigorous processes.

This method—plus Sturz's personal and political skills—built support for his reforms, first in bail reform, then in other related areas. He always stayed in the background, stepping forward only if something went wrong. Otherwise, he let public officials take the credit for changes that worked. This explains why Herb Sturz was called on to help with one major issue after the other. It also explains why he was so little known, until this book was written.

Sturz died in 2021 at age 90. His obituary in the New York Times, written by Sam Roberts, called him “a quiet force in the life of New York City,” adding that “his agenda and reach, in government and out, extended from criminal justice to urban planning, though his constituency—prisoners, the homeless, the elderly and more—hardly knew his name.”

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.