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The High Appeal

OF LOW COUNTRY

Open, easygoing, and friendly: That describes many a Southerner. It also describes the Low Country-style house of one South Carolina family.



THE PHOTO | In the daytime, the view outside sparks living room conversation. At night, the fireplace sparks relaxation. OPPOSITE | In keeping with low country style, exterior lines are homespun simple. Siding is treated pine planks.





OPPOSITE | Double doors opening from the kitchen onto the porch were custom-made from mahogany. The dark wood nicely complements the ceiling grid, which sets off the kitchen as a unified space.

LEFT | Deep coffer moldings in the dining room, as well as the kitchen and living room, are another architectural element used to establish boundaries in a single public space with no interior walls.

found in Cathy and Frank Middleton's 3,078-square-foot house, which nicely nestles into the terrain on Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina.

To fashion their dream, the couple assembled a team that included architect Stephen Herlong and interior designer Sissy Bradham. These and other team members put style and substance into the homeowners' desires—*notions, really*—that had been stirred by the remarkable island setting. The design needed a Southern accent so it would be conversant with cool breezes, marshy grassland, swaying trees, and the pleasures of country life.

"I could not articulate exactly what style I envisioned," Frank says, "except that this house needed to be appropriate to the site, and the style needed to embrace the outdoors. And it had to have one thing I remember from my childhood—breezes roaring through the house. So it had to have a lot of windows and a porch to catch the breeze, which comes up the creek from the ocean." In the end, Herlong and Bradham delivered exactly the house the couple wanted. The interior designer recalls a critical early meeting where she, Herlong, and the Middletons fleshed out ideas for the home.

"We went room by room and detailed exactly how those rooms were going to be used. We

Architectural styles have always been influenced by their environments. Look no farther than the coastal flood plains of the American South, where sea-level living long ago triggered the evolution of a modest style called Low Country.

Among other things, Low Country houses are noted for their sturdy foundations, so necessary in a coastal area; two sets of double doors fixed opposite one another, creating a strong breezeway; and low-pitched roofs that extend from the main house to cover screen porches. All of these regional elements—and more—can be

The best designs are **purpose-driven**.
There's a reason behind every choice.





changed and added to a few areas of the house and, when we were done, every nook and cranny in this house had a purpose," she says.

From these early conversations emerged the right-for-the-site Low Country look. Though it was once common for houses in this style to have elevated foundations, the team took a "low" Low Country approach in this case.

"We discussed the pros and cons of building up higher," Herlong says. "But we chose to move the house back from the stream slightly to stay in a lower flood zone, which allowed us to build as close to the ground as possible. It required a very serious foundation that uses masonry piers and steel reinforcing, with additional steel plates that resist seismic and hurricane forces that this house could possibly see in its lifetime."

Settling on materials and other details moved the process along. The warm character of heart-pine flooring was an easy choice. So was copper for the roof because it would add such visual and physical strength. Glazed mahogany doors were just the right touch for framing the all-important indoor-outdoor connection.

While the house was under construction, the Middletons lived in a small cinder block cottage on the property. This proved to be of real benefit to the couple, who could witness the day-to-day progress of construction.

"Every day, we talked with and saw what the various carpenters and other contractors were doing," Frank says. "This way, the framer could design a finial or two, for instance, and ask us which one we wanted. So everything evolved,

The Lowdown on Low Country

These facets of design capture an easygoing Southern spirit.

1

Expansive windows and large doorways They invite in cool winds and great views.

2

Special foundations The possibility of flooding was addressed by constructing a reinforced foundation and siting the house so it is back from a stream.

3

Screen porches Screens keep pests out while making the natural scenery part of the room. Porches are a favorite escape from the Southern heat.

4

Gallery with columns Galleries invest interiors with stately distinction, even though Low Country architecture is basically modest.



THIS PHOTO | The screen porch offers the best place to settle in the cool of the evening. The floor is ipe, a tropical hardwood that is highly resistant to damage from insects and water, though water intrusion is rare because the roof acts like a huge umbrella.

OPPOSITE | Instead of holding tight to the house, the circular screen porch pushes out toward the surrounding marshlands.



such as the paneled columns and molding detail, which are rather exceptional."

The completed home is graceful, though not overly grand. It evokes the region's landscape while offering intimate settings for conversation and relaxation.

Though harking back to a folk style of architecture, the main public rooms are really one big, open space—a very modern idea. Variations in the ceiling treatments give definition to the living room, dining room, and kitchen spaces.

The ceiling also came into play with the Middletons' desire to accommodate breezes. A wood-lined barrel vault within the ceiling stretches from one set of double French doors at the front entry to another on the opposite exterior wall. The vault acts to usher cool winds in one doorway and out the other.

The design was completed with color. Here, again, the location helped in making choices.

"Sissy questioned me about colors in the house and I said, 'I love the outdoors—I love the colors of the sun,'" Cathy says. "So Sissy asked, 'The sunrise or the sunset?' Or I said I wanted to capture the colors of the marsh, and Sissy asked, 'What time of day?' My gosh, I never thought about the time of day! But that's an example of how she listens so carefully to what you say."

The palette reflects their conversations: Cool, natural tones continue the connection between

the surrounding environment and the architecture. The choice, again, was just right.

As Herlong says of this Low Country design, "It's elegant, but also appropriate to a rural setting." Cathy and Frank enjoy nothing more than rocking away a lazy summer afternoon on their porch. *

Shopping Guide, page 106

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About this Home

SQUARE FEET: 3,078
BEDROOMS: 3
BATHROOMS: 3½

FOOTPRINT: 65x34'
LOCATION: Wadmalaw
Island, SC
EST. COST: N/A

- 1 Open invitation to cool breezes** When a gentle wind offers no-cost air-conditioning, all that's needed is to open the double doors on each side of the living room to take advantage of nature's gift.
- 2 No dark passages** Because the main public space is one large room, no hallway was needed. Instead, a gallery of white columns is a fine Southern accent.
- 3 Easy change to make** At first, a screen porch was planned off the master suite instead of an office. But it cost nothing to make the change during planning.

OPPOSITE | A plank ceiling dresses up the pitched roofline in the master suite. Although there is no coffering in this room, molding along the soffit behind the bed echoes the ceiling treatment seen in the public spaces.

