

## Strategic Sites | Latent Ideas: Design Studio as a Platform for Activism

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**The hypothetical nature of a design studio course creates an ideal laboratory for testing new ideas for local communities. Students can learn from the challenges facing our cities, while their ideas can be of benefit to others.**

**In the spirit of “less talk, more action,” this presentation outlines a strategy for leveraging studio engagement in the realm of ideas, as a contribution to community conversations. This presentation looks at identifying ideas for strategic sites, as a practice for future action.**

**Too often, community engagement in architecture programs is assumed to be a type of beneficial design-build action. On the other hand, many schools have some form of community design center, with the accompanying challenges for funding and accountability to partners.[1] Instead, this presentation focuses on exploring design ideas within the learning environment of the design studio. In a more agile way, the typical design studio can pro actively address community issues and challenges. Positioning design studio work as contributing to a public conversation for future change involves a two-part strategy. First, in structuring the studio challenge, the faculty member must identify strategic sites that have the potential to impact change with design ideas relevant to current community issues. Second, the work itself has to extend beyond the hermetic environment of the school: input sessions, public reviews, community meetings, press releases, exhibitions, and publications are all necessary to position valuable work within a broader context.**

**This presentation represents my third year studio design work in Knoxville, over the last ten years. Design ideas for strategic sites can spark long term, transformative change for a neighborhood, town, or city. Perhaps, this can be of value for studio work in similar areas.**

**Analysis and design are complementary strategies for creative thought in design thinking. Creative analysis of a strategic site, in the context of community concerns, can reveal latent design ideas through speculative design explorations.**

### QUALITIES OF STRATEGIC SITES

The studio critic frames the terms of engagement, through crafting the issues and learning agenda within the design studio.

Typically, in a design studio, the selection of a viable site is both a critical and irreversible decision. When the goal of a design studio is to engage in a broader, relevant, community discussion, the selection of the site is even more prescient. All sites are not equal, and strategic sites offer more latent potential than others.

As a platform for pedagogy, the strategic site might have any of the following characteristics:

- The site is currently undervalued or under utilized.
- The site might suffer from conventional assumptions.
- A crisis or dramatic change might transform the value and identity of the site.
- The site has the potential to be a catalyst, transforming its surroundings.
- The site might align with current issues, community goals and priorities.
- The site might be an inherently important location: at an edge, a cross roads, or connector area, or near important landmarks or geographic features.
- Latent ideas related to the site, its broader context, its potential, and its history can spark new ideas leading to future change.

The strategic site, then, demonstrates the transformative power of design. Initial research by the studio faculty member can identify such sites. Additional research within the studio can expand the identification of opportunities, through a better understanding of the context, public policies, funding structures, and impact of unintended consequences.

This presentation represents design work in Knoxville, a medium-sized city of 190,000 within a metropolitan area population of 890,000 in East Tennessee. Within a strong tradition of low taxes and property rights, state laws limit development incentives and often restrict the local governments’ planning ability. Without an income tax, state and local government are heavily reliant on sales taxes.

Typically, I have structured design studios in various strategic sites in order to demonstrate how private sector development might align with community issues, local government policies and infrastructure investment.

