

# The Catalyst

Director of Center for Design Innovation puts answers out there | By Andy Owens

Talking to Dr. Carol Strohecker, you get the sense that she's always had good ideas. The director for the Center for Design Innovation characterizes her vision for the Center by talking about possible projects and ideas for future innovations like someone reading from a menu at a familiar restaurant. She knows where to start, and she knows where she wants to end up. The challenge is in the middle, where she hopes to engage the raw talent, brainpower and creative spirit that already exists in Winston-Salem to propel the Center for Design Innovation beyond her own imagination. She's the catalyst. The person who will focus resources and stimulate meaningful ideas into something bigger.

"Design is a process that encourages a very broad style of thinking," Dr. Strohecker said. "I see myself as a bridge connecting institutions, people and ideas. I use my knowledge of design and the digital media landscape to focus and encourage ideas that will promote the Triad. I'm both a bridge and a catalyst."

In a rubber-meets-the-road kind of way, Dr. Strohecker will be quickly involved in the overreaching goals of finding more money and enlisting political support for the Center to realize some of the goals and recommendations outlined in the 2003 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy from the Northwest Piedmont Council of Governments. She will also be forging relationships over a broad range of professions and disciplines through the state and region.

"One thing about the kind of innovation that we're talking about is it is inherently interdisciplinary," she said. "In order to innovate, you have to bring together a lot of different ideas and that means a lot of different people."

While making sure the specifics of running a sustainable idea center provides the kind of environment where innovation can give Winston-Salem an edge in educating a workforce, recruiting talent, and luring high-tech and creative jobs, Dr. Strohecker will also be harnessing the talent that's already here. The best ideas will come by bringing people together who might not expect to have much in common, such as artists and scientists. At the

Center for Design Innovation, those people will be encouraged to step onto that common ground and that's when something wonderful can happen.

"The stereotypes are that they are somehow opposed to one another, but most people realize that scientific effort involves creativity and artistic effort involves rigorous inquiry," she said. "We want to create a synergy by bringing them together. Theoretical questions, real-world problems, personal expression, general communication. We think that by allowing artistic methods in technology research and development, more people will participate — like members of minority groups, girls, and artists who may otherwise shy away."

Engaging a diverse pool of people will be crucial to realizing the Center's goal of creating products and processes that have value to business and industry and the community. Without enough broad-based input, what happens in a laboratory environment may not work in a school, factory, or hospital, some of the places Dr. Strohecker sees the Center having a positive impact.

Dr. Strohecker doesn't speak just from a theoretical and abstract point of view. She has experience putting ideas into action. She's seen the miscues and knows how to avoid them to get the Center off to a good start. After studying journalism, botany, graphic design and studio art at the University of Maryland, she earned advanced degrees from MIT and holds several patents in technology and education. She's worked in both the business and academic settings, serving as a guest lecturer at Harvard University and Copenhagen, Denmark, among other places around the world, and as a consultant and researcher for such organizations as Sun Microsystems and the J. Paul Getty Trust. She founded her own company in 2005 and worked with the BBC's Digital Curriculum. She also has a long list of fellowships and appointments that includes a breadth of education, teaching, and corporate experience from arts and sciences to technology and business. Through all of her experience and travels, she said the one thing that has held true is how artistic and scientific innovation



Photography by Snyder Photography, Inc.

Dr. Carol Strohecker

connects people in a way that allows them to have input on how a problem is solved or how a solution is formulated. The knowledge and potential is there if you ask the right questions, she said.

"Ideas don't live in the air, they live in people. Not around meeting tables, not on paper, but in people who bring them to life through the things they make together," she said. "I'm trying to do my part by putting some answers in the world. I see design as a way to do that. Design is really a learning process, developing something from an idea. Thinking about it and developing it further. This is a wonderful opportunity to place Winston-Salem as a leader in transitioning to the knowledge economy." ■

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— Dr. Carol Strohecker

## The nuts and bolts

The Center for Design Innovation has a temporary location downtown and has plans to open a permanent site in December 2008. Ten million dollars will be spent at the final location, which will include a building, meeting space and laboratory equipment.

As a place of ideas, the Center will always have a virtual presence through technology where participants can network with one another and use vast national and international bases of knowledge. Dr. Strohecker said the CDI will probably use the UNC model for determining who owns and benefits from the intellectual property that grows out of the CDI's partnerships.

The physical space is important because some of the most exciting things will happen when groups of people come together. It's also where the community will interact with the technology to test the ideas and products that come out of the CDI.

"We can't build technology without their input. It just wouldn't make any sense. We think that by allowing artistic methods – personal expression, critique, performance – in technology research and development, more people will participate, like members of minority groups, girls, and artists who may otherwise shy away," Dr. Strohecker said. "We'll also be seeking partnership with the business community. I think we can create results that will benefit the business community here."

Going beyond the classroom and laboratory is also essential, said DeCristo of the North Carolina School of the Arts. This allows the Center to pursue what existing industry needs to develop and stay strong, and it gives insight into building an infrastructure to attract more technology and more creative people to the region. DeCristo said the CDI is a natural progression for what's already going on in Winston-Salem where medical research and biotechnology exist alongside marketing and manufacturing.

"Would a lot of this have happened on its own? I think it'll be pretty clear five years out if it goes according to plan that this is a vital resource. We've had several meetings with our industry friends group to make sure that our facility is relevant," DeCristo said. "We have been very well received from a wide variety of businesses, from the Fortune 500 companies to the one or two person shows."

## Getting down to business

Keith Vest understands how innovation and design can positively influence the future. His 7-year-old company, PAVE Creative Group in Winston-Salem, is a product of innovation and

innovative thinking. His team works to deliver a consistent message to a client's customers. Sometimes that's in a logo that evokes a feeling at a glance, sometimes it's in an e-mail campaign, a scripted Web site experience or through direct mail, but it only works if PAVE designs a message around its customer's understanding of itself.

"It really comes down to what's the story you're trying to tell. What's the experience they have when they encounter you in a store or on a Web site? We're able to make all the materials consistent between one another and leverage them to keep costs down," Vest said.

The president of PAVE wants to be part of the Center for Design Innovation because it symbolizes a search for excellence and innovation that is a hallmark of Winston-Salem.

"I think design is really thinking about what you're trying to create. It's a conscious process and then acting on it. There's a methodology to the thinking. By bringing together folks who are doing it from different angles, I think the hope is we might be able to create something special."

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*"Design thinking emphasizes breadth. Innovation requires interdisciplinarity. We need the different institutions and will build upon their unique strengths and their connections to the region."*

— Dr. Carol Strohecker,  
the CDI's director