

The Kingsport Urban Architecture Studio: Educating Students and Citizens as a Dual Mission

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During the past four years, under the author's direction, the University of Tennessee School of Architecture has operated an ongoing design program known as the Kingsport Regional Interactive Design Studio. This endeavor is an externally funded studio working in partnership with communities in Kingsport's Tri-Cities Tennessee / Virginia Region to explore urban, architectural, and landscape problems and potential. To date, we have received almost \$200,000 in gifts and pledges. The program is representative of the national trend toward such liaisons between universities and communities- a trend endorsed by the Boyer Report on Architectural Education. During the initial years of this program, we have focused on capital projects to revitalize Kingsport, and only in the past year have we begun to explore intriguing problems elsewhere in the region.

A design studio interactive with a community introduces new opportunities and challenges for an architecture school. How does such a program gain the support and confidence of a community? How is teaching prioritized within a public forum? How does such a program represent the "special interest" of architecture and avoid co-option by local entities? Such questions suggest the delicate balancing act these programs confront in reconciling the competing interests and divergent goals of local practitioners, politicians, corporate groups and citizen constituencies. At the outset, the way in which such a program is structured and publicly presented is crucial for the design studio to maintain a role as an autonomous, yet engaged participant. In essence, the faculty is quickly challenged with a dual teaching mission: one oriented to students, the other oriented to citizens.

This paper will first suggest why we feel Kingsport is an intriguing "laboratory" for students to learn about urbanism. It will then discuss the formative premises established by the University of Tennessee in structuring the studio, and suggest some of the unique issues of a dual teaching mission which are inherent in such community interactive partnerships: issues not normally encountered in the conventional format of a design studio.

Not every city or town has the potential to sustain design pedagogy, design development, and faculty interest over a long period of time. Any ambitious interactive studio should be seeking a creative product in three spheres: first, faculty creative work/research/scholarship in which the faculty member disseminates insights as an outcome amongst academic and professional peers, second, pedagogy in which the students produce projects as an outcome, and third, eventual built improvements, which are the outcome the community most directly hopes will transpire. For a School of Architecture to identify a city with real potential in all three areas assumes a high degree of front end discernment, and it also assumes a long term sustained involvement with the city. One of the lessons of our Chattanooga has been the need for continuity of faculty personnel over time to sustain the education process consistently and

to direct the evolution of ideas.

Why was the city of Kingsport selected for sustained study by the author? The answer lies not only with the city's present circumstances, but also in its unique planning history and design. Kingsport was designed in 1916 by the prolific town planner John Nolen as a new model city for industry located in northeast Tennessee. Nolen's plan was built over the subsequent two decades largely in accordance with his specifications. Late in his life, he described Kingsport to a journalist as his most significant career accomplishment. Indeed, Kingsport was the largest new town built in North America between the years 1915 and 1965. This "City Beautiful", coupled with remarkable adjacent housing neighborhoods inspired by the Garden Suburb movement, maintains its compositional integrity as an urban plan today, albeit at a lower density than intended, and suffering many of the problems facing other American cities. What makes Kingsport unique in the legacy of City Beautiful planning is its integration with the most intense concentration of heavy industry in the State of Tennessee.

The city's planning was remarkably progressive for its time. Nolen termed it an "industrial city built to order," reflecting the fact that it was comprehensively designed, with aesthetic considerations considered central to its success as a community. It was conceived by its early financiers, industrialists, and Nolen as an "ideal city" for industrial capitalism- a "Model City." If one reads written descriptions from the period, while optimization of industrial output was a primary objective, there was a realization that a well housed work force, with access to universal health insurance coverage, living in a community with a participatory, horizontal government structure would, in the long run, yield economy through investment and subsequent prosperity. Many of the homes of Nolen's neighborhoods were designed by the office of Clinton MacKenzie on Park Avenue in Manhattan, and were informed by the Garden Suburb movement, which was building momentum at the time in the United Kingdom. The term "cooperative teamwork" was used to describe a remarkably prescient idea of industrial synergy. Industries were recruited, and then strategically located adjacent to each other, so that no manufacturing by-products were wasted and the industries supplied each other with raw materials. A sense of community was explicitly sought to allow for the recruitment of a high quality work force which would remain stable in the city, without the civil strife and out migration to the north which was occurring in other southern cities of the time.

The idealism and vision of the city's planning has allowed the faculty to elevate the discussion and expectations of both the students and the citizens in this process, and to clarify for the citizens what it is about their city that makes it unique.