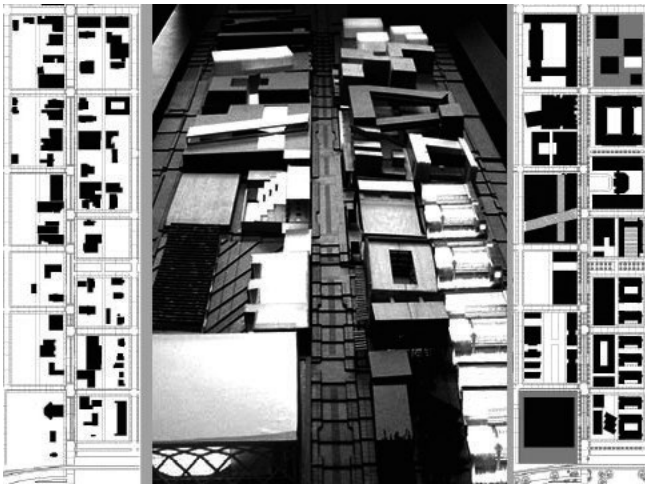


Figure 1. Cumberland Avenue existing and proposed design: 2008

### AN UNDERVALUED SITE SUFFERS FROM CONVENTIONAL ASSUMPTIONS: CUMBERLAND AVENUE

Serving as the primary entry to Knoxville’s downtown, Cumberland Avenue borders the University of Tennessee. This unattractive commercial strip welcomes visitors with gas stations, fast food stops, bars, and small stores, along with narrow sidewalks, slow moving traffic, parking lots, and exposed utilities. A 2003 campus master plan identified the street as a “town-gown” priority. While long identified as an eyesore, the collection of dozens of private properties and parking lots seemed beyond the scope of any kind of planning effort, especially with the existing single-use commercial zoning and parking requirements.

Understanding the latent potential for change along Cumberland Avenue was triggered by the realization that this was Federal Highway 11, eligible for federal highway funds targeted for community development. In a series of grants, the city explored ambitious infrastructure changes: traffic improvements with a reduction from four lanes to three lanes, wider sidewalks, new street landscaping, and buried utilities. The city developed a new form-based code for the Cumberland Avenue district, with goals to improve the overall pedestrian experience (including safety) and to enhance property values along the street.

Concurrent with these city efforts, I realized that the design studio could be an opportunity to demonstrate the implications of the preliminary form-based code. Each student took a block, programmed a building, and developed a design consistent with the code which called for street frontage and more density. The studio work helped elected officials and local stakeholders to visualize the district with larger buildings and more density. Engineering students also analyzed the traffic changes, demonstrating the counter-intuitive notion that traffic flows would improve with three lanes of traffic in place of four.



Figure 2. Cumberland Avenue, before completion with final landscaping: 2018.

While the studio work did not single-handedly create change, the work contributed to the public conversation about future change. A \$25 million public investment in infrastructure has helped leverage more than \$290 million in private investment. Safety metrics have improved. Property values have risen.

### AN UNEXPECTED CRISIS CREATES OPPORTUNITY: CREATIVE CIRCUIT ALONG JACKSON AVENUE

Arson sparked a dramatic fire which destroyed seven historic brick warehouses area north of Knoxville’s Downtown. The unsafe remains were demolished. Only a few months earlier, the city had acquired the properties after years of unsuccessful efforts to motivate the negligent owners to care for the severely deteriorating and abandoned warehouses. Thus, plans for renovation and development of this emerging area disappeared with the flames. Given the empty properties, the magnitude of new construction was now daunting.

The city engaged the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Advisory Services to consult and present ideas for four different areas in the city, including the Jackson Avenue site. Concurrent with the ULI process, my studio immediately explored the future potential of the area. It was our intent to speculate about future development, mixed uses, and infrastructure needs, including parking and street configuration.

Knoxville’s Downtown has been thriving since 2003, with the renovation and construction for almost 3000 seats in two theaters and seven cinemas, along with a developing restaurant and music scene. The warehouse fire just north of the Downtown presented an opportunity for a new district of development, with a distinctly different identity. An “Arts District” was often mentioned. The studio researched existing local resources, businesses, and opportunities, identifying the potential for this area of the city as a center for creative endeavors: a Creative Circuit.



Figure 3. Jackson Avenue warehouse district fire: 2014

Like many cities, a maker culture is evolving in Knoxville. In East Tennessee, traditional handcrafts has been redefined by new technologies related to robotic and computational design. Carpentry and metalwork have been transformed, as has quilting, fashion, furniture design, and ceramics. While Nashville might be the “Music City”, the music scene in Knoxville is a potential attractor, particularly with the role that AC Entertainment plays in nationally known festivals such as Bonnaroo and Big Ears. Finally, research also revealed a sense of synergy for “Hollywood South,” a downtown presence for four high profile entertainment entities headquartered in the Knoxville area: Regal Cinema, Bandit Lites, AC Entertainment, and HGTV.

