Case Study: The Renaissance City does it Again

When Chattanooga, Tenn., one of the nation’s most polluted cities, began its transformation from an industrial wasteland into a tourism mecca nearly 30 years ago, it was lauded as a national model of post-industrial reclamation and dubbed “The Renaissance City.” The decades-old plan that was painstakingly laid out by urban planners and the citizens they inspired was designed to reclaim the city’s waterfront and transform its downtown. The result is a modern city that is continually recognized for its scenic beauty, vibrant urban lifestyle and abundant outdoor amenities. Still, prominent city blocks in Chattanooga’s urban core remain vacant and plans to develop them have failed to materialize. Proving that the Renaissance City lives up to its moniker, Chattanooga visionaries recently completed an Urban Design Challenge, a year-long endeavor to reinvigorate development and spur the next phase of urban revitalization.

A City with Vision

In 1984, in the middle of the worst economic crisis since modern times, more than 2,000 people gathered for a series of charrettes lead by a former city planner and an economic developer to envision the future of the community. Citizens offered dozens of ideas for community revitalization, but restoring downtown’s vitality was at the heart of the meetings. The greatest impact of the Vision 2000 development plan though was a galvanized sense of community pride and a commitment to re-integrate the city with its river roots.

One year later, the Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan was born. It called for $750 million worth of mixed-use development, enhancement and conservation along 22 miles of the Tennessee River Corridor as it passed through Chattanooga.

The private nonprofit, River City Company, was established in 1986 to implement the blueprint. Since then, River City Company has partnered with local government, the private sector and philanthropic foundations to support and develop Downtown Chattanooga.

Completing a Return to the River

During the 1990s Chattanooga began turning the Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan into bricks and mortar. The Tennessee Aquarium opened in 1992, the Chattanooga Visitors Center and renovated Walnut Street Bridge were unveiled in 1993, the Creative Discovery Museum came along in 1995 and the IMAX Theater in 1996. Directly across the river from all this activity, Coolidge Park, featuring a vintage carousel, opening in 1999, spurred a retail renaissance on the north shore. On the south end of town, the convention center was being expanded a block away from the Chattanoogan, a newly-constructed conference center and hotel.

In 2002, Senator Bob Corker, who was then mayor of Chattanooga, put River City Company in charge of overseeing the $120 million 21st Century Waterfront Plan. Three years later, on the 20th anniversary of the Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan, the 21st Century Waterfront opened. Project highlights included major expansions of the Tennessee Aquarium, Hunter Museum and Creative Discovery Museum, as well as a new public pier, riverfront park, wetlands area, Trail of Tears passage, adventure playground. The project also included a hard-edge shoreline suitable for mooring leisure boats and strong pedestrian connections between all of the projects.
The Urban Design Challenge

On the River City Company’s 25th anniversary in 2011, it issued the Urban Design Challenge to the city’s key partner in its rebirth: the local architecture community. The Challenge was a fitting tribute to the work done by those who have come before and the current cohort of citizens and designers who envision a greater Chattanooga.

Over the course of a year, thousands of Chattanoogans participated in the visioning process that focused on downtown. In an innovative and energetic way, the Challenge featured the talents of the local professional community, provided for robust participation of the community, and drew on expertise from nationally and internationally recognized design experts. The process has changed the landscape of community participation and has moved beyond vision to impact large-scale, real world projects.

The purpose of the Challenge was to apply the talent of local planners, urban designers, and architects in a visioning of the future of key sites in Downtown Chattanooga. It energized public discourse about the importance of urban design in our downtown, influenced real-world projects and will serve as a knowledge base for future discussions about development and improvements in downtown.

Teams led by registered local architects were each given one of six unoccupied downtown sites to create a quality public realm and community context. The design endeavor was kicked off by one of the world's foremost urban planners, Alex Krieger of the department of Urban Planning and Design at Harvard Graduate School of Design, and made possible through grants from the Benwood Foundation, Lyndhurst Foundation and Maclellan Foundation.

The Challenge has given River City Company an opportunity to once again inspire thought and engage the community by focusing on very different projects and their associated problems and opportunities. The sites included:

- a leveled block in the city center that is surrounded by mostly vacant century-old brick buildings;
- a prominent block in the southernmost section of the central business district that is home to a single-story vacant building and a parking lot;
- a tree-lined parkway featuring an entire city block of historically significant buildings and monuments;
- an interstate exchange that serves as the primary entrance into city’s tourism district;
- a city block that connects the University of Tennessee Chattanooga campus to downtown; and
- a block in the Southside District that is bordered by the city’s primary thoroughfares.