The original vision rendered in Nolen's complex composition of streets and squares is still intact today, and serves as a provocative formal armature. In this compact design, with its clear boundaries

and consistent typological categories within the small city, students are able to perceive the spatial richness and potential latent in the plan. In essence, at a purely formal level, the city is a rich laboratory for the study of physical design and urban form. At the same time, Kingsport suffers from problems afflicting so many cities in America today, most pervasively "disinvestment" downtown coupled with reciprocal sprawl at the periphery, all resulting in the physical deterioration of downtown. With its uniquely spatial urban design quality, and its concurrent prototypical urban problems, Kingsport serves as a provocative model city for study.

While its plan has been influential within the "New Urbanism," this city today is by no means a nostalgic community aspiring to preserve "a better time," such as Nolen's Mariemont, Ohio or Venice, Florida. Kingsport is a gritty and authentic working city living in the present, whose industry and architecture evokes Constructivism and Aldo Rossi as much as it reflects Civic Art and Ebenezer Howard.

The divergence of scale and imagery often found adjacent in this city, as well as its rich topographic setting relative to the nearby river and mountains, are particularly appealing to the author because they set up a diverse, if not dialectical context for the students to draw on. The author's personal desire is to evolve what might be called a "critical urbanism," as opposed to a prescriptive "new urbanism." Such a dialectical urbanism would have long ago conceded the limits of modern architecture as an exclusive strategy in the city, but would now find tedious the reductive American scapegoating and demonization of modern architecture.

There are a number of other circumstances which argue for Kingsport as a topic. The city finds itself now at the trough of a long period of downtown disinvestment and deterioration, which compromises its competitiveness as a site for major multinational industries. One irony is that while downtown declines, the economy of the city as a whole is strong due to its industrial base. Hence, unlike so many cities which find themselves in economic desperation, Kingsport is in a position to demand a higher standard of building in its future. It does not need to immediately surrender to avaricious developers luring jobs, investment, tax base enhancement, etc. packaged in dismal design. All contingent on public subsidy.

In the specific case of the Kingsport Studio, it should be acknowledged that establishing the studio was facilitated by the lengthy success of the Chattanooga Urban Design Center, a nationally recognized "think tank" for urban revitalization initiated in 1981 by Professor Stroud Watson of the University of Tennessee School of Architecture. The outcome of the Urban Design Center includes Miller Plaza, designed by Koetter and Kim of Boston and winner of a Progressive Architecture Design Award in 1988, which has served as a "Rosetta Stone" project for Chattanooga's subsequent development.

The studio process in Kingsport is as follows. During the initial year of study, the author, drawing on an understanding of local history and circumstances, as well as current thinking in urban architecture, carefully framed what amounts to an urban design master plan for the city. This became the conceptual framework within which all student projects since have been situated as exercises. While some latitude is possible, the approximate massing and urban site and program for the projects is pre-loaded into the problem statements. Students then work on variations on these themes, as a mechanism for floating ideas before citizens and receiving feedback. Student work, particularly when it involves multiple iterations within a studio, can be a very disarming way of interacting with a community. The author subsequently produces my own version of the original urban design proposal to a significant level of architectural development, with the directed assistance of paid student workers. This product is capable of providing an ambitious cost model, and specific discussion, to assess the potentialities and problems associated with my initial ideas. In addition to the student projects, because this process is largely faculty driven, it provides a credible product in the end at a professional level of schematic

resolution. This overcomes dismissive observations that student work can never have credibility in the marketplace capable of effecting change. It also provides faculty with ownership of their own creative work as an outcome of the program. This is very important in sustaining faculty interest over the long term, given the slow, churning process of urban revitalization.

The outside objectivity, "critical distance," and independence of the design studio constitutes a unique strength and contribution to the community. Nonetheless, there is a continual tension in such a studio between its imperative to be inclusive and interactive with community partnership groups, and the studio's stated role as an independent player.

To date, we have architecturally developed six strategic projects focused on the west side of downtown, including:

- A Tennessee Center for Applied Technology with an IMAX Theater
- An Elevated Courtyard Housing Prototype
- A Government Plaza defined by Mixed use Buildings
- A New Marketplace Row as an Entertainment/Shopping "Anti-Mall"
- Senior Housing with Day Care and an Art Gallery
- A Downtown YMCA / Wellness Center

We have also proposed a new Live/Work neighborhood in the east side of the city.

