



PEOPLE

MAKE CITIES

THE CHARLOTTE URBAN DESIGN CENTER

YEAR IN REVIEW

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01 INTRODUCTION

Every year is a new beginning, a time to set goals and make plans to accomplish those goals. For urban designers and planners with the Charlotte Planning, Design & Development Department, 2020 was going to bring growth and opportunities with the new Charlotte Urban Design Center. The center would be housed in a studio space in Charlotte’s South End neighborhood, bringing together city staff and residents to collaborate on projects. In 2020, the urban design team would add new members, deepen its bench and expertise. More community-led projects would be created to beautify Charlotte and build residents’ pride in their city.

But within just a few months, everything changed for the world, for Charlotte, and for the Charlotte Urban Design Center.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Charlotteans to isolate from one another. People went for walks more; they went out to eat less. Families and businesses experienced both health and economic hardships. The pandemic amplified existing socioeconomic and racial disparities. Protests swept across the United States, and came to Charlotte, after the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. For weeks and months, people marched in the streets and parks, demanding justice and an end to systemic racism.

Charlotteans’ relationship to public space pivoted in 2020, and the Charlotte Urban Design Center pivoted with it. Staff members rose to the moment, rolling out projects and programs that prioritized physical and mental health and well-being, and economic resiliency. The team added one new staff member and began a soft launch of the South End Studio. Along the way, the center demonstrated how Charlotte is leading and innovating through urban design.

Reflecting on 2020, it is clear the Charlotte Urban Design Center achieved, if not exceeded, many of its original goals. But those achievements, like most things in 2020, look a bit different than expected. This year-in-review report highlights those successes, and the outside-the-box thinking and collaboration required to create colorful and impactful results in a tumultuous year. It also looks forward to a bright future ahead.

Thank you for your interest in the Charlotte Urban Design Center. Visit charlottenc.gov/urbandesign to learn more about its services and how you can partner with its staff to create a healthier and more beautiful Charlotte.

02 STAFF REFLECTIONS



Monica Carney Holmes, Charlotte Urban Design Center Program Manager
“This year has been the most professionally challenging year of my career – pivoting, growing, and responding to the world around us has pushed my design and implementation skills in unimaginable ways. For all the challenges, it’s been worth it. I am so proud of our team and the work that we’ve led for the City of Charlotte.”



Erin Chantry, Senior Urban Designer and Planner
“In 2020 I enjoyed saying ‘Yes!’ to our residents as we assisted them in implementing their vision for using their public spaces in new ways. Through street murals, closing rights of way to cars, and the exploration of new permitting processes, we’re transforming publicly owned land for our communities.”



Lorna Allen, Senior Urban Designer
“With all the change 2020 has brought, it has also provided our team the opportunity to reevaluate plans, adapt and respond. Taking a placemaking approach, the Urban Design Center capitalized on local community assets, inspiration and potential, with the intention of creating policies, projects and programs that promoted people’s health, happiness, and well-being. The result has been colorful, creative, and collaborative. 2020 has become the year to adapt, think outside of the box, and assess the value of urban design in the City of Charlotte.”



Rachel Mukai Stark, Senior Urban Designer
“2020 put our nimbleness to the test. From StreetEats, to the Black Lives Matter mural, to rapidly changing our engagement format to keep our community healthy, we turned things around in a matter of days and I am proud be a part of this team. My work this year has strengthened my roots and reaffirmed my values to continue to best serve Charlotte.”



Charlotte Lamb, Associate Urban Designer and Planner
“While challenging and unpredictable, 2020 highlighted how flexible and adaptable Charlotte’s residents, businesses and government can be. We were busier than ever implementing outdoor dining, street murals and more with enthusiasm from residents and city leadership alike. I hope that we look back on 2020 as the year that the Urban Design Center brought tactical urbanism to the forefront of city conversation.”



Jacob Huffman, Associate Urban Designer and Planner
“I joined the Charlotte Urban Design Center in November of 2020, and it has been great working with such a talented group of folks helping Charlotte thrive and grow. I’m just thrilled to be part of the team!”

03 INTRODUCING THE CHARLOTTE URBAN DESIGN CENTER

PURPOSE AND HISTORY:

The Charlotte Planning, Design & Development Department formed the Charlotte Urban Design Center in 2020 to consolidate its urban design consultation, placemaking and community engagement services under one roof.