Students studied best practices related to “Complete Streets,” most notably the proposal for “Creative Corridor: A Main Street Revitalization for Little Rock” by Stephen Luoni, Director of the University of Arkansas Community Design Center with architect, Marlon Blackwell. [2]

After a week of closed sessions with over 100 invited participants, the ULI Panel presented its recommendations for the four sites, including Jackson Avenue. Sketches of new brick buildings designed to evoke the 19th century warehouses disappointed many, due to the inauthentic approach. In stark contrast and six weeks later, the exhibit of our design studio work demonstrated a range of ideas. Our “First Friday” public exhibit attracted many key community leaders and over 300 individuals.

While the upcoming change in city elections has delayed decision-making for this district, the student ideas are well known and have already shaped public expectations.

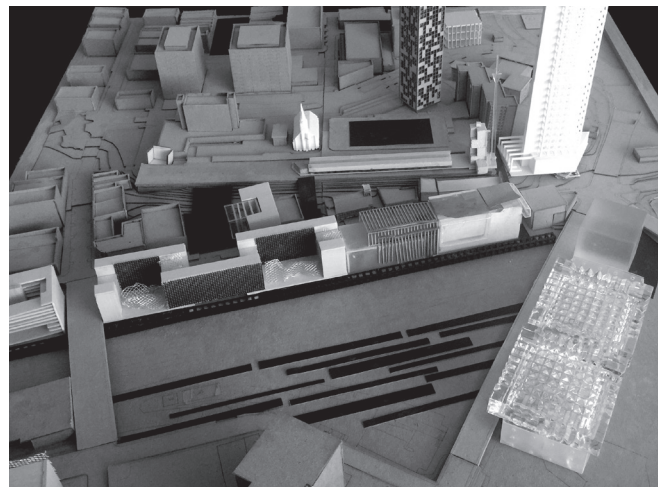


Figure 4. Creative Circuit along Jackson Avenue: design proposal: 2014

### **STRATEGIC SITES CAN ADDRESS EMERGING COMMUNITY CONCERNS, NEEDS, AND ISSUES: URBAN PLAY**

Designers can respond to community issues, through imaginative thinking and identification of strategic sites for new opportunities.

Termed “Urban Play”, my studio looked at new homes for two minor league teams in Knoxville: an ice hockey rink for the Knoxville Ice Bears, and a minor league baseball stadium.

The same ULI consulting visit had recommended the demolition of a 60 year old city-owned Coliseum with a viable performance auditorium and an outdated arena venue, which hosts events from tractor pulls to concerts. The NHL minor team franchise, the Knoxville Ice Bears, plays its home games here on a non-regulation sized rink, while spectators have poor sight lines. The recommendation to demolish a viable civic building in an African American part of town was controversial, yet the Knoxville Ice Bears clearly need a new facility.

Since 1954, Knoxville had been home to a minor league baseball team. In 2003, and after years of negotiating facility improvements with the city, the team owners surprisingly announced plans for a new stadium at an interstate interchange 30 miles to the east, in Sevier County. With major tourist attractions such as the Great Smoky Mountains and Dollywood, Sevier County had the resources to build a new stadium for the team. Knoxville lost its minor league baseball team. Rumors about bringing minor league baseball back to the city have persisted, especially with well-known business leaders involved.



Figure 5. Urban Play proposals: 2017. Shown clockwise from the lower left: location map, baseball stadium at the original home of the Knoxville Smokies, an ice arena near the Jackson Avenue district, and an ambitious proposal for housing, baseball stadium and a twin-rink community center to the east of the Downtown.

Seven strategic sites were identified for either the rink or a ball park, based on the following criteria:

- The land was under utilized and potentially available.
- The site could accommodate such a large facility.
- The new rink or stadium would be within a 15 minute walk of the downtown, or an emerging city neighborhood district.