Having already described the educational model used with our students, I would now like to describe the educational efforts with respect to the local community. Periodic student presentations of work are obviously one venue, which citizens find impressive as a product and source of energy. These events attract significant media attention. One advantage of working in a small city is that the media is starved for news.

Faculty contact has proven to be even more important. In the case of Kingsport, I have spent one day per week, on average, in the city. Field trips for local officials, speeches to different community groups, and meetings *ad infinitum* are inherent. The local newspapers published and distributed 52,000 copies of a 24 page tabloid format insert depicting faculty project and policy proposals, as well as describing the Nolen heritage. Newspaper editorials, a cover page article in the Business Journal, and other publications are also part of the propaganda effort.

Our most recent accomplishments are that we have acquired permanent exhibition and meeting space in Kingsport, hosted a conference on urban sprawl issues, as well as constructed a web site.

As a direct result of our efforts, a task force called the Model City Coalition has been formed. The Coalition is a nine member independent body, but its membership aligns it with the Chamber of Commerce, city government, local business and industry CEOs, the author, and the citizen group involved in the "vision thing." Its mission is to create opportunities for sustainable development to reestablish Kingsport as the "Model City."

The Model City Coalition has just commissioned an outside professional Land Use Development Plan and Market Feasibility Assessment for downtown Kingsport. This plan and assessment will consist of a comprehensive economic, architectural and implementation analysis of the current situation, the studio composite plan of six strategic project proposals, as well as other ideas which may emerge from the process. The scope of the plan includes four gateway corridors into downtown Kingsport.

The professional team selected for this action plan incorporates architects, landscape architects, planners, economic analysts, and developer representation. The development of the plan will be an intense thirteen week process. It is intended to be highly interactive, with community forums, workshops, and listening sessions to be scheduled with the citizens of Kingsport, and with groups of community "stakeholders," a term I dislike because it reinforces a sense of self-interest.

The final master plan resulting from this process will be pre-

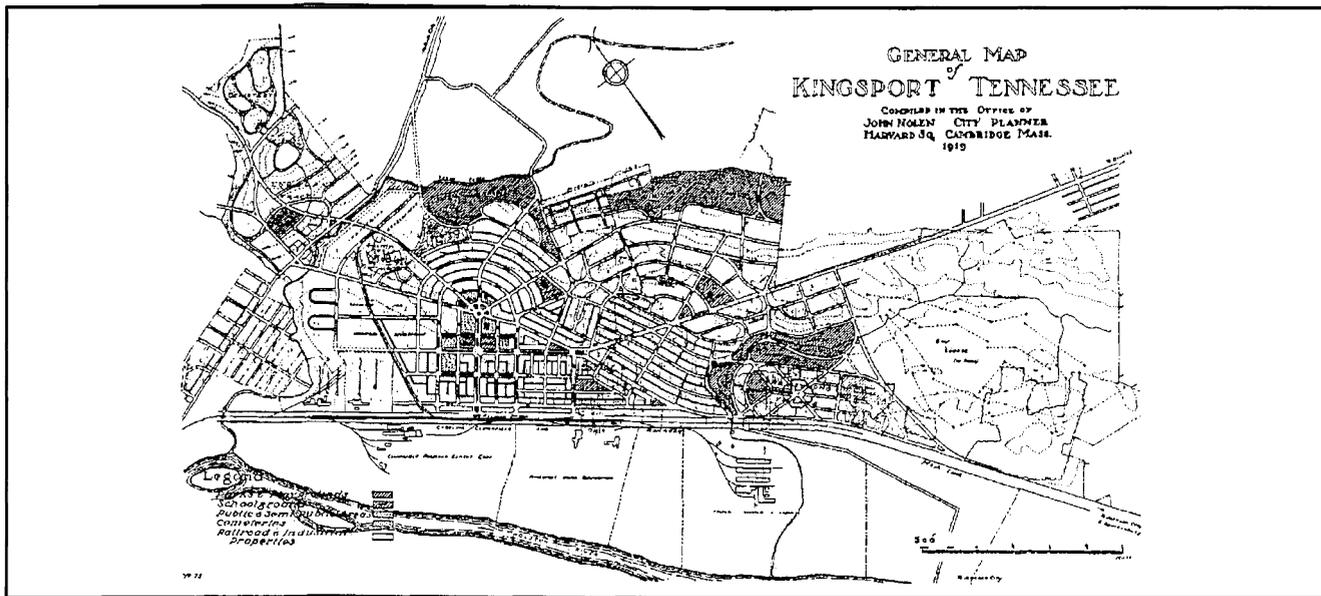


Fig. 1. Nolen's Kingsport Plan 1919.

sented to Kingsport as a prioritized agenda for action. Viable project proposals will be illustrated in marketing packages which can be used to solicit investors. Concurrently with this action plan, an effort is underway to establish Tax Increment Financing incentives for downtown Kingsport's 44 blocks.

