

Aspiring to Perfection

The American College of the Building Arts sets high standards

BY PATRA TAYLOR | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLGER OBENAU

The Old City Jail, one of Charleston's most historic buildings, once housed the city's most infamous criminals. From 1802 to 1939, the city's convicted robbers and murders, along with 19th century pirates and Civil War prisoners, met their demise inside the prison's dreaded compound. After 137 years of human

misery unfolded in the jail's purported squalid conditions, the Old City Jail was abandoned, yet the historic and architectural significance of the eerie fortress that includes a wing designed by Robert Mills, America's first native-born architect, continued to flicker within the decaying edifice.

In 2000, 61 years after the last prisoner

passed from the jailer's iron fist, the American College of the Building Arts acquired the old prison and its grounds, which is tucked along a residential street in the heart of historic Charleston. With most of the jail's original structures still intact, the college's founders and board of trustees were drawn to the structure by its history and architecture. They



Restored Charleston iron work



Architectural stone carving shop



Classroom entranceway



Landing showcase for senior projects



Computer lab

saw it as a future living laboratory and classroom for America's only four-year liberal arts college dedicated to developing the minds and hands of a new generation of traditional building artisans. So the college acquired the structure and immediately initiated an emergency stabilization program. A decade later, the Old Jail is still a work in progress.

Reported hauntings aside, over the last 10 years Charleston's Old City Jail has become

synonymous with ACBA. This incredible partnership between an historic landmark—an official "Save America's Treasures" project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the White House Millennium Council—and the college has created what is arguably one of the most inspired higher educational experiences in the country, a place where a chosen few are trained to take up the mantle of a dying breed of skilled artisans in the building arts.

While the history of the mysterious, yet intriguing Old City Jail spans more than two centuries, that of its young caretaker barely breaches a single decade. The idea for the college emerged in 1998 when a small group of local preservationists and concerned citizens gathered around a single purpose: to solve the growing problems in building preservation that became evident in 1989 after Hurricane Hugo severely damaged many of the city's historic



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structures. Inspired by Charleston blacksmith Philip Simmons, whose mastery of decorative ironwork is celebrated across the nation, this group of dedicated residents sought to restore the city's damaged buildings to their historic glory by using traditional building methods and materials. But they soon discovered that, in spite of Charleston's commitment to historic preservation, there were only a few local craftsmen trained and qualified for the task. (The lack of master craftsmen is not unique to Charleston—quality design and craftsmanship training has steadily declined across the country over the last several decades.) Finally, on July 8, 2004, the group's dream became a reality when the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education licensed ACBA to begin recruiting students.

Today, ACBA is the only college in America offering a bachelor's degree in applied sciences in the building arts, with students specializing in architectural stone, carpentry, forged architectural ironwork, plaster working, preservation masonry or timber framing. Described as a "trade school, much like MIT is a trade school," ACBA offers the finest instructors in the building arts available anywhere in the world, each recruited because of a passion for his or her craft and a strong desire to not only teach, but to pass along skills to the next generation of traditional building artisans. Across the board, the instructors at ACBA aspire to one acceptable standard... perfection!

ACBA has rigorous academic standards, as well. All students have the opportunity to receive a quality liberal arts education while they learn the skills needed to excel in their chosen trade. Interestingly, ACBA has intentionally geared much of the college's academics to real life. For example, instead of studying economic theory, the students learn the economics of running their own businesses. In fact, a number of the college's graduates have literally stepped from their graduation ceremonies into their own thriving companies.

The 22 students from across the country (15

have chosen to stay in the area) who have successfully completed their studies at ACBA are already having an impact on the local construction industry. The methods they use to restore and preserve historic structures are virtually indistinguishable from those used to built Charleston, once the wealthiest city in the New World. The graduates' contributions are already helping to raise standards in the building industry, creating architectural treasures that will stand the test of time.

Today, the Old City Jail hums with the excitement of learning. Clearly, every ACBA student, both male and female, has taken the road less travelled in the world of higher education. Each has dared to follow their dream of leaving an enduring mark on the world of historic preservation. As the students, always reaching for perfection, hone their skills in (and sometimes on) their classrooms, the troubled spirit of the Old City Jail is finally being soothed.

Work on the historic jail is expected to continue for many years, but college officials, in partnership with the City of Charleston, are already formulating plans to redevelop the Trolley Barn as workshops for the various trades. The Trolley Barn was used for mass transit purposes, first by the trolleys and later by the bus system, until Interstate-26 was constructed in the 1960s. Built in 1897, the building was severely damaged by Hurricane Hugo.

As the plans for the Trolley Barn unfold, the students of ACBA will have yet another opportunity to contribute to the growth and success of their alma mater, a unique college that will one day provide much needed skilled artisans to all of America's historic places. ➤

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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