Chattanooga: A Reinvented City

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Signed: James Spencer
Date: 11-28-01

Comments (Optional):

The redevelopment of Chattanooga is widely known as a success story. Different people and organizations are putting themselves forward as the reason for the success. Ms Stettler has done a good job of investigating a complicated story and presenting her findings with focus and clarity. Her report reflects good insight into the city of Chattanooga, the nature of its problems, and the dynamics of the forces at work throughout its transformation.
Chattanooga: A Reinvented City

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December 15, 2001
Abstract

In today’s urban realm the process of urban redevelopment is implemented by cities to create a livable city out of one that is suffering from the loss and deterioration of industry. The purpose of the program is to improve the quality of life in the cities by focusing on downtown development, waterfront development, and neighborhood improvements. The Chattanooga redevelopment process is mainly a business-dominated strategy that focuses on downtown development, including the Tennessee Aquarium, public parks and pavilions, 3-D Imax Theater, and a Creative Discovery Museum. The Chattanooga plans also included the renovations and upgrades of several downtown neighborhoods with an emphasis on historic preservation.
Purpose

My purpose for this project was to use the knowledge gained through my study of Urban Studies and Architecture to analyze Chattanooga and the success of its revitalization process.
Introduction

Many central cities in the United States are suffering a large decline as a result of the changing economy, older infrastructure, and trends in increased suburbanization. Chattanooga is a city that has been through many changes from its origins as an industrial center and now its development into a service center. Also, Chattanooga is a successful example of a city implementing a revitalization plan that has successfully turned the economy around and brought reinvestment back into the downtown area. Although Chattanooga has proven as a prime example of the ability of a city to reinvent itself, each city is unique and Chattanooga's methods cannot be universally applied to other cities whose downtown regions are in decline.
Chattanooga: A Reinvented City

Chattanooga, Tennessee is a city that is located in the Inland South Region of the United States along the Tennessee River at the base of the Appalachian Mountains. Historically, the image of the Southern economy is strongly entrenched, nondiversified, and known as an economically depressed region that is known for its agricultural emphasis (McKnight 193). However, since the 1940’s there has been a decline in the role of agriculture and an increase in the diversification of the economy of the South (199). Also, in even more recent history, there has been an increase of employment in the service industries (199).

I. History of Chattanooga

The Chattanooga area was first inhabited by the Chickamunga Indians. As a result, even the name “Chattanooga” stems from Indian origins. The Choctaw Indians lived on the southern bank of the river and the area was called Choctaw-town. Choctaw-town later developed into Choctawnooga (Walker 10), because “Nooga” is the Cherokee name for town or place (10). As time progressed the name Choctawnooga developed into Chattanooga (10), which became the official name of the city in the mid 1800’s.

The region remained remote for years after the settlement of the United States for several reasons. One reason for late settlement was the amount of difficulty in getting to the region because of the surrounding mountains and poor
transportation methods. However, access could be gained through travel along the Tennessee River, although this method of transportation had its own perils. For instance, the Chickamunga Indians preyed on the property and lives of the settlers who tried to travel along the river. In 1780, the area was considered so remote that by Presidential Proclamation a warning was issued to all of the residents within the region that they lived there at the risk of life and property (Walker, 5). Since the region was home to both the Cherokee and the warring Chickamunga Indians, settlers were unable to occupy Chattanooga until relations with the Indians improved.

The first white settlement in the Chattanooga area was a mission. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions established the Brainerd Mission in 1817 with the purpose of educating the Cherokee children. The mission played an important part in the advancement of the communication of the Cherokee Indians, by aiding a crippled Cherokee Indian silversmith, named Sequoya. With the help of the mission, Sequoya developed the Cherokee alphabet, which allowed the Cherokees to communicate on paper like the “white men” (Walker 8).

Shortly following the establishment of the mission, the first settlement of traders was founded on the land known as St. Elmo (9). John Ross and his brother founded the small trading post along the Tennessee River in 1828 (9). John Ross was one eighth Cherokee and the following year became the Chief of the Cherokee Nation (9). Trading at this location between the white men and the
Indians became very active and the relations with the Cherokee were so good that white settlers began to make this a permanent home, called Ross's Landing. The name was later changed to Chattanooga when the city opened its first post office and Ross’s Landing did not describe the progressive city that Chattanooga was to become.

