How a Colonial Louisiana Landmark
Was Built in the 20th Century

Early methods of design were used by A. Hays Town, when he was asked by leading Lafayette business men to design an Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana building for the University of Southwestern Louisiana Foundation. Here is how it was done.

Bricks were saved from the first administration building of USL's campus for building the double brick walls; but custom wedge bricks for 24 Doric columns had to be made by local craftsmen. Fortunately, Henry Busch a member of the board of directors owned a brick company.

Slate from the Alps used to come to New Orleans in sailing ships as ballast during the 18th and 19th centuries. Many New Orleans and River Road buildings still have shingles made from this durable material, and Town found some from a razed building to use here. The soft grey contrasted well with the pink walls and grey-green shutters.

"Acadiana has many craftsmen with the patience and ability to produce authentic old techniques by hand," Town said.

Plaster was applied to the columns and walls in the same manner that had been used in some of Louisiana's earliest great houses. The two main floor rooms and the wide central hallway between two entrances feature walls, cornices and dado treatments that required custom-made metal and wood molds to sculpt the patterns. Two craftsmen were found who mastered the old techniques, because none had been produced in more than a hundred years (in 1967), Town said.

He specified a soft shade of pink for exterior walls and columns to duplicate the same kind of finish that had been used years ago. In order to get this look craftsmen ground bricks to dust and added it in their paint buckets. Lafayette watchers were puzzled about the shade and wanted to know why even the columns were painted with the tint.

"People think that columns should be white," because of the publication of a book called "White Pillars," two generations ago. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries good quality white paint was not available. Whitewash was used on plantation out-buildings, but not on the main house until nearer midcentury. White columns stood out on River Road houses during the Civil War, not when Greek Revival was new."

Town said that the building would look best in a few years when the colors mellowed. And they did.

Sturdy batten blinds on the first floor were originally used for protection, and they are held back by wrought iron fixtures made by a blacksmith. The second floor shutters are louvred.

Each of three fireplace facades were carved in traditional Adams styles of the late 18th century with Doric or Ionic columns flanking the openings. Similar designs are found in some of Louisiana's great houses, such Chretien Point, Oak Alley, and the Shadows. Some of the motifs were carved by hand, like the sunburst in the cypress-paneled library.

The first-floor interior was designed to complement the early Louisiana collection of fine paintings given to the USL Foundation by the late W. E. Groves of New Orleans, and Town said that he hoped that they would always remain on view in the museum. At the time that the paintings were donated Groves said that he was including one each of the finest paintings in his collection by Sully, Healy, Rinck, Vaudechamp, Jarvis, Lion, Pomerade, and others, all well-known early American artists.

"I hope that the Louisiana collection will always be located on this first floor, and that early Louisiana furnishings will be collected slowly, even if it takes 30 years," said the architect. "The second floor is appropriate for special and temporary exhibits."

Flooring includes old, dark-stained cypress in two of the rooms, and old brick in the hallway and library. The brick floors were sealed with two coats of beeswax, kept simmering in a big black iron pot and applied by hand.

"Don't wax often, just buff," advised the architect. Cypress paneling and the old cypress stairway were finished with a coating of lye, then vinegar, and finally with a hand-rubbed beeswax finish to provide a light-toned aged effect.

Four antique hanging lights were saved by Town for this building, including two of blown glass and bronze early American fixtures, an Empire three-branch black and bronze design, and a massive 16-branch bronze piece for the library. Town was extremely proud of this last find.
"I was able to buy two of these early lamps," he said. "One for this building and one for my own studio."

Together with his two good friends, Maurice Heymann, the philanthropist who donated the land and first large donation for this project; and Horace B. Rickey, Sr., the contractor, Town had executed many Lafayette buildings in the Oil Center (1952-1970), the Municipal Auditorium (1960), the original part of the First Presbyterian Church (1948), and many homes. Since designing the Art Center, he has devoted himself to creating over 1000 fine homes in his well researched early Louisiana style. Hays Town believes that this early design is especially appropriate for the Louisiana landscape, heat, humidity, and comfort in living well.

Now in his ninth decade Town has enjoyed an enviable lifestyle. He has had the opportunity to create exactly what he likes best, and has been appreciated by the many people who not only love living in his kind of architectural comfort but invite him to return as a friend.

He has not been without detractors. Many younger architects had scoffed at an art museum in an "old house." Some of them were jealous of his affiliation with Heymann and Rickey. They wanted to build something contemporary.

Heymann said smiling, "No! I am donating this corner property to be visible for many years. It must be something that Louisiana people can easily identify with. Contemporary buildings soon look outdated. This design will be timeless. Fifty years from now the building will look as good as it does today."

'The late Maurice Heymann, Horace B. Rickey, Sr., president Joel Fletcher, Sr., and Fred Bates and others of the USL Foundation.'

Cornice Molds
Several made on the site molds were used to provide traditional ceiling finishing, and the architect urged that they be stored in the attic, so that years from now people will know how they were made. Only one pair of craftsmen could be found in Louisiana who knew how to make plaster cornices. The template (thin metal with the cutting pattern) provided the desired design. "It is hard work, and in the corners this design must be done by hand," Horace Rickey said.
ARCHITECT A. HAYS TOWN chose this light fixture for the cypress-paneled library at the Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana. Note the ring that was designed to pull it down for lighting. Barbara Pettit gets a close look.

