

OUTSIDE OUR WALLS

Partnerships Focus on Making Creative Works More Accessible

by KITTY JANVRIN

In a city that searches in perpetuity for the next new thing, it can be easy to overlook the rich remnants of bygone Charlotte. These hidden gems speak to the history of the city and provide an even richer canvas for the future – the groundwork laid for progressive programming and unique collaborations between artists, creative spaces and creative institutions.

Ideas around accessibility and outreach for a growing city have been top of mind for many creative organizations, including Blumenthal. Since Boris “Bluz” Rogers joined the Blumenthal team in September 2020 as director of creative engagement, he has collaborated with Blumenthal President Tom Gabbard and other community leaders to devise innovative ways to bring creative works into different Charlotte neighborhoods.

According to Rogers, part of this process has been to ask the big questions: “How do we get into the smaller neighborhoods, into the historical backgrounds of these neighborhoods and not just be there, but actually help make an impact? Be there and remind people of what used to be here before we got here to be respectful to the history that the city has given us.”

Enter Camp North End and the Brooklyn Collective, two of Blumenthal’s most recent collaborators – organizations whose teams are dedicated to preserving and educating visitors on the history of each of their campuses while also infusing the locations with creativity and industry.

Camp North End, according to Marketing and Events Coordinator Kadeeja Janneh, is “the creative hub of Charlotte for makers, doers, designers (and) artists.” This artistic playground is located only a mile outside of uptown off of Statesville Avenue. Visitors are sure to discover creativity in its visual, performing and culinary forms around



Camp North End.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAMP NORTH END

almost every corner, on every loading dock door and in each of the historic warehouses on the 76-acre lot. An influx of new retail, restaurants, business suites and creator studios over the past four years have cemented Camp North End’s ranking as one of the hottest places to visit while also breathing new life into the original structures on the property.

“We have so much culture here, and that’s why we want to encourage and showcase that through our partnerships, events and businesses,” Janneh said. “The homegrown talent and culture that’s here is playing a role in shaping our city’s identity.”

Camp North End’s emphasis on fostering local connectivity and creation, as well as its spacious outdoor areas, made it a perfect partner for Blumenthal and a perfect location to host Blumenthal’s We Are Hip Hop: The Reveal, a debut weekend celebration of hip-hop music, dance, art, fashion and culture.

“I think the energy and vibe of Camp

North End really, really lines up with what the hip-hop culture is,” Rogers said. “It’s out there on the fringes, if you will. It’s out there not having any boundaries. Camp North End is a really cool place, and it was a cool place before everyone thought it was a cool place.”

The first weekend of November 2020, more than 40 acts brought their talents to pop-up stages and performance spaces throughout Camp North End’s Boileryard area. The weekend’s festivities included break dancing, DJ sets, emcee and rapper performances, and completion of the “CHARLOTTE” mural by nine graffiti artists on a set of garage doors.

One performer, hip-hop emcee and rapper Legend Status, believes the success of the event was due in large part to the location.

“That space typically has a diverse culture to begin with, so that was kind of perfect,” he said. “To see everyone come out, people of all colors – there was a great

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mixture – to see them all come out and celebrate hip-hop like that, it was beyond great.”

The Reveal event in November marked the birth of the We Are Hip Hop brand and continued collaboration with Camp North End. We Are Hip Hop will create various celebrations of and outlets for hip-hop artists throughout the year.

In branching out to new areas of the city, Blumenthal is entering into a covenant with the community: everyone is welcome to enjoy and interact with the creative industry. Perhaps there is no better place to cement this vow than one of Charlotte's most iconic historic places of worship.

Brooklyn Grace, formerly Grace A.M.E. Zion Church, is one of the three buildings managed by the Brooklyn Collective at the corner of 3rd and South Brevard streets. Following the city's plan to displace and demolish many of the homes and businesses that comprised the largely Black Brooklyn neighborhood in the 1960s, this group of buildings remained one of the few reminders of the vibrant community that generated economic, social and political successes for its residents. The need to resurrect the welcoming atmosphere that once permeated the walls of these buildings is largely what drives the Brooklyn Collective's work.

“I believe strongly that place is important,” Brooklyn Collective board member Jason Wolf said when asked about welcoming visitors into Brooklyn Grace. “Since 1886, people have been convening there to elevate and celebrate the community. And there's no better partner than Blumenthal to be the ones that utilize it to elevate and celebrate.”