II. Transportation in Chattanooga

Several events that have been responsible for Chattanooga’s growth are related to transportation improvements. The first growth experienced by Chattanooga was in part due to the ferry started by Bill Gentry when the area was still the trading post known as Ross’s Landing. The ferry brought in white traders and eventually settlers when the area became prosperous from trade between the Indians and white men (9). The second transportation investment that opened Chattanooga up to increased settlement occurred in 1849 when the area was chosen as a desirable point by the railroads. One hundred years after Ross’s Landing the area was the site of several trunk lines for railroads that connected Chattanooga to Memphis, Atlanta, Charleston, and Nashville. Also, as a result of the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1933 the river became a more navigable, and dependable waterway for heavy freight (http://www.chattanooga-chamber.com, 17). Another benefit of the TVA was the reduced number of massive floods on the Chattanooga banks, thus enabling more permanent settlement without so much risk.
The most recent transportation movement that made Chattanooga an extremely accessible city is that the city is connected to the rest of the country by three major interstate highways. These transportation improvements have counteracted one of the original reasons for late settlement of the region, poor accessibility.

**III. Industry in Chattanooga**

In contrast to many of the other cities within this region, Chattanooga developed as an industrial center during the late 19th century while many other southern cities boomed as a result of their agricultural emphasis. Even the little manufacturing that did exist in the Southern Region was mainly limited to the piedmont of North Carolina and existed with little diversification of production. However, Chattanooga was an exception to the rest of the South. One of the reasons for Chattanooga’s industrial base is due to its geographical location, Chattanooga supplies 53 of the 63 basic ingredients needed for manufacturing (Walker 31). In addition to this, the fact that Chattanooga is located within about
500 miles of half of the United States population and connected to the rest of the country through interstate, railway, and river travel makes Chattanooga a great location for the manufacturing industry. Also, as a result of its southern location Chattanooga’s manufacturing emphasis benefited from a large supply of cheap labor, cheap production costs, cheaper taxes, and lower land costs.

However, Chattanooga today has little industrial focus left as the main source for its economic growth. Chattanooga’s industrial base suffered the same effects as the Rust Belt of the north east and was no longer able to support the economy for a couple of reasons. The methods of production and machinery were outdated and increasingly being replaced by cheaper and more modern products from Europe and other parts of the world.

![Figure 2: The smokestack surrounded by new growth demonstrates the remnants of prosperous industry succumbed by Chattanooga’s new growth.](image)

Another reason was that much of the industry in Chattanooga was “heavy” industry, which was dirty, smoky, and a noise producing activity. The industry in Chattanooga had trouble meeting new environmental standards. As a result,
Chattanooga along with the economy of many cities in the United States and we, as a society, are moving towards more service-based economies.

**IV. Central Business District of Chattanooga**

Also, in concurrence with many other cities in the United States, the central business district of Chattanooga has been in decline. There are several reasons to account for this decline. For example, over the past 50 years central cities have been developing more slowly than suburbs, the United States is the only country with the majority of its population living in the suburbs. Also, there is no longer the need for the population of a city to go to the central city to shop and a decreasing need to go there to work. The central city used to be the gathering point for all of the daily needs of the population, however, as the population has moved to the suburbs so have the businesses, even the manufacturing business that have benefited from the location of the inner city of Chattanooga along the River have moved to the outskirts of the city. This movement away from the central city was first made possible by the trolley and was later made even easier with the invention of the automobile. With the decline of the number of businesses in the central business district and the declining need for the types of businesses that have been successful in Chattanooga's past there is a need to find a new purpose for Chattanooga as a central city, a need to reinvent itself.

**V. Change in Chattanooga**

The beginning of Urban Renewal in the U.S. resulted from an effort that began after WWII through the Housing Act of 1949 (Wilson, 180). The emphasis
of the program was on slum clearance, and in Chattanooga resulted in an expansion of the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga's campus and clearance of the land west of the Central Business District to US 27. The national program received a bad reputation as the result of the displacement of a large number of poor, inner city residents. As a result, the program was ended in 1974 after becoming the largest urban program in U.S. history. Today, new redevelopment programs focus more on restoration and preservation of key characteristics of downtown areas.