With its physical space rooted in South End, the urban design team offers community members more access to these services, builds on past successes and continues to excel in design and engagement.

MISSION:

The Charlotte Urban Design Center's mission is to advance the quality of Charlotte's built environment and bring public awareness to the importance of urban design. The center reveals how design influences quality of life and economic resilience, and advocates for great public places in a livable city.

04 THE CHARLOTTE URBAN DESIGN CENTER SOUTH END STUDIO

The Charlotte Urban Design Center – South End Studio is the city’s hub for engaging the community around urban design and placemaking. It is a space where residents, artists and community organizations can access the City of Charlotte’s planning and urban design resources and staff in a single location.

The studio is housed in the former Charlotte Trolley Powerhouse Museum at 1507 Camden Road in Charlotte’s South End neighborhood. It is staffed by experts who employ innovative design, research and community engagement strategies to create vibrant public spaces across the city.

Although the opening of a refreshed studio space to the public – originally scheduled for 2020 – has been delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Charlotte Urban Design Center continues to provide its full breadth of services virtually.

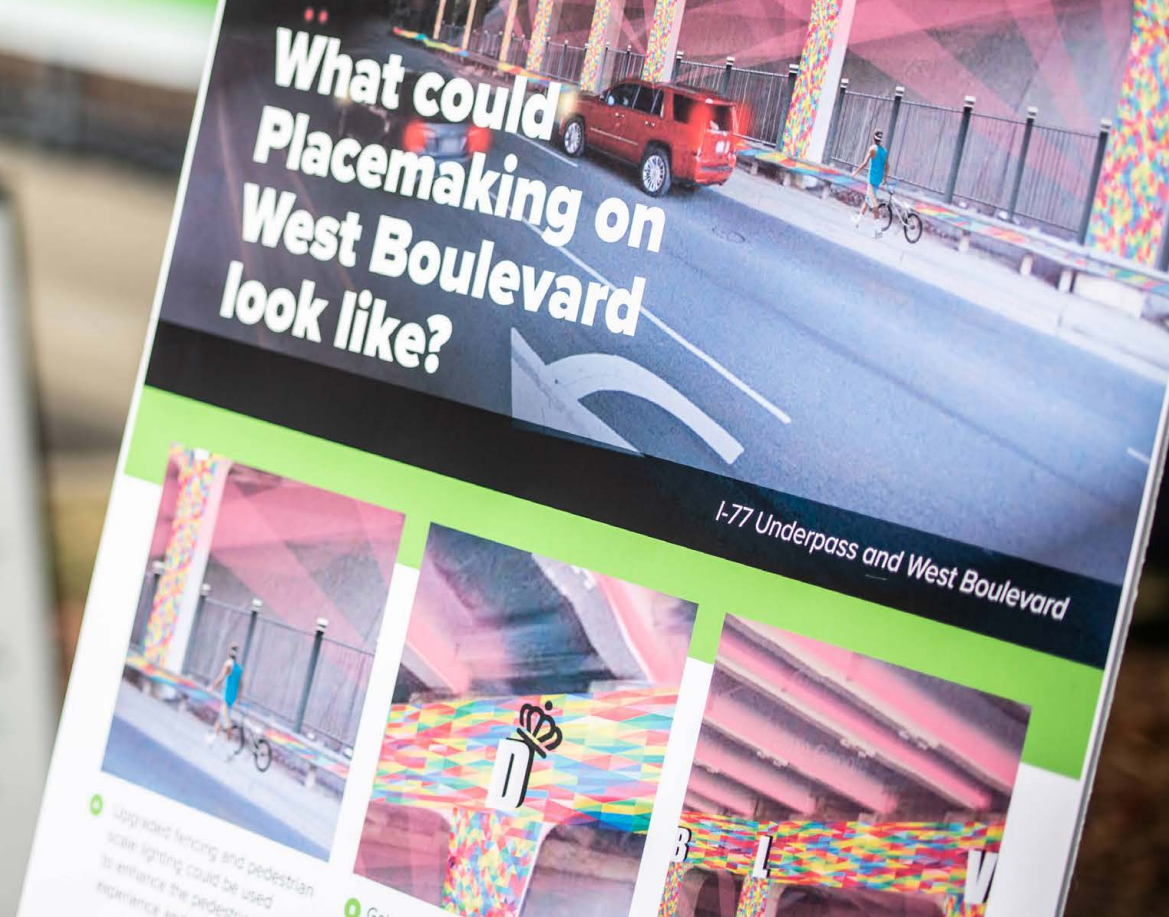
Please go to charlottenc.gov/urbandesign to learn more about working with the Charlotte Urban Design Center.



