

Southern Accents

The magazine of fine Southern interiors and gardens

September-October 2002

CIVICS LESSON from HABERSHAM



our fall showhouse
Inviting Rooms
beautiful accessories



Civics Lesson

A new Carolina Low Country town builds timeless landmarks

by Philip Morris Photographed by J. Savage Gibson

Public buildings positioned and designed to serve as neighborhood landmarks are an integral feature of the New Urbanism movement, and the new pedestrian-friendly small town of Habersham, overlooking the Broad River near Beaufort, South Carolina, was planned accordingly. A young architecture firm in nearby Port Royal welcomed the opportunity to design its first four civic structures: Habersham Post Office, the river pavilion, the pool house,

and the community dock.

“We put a strong emphasis on context, rather than designing stand-alone buildings that could be anywhere. When you have a development like Habersham you have a good starting point for design,” says architect Eric Brown, partner with Thomas Michaels, Jr., in Studio 3 Architects. “The plan and architecture codes adopted by Bob Turner, the developer, show in all the houses that have started to line the streets, so our

buildings needed to respond to the street pattern and the architectural language being established.”

That architectural “language” is classical, which Habersham has adopted from nearby historic towns. The layout balances formal, axial elements with the site’s natural features. In response to the plan, the post office is placed at the end of a long boulevard to be fronted with two- or three-story commercial buildings and town houses to form the town center.

The Habersham Post Office, one of four civic structures designed by Studio 3 Architects, occupies a prominent site at the end of a boulevard. It is classical but relaxed with exposed trusses and roof structure to fit the laid-back character of the new coastal town.



ABOVE: The Pool Pavilion's tower, set above the changing rooms, has an open-air room with sweeping views of water and marsh. LEFT: Upstate Carolina tobacco barns inspired the architect's design of the river pavilion. The wide, stout-columned verandas extend the covered space.

The other end of the block-long axis is centered not on a building but a landmark 250-year-old live oak.

The architects designed the post office in classic temple form facing the axis. The modest-size structure is raised three steps and made tall enough so that, though a single story, it signifies importance. Inside are postal boxes for all the houses, creating a place for residents to run into one another on a regular basis. While the proportions are classically correct, the details reveal a vernacular accent.

"Habersham is meant to be a relaxed place, so we used exposed trusses on the porch and inside and let the rafters and other structural elements show," Brown says. "The boxed columns, instead of having refined inset panels, have simple vertical slots to make them seem like they are made of heavy timbers. The

proportions were carefully worked out using what's called the 'golden section,' which produces a pleasing effect whether you realize it or not. Happily, that is all worked into the Habersham code."

For the pool house, located on the first small island between Habersham's residential blocks and the Broad River, Studio 3 Architects made the most of a slightly elevated site to create a community landmark. There are two structures tied together with an arbor, all overlooking the pool a few steps down. The smaller equipment building is where residents pick up towels and other items; the other pool house has changing rooms below and a tower above. "This arrangement creates a sheltered character for the pool and a place to view the whole setting, including marsh, river, and Habersham's developing

SOUTHEAST FOLIO



Habersham's classical architecture extends to the temple-form community dock, which sits serenely above the marsh and river's edge.

neighborhoods," says Brown. "The tower is subtly illuminated at night, so it glows like a beacon."

On the second little island, developer Turner asked the architects to design a river pavilion that would serve a variety of purposes but be deferential to live oaks and wrap-around views. The open-air pavilion is anchored by a large fireplace, but there is no real front or back. Instead, a deep veranda wraps around the core where dining tables are clustered. Rows of clerestory windows bring light to the interior area, and there is natural ventilation. The structure is raised on low, wide steps, which double as impromptu seating.

Not far from the river pavilion, at the end of a wood-plank pier, the community dock floats above the Broad River, a little temple in a heavenly landscape. In its timeless poise, this simple structure speaks for the graceful way this architecture makes a memorable new place to dwell. ♦