

Works of Human Hands

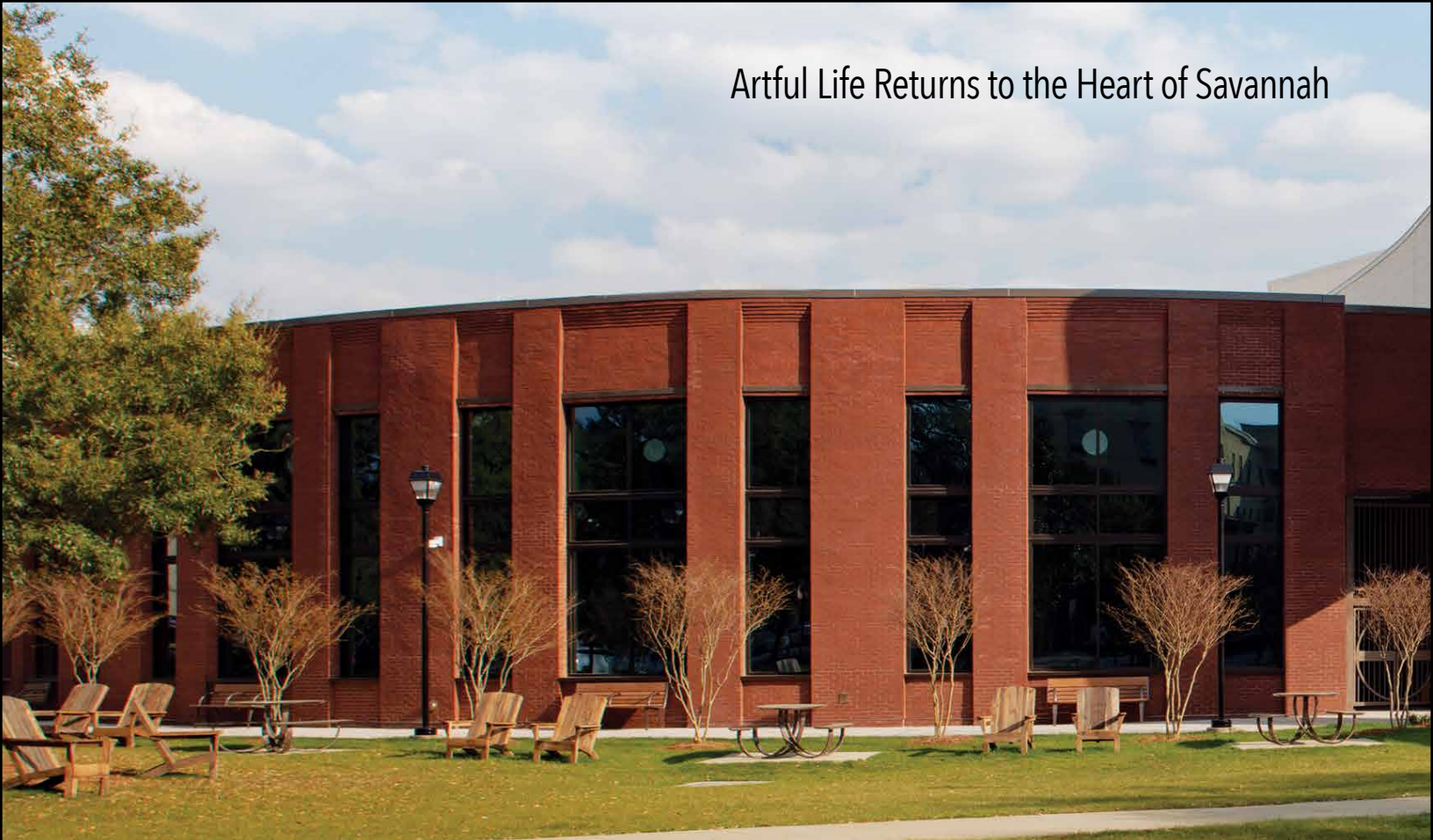
Case Study in Brick:

Savannah
Cultural Arts
Center

Acme Brick Red Richmond Blend Velour Modular
General Shale Cunningham Brick Diamond White
Velour Modular with Glazed Accent Bands
Acme Brick Normal Weight Concrete Block

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Artful Life Returns to the Heart of Savannah



View from northwest to lane entrance



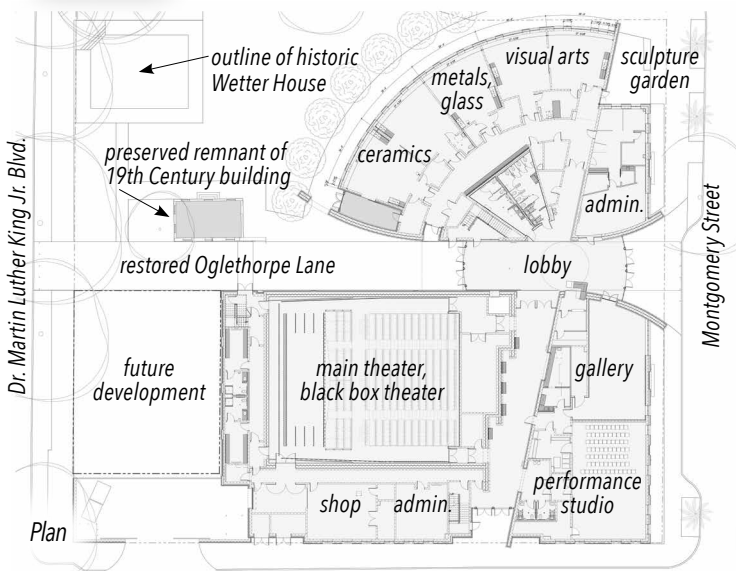
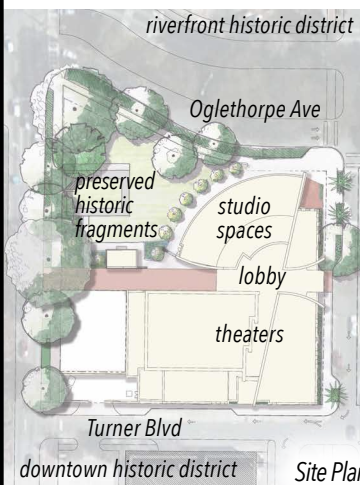
Main entrance

The human touch has returned to a formerly desolate city block of Savannah. Architects took heart from a historic fragment onsite and railroad buildings to restore life to a prominent piece of the historic district.

Acme Brick in two colors, and a glazed accent, were central to the design of the Savannah Cultural Arts Center. In combination with sealed concrete block from Acme, these materials provided form for performance spaces, art and craft studios, and staff in a vibrant, active community hub.

Brick and concrete block were materials of choice to reflect and enhance the history of the neighborhood and to imbue the center with an industrial character appropriate for a place where artists take chances and create new works. They also happened to be the materials that met a demanding fixed budget and that will stand up to the harsh weather of the Georgia coast.

