

CHARLOTTE BUSINESS JOURNAL

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FIFTY YEARS OF INFLU

HOW UNC CHARLOTTE'S SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE HAS SHAPED WHAT THE CITY HAS BECOME — AND WHAT IT

BY ERIK SPANBERG

Look at the urban growth here and you will see the hand of UNC Charlotte's School of Architecture close by. That influence runs the gamut, from restaurants and shops to transit systems, schools, uptown parks, and signature neighborhoods and developments including Birkdale Village and Ballantyne.

The timing for such collaboration was ideal. The architecture school debuted 50 years ago as the College of Architecture. Since then, few cities have seen as much change and population growth as Charlotte — growth that spurred taxpayer and corporate investment as well as a continuing need for planning that accommodates a rapidly shifting landscape.

Retired Bank of America Corp. CEO Hugh McColl Jr., part of a small group of town fathers who drove Charlotte's growth in the 1980s and 1990s, came to view the architecture program as an important ally.

"I thought they were tremendously helpful when I was deeply involved in trying to develop Charlotte," McColl said. "They were so helpful in the design of the city. The architectural school participated in giving blessing to some of our ideas and, others, telling us, 'That's not the right idea.'"

McColl said he and former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt, himself an architect, often discussed and worked from master plans developed for uptown beginning in the late 1960s.

Having expertise and perspective from UNC Charlotte architecture professors and their

▲
From left, graduate students Tahlya Mock, Becca Seagondollar and Erin Brinkley work on an accessory dwelling unit model created for a home in Washington Heights.

students provided much-needed context and insight, McColl added.

Ken Lambla, who retired in 2018 as dean of the College of Arts + Architecture, and Blaine Brownell, who became director of the architecture school in 2020, recently sat for a joint interview with *CBJ* in Brownell's office on campus. Lambla, whose tenure as professor and dean spanned 35 years, spoke about the pride he and others took in seeing students and, later, alums from the architecture school shape Charlotte.

Brownell pointed to the foundation provided by Lambla and others as cause for optimism about the school's future influence across the region.

Lambla noted that students' projects as well as those done by firms started by graduates, such as Shook Kelley, have left a lasting imprint on



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Monroe is the lead architect on a 104-unit affordable housing project being developed by DreamKey Partners (the former Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership) and YWCA Central Carolinas on the Y's 10-acre Park Road property. It is scheduled to open next year, with all units reserved for households earning 30% to 60% of area median income (\$25,000 to \$50,000 per year for a family of four).

Studying abroad in Tuscany as part of professor David Walters' program gave Monroe a sense "of how buildings can influence a place," she said. After graduation, "I eventually came back to housing as a building block of community. And the way you build and design multifamily housing is a building block for a community. That can be any kind of community: market-rate, mixed-income and affordable housing."

In 2020, the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects honored Monroe with its Citizen Architect Award for her advocacy for affordable housing.

"I think we are good at identifying ways, as an academic institution, (that) demonstrate to our students – and as they move into practice as graduates – how the economic impact of architecture is more important than whether or not it's a cool design," Lambla added.

He became dean of what was then the College of Architecture in 2002. Six years later, he engineered a merger with the creative arts programs and became founding dean of the new College of Arts + Architecture. The former College of Architecture became the School of Architecture – one of five disciplines represented within the college, joining art and art history; dance; music; and theater.

As of the 2021-22 academic year, enrollment was 348 at the architecture school: 235 undergraduates and 113 graduate students. The school had 326 students in 2016, down from 339 in 2011.

Brownell, whose expertise includes architectural materials, an emphasis that has taken on greater urgency given climate change and other environmental crises, said the school has seen

▲ Catherine Monroe of Housing Studio is pictured at 940 Brevard, an affordable senior housing community she designed.



BLAINE BROWNELL, who became director of the architecture school in 2020



KEN LAMBLA, who retired in 2018 as dean of the College of Arts + Architecture

"moderate growth" in recent years. It has been limited, to some degree, by the need for more space. Expanding capacity for students is one of the school's current focus areas, he added.

