

NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

Back to School

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One potential source of civic space in SoBro is also what the greater downtown area needs to enhance its residential prospects--an elementary school. Other cities in Tennessee have realized that a school is a crucial component in urban neighborhood building. They have constructed schools in the downtown area, not to meet the needs of current residents, but to attract a new residential population more varied than the typical empty-nesters and 20-somethings.

Memphis recently completed a new public elementary school in a developing urban village adjacent to its AAA baseball stadium and within easy walking distance of the historic Peabody Hotel. Chattanooga has gone Memphis one better, with two new public elementary schools.

The original proposal by the Department of Education of Hamilton County, which serves Chattanooga, was to build one K-5 magnet school for the approximately 400 children who were being bused several miles out. Chattanooga's urban revivalists had a more ambitious plan. They reasoned that with only one school, it would be filled on opening day, mostly with poor children. School superintendent Jesse Register didn't want to create a "school of poverty," and urban advocates wanted growing room for subsequent residential development. The solution was two magnet schools. To supply the additional funding, the private sector kicked in \$8 million.

To ensure a diverse student population and fill the classrooms until dwellings catch up with desks, the school system devised a special enrollment plan. Top priority for admission to the magnets goes to downtown residents, then to children of downtown workers.

Site selection was driven by the need to find land at low or no cost. One of the schools is located on city-owned property in Chattanooga's Southside, a once-blighted industrial and marginally residential area similar to SoBro.



Chattanooga's Battle Academy, built in 2003, offers an unique urban environment for an elementary school. Photograph, 2004: NCDC, Andrea Gaffney.

Battle Academy rests on 3.3 ACRES, considerably smaller than the typical 8-to-13-acre campus of a Hamilton County suburban school. The tight site required building up--two stories--rather than out; recesses are staggered because of the smaller playground, which also serves after hours as a public park.

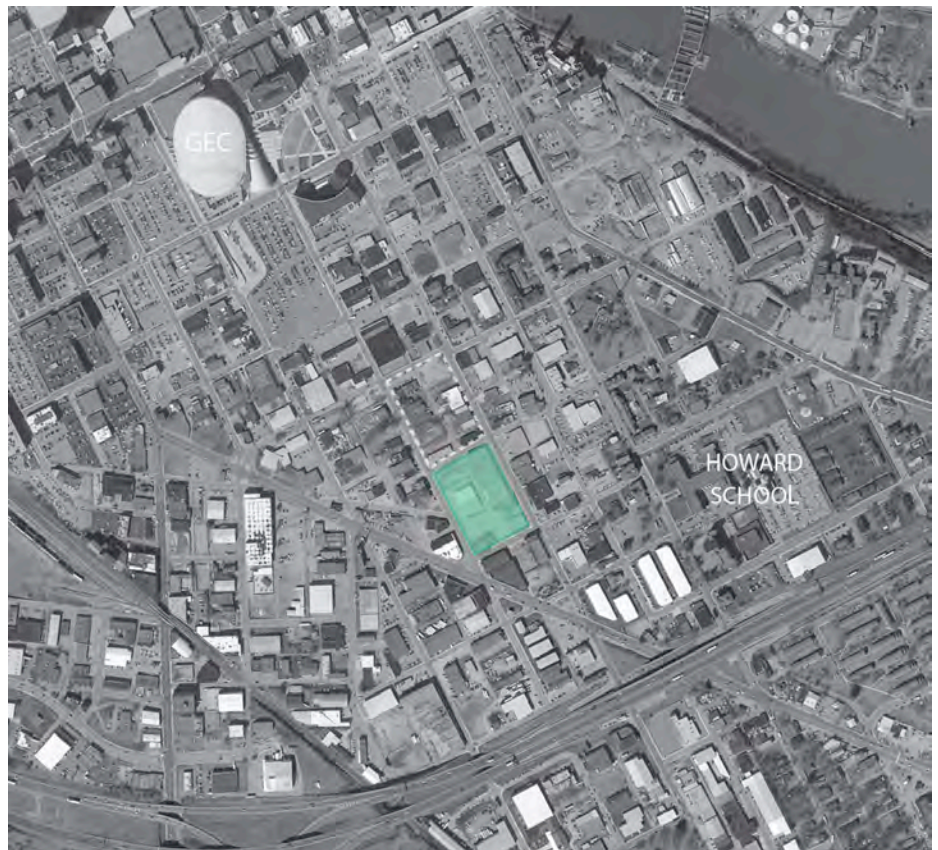
The second school, Brown Academy, stands on a still-smaller parcel: 2.5 acres owned by the University of Tennessee next to an abandoned rail corridor-turned greenway that is part of the playground. The constricted site caused the school to rise to three stories; parking is shared after school hours with the neighborhood, mostly university student housing. Both schools provide field experience for the university's education program.

SoBro seems a logical location for an elementary school to serve downtown. The district as a whole is easily accessed from the central city to the north, offers large amounts of undeveloped and under-utilized land, and is the site of cultural institutions that could partner with the school in educational programming. Much of SoBro lies

within the boundaries of Metro Development and Housing Agency redevelopment districts, giving the city the power to acquire land for a school.

The Board of Education's current guidelines for public elementary schools, however, call for a minimum lot size of five acres, with an additional acre for each 100 students. A typical Metro elementary school has approximately 600 students, which would mandate an 11-acre campus. Such guidelines were developed in response to the suburban condition of cheap land available in large parcels. Enforcing these guidelines in urban conditions would make the construction of a new school all but impossible, and unwise as well. A one-story, suburban-style school on a large campus would violate the traditional street grid of SoBro as well as the scale appropriate to an urban neighborhood.

On the other hand, a school of two or three stories of good urban design, with adjacent park and playground to be shared with the neighborhood, could spur residential development and create a more diverse population in SoBro. The examples of Memphis and Chattanooga show that, with sufficient collective will, there's a way.



Location for new elementary school and park in SoBro. White dashed line: school site; green: park space. Diagram over Photograph, 2004: Gary Gaston

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