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BY PHILIP MORRIS

PHOTOS BY JASON WALLIS AND

COURTESY OF WOLCOTT ADAMS VERNEUILLE ARCHITECTS

AND SKT ARCHITECTS

## MAGNOLIA SPRINGS

Using a standard branch design can help large, regional banks brand themselves and save money, and some are the most attractive buildings along Alabama's suburban strips. But there is another approach, one taken by the three banks shown here: Buildings that reflect local place character.

For United Bank, a hundred-year-old institution serving smaller towns and rural areas across south Alabama and into Florida, this means a new Magnolia Springs branch that could easily be taken for an old house given adaptive reuse.

front the sidewalk and use a rhythm of traditional storefront bays. GA Architecture Studio turned the bay requirement into a series of brick-clad gabled pavilions in a design that strikes a balance between contemporary expression and the dominant English Tudor context.

"We set out to solve a tough programmatic issue, to fit an extended branch bank onto a tight site and combine an existing new storefront building with an addition and have it all flow," says architect Chris Giattina. "There are turrets and towers holding the corners on nearby buildings,

# Banking on

*Three new Alabama banks are designed to reflect locale.*

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:

*For a new United Bank branch in Magnolia Springs, Wolcott Adams Verneuille Architects of Fairhope designed what at first glance appears to be an adaptive-reuse of an historic house, but it's all new and gracefully preserves existing live oaks on the site. The interior continues the domestic character.*

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:

*GA Architecture Studio employed abstracted gable pavilions and an old brick to fit Red Mountain Bank into Mountain Brook's English Village. The element fronting Cahaba Road is rotated five degrees to hold the sidewalk edge.*

Fairhope-based Wolcott Adams Verneuille Architects nestled the two-story, gable-front "house" with lap siding, double-hung windows and a corrugated metal roof under existing live oaks. Wood columns on brick piers support a welcoming wrap-around porch, and the drive-through teller looks like an old shed.

"We've developed two branch prototypes for United Bank, one a brick storefront like you'd find on a Main Street and another, more rural, version like Magnolia Springs," says project architect Ryan Baker. "CEO Bob Jones wants each branch to belong locally. We did a little free-standing drive-through in Atmore, a railroad town, to look like a railroad ticket booth. All their new buildings will incorporate these ideas tailored to location." Any small town would welcome these thoughtful designs.

## BIRMINGHAM

English Village, the smallest of Mountain Brook's three commercial villages just over Red Mountain from the city center, has recently gotten a spunky new Red Mountain Bank, replacing a bland, concrete-block clad dry cleaners. Under urban design guidelines, new buildings in the villages must

and we wanted a presence on Cahaba Road. We started playing with gables with the biggest at the corner, and a series of 22-foot-wide bays that step back three feet as they move away from the street, each one expressing interior spaces. We abstracted the forms, but we worked carefully with an old brick to assure a fit with existing buildings."

Playing up the corner further, the architects rotated the bay five degrees to line up with the sidewalk frontage. Expansive glass cutouts at each end give a modern twist to the composition and address function: the main lobby at the front and the remote teller to the rear. A small raised plaza with sidewalk furniture anchors the corner. The architects worked both ends of the architectural spectrum to shape this little jewel. They looked hard to find an old 'Billy's brick' (named for the neighborhood pub across the street). They use gables, but crisp un-Tudor ones that create a *tour de force* of perspective as they march away from the street.

Coupled with the modern wrap-around windows, this subtle abstract take on tradition establishes a useful architectural vocabulary for new buildings in Mountain Brook's villages.





Using a standard design can help large banks save money, but there is another approach: buildings that reflect local place character.

# context







ABOVE: Bringing the classical design of its downtown Huntsville headquarters to a growing suburban area, SOUTHBank let SKT Architects follow rules on proportion and detail to make it authentic. The clerestory brings light to the interior and heightens the building profile against the Huntsville Mountain backdrop.

## HUNTSVILLE

Though located in a new, rapidly-growing area of Huntsville, a new branch for SOUTHBank elicits the bank's architectural roots. Its headquarters occupies a classical art deco building on Huntsville's historic square designed by Warren, Knight & Davis in the 1940s, and bank owner Danny Wiginton also restored the classical 1814 Leroy Pope House in the Twickenham District. SKT Architects of Huntsville gave the new branch building dignity and authenticity, unusual attributes in such a setting.

Following the rules that have shaped classical buildings for centuries, the one-story building uses simple massing with well-proportioned windows. A granite-clad base visually lifts it above the ground plane, and a simple but powerful Doric-columned portico is properly detailed. A close look reveals that the column capitals project beyond the entablature, rather than being tucked under—the latter a mistake commonly seen today when architects do classical design without understanding the rules.

"The classicism reflects the owner's interest in the historic architecture of the South," says architect Frank J. Nola, Jr. "The clerestory, silhouetted against Huntsville Mountain, gives the bank a distinctive image amid a sea of fast-food restaurants and strip centers, and at night the clerestory is illuminated to create a striking effect." The architects—and anyone, really—might wish that this developing area of Huntsville had been shaped to be something like the Mountain Brook villages, a context where well-designed buildings can be fully satisfying.

Three different places, three distinctive buildings that take their design direction from local context. Isn't it nice to know that with the right clients and architects involved, the sense of place can be enhanced, not diluted? 🍃



Still life with Flowers (detail), ca. 1910. Max Albert Carlier (1871 - 1938) oil on canvas, dimensions (artwork only): ca. 31 by 21 in.

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