



Carolina creativity

Hurricane codes inspire design creativity, not frustration

By Maureen Alley, associate editor

Designing homes on the coast of South Carolina requires employees at Stephen Herlong and Associates, in Isle of Palms, to stay up-to-date on hurricane codes. But this doesn't restrict the firm's design solutions. Herlong's team simply must be more creative, understand the codes and work closely with them as part of the design process.

Materials used in Herlong homes aren't chosen based on being natural or synthetic. Instead, the mind-set is to find the best product for the application. Period. "We are not truly natural in that we won't use synthetic. We are careful when we use newer products; we want the new products to be tested and proven," says Steve Herlong, AIA, president. "Most of our work is done with natural materials. It makes the solutions easier because natural materials have certain characteristics and work in certain applications much better than synthetic."

Regardless of material choices, one of Herlong's first steps to good design is visiting a home's location, with most of the design ideas developing from a particular site. "I look at the orientation of the property and at the challenges that the property may have such as trees to work around or wetlands where the breezes are coming from. I take all the clues from

STEPHEN HERLONG AND ASSOCIATES

Isle of Palms, S.C.
herlongarchitects.com

COMPANY STATS

Industry memberships:
AIA, NAHB, USGBC
Residential new construction:
70 percent
Residential remodeling:
30 percent
Average annual revenue:
\$1.5 million

the site — look at the program and determine the space. It tells me where the space should be located,” he says.

Inspiration for Herlong comes from traveling and always being aware of his environment. Many employees spend a lot of time reading to stay up-to-date on trends and to find inspiring design ideas.

Education is an important part of the company’s culture. “We’ve made a point of emphasizing continuing education for our office. We all attend seminars relevant to design and construction, and we are all involved in the professional community activities to some degree,” says Jim Henshaw, AIA, principal and vice president. “We also consistently attend national design conferences that focus on custom residential design and construction.”

Herlong doesn’t pride itself on contemporary-only design or shaker-only design; the company designs a variety of styles. “We do homes on the coastal islands and those are more an adaptation of cottage styling. We also do inland neighborhoods and those homes reflect more traditional detailing — a shingle-style approach. It depends on the area where we are building and the client’s particular style preference,” Herlong says.

Clients recognize a Herlong design when they see it due to its extensive details. “We are very careful to work through the proportions of our homes, the facades and trim detailing. The homes connect the inside spaces to the outdoors and the transitional spaces are very fluid,”



Stephen Herlong and Associates works with a consistent group of builders who have a reputation of building sustainable homes.

Herlong adds. “Those are recognizable elements of our homes. [We stand out] because of our attention to detail, the completeness of our documents and drawings, and the trust clients feel when working with us.”

Working with builders

Stephen Herlong and Associates isn’t a design/build practice but employees acknowledge its business is handled in a similar fashion. “We like to recommend builders we have worked with in the past that not only build a high-quality sustainable custom home, but also provide a high level of customer service. We are also talking to and looking for new builders to recommend to our clients,” Henshaw adds. “It is very important our builders are familiar with construction techniques and cost implications of building custom homes in this extreme coastal environment.”

Steve Herlong practiced traditional design/build earlier in his career but found it restrictive to work under one particular builder compared to his situation now where he chooses particular builders for each project. “I was in business with a builder and it limited me in too many ways,” he says. “I do design/build now but I have the freedom to work with the best builder for each location. I match builders to clients and pull a team together for each particular project. We tend to work with a small group of builders who provide excellent service.”

Each project manager is hand-picked to work with specific clients with the goal of creating a positive experience. In addition, project managers are also matched with projects because of their knowledge of geographic locations.





The inspiration for each design starts with admiration of the site such as the location of desired views and site envelope.



Staying up-to-date on trends and education is an important business practice. Continuing education courses and reading helps architects stay inspired, and current.

Long before a builder or location is chosen, an interview process begins on both sides of the table: The client interviews Herlong to make sure they can do what they want; and Herlong interviews the client to guarantee goals are the same. "Everyone wants a successful project so when a client comes to interview us, we try to qualify them as well. Having realistic expectations of each other is key to a successful outcome," Henshaw says.

Some of Herlong's clients have gone through the custom building process before which makes them great clients. "That type of client knows the reason to choose



Designing homes in hurricane zones drives the team to be more creative and stay in constant communication with engineers.

range differ to an unrealistic extent, we may agree not to move forward.”

In addition, Herlong pays attention to which project manager works with which client to ensure a successful result. “Because designing a home is so personal, our clients and project managers must have a good personality fit to effectively interact over the life of the project,” Henshaw adds.

The key to keeping the experience positive for all parties is open communication, especially in regard to budget. Herlong makes sure the budget is talked about from the very first meeting and each meeting afterward.

“We have a discussion about the budget every time we have a discussion about design,” he says. “[We stand out] because of our ability to identify budgetary issues early on. That can be a huge issue because a lot of people get sidetracked [by the budget] when building a custom home. They want more than they can afford and someone needs to step up and let them know where they are on their budget.”

And that’s what they do. ▀

an architect or designer is not because of price but because of service,” Herlong says.

Saying no to a potential client can be one of the hardest situations for an architect, but it’s something Herlong is able to do. “Occasionally we let clients know that we are simply too busy. On other occasions, we turn down work based on differing expectations,” Henshaw says. “We are very forthright at the beginning of the project about the cost of building a quality home in this area and the time it takes to do so. We discuss this with our potential clients to ensure we all understand the cost and quality of the home, depending on the decisions made in the design process. If our opinions of this