

## On the level



Eric  
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# David Furman

## Building for the sake of building

David Furman wants to put Charlotte on the map as one of America's most well-designed cities.

He was recognized for his contributions April 23 as the recipient of the 2015 Charlotte Center City Partners Vision Award, which recognizes a community leader who has made contributions uptown. His son traveled all the way from Berlin to attend the ceremony at the Convention Center.

The Charlotte native and architect started his career designing jails, and after a steady run, founded his own company, David Furman Architecture. Because he wanted more control over what buildings were being built in Charlotte, he started the development firm The Boulevard Co. which turned into Boulevard Centro in 1999 and focused exclusively on urban housing. In 2008, Furman moved into office space in the Trademark condo building in uptown, which his company developed, and rebranded the company to Centro CityWorks.

Furman also lives in the Trademark building with his wife, Marilyn. Together, they run a charitable foundation named the Centro Bono Foundation, which focuses on providing affordable housing.

Furman said his goal is to make Charlotte as cool as the two cities his children live in: Washington, D.C., and Berlin. In his free time, he creates wood sculptures in his uptown studio, and drives around town around looking for new development opportunities.

Furman is passionate and eccentric and a risk-taker, but he's also a strong believer in developing buildings for the right reasons. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### What is your average day like?

What I do every day is I either work on trying to create new developments, but I don't do it from the treadmill perspective. In other words, I don't have to do it. I do it because I think it's fun. I only work on projects that I think ought to happen. I'm not doing things just because it makes a good financial model. It's an intersection that's empty, but it's prominent and something needs to happen there. My business model is I go find something that needs to happen, I create a design for it, and then I go to the guy who owns the property and say, "You know, this is what you ought to do. Let's you and me go do it." And sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. I work on some other community initiatives...all the other stuff I work on I don't get paid for...The most prominent one I'm working on now is this Rail Trail idea (in South End)... I created kind of the original vision document for the Rail Trail.



Photo by Eric Dinkins

I'm working with Center City Partners on that, trying to push initiatives forward and make things happen. And then I'll just do these guerilla initiatives on my own where I go just design something and it appears on the trail. There's a few of those out there now. What the vision is, is to turn it into more than just a 12-foot sidewalk, and have initiatives along it that you can engage with. There's a festival that Center City Partners is (putting) on in South End Saturday and Sunday, and I'm creating a new initiative that's going to appear: It's a hexagonal pingpong table.

### What does that look like?

It's hexagonal, so six people can play at the same time. Some of the initiatives that I've done are out there along the trail now, but my latest one's going to be the hex-table: hex-pong.

### Is that the official name for it?

Yeah. The idea is it's engaging. Two people can be playing pingpong and somebody can walk by and they can pick up a paddle and start playing, and somebody else can pick up a paddle and start playing. Ultimately you

end up playing with people you don't know. You're probably not keeping score; you're just farting around. But it's engaging and it's fun. Two weeks ago I went to San Francisco to go to what was called a prototype festival. It was along Market Street in San Francisco. They had created a festival where you could bring forward an idea and put it along the street, and its sole purpose was to engage the public. It couldn't cost more than \$2,000 to build it, and they had 20 winners who had built these and they were up and down the street. One of them was a hexago-

nal pingpong table. I was like, “This is fantastic!” I’m out there playing with these Japanese women, and, “Who is that? A homeless guy?”

*(Furman motioned as if he waved a homeless guy into the pingpong game)*

And we were just having a ball playing pingpong on the streets of San Francisco. And that’s what the Rail Trail is going to be about; it’s going to be about public engagement. The other thing I do is I have a sculpture studio downtown that I create artwork in.

### How long have you been doing that?

Since the recession. Actually, about 2011. In 2010 I was just going crazy because ever since I was 25 years old I probably had a building under construction somewhere, and I wasn’t working on anything, I had no designs happening, nothing under construction, and I just thought, “I’m going crazy. I’ve got to build something. I’ve just got to go design something and build it,” just to scratch an itch. I live here, and I don’t own a car, so it had to be within walking distance. There’s an abandoned building down the street that I knew had been abandoned for about 10 years, and I knew somebody who had been working on a project for that block so we sort of had access to the block. So I got a locksmith down there one day to pick the locks and give me the keys...