Providing more access to a more diverse group of students was part of what attracted Brownell to UNC Charlotte. In 2021-22, there were 45 Black students (12.9%), 37 Hispanic students (10.6%), and 177 female students (50.9%). Five years earlier, the corresponding numbers were 38 Black students (11.7%), 36 Hispanic students (11%), and 150 female students (46%).

"Diversity is really an attractive thing about this student population," he said. "And the fact that we have a lot of first-generation students. ... The representation in terms of diversity is wonderful and something that a lot of schools are desperate to achieve. And we're also trying to expand that mission of being accessible to as broad a population as we can."

As an example, he cited a pilot program with Central Piedmont Community College for a select number of two-year students to enter the architecture school at UNC Charlotte as third-year program participants.

The school aims to keep a pipeline of students connected to Charlotte beyond graduation, whether they join established firms such as Little Diversified Architectural Consulting Inc., LS3P and Perkins + Will or they start their own practices: Shook Kelley, Cluck Design Collaborative.

Those firms and others, some in related fields such as real estate and transit, include School of Architecture graduates leading the way. Among them: David Ravin, president and CEO of real estate management company Northwood Ravin; John Howard, transportation planner at Charlotte Area Transit System; BB+M Architecture principals Tripp Beacham and Brian Bunce; Little Diversified principals Bruce Barteldt, Shannon Rydell and Jim Thompson; and LS3P Charlotte office leader Jeff Floyd.

Following are perspectives from one professor and three former students who have influenced design, planning and development in the Charlotte region in recent decades.

UENCE

IS STILL BECOMING

what is now a 19-mile corridor stretching from Interstate 485 to the south through uptown and north to the UNC Charlotte campus. Diversity, too, has been a point of pride, including housing on the west side, where historically Black neighborhoods are facing the opportunities and challenges of balancing increased investment with maintaining affordability for long-time residents.

Catherine Monroe of Housing Studio, who earned her master's degree from UNC Charlotte, offers the best example of making affordable housing a priority as part of a practice. Monroe's local affordable housing design work includes the Seigle Point and 940 Brevard multifamily projects near uptown. She has encouraged developers of market-rate housing to include affordable units in projects, too.

TRACY DODSON

Assistant city manager/head of economic development, city of Charlotte

Dodson earned her architecture degree from UNC Charlotte in 1998, followed by a Master of Design Studies in real estate and urban development from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design in 2003. Or, as she said about the School of Architecture, "I was there most of the nineties."

Dodson has shuttled back and forth between the private and public sectors in Charlotte during her career. In 2018, she joined the city, where her role as lead recruiter includes adding a combined 7,500 jobs and job commitments through relocation and expansion agreements with Centene Corp., Honeywell International Inc., Lowe's Cos. Inc., AvidX-change Holdings Inc. and LendingTree Inc.

At UNC Charlotte, Dodson quickly noticed how involved faculty members, including Lambla, Deb Ryan and David Walters, were in various design and planning projects around the city. For her thesis, Dodson, who at the time was working at design firm Shook Kelley, embraced the practice-based example of those professors.

"I wanted to do something that wasn't hypothetical," she said. "I wanted to do something that was Charlotte."

During a recent interview at the Starbucks in Cotswold, Dodson laughed while opening her late-1990s thesis presentation on the table. Ryan and Walters were her advisers. Tony Pressley, the developer who played a leading role in reviving what was a moribund area now known as South End, was early in his work investing in that area when Dodson started on her thesis.

Pressley's sons, Andy and Rob, joined him at the

family firm, MECA Realty, in the 1990s. Andy Pressley and Dodson scouted the neighborhood together, meeting with property owners and asking whether they might sell their land or redevelop it soon. They asked what those property owners envisioned for South End's future and what would best fit there.

Her thesis focused on an area along Camden Road, bordered by West Tremont Avenue and South Tryon Street, with an emphasis on adapting existing buildings into residential units. "I was pushing it," she said, "going, maybe, to three stories."

