

# Clem Labine's Period Homes

THE PROFESSIONAL'S RESOURCE FOR RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE ■ Volume 8, Number 5 ■ September 2007 \$6.00

Period Homes  
45 Main Street, Suite 205  
Burlington, VT 05401  
Chicago service requested

Period Homes  
45 Main Street, Suite 205  
Burlington, VT 05401  
Chicago service requested

The New Period Home



# Informal Logic

A young firm takes a design-driven, client-centered approach to its work throughout the Southeast. By Will Holloway

In the mid-1990s, Louis Nequette was as a young architect in Birmingham, AL, looking to relocate from a large, business-driven firm to a more design-oriented practice. He soon realized that the handful of buildings he admired around town were all designed by the same local firm. After getting in touch with the firm, interviewing and hiring on, Nequette found that all of those buildings he had admired were designed by someone named Jeff Dungan. Dungan and Nequette quickly became friends, realizing they shared many of the same design philosophies. Finding, also, that they worked together well, they established their own practice three years later. In the eight years since, Dungan Nequette Architects has grown from the two partners working out of Nequette's mansion to a 35-person firm with an impressive portfolio of over 100 custom residential, multi-family and planning projects.

## The Early Years

The rapid success of Dungan Nequette Architects can be attributed, in part, to the fact that the partners complement each other well. While both grew up in Birmingham and attended Auburn University, they bring different strengths to the design process. "While we overlap, I'm definitely the more practical and technical one, and Jeff's the more creative one," says Nequette, who earned his B.Arch. in 1993, minor in business. "I signed up early enough to start day one in the architecture program at Auburn - Jeff probably didn't think about it until the day he got there."

"I don't see Louis as being any less creative than I am, but I'm probably slightly outside the box - I'm more like 'what box?'" says Dungan, who earned his B.Arch. in 1989 before studying sculpture and philosophy at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. "I like to say that I focus more on doing the right things and Louis focuses on doing things

right. We work very closely together and usually come up with surprising solutions to issues and problems in the design process."

Early in their careers, Dungan and Nequette were given the freedom to design and manage residential and large commercial projects, gaining confidence, knowledge and experience with clients while amassing considerable bodies of work. In 1999, after sitting next to each other for three years, they felt they'd gained enough experience to start their own firm, which would enable them to focus on client-centered residential work without compromising their "shared vision of design." "We felt that design, if done well, should be the heart of the project, the heart of the passion for why a client wanted a house," says Nequette. "We let that drive our business decisions, rather than let business decisions drive our designs. We took whatever time it took to get the designs right because we knew that if they were built that way, they would forever be a representation of our design philosophy."

"I always joke that there is never a plaque on a building that says, 'it looked awesome in the sketch version before it got value-engineered down to nothing.' You've got to be smart in the beginning, be realistic about what can be afforded and built, and do your best to take someone's wishes, hopes and desires and translate that into a concept and a manifestation in a way that the client could never have foreseen and is totally delighted to get. Pretty early on, we found ourselves capable of doing that - beating expectations."

Dungan Nequette's first commission was to design two fire stations - each with dormitories for live-in volunteer programs - for two Traditional Neighborhood Developments (TNDs) southeast of Birmingham. The fire stations at Mt. Laurel and the Narrows, which are neighborhood center buildings that set the tone for the communities, quickly led to other projects in the developments. Soon after, the



Since forming Dungan Nequette Architects in Birmingham, AL, in 1999, partners Jeff Dungan (left) and Louis Nequette have completed over 100 projects in the Southeast, including the Private Residence Club (top), a 16-unit, multi-family "resort within a resort" at Rosemary Beach, FL. *Photos courtesy of Dungan Nequette Architects; top photo: Karen Shaver-Risher*

The Shipp residence, a 1,000-sq-ft. design in Birmingham, illustrates an informality that is often present in Dungan Nequette's work. Its simple cottage feel is expressed at a scale appropriate to its historic neighborhood. Photo courtesy of Dungan Nequette Architects

firm was hired to design two beach houses in the Florida Panhandle development of Carillon. "That introduced us to the area, the 30A area in particular," says Nequette, referring to the stretch of the Florida coast that is a hub of New Urbanist development. "It's been a haven for us, because you've got people wanting second homes that are designed well, and they are willing to put the time, money and effort into them."

