



Project Focus: UCF House

Where would 1,300 Birmingham college students from a half-dozen schools gather on a Wednesday night? Try church.

Mountain Brook Community Church hosts about 1,000 students each week for its University Christian Fellowship meeting. Students gather in the church's worship center for prayer, teaching and music.

But then there's the rest of the week, when students want to gather in smaller groups in an informal setting. Until last fall, students met during the rest of the week in a storefront. But they needed a large place of their own to gather for small group Bible studies, music sessions and just "hanging out."

The resulting facility, dubbed the UCF House, opened last year. It quickly earned raves from students, church members and professionals in the building industry.



The industry thought so much of the structure that Evan Terry Associates was presented ACIA's Top Block award last October for its design. The House is built of scored concrete block, with interior masonry exposed walls. Evan Terry's Jeff Fowler, AIA, was the project architect.

He calls masonry the "only choice" for the House, both for the product's fresh aesthetics and practical use. Fowler knew he would have to design a building that matched existing buildings on site. In 2004, the congregation moved to the ten acre property on U.S. Highway 280 formerly occupied by Southeastern Bible College

and originally built by Briarwood Presbyterian Church. The buildings on the original campus were made of concrete block with stone trim.

Project Architect Jeff Fowler calls masonry the "only choice" for the UCF House project which features scored concrete block that provides both exterior and interior wall surfaces.

Church Administrator Gary Wyatt said that when the congregation decided to replace the college ministry's storefront location, they initially considered remodeling one of the property's three dorms. But they soon realized building a new facility made more financial sense.

The result is a soaring mix of rustic and modern architecture that both fits the established campus and offers students a contemporary gathering place. Fowler said

UCF Director Joel Brooks requested a loft-like coffee house area. That wish was granted with a vaulted-ceiling space, complete with small stage, that anchors the building. Above is a balcony/mezzanine level from which one can look down upon student gatherings or out the wall of windows to the wooded grounds.

"It's an unusual space that I think was successful," says Fowler. Wyatt agrees. "It blends very well with the rest of the property," he says.

Wyatt also says the building meets multiple purposes, often simultaneously. While students are using their laptops at the wireless coffee bar or listening to live music on stage, as many as eight Bible studies may be meeting in small rooms. One of those rooms looks like a living room, with a stone fireplace. Others offer ping pong, foosball and other entertainment options, with one solely dedicated to prayer. A small sound studio accommodates demo recordings while washers and dryers in another room

provide a laundry place for dorm dwellers. "It's a place for students to gather," says Wyatt. "It's really a hangout place." That's another reason Fowler chose masonry block. He knew the House would have to be made of materials "as tough as possible," and chose masonry for both its hard-wearing wall surface and for its contemporary edge.

He knew masonry would "stand the test of time," he says, both in physical durability and in classic design. He highlighted the block's design by specifying a gray paint shade to duplicate its natural tone.

Wyatt said students were so appreciative of the church's accommodation that they raised \$300,000 toward the building's cost. The resulting structure offers a place to live out the "Faith, Art, Community" theme of UCF.

"Jeff listened to what we wanted," says Wyatt of this Top Block architect. "He just did a brilliant job on it."