South End wound up going much bigger than Dodson – or anyone else – imagined then, when an abandoned, 600-foot rail spur was brought online for the purpose of having a single vintage trolley car hobble along on an occasional basis.

That planted the seeds for a 10-mile light-rail line that opened in 2007. During the past 15 years, South End, which still consisted of brownfield sites and 100 vacant buildings as of the mid-1990s, has seen its residential population surpass 11,300 while restaurants, breweries, stores and office towers pop up almost routinely. A neighborhood that had no high-rises 20 years ago now has towers selling for hundreds of millions of dollars.

According to data analysis by Charlotte Center City Partners and CoStar Group Inc., South End's residential population has grown 19.4% since 2017, while private investment totals \$2 billion since the light-rail line opened.

Dodson said the "parcel at a time" evolution of South End and her thesis at the School of Architecture are among many lessons learned from her days

"I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING THAT WASN'T HYPOTHETICAL. I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING THAT WAS CHARLOTTE."



MELISSA KEY, CBJ

at UNC Charlotte – lessons she continues to draw on today.

Along the way, she's gone from trying to decipher the potential of South End growth to negotiating deals with LendingTree, Lowe's and other major employers who have helped make the neighborhood the city's hottest commercial address.

KEVIN KENNEDY

Co-founder, Cluck Design Collaborative

Kennedy and fellow alum Chris Scorsone started their Charlotte firm in 2005. Cluck describes itself as "smart, innovative, and totally badass," and clients seem to agree.

The firm has done extensive mixed-use and residential work but has become known for restaurant and brewery projects. They include the Common Market on West Tremont Avenue, Haberdish and Southbound. Cluck is also the master planner and architect behind an extensive renovation and related improvements at the century-old VanLandingham Estate in Plaza-Midwood.

Kennedy told CBJ that Cluck's approach to architecture stems from what he and Scorsone experienced at UNC Charlotte.

A professor proffered advice that stuck with Kennedy. "I remember him saying, 'If you are strategic as you move through your classes and design your curriculum, there's so much opportunity,'" Kennedy said. "That's kind of how we look at our practice, where we question some of the things that are sometimes taken for granted."

Kennedy and Scorsone have stayed close to the School of Architecture through guest lectures and hosting students for various events and programs. Kennedy said he has been pleased to watch the school's influence and involvement in the community continue to grow.



COURTESY OF CLUCK DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

TERRY SHOOK

Co-founder, Shook Kelley

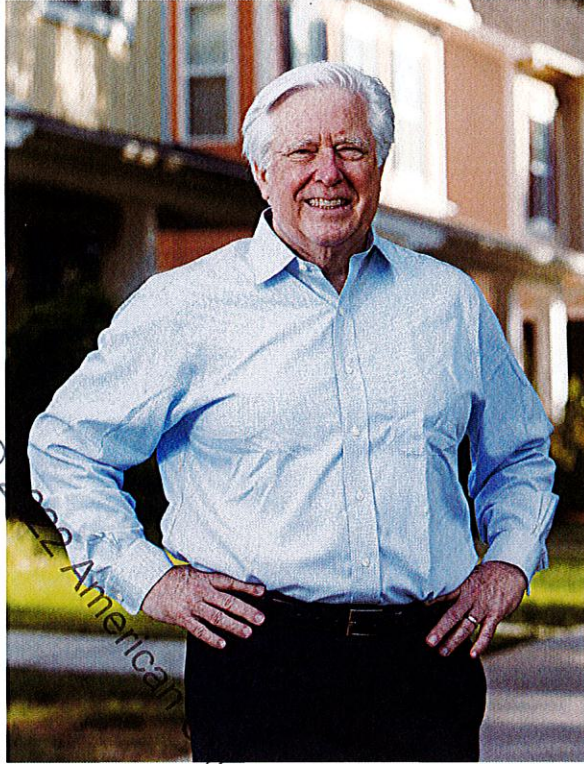
Thirty years ago, Shook and another School of Architecture alum, Kevin Kelley, founded a firm that went on to play a pivotal role in South End's evolution – including an awareness campaign that fueled support for the city to make its initial light-rail investment in the 10-mile line along South Boulevard.