2020 HIGHLIGHTS:

While the studio remains closed, staff members continue to be leaders in virtual engagement, working to identify issues and opportunities in the community and foster creative solutions alongside residents and local partners.

The Charlotte Urban Design Center is integral to the city's Corridors of Opportunity program, which strategically invests in six Charlotte corridors and fill gaps in infrastructure and transportation, workforce and business development, housing and code enforcement, public safety, and urban design. In 2020, the center led planning and community engagement efforts that will bring investments to Charlotte's West Boulevard and Sugar Creek/I-85 corridors. In 2021, the work will continue in these corridors with implementation, while additional studies and investments kick off in the Central/Albemarle corridor.



West Boulevard Placemaking Master Plan Workshop

In November 2020, the center collaborated with the West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition, West Side Community Land Trust and Three Sisters Market to host the West Boulevard Placemaking Master Plan Workshop to identify and prioritize public space and placemaking projects in the corridor.

Placemaking is the process of building welcoming places where people want to be. The one-day workshop and walking tour ushered community leaders through the planning process for placemaking, from brainstorming meaningful, quick-win community projects, to building consensus and a plan for a path forward. The workshop was key to progressing the neighborhood coalition's goals of transforming the West Boulevard area from a pass-through environment to a vibrant destination. Upcoming projects will celebrate the corridor's unique history, culture and character, and leverage the skills of neighbors and area businesses. Projects may include reimagining bus stops, new public spaces and community-led art.

As next steps from the workshop, the Charlotte Urban Design Center will assist the West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition with funding from the Corridor of Opportunity program and project implementation.

Sugar Creek/I-85 Design Sprint

In 2020, the Charlotte Urban Design Center and the City Manager's Office guided nearly 30 community stakeholders through a virtual design sprint to address crime near Charlotte's West Sugar Creek Road and I-85 interchange. A design sprint is a time-constrained process that allows participants to understand issues, define shared goals and success, ideate, and test prototypes and ideas.

The Charlotte Urban Design Center's work in the Sugar Creek/I-85 corridor used a public health approach to reveal underlying and systemic social, behavioral and physical conditions that contribute to making the interchange an unsafe area.

From the design sprint, the City of Charlotte will create a West Sugar Creek Road corridor playbook in 2021 to guide future investments and policies for the corridor. It will also begin to implement physical improvements to the area through various programs, including business matching grants, placemaking, street safety and code enforcement.



05 URBAN DESIGN CONSULTATION

The Charlotte Urban Design Center collaborates with City of Charlotte staff and community partners to design projects, provide design review, connect policy to building and neighborhood design, and contribute expertise to area plans, master plans, vision plans and community investment plans. It also develops design standards and guidelines for rezoning plans and new development.

With its focus on advancing the city's built environment and the diversity of expertise among its staff, the Charlotte Urban Design Center brought unique value and perspectives to the City of Charlotte's infrastructure, transit, and economic development projects in 2020.

2020 HIGHLIGHTS:

Accessory Dwelling Units and Affordable Housing

Led by the Charlotte Urban Design Center, City of Charlotte colleagues conducted an in-depth analysis of programs to support housing affordability in Charlotte, with a focus on accessory dwelling units.

The study produced an understanding of existing conditions for accessory dwelling units, hurdles that exist in policy, financing, and permitting these units, and how and where they can be built. A set of recommendations was drafted from this research to guide ongoing efforts to expand affordable housing accessibility. The recommendations were tested with consumers and were found to be easy to use with a high probability of success.

The planning department is incorporating affordable housing and accessory dwelling unit recommendations into the Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan for growth and development, the upcoming Unified Development Ordinance that will consolidate development regulations into one document, and the city's permitting process.

Charlotte Area Transit System Silver Line

The Charlotte Urban Design Center serves as the city's planning team for the LYNX Silver Line, a proposed 26-mile light rail project connecting the city of Belmont in Gaston County, the Charlotte Douglas International Airport, uptown Charlotte and the town of Matthews, with a potential extension into Union County. Led by the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS), the project is a collaboration of several partners, including City of Charlotte departments, Belmont and Matthews.

