

Chattanooga planners took impressive advantage of the city's riverfront in redesigning its downtown. Among the developments near the Tennessee River are the ultra-modern Tennessee Aquarium and the RiverSet Apartments, a complex of one- and two-bedroom units with decks facing the river.



A DECADE AGO, CHATTANOOGA OFFICIALS TOOK A CUE FROM PITTSBURGH ON HOW TO REVIVE A COMMUNITY HARD HIT BY INDUSTRIAL DECLINE. NOW PITTSBURGH CIVIC LEADERS ARE GETTING TIPS FROM CHATTANOOGA ON HOW TO REVIVE A DOWNTOWN.

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# THRIVING BY DESIGN

T

he Pittsburghers swarming over the Chattanooga riverfront on a crystal-clear day last October behaved no differently than the million other visitors who flock to this re-made southern town each year. They strolled in ball caps and sneakers between the contemporary Tennessee Aquarium, the Creative Discovery Museum and the Hunter Museum of American Art, pausing en route to admire the sunlit sculpture garden and handsome new condos. They scooped up brochures from the friendly Visitors Center and scanned them over coffee at the adjoining outdoor cafe. They watched crew teams race past on the Tennessee River and rode the carousel at the riverfront Coolidge Park.

But for souvenirs, the Pittsburghers took photos that were more quirky than Kodachrome: a bannered bus stop for the city's electric shuttle, a bulldozer at a wetlands park, a parking garage with a ground-floor movie theater.

Cities trying to redesign tired downtowns know that the devil is not just in the details, but in the collaborations. In Chattanooga, those are picture-perfect. Here, the bus stop serves a popular tourist district shuttle that's nonpolluting, efficient and free. The wetlands park reclaims a downtown Superfund site. The garage-cineplex replaces ugly acres of surface parking and adds the Bijou, the city's first downtown movie theater in 30 years.

The Pittsburgh team snapped those shots as evidence of stunning cooperation among politicians, planners and philanthropists in making Chattanooga a national success story for civic design and community development. The three-decade transformation of this city on the Georgia border, with a population of 155,000, from a decayed industrial riverfront into an attractive, sustainable community struck a particular chord



with the 30 Pittsburgh guests. The Pittsburgh Civic Coalition had invited the group of architects, developers, planners, traffic engineers and community leaders to travel south on a first-ever field trip.

“Our coalition came together as eight organizations working hard on distinct tasks, but totally focused on design,” says Mary Navarro, The Heinz Endowments Arts & Culture senior program officer, who has chaired the coalition since its creation by the foundation in April 2004. “We believe that quality design is an economic development tool and that design brings value. Chattanooga has proved that vividly.”

The civic leaders and design specialists who participate in the coalition are working together to encourage development that complements and enhances Pittsburgh’s physical and cultural environment. The group is seeking to advance Pittsburgh’s early successes in civic design: New downtown stadiums and parks are complete. Local neighborhoods are reclaiming run-down districts. Environmentally savvy green building concepts have been adopted at every scale, from family homes to the city’s David L. Lawrence Convention Center, the nation’s largest green building. But new energy, dollars and consensus are required to amplify that success across the region.

In convening the coalition to define and champion design excellence in Pittsburgh, and providing \$105,000 in first-phase funding, the Endowments formalizes a hands-on role in civic design that has been in play in the community for more than a decade.

It was certainly no accident that the coalition’s first out-of-town field trip was to Chattanooga. Much of the foundation’s early ideas on civic design issues were transferred there informally by Teresa Heinz in the early 1990s. She became involved in an effort to remake the southern city after it had gone through many of the same wrenching changes experienced by Pittsburgh a decade before: a huge exodus of workers after the collapse of the steel industry, a decaying urban core and a national reputation as one of the country’s most polluted cities.

Heinz participated in a community charrette process in Chattanooga that has been used many times in Pittsburgh and that became the blueprint for the city’s transformation. She also took major players in the Chattanooga renovation effort on an informal tour of Pittsburgh to show the turnaround that was possible.

