

Hartford's iQuilt Needs A Main Street Component

July 18, 2010 Op-Ed by TONI GOLD

I recently attended an update on the iQuilt project — an ambitious urban design project with the goal of linking the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts — isolated in the state Capitol area from other Hartford cultural institutions — to those other institutions with walkable, programmed greenways through Bushnell Park and city streets all the way to the Riverfront, touching the Atheneum, the Old State House and the Science Museum on the way.

Hartford has a remarkable — and long under-appreciated — collection of cultural assets for a city its size. The iQuilt project is an attempt to leverage these assets to make downtown more compelling to visit and more inviting to economic development. The project is about to enter its design phase, and the Bushnell, which initiated it, is using its formidable fundraising capability put together the \$891,000 needed for this phase.

As one who has long seen the unrealized potential of Hartford's compact, rich downtown, and who advocates for the linking of transportation and land use as the key to smart growth and livable communities, this is an exciting project. The transportation mode that the iQuilt uses is walking, and the land uses it links to will enhance what we already have. What more could one ask?

But this good idea goes only so far. It lacks the multi-dimensional features and critical mass of a comprehensive economic development program, and it depends heavily on competent and intensive managing and programming of the public spaces that are to be created. Where will these key ingredients come from?

The missing pieces can be provided by integrating the iQuilt closely with a couple of other efforts waiting in the wings. One is a rethinking and redesign of Main Street — that 375-year old "road from Windsor to Wethersfield" as it is characterized on Hartford's earliest maps — to give the city an attractive spine and a consistent, less automobile-oriented character than it has today, and to showcase Main Street's wealth of historic and architectural assets. This project is also consistent with the plan of conservation and development.

The second project that should be closely integrated with the iQuilt is a study of a Main Street trolley line, tentatively proposed to run from the approximate area of Hartford Hospital and the South Green on the south end of downtown up to the area of Keeney Tower and the new public safety complex on the north end of downtown. This project would pull the north and south neighborhoods closer to downtown and to one another.

More and more, short-line streetcars running on rails (also called trams or trolleys) are being adopted by cities because they have proved to be catalysts for urban development in a way that buses have not been. Some 40 cities across the country have revived streetcars, which in many cases has induced the construction of a wide range of housing and other buildings.

These additional elements are what can make the iQuilt plan work. They also provide a couple of other components that the project needs. For one, they link what could be conceived as a precious piece of prettification by an elite cultural institution to a broader geographic and demographic constituency — essential for success in Hartford. For another, they link the project to a heftier economic development and housing agenda that will multiply the impact of the iQuilt.