To conclude, the mission statement and five core principles motivating the Kingsport studio program suggest its dual education of both students and citizens, and its complexities.

The Mission Statement reads: *The Kingsport Regional Interactive Design Studio (KRIDSStudio)... researches, develops, and advocates project proposals and public policies to enhance the quality of the built environment of Kingsport and its region.* What is being diplomatically implied here is the research dimension of the program which is essential to faculty, interest. In addition, the statement affirms the critical, advocacy role of the program in questioning the status quo, and the necessity to address specific credible project proposals but also public policy- in other words the political sphere, all of which form an interwoven, multiple mission. The term "built environment" connotes a multi-disciplinary range of issues, and the reference to region addresses the wider reality of a regional economy and sub-culture (a very conservative sub-culture I might add).

The first core principle reads: *The Kingsport Studio believes that John Nolen's visionary and comprehensive 1917 design for Kingsport, and its underlying principles, are unique to the identity of "Kingsport: The Planned Industrial Community" as a place.* The message here is that a community must look to its own roots, as a "genus loci," and build on that, rather than seeking an identity imported from elsewhere as a vision for its future. It also states that the physical design priorities, and their specific principles, are essential to understand and, where possible, to extend as a template for design.

The second core principle reads: *The Kingsport Studio maintains that a vital strength of Kingsport is its dual identity as both a unique community within the Tri-Cities Tennessee / Virginia Region, and as a city integrated within one of the 90 largest metropolitan areas in the nation.*

This statement is a call to citizens to think regionally as a means of strengthening their competitive and cultural position, which enables them to simultaneously think as a small city of 41,000, and as a metropolitan region of almost 500,000 people.

The third core principle reads: *The Kingsport Studio believes that the stewardship of natural open spaces and technological entrepreneurship characteristic of East Tennessee are compatible and essen-*

tial to renewing Nolen's vision in the future. This speaks to reconciling the region's industrial, technological, conservative, and capitalist ethos, with its natural environment in Appalachia: in short, the need to preserve open space in the face of sprawl.

The fourth core principle reads: *The Kingsport Studio maintains that in a mobile, knowledge based global economy, "quality of life" investments in the built environment are vital for long term competitiveness in recruiting and retaining a high quality work force.* The purpose of this principle is to situate the argument for quality of life design issues not solely in the realm of subjective ethical consideration, but in the economic rationalist domain of capitalism. Such a formulation concedes the necessity of broad persuasion, in terms that citizens can understand in the prevailing culture, and in terms consistent with Nolen's founding principles of the town as an ideal city for capitalism to prosper. In short, urban revitalization and controlling sprawl are just good business sense and are not incompatible with economic growth. This is a very difficult and time consuming message to get across to the public.

The fifth core principle reads: *The Kingsport Studio endorses and advocates the principles of "smart growth" and town planning found in the Charter of the New Urbanism, as ratified at a national meeting of over 260 planners, architects, and urbanists held at Charleston in June 1996.* Kingsport, as an paradigm of the City Beautiful Movement, was structured *de facto* on these principles of town planning and "smart growth." Affiliation with the Charter has been grudgingly adopted as a tactic, to flesh out for citizens who have no architectural background, a body of principles which are specific enough for traction, yet broad enough to cut across the political spectrum in mobilizing the community. I say grudgingly because while the Charter is a very persuasive document, it brings with it immediate media images of retrograde, *gemutlich* traditionalist building. This is the last outcome that one would wish to see in faculty or student work, and is expressly not advocated in the Charter. The Charter, in fact, is consistent with non-CIAM initiatives in modern urbanism, such as Berlage's Amsterdam South. Indeed, one of the sub-texts of the Kingsport project is to explore the reconstruction of a spatially traditional city with the full array of archetypes available today, including emerging hybrids.

