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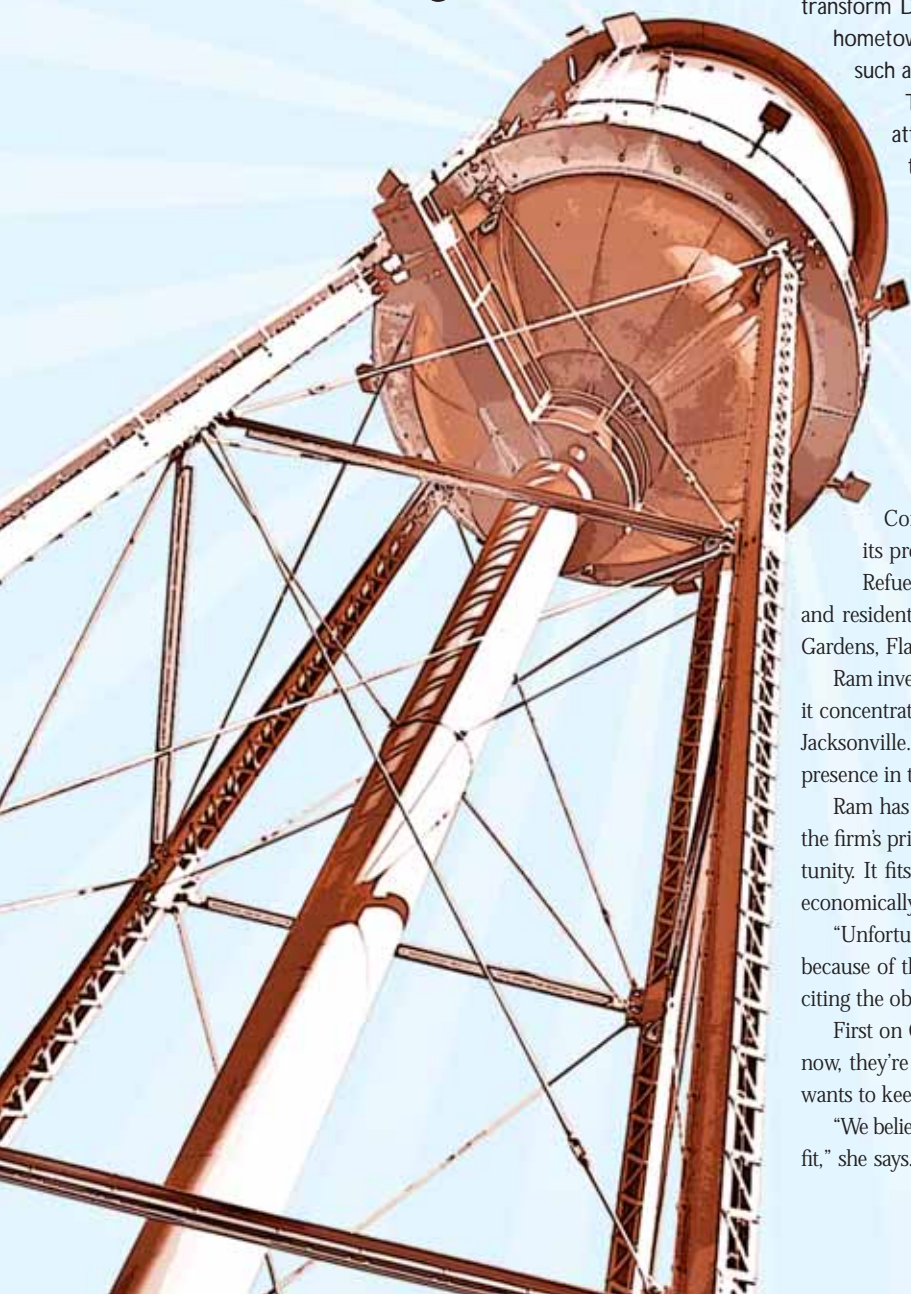


**COLLABORATIVE
MECCA**
Design Center Reaches
for New Heights



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The Design Center of the Carolinas (DCC) has had a significant past. Once a prominent knitting mill in Charlotte's textile heyday, it was rehabbed in the late '90s, knitting itself into Charlotte's urban core as an adaptive reuse of historic buildings offering unique spaces with architectural amenities that appeal to the design community.

The DCC dates to 1929 when third-generation hosiery knitter William Nebel built the Nebel Knitting Mill at Camden Road and West Worthington Avenue, in what is now called South End. By the 1950s, it was among the largest and most productive hosiery mills in the southeast.