Shook graduated in 1976 as part of the architecture program's second class. Kelley earned his degree there in 1987.

Asked how the architecture school influenced his career, Shook said, "In every way. With a young school like that, it's not hide-bound in tradition, nor in procedure or protocol. Everyone – faculty, students – we were making this stuff up as we went."

Not only was UNC Charlotte young, so was the city, which was still more than a decade away from landing big-league sports and becoming a rising banking center.

Shook cites the "wild, wild West" mentality Shook cites at the School of Architecture as a source of constant inspiration, including for one of the firm's signature projects, Birkdale Village in Huntersville. The 52-acre, mixed-use project opened in



MELISSA KEY/CBJ

2002 and won industry awards for combining pedestrian-friendly, small-town ethos in a modern development that includes a 1.65-acre linear park, 360,000 square feet of offices, shops, restaurants and hundreds of apartments.

More recently, Shook has turned his attention to work that focuses on diversity, equity and inclusion. Shook Kelley relocated several years ago to the Five Points neighborhood, which includes Johnson C. Smith University, the city's lone HBCU (historically black college and university).

Shook said he did so only after receiving the blessing of Darrel Williams, a prominent Black architect whose firm, Neighboring Concepts, has been and remains active in planning and designing projects to further jump-start investment in historic African American neighborhoods.

"I didn't want to be the interloper," Shook said. "Darrel welcomed us with open arms. We've been doing a number of things ... I'm always looking in my new ventures for African American investors so they can be a part of the growth of this city. They need a seat at the table."

DEB RYAN

Professor of architecture and urban design, UNC Charlotte School of Architecture

Hired in 1985, Ryan joined the School of Architecture during an era when the faculty skewed heavily male and few women were teaching architecture. During a recent interview, Ryan told CBJ she was frustrated early in her career by what she considered a lack of community involvement.

Early on, Ryan went to Harvard's Graduate School of Design as a visiting assistant professor for a semester in 1988. When she returned to Charlotte, Ryan found herself still looking for tangible civic connections marrying the architecture school with its fast-growing hometown.

"I was quite disenchanted," she said. "I didn't really fit in. I thought, 'I'm going to go do some projects.'"

That she did – by spearheading the school's first off-campus community outreach arm.

Ryan, as co-director of the school's Charlotte Community Design Studio, fostered closer connections with civic leaders and projects.

With her faculty colleague, David Walters, professor emeritus of architecture and urban design, Ryan led the community design studio. (Walters, founding director of the school's Master of Urban Design program, served as a consultant to Davidson and Huntersville on master-planning projects.)

McColl, the BofA CEO, and his bank, through commissioned studies, buttressed the community design studio's effort to provide context

for melding architectural theory with real-life projects. Ryan, in subsequent years, raised more than \$1 million for a range of planning projects.

She attributed her breakthrough to an off-chance encounter with one of McColl's lieutenants, Jim Palermo, who presided over real estate at BofA and its predecessor banks. While participating in the Leadership Charlotte civic engagement program, Ryan offered a blunt critique of an entertainment district concept being pitched by the bank.

Eventually, Ryan found herself in a meeting with Palermo, who asked to hear her assessment face to face. "I said, 'You guys normally do good work, but this kind of sucks,'" she recalled. Palermo challenged Ryan and her students to come up with alternatives. And that, in turn, began what morphed into a long-running series of projects, as well as uptown workspace provided by the bank.

Over the years, Ryan has led the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission and the Public Art Commission, served on Charlotte's planning and zoning committees, and spearheaded studies that have shaped long-term planning for uptown's Second and Third Ward neighborhoods. UNC Charlotte's Urban Open Space Study, run by Ryan, spurred the funding and building of the 5.4-acre Romare Bearden Park, opened in 2013, and the 4.5-acre First Ward Park. The latter, opened in 2015, sits next to the university's center-city campus.



TOBY SHEARER