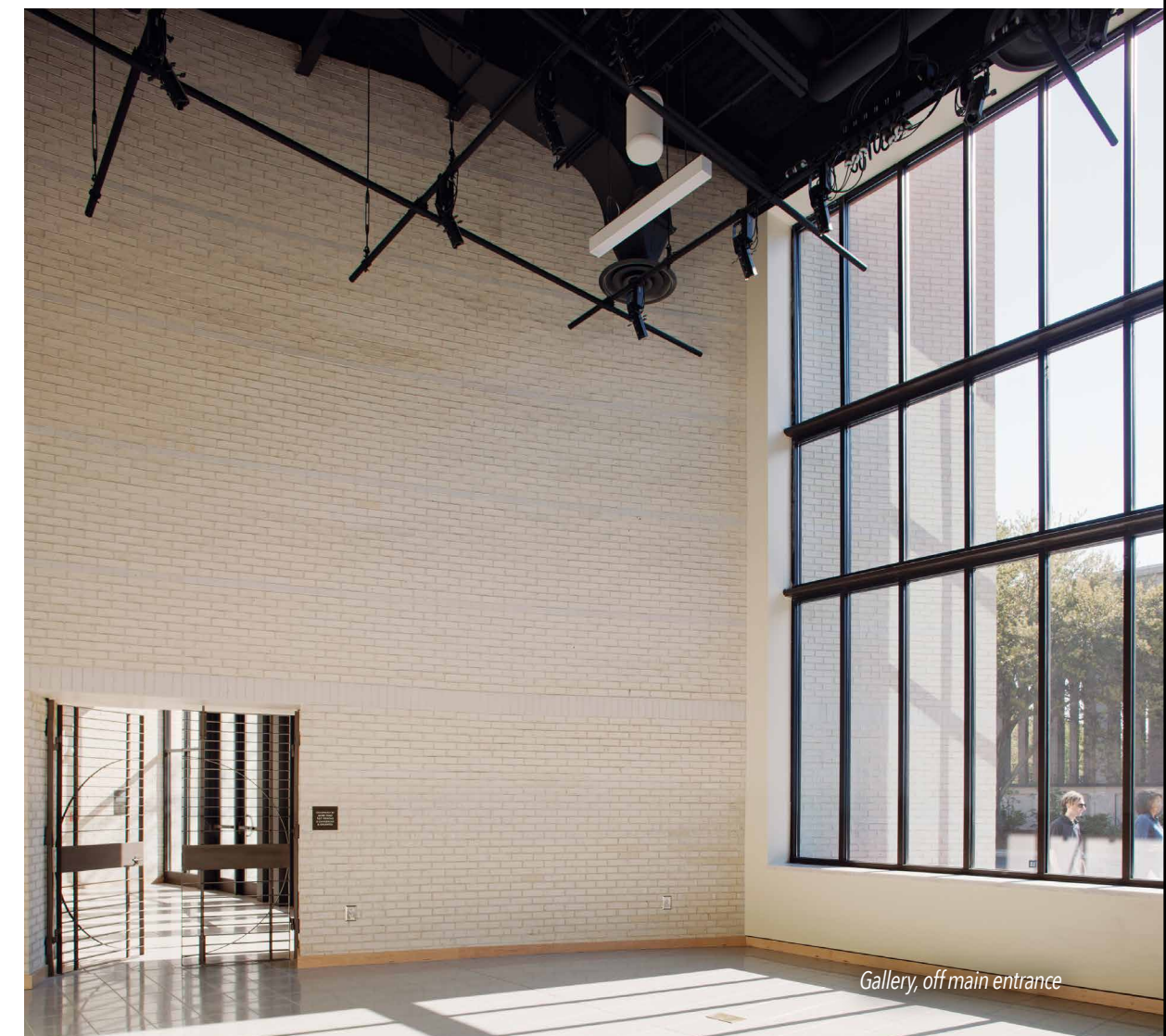
Once Savannah's grandest home stood here; now only its garden shed, lovingly preserved, remains to enjoy a new context with humans in its midst—artists and performers, patrons and audiences—proud of their city.



Main entrance lobby



MAIN FOOD STUDIO



Gallery, off main entrance



Command of Scale in Architecture

Brick was better for design, and it turned out to be more economical than structural concrete or stucco. We were surprised by that, and pleased because brick is a far superior material over the long haul, especially for a white finish; stucco gets disfigured quickly in this coastal climate.

The center was built with a special-purpose local-option sales tax, which meant the City of Savannah paid for construction in cash, and had a fixed

budget. We worked hard and used brick and concrete block to meet the City's program within that budget.