Then I got electricity. I got Duke (Energy) to put a meter on the street under the guise that we’re going to do some renovations and we needed saw service, and then I got an electrician to take a wire from that meter and take it into the building. I went to Lowe’s and just went up and down the aisle and was buying equipment. I bought all these table saws and crap. So I set up this wood shop down in the abandoned building — I had drop cords going all over the place like spaghetti — and I started making sculptures in this wood shop. I did it for three years. I didn’t have any plumbing, any heat, no cooling. I had a big fan for during the summer and I had one of those restaurant heaters for the winter that I would just stand under, and I would take big jugs of water down there to wash with and...

### You said you did it for three years? Does that mean you got caught?

I got caught. I finally got busted. And I got busted because there was a police chase. The cops were chasing some guy, and he lost control of his car and crashed into my studio. So this carjacker with a stolen car is there inside my world.

### Were you there when it happened?

No. It was like 5 in the morning or something like that. I heard it because it was right down the street, and sirens came...and the guy ran inside and hid. There were like 20-something cop cars surrounding the building (with) spotlights, rifles, (yelling), “come out with your hands up!” It was a stand-off for like

an hour and then they finally caught the guy. But the next morning I got a phone call because they found something with my name written on it. They called me down there and said, “What the (obscenity) is going on in here?” I said, “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about it.” They knew I was guilty so they shut off my power that day and told me I needed to get my crap out of there. So I went legit and now I have a shop over next to the arena in a garage. But I don’t make the wood pieces. I tear up stuff that’s made out of wood, and then I create new pieces and then build new stuff with it. So I basically collect junk and then repurpose it, and take shapes out of the junk and then create new compositions.

### Jumping back into real estate talk, what drew you to urban housing?

I guess that I never came at development from a business perspective. I always came at it from the architecture perspective, the urban planner perspective. There’s plenty of easier ways to make money than the development business. It’s too damn hard. But I came at it from more of a city-building perspective. I just wanted to work on projects that I can see, and that I ride by. If it’s somewhere I don’t live — like another city or whatever — it’s just less important to me. I want to be about filling in the blanks in Charlotte and making Charlotte a better city.

### Is that because Charlotte’s your hometown?

I guess it’s because I live here. It’s my world and...I guess your question is why don’t I have that perspective on other cities? I guess it’s selfish, and it’s more about my world and my city; where I live every day and I enjoy every day.

### What are some other cities you’ve been to that have impressed you?

You know, why are European cities better than American cities? I think they are. But why is that? Even smaller European cities are more urban and...you know you’re riding through the countryside of Europe and there’s a village, and the village is like super dense. It’s all over each other and there’s tons of land everywhere. It’s a spirit of community or something. City planning just comes from more of a communal perspective. And maybe it’s more of a higher-altitude thing, like how the American spirit is about independence and having my own everything. And as we’ve grown as a country, now that spirit is...to me the negative side of that spirit is when you’re focused on you all the time and your world and your independence, you don’t focus on your community and what makes your world better. If you focus on what’s good for everybody in your community and you think about that when you’re building a project - you think about, “Is that going to make a good street?” or “What does that feel like to the guy walking down the street?” or “What does that feel like to be the guy that happens to have the building next door?” If you think about those kinds

of things while you’re building your personal world, ultimately your personal world will be better; it will be higher caliber because the community exists as a higher caliber. And I think — at its core — that’s somewhat of an un-American concept because America’s all about me. Well, I don’t know. Is that why European cities are cooler? I don’t know, but they are.

