

# WE WILL BUILD IT CHARLESTON

**Preface:** The American College of the Building Arts in South Carolina is preserving traditional skills by teaching them to the next generation of craftsmen. It's not just the students who benefit, though: the historic city is also being treated to some fine restoration work along the way.

**School:** American College of the Building Arts  
**Location:** Charleston, USA  
**Founded:** 1989  
**Number of students:** 54  
**Number of premises:** 2 (the main campus at the Old Jail on Magazine Street and craft specialisation facilities on James Island. In 2016, ACBA will move to new premises in a refurbished 1897 trolley-car barn)

**Quote:** *'We don't reject modernism. We just feel there is an equal place for tradition in the 21st century'*

Just beyond the College of Charleston is the city's historic Old Jail, a rambling fortress built in 1802. In the early 19th century the jail housed runaway slaves. A century-and-a-half later, the building is home to the unusual student and faculty body of the American College of the Building Arts (ACBA).

Originally established in 1989, the ACBA became licensed in 2004 as the US's only institute of higher education offering a four-year liberal arts degree in the traditional trades of pre-industrial-era Europe and the US. Using the jail building and more than 1,400 historic structures in Charleston itself as a laboratory, the school teaches its students building arts that have almost been lost, using stone, iron, timber, masonry and plaster.

While emphasis is placed on both preservation and new-build architecture, the ACBA clearly stresses old-world craft over 21st-century flash. "We don't reject modernism; we just feel there is an equal place for tradition in the 21st century," says professor of architecture and design, David Payne. "We are more about Andrea Palladio here than Rem Koolhaas."

At the ACBA, coursework is anchored around a traditional trade that students select when they enrol and that they master during their four years of study. Yet, whereas French *compagnons*

are trained solely in technique, ACBA students receive an equally intensive academic education. Literature, mathematics and foreign-language courses comprise half of the students' schedules. But unlike at conventional colleges, academic subjects are integrated into the ACBA's overall mission to develop professional craftsmen.

While the Old Jail remains the ACBA's home base, its students work throughout Charleston. Out on James Island, for instance, is a satellite campus used as a workshop for the ACBA's carpentry, timber framing and architectural-metal programmes. Over on Meeting Street, meanwhile, students apply the final touches to an intricate plaster ceiling in a Georgian townhouse in the heart of Charleston's historic district. The students are employed, albeit without compensation, by a private contractor sourced through the ACBA's work-study programme. Like many ACBA endeavours, the Meeting Street project blurs the lines between education and enterprise. — (M)

**Why you should come here:** Few other schools immerse their students in the way the ACBA does. The Old Jail houses classrooms but also serves as an ongoing restoration project where the students and teachers can put their skills to work.



- 01 James Island workshop
- 02 Student Aislinn Lewis
- 03 College dean Simeon Warren carving stone
- 04 Benjamin Smiley and Emily Gillett working on plaster
- 05 Beverley Payne, student co-ordinator
- 06 Student Peter McGinnis
- 07 Main house at Drayton Hall
- 08 Class in session

