

AIA Chattanooga Finds Its Calling

The component formed a committee, composed of two older, experienced architects, two young architects, and a member of the public, to identify what type of project we could do that would benefit our community. We initially came up with a list of about 15 projects, and then narrowed that list down to two: encouraging our local school system to build "high performance" schools using guidelines developed by AIA Chattanooga, or addressing the issue of homelessness through affordable housing and initiatives developed by AIA Chattanooga. We felt that, eventually, the schools would somehow solve their own problems but that the homeless issue would never be *solved*, only *treated*.

We struggled with what the actual project would be if we chose the homelessness issue. But, while we were struggling, the mayor of Chattanooga announced that the city was purchasing the old "Farmers Market" site in downtown to create a place to house and serve the homeless. Suddenly, it was obvious what our project was!

The Farmers Market is immediately adjacent to the MLK neighborhood, which has undergone significant revitalization in recent years. The committee was concerned that if the Farmers Market site was not planned and designed correctly, it could negatively affect this neighborhood. We decided that our mission was to assist the city with planning and design in order to create a "urban place" that would fit into the fabric of this neighborhood and continue its revitalization.

We presented our idea to the mayor less than a week after he made his announcement. Chattanooga's mayor, Ron Littlefield, is a former planner and completely understood and shared our concerns. He accepted our offer immediately and very enthusiastically. We then met with our county mayor, Claude Ramsey, about this project. Though the project is clearly within the city of Chattanooga and will be a city project, we found that Mayor Ramsey and Hamilton County also have significant concerns about the homelessness issue. Their jurisdictions pay for indigent care and also for incarcerating the homeless in the county jail, thus costing taxpayers money.

The city of Chattanooga has enthusiastically endorsed the AIA's involvement. We have been "assigned" to Al Chapman, director of Faith Based and Community Partnerships, and have also been working closely with the mayor's communication director, Michelle Michaud. Both of them have taken to this project personally and have gone well out of their way to allow us to assist them and the city. They completely understand the purpose of AIA150 and have been more than cooperative in using their media clout to expose the AIA to the community.

As our committee began to research agencies and people involved with the homeless, we found there are literally hundreds of agencies trying to address the issue. And we found out very quickly that coordinating and obtaining consensus would be a big issue—something architects are good at. We also found that although the mayor had a vision for the project, there really was no program and, in fact, all of the agencies seemed to be competing somewhat for involvement. So we, in conjunction with the Homeless Coalition, became the programmers for the project.

The MLK Neighborhood Association has many legitimate concerns about suddenly dropping most of Chattanooga's homeless population into their neighborhood. The mayor scheduled a neighborhood meeting to address their concerns. However, without a program and no design work, he had nothing to show them and little to talk about except to try to allay their concerns. The AIA offered to hold a charrette to program the project and ultimately come up with drawings for the mayor to show the neighborhood association.

With less than one week's notice, the AIA, with the help of the Chattanooga Planning and Design Center, held a charrette. AIA Chattanooga bought lunch and approximately 30 people attended. Though we had asked the mayor only to begin the meeting with his vision, Mayor Littlefield cancelled two appointments and stayed for the entire process.

From this charrette, the consensus was to create a "park-like atmosphere" that would not only provide housing and services for the homeless but also re-create the farmers market, which is sorely needed in Chattanooga. The plan would include a significant amount of open space and a playground. The charrette also envisioned retail stores lining the streets, providing opportunities for small businesses and artists to sell their wares in small, shed-like structures that would be topped with photovoltaic panels to provide electricity. The main idea is to fully integrate the facility into the city so that the homeless can maintain their dignity and interact with other city residents.

After the charrette, the city's media machine went to work. The AIA had exposure on all three local network news stations, on the radio, and in print. At every opportunity, Mayor Littlefield has gone out of his way to mention architects and AIA Chattanooga. The publicity has been incredible. We have received calls from more agencies wanting to get in on the project and also from a local reprographics firm offering to donate all printing associated with the project.

When I attended the first champions training session in November, I really wasn't sure I understood or appreciated what the AIA was trying to do with the AIA150 Blueprint for America program. However, after returning from DC and reflecting on how the Blueprint could positively impact so many communities and the image of architects, I began to believe this could be the greatest thing AIA has ever done. Based upon the results and success we are having here in Chattanooga, I am now convinced it is!