

Brittany Kyles, at home in the space she designed.

THE EDGE

BETTER TOGETHER

Entrepreneurial ingenuity could play a significant role in bringing businesses back to life and reviving the economy after COVID-19. With The EDGE Incubator and Accelerator, Tuscaloosa has a wonderful environment in which to encourage that pioneering spirit.

The EDGE had its genesis in the aftermath of the 2011 Tuscaloosa tornado. Created jointly by the City of Tuscaloosa, the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama and The University of Alabama, it supports both new and established firms by providing space and learning opportunities designed to help build and grow businesses and jobs.

The 26,300 square-foot facility features 20 offices, 100 workstations and several conference rooms.

CHES interior design alumna, Brittany Kyles, played a role in making The EDGE what it is, a space that encourages innovation and collaboration. A Registered Interior Designer and Interior Designer II in The University of Alabama's department of furnishings & design, Kyles oversaw the programming, planning, coordinating, procuring and installation of the furniture for the space.

Kyles has always been attracted to architecture and the history it shares. That interest evolved to include interior design. She remembers at a young age being drawn to the creativity and problem-solving aspect of designing spaces. When she got to college she says, "I knew after my first 'Introduction to Interior Design' class with Dr. Shirley Foster that this was the profession for me."

During her time at CHES, Kyles says she discovered her strengths, her weaknesses and her drive for interior design. "My professors supported, challenged and encouraged me to do my best. The interior design program gave me the building blocks to construct my own professional future. It was the first step in achieving my professional goal of becoming a Registered Interior Designer," says Kyles.

According to Kyles, when a designer begins programming for a space one of the first questions they ask is 'How will this space be used?' For The EDGE encouraging innovation was a big priority.

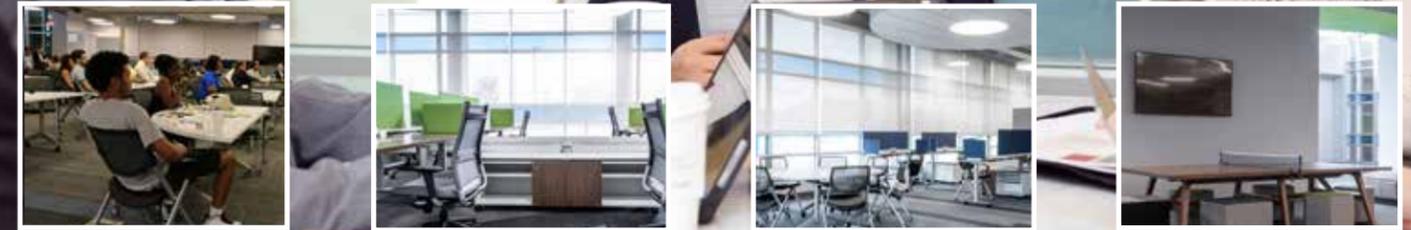


High backs and semi-enclosed sides give this seating area privacy.

"IF THIS UNDERTAKING SAYS ANYTHING, IT WOULD BE THAT WE ARE ALL BETTER TOGETHER."



Spaces in the facility are designed to encourage innovation and collaboration.



"We were tasked to appeal to the current generation of upcoming entrepreneurs, move away from closed offices and take more of a 'Google' approach," she says. "And by supporting the fluidity of ever-changing technology and work environments, design a space that supports collaboration, communication and learning from each other."

Other goals included creating a hierarchy of work spaces (for leasing option purposes), spaces that suggested collaboration and had access to technology, training and meeting spaces, teaming spaces, and a few private zones as well.

"My team and I were responsible for interpreting the end user's functional goals and parameters outlined in a government-funded grant for each space while creating a furniture package that made it come to fruition," says Kyles. They satisfied those requests with private offices, open benching, modular and mobile furniture, and collaborative groupings that included provisions to support technology.