The revitalization of Chattanooga began as a twenty-year effort to reorient the city to its river-site origins (http://www.chattanooga-chamber.com, 18). One of the goals for Chattanooga’s urban revitalization program was to increase the awareness of the special qualities brought to the downtown environment by historic resources (http://www.cherpa.org/dchistory.htm, 1). Also, the goals

Figure 4: One of the historical assets featured in Chattanooga is the Native American Museum. included an intention to have all built structures contribute to the public realm aesthetically and physically.
The need to engage the city by establishing a central business district and then to connect the city to the river, where the city originated was another focus of the program (1). In addition, the program aimed to utilize the city’s assets to create a new need for Chattanooga as an urban center.

Chattanooga as a city has a collection of many and varied assets, the main asset being its location. The location is an attribute to the city for many reasons. The city was early recognized as the “natural gateway to the South” (Walker, 13). Even the Indians realized, at an early date, the benefits of Chattanooga’s location when they settled in the region. The region first prospered as trade center due to its location along the Tennessee River. The benefits of Chattanooga’s location increased with new transportation technology that connected Chattanooga to the rest of the country. As a result, Chattanooga has long had a strong logistics industry due to the surplus of transportation possibilities (http://www.chattanooga-chamber.com, 19). Also, the location adds a large amount to the quality of life in the region. Chattanooga is framed by the mountains, which add a scenic beauty
and an outdoor life that isn’t available in all parts of the south. The surrounding environment allows for those with urban centered jobs to feel a part of a more natural environment (http://www.chattanooga.gov/about.htm, 1). Also, the city has incorporated several inner city parks to enhance the beauty of the public realm.

Figure 6 & 7: Chattanooga has included parks to enhance the public realm within the city.

With the mountains and the river there is a surplus of outdoor activities such as hang-gliding, bass fishing, mountain climbing, and caving expeditions that add an additional level of benefits to the city (1). Other benefits of Chattanooga are low wage rates, taxes, and utility costs (http://www.chattanooga-chamber.com, 18). The area also has an overall cost of living that is almost 4% below the national average (18).

The steps towards change in Chattanooga began with a change in attitude towards new business. For many years the old families and generational businesses of Chattanooga tried to keep any new business ventures out of the area to maintain their standing within Chattanooga’s economy. These leading families were anti-union, anti-foreign investment, and against anyone who did not already have ties to the region (23). Finally, when these family holdings eroded and some
of the companies closed or were sold to national chains the tune toward new economical investment changed from “Keep ‘em out” to “Bring ‘em on” (23).

VI. Plans for Revitalization in Chattanooga

Planning for the revitalization of downtown Chattanooga began with a private visioning process headed by Ron Littlefield. Chattanooga has large endowments, such as the Lyndhurst and Beniwood Foundations, from its past industrial successes, which allowed for many of the ideas and hopes of the city to become reality. According to Joe Guthrie of the Southeast Tennessee Development District, “at one time, the money from these foundations totaled more than the funding for the state of Virginia.” Economically speaking, the revitalization process reflected a belief that if the environment were suitable businesses would come. Joe Guthrie said that in accordance with this belief, “the incoming of new business was slow at first, but once they began settling in core facilities others began to follow like dominos.” When asked what public agencies had done to aid the investment of small businesses, Joe Guthrie stated that other than a few private agencies, such as River Valley Partners, which acquired small areas of land and made them suitable for and sought out private investment, little was done to seek out new investment. Many of the large investments in the downtown area were solely private ventures with the exception of the conference hotel, which was a joint city-private venture. Also, the majority of the public facilities within the revitalization plan were funded through foundations and thus made them more possible and less risky for the tax base of the city.
The first action plan that included physical changes to the city began in 1982 with the Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan that came to completion in 1985 (http://www.cherokeepa.org/dchistory.htm, 1). This plan’s goal was to complete a link of public pedestrian traffic and outdoor recreation in the city, by building a public park system along 22 miles of the Tennessee River in an attempt to stimulate business growth and create a recreational emphasis in the area (1).