Sightseeing in Chattanooga for the Pittsburgh planners and civic leaders includes snapping photographs of the latest in urban design, much of which emphasizes openness and access. Top: A New Urbanist development shows the appeal of open space, sidewalk-lined streets and a diverse range of housing. Middle: Water that sprays from “The Passage,” the largest work of art by Southeastern Native peoples in 1,000 years, flows into the Tennessee River. Bottom: Visitors to the Hunter Museum of American Art can view the Tennessee River from inside a new addition that uses some of architect Frank Gehry’s design principles for glass and steel.

Chattanooga’s leading philanthropy, the Lyndhurst Foundation, has served the same community challenger–convener role in its hometown as the Endowments has done in Pittsburgh. The Lupton family charity has been a courageous source of capital there during the past three decades, contributing \$105 million to support a working partnership of design professionals, developers and politicians that has extended through the terms of four mayors.

“What happened in Chattanooga was that the Lyndhurst Foundation, working with politicians and the university, provided the leveraging capital for change,” says architecture professor Vivian Loftness. As director of the Urban Lab at Carnegie Mellon University, she has followed the Chattanooga story since 1994. “You need a partnership for design vision, political will and foundation commitment—but there has to be capital in there somewhere.”

Chattanooga’s innovations incorporate handsome tourist destinations and wise land use with green development solutions. Among the standouts are the \$75 million Tennessee Aquarium; a 10-mile recreational greenway along both sides of the Tennessee River; revitalized neighborhoods with new owner-occupied housing; and connections to the downtown riverfront incorporating a \$1.2 million public art project, a free electric shuttle and pedestrian paths. Officials also re-routed a riverfront parkway to encourage pedestrian access and create commercial and residential development. After the improvements, revenues from tourism topped \$133 million per year.

The Lyndhurst Foundation’s civic design support is “maybe the best value for the dollar that we’ve invested in any project,” says Jack Murrah, its president since 1989. “It’s had such a large impact on the physical and social environment of the city.”

As the lights went down in the Hunter Museum’s auditorium in October, slides familiar to Pittsburghers flashed on its screen: images of blight, followed by demolition and renewal. Chattanooga planners and developers took the podium to review how the city articulated a single design vision for a troubled region.

“We had to change through persuasion, not regulation,” recalls Murrah. “One of our successes has been creating a shared vocabulary that the community can use to talk about what we want the city to be.”

Beginning in 1984, 1,700 Chattanoogaans applied their new



vocabulary in a process called Vision 2000. The public discussions guided subsequent debate on the city’s priorities.

Residents said they cherished the city’s natural beauty, its river location, its mountains and public life. After 65 meetings, they decided to showcase those assets, keying new development to downtown attractions and close-in neighborhoods.

The environmental and civic centerpiece for the plan was the Tennessee Aquarium, which replaced old industrial plants on the river’s southern bank in 1992. The location, just steps from the city’s earliest settlement, symbolized the determination to celebrate the river in a unique contemporary setting. Visitors move along a watershed of ramps, past freshwater exhibits that trace the river and its wildlife from its mountain source to the Mississippi. A second building, opened last year, showcases saltwater life.