But textiles fell on hard times and eventually native Charlottean Tony Pressley of MECA Properties redeveloped the warehouse-style complex into three office buildings and a courtyard. His late 1990s dream was to transform DCC into a destination. He hoped it would someday cause his hometown to be mentioned with the world's best-known design cities such as Milan, New York, Chicago and San Francisco.

The DCC was part of a groundswell of developer activity to attract the Charlotte design community to South End by its location and by the adaptive reuse of historic buildings offering spacious loft areas and unique character. Building on the synergy of drawing creative types together, compatible and competitive businesses both benefit as well as their customers.

The area is also easily accessible—to uptown, SouthPark and the interstates. And with the completion of the Lynx light rail, the access to the area has expanded even further, increasing foot traffic and making it a convenient and quick stop.

Raising Its Profile

Having been purchased more recently by Ram Development Company in 2007, the DCC Charlotte landmark is ready to raise its profile—literally.

Refueling a new ascent for the DCC is South Florida commercial and residential real estate services firm Ram Reality Services of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

Ram investments and developments are mainly in the Southeast. In Florida, it concentrates on Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton, Tampa, Orlando and Jacksonville. In Georgia, it's active in Atlanta. In North Carolina, Ram has a presence in the Raleigh area as well as here in Charlotte.

Ram has plans to take the historic DCC to new prominence in a city that the firm's principals have targeted as a valuable investment and growth opportunity. It fits the Ram mantra of making places that are socially responsible, economically vibrant, and environmentally sustainable.

"Unfortunately, it's taken a while to put our stamp on the Design Center because of the economy," explains Ivy Greaner, Ram's chief operating officer, citing the obvious downturn.

First on Greaner's agenda is getting the three structures fully leased. Right now, they're probably 85 percent occupied. True to the creative concept, she wants to keep occupancy concentrated among design professionals.

"We believe that architects, engineers, creative people and the like are our best fit," she says. "The DCC offers unique architectural spaces that naturally attract

creative people and businesses, and they in turn benefit from the synergy of being located alongside other design businesses.”

Concentric Marketing’s Bob Shaw is spearheading a major campaign this fall for Ram to showcase the historic South End as an area of creativity and innovation within Charlotte and the DCC as the bustling hub of it all. The overall theme is “Get Inspired,” inviting forward-thinking businesses and entrepreneurs into a unique environment centered on innovation and inspiration.

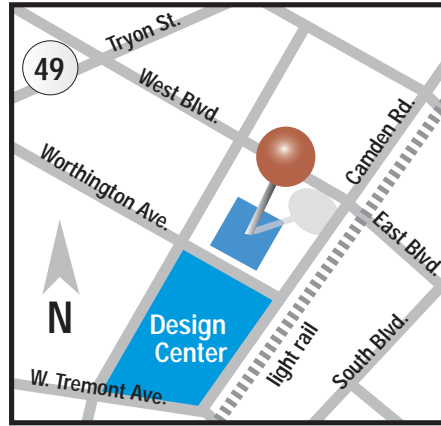
Beyond promoting this theme through traditional venues such as enhanced signage, a new Web site, a new logo, and media placement, Ram is also working aggressively to further position the DCC as a dynamic creative venue, where there is always something exciting taking place.

To achieve this, the building will be home to speaker series, awards shows, conferences, and monthly meetings from a variety of industries. Ram is also inspiring its tenant base to share ideas by setting up quarterly meetings around topics of interest for creative-thinking businesses, hosting lunches to spur conversation, and utilizing social media (Twitter) to further encourage connection. To involve the community, they are organizing with local schools to provide art for the water tower. The rebranding is set to launch officially with the unveiling of the new water tower this month.

Next for Greaner to contemplate is new development on DCC land used now for a parking lot, and possibly acquisition of an adjacent parcel. The development could include a residential high-rise or hotel, complete with retail on sidewalk level. That building has been envisioned for five to 12 floors but it could rise much higher, Greaner says. It would also include a built-in parking deck.

“Tony originally had a vision for something like that,” Greaner says of the high-rise. “We believe he was on the right track.” She adds that any DCC expansion would be based on solid growth projections.

She has concerns about ground contamination from chlorinated solvents, but adds that Ram sought and received state permission earlier this year to deal with the issue as it redevelops the



brownfield. She points out that the DCC itself was cleaned up as a result of a 1996 decontamination project, and that dealing with the brownfield aspect of the adjacent property is “making places that are socially responsible, economically vibrant, and environmentally sustainable,” their goal.

