The Art Center’s Architect

A. HAYS TOWN, the architect whose long career of designing Louisiana French and Spanish colonial houses and buildings, was Maurice Heymann’s choice. Now in his mid-nineties he continues to work. His buildings are known along the Gulf coast from Texas to Alabama for traditional dimensions and fine craftsmanship. He even helps his clients to find appropriate plantings and antique furnishings.

Perhaps his restoration projects are even more important to the heritage of Louisiana. Although he lives in Baton Rouge and has built some great houses there, he is especially honored in Lafayette, where he has not only built homes, he was architect for the Oil Center, Petroleum Club, Municipal Auditorium, and office buildings, from the mid-1950s. His Lafayette churches include the First Presbyterian and the Episcopal Church of the Ascension. In 1965 he designed the Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana adjacent to the University of Louisiana campus.*

At home, he paints, crafts ornamental wooden grottoes, and collects fine art for his clients and his own home. Years ago, when I walked into his house, he said, “Here is one of my Gainsborough paintings, and there is another one in the living room.” He has built well over 1200 houses and building of Louisiana historic design.

A book was produced about 1988 that showed the drawings of about two dozen houses that he has built throughout the South. In 1999 Town collaborated in a second book that features color photographs of some of his houses, including his own. The photographer was Phillip Gould.

* Now named the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.
How to build a landmark
Fine craftsmanship and remarkable detailing went into the construction of this twentieth century re-creation of an ante bellum plantation home. The new Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana University is a composite of many of the best buildings of the early South, closely resembling them in the smallest structural as well as decorative detail.

The builder employed many of the same construction techniques traditionally used by craftsmen nearly two centuries ago, and for that reason the building offers a number of surprises.

For one thing, the 24 stately columns aren't wood or plaster — they're brick — beneath that stucco facade. Furthermore, the building isn't painted white but a very pale shade of pink, which was achieved by mixing old brick dust with paint base, in the traditional manner. The pink glow is tempered with grey-green shutters, a charcoal grey roof and white gallery rail. (Contrary to popular belief, only the plantation out-buildings were whitewashed, and many houses and public buildings in the late 18th and early 19th centuries were painted in pastel shades.)

Wherever possible, authentic materials salvaged from older buildings were incorporated in the design. The roof of secondhand slate from New Orleans originally was imported from France as ballast in sailing ships.

Interior finishing is rich in authentic architectural detail. Molded plaster cornices, custom brick, hand-carved mantelpieces, all were executed by hand by skilled craftsmen in the area, who learned to duplicate early techniques. Cypress paneling in the library was treated to a series of processes that included a coating of lye, then vinegar, and finally beeswax for a light-toned aged effect. Brick flooring in the hallway and library was laid in an old pattern and sealed with beeswax kept boiling in an iron pot during the application by hand. Constant buffing maintains a gleaming surface with very little waxing.

For all its authenticity, however, the building does benefit from modern materials and systems. Beneath the old slate is a fireproof roof, and reinforced concrete was used in the construction of the second-floor framing system and porches. Air conditioning, elevator service and ample provision for staff and visitor comfort add up to a functional new heritage landmark.

Custom wedge-shaped brick was used to build the 24 Tuscan columns that are certainly the distinguishing features of the building.

Art Center closely resembles the famed Hermitage plantation at Darrow, Louisiana, built in 1812.