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SHAPING WHAT'S NEXT

A bold, new
strategic plan
for directing
UNC Charlotte's
next chapter





The Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City overlooks First Ward Park.

Community Connector

The Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City uses urban presence to cement its position as a catalyst and active community partner facilitating economic, civic and cultural placemaking for the region.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER

One late summer evening in 2019, visitors to the Projective Eye Gallery at The Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City did a double take as uniformed police officers milled about the space, engaging with local teens and their parents about the artwork displayed there.

“We hosted a special exhibition by Charlotte’s Arts Empowerment Project,” said Adam Justice, director of galleries for the College of Arts + Architecture, addressing the unique gathering. “The arts-based nonprofit works with at-risk youth and reached out about collaborating on a project between their kids and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department. The opportunity to partner with them extends our space

into the community and helps build relationships beyond our walls, part of our mission. It was special to see police in our gallery talking about art they created with the teens and how the project helped build trust and new positive connections.”

Creating connections between the University and the community is precisely the vision UNC Charlotte and community and business leaders had in mind more than 15 years ago when the notion for a Center City campus first began to surface.

“The ability of UNC Charlotte to conduct work relevant to community partners in Center City through a presence in Uptown was a bold, if not risky, idea at the time,” said Ken Lambla, founding dean of the College of Arts + Architecture. Lambla was involved in early conversations surrounding a Center City





Award-winning actress Laura Linney, right, spoke about creative citizenship for a Chancellor’s Speaker Series presentation, which is part of the annual UNC Charlotte Civic Speaker Series presented by Bank of America and held at The Dubois Center.



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–Jerry Coughter, The Dubois Center’s executive director

campus, noting the Charlotte business community welcomed the chance to have greater connectivity to the University’s thought leadership, research capabilities, academic expertise and network of student talent.

“Chancellor Emeritus Philip Dubois embraced the idea and envisioned the connectivity of the Blue Line light rail — to Uptown from the south and ultimately to the main campus in University City through the extension — as a key growth vehicle for the University and an economic and cultural driver for the region.”

To that end, the Uptown building, at that time UNC Charlotte’s largest-ever capital investment in an academic building, opened in 2011. In 2020, it was renamed The Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City, recognizing the contributions of the former chancellor and his wife, Lisa Lewis Dubois, to the University’s ability to strengthen community bonds and accessibility.

The 11-story, 143,000-square-foot tower anchors Uptown Charlotte’s First Ward, features 25 state-of-the-art classrooms and design studios, a 300-seat auditorium, a 100-seat lecture hall and the Projective Eye Gallery, host to exhibitions by students and recognized artists from across the globe. More than 1,300 students are served here annually, enrolled in bachelor’s or master’s degree programs in business, architecture, urban design, education, public administration or health administration. An additional 2,600 professionals participate in annual certification programs and other continuing education offerings.

In 2013, the building, designed by architectural firm KieranTimberlake, was honored with the International Architecture Award for its innovative design. The tower’s top floors display a shifting mass and represent the collaboration, mixture of ideas and

aspirational ideals of the University college residing here, and the community partners UNC Charlotte supports and works with.

The Dubois Center is contiguous to Charlotte’s celebrated First Ward Park, acres of green space and shade fronting the city skyline, only steps from the Blue Line light rail. Internationally acclaimed sculptor Jaume Plensa’s “Ainsa III,” a die-cut stainless-steel work fashioning letters from nine alphabets from around the world, anchors the outdoor plaza and is a visual connector to the cityscape at the Center’s doorstep.

Development opportunities for working professionals

“Our mission at The Dubois Center is to connect the University to the city, and the city to the University,” said Jerry Coughter, The Dubois Center’s executive director who has been with the Center since its opening. “This begins with academic programming appropriate for the urban environment, which is why our Belk College of Business has such a prominent offering here, including our part-time MBA evening and Master of Public Administration programs. Being Uptown also attracts working professionals who might not ordinarily interface with the University through continuing education and certification programs as varied as firefighter certification and licensure programs for engineers.”