Dane Suchoza, owner of DAS Architecture, says, “The environmental situation is one that can be handled. It’s just an expense. It’s a matter of how you deal with haul off and disposal.” Suchoza’s firm is in its second year in the DCC and is contracted to draw up any expansion plans.

Furthering by Design

“We were one of the first Design Center tenants,” says Tom Wright, principal architect for Narmour Wright Architects, proudly. “We were the designers of the Design Center.”

Wright says he likes Ram’s efforts to enhance the concept that the complex is, indeed, a center for design. “That was Tony’s original idea,” he says.

Greaner agrees. “Tony Pressley really invested into taking those buildings and creating a statement

and an identity for South End,” she says. “He did a phenomenal job. And he was at a point where he needed someone to help grow it and continue to establish it.”

Ram found out about the potential availability of the complex and made inquiries to Pressley. Ram had already established a presence in the Raleigh area, having been attracted to North Carolina by its climate and its growing magnetism for people from across the country.

The firm paid about \$28 million in 2007 for DCC’s 188,146 square feet.

“We really believe in this area,” says Wright. “We’re glad Ram is here and has the wherewithal to keep developing the Design Center into the community it can be.”

“If we had a hotel on the property in the not-too-distant future, that would be great,” Wright continues. “It’s wonderful to see the new uses coming up, to really make this South End into an independent community.”

David Creech split off from the Narmour Wright firm at the start of this year and houses his new company, Creech & Associates, in nearby DCC space.

“We like the fact that it’s an adaptive reuse of an older building,” Creech says. He praises the patinas that include aged wooden floors and exposed brick walls. “All those things are very conducive to what people expect when they come into an office that deals with creativity,” he adds. ➤





He also likes the expansion plans. "I'm a proponent of density," he smiles. "We're on the light rail line. We need to promote continued density along the rails and I think the Design Center

should be a leader in that regard."

Doug Grenade operates an office of Cline Design Associates in DCC space he leased in May 2008, after the Ram acquisition. The Raleigh-based firm chose the South End neighborhood for its Charlotte location.

"We like being around other design types," Grenade says. "Not just other architects, but engineers and graphic designers." He too has bought into the Ram expansion plans.

just moving around. It's also people still coming to Charlotte," she says.

The DCC can attract its share of these moves, Greener believes, because of its history and its opportunity to grow with the South End.


Though Ram has looked at other properties in Charlotte, both shopping centers and residential, new and existing, Greener says emphatically, "The Design Center needs to be the star of the show."

Greener is quite complimentary of Concentric Marketing. "They live and breathe the Design Center," Greener says, "and have been instrumental in our rebranding efforts."

She also coordinates efforts with Charlotte Center City Partners and the South End Historic District.

She is particularly proud of the contemplated promotional effort involving the DCC's historic old-style water tower figure. "What we are going to do on an annual basis is have a contest with local schools to put their art work on the water tower," Greener says.

"Five years from now," Greener says, "I think the Design Center will be the central place within South End. We host weddings in the Design Center as well as other business functions, and even have caterer tenants with space to host events. We don't want it to be just a place where you come to work 9-to-5 every day, but a place where you enjoy being inspired and a place that has creative energy."

Greener sums up, "There's no denying that commercial real estate has become a more competitive business as of late. However, Ram's mission is to develop properties that hold greater significance to the community, stand apart in genuine uniqueness, and generally hold more meaning than basic square footage. With the DCC, I think we are well on the way to achieving this vision." 

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Coldwell Banker Commercial MECA Complex: 52,000 sq. ft. Courtyard at 101 West Worthington Avenue; 45,000 sq. ft. Atrium at 127 West Worthington Avenue; 82,000 sq. ft. Plaza at 1930 Camden Road; and two surface parking lots.
Owner: Ram Realty Services/Ram Development Company
Headquarters: Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.
Principals: Peter Cummings, Chairman; Keith (Casey) Cummings; Ivy Z. Greener, Managing Partner for Ram and COO
Established: 1978
Employees: 135
Business: Ram is an affiliated group of companies comprised of Ram Development Company, involved in retail, residential and mixed-use development and acquisition, and Ram Realty Services, a provider of residential and retail management and leasing services. Currently, the company manages approximately 2.5 million square feet of retail property and 3,000 apartments and is active in Florida, North Carolina and Georgia.



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