There is, then, often a tense schism between the public discourse of pedagogy, deployed outside the academy and aimed at citizens, and the private discourse of pedagogy, deployed inside the academy and aimed at colleagues and students. Here the dual teaching mission reveals its discontents.

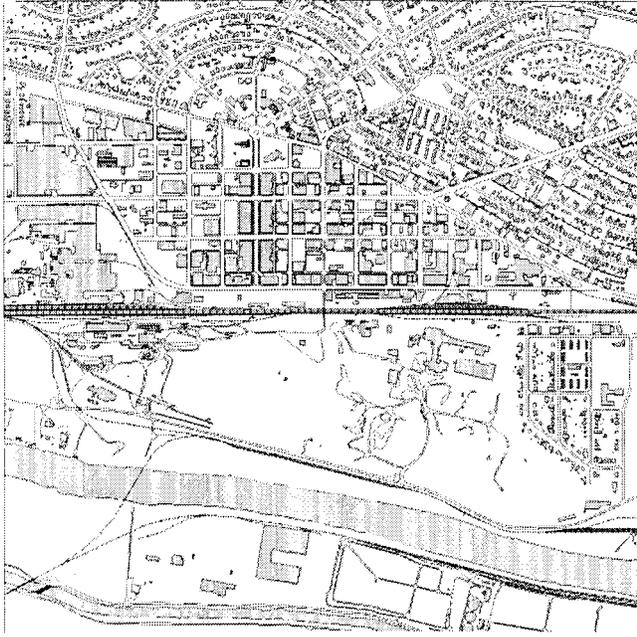


Fig. 2. Existing plan of downtown Kingsport.

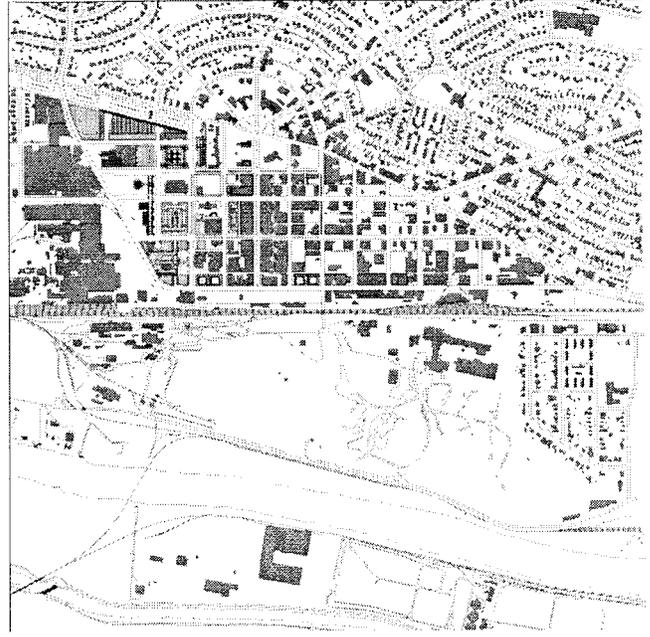


Fig. 3. Proposed composite plan with six strategic projects to revitalize downtown Kingsport.

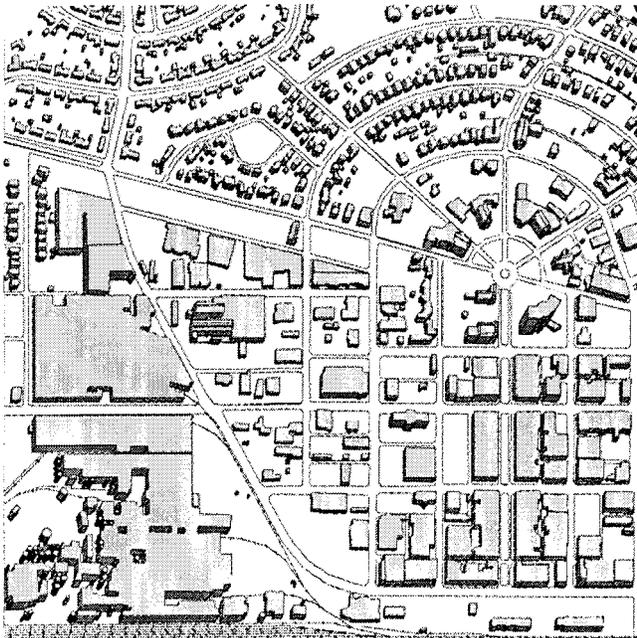


Fig. 4. View of existing conditions.

