

## PLACE

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## Timing Tough For Green Downtown Dream



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## Constitution Plaza Developer Beating Bushes For Financing For New Tech Center

executive director of the Connecticut Development Authority, which is involved with the project. City officials love the idea. But will someone show Islam the money?

You never know where change will come from; so why not Karachi, Pakistan? That is where Islam was born and raised. He came to this country to get a master's degree in engineering at City University of New York. When he finished in 1984, as timing would have it, Connecticut was embarking on a major rebuilding of its highway infrastructure following the collapse of the Mianus River Bridge on I-95.

Islam worked as a structural engineer on bridges and highways for the big architecture/engineering firm now called HNTB Corp. and then started his own firm, AI Engineers Inc. in 1991, at the height of the early '90s recession. He has built that company into a 100-employee operation with offices in several states, and outgrown his Middletown headquarters. Hence the idea for a Hartford headquarters.

Islam bought the decaying former Broadcast House building on Constitutional Plaza and demolished it (leaving some

materials to incorporate into the new building).

The new building, the AI Tech Center, will have an astonishing array of green features — everything from ice storage cooling and storm water reuse for sanitary systems to photovoltaic and fuel cell power generation. Islame said the cost for tenants will be comparable to that of CityPlace and other Class A space. If all goes well, the building will be a focal point of education.

Islam is an argument for giving a green card or path to citizenship to foreign students who complete advanced degrees in this country. By dint of wit and hard work, he's living the American dream. He lives in Glastonbury and has a son at Trinity College.

"He is a very intelligent, very hard-working guy," said Middlesex Chamber of Commerce president Larry McHugh of Islam. "And if he tells you he's doing to do something, he's going to do it."

I had lunch with Islam one day last week. He is a youthful-looking 51, bright, intense, engaging, opinionated. Though he's worked on highways and bridges, he's frustrated by

the lack of an overall, multi-modal transportation plan for Connecticut. "The Hartford-New Britain busway should have been finished 10 years ago," he said. Amen.

He believes the key to Hartford's revival is creating jobs — amen again — and here he has a real idea. Islam is a volunteer mentor at Hartford's Engineering and Green Technology Academy, one of the schools-within-a-school at Hartford Public High School, and he is also a board member of the Capital Community College Foundation. He'd like to use his building to teach sustainability, and to help develop training in infrastructure repair, which should be a national mission in the next 10 or 20 years. In a way, it's 1984 again.

Islam has been reaching out to many potential tenants. Everyone would like to see a financing commitment. A possibility emerges.

The state has \$135 million in tax exempt federal stimulus "Recovery Zone Facility Bonding" funds, which may be a financing resource for part of the cost. He hopes the investment community will see fit to put up the rest. Bring in some companies interested in being in a green building, get more tech companies in Hartford, and who knows what will happen?

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Unless I'm missing something, the 11-story, 296,000-square-foot, LEED Platinum office/retail building proposed for Constitution Plaza is the most promising project on Hartford's drawing board. It's got all kinds of things going for it — technology, sustainability, jobs, smart growth, even a tie to local schools. What it may not have in its favor is timing.

For the past 18 months, the developer, Abul A. Islam, has been trying to assemble the financing. Call him Mr. Lucky, as the late Hartford Mayor Mike Peters used to say — he hit the worst economic downturn since the Depression. Now there are stirrings of support. Has the market — lenders and tenants — rebounded enough to back a \$50 million project?

"It would obviously be a terrific addition to Hartford," said Anthony Roberto,