One axis to organize the site plan was Oglethorpe Lane. The other was the tall white brick wall, set at an angle, to divide spaces into functional quadrants. One quadrant houses the best performance space available in Georgia. Another contains administration on two levels. The round quadrant is made up of art and craft

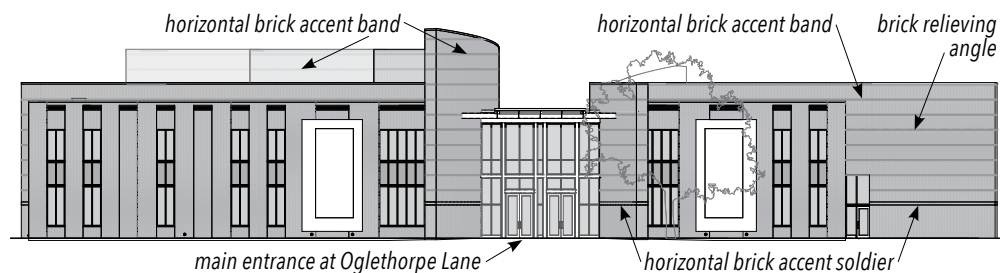
studios, essentially a series of classrooms. The fourth quadrant is a black-box performance space. All are very flexible spaces, and accommodate a wide variety of arts. The center is an embodiment of how to make art and make a living off of it.

This site had no adjacent historic structure for reference, only a tiny shed from 1898 that remained from a lost historic mansion. We looked farther afield and took inspiration from railroad buildings of that era, especially a red brick roundhouse. We added contrasting white brick on the long diagonal and curved elements to pull in visitors, visually.

We used heroic detailing on the red brick structure to make it look like really thick old brick. The corbelling at the top is a reference to the thickness of historic solid masonry structures, which sometimes had five or six wythes of brick.

During design, we noted that the white brick lost human scale when walls got so tall. So, we introduced banding every forty inches to define curves better and provide a more human scale. After all, any brick wall is a series of small "stones," expressly designed to be the scale of a human hand.

The small structure preserved on the site was a garden shed, the last standing element of the most prestigious 19th century mansion in Savannah, the home of Augustus Wetter, an architect. It was demolished in 1950 for a used-car lot, and the shed served as an office for the car dealer. Because it is the last such element in the area, it has become an architectural gem. We love how the new brick makes the old brick look more interesting, and vice versa—it's the contrast at work.



An 19th Century garden shed provides historic grounding and contrast to dynamic brick.

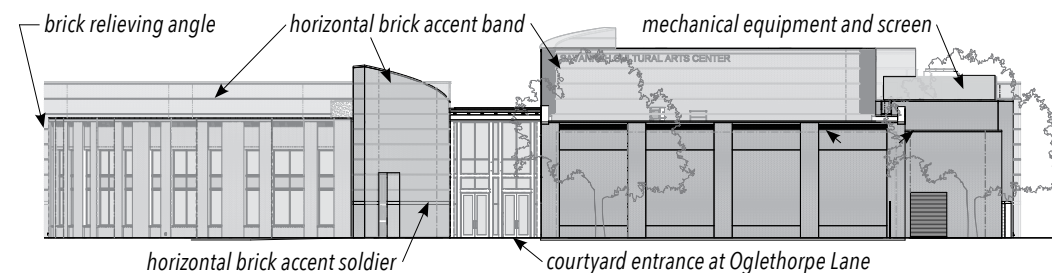
Inside the center, we used exposed concrete block to show that this is a workplace. We wanted the building to have an industrial character, more like a vocational school than an art museum. We kept it in its raw state, to contrast it with the long wall of white brick. Normal weight concrete block, denser than typical "gray block," allowed us to avoid painted walls. It has a finer, denser texture that is beautiful when clear-coated. The

construction team did some herculean work installing the enormous amount involved and then protecting it to the end. Adding expanses of simple maple wood planks gave welcome warmth to offset the block and brick, and to echo the beautiful maple floors in performance spaces.

I've used brick in almost every project I've ever done. I like to use brick to give an overall building a monumental scale, but keep it connected to human scale, too.

That's apparent here, even in intentionally dark spaces, because we used daylight to show off all that beautiful brick and concrete masonry work. The human element was the great accomplishment of this project, and I can't think of any other material—even natural stone—with the integrity to do that. Brick as a material is absolutely the work of human hands.

