

'Dolce' Gulf Shores Home Celebrates Italian Style

Contributed by Carole McMichael

If you happen to do some boating in the warm waters around Alabama's southernmost coastline and explore a beautiful inlet in the Gulf Shores area, you will come upon a small house that looks like a little bit of Italy. It is the vacation home of Lundy and Harry Wilder, inspired by Italian architecture that the Wilders had fallen in love with on a bicycle trip through Italy. The rectangular 600-square-foot house stands on an acre lot: 100 feet wide on the waterfront and 400 feet deep. Thirteen and a half-foot ceilings, 10-foot French doors and beautifully waxed concrete floors help create the classic Italianate ambiance, and make this small home seem like a much bigger place.

The house was designed in collaboration with Mobile-based Ted Dial, developer and manufacturer of Dial Architectural Component (DAC-ART) Building Systems. As a specialist in historic home restoration, Dial has experience in replicating authentic European styles and avoiding what Wilder calls "pseudo Mediterranean."

The concrete DAC-ART blocks have tint variations and subtle surface imperfections that give them the look of fine European cut stone. Based on typical European block size, exterior blocks run 20 inches high by 12 inches wide by 30 inches long, weighing in at 360 pounds a piece before back filling with concrete. Blocks for interior walls are available in 8-inch widths. Both types have an optional Styrofoam insulating liner. A steel wire basket that encases the block includes fold-up handles to facilitate lifting and guiding placement and alignment when stacking succeeding courses (layers).

Each block has slotted openings on the ends and the top and bottom to accommodate running conduits for electrical wiring and piping for plumbing both vertically and horizontally. These hollow cavities are then filled with steel reinforcement rods and back-filled with poured concrete.

Electrical boxes can be pre-cast in particular blocks, as can decorative elements. The latter are initially custom designs, which thereafter become part of the company's design catalog for selection by future clients. All the regular blocks and specialty blocks (arches, balcony supports and under-window panels, for example) are precast, then labeled as to course and position to indicate their precise placement for erection onsite. The specialty blocks are stacked and back-filled with concrete in the same manner as regular blocks, greatly simplifying and shortening the whole process for the builder.

Building Was 'a Blast'

The Wilders were their own contractors on this project. Most client-contractor home building episodes on HGTV seem to highlight a series of disasters that make the clients moan and groan. The Wilders, however, had a totally different experience, thinking outside the box whenever something didn't go according to plan — and planning very wisely beforehand.

"Over the years, we have been involved in different types of construction," Wilder said. "I had concrete classes in college and was the one who was pro concrete. My husband had a better working knowledge of the order of events in construction. Our ultimate goal was to find a material that would give the house an Italianate style. Beyond that, because we were handling the subcontracting, the goals were 1) to minimize the number of people involved in the project, which cuts down on headaches considerably; and 2) minimize the number of materials that had to be delivered in a timely manner, which means fewer costly hold ups during construction."

DAC-ART blocks turned out to be the right material. Because they did not have to be protected from the elements, shipments could be delivered ahead of time to sit onsite until the Wilders could work building time into their regular schedule. The sides of the blocks provide a finished surface, so they need no exterior cladding. One very important plus to having no stucco or other exterior was that there would be nothing to be ripped off by the horrific wind forces of tropical storms and hurricanes. Wilder noted that their DACART blocks got through all three recent tropical storms last fall just wonderfully and make the house wonderfully energy efficient as well.

The block surface also is totally maintenance-free: the tint is cast clear through, so there is no need to paint; it won't rot; and is termite-proof and fire-resistant.

"The building process was just as much fun in the doing as in the final solution," Wilder said, "a complete blast. To help my husband with the erection work, we found a concrete tradesman, who put in swimming pools and foundations. Then we rented a Bobcat for stacking the first four courses. Anyone with a reasonable sense of dexterity can quickly pick up the skill needed to run the machine. For the higher courses, we rented a Dynalift, which is kind of like the combination of a crane and a boom truck. The wheels all turn independently, so you can turn in a very small radius, minimizing problems when driving over tree roots. Again, the process was mostly self-taught.