By focusing attention on these apparently marginal sites, the studio design work demonstrated that the strategic sites could indeed accommodate the unique requirements for these large facilities. Further, the projects demonstrated how sports facilities could benefit their adjacent neighborhoods, while promoting commercial growth. [3]

The studio proposed a range of mixed uses beyond game day activities: 365-day commercial opportunities, housing, practice facilities, and using the venues for other activities.

Skepticism regarding public investment in sports facilities is well-founded. Economist Scott A. Wolla outlined many of these reservations, but did observe, “A potential new stadium also holds the promise of new development taking root nearby. Such development might include new restaurants and bars as well as condominium and office space.”[3]

With its SEC university sports, Knoxville has a strong fan base for sports, including the city’s long history with its former minor league baseball team.

While ice hockey in the South has limited appeal, the experience of the Nashville Predators is instructive. In order to build a fan base in its new home, this NHL franchise partnered to repurpose a dead mall with a practice facility and an additional rink for youth sports, club sports, public skating, and other events, along with a community center with basketball courts and a local library branch. Opened in 2013, the success of the ice center / practice facility has created so much demand for



Figure 6. Recode Burlington: a vision for 2040, completed in 2019. The Downtown Burlington X is a pedestrian center, with mixed use development along Magnolia Avenue, linking to a redesigned state fair grounds with a new ice arena.

skating time, that the Predators have completed construction for a second “twin-rink” facility, which opened in 2019.

Finally, unknown to most Knoxville residents, the Knoxville Ice Cubs under 18 youth hockey team was the national champions in 2014. The only hockey practice rink for the Ice Bears, Ice Cubs, and other club sports, is 30 miles south of Knoxville, near an industrial park. Bringing not only spectators, but youth skaters, and their families, to a facility within a downtown district could benefit the area, while helping Knoxville to retain its minor league hockey franchise.

Research into local opportunities reinforced the viability of new, unexpected opportunities related to minor league sports.

### **SMALL CHANGES CAN SERVE AS TRANSFORMATIVE CATALYSTS FOR A CRITICAL CONTEXT: RECODE BURLINGTON 2040**

In cities throughout the United States, single-use zoning is being questioned.[4,5] The city of Knoxville embarked on a three-year process to completely overhaul its zoning code. The new code can be a model for other medium-sized cities facing similar challenges of growth and sprawl.

With a future vision for an African American district in Knoxville, my studio helped citizens understand the long-term impact of a proposed major overhaul to the city’s zoning code.

Students ideas demonstrated the powerful latent potential of this small district, with its unique history as the business center of Tennessee’s first African American millionaire in the 19th century.

The exhibition of student work demonstrated three major strategies to promote affordable housing, made possible by the new code:

- Provide mixed use residential and commercial buildings along existing commercial corridors.
- Increase density with many new types of housing infill strategies.
- Create walkable neighborhood districts along future transit routes.

In 2017, the Burlington Residents Association developed a short-term vision to reinvigorate its small commercial district. This community input formed the initial basis for my studio design work. In addition to outreach with stakeholders, students researched best practices and policies related to affordable housing and community design.[6]

Each student adopted a site in the central commercial area of Burlington. Conforming to the new form-based code, they developed concepts related to mixed use buildings with commercial below and residential units above. Housing concepts included ideas for micro-housing, live-work units, prefabricated units, and other strategies to support affordable housing and legacy business.[7]

Research regarding the Burlington area revealed a future plan to reconfigure the nearby interstate exchange, which proved to be a way to create a more direct “entry” to the district.