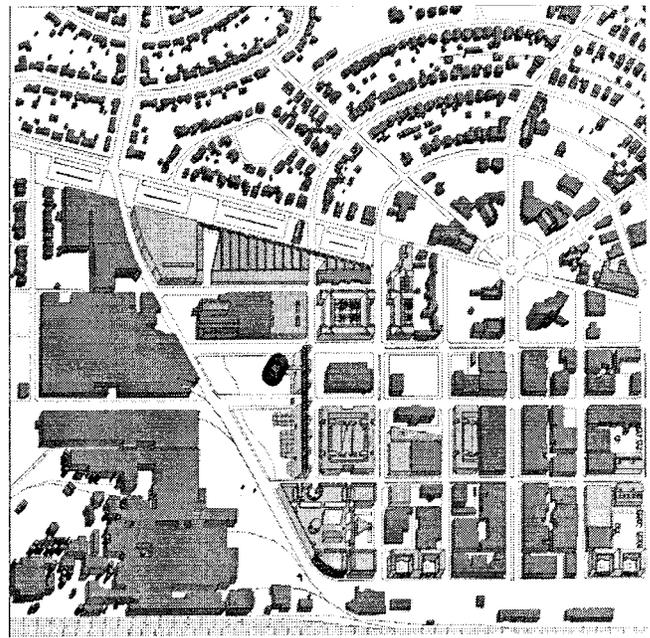


Fig. 5. Composite view of proposed six strategic projects

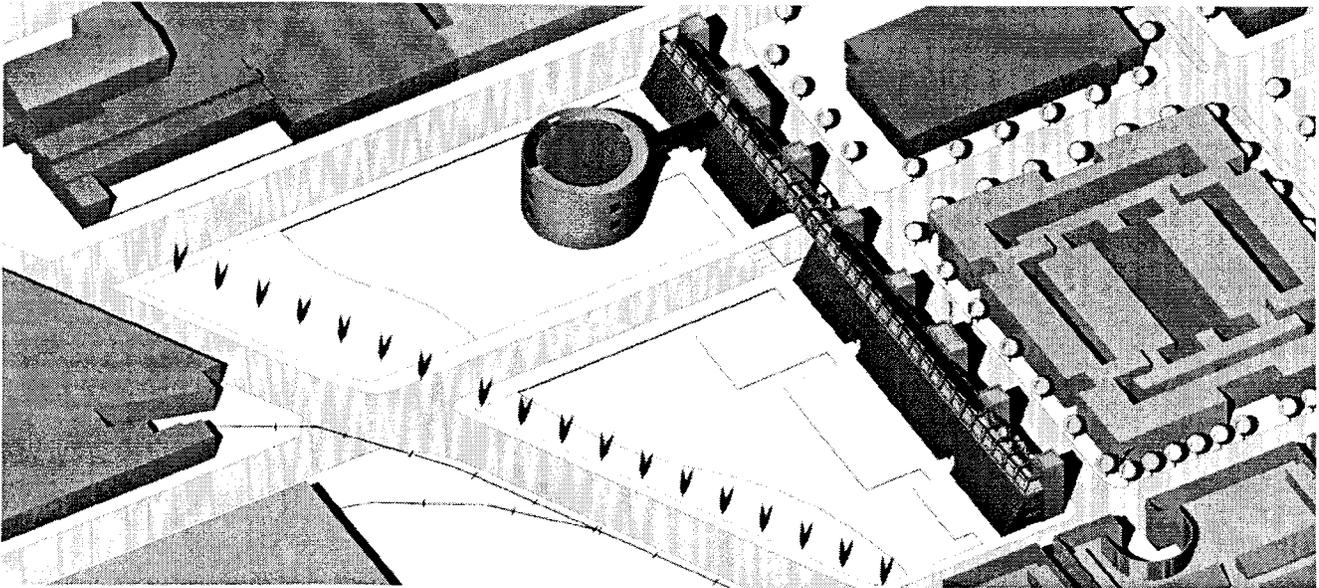


Fig. 6. View of the Tennessee Center for Applied Technology forming an entrance into the city from the west.