"Once the raised foundation level met the code for waterfront construction, (an extra four feet in this case), the blocks were dry-stacked — usually three levels at a time before they were back-filled with concrete. Using a fairly stiff mixture of concrete, we poured it from 5-gallon buckets, doing a few courses at a time. Then, we just used rods to stir it up in place of vibrating. On the lower courses, we used Spanish Moss as joint filler (pushing it in with a BBQ fork) because we used a little looser mixture. It fit the bill because it was free and a natural material.

"The blocks have a beveled edge ready to receive the grout. There is a certain amount of shimming required to get the courses perfectly level. For this, we used plumbers' clear plastic shims about 1 1/2 inches by 3/4 of an inch. Then when the back filling in the blocks was set, we removed the shims and came back to grout the edges.

"We used Thoro-Seal's Dry-Joint, a water-proof mortar made for the restoration of historic buildings. Because the blocks are not set into a bed of mortar, there is minimum shrinkage. Therefore, if there is variance in the width of the grout line from shimming the blocks, you don't have to be concerned."

Wilder had no trouble working with the code inspectors. "The inspectors were so impressed with the product that they bent over backwards to work with me. One of the inspectors said he was awestruck by the beauty of the structure."

More Fun Stuff

When the floor staining contractor failed to show up, Wilder, who has a degree in engineering technology with a minor in art, decided to take charge of the project herself.

"Our concrete slab was prepared for an acid-stain color and scoring treatment," Wilder said. "We penciled on the score lines before the acid stain was applied. The copper in the Miracle-Grow that we sprinkled on the concrete reacted with the stain and gave us a wonderful deep aqua speckle on the aged copper-colored background on the interior slab. The porch also received a concrete acid stain, but in an olive green color with soft brown mottling, as well as the aqua speckles.

"I used a concrete acid stain from Superstone, a Florida company. It was very easy to apply and performed as expected. I did do some test pieces first to judge the intensity of the color. You can either cut your score lines first and use them to assist you in laying out various designs or stain before you do you cutting. I prefer the look of natural gray concrete score lines, so all staining was done first, followed by the scoring."

Next came polishing. "I tend to be technical by nature," Wilder said, "and I have a working knowledge of the properties of a lot of adhesives. I knew paste wax would work, and I wanted to go with what was natural. Whenever possible, my goal was to minimize headaches that I get from exposure to unnatural housing products. I also chose paste wax because I thought it would be readily available. Surprisingly, I had to go to several places to get enough paste wax."

The Crowning Touch

One design element turned out to be quite spectacular. "The shower space is quite small," Lundy said. "I knew I didn't want a typical shower insert. Then I remembered the beautiful mosaic work I saw in the Ravenna area of Italy. I felt the focus on the smallness of the shower would be removed if I covered the shower walls with mosaics — in this case, an underwater scene. I put in a mirror on the ceiling to double the impression of space by reflecting the design. When I step into the shower, it is like stepping into a work of art. People now come here from out of town to see my shower. I have pictures of it on my Web site (www.Mosaic-Tile-Design.com) ."

What's Next?

"We plan to keep building in stages," Wilder said. "This summer home will become the guest house. Next, we will put in a DAC-ART retaining wall, a sidewalk, and a sea wall with steps down into the water. Then, we will add a swimming pool at the level of the porch; and finally, we will build a two-story house with a flat roof that will provide a great view of the Gulf. DAC-ART is great for this modular approach. Down the street from us, there will be a Moroccan style, DEC-ART house."

Besides the beauty of the Gulf itself, the Wilders are enjoying the nearby wetlands, which serve as the first stopping point of birds and butterflies that come up from South America. And now and then, they get to watch the aerial acrobatics of the Blue Angels, which just happen to use this stretch of the Gulf for practice.

For more information on this house and DAC41-ART block systems, please visit www.scrapbookscrapbook.com/DAC-ART.*