Lifelong learning and educational development opportunities for the city’s working professionals are key components in the city’s economic expansion and diversity, according to Charlotte Center City Partners President and CEO Michael Smith. “This community has been blessed with incredible public and private leadership, and one of the great moves made by prior generations has been in the establishment and growth of UNC Charlotte,” he said. “The University is a tremendous source of talent for all sectors of our economy. The creation of The Dubois Center represents a dramatic connection creating proximity to an abundance of resources, which are leading assets we emphasize to all our prospects.”

Last July, when Jennifer Troyer became the seventh dean of UNC Charlotte’s Belk College of Business, she noted part of her strong interest in the role was driven by the vision of the college’s role as a leading urban research school. “To have connections with the Charlotte community while also doing groundbreaking research applicable to communities around the world is exciting,” she said. “We do so by building on the college’s deep partnerships with Charlotte’s corporate and business communities.”

Shaping the future of the city

According to Brook Muller, who joined UNC Charlotte as dean of the College of Arts + Architecture in 2019, it's essential for students to have exposure to professionals. "Our program has a long-standing tradition of partnerships with the professional community, primarily in the city," he said. "Our architecture program is one of the few in the country to be early adopters of something called integrated path to architectural licensure. This allows students to have opportunities to work in practice as part of their architectural education experience."

The college's Master of Urban Design program and City.Building.Lab both operate from The Dubois Center, allowing the University to take advantage of the city as a research laboratory, while investigating global urbanism through the structured studio sequence and immersive study abroad sessions. Benefits of this integrated approach extend to students and the professional design community and urban planners. "The talent exchange is both ways," said Muller. "The advantage educationally is that students are helping the city, and our community helps visualize its features at the same time. We're exchanging ideas, driving the future of architecture and the future of the city."

Convener of people through events

Over the past decade, Charlotte has come to expect and appreciate the diverse perspectives and thought-provoking discussion forums, speaker series and events held at The Dubois Center. "In 2019 before the pandemic, The Dubois Center convened more than 1,800 university, corporate and community events," said Coughter. "We are always looking for ways to engage and inspire the community, and my personal goal in coordinating events here is to offer a diverse slate of programing."

Among the most well-attended annual events here is the Chancellor's Speaker Series. Launched in 2011, the showcase features discussion on topical issues with influential and widely recognized thought leaders. From the inaugural event, where former Sen. Alan Simpson and past UNC System President and White House Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles discussed pragmatic solutions to America's debt crisis, to a discussion on creative citizenship led

by actor and community activist Laura Linney, and thoughts on multiculturalism and diversity by Harvard professor and historian, Henry Louis Gates Jr., The Dubois Center's audiences have been entertained and challenged at every turn.

Open to the public, the quarterly UNC Charlotte Economic Forecast, hosted (until the pandemic) by The Dubois Center, is a must-attend appointment for area business, development and municipal leaders. Compiled and led by UNC Charlotte economist John Connaughton, the forecast is an invaluable source of timely data to inform decision making for those influenced by the region's economic climate.

Cultural events hosted at The Dubois Center consistently bring scores of area residents to campus and showcase significant artistic and cultural achievements. One such event, the 2012 North American debut of *Violins of Hope*, an exhibition and concert series of Holocaust era reclaimed string instruments, drew international coverage and made connections throughout the region with faith institutions and beyond.

KEEPING WATCH

Taking a leadership role in regional environmental and sustainability efforts is a responsibility UNC Charlotte is committed to. KEEPING WATCH, a multiyear initiative designed to foster collaboration across disciplines and interest groups to engage the public in local environmental issues hosted programming at The Dubois Center from 2014 through 2017. The collaboration between UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute and the College of Arts + Architecture brought together community partners to raise awareness and inspire action around plastic waste and recycling, water quality and urban streams, air quality and tree canopy and wildlife habitat in the urban ecosystem.

"We're serious about being good neighbors and an advocate for sustainable development," said Coughter. "From the very beginning, we've expected our Center City presence to be a catalyst for the community. We look forward to building on our momentum and believe even greater opportunities lie ahead."

Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte-based freelance writer.



The Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City, pre-pandemic, convened numerous offerings for the public, including the Personally Speaking lecture series sponsored by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. English professor Jeff Leak discussed his book, "Visible Man: The Life of Henry Dumas."