Just as it did almost a century ago, The University of Alabama is undergoing a transformation, turning big dreams into reality.

by Kayla Montgomery
THE VISION

When Witt became university president in March 2003, he not only brought his bags from the University of Texas at Arlington, but he brought with him a vision for the future of The University of Alabama: to become a national university of choice for the best and brightest. Upon his arrival, three-quarters of the University student population were in-state residents, and while UA was a good regional university, he said, he aimed to propel it to national prominence.

To do that, Witt said, the University had to grow with “balanced excellence.” Not only did the academic prowess of the institution need to improve—and it did, thanks largely in part to an intensely personalized recruiting effort—but the facilities as well. “Part of balanced excellence is working to ensure that facilities, broadly defined, would have facilities that were ‘fully competitive’ with any university in the country.”

That sentiment is accurate, Witt said, but incomplete. “When we began this transition, unfortunately there was—and I would stress the word inaccurate—there was across much of the country an inaccurate perception of the state of Alabama and, in some ways, the South in general,” he explained. “So as I looked at facilities on this campus and thought about what it would take for us to be competitive, I felt we had to have facilities that literally were better than anyone else, because that would help counteract the inaccurate perception of the South.”

The University began construction at a record pace, opening a new building every 90 days over a nine-year span. This pace in itself, Witt said, became a driving force for change. We were in the process of turning a vision—a national university of choice for the best and brightest—into a reality. We wanted to do that in a short period of time and the momentum of our construction program became a very important part of that process.

The accelerated climb of the University from regional stature to a national presence would not have been possible, Witt said, without the UA System Board of Trustees to do something pretty unusual. “We were asking them to let us build buildings at a record pace—a new building every 90 days for nine years. We were asking our trustees to let the University issue debt to finance those buildings. We were asking our trustees to believe that our vision could become reality and to believe that we could grow as rapidly as we said we were going to grow. If our trustees had not supported that, we would have had to move as most universities move—very slowly.”

THE LOGISTICS

Since 2003, 88 new buildings have been constructed to accommodate the growth in campus population. The University has also seen 59 major renovations and the demolition of 84 structures. New projects completed for the fall 2016 semester included North Lawn Hall, a 2,000-seat classroom building on the Bryce campus; a new retail facility on Paul W. Bryant Drive, featuring Starbucks Coffee and an extension of the SupeStore; new Greek houses, including an extension of the Superstore; a new retail facility on Paul W. Bryant Drive, featuring Starbucks Coffee and an extension of the Superstore; new Greek houses, including an extension of the SupeStore; and an extension of the Superstore.

Wolfe explained, “You had the right people come together with the right attitudes, and it was really the right time as far as funding goes. Because of the recession, interest rates were as low as they’ve been in years; construction costs were reasonable because there wasn’t a lot of work.”

Photos by Porfirio Solorzano

Above, three photos picture the construction process at Zeta Tau Alpha sorority. The bricks pictured right middle are reclaimed from the Bryce property. Pictured middle left, North Lawn Hall classrooms will seat students in an auditorium setting. From page 6, the Zeta Tau Alpha front balcony, top, overlooks sorority row; Phi Mu sorority, bottom, opened this fall.
ties Kappa Kappa Gamma and Phi Mu, and fraternities Kappa Alpha and Phi Kappa Psi; and an addition to the Moody Music Building.

“The challenge is if you bring the people, now you’ve got to feed them, you’ve got to house them, you’ve got to have classrooms for them, more faculty, so everything has to grow proportionally,” Wolfe said.

To meet that challenge, the University acquired the neighboring Bryce Hospital grounds. Offering 168 acres contiguous to campus, Wolfe said it is the single most important decision the University has made in regards to land management due to the potential for renovation and development. “There were rumors when we acquired Bryce that we were going to bulldoze the whole thing down, all we really wanted was the land, and that was really never true,” Wolfe explained. “We went in and did building audits and went in to every building on Bryce grounds and determined if it had good adaptive reuse for the University or no it didn’t.”

Working with the Alabama Historical Commission, the University decided the iconic white building with its signature tower will remain, as will four of its wings, two on each side of the building. The building is currently being stabilized and will eventually house the University welcome center, a museum of university history and a museum of mental health, paying homage to the building’s storied past.
The Moody Music Building received an addition for the fall 2016 semester.

Pi, Delta Zeta and Pi Beta Phi. Zeta Tau Alpha is slated to open in December 2016. An adaptive athletics facility is also in the planning stages, Wolfe said, which will be one of the nicest facilities of its kind in the nation. Solely dedicated to adapted athletics, the building will be located on the south side of the Student Recreation Center.

“We kept thinking, ‘It will slow down, it will kind of slow down,’ and it never has,” Wolfe said. “It’s just gotten busier and busier. When I came here, I knew the campus could be, and needed to be, better. Just attention to details, things like that. One of the things I’ve always said is it was like a beautiful apple; it just needed to be polished. Hopefully we polished the apple a little bit and grew it and really made it better.”

THE FUTURE

University President Dr. Stuart Bell now drives the future of the Capstone since taking office in July 2015. In his year at the helm, a new strategic plan has been crafted to serve as a guiding force for The University of Alabama and its future endeavors. “The University has accomplished significant growth at the undergraduate level, and we were at a point where it was time to rediscover our direction and aspirations,” Bell said.

Arriving at the University during a period of such positive change, Bell said, provided an opportunity to reflect, but also to dream about new goals for the Capstone. “I think it was a very timely arrival for me to be able to now say, ‘Let’s pause here for just a moment and look where we’ve gone,’” he explained. “That’s always important, but sometimes self-gratifying to do that too much — but then to say, ‘Okay, now where do we need to go from here?’ I think this plan has allowed us to dream—and to dream big—and to look at how we can build on all the great successes we’ve had and build an even greater flagship university for Alabama and the nation.”

A new Starbucks Coffee and UA Supersave opened on Bryant Drive. The Bryce Campus, pictured at top, will provide area for future expansion, including North Lawn Hall.

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