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## Chapel architect builds with material from past

**BY ROBERT BEHRE**  
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Everyone eating oysters at Bowens Island a year or so ago was doing more than having a meal. Unknowingly, they also were stockpiling building material for James Island's newest church.

It all began when Bishop Gadsden's executive director, Bill Trawick, thought the retirement community's new chapel should resemble something from the Lowcountry's past.

"Our goal was to have the chapel look like it had been here first and that the Bishop Gadsden community was built up around the chapel," Trawick says.

He turned to architect Dan Beaman of Cummings & McCrady Inc. Beaman created a design that looks like a restored tabby church.

"Modern architects - they'd roll their eyes at something like this, but

I think it's interesting," Beaman said. "The issue becomes how to do it and what to do."

Tabby is a highly textured cement that the Spanish first used in North America in the early 16th century, more than a century before the English founded Charles Towne. (The word's origins apparently stem from the Spanish word "tapia," which means "mud wall"). They burned seashells to extract lime, mixed it with sand and more shells and then channeled it into wooden molds to form walls and pillars.

English colonists later used it themselves, and the Chapel of Ease on St. Helena Island was built of tabby and brick in the 1740s. Tabby wasn't used as often in Charleston as it was in Beaufort, possibly because bricks were easier to come by here. Still, a small chunk of a tabby fortification remains in Marion Square.

These days, no one can build anything of substance with tabby: The material is unreinforced and too vulnerable to earthquakes.

But Beaman created a tabby look with tilt-up concrete construction. The church's shell consists of eight massive concrete slabs that were poured on the ground and then lifted into place with a huge crane.

His design actually was based on two Beaufort County ruins. The material makes the chapel look like the ruins on St. Helena Island, but its proportions are similar to the Prince William's parish church (also known as Old Sheldon Church).

Before these sizable slabs were poured, workers with Bovis Lend Lease and Citadel Contractors washed thousands of shells to remove the sand, then placed them into a half-inch of sand. An egg timer went off every 10 minutes, signaling that crews should move to a new spot so their work would be scattered randomly across the wall, avoiding any patterns.

Beaman says the contractors were very cooperative. "The big challenge was to convince these workers that we wanted it to be imperfect," he said.

Once the walls were all poured, it didn't take long to frame the chapel. "They started at 7 a.m. Friday," he said. "All the walls of the building were up by the time they quit Saturday afternoon."

Beaman said using tabby and concrete didn't raise the cost above what the community would have paid for a stuccoed metal frame.

He expects the tabby to age well. "I expect that it's probably going to get a little mildew and dirt in it over time," he said. "It's a question of how much lime will react in the air. All the tabby ruins that we see are white."

Beaman notes that while the new tabby chapel might look like a ruin, the shells in real tabby walls originally were covered with a layer of lime stucco made by burning the same shells.

He called this tabby "more than a veneer because it's integrally poured into the tilt-up concrete. But ultimately, it's a texture, and ultimately, it's a contemporary texture because no traditional building would have had this for a texture," he said. "Most people would say, 'Yeah, this is a traditional building.' I would say, 'Are you really sure?' "

Shucks, no.

\* Readers last week were understandably confused about the caption underneath a rendering of the Clemson Architecture Center. The words mistakenly identified the center as one of the older homes on the street; if that were true, I'm sure there wouldn't be nearly as much fuss. (The center is the third building from the left. My apologies.)

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