The urban design team leads transit-oriented development and urban design efforts associated with the project. In 2020, the center completed an audit of Charlotte's existing LYNX Blue Line light rail, and the design decisions that made it a success or can be improved in the next transit line. The team also advised CATS on the light rail alignment and station locations, working to maximize the community benefits of the line.

In 2021, the Charlotte Urban Design Center will apply the lessons learned from the Blue Line and complete an urban design framework for the LYNX Silver Line to define and design aspects of the project such as station elements, wayfinding and signage, and public art.

06 PLACEMAKING

The City of Charlotte's placemaking program launched in 2018 to transform underutilized public spaces into vibrant places for people. Placemaking is collaborative. Community members come together to shape the public realm, ensure it reflects a shared identity and to maximize its physical, cultural and social value for all. Placemaking helps people feel more connected to each other and their surroundings.



2020 HIGHLIGHTS:

Programming Charlotte's New Five Points Plaza

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation awarded the Charlotte Urban Design Center a nearly \$400,000 grant in February 2020 to program the city's \$5.5 million Five Points Plaza.

The three-year grant is instrumental to creating a welcoming public gathering space in the Historic West End. Five Points Plaza is scheduled to open in the summer of 2021. Knight's investment supports neighborhood engagement, planning and programming at the plaza to increase connections and promote inclusive, resident-led development of the area. The Urban Design Center will facilitate the community effort and oversee construction and implementation in advance of the grand opening in the summer of 2021.

2020 Placemaking Grant Awards

The Charlotte Urban Design Center awards annual placemaking grants to community organizations to support space activation, streetscapes improvements, art and beautification, and the creation of community gathering spaces.

2020 produced the largest group of grant awardees to date, with more than \$130,000 going to projects such as edible landscapes, sculpture gardens, traffic calming murals, and culture-reflecting bus stop designs.

07 2020 HAS BROUGHT INCREDIBLE CHALLENGES, BUT ALSO INCREDIBLE OPPORTUNITY

As Charlotteans have shown resilience and adaptability in 2020, the Charlotte Urban Design Center has reimagined how the public realm and built environment can adapt and serve people in a time of need. In the last year, new needs arose, which the center met with responsive projects. From creating spaces for civic expression, to new dining options for struggling restaurants, the Charlotte Urban Design Center served as a local leader in creating places that help people cope and thrive.

BLACK LIVES MATTER MURAL AND TRYON STREET PEDESTRIAN PLAZA PILOT PROGRAM

In early June 2020, Taiwo Jaiyeoba, assistant city manager and planning director for the City of Charlotte, read the news that Washington, D.C., had painted the words “Black Lives Matter” across two blocks of a busy street. He reached out to city staff and took to Twitter to celebrate, heighten and localize the idea.

“I’m reposting again...imagine for a few minutes that we can ‘art-ify’ the intersection of Trade and Tryon with ‘Black Lives Matter!’” Jaiyeoba tweeted, sharing a video of the Washington mural.

On June 9, 2020, after 11 nights of protests over the police-involved deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, the Charlotte Urban Design Center and the Charlotte Department of Transportation (CDOT) partnered with local groups Charlotte is Creative, Brand the Moth, BLKMRKTCLT and

Charlotte Center City Partners to install Charlotte’s own mural. Over the course of that day, 17 local artists, supported by a crew of fellow creatives, painted each letter of the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” depicting unique and personal expressions of that statement.

The mural now spans two lanes and a full block on South Tryon Street, between Third and Fourth streets, in uptown Charlotte.

Almost as soon as the first paint brushes hit the pavement, the mural attracted visitors. After the mural was completed and the street reopened to traffic later that night, people continued to flock to see and celebrate the mural. To ensure visitors could enjoy the mural safely, the City of Charlotte and Charlotte Center City Partners temporarily closed the street again on June 12. The closure remained in place until Nov. 10, 2020.

Alongside the mural’s impact — the artist-led approach inspired similar efforts across the United States and around the world, and the mural’s creators were among Charlotte’s Magazine’s 2020 Charlotteans of the Year — the temporary closure presented the city with the opportunity to study how Charlotte might achieve a decades-old goal of creating more pedestrian

spaces in Uptown, specifically along Tryon Street. A pilot program and study from June through the end of September acted as a test run for a pedestrian plaza.