The existing small downtown was reconfigured with stronger walkability, improved vehicular traffic, urban art, and expanded public spaces for an existing public market, and pocket park. Along the major commercial boulevard, new mixed use residential and commercial buildings created a

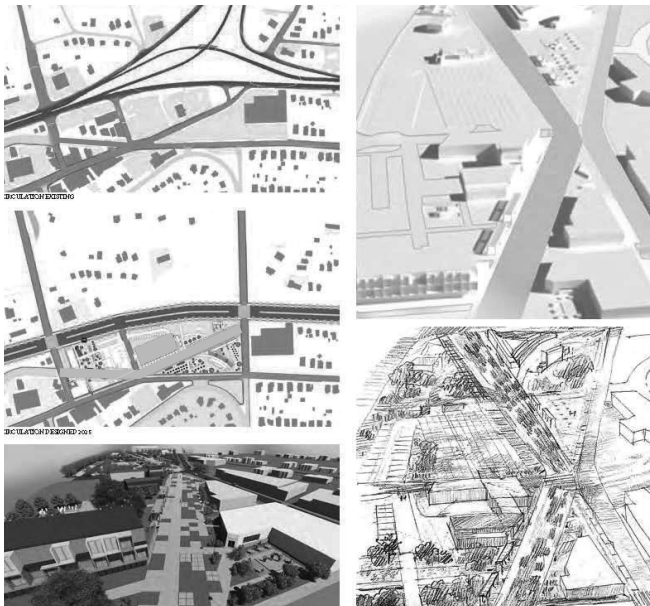


Figure 7. Short term proposals for downtown Burlington, 2019. Traffic analysis revealed opportunities for an improved entry to the business district. Redirecting redundant traffic lanes in the “Burlington X” creates a pedestrian promenade and public spaces.

robust walkable district. After public input sessions, students also developed strategies for workforce training programs and new job opportunities.

We also researched best practices to mitigate the negative impacts of gentrification.[8,9] As students engage a critical agenda, their work should be situated in a larger, nuanced social and economic context. Surprisingly, the 2018 federal tax bill includes incentives for affordable housing in opportunity zones.[10,11] These communities should anticipate this level of investment, with programs to mitigate potential negative aspects of gentrification by addressing displacement, legacy businesses, and residents’ needs.

During the semester, serious flooding in the adjacent state fairground reinforced the need for future stormwater management, with a major reconfiguration of the park. After public input sessions, the students responded to suggestions for public uses for the park area, including a twin-rink used for the Knoxville minor league hockey team, Knoxville Ice Bears. Not only would the facility be used only on game days, but 450 skaters in the Ice Cubs youth league, and their families, could energize the nearby Burlington commercial district. Proposing a home for the minor league and public rink facility was enthusiastically received. The city already owns the land, and a public/private partnership is viable. Furthermore, any government subsidies would also serve as an economic boost for the Burlington community.

The final design vision for Burlington in 2040 tripled housing density, from 1010 single family homes in the area to over 3000 units of housing, while moving 36 existing wood-frame houses on Magnolia Avenue. The new design ideas focused

on Burlington’s commercial district, while preserving the character of the neighborhood with small homes on tree lined streets, additional infill homes, accessory dwelling units, duplexes, and townhouses in available land parcels. Thus, the increased density made possible by the new code will counteract sprawl by reinforcing existing neighborhood districts.

The student design work, and subsequent public exhibitions, demonstrated the transformative effects of design ideas, for short-term and long-term change in improving affordable housing and walkable communities.

Once the design semester concluded, hundreds of stakeholders subsequently viewed four exhibitions, with multiple conversations regarding the work and its impact. In August 2019, the City Council approved Knoxville Recode, for implementation in January 2020.

Thus, in Burlington Recode 2040, a number of agendas were at play. Goals for the studio included:

- To help local citizens envision the long-term potential of Burlington as a thriving community, responding to residents requests for public space and better infrastructure.
- To help elected officials, citizens, and local professionals understand the application of the newly formulated “Recode Knoxville” in a specific demonstration project for mixed use buildings within the city.
- To encourage students to address complex, local community issues within an ethos of enhancing social justice through design.

## PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

Visualized in drawings, sharing design ideas with a broader community can engage interest and enthusiasm. This a first step in motivating action.

