MOVING TENNESSEE FORWARD
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“Eventually everything connects – people, ideas, objects… the quality of the connections is the key to quality per se…”  Charles Eames

In the long history of the human race, the idea of the city has continually existed as an unfulfilled possibility. Just as no designer has solved the ‘problem’ of the chair, no civilization has solved the ‘problem’ of the city. All actual cities are latent with potential and continually evolve.

For nearly twenty years, the College of Architecture and Design at University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has been involved in the future of Nashville. Beginning in 1995, UT professor Mark Schimmenti began travelling from Knoxville to Nashville to teach classes on urban design. Students from those classes came away with a heightened awareness of qualities fundamental to great cities and discovered the unrealized potentials in the neighborhoods and public places of their own city. Determined to make a difference in what their city could become, they formed the Nashville Urban Design Forum. By 2000, following recommendations from a task force initiated by former mayor Bill Purcell and recommendations from leading citizens and the design community, a downtown center, the Nashville Civic Design Center was established with Professor Schimmenti as its first design director.

Through an intensive summer urban design studio, Professor T.K. Davis, who followed Schimmenti as Design Director of the NCDC from 2004–2008, continues to engage UT Knoxville architecture students in the evolving design and development of Nashville. Working from a studio situated in the NCDC, students discover the challenges of participatory planning, an approach they would not typically encounter in an architecture curriculum. Working together with citizens from diverse backgrounds, they learn how to clearly communicate ideas to non-professionals, how to work collaboratively, and how to build a consensus while being immersed in a living laboratory—the actual environment of the city.

In addition to learning new design skills through community engagement, students in UT Knoxville’s Nashville Studio have also had the opportunity to connect ideas developed in their studies to real-life problems. The combination of academic rigor and civic responsibility has become an essential component of our college’s partnership with the NCDC. Knowing they are actively serving the community through the practical application of their ideas makes a difference in their education: when healing a neighborhood is the object, there is a certain edge, immediacy, and authenticity to the work.

The visions that transform a city take time. Urban plans, in contrast to singular buildings, often look 50 years or more into the future. Alvar Aalto’s Helsinki civic center plan of 1961 is a case in point. By the time Aalto, one of the most celebrated architects of the modern movement, was commissioned by the city of Helsinki to design Finlandia Hall in the mid-1960’s he had already completed a long range plan that envisioned a string of cultural buildings along Töölöölahti Bay near the city center. When the Finlandia Hall was finally completed in 1971 it stood alone. It continued to stand as an isolated object for many years, the front façade facing a main thoroughfare in the city and the rear fronting a bleak view of a neglected urban landscape used as a rail yard. Aalto knew that influential figures who had the power to shape the city—politicians, financiers, and developers—would be frequently in attendance at the concert hall. In a clever architectural maneuver, in the grand space of the foyer adjoining the main concert hall, he designed a series of floor to ceiling openings that provided compelling views of a barren
urban area littered with broken train cars behind the building. For years—for an entire generation—nothing happened on the conspicuously neglected site between the long eastern façade of Finlandia Hall and the western edge of Töölönlahti Bay. Then, after more than twenty years, the other cultural buildings Aalto envisioned started to appear: first the Opera House in 1993, then the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1998, and then the Music Center in 2011. Now, 50 years after Aalto’s first master plan was realized, the bleak landscape that was once behind Finlandia Hall is in the process of becoming “Finlandia Park”. Action took shape through foresight, through time.

The example of Aalto in Helsinki (where the University of Tennessee’s College of Architecture and Design has a thriving study abroad program) is simply this: for long range plans to work, there needs to be a vision so clear, so compelling, and so concise that it inspires others, even a multitude of others to become stewards of the work.

Urban design does not always begin with a monumental vision, but it does need to have an uncomplicated foundational principles. Eight times zones west of Helsinki, in Nashville, the NCDC has been working to elevate the quality of their city and its connections to the metropolitan area. In a relatively short time the NCDC has overcome inertia by engaging a cross section of citizens, through community participation, in a long-range plan. Their first document, the Plan of Nashville, illustrated not only a 50 year vision for the city, but a set of principles and the process that guided their establishment. This new book, Moving Tennessee Forward, specifically identifies and proposes action in six areas essential to Nashville’s future.

That an architect should be able “to design anything from a spoon to a city,” is one of the most provocative thoughts emerging from the modern movement. The University of Tennessee’s connection and commitment to the Nashville Civic Design Center provides our college with the opportunity to do just that.