— Patrick Shay, AIA, LEED AP
Principal, GMSHay



From opposite page, l-r:
east elevation / main entrance,
west elevation / courtyard entrance



View from southeast, outside black-box theater and gallery spaces



View from northeast, outside administration and studio spaces

Interior Finish, Exterior Match: Masonry Makes Challenging Construction Satisfying

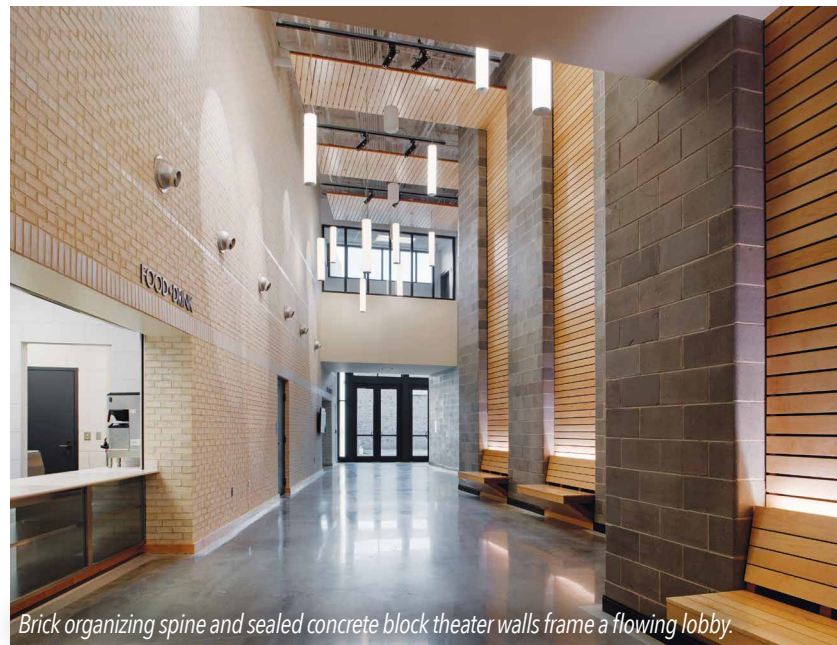
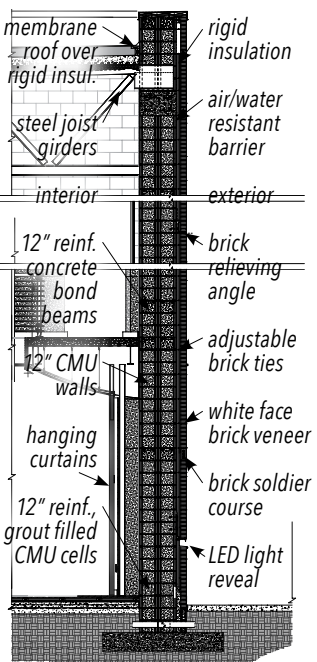
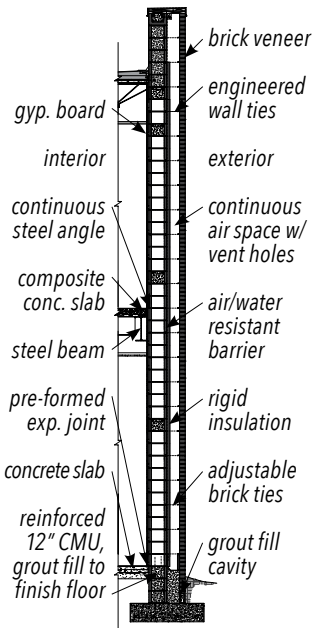
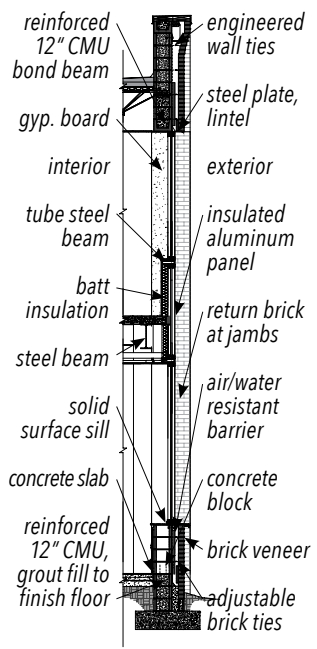
Masonry construction was straightforward, but still challenging because brick flowed through the building. That required coordination to get the interior brick done and cleaned for interior finish-out, and then to make sure the exterior brick coursed out with it later when it was laid outside.