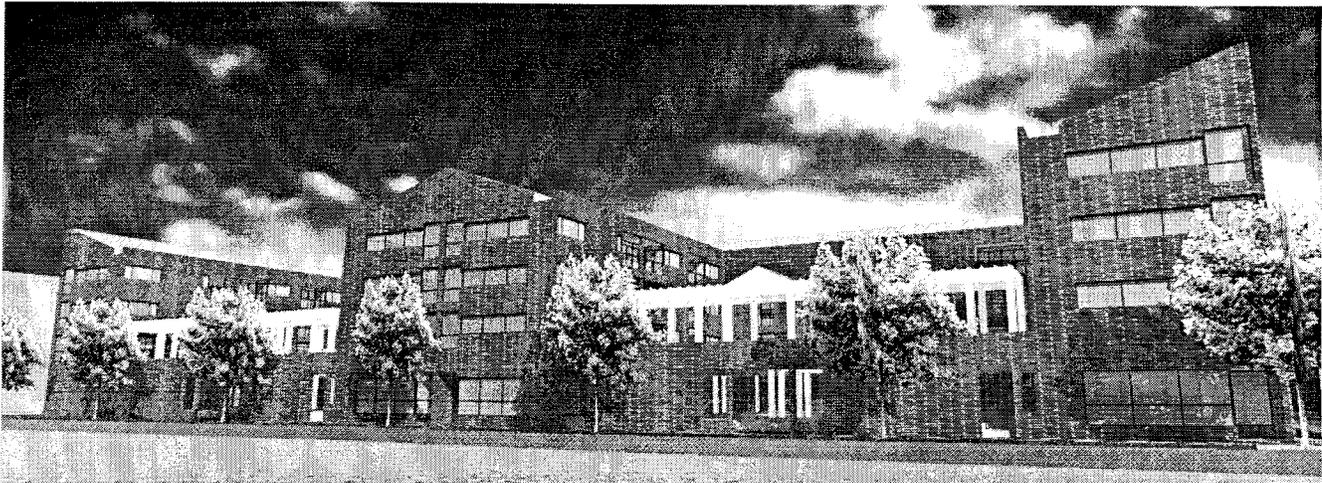


Fig. 7. View from across Main Street looking north at proposed housing block

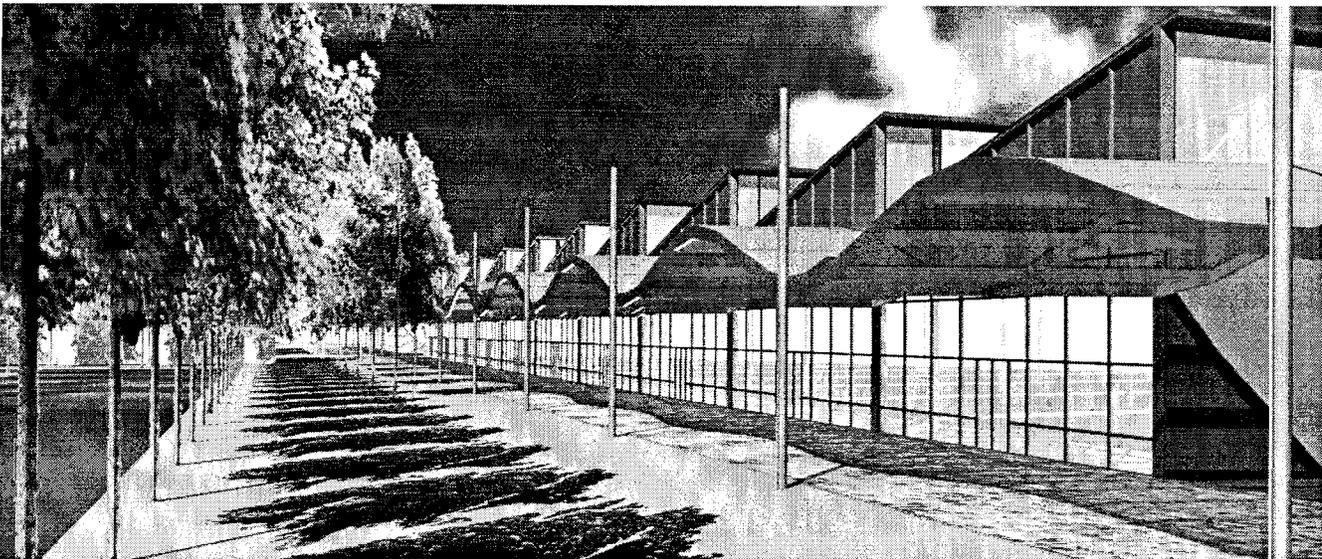


Fig. 8. View of Marketplace Row from parking area within treed greenway connection.