In the Burlington work, local residents were typically enthusiastic, curious, realistic, and skeptical. They realize that the city must invest in its infrastructure, and develop policies to guide change and help local residents retain their sense of community. Thus, residents become stronger advocates. Unintended consequences could be anticipated and critiqued. I recall a developer being fascinated by the concept of support for legacy businesses. Elected officials develop a more concrete grasp regarding potential policy decisions. These are learning opportunities for all involved.

The studio critic can also seek strategic partners who lay the groundwork for meaningful community partnerships and design study. Strategic partners might be influential leaders from citizen groups, non-profits, the private sector, the city staff, and/or elected officials. Informational meetings with key individuals lay the groundwork for the studio for exploring issues, identifying additional organizations or contacts. Further, this front-end work for a design studio engages curiosity in the project while setting the stage for follow-up opportunities with students and their studio design work.



Figure 2. Student events, reviews, input sessions and exhibits, typically with invited guests and/or open to the public. 2013 - 2018

As the studio design work unfolds, students benefit from research, analysis, and meetings with interested parties. During the design phase, input into student work enriches their designs. Academic reviews can help, as will visits to community residential associations and invitations for more informal feedback.

Although the conventional final jury seems like an ideal time to invite key individuals to view the impressive completed work, this can backfire. Busy individuals, along with curious citizens, can be surprised, confused, or discouraged by the length of a traditional academic jury. This might be the first and last time someone responds to an invitation which involves four hours of discussion.

As a complement to the traditional final review, I have discovered that a short “open-house” exhibit with “comments” can work well. In addition to a publicly announced event, personal invitations to a range of people are important, along with key information regarding the schedule: a 2-3 hour time period for a public drop-in, along with a specific 30 minute time for “comments” followed by “discussion with students.” The comment phase usually includes a short introduction of the process, followed by each student presenting a short 2-3 minute summary

of their work. The full scope of exploration is rapidly summarized, guests are typically curious to hear from students, while the students are surprisingly articulate in these elevator speeches. Informal, one-on-one discussions ensue, allowing for various guests to connect with the students and topics they are primarily interested in.

While student drawings can be fascinating, text is necessary to interpret the key work. Flyers, with simple metrics, also give the design a sense of value and magnitude.

I have typically had a “bottom-up / top-down” approach. Local citizens know their community best: open public events bring diverse perspectives and establish transparency. Conversely, elected officials and key leaders have the clout or ability to effect future change.

I have found that local elected officials value transparent processes which lead to public-sector decisions for development. The involvement of student work is considered a non-threatening way to bring ideas to the public, beyond the conference rooms of city staff, consultants and developers, with their own agendas. While students are not perceived as professionals, their motives for positive change are respected.

During the Burlington work, much discussion focused on affordable housing policies. Local city development incentives (tax deferrals) created twenty years ago are now expiring, and the city will see new sources of revenue. Perhaps, this might be guided to existing modest programs for community investment and an thirty-year old affordable housing trust fund.

Important conversations lie ahead, and design studio work can continue to spark interest, awareness, and imagination.[12]

### SERENDIPITY, CREDIBILITY, AND NETWORKING

The actual trajectory of the studio project is unclear at the beginning, but can unfold in a serendipitous way, with an emerging grasp of the design challenges and context. Like a detective trail, research can provide a series of provocative and unexpected clues. A certain agility in anticipating the unanticipated leads to new perspectives.

Student work can be inherently naïve, unpredictable, or unrealistic. When the work is framed as genuinely speculative, but informed by realistic challenges, the work definitely provokes discussions about “what if?” Even though I ask students to consider traffic, parking, and affordability, these mundane issues do not dominate design decisions, yet enhance the credibility of the studio in understanding the magnitude of community challenges. The speculative nature of studio work allows one to transcend banal concerns which can be initial impediments to change.

Gaining credibility is based on finding an appropriate balance between speculative, provocative work, and realistic parameters that might lie ahead. Once lost, credibility is hard to regain.

