

Design Narrative (IDEA)

The new Bruce Nesbitt African American Cultural Center is a four-level building on the site of the original “Black House,” continuing and expanding upon the mission of both BNAACC and the Department of Diversity and Inclusion from its prominent quad-adjacent location.

The BNAACC mission - ***to provide a network of programs and support services promoting the individual, social, cultural and academic well-being of Illinois’ African American students*** - is the catalyst for our design of the new Center. In formulating our design we have focused on interpreting elements of history, culture, education, inclusion, student and community engagement with the goal of providing a welcoming haven for study, socializing, sharing meals and conversation, performing, and other nurturing activities. For us, this project is an extraordinary opportunity to celebrate new ways of bringing people together in a new building that carries on a distinguished history of witness and outreach both to University students, faculty and staff as well as to the surrounding Champaign-Urbana community.

Building materials were selected to reflect the multi-layered design goals, with transparency and opacity carefully considered in the design of interior spaces. How are visitors welcomed while providing comfort and security both to long-term students as well as those who are experiencing diversity for the first time? Transparency of active spaces allow views into the ongoing student and community life amid the varied program spaces within the center. The Multipurpose Room is enclosed on the west with a two-story glass wall while the Active Lounge at the southeast corner features glass on two sides. Both spaces have direct access to the exterior to allow for programs to be expanded and provide engagement with a greater audience. The stadium seating in the Multipurpose Room is echoed on the exterior as well as in the southwest stair tower to allow for quiet study or collaborative human collision in spaces that would otherwise lie dormant when not in use. The Active Lounge on the east opens to an outdoor patio that serves to engage with the other cultural centers on the block. The openness of the lounge is also at a scale to which students and the community passing by can relate. Seeing social activity, collaboration, and relaxation will, at the least, be a catalyst for curiosity and interest.

The concept of movement is expressed in the building materials selected for the project. The warm-hued tones of the fiber cement wall panels reflect a transition of place from west and southern Africa to what is now the southern United States, followed by a migration to the major northern cities from the south. The glass enclosed stair towers also celebrate movement and activity, showing students, faculty and staff as they circulate through the building. The glass-enclosed stair tower on the southwest corner provides an opportunity to use the expanse of a two-story wall as a forum to inform, educate, and engage. This can be achieved via a video wall, dynamic and easily changeable via software, or through artwork that is repositioned over time. The Center will always be communicating, engaging and educating, even when not occupied.

The address will be on Nevada Street, with many students arriving on foot and bikes via the quad, or by car south on Mathews. To welcome everyone to the Center, we created an entrance canopy that opens toward the quad to orient visitors to the entrance. The front porch is a staple of American culture and part of the fabric of black American hospitality and social engagement; to this end we have provided a defined front porch zone, finished in wood, signaling a warm welcome to the Center and inviting visitors to sit and converse outdoors, weather permitting. Additional areas to sit and engage are provided through concrete stadium seating to the west and a smaller wood bench area to the east overlooking the courtyard connection to the neighboring cultural centers. The front porch is also where the BNAACC identity is celebrated graphically through large letters.

The interior is designed to be an open and flexible complete environment, with visual transparency combined with more sheltered and intimate spaces to provide quiet support to students and visitors. These spaces will be developed in much greater detail in the coming phases of the project. We have included at the conclusion of this report examples of some photographs that have inspired us during our design process.

