MOBILE, Ala. -- A commuter heading downtown to work might look at a streetscape dotted with empty lots and derelict buildings and see decay. An urban designer, though, might see opportunity.

Mobile’s people will soon be able to see the city center’s potential from a designer’s point of view, thanks to 18 Florida A&M University architectural students focusing on the town for their senior projects.

Led by a Harvard-educated professor in Roy Knight, the students will work in pairs to conceptually rework nine prominent urban corridors and intersections based on principles of good design.

How Knight ended up choosing Mobile for this year’s project — previous design studios have been held in New York, San Francisco and Atlanta — is a story unto itself.

Knight said that his wife, who works for the state of Florida, stumbled across a copy of Mobile’s downtown master plan in an office copy machine.

She told Knight, who is from Birmingham and had been somewhat fascinated by Mobile for a while, and the seeds of an idea began to grow.

The master plan, commissioned by Mayor Sam Jones shortly after he took office, focuses on mixed-use development and emphasizes walkability and viable public transportation — just the sort of things that Knight wants his students to bring into the world as they head into the job market.

Knight contacted the city and decided that it was the right place for the students’ senior project.

He said he’s not sure who printed out the plan in Florida, but he’s glad that they did.

The students will visit Mobile next week and walk their sites, which include locations on Broad Street, as well as Dauphin and St. Francis streets and the Five Points intersection at Spring Hill Avenue and Ann Street.
After getting a feel for the community, they will return to Tallahassee armed with the master plan to use as a road map for their projects, Knight said.

The city has also provided them with technical maps, property plots and historic development information.

By the end of the semester, they will produce graphic renderings of developments that fit into the city’s master plan. “It will be the most realistic project we’ve had them work on,” Knight said. “Nowhere else have we had this much interaction and input from the city staff.”

Laura Clarke, director of Mobile’s Urban Development department, said she was enthusiastic about the project because it applies the master plan on a much more detailed level than has previously been undertaken.

The master plan is long on vision, large-scale undertakings and initiatives, but short on street-level design, she said.

The students who design the top projects will return to Mobile and present them to the City Council and the Planning Commission.

Because the projects are likely to contain elements of a walkable community — shallow building setbacks, and on-street or shared parking — the renderings will probably violate several of the city’s current development codes, Knight said.

But he’s telling his students to work under the assumption that Mobile’s rules will someday change to accommodate such design, known by the name Smart Growth.

Hopefully, Clarke said, the students’ work will show what’s possible and help generate support for codes that open the way for that kind of development.