Though the firm's portfolio was expanding rapidly, Dungan and Nequette were becoming increasingly frustrated with the interiors of the houses they'd spent so much time conceiving and executing. "With the interiors, there was a lack of vision," says Dungan. "People were bringing in their furniture and throwing it all down — it wasn't thoughtful. So when a project was completed, we had invested 18 months or so designing and getting it built, only to feel like it was cheapened in the end on the interior-design side." To remedy this, the firm established an interior division, Tracery Interiors, which is based in the Panhandle development of Restonary Beach. "We wanted to give our clients the option to have one firm do the whole project from stem to stern," says Dungan, "from the roofline to the couch, the rugs and the colors. So it was born out of a desire to do really good work, and to do it thoughtfully and cohesively."

#### Custom Residences

In 2007, Dungan Nequette was approached by a client seeking a house with a cottage feel and simple massing and scale that fit the precedents of the historic Crestline neighborhood of Birmingham. The resulting 1,000-sq-ft. Shipp residence, featuring extensive fenestration and a shingled exterior, demonstrates the firm's predilection for informal design. "We were brought up in informal living situations, so we are a little turned off by Classical design," says Nequette. "That's not to say we don't appreciate it — we just have no interest in designing strictly formal Classical homes. The architects of the English Arts and Crafts movement — Lutens, Voysey, Mackintosh and Webb — are really the core influences for a lot of our work. They were called modern then, because nothing else was more modern — mainly because it was informal. They were really doing the first open-plan houses, using a lot of glass and natural light. The concepts that we learned from those architects are part of the foundation of what we are designing everyday. So it's a process of taking those philosophies and letting them become unique to a new place and become part of a new language that is not being done intentionally, but is being done philosophically."



"The Shipp residence borrows from the great traditions of Europe, but it's reinterpreted and made to work for a modern-day family that has a totally different lifestyle than people did at the turn of the 20th century," says Dungan. "You borrow some ingredients from over here and over there, but in the end, after it comes through your unique filter and passes through the filter of the client, it's a new thing."

"And in the end, it's really about the client — I always remind people that I'm never going to live in the place I'm designing. I'm doing it for them, not for me."

This client-centered approach may best be evidenced by the design of a residence for the Birmingham-based interior designer Richard Fidd. Completed in 2005, the 1,000-sq-ft., three-bedroom house is purposely simple with clean lines — almost stark in the interior. "With interiors, I feel that it's incumbent on me to create a certain amount of sex appeal," says Dungan. "But in this case, since Richard is such a talented interior designer, I wanted to allow him to do things to the interior that were to his liking. So instead of using the architecture to create interest, I took a step back and made it a little bit more like a museum — the museum itself is not the thing that's being honored; what's being honored is what is inside the museum."

"It's very simple with great proportions and great lines. Every time I went over there during construction, I thought it looked good, but that it was almost boring on the inside. I had to remind myself that I did it on purpose, that Richard was going to get inside and it was going to be great."

Other significant custom residences include the Dickinson residence, a gingerbread-looking cottage on a mountain in nearby Springville; the Black residence, a 5,500-sq-ft., four-bedroom limestone house overlooking a lake in Oak Mountain, AL; and the Bodnar residence, an old Pennsylvania barn that was taken apart, re-batched in Trussville, AL, and converted into a 3,100-sq-ft., four-bedroom residence. "We took all of the old barn siding and used it for the interior walls, so when you're inside, you feel like you're in an historical structure," says Nequette. "Then we wrapped it in cedar and put a copper roof on it. It's still very barn-like, but it's a residential barn."

The 1,000-sq-ft. Fidd residence in Birmingham was intentionally designed as a "black canvas" so that its owner could create interest through its interior design. Photo: Brent Gault





The Zeiflin residence, a 4,100-sq-ft, four-bedroom, five-bath house at WaterSound, FL, features a rustic interior (right) and is organized around a pool courtyard with views of the Gulf of Mexico. Photo: Tony Cox

### New Urbanism

In recent years, Dungan Nequette has become increasingly involved with New Urbanism developments, providing planning and design for new traditional communities throughout the Southeast, including the Alabama developments of Mt. Laurel, The Preserve and Ross Bridge and the Florida developments of WaterColor, WaterSound, Alys Beach and Rosemary Beach. In many of these developments, the firm has been called on repeatedly to provide additional designs after initial projects have been completed. In addition to the fire station at Mt. Laurel, for instance, the firm has designed a significant portion of the commercial downtown area, a collection of three-bedroom cottages, a 10,000-sq-ft. office building, two live/work buildings and two beach clubs and is currently working on a church for the development.

