

LOCAL

This famous architect's building was discovered in Knoxville, hiding in plain sight

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Knoxville News Sentinel

Nov. 17, 2025, 5:07 a.m. ET

Key Points

A brick building near downtown Knoxville is a prime example of industrial architecture. It turns out the designer was one of the best.

It's an unexpected find, and even more unexpected for Tennessee, where Albert Kahn's work is rare.

East Tennessee Community Design Center is working on a project to explore possible uses for the site.

Knoxville's industrial roots are a core part of its identity and visual landscape. Just outside the historic downtown, neighborhoods are defined by train tracks, warehouses and factories.

One of them turned out to be a masterpiece hiding in plain sight.

It was at a routine project meeting that a group discovered a prominent architect's name in the title block of some unassuming old blueprints. They had gathered at the building to review them and were suddenly awed by the warehouse's new significance as the work of [Albert Kahn](#).

'Shocking' Kahn discovery

A long time ago in Knoxville, Kahn designed a building for the Chevrolet Motor Company. And over the last 96 years, Knoxville forgot about it.

The recent revelation was a product of the East Tennessee Community Design Center's 2025-2026 [Community Collaborative](#), a project that explores possible new visions for old buildings or neighborhoods. This year's collaborative sites are the areas surrounding the old Sears building at 1000 N. Central St. and the Knox County Schools and Operations building at 900 E. Fifth Ave.

The latter, a commanding brick building with many windows, might have caught your eye from the front windows of Last Days of Autumn Brewery or on your way to the Cansler YMCA. Maybe you thought it was mundane, or maybe you saw something special in it – perhaps that signature Kahn style, although even to the experts, it wasn't obviously his work.

It was a "shocking" discovery, said Ted Shelton, a University of Tennessee professor who is involved with the project and was there that day.

"We were already admirers of the building," he told Knox News. "It's one of those things, when you see it, you go, 'Oh, that's what it is.' But you would never be able to work it back the other way and say, 'Oh, well, this obviously was that.'"

Kahn's work is uncommon in the South and he has just two other known works in Tennessee, according to a map of his projects on the Albert Kahn Legacy Foundation's [website](#).

While a 1929 Knoxville News Sentinel article about the recently completed building dwelt more on the building's practical uses than on Kahn himself, a United Press obituary that ran in the News Sentinel after the architect's death in 1942 described him as a "noted industrial architect who has designed hundreds of factories" and "generally regarded as the nation's leading designer of mass production structures."

What's next for Knoxville's Kahn building?

The Community Collaborative will take into account its historic significance as it explores possible future uses in a process that begins with research and community sessions. Then, students at UT's College of Architecture and Design contribute

additional ideas, and an event called a charrette is held that features local architects and designers. The work is finally summed up in a publication that lays out potential for the area.

"The county has requested the Community Collaborative coordinate public engagement for this site along with the Knox Central building," Ben Sharbel, supervisor of property development and asset management for Knox County Procurement, told Knox News in an email. "The purpose of this is to hear from the community and receive feedback on what would be best suited for these locations."

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