"As an incubator space that supports growth and versatility, its furniture needed to reflect those traits. The open, collaborative furniture footprint directly supports this philosophy. We created a furniture design that complemented the building's footprint, provisions and finishes while preserving the functional needs of accessibility, convertibility and flexibility," says Kyles.

Although the furniture plan for The EDGE encourages open dialogues with shared and mobile spaces, it still incorporates subtle details that establish a sense of territory and provide privacy.

Separate lockable storage units, privacy screens and consistently sized breaks between work surfaces are territory details. They give EDGE entrepreneurs a place to touch down and make it their own by configuring spaces to their way of working.

The footprints of the various furniture groupings send messages of inclusion and collaboration which differs from typical office footprints that exude privacy and a sense of authority.

One wing of the building is predominantly a fully flexible open plan space that includes nesting tables and chairs that can be stowed away for versatile events. The other wing has a combination of mobile and stationary furniture that supports collaboration and productivity.

Color plays a role as well. The EDGE is full of bright stimulating colors. All combine to support productivity, creativity and mood. Kyles explains, "We also used color coding to help create identity among the open floor plans. Privacy screens are specified in different groups of colors. You will also notice that each station has the same amount of pedestals and work surface sizes. This helps communicate 'this is my space and this is your space.'"

Dr. Theresa M. Welbourne, Executive Director of the Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute and The EDGE says of the furniture installation, "It has been a critical asset for attracting tenants and members as well as building a collaborative and innovative culture. Members love the stand/sit desks. And being able to move chairs, desks and white boards to create short-term huddle spaces or pseudo offices has been a big plus. The design choices really complement the light and open spaces at The EDGE.

(l-r) One wing of the building is fully flexible for events with easily stowed, moveable furniture. Colors help create identity among the open floor plans. The EDGE design will support ever-changing technology and work environments. Incorporating a few areas for relaxation are the norm in innovative office design.

"Colors, style and everything come together to provide ample options for how we use the building. From running a workshop to hosting a speaker, we have been able to provide amazing content and educational/networking opportunities across our audiences. Additionally, with the onset of the pandemic, we had the freedom to allow our members and tenants to easily spread out at a safe distance to assure they can continue to work safely."

Kyles described her team's end-product this way, "The EDGE is definitely edgy and innovative in both aesthetics and functionality."

Kyles' team included three other CHES grads, director of furnishings and design Susanna Johnson, fellow Interior Designer II Laura Nichols and interior design intern Mollie Evans, along with representatives of furniture vendors. Kyles explained, "Susanna helped support me the entire way, especially with navigating grant and procurement language and making sure that we reached our tight deadline to place a \$1.1 million furniture order. One of the biggest challenges of the project was the furniture order and install timeline which left no room for error."

"Laura, who also has a wealth of furniture knowledge, was essential on-site when the furniture was delivered, installed and punched. Mollie aided in the behind the scenes operations by preparing presentations and

creating necessary documents. Each vendor went above and beyond to help turn around furniture orders and I am so thankful for their commitment to making this a success."

Welbourne praised the group's efforts saying, "First, Brittany and her team did a great job of requirements gathering and looking at similar buildings to provide ideas. Second, I really felt she worked with us as a team; she never pushed a product or options that we didn't want. She paid attention to the small things we discussed.

"It was never a design vs. functionality issue; she knew what we needed. Also, she respected our budget. I very much enjoyed working with them. She continues to support us, answering calls almost immediately and following up with any concerns we have. I feel very fortunate to be able to work with such a professional and talented team."

For Kyles, the most rewarding part of this project was the honor of playing a constructive role in helping to create a space for growth, entrepreneurship and innovation in the Tuscaloosa community.

Kyles adds, "The successful completion of this project took a collaboration of professionals from the City of Tuscaloosa, the Chamber of Commerce and UA. If this undertaking says anything, it would be that we are all better together."

The furnishings package that Kyles and her team dreamed, designed and delivered does just that, making The EDGE function much like her team - better together.