

'ECOLOGICALLY RESPONSIBLE'

Disciplined in design, Moss Creek cottages spurred Lowcountry architecture's sensitivity to nature

By JEFF ELEY • Special to the Packet and Gazette

Today's Lowcountry architecture owes a nod to cottages in Moss Creek, which brought national recognition to our area decades ago for their eco-friendly and innovative design.

In 1980, the Salt Marsh Cottages in Moss Creek Plantation in Bluffton won a merit award from the South Carolina chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Walter Netsch served as a juror and commended Moss Creek cottages architect Jakie Lee's "excellent floor plans" as well as their connection to nature. Netsch was a dominant force at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, America's most successful architectural firm at the time. He made a special point to highlight the compactness of the Salt Marsh Cottages' development as "ecologically responsible."

Lee's cottages showcased an emerging style influenced by Richard Pollman, Charles Moore and Frank Lloyd Wright. By the 1960s, Pollman had become influential for his idea houses and small vacation homes envisioned for the rural landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. Moore was leading domestic architecture forward with a provocative take on modern design seen in several projects in northern California.

Sensitivity to nature was a hallmark of Wright's work, as nearby Auldbrass Plantation at Yemassee attests. Like Wright, Pollman's works often included simple yet strong roof shapes. These highlighted the influence of Japanese architectural elements in American design popular since the turn-of-the-century.

One of the developers to study the works and styles of the Pacific coast was Charles Fraser of Hilton Head Island. Fraser flew several architects and others to look at examples of the architecture.

By the late 1970s, development moved off Hilton Head Island to Moss Creek Plantation. For the Salt Marsh Cottage

project, Jakie Lee indicates, "site was the first challenge."

Lee had no desire to render the cottages within a manicured landscape, but envisioned them as a partner to the site. The question for Lee was "how to join them." Individually, the cottages wouldn't have complemented the sublime natural setting. Working together in clusters, the units become more meaningful. They connect in thoughtful organic patterns - something akin to the organizing approach of Moore and Pollman. These arrangements combine to create larger, singular statements that are not overwhelmed by the expansive marshscapes.

Today, Lee is happy that more than 30 years later these cottages continue to "enjoy their site."

Disciplined in design, the cottages respect the individual and their activities while collectively they acknowledge larger, more complex matters of human interaction. Governed by geometry and essential shapes — reflecting the abstraction of modernists — Lee created quality architecture on a budget. Natural materials provide contrast

ABOUT THE COTTAGES

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and enable the bold forms to beautifully connect to their environment.

Interior spaces in the Salt Marsh Cottages have balance and pleasing proportional relationships. Light enters everywhere and outside seems to merge with inside through a generous number of doors, windows and skylights. Open floor plans in the main living area became a popular trend in the 1980s but the 1970s work on Hilton Head represents some of the earliest seen outside of Long Island, N.Y., and the Pacific Coast.

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As Netsch observed, the quality of Lee's Salt Marsh Cottages and their sensitivity to site made them worthy of recognition. They are no less commendable today. In a world where we automatically express reverence for the buildings of the Colonial Era, the Victorian Age and even the earlier 20th-century, it is important to understand that the Lowcountry possesses outstanding design from a more recent past.

The Salt Marsh Cottages are one of the best examples.

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