Over the course of the pilot program, the Charlotte Urban Design Center worked with multiple city departments and Charlotte Center City Partners to study if and how the plaza drew people into Uptown, how people used the plaza, and its impact on surrounding businesses and residents. The project team heard from more than 2,000 community members in a survey and had regular dialogue with plaza neighbors to gain feedback on the program. Key takeaways include the importance of maintenance and programming in a public space and the wraparound services required to make it a success.

Moving forward, the Charlotte Urban Design Center will continue to study its findings from the pilot program and research the future of pedestrian facilities in Uptown. Additionally, it will continue to work with its artistic and community partners to honor the mural’s installation and plan for a more colorful future in Charlotte that prioritizes and celebrates public art and community expression.

COVID-19 RESPONSE: TEMPORARY OUTDOOR DINING GUIDELINES AND STREETEATS

As part of the City of Charlotte's Open for Business initiative the Charlotte Urban Design Center developed temporary outdoor dining guidelines in May 2020 to help restaurants expand their capacity while social distancing, and recover from COVID-19 business impacts.

The guidelines allow restaurants to temporarily convert 25% of their parking spaces, and sidewalk and street space into outdoor dining areas. Restaurants that qualified for the program did not pay a permitting fee and were able to expand their capacity while staying in compliance with the City of Charlotte's Zoning Ordinance and Governor Roy Cooper's executive order that restaurants operate at limited capacity.

The Charlotte Urban Design Center collaborated with multiple city departments and Mecklenburg County to create the temporary outdoor dining guidelines. The City of Charlotte has implemented the guidelines in restaurants across Charlotte through a program called StreetEats, part of the city's Open for Business initiative to help businesses with COVID-19 recovery.

Using \$400,000 in federal funding available through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the city managed 17 multiday, pop-up dining events in 13 locations across Charlotte from October to December. At each StreetEats event, multiple restaurants leveraged rights of way, private streets and parking lots to set up tables and other dining

facilities. The pilot program's goals included increasing patrons and sales for participating restaurants, greater neighborhood support of local businesses and pedestrian environments during the dining events.

To execute this neighborhood-focused program, the City of Charlotte worked with community organizations and businesses to roll out StreetEats, including Charlotte Center City Partners, the Plaza Midwood Merchants Association and University City Partners.



PLACEMAKING ARTISTS BRING INSPIRATION TO CHARLOTTE'S STREETS

Since 2018, the Charlotte Planning, Design & Development Department has supported public art by inviting local artists to join a pool from which they can be matched, on a rolling basis, with opportunities and commissions for public art throughout Charlotte.

The Charlotte Urban Design Center selected artists from the pool to paint 15 street murals across Charlotte that captured the impact of COVID-19, and the resiliency of the city and its people. Through the project, the city was able to provide \$15,000 in support of local artists and their work to beautify and unite Charlotte.





Irisol Gonzalez

@irisolgonzalezart
Path between Bascom and
East Eighth streets

“The concept is to do large, 3D water droplets on the ground with each drop showing a reflection of friendship, love for our elders, teachers, nature, and our city skyline. The [idea] is that COVID-19 has made us look closer into nature and in it we’ve been able to reflect on what is truly important in our lives.”



Makayla Binter

@mkay_15
500 Andriil Terrace

“The concept came from how my community has bounced back and made a resilient effort to maintain that community. In response to COVID, my Davidson College community started doing Zoom calls called ‘Cold Open’ where artists across all disciplines could share their work. In being part of these calls, I saw the wonderful impact and connective feeling that comes from being in a space that is safe, and you are able to share some of the deepest parts of yourself through creative expression. I wanted to make a street mural that reflected that sense of wonder by having exploding colors and shapes coming from a computer screen. Although we are all inside, there are so many wonderful creative things that are still happening that are keeping artists inspired and I think that is the best form of resiliency.”

To see all 15 murals, follow
@clturbandesign on Instagram.

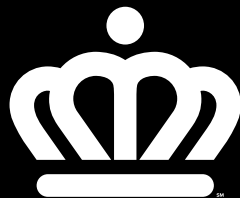
08 LOOKING AHEAD TO 2021

The Charlotte Urban Design Center is poised to take 2020's lessons in adaptability, creativity and excellent public service and elevate its work even further. While the center's staff hope to open the South End Studio to visitors in 2021, in the meantime, they will continue to solve public space issues and find ways to make Charlotte more beautiful and welcoming for all.

Stay tuned for even more impactful work rolling out in the coming year.



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+

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