Sunburst motif.

CHAMBORD CHATEAU OF FRANCIS I IN THE LOIRE VALLEY AREA OF FRANCE—This chandelier is similar to the one at the Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana.
"The building itself is a work of art," said visiting Louvre curator, Pierre Verlet of Paris. In order to make the columns visually straight when viewed from a distance they taper slightly from bottom to top.

CUSTOM BRICKS—Rickey, left, demonstrated the beginning of one of the columns. Although handmade bricks were made directly on the site of neoclassic buildings and homes, Henry Busch's Mike Baker Brick Company locally was willing to make custom bricks, which taper slightly to form a circle of 23 bricks at the base. One third of the way up, one brick was removed from the circle, two thirds of the way to the top, one more brick was removed. This is called "entasis."

FACING PAGE—For the first time since before the Civil War 24 Doric columns were constructed in the classical manner to surround the Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana. A Hays Town was the architect, and Horace B. Rickey, Jr. was the contractor. Both men invested lifetimes of research in building this tribute to Louisiana fine arts. In order to make the columns visually straight when viewed from a distance they were slightly tapered from bottom to top.

BASE OF COLUMNS—Hand chosen craftsmen were picked by the architect and the contractor. "Only in South Louisiana do we still have craftsmen who have the patience to learn techniques that were used in the early 19th century," Town said. The foreman is showing college girls the beginning of the first column.
TWENTY-FOUR DORIC COLUMNS of custom made bricks, covered with stucco surround this building and support the hipped roof. A. Hays Town of Lafayette and Baton Rouge was architect, and Horace B. Rickey was contractor. Both men are specialists in traditional Louisiana building techniques. The Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana (now called the USL Art Museum) was started in March, 1967. One year later it was completed.

BEFORE PLASTERING—Few people had seen columns before the finishing stucco was added. "We see Louisiana River Road columns as they are deteriorating—not when they are being built," said a faculty member of the Louisiana State University department of architecture at Baton Rouge. Town decreed that plaster would be made in the traditional manner and applied to the building, as well as the columns.

L'HERMITAGE WAS BUILT ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER IN 1812. It is built exactly like the above building. Originally it was the home of Michael Doradou Bringier. About 1970 it was restored and is now the home of Dr. and Mrs. Robert Judice, who have furnished it with many Louisiana-style 18th and early 19th century pieces. This neoclassic style of architecture was popular in Louisiana from the Louisiana Purchase until 1860. (See page 63 for sample chair. Many Judice pieces of furniture in the Louisiana provincial, Creole, and Acadian sections were included in the 1972 furnishings exhibit at the Cabildo."
The Art Center Building Is A Work of Art

A detail of the cypress mantel facade was hand-carved in sunburst motif, library.

One of the most important works of art is the Art Center building itself which was designed by architect, A. Hays Town, and built in the colonial Louisiana plantation style. Old bricks, the stairway and newel post from Old Martin Hall at the University of Southwestern Louisiana were saved for this building when the administration building at USL was razed in 1963.

Other old materials include cypress flooring from an early New Orleans convent and several antique light fixtures.

Old methods of finishing were used on plastering, paneling, brick flooring and paint tinting to give the authentic look to the architectural period.

Workers applied hot beeswax from a black iron pot to the brick floors, and they mixed ground brick dust to the pigment for the soft pink exterior of the building. The cypress paneling in the library was finished with hand-rubbed coatings of lye, then vinegar, and finally beeswax. The traditional plaster cornices on the first floor were applied by craftsmen who used wood and tin molds.

The Art Center’s 24 Doric columns were constructed in the original Greek Revival manner, i.e., custom pie-shaped bricks were laid in a circle. At the base 24 bricks were used. One third of the way up the layers were reduced to 23 bricks. Two thirds of the way up the layers were reduced to 22 bricks. This is called “entasis”, which means that there is a slight narrowing of the vertical column — but that it seems visually straight. Since this method of construction is extremely expensive, columns are seldom made in this manner. Only a few of the old Louisiana houses and buildings built prior to 1861 can be seen today with columns like those of the Art Center. When the columns were being constructed, many architects and architectural students came here to observe. Plaster covers the bricks, which is the traditional method of finishing.

H. Alvin Sharpe

This talented Louisiana artist has placed a large collection of his engravings, dies, medals, drawings, and prints at the Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana. Using a centuries-old technique, he cuts an intaglio free-hand directly on the surface of a mild steel die. The steel is hardened and the medal is struck on a hand press in his studio in New Orleans.

“Diana and Ippolita”
Painted by Allessandro Varotari (1588 - 1654)
Donors: Mr. and Mrs. J. Arthur Roy

This oil painting on canvas measures 51” x 53” and was in the collection of Baron Achille Nenzi of Florence, Italy, who was a prominent collector. The subject is typical of the seventeenth century Florentine period and similar paintings can be seen in both Florence and Venice.
W.E. GROVES AND MRS HEYMANN met at the opening reception of the Art Center for Southwestern LA.

BELOW: At his home in New Orleans with a favorite painting by Richard Clague.