At two-month intervals throughout the year-long Urban Design Challenge, selected teams made public presentations about their design plans. Each of the design teams reflected on and paid tribute to Chattanooga’s history while at the same time offering a thought-provoking, inspired vision for the future. While there were six formal teams involved in the design challenge, the seventh design team was present at all of the presentations and represented River City Company’s signature of successful urban planning and development – an engaged community.
Inspired by the Past, Recognizing the Potential of the Future

Chattanooga’s architects proved that imagining the possibilities is the key to making Chattanooga the “Best Town Ever,” a title bestowed it by *Outside Magazine*’s readers in 2011. The designs, according to Morgan, are a “beautiful balance of blue sky and doable.”

Under the watchful eye of three carefully-selected jurors and thousands of engaged citizens, six design teams set out to make Chattanooga the most transformed city in America as they unveiled visuals and showcased new concepts for sites important to the future of Downtown Chattanooga. Jurors included famed Memphis urbanist Henry Turley, Auburn University Design Studio head Cheryl Morgan, and Chattanooga Urban Design Studio alumnus and director of the School of Architecture at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville Scott Wall.

In mid-August 2012, nearly 500 Chattanoogaans gathered at the finale of the Urban Design Challenge where the jurors shared their insights on the projects, which included designs for technology hubs, multilevel urban housing, gateways where transit is the centerpiece, and gardens and play spaces placed atop urban buildings.

A rich history of transportation-related public spaces like Chattanooga’s grand railway terminal gave the city its worldwide notoriety and a song. Over time, a cultural shift in transportation-related public spaces and the installation of a state highway bisected the city’s physical and human connection to those entering through the 4th Street Corridor. That is why team Elemi+ ultimately took on the TDOT and won the jury’s favor for the winner of the Urban Design Challenge.

Champion Elemi Architects’ plan sparked discussions with TDOT about how plans to straighten and relocate a portion of US-27 that cuts through downtown could open up a variety of development opportunities along the Fourth Street Corridor with just a few minor adjustments. The blueprint for development includes:

- increasing development infill;
- enhancing pedestrian connections north and south;
- expanding public transportation opportunities along the corridor;
- rebalancing the street’s integration with and defining the city block at the entry and exit of US-27; and
- animating all of the 4th Street’s building edges.

River City Company President and CEO Kim White said that even within the boldest aspects of the 4th Street concept there are smaller aspects of the gateway design that can be realized prior to the highway project, including park-like streetscapes.
The Civic Vision Award, which was determined by popular vote at the finale, went to the Broad Jump team, comprised of representatives from three local architecture firms, Artech, Hefferlin + Kronenberg Architects and Barge Waggoner, Sumner and Cannon. Their concept centered around moving or removing a chicken processing facility and replacing it with a new sports arena and pedestrian and vehicular connections to other parts of the city, creating a gateway to US-27 on the south side of downtown, and appropriate infill and re-use projects.

Highlights of the other four designs include:

- transforming a vacant city block into a unique, active, multilevel, mixed-use destination in the heart of Downtown Chattanooga;
- creating a hub for technology businesses in this "Gig City";
- adaptive reuse of a historically significant block for market square that includes a war memorial park, housing and retail; and
- development of a square with outdoor-oriented restaurant space and a city park over a multilevel parking deck, with housing, office and retail. The building would serve to unite the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga campus with the business district and would feature a new rooftop venue for spectators of collegiate sports.

**A City Worth Watching**

Chattanooga, the Renaissance City, is a national model for the successful marriage of sustainable growth and community visioning. Through the Urban Design Challenge and by continuing to invite the community to imagine a better tomorrow, River City Company elevated conversation about keeping Downtown Chattanooga livable, desirable and, most of all, authentic.

Juror Scott Wall noted that Chattanooga’s “nothing is impossible” attitude is key to getting ambitious, expensive and complicated projects underway. "If you have belief, things happen. This place has belief that this place will be better."

Juror Henry Turley said "sometimes you have to do it before people believe it can be done" when referring to the Urban Design Challenge teams’ designs. His comments drew applause when he announced that “Chattanooga has proven more than once that it can do it,” and he has identified three developers interested in making some of the Urban Design Challenge plans a reality.

“The Urban Design Challenge is a unique celebration of who Chattanooga is,” said Wall. “I’ve never seen anything like it, except in Chattanooga over the last thirty years! There is no place like home.”