

Slave quarters given modern touch

- Robert Behre
- Jul 19, 2009 Updated Dec 8, 2016



The newly renovated upscale home in the former slave quarters behind 8 Vanderhorst St. shows how a modern design approach can nestle well into the old city.

But architect Robert “Buz” Morris knows the “modern” approach can make some here in Charleston uncomfortable.

“I hate to use the word ‘modern’ because people don’t like that word,” he says, “but this is a very simple, straightforward plan.”

The two-story brick slave quarters were built around 1855, the same time as the main home on Vanderhorst Street. After a later stint as a bed and breakfast and who knows what else, the building had fallen on hard times.

“When we got it, it was basically a college flop house,” Morris says. “The building was in dire need of structural work.”

Morris, working with Mitchell Construction of Walterboro, repointed all the brick to shore up the building’s 16-inch-thick walls, even recreating the bird’s beak

pointing — a way the mortar comes to a point between the bricks — found in its best-preserved joints.



They also added bracing to the eastern wall and built new three new interior partitions to increase its stability. On both floors, the circulation is a hallway that runs along the western wall, and the new arched openings at the partitions help obscure the wall's noticeable eastward tilt.

“You still see a lot of lean, but it’s not as pronounced,” Morris says.

Morris emphasized saving all the original fabric, including the bricks, ceiling trusses and heart pine floors, even a handsome marble

mantel installed later.

These original parts remain the building’s highlight because Morris didn’t add much molding or other ornaments inside and because he subtly incorporated the modern necessities.

This minimalist approach helps hide the types of things that never were in the building originally. After all, the slaves here never had bathrooms, closets, cabinets, electrical lighting or a heating and air conditioning system.



“A lot of care has been taken for this building to make it look as simple as it does,” Morris says.

The piazza, which was added later, was rebuilt using the same columns. But the pickets are now simple quarter-inch metal, and the rail is topped with teak.

“You can now sit on the porch and see through that little screen to see the garden.”

Some might think of modern design as pure white or metal surfaces, but the feel inside this 2,000-square-foot home is dominated by its exposed wood and brick.

“The whole building is warm,” Morris says. “When people think of modern, they think of stark white, and it doesn’t have to be.”



The modern details, such as the half-inch reveals around the windows and around the cloth surface between the ceiling beams, help highlight the old rather than draw attention to the new.

The two upstairs bathrooms are cleverly partitioned off from the neighboring bedrooms by glass sections in the trusses, glass that hardly can be seen but that keeps the bathroom fully separate.

Only one of the new details echoes the city's tradition: The bolt washers on the northern facade, which resemble the circular metal washers placed extensively around the city after the 1886 earthquake, simply are there to anchor a bathroom vanity.