![Figure 7 & 8: Chattanooga incorporated several bridges and walkways along the river to create a recreational emphasis in the area, including the nation’s longest walking bridge, Walnut Street Bridge (Figure 7).](image)

At about the same time, Stroud Watson, the director for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, School of Architecture and Design satellite studio in Chattanooga, initiated a program for the guidelines of Miller Park (1). This plan was for the design of a 5 block mixed use development on existing surface parking lots in the center of the city (1). In 1986, a plan was devised to introduce a public park based on the history and culture of the city at Ross’s Landing (1).
Figure 9: Historic markers sit in the place of origin of Chattanooga, Ross’s Landing and several other places along the River walk.

During 1987, the plans for the Tennessee Aquarium, the focal point of a majority of the redevelopment scheme, were initiated (1).

Figure 10 & 11: The Tennessee Aquarium, a major focus of Chattanooga’s revitalization.

In 1988, the Miller Plaza Project was built in accordance with the Miller Park Guidelines that were established in 1982 to build a public park, and a pavilion with an entertainment emphasis (2). The Streetscape Program followed in 1990 to “improve the quality of the public realm” (2).
In 1992, guidelines were established for Kirkman Site Development at Ross’s Landing. This plan called for a 3-D Imax Theater, a Residence Inn, and a Creative Discovery Museum that created "an entirely new public edge that incorporated heavy landscaping, reinforcing the city’s only street to directly link to the River" (2).

A broad plan for the City’s direction was stated in 1993 in The North Shore Plan that targeted future development on the northern edge of the River, including a community theater and a park (2).
In 1994, the Downtown Housing and Overlay Zone Guidelines focused on the issue of housing in downtown and governmental controls on development that allows developers to build true urban projects by bypassing zoning regulations (2). The Southside Plan was developed as a “comprehensive revitalization strategy to reinvest in the Southside District” (3). The plan incorporated the creation of job opportunities, housing, and an increased effort to retain the existing residents in the area (3). In 1998, the Rustville, Fort Negley, and Jefferson Heights Neighborhood Plan for the Southside District was to involve community participation in combination with Dover Kohl & Partners, Urban Design, to provide a “framework for the redevelopment of the Southside District, including three historic neighborhoods” (3).

**VII. Implementations of Plans and Success of Chattanooga**

The implementation of the majority of the plans was possible through joint efforts of public/private investment and partnership. It began with a grant from the Lyndhurst Foundation to establish a laboratory for students of The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, College of Architecture and Design in Chattanooga,
directed by Stroud Watson (1). The idea for the program developed from the desires of the local architectural community to have the students focus their design projects on the Chattanooga area. The Design Center, an office of the Chattanooga/Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency, is funded and jointly staffed by the Mayor of Chattanooga, River Valley Partners, Inc., the Lyndhurst Foundation, and the UTK, College of Architecture and Design (http://www.chcrpa.org/funding.htm, 1).

There are several factors that contribute to Chattanooga’s success. One of the main reasons for the success of the plan stems from the fact that the combination of plans was so complete and comprehensive. The plans involved focus on housing, the economy, the aesthetics of Chattanooga, preservation of the historical areas, and an emphasis on a new purpose for the city. A large portion of this new focus for the city was to create the city as a tourism and service center. This was done partly through the addition of a world-class aquarium, a 3-D Imax theater, a community theater, and the Creative Discovery Museum. The plans were also well compiled in the fact that they utilized the existing attractions of the region such as its history, while at the same time creating a new need through new attractions. The new plans accounted for new additions to the Central Business District, while complimenting existing infrastructure and maintaining the ideals and history of the city. In addition, the new plans called for the addition of several city parks and other beautification features that added to the overall appearance of the city and drew attention to Chattanooga’s best feature, the River.
Today Chattanooga is the fourth largest city in Tennessee and has the most extensive affordable housing program in the nation (http://www.chattanooga.gov/about.htm, 1). The most remarkable aspect of the redevelopment of Chattanooga is that despite the number of different agencies, people, and time involved that they all were able to push toward one goal and accomplish that goal to benefit the city. The economy is no longer one of slow manufacturing decline, but one of a mix of manufacturing and service industries. The city itself has been awarded three national awards for outstanding “livability” and nine Gunter Blue Ribbon Awards for excellence in housing and consolidated planning (1).
Resources Used


<http://www.chattanooga-chamber.com> (12 February 2001)

<http://www.chattanooga.gov/about.htm> (22 April 2001)

<http://www.chcrpa.org/dchistory.htm> (23 April 2001)

<http://www.chcrpa.org/funding.htm> (22 April 2001)

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