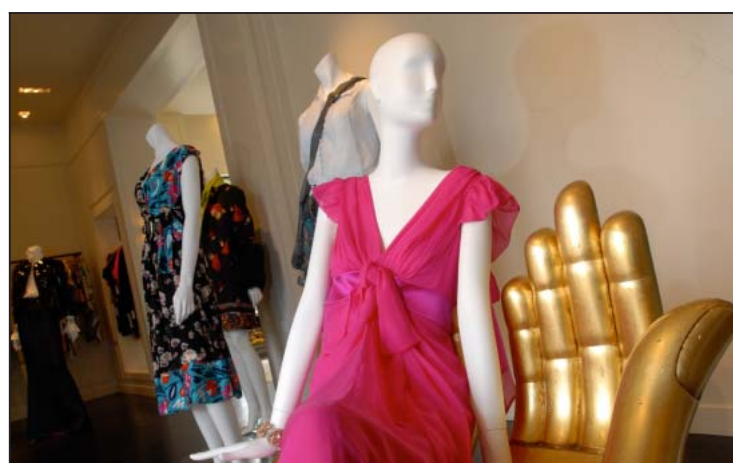




PHOTOS BY T. ORTEGA GAINES - ogaines@charlotteobserver.com



Among the jewelry offerings at Capitol are works from Irene Neuwirth and Tom Binns, as well as ethnic pieces from Morocco.



An appreciation of mid-century furniture is incorporated into the look of Capitol. Gold Pedro Friedeberg chairs from the 1960s complement a gown by Christian Lacroix.

◀ The Patrick Blanc vertical garden in the courtyard at Capitol is composed of 150 varieties of plants purchased from a nursery in Raleigh.

Festival of Capitol

To celebrate the new retail space, Laura Vinroot Poole and her team have planned a weekend of events showcasing the South for their guests, some of whom will be experiencing the region for the first time. There will be group outings to Lowe's Motor Speedway, dinner at Mac's Speedshop and a visit to Metrolina Expo Antiques Spectacular. The festivities will culminate with a party Saturday.

Among the expected guests: Designers such as **Erin Fetherston**, **Christian Cota**, **Chris Benz**, **Jeremy Laing** and sisters Kate and Laura Mulleavy of **Rodarte** are scheduled to attend, as well as editors from *Vogue*, *Women's Wear Daily*, the *New York Times* and *Domino* magazine.

CAPITOL

■ from IE

Charlotte. I'm from here, I'm proud of it, I love it," she said. "I think that people underestimate Charlotte. And I've never, ever done that. I've only believed in Charlotte and (its) level of sophistication."

A UNC Chapel Hill grad with an art degree but no formal fashion training, she cut her teeth shopping at the Junior League Warehouse.

"That was where I learned everything about construction, fine fabrics," she says. "I had a closet full of Ferragamos I got for \$20 and Oscar (de la Renta) peasant blouses and Adolfo suits. I just have always had a real love for it."

She and husband, Perry Poole, got their retail education through Beanie & Cecil, a pair of boutiques he launched in Raleigh and Wilmington. He sold them in 1997. They learned sometimes-hard lessons about vendors and how to stock a store, and the value of sweat equity.

The pair decided to move to Charlotte from Raleigh. Perry got a master's degree in architecture from UNC Charlotte and worked with Laura to open Capitol, mostly because she found herself wondering where she'd shop in Charlotte.

"There was really nothing here (from a retail standpoint)," Poole says. "I don't mean it as an offense, but all of my mom's friends shopped in Atlanta, Charleston and

New York. ...I just thought it was strange."

Together, they have created a unique retail experience in Charlotte that is quickly picking up national and international recognition.

New York Times style blogger Sandra Ballentine recently used "über-delicious" and "fierce" to describe the store's well-edited racks, which include Lanvin bridal and pieces from stalwarts like Oscar de la Renta and Yves Saint Laurent next to industry darlings such as Dries Van Noten and Stella McCartney.

"The store has a comprehensive and impressive mix of designer collections and is able to balance being real and approachable, yet cool and fashionable," Stella McCartney spokesperson Arabella Rufino says.

The Charlotte boutique is celebrating its move to the thoughtful new space with a coming-out party of sorts this weekend.

"Charlotte is an ambassador for the whole Southeast with this (party)," Capitol buyer Ruth Caldwell, 29, says. Guests are traveling from India, Paris, London, Canada and across the United States to attend Saturday's festivities in the store designed by architect Perry Poole.

The retail space is as much an attraction as the apparel. The centerpiece of the well-appointed two-story building is a courtyard featuring a vertical garden from Parisian botanist/artist Patrick Blanc, per-



A custom-built display rack holding Chloe, Givenchy and Balenciaga bags shares space on Capitol's retail floor with an Edward Wormley sofa from the 1950s.

haps best known for his green wall installation at the Quai Branly Museum in France.

Capitol's mix of refined sophistication, high standards and realism is compelling.

"I get to shop everywhere, and I buy more when I go to Capitol than I do when I'm in New York," says Domino fashion director Lauren Goodman. "She's buying in a way that she wants to dress. I've seen her sit there and say, 'I can't buy this collection because you can't wear a bra with it.' She thinks about the way women live in the clothes, how they want to feel."

Caldwell and Poole are appreciative of the artisanal nature of what they're selling, but they also expect the function to match the form.

"Somebody told me a long time

ago, 'It's not a luxury if you don't use it,'" Caldwell says. "Luxury is incorporating it into your daily life ... We're all plugged into what works and what doesn't."

The new space opened in July, well before the present world-wide economic troubles, but Poole is confident Capitol will weather the financial crisis relatively unscathed. She and her team haven't noticed a dramatic change in how her clients are shopping. The new location is also off to a profitable start, she notes.

"We do have things that are incredibly expensive, one-of-a-kind art pieces," buyer Caldwell says. "A Rodarte gown can be \$25,000... That's available if you're interested. But there's also \$150 cotton knit day dresses."

The boutique's growth from carrying 25 designer lines to 125 has been as unassuming as its fearless fashion leader Poole.

"Any growth that we've had has been...absolutely led by our clients," Poole says. "It's not sort of 'Watch this.' It's more of 'Where do you want to go next and how can I get you there?'"

Charlotte media personality Barbara McKay has been a Capitol shopper since the beginning, she says, and is thankful for the education she's received via Poole and Caldwell about designers.

"My clothes are my art collection. I enjoy them so much more than just a pretty outfit," she says. "I love hearing about the designers. That is meaningful to me. (Poole and Caldwell) are wonderful at building relationships not only with designers but with their customers."

McKay's love runs deep - during the boutique's 2001 move within Phillips Place, she was rolling racks between storefronts with the rest of the Capitol employees. "I will do anything for them," she says with a laugh.

That mutual admiration and respect is integral to the success of Capitol, Domino's Goodman says. Poole "is teaching (her clients) how these clothes fit into their lives... She's like your fabulous best friend."

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