Fellow board member and Studio 229 on Brevard co-owner Monique Douglas



Camp North End is home to retail stores, eateries, business suites and art studios.



Brooklyn Grace exterior and interior.

agreed that there is something special about the group of buildings on the corner.

“We call it ‘the intersection’ because we believe it's an intersection of community, culture and collaboration, aside from being (at) a physical intersection. We want it to be known as a collision point; you come to this intersection and you're going to collide with people who are like-minded,” she said. “The Brooklyn Collective is a place of inclusivity and a home where you can feel comfortable in coming and knowing that our interest is truly in upward mobility for our community.”

Blumenthal's partnership with the Brooklyn Collective began last year with the launch of Acoustic Grace, a monthly concert series featuring artists in the Charlotte area set in Brooklyn Grace. While a small audience has had the chance to enjoy these events in-person, Acoustic Grace has been live-streamed on Blumenthal's social media channels to allow more people a first glimpse of the refurbished church and an initial listen to the local musicians and singers who take the stage.

The Blumenthal-Brooklyn Collective creative union has since expanded to include another event: The Atelier at Grace. Poets are welcome to the workshop series to draw inspiration from the other wordsmiths around them and from the space itself, which boasts some unique architectural features.

“The first thing I noticed was how amazing it sounded in there,” Rogers said, remembering the first time he entered Brooklyn Grace.

The idea for Acoustic Grace was, as the name suggests, born of the striking acoustics. The remarkable sound also lends itself to spoken word and poetry.

“A lot of people love that whole cathedral hall sound.”

JESSICA MACKS
MUSICIAN AND VOCALIST

“A lot of people love that whole cathedral hall sound,” said Jessica Macks, a musician and vocalist who works with Rogers to direct and curate each Acoustic Grace event. “They love to hear the ringing, the reverb and the full bounce that it gets when it hits from the ceiling and back down to the floor.”

Beyond music, beyond poetry, beyond hip-hop and graffiti, the idea that continues to echo throughout Charlotte's creative scene is more accessibility.

For Rogers, that key idea for creative organizations to remember when looking out into the community is that creativity “can exist and grow and thrive in any place you put it,” and it is vital to give local creatives space for their work to manifest without limits while paying homage to the rich past of the space in which they create.

“We get to rethink how we can really get folks into these spaces now,” Rogers said. “More diverse groups, more creatives of color and marginalized folks who have some really amazing show ideas, but they never have the real access to get into uptown or our bigger theaters. And there are ways to work toward that.”

Blumenthal's partnerships with the creative, innovative teams at Camp North End and the Brooklyn Collective is only the beginning of ensuring Charlotte's history is not overlooked and its future is more equitable, accessible and creative. ✨

Special thanks to Kadeeja Janneh and the Camp North End team and Jason Wolf, Monique Douglas and the Brooklyn Collective for additional research about the history of Camp North End and the Brooklyn neighborhood, respectively.

STILL-STANDING HISTORICAL SPACES

The History of Brooklyn Collective and Camp North End

by KITTY JANVRIN

THE BROOKLYN COLLECTIVE

Located in the Brooklyn neighborhood in Charlotte's Second Ward, Brooklyn Grace is a beacon of the vibrant Black community that sustained a mix of housing and local, walkable businesses and social spaces like the church for decades.

Recent work to revitalize the cluster of buildings at the corner of South Brevard and 3rd Street includes reimagining the church, introducing multiuse space Studio 229 into the one-story building, and opening an art gallery on the ground floor of the Mecklenburg Investment Company building.

Here's a brief timeline of the area:

- **1888:** A congregation of four men and 17 women establish Grace A.M.E. Zion Church under the principles of "Deo Religion ET Temperantiae" ("God, religion, and temperance"), which can be found inscribed on the cornerstone of the building.
- **1891-1921:** The leaders of Charlotte's Black Better Class establish the Queen City Real Estate Company, AME Zion Publishing House, the Afro American Insurance Company and the Mecklenburg Investment Company in the Brooklyn neighborhood.
- **1900:** The current Brooklyn Grace building is completed, boasting brickwork by William W. Smith, a brick mason and North Carolina's first recognized Black architect. Smith's design and bricks can also be



PHOTO FROM ROBINSON SPANGLER CAROLINA ROOM

Brooklyn Grace estimated sometime before 1960. The houses are no longer standing. The first was built and occupied by JT William, founder of Grace, and the one closest to the church was the Andrew B. Kerns home.

seen on the Mecklenburg Investment Company building.