Designing to New Urbanist codes can sometimes run counter to the instincts of a firm that, as Nequette says, "doesn't really play by the rules." "In some of these developments where they create really tight codes," he says, "they become a little too mono-themed, with everything blending together and nothing standing out. It's equally as bad if nothing stands out as if everything stands out. So we try to break from the norm—we try to find a way to do the 'spice' style. The key is to build relationships with developers so you understand what they are trying to achieve and they start to trust in your design ability. Because, truly, the reason for these codes is more to control the bad design than inhibit the good design."

"It can be very challenging at times, because we push the envelope a little bit, and sometimes the envelope pushes back," says Dungan. "But the code really just adds another criterion to the design list. We've got the client, their needs, their budget, their desires, and we've got our own ideas about what is good, and now we have another group of people that we have to work with and satisfy. To me, it's fun—it adds another level of rigor to the process."

At Rosemary Beach, Dungan Nequette recently designed the 17,000-sq-ft., multi-family Private Residence Club, which is composed of 16



For The Preserve, a Traditional Neighborhood Development in Montgomery, AL, Dungan Nequette is in the process of creating a 12-building Southern vernacular town center through the design of structures like this live/work building. Rendering courtesy of Dungan Nequette Architects.



The 57,000-sq-ft Private Residence Club at Rosemary Beach features a hurricane-resistant concrete frame and louver shutters enclosing private porches (left); its common courtyard (above) features a reflecting pool. Photo: Steve Harris/Leads

two-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath units. The hurricane-resistant concrete structure includes a common courtyard with a reflecting pool and private porches concealed by extensive louver shutters. Features include below-grade parking, a theater and a rooftop pool deck with views of the Gulf of Mexico. "The thing that I love about Rosemary Beach is that they are very mature in how they approach design," says Dungan. "They realize that in places they can loosen the strings in order to do something great that is quietly outside of the parameters of what they normally do. They realize that there is the letter of the law and there is the spirit of the law, and they can set aside some of the letter of the law for the greater good."

For the Birmingham development of Ross Bridge, Dungan Nequette created ten 4,000- to 5,000-sq-ft, village-center homes based on turn-of-the-century railroad resort towns. "We looked to Asheville, NC, from 1860 to 1930 for a lot of the background, because it's Southern, it's mountainous and it's got a lot of the same vernacular materials and language," says Nequette. The Grand Avenue homes are a cross section of historical styles, from Classical to Georgian and an almost Adirondack design, creating what Nequette calls "a delightful mix."

At The Preserve, a TND in Montgomery, AL, ground is about to break on a large live/work building, the first of about a dozen town-center structures that Dungan Nequette will play a large part in designing. "They want to create a simple, quaint, traditional Southern-small-town downtown area," says Nequette. "The big challenge today is taking things that feel comfortable because they have historical connotations and designing them to meet today's codes. With a live/work building — this has commercial spaces on the first floor and residences above — it basically has to maintain, from a code point of view, a condominium designation. It's a

complicated building, but the residences are true to the elevations front to back, and they have garages in the back."

#### The Planning Process

Dungan and Nequette estimate that planning now comprises about 20 percent of the firm's work, emphasizing that they approach it from an architectural perspective. "We see it in three dimensions — we sketch the village or the streetscape and then determine what size lots are needed to pull it off," says Nequette. "It's not a process of looking at it from a bird's-eye view and drawing roads. Probably the best influence is Frederick Law Olmsted. He was creating scenes — he sketched scenes and then designed the plan to create that scene. It's no different from the way that we approach planning."

"I do feel that we have a certain ability to visualize, and I think vision is important," says Dungan. "I don't see it as a process of laying the roads out and then sticking buildings in the leftover spaces — it's a process of conceiving it at one time in a three-dimensional way."

Dungan Nequette has brought that vision to bear in planning several recent developments, including Edenton Village, in Birmingham; Creekside of Auburn, in Auburn, AL; Silverock Cove, which is on Smith Lake in Cullman County, AL; and Chanticleer, a French-inspired development in Montgomery that will be breaking ground in late 2007. As with all of the firm's work, the user's experience is paramount to the planning process. "Whether it's a custom house or a community master plan," says Nequette, "we conceive of the experience we want the user to have in a space, whether it's inside or outside, and then create the environment, create the experience." ■



The plan for Chanticleer, in Montgomery, was inspired by French design traditions; Dungan describes it as having a certain randomness of intersecting roads that is reminiscent of Paris. Rendering courtesy of Dungan Nequette Architects