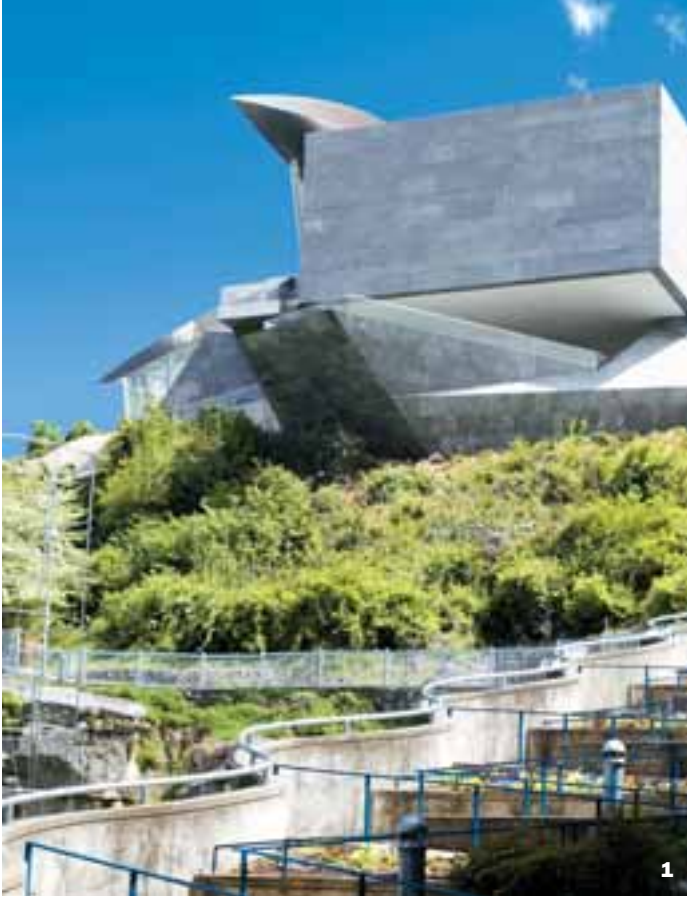
Public response to the aquarium’s opening was ecstatic. More than a million visitors poured through the building in its first year.

“At the beginning, we asked people to be hopeful and helpful,” recalls Karen Miller Hundt, head of the Planning and Design Studio at the regional planning agency. “We think we have all the answers as urban designers. We really don’t. Involving the public through Vision 2000, even though it took a long time, was crucial to get community buy-in.”

Priorities were visually translated by the Planning and Design Studio, an outgrowth of a university storefront architecture lab, with strong New Urbanist principles. Under the leadership of Stroud Watson, the center advocated human-scale streetscapes to give pedestrians priority over parking and freeways.

Watson’s civic design philosophy was strongly endorsed by the staff and board of Lyndhurst, which funded the public process. His principles also emerged as a guiding force of the RiverCity Co., a nonprofit created with bank and foundation backing in 1986 to spur economic development in downtown Chattanooga. While Lyndhurst and the Lupton families donated the \$45 million cost of the first aquarium building, RiverCity developed the surrounding sites: a visitors center, the Creative Discovery Museum, an IMAX theater, restaurants and retail shops.

“If all we’d done was open the aquarium, it probably would have been successful for a while, but people wouldn’t have come



back the next year,” says the Design Studio’s Hundt. “We had to look at streetscape improvements, new hotels and restaurants and other things for people to do while they are here. So all of that — the private and public sides — is very important. And if you don’t insist on quality design, it’s not going to be as good a project as it could be. We demanded it on all our projects, right down to streetlights and flowerpots.”

An ambitious 21st Century Waterfront plan emphasized the waterfront, tourism and pedestrian access to extend success in all directions: to public art, parks and museums. The three-year, \$120 million scheme, funded by a \$69 million hotel tax and \$51 million in private investment, encouraged downtown density.

The city’s response to the improvements, however, was mixed. While residents took pride in the downtown face-lift, political grumbling began: Where was the commitment to the city’s struggling residential districts?

Lyndhurst was caught in the crossfire in last year’s mayoral campaign, in which the candidates — both city planners — took opposite positions.

“It was framed as downtown versus neighborhoods; the success of downtown became a liability. The complaint was there was too much attention [to downtown] from city government and private funders,” recalls Murrah of the Lyndhurst Foundation.

In fact, the partners who had collaborated on downtown had been achieving similar success in neighborhoods.

The RiverCity Co. had raised \$8 million for a new elementary school in the Jefferson Heights neighborhood to complement new owner-occupied housing. The Design Studio had provided technical assistance for both, while Lyndhurst had



## MANY INITIATIVES, ONE VISION.

With a blend of old and new, classic and contemporary, Chattanooga’s reinvigorated downtown and adjacent neighborhoods boast a variety of business, recreational and residential developments. But the diversity promotes the single vision of making the area an attractive destination for tourists and residents.