- **1960:** Urban renewal demolition of the Brooklyn neighborhood begins, clearing more than 238 acres of housing, businesses and other property designated as "blighted areas" by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission. Over the next seven years, the project displaces more than 1,000 families and shuttered 216 Black-owned businesses.
- **2014:** Three of the remaining original buildings at the corner of South Brevard and 3rd streets are acquired and the Brooklyn Collective is established.
- **2020:** Blumenthal works with the Brooklyn Collective to develop programming such as Acoustic Grace and the Atelier at Grace in Brooklyn Grace.

CAMP NORTH END

With its sprawling 76-acre historic campus, Camp North End has repurposed warehouses as boutique retail and local dining, garage doors as canvases and its storied land as a one of the city's hottest gathering places. A blended industrial and modern aesthetic has welcomed a diverse collection of local business owners, creators, events and visitors with plans to only increase its impact on the community.

Here's a timeline of the space:

- **1924-1941:** Ford Motor Company

Assembly Plant operates at the property, employing 500 people and assembling more than 231,000 cars and trucks between the plant's opening and 1932

- **1941-1949:** The Ford plant is transitioned to U.S. Army Quartermaster Depot and an additional million square feet of warehouse real estate is built. These warehouses process uniforms, typewriters and other goods for training camps throughout the southeast during WWII.
- **1954-1967:** During the Cold War, the U.S. Army remains at the site to operate the Charlotte Army Missile Plant (C.A.M.P.), specializing in the production of Nike Hercules and Nike Ajax missiles and Honest John rockets.
- **1975-2016:** The site houses the Eckerd Distribution Center, which is incorporated into Rite Aid in 2007.
- **2016:** ATCO, a national real estate company, purchases the property and begins its innovative redevelopment project. This adaptive reuse initiative is the largest such project in Charlotte and is currently in Phase 2 of the 20-year plan.
- **2020:** Camp North End hosts Blumenthal Performing Arts to present We Are Hip Hop: The Reveal during the first weekend of November, beginning a new partnership. ✨



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAMP NORTH END

The plaza at Camp North End.

NEXT PAGE: Blumenthal Explores New Ways to Engage the Community

EXPLORING NEW WAYS TO ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY

Venues and Staff Tapped in Creative Ways During the Pandemic

by MARK WALLACE

In the midst of dealing with the cancellations of Broadway shows and other events due to the pandemic, Blumenthal Performing Arts has worked hard to keep hope alive. Finding alternative spaces for events through strategic partnerships is just one part of it. Blumenthal and its employees have also refocused within, finding creative ways to tap its own venues and staff during these difficult times.

Blumenthal Front of House Manager Tommy Cantrell had been conducting tours of the theaters based on availability, but now that the theaters are empty, it was decided to make them more of a regular thing to bring in a little revenue during the downtime. Tour groups have been kept small because of COVID-19 restrictions.



Cantrell

Guests were appreciative of the tours.

"I did have a few say that they will never complain about the ticket price again after they heard what all goes into the producing a Broadway tour," said Cantrell.

One guest said: "Thank you for providing this opportunity. We loved having a tour guide that has been with the Blumenthal for 20 years."

Another said: "Great way to bring show goers and newbies back to the theaters. Tommy went above and beyond."

When the backstage tours cranked up in late fall, it was the perfect time to include ghost tours in the theaters as well. Several staff members took turns conducting those tours, telling of eerie

encounters in the Blumenthal buildings.

Staff also played a big part in an outdoor, socially distanced touring show that came to Charlotte called *Art Heist Experience*. The interactive event required participants to move in loose groups from site to site uptown to get different clues from an actual unsolved art heist.

Blumenthal Season Marketing Manager Kitty Janvrin took on the role of production coordinator. "I worked with the directors and the production company to essentially build the Charlotte production using the script and past productions as a base," she said. She also coordinated local casting and rehearsals, scouted locations for the clue stations, worked on costuming and props for the characters, worked with tech and front of house on health and safety protocols and enforcement, and served as the "on-the-ground director" and stage manager once the show started.

