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
Artful Life Returns to the Heart of Savannah

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

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, by that, and pleased because brick is a round quadrant is made up of art and craft. 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. We added contrasting white painted walls. It has a finer, denser texture that is beautiful when clear coated. 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. We added contrasting white painted walls. It has a finer, denser texture that is beautiful when clear coated. 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. We added contrasting white painted walls. It has a finer, denser texture that is beautiful when clear coated.
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 Hugh
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.
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.