1. The **Hunter Museum of American Art** contains one of the southeast’s most important collections of American art, with work by artists ranging from Norman Rockwell to Pittsburgh native Andy Warhol.
2. Originally built in 1890, the **Walnut Street Bridge** has been refurbished into a half-mile pedestrian walkway, one of the longest in the world.
3. “**The Witness**,” with its six “heads” facing all directions as if seeing everywhere, is a public art sculpture by Chattanooga artist Rick Booth that stretches toward the sky in Coolidge Park.
4. Once an abandoned shipyard on the city’s North Shore, the seven-acre **Coolidge Park** features a century-old, hand-carved carousel and a large fountain with stone horses, lions and sea turtles.
5. The **Cherry Street Townhomes**, with their Georgetown-style brick facades and private courtyards, are among the more than 750 new condos and apartments under development in downtown Chattanooga.
6. Across from the Tennessee Aquarium, the **Tortilla Factory** restaurant offers Mexican fare downstairs and an open-air rooftop bar.
7. The free, environmentally friendly **CARTA Electric Shuttles** run daily about every five minutes from the legendary Chattanooga Choo Choo to the Tennessee Aquarium, with stops every block in between.



generously funded neighborhood development nonprofits, incentives for new home buyers and grants for streetscape improvements. Housing values have risen 60 percent, and private developers are extending the growth.

The controversy — and a new administration’s shift in focus and funding toward neighborhoods — hasn’t shaken Lyndhurst’s priorities. “There’s an opportunity for the civic design conscience to stick around for residential projects downtown,” Murrah argues. With a five-year funding cycle, his organization is committed to both downtown and neighborhood support for the long haul.

As the Pittsburgh Civic Design Coalition forms a 10-year plan, Chattanooga’s forthright collaborations have made an impression. The Pittsburgh visitors envied its inclusive planning process and the central role of its Design and Planning Studio.

“As a group, our coalition can develop language that resonates, like Chattanooga,” says coalition member Anne-Marie Lubenau of the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh. “We need to organize forums that engage the public around design on a multi-neighborhood, citywide level.” Heeding the Chattanooga example of pulling elected officials into that discussion, the coalition invited candidates from last year’s Pittsburgh mayoral campaign to discuss their views in a first-ever forum on civic design.

“They put together a debate on issues never brought up before in any campaign for elective office in this city,” recalls Pittsburgh City Councilman Bill Peduto, who had been a candidate. “They’re holding candidates accountable. Every city is changing the paradigm of economic development to incorporate public opinion. But everyone approaches it from

different directions. We need civic designers as translators.”

Enter the Pittsburgh Civic Design Coalition with its wealth of design expertise. The eight members suggest the wide scope of its talent.

Loftness’ Urban Lab at Carnegie Mellon assigns graduate architecture students to brainstorm solutions for community needs — a supermarket for the inner-city Hill District or a new business district in a Mon Valley mill town. The Community Design Center of Pittsburgh makes \$80,000 in grants to neighborhood nonprofits to hire architects and planners. The American Institute of Architects’ Pittsburgh chapter pulls the local professional community into the debate; the city’s planning director offers the government perspective. The Green Building Alliance encourages Pittsburgh’s growing reputation as an innovator in environmental design, while Sustainable Pittsburgh emphasizes transportation and planning solutions. As its name suggests, the Riverlife Task Force promotes a vibrant urban waterfront. The Endowments has provided individual support to each of the nonprofit coalition members, as well as funding the coalition effort.

“The Endowments has provided catalytic dollars for our design vision. We’re not yet where we want to be, but we’re putting visual ideas in peoples’ eyes,” says Carnegie Mellon’s Loftness. “Agents for change are in place. There’s tremendous political will in [Pittsburgh’s] Urban Redevelopment Authority and city planning. The power of our coalition is a bigger voice to convince our political leaders to fight to make quality design a defining feature of our region, too.” *h*