Over the years, I have benefitted from many personal contacts.[12] During my presentation at “Less Talk | More Action,” I was asked how new faculty might become more connected to their community. Local media, community websites and blogs are a good source of potential issues to explore in the design studio. Architects are typically very respected, so building on that respect works when contacting unknown individuals about potential projects. Connecting with the local profession is a way to find allies. Most city governments have professional staff members, who are knowledgeable and dedicated. Local organizations and businesses might have surprising histories and missions. Design faculty have the imagination to perceive these latent potentials.

### CONCLUSION

Designers must seek to understand, and respect, challenges confronting a community, including parameters related to citizen concerns, property owners, investors, and political nuances. This is not capitulation to the reality of status quo banality, nor a bottom-line mentality. Conceived critically within this respect for complexity, new ideas gain an authority that can provide a vision that motivates reciprocal action.

In the end, if architecture students and their faculty are to establish trust, demonstrate empathy, and establish credibility with the communities they engage, it seems we must resolve:

- To do more than show up as experts, but learn from each other.
- To engage in “active listening” that requires a common language.
- To exchange ideas as respectful partners, working towards common goals.
- To fearlessly generating ideas, and welcome input, critique, and advice.

Compromise is the territory between idealism and reality. Entering that territory is not a sacrifice of ideals, but can provide a basis for real action informed by ideas and ideals. Work in our design studios can impact our communities, through speculation of strategic sites combined with efforts to engage beyond the school itself.

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### ENDNOTES

1. In her 2018 book, *Resilience for All*, Barbara Brown Wilson outlines the scope of community-driven design, stating that more than 80 community design centers are operating today. While these design centers have many different missions and structure, many are embedded within schools of architecture.
2. Stephen Luoni, Director, University of Arkansas Community Design Center, and Marlon Blackwell, Principal MBA, *Community Creative Corridor: A Main Street Revitalization for Little Rock*, 2013
3. Scott A. Wolla, “The Economics of Subsidizing Sports Stadiums”, *Economic Research Journal*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, May 2017. <https://research.stlouisfed.org/publications/page1-econ/2017-05-01/the-economics-of-subsidizing-sports-stadiums/>
4. “As cities rethink single-family zoning, traditional ideas of the American Dream are challenged,” *Washington Post*, June 27, 2019.
5. For a comparison of ten cities, see Emily Badger and Quoc Trung Bui, “Cities Start to Question an American Ideal: A House with a Yard on Every Lot,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2019.
6. The East Tennessee Community Design Center (ETCDC) facilitated the visioning process with the Burlington Residents Association. In 1970, Knoxville architects founded the ETCDC, which is the fourth oldest still-running community design center. As an independent non-profit organization, the ETCDC has been loosely affiliated with the local American Institute of Architects (AIA), the University of Tennessee, and many other local entities for its pro-bono design work.
7. Brian Turner, “A Roadmap to Intangible Heritage in San Francisco: The Legacy Businesses Program”, Preservation Leadership Forum, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, July 31, 2018. <https://forum.savingplaces.org/blogs/brian-turner/2018/07/31/a-roadmap-to-intangible-heritage-in-san-francisco>
8. “Affordable Housing Task Force Findings and Recommendations” for the City of Pittsburgh, May 2016.
9. Luke Herrinem Jessica Yager, Nadia Mian, “Gentrification Response: A Survey of Strategies to Maintain Neighborhood Economic Diversity,” Furman Center, New York University, October 2016
10. Matthew Goldstein, Jim Tankersley, “Wall Street, Seeking Big Tax Breaks, Sets Sights on Distressed Main Streets,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2019.
11. JP Julien, Mike Kerlin, Ben Safran, and Rachel Schaff, “Making the most of US opportunity zones,” *McKinsey Company Report*, April 2019.
12. Organization that have helped my studio include: City of Knoxville, Knoxville -Knox County Planning, Knoxville City Council, East Tennessee Community Design Center, Knox Heritage, Knoxville Chamber Partnership, Knox County Community Development Corporation, and American Institute of Architects-East Tennessee,