Chattanooga, Tennessee, is nestled in the Tennessee River Valley, at the foot of the Cumberland Plateau. This medium-size industrial city provides an inspiring example of participatory city planning that has produced a clean urban environment, a vibrant economy, and strong social capital. Twenty-five years ago, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare named Chattanooga America's dirtiest city. Factory smoke trapped between the mountains gave city air the highest particulate count in the nation—dirtier, even, than Los Angeles. Per capita tuberculosis rates were three times the national average. Chattanooga Creek was so polluted by toxic waste from coke ovens and steel mills that the Environmental Protection Agency designated 4 km (2.5 mi) of it a Superfund site.

Social conditions declined along with environmental quality. As industries moved out and the upper class fled to the suburbs, the city was left with abandoned factories, boarded-up buildings, a declining tax base, unemployment, crime, and despair. The worst conditions were concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods, producing further frustration and social division.

In 1984 the city council, led by David Crockett—the great nephew of the famous frontiersman—started a series of town meetings to get residents talking about the city and its future. More than 1,700 people brainstormed ways to achieve clean air and water, jobs, affordable housing, personal safety, a place to fish, and somewhere to walk along the river. By giving everyone a voice, the process built community spirit and a broad base of support. Suddenly, people with energy and good ideas from every part of the city got involved.

Public-private partnerships led to nearly $800 million in investments (two-thirds from the private sector) and created 8,000 new permanent and temporary jobs. The Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise Corporation invested $60 million in affordable housing. More than 1,000 first-time home buyers obtained low-interest loans, while other residents got home-improvement help. By 1990 Chattanooga was in compliance with national air quality standards. Public transport is now widely used and efficient. The riverfront has been cleaned up. A 35-km (22-mi)-long riverfront park with walking and bike trails has been built along both sides of the river through downtown. Fountains, flowers, shade trees, street musicians, and outdoor festivals now fill the park. Property values have shot up, and people are moving back to the center city to take advantage of the recreational and cultural opportunities.

Using principles of urban ecology, the city has created a livable environment, a strong sense of community, and a flourishing economy. As David Crockett says, it is "a city that is cleaner, greener, and safer; that values human and natural resources; and that provides an economic system that will keep our children here."