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## University Place: Radical idea changed Charlotte

**2 men brought an urban village to a mostly ignored part of Charlotte.**

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Slideshow



Shops, restaurants and condominiums are woven together around the lake at University Place. The open areas, sidewalks and bridges create a pedestrian-friendly environment for people to work, shop and play. L.MUELLER – lmueller@charlotteobserver.com

One morning last week, Doug Orr stood at the window of his 10th-floor room at the Hilton Charlotte University Place, gratified by what he saw below.

The shops and condos built around a 10-acre lake fit a plan that was a quarter-century in the making.

Yet it was the scene off in the distance, well beyond University Place, that held his gaze in wonderment.

“There were all these developments popping up amid the canopy of trees for as far as you could see,” Orr, a former UNCCCharlotte vice chancellor, said after a gathering to mark the 25 years that have passed since University Place was announced.

Orr and the late Jim Clay, director of UNCC's Urban Institute, created that dream.

Its core was a European-inspired urban village, rising like Oz from the pasture and scrub oaks of northeast Mecklenburg – a town center linking a fledgling commuter university to an even younger research park struggling to grow.

It's hard to believe now, but 25 years ago there was no University City.

Many thought building UNCCCharlotte on a remote outpost would immediately draw people, and a university town would grow up around it.

Not so; not right away.

Instead, in the early 1980s Charlotte was stubbornly growing in one direction.

“The growth axis was entirely toward the southeast – a march to South Carolina,” Orr told the gathering. “It was so lopsided and one-dimensional that ... downtown was in danger of being on the periphery of development.”

He and Clay needed something dramatic to prod growth northward toward UNCC.

So the two geographers began exploring this cockamamie idea – build a \$300million mini-city of shops, condos, offices, banks, churches, movie theater and hotel on 250 acres – long before there was Charlotte's Phillips Place or Huntersville's Birkdale Village.

University Place would be the Carolinas' first such experiment, a then-radical concept that since has swept the region and country.

### **'Growth was coming'**

It didn't come easy.

In the early days, developers hooted at the notion of building in northeast Mecklenburg, predicting it would be the turn of the 21st century before the UNCC area could support such a development.

Orr and Clay persevered.

“It was a Catch-22 situation,” Orr said. “People would not move out here to live because there weren't enough services, and there weren't enough services because there wasn't enough population out here.

“We needed a breakthrough.”

That came from IBM.

In 1978, the computer giant announced plans to build a manufacturing and research facility on University Research Park land it had been acquiring since the 1960s.

Suddenly, northeast land was desirable.

“We knew growth was coming and we'd better have a plan,” Orr said.

So he and Clay hit the road to “new towns” in America. They toured urban villages in England, Scotland, Holland, Germany and Spain, studying which “best practices” to bring to the university area.

Water was one. Their village had to be pedestrian-friendly (a walkway at University Place was inspired by Las Ramblas in Barcelona, Spain) with an “urban texture” and a mix of services, including a hospital.

It had to have energy, with street activities. And it needed to be connected by public transit. (Light rail may run through by 2014.)

“It was new urbanism at play,” Orr said. “We saw it at work, and it was powerful.”

### **Pieces fall into place**

Back home, the two made market studies that showed a dramatic growth in jobs and people after IBM pumped 4,500 new jobs into the research park.

In 1982, the university sponsored an International New Town Symposium that attracted developers from all over the world, including David and Jim Carley of Madison, Wis. Orr and Clay took an instant liking to the Carley brothers, who saw potential and signed on as the developers.

A year later, the brothers unveiled a plan for University Place, with brick walkways, red roofs and a centerpiece lake.

In September 1985, 20,000 people turned out for the grand opening.

“University Place provided a sense of place, an identity, a landmark,” said Jack Claiborne, former UNCC public relations director and Observer editorial writer. “It created a node around which everything else has come.”

It triggered the economic development, neighborhoods, banks, churches, medical center – and traffic – you see today.

Over the years, University Place became a model for architects, urban planners and developers.

“The final outcome of the urban village is still in play,” Orr said. “With the fuel crisis and extended commutes, there's no question it is more relevant than ever.”



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