### What sort of urban design concepts would you like to see more of in Charlotte?

More mixed use. Sometimes in America the development is done — especially these days — by big companies. It’s hard for the small-time developer to do a significant project. When you were doing condos you could. But now housing is sort of driven by apartments, and the apartments are done by big companies, and they drive their developments with formulas — it’s their formulaic solution. You can just drive around and look at all these apartment projects; they all kind of look alike and feel alike. But if there were a way to create more mixed-use projects where retail was happening at the street, maybe some office included, some work space included, and maybe some housing included or a hotel included...just mixing all the stuff together. That’s happening some, but it’s on major-scale projects like Tryon Place. But it’s harder to do on a smaller scale. The apartment guys hate doing retail, so when they come to an urban setting they just resist putting retail on the street and you can see projects that have basically blank walls on the street or there’s parking behind it. They might put their workout facility or their leasing office there or something, but there’s not any storefront opportunities.

### Why are apartment developers opposed to retail?

Because it doesn’t fit their formula. They’re all about the formula. Their leasing agents and all that are set up to lease apartments. They just don’t like going outside of that formula. Sometimes if you prove it they’ll do it, like if it’s a really significant location. We developed a project at the corner of East Boulevard and Camden Road in South End — it’s called Camden Gallery and it’s rising up now. We developed that, but we sold it to Camden (Property Trust), which is a big company. We had retail all along the street because Camden Road is going to become downtown South End, and we’re building for the future; we’re building for the next generation. We can’t just ignore that and make it blank because it’s going to be the center of South End. So we had retail all along the street; they didn’t want to do it and we told them that was part of our design and they had to do it. And so they are (going to do it), and it’s going to be super successful and we’re really excited about it. And it helps their asset. People that want to live in an urban context want to live around mixed use; they want to be able to walk to get a donut or toothpaste or whatever. They don’t want to have to get in the car to go anywhere if they don’t have to. And

so the more the mix of the uses, the less commuting and traveling you have to do.

### I take it you’re not a fan of the formula?

You know, the scheme we originally teed-up for that corner — and this was five years ago? I was going to take our Centro concept that we were so successful with in the condo world and turn it into apartments. The keys to the Centro concept were great location — and that corner is a super location. There’s a Lynx (Blue Line) stop right there. I was going to do tiny little units. So I had this whole project designed, and units were like 450 square feet. They were super tiny, super efficient, and therefore cheap. A young person could rent one less than they could rent one anywhere else, and in a cool new project in a great location.

### What were the rents going to be?

It was like less than a \$1,000 a month, which...you can’t do that in downtown or South End. But I couldn’t get it financed and everybody thought I was just nuts. They said, “You can’t do a whole project of tiny units.” You go to any of these projects that are out there, 15 percent of them are tiny units and they’re all full. So why not do a whole project? And everybody went, “No. You just can’t do it.” So I said, “Fine. Camden, you want to buy this thing?” And then I had to make all the units bigger and sort of tweak it up a little bit for their formula. But at least it’s getting built and it will be a great project. It’s filling in the corner.

### I read that you’ve started dabbling in office projects. What’s your take on it so far?

I think there’s a revolution getting ready to happen in the office building business right now. We teed-up another project over (in South End), next to (Price’s) Chicken Coop and it’s under construction. I just think that office is too corporate, and the young demographic doesn’t want that; they want something that’s cooler. The project we’re doing has all the steel exposed and you walk through it and see it every day. It has a big staircase you can take to get to your office. You don’t have to go up one floor. We had windows that opened. We had a bike-share that you could (use to) jump on a bike if you had to go to a meeting. We had electric cars you could check out so you didn’t have to drive. If you had a meeting downtown you could check out a car — or get on the train and come downtown. It was all that sort of stuff, but I couldn’t get it financed. So I sold the project to Beacon (Partners), and Beacon’s financing it and building it. It’s going to be a really, really cool building. And it’s going to be a different type of office. So I’m trying to get a couple more of those things going. But yeah, the business model may just be: find the great site, design the great project, sell it to someone else who can go build it and not take the risk. But it gets done. The important thing to me is it gets done.