

## **iQuilt: Corridors Of Culture Connecting City Arts, Culture With Walking, Cycling Routes**

Tom Condon June 21, 2009

Downtown Hartford is compact and generally attractive, but it doesn't feel that way. It feels disconnected and confusing, not woven together. Outside of Bushnell Park, much of downtown isn't inviting to pedestrians.

Downtown Hartford has a myriad of wonderful arts and cultural institutions, perhaps unmatched in the country for a city its size, but these tend to be known, and visited, individually. The parts don't equal the whole. The city doesn't have the arts reputation it deserves.

Can the iQuilt solve both problems?

The iQuilt is a plan to connect Hartford's cultural institutions with pedestrian and bicycling routes running from the Capitol and Bushnell Park to the river, and then enhance the area with physical and programmatic improvements. The idea will be rolled out at a meeting Wednesday at 5 p.m. at the Belding Theater at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts. It is worth your attention, and you will enjoy meeting the planner.

The folks who run the Bushnell got this going. Though the grand theater complex is somewhat isolated from the rest of downtown, its leaders have historically — and understandably — been wary of any plans that might interfere with the theater's shared parking agreement with the state.

But in 2007 they picked up a rumor — it turned out to be an old rumor — that the state was going to build a new office building somewhere around the theater. Bushnell CEO David Fay began to think that planning and parking weren't necessarily an either/or, that there might be ways to enhance the Capitol area without endangering the parking arrangement.

He put together a task force, met with interested parties, found a partner in the Greater Hartford Arts Council and went to look for a planner. His top deputy, the able Ronna Reynolds, went to the American Institute of Architects' website and immediately found an internationally known, award-winning architect and planner from Los Angeles with a familiar name. Doug Suisman, it turned out, is the son of Michael Suisman of West Hartford, "Mr. Bushnell," the longtime president of the theater's board of directors. Doug Suisman, not unlike his dad, is very bright, engaging, talented and civic-minded. He has designed cultural districts in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and elsewhere, and was happy to come back.

He returned with an appreciation for the "remarkably compact and clearly bounded" downtown Hartford. The square created by Buckingham-Charter Oak Avenue, the river, I-84 and the west side of Bushnell Park contains a "charmingly irregular "

street grid and a plethora of arts and cultural sites and institutions, nearly all a short walk from each other.

But hardly anybody thinks to walk from one place to another. People who go to dinner on Trumbull or Main streets often get back in their cars to go to the Bushnell. It is a few short blocks away. You'd walk ten times that distance in New York and not think twice about it. But the yawning open spaces in the park or along Capitol Avenue is not inviting. Suisman, building on earlier plans by Ken Greenberg and the Urban Land Institute, came up with the idea for a loose grid of walkways between the river and Bushnell Park that would connect the arts and cultural institutions with pathways, signs, lighting, exhibits and programs of various kinds.

The idea would be to get people used to the idea of walking and hanging out downtown, and making it comfortable for them to do so, said Kate Bolduc, new head of the arts council.

Having established the general idea, the iQuilt could spin off projects, such as redoing the once-elegant LaFayette Place between the Capitol and the Bushnell, reviving the riverine water feature in the park, which the Metropolitan District Commission has supported, and — this would really be cool — extending the park up through Gold Street to Main, and connecting it to the underappreciated Travelers plaza and building as well as the Wadsworth Atheneum.

The theory behind this is that once the public understands that there is a network of desirable attractions to be seen, the number and length of visits increases, economic development picks up, some of the empty lots are developed and Hartford starts getting hot. OK, warm.

Obviously, this now is just an idea. There's much to do to make it work this time, many issues to resolve, such as who will manage the iQuilt. Without someone being in charge, it becomes the "Connect the Dots" campaign of the 1990s, fun but with no staying power. With those caveats, here's why I like the iQuilt idea.

It gives Hartford a theme — arts and culture — to rally around. "New England's Rising Star" has been an effective external marketing campaign, but it doesn't tell anyone what is here. The city needs an organizing vision, a reason to get excited. The arts make the city cool, enhance quality of life, engage the schools, attract creative people, make it a good place to do business.

The iQuilt would bring some thought to planning the Capitol campus, something that has been missing for decades. It might also make it easier to bring more commuters into the city via commuter rail and busway. Also, it would get Hartford thinking about pedestrian-only zones, which are catching on in cities all over the world.

The wonderful new Science Center of Connecticut just opened. But if visitors are getting back in their cars and driving away after they've enjoyed Science Alley, Hartford is not gaining much.