The architect's design was good—aesthetically appealing, but not overly complicated. Brick included glazed accent bands, one turned as a header course, and a reveal in that wall. One of the more challenging things was the concrete block. The load-bearing walls went up early with exposed block laid cleanly. Then, we had to protect them throughout construction, and apply a clear sealer at the finish.

Acme Brick delivered a quality product, and they worked with us on the challenges of being in a historic district. We were limited to a small amount of laydown area for brick, contained inside a city block, for a building that mostly covered that city block. There was not a lot of room to maneuver.

— Anthony Pugh
Project Manager
M.B. Kahn Construction

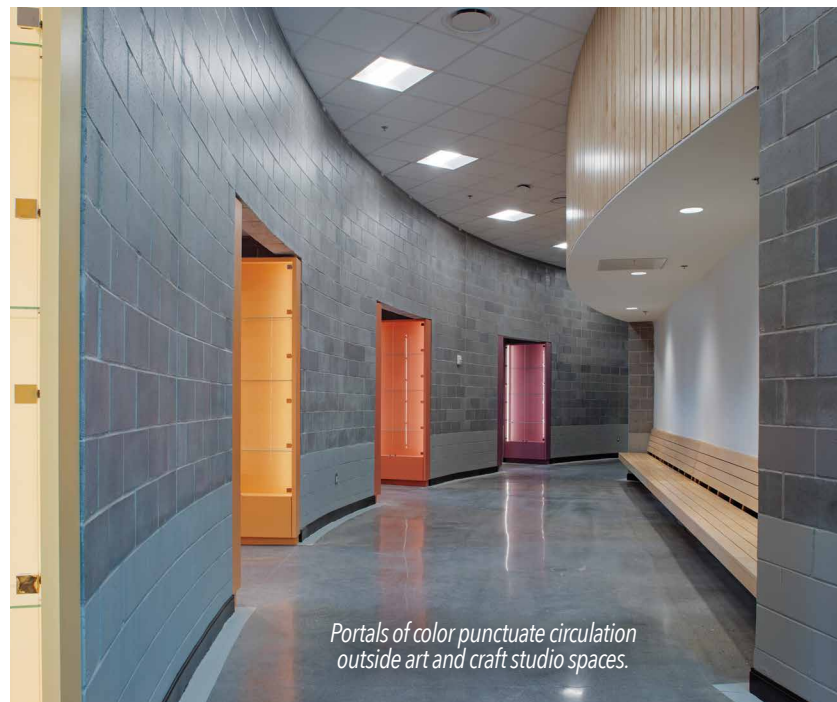
Architects detailed wall sections that mimicked historical brick walls several wythes thick, relying on extensive structural concrete block and brick interior walls.



Brick organizing spine and sealed concrete block theater walls frame a flowing lobby.



Normal weight concrete block provides an upscale industrial setting for ceramics activity spaces.



Portals of color punctuate circulation outside art and craft studio spaces.



View from northwest to studios,
main theater, and historic structure



Masonry for Ages

photography © Richard Leo Johnson



Savannah Cultural Arts Center
Savannah GA
architect
GMSHay, Savannah GA
program manager
CHA Consulting, Savannah GA
general contractor
M.B. Kahn Construction,
Columbia SC, and
Polote Construction,
Savannah GA
masonry contractor
Rush Masonry,
Andrews SC



Augustus Wetter's 19th Century home included the center's preserved garden shed, constructed from Bermuda stone and brick. Demolition in 1950 left only the shed, remodeled as the office for a used car dealership. The brick stands today as it did when first laid.

Architects can trust masonry to go up beautifully and economically, and to endure the elements and the winds of progress. Durable and adaptable, masonry is the material for human scale and life-cycle outperformance.



Accent bands emphasize curves at the east entry.

Glazed accent bands and an LED light reveal give scale to the main theater wall.



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