During the holiday season, Booth Playhouse was converted into a private movie theater for groups to rent and view their favorite holiday movies. The tech department brought in lighting and sofas and Tommy Cantrell decorated Christmas trees and helped guide the overall decorating of the theater.

Blumenthal's education department kept things alive in the organization with programs that engaged students and teachers in the performing arts.

"Our goal is to create programs that meet the needs of our community," said Blumenthal Vice President of Education Andie Maloney. "This year in particular has created rapidly changing needs, and we have stayed nimble to respond."

For instance, when the beloved Blumey Awards ceremony in May had to be canceled because of COVID-19, the education department quickly shifted gears and worked with PBS Charlotte to create a special televised program that honored the hard work and dedication of former and current high school musical theater students and teachers. It was presented in partnership with Wells Fargo and PBS Charlotte.

Since restrictions are still in place, most schools are not able to produce shows. This year's Blumey Awards program has been



Booth Playhouse is decorated for private group movie parties.

restructured so that individual school musical productions are not required. Instead, students from participating schools will use an audition model that can take place in-person or virtually. This year's ceremony will be a celebration, featuring students from each participating school in musical numbers, either with a live or virtual audience.

This past fall, Blumenthal's education department started a weekly Teen Actor's Lab at Spirit Square for middle and high school students of all skill levels. The program ran three days a week from September through November, with each day consisting of supervised study hall to complete schoolwork, and then hands-on theater workshops.

"The Teen Lab filled a gap in theater training and safe in-person peer interactions for teens while school was fully remote," said Maloney.



Maloney

Diving even deeper into musical theater training, Broadway Bootcamps were set up to give eighth through 12th graders intense and in-person one-day masterclasses in acting, voice and dance from working Broadway actors and industry pros. One was held in October and one in December.

Maloney says more of the "bootcamps" are to come, so stay tuned.

For younger students, Blumenthal usually conducts the Junior Theater Celebration at Knight Theater with in-person workshops, giving elementary and middle school students a chance to



Art Heist participants gather outside Belk Theater.

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perform on a real stage. This year's Junior Theater Celebration will move to a digital platform the last week in March.

To support educators with resources and development opportunities, the education department initiated an Arts Educator Network. The four-hour workshop covered rehearsing and presenting a musical online.

"The timing of the program launch happened to come when educators most needed to share resources and connect while adapting to the pandemic," Maloney said. "We hope the launch of this program has helped them feel valued and appreciated while they work so hard to keep the arts thriving and accessible for their students."

Also, at the request of the Rock Hill district arts coordinator, Blumenthal will be developing a full-day workshop to support the professional growth of creative industry teachers and programs in the Rock Hill School District.

Maloney said the Arts Educator Network program is here to stay. "We look forward to a day when we can gather in person to network and celebrate, including attending performances together."

Late last year, Blumenthal also hosted some industry panels. One titled "Young, Gifted and Black: Bringing the Young Black Artist Center Stage" was streamed live

from the McGlohon Theater stage.

"The Young, Gifted and Black panel discussion was a step in the journey to increase diversity in theater; uplifting talent that is underrepresented to ensure our youth hear and see role-models that look like them, or don't look like them for that matter," Maloney said.

"Thank you for all you do, both for arts education here in Charlotte, and especially thank you for last night," said Casey Starkey at Central Academy of Technology and Arts after viewing the program. "It was honestly the most encouraging event and something I can't even begin to describe how it impacted my heart and the hearts of my kids!"

The other panel was "Home for the Holidays" featuring three Charlotte natives who are in the Broadway industry – actor and teacher Tyler McKenzie, producer Thomas Laub, and stage manager Ryan Gardner. They discussed their paths in



Students participate in Blumenthal's Broadway Bootcamp.



Teen Actor's Lab takes place at Spirit Square.

the industry, what it was like working in professional theater during the holidays, and life while theaters are dark. Maloney wants to do more of these type panels this year.

Open Mic continued on, as well, but outside instead of inside the McGlohon Theater. In October and November, a stage was set up on the landing at the back entrance of Spirit Square, and socially distanced mask-wearing watchers gathered on the square at Spirit Square.

"Artists have not stopped during the pandemic and the need for art – to entertain, to express, to commune – is as essential as ever," Maloney said. "I am excited for the renaissance on the horizon that will feature an explosion of beautiful and powerful works of art uniting, celebrating and challenging people from all backgrounds to experience, explore and share together." ✨