

Simply A Natural Choice

Spring Hill College, located in historic Mobile, Al., is the oldest college in Alabama, and the third oldest Jesuit, Catholic college in the United States. Generations of students have passed through its halls. Going hand in hand with academics, students at Spring Hill learn life lessons here. With more than 80 percent of students in a resident population at the school, young people experience their first taste of independence, and learn lessons of cooperation, friendship and community building within its residence halls.

Buildings are updated and added through the years to accommodate a growing student population. New structures must echo the beauty of the historic campus, while at their core providing

strength and longevity to stand up to an active and ever-changing body of residents. Almost exclusively, concrete answers the call for these facilities.

The newest structure on the campus is the Skip's Place Residence Hall, part of the Viragh Residence Complex. Constructed in 2007, the hall accommodates 139 residents in double and single rooms, featuring pod-style living arrangements with six to seven students living in each pod. The complex features study

areas, classrooms, laundry facilities, meeting rooms and common areas. The building was designed to complement Viragh Hall, which is located across a spacious courtyard, landscaped to include a



stone sitting area and decorative concrete fountain.

The entire Skip's Place superstructure was constructed using cast-in-place concrete, which is used for most foundations and slabs on ground, as well as walls, beams, columns, floors and roofs, in addition to pavements and other infrastructure. Cast-in-place concrete offers long-term durability and structural support perfect for a high-traffic, high-impact facility like a residence hall. Concrete block is also used on the interior walls.

"The main concerns for this project was that the building would be durable, and also within their budget," explained Tom Kelly, construction manager with TAG Architects, which provided turnkey design and build services for this project. "Concrete was a natural choice to meet their goals. The owner wanted a building that would be a 50- to 100-year capacity. They need it to last that long and that's why concrete was chosen," he said. "Kids are bounding around, bouncing off the walls and all – it's a high traffic facility," he said with a chuckle. "Concrete can definitely hold up to that."

The use of concrete for the Skip's Place dorm also allowed the project to be completed in a timely manner, with construction completed in about one year. This helped to keep the college on track to house more young people as its student body continues to grow.

Because the building would need to complement the existing Viragh Residence Hall, and create the Viragh Residence Complex, there were a number of site challenges. These included working an active construction site in close proximity to the existing Viragh Hall dorm, accommodating traffic for student flow as well as traffic for construction workers and vehicles while maintaining safety. The design of the building also needed to complement the existing structure, and landscaping had to be designed to connect the two buildings in an aesthetically pleasing and functional way.

The older residence hall, Viragh Hall, was built about eight years ago, and both buildings were funded by the same donor, the late Albert P. "Skip" Viragh, a 1964 graduate of the college and former member of the college's Board of Trustees. Skip Viragh is the biggest benefactor in the college's history, having given more than \$13.5 million prior to his death in 2003. The buildings share a sightline and should communicate a sense of togetherness.

"When we designed the second phase of this residential complex, we basically made a big courtyard," said Cindy Klotz, AIA, a designer with TAG. "The buildings making up the new Skip's Place are separate and U-shaped, in a cluster, then they relate to the older building with some of the same elements, like columns, arches and colors," she said. "It's a historic campus, so they're sort of carrying that look on as well."

Although referred to as a courtyard, the green space between the two buildings is actually quite large, close to 200 yards across, a quad-style area designed to facilitate movement between the two residence halls, and activity in the green spaces between them. There are concrete walkways and a decorative masonry concrete fountain with some cast concrete and decorative concrete stone, which provides the look of river stones. Benches, a barbeque area and welcoming expanses of lawn encourage students to stroll and gather.

Viragh Hall houses freshmen students, while the new Skip's Place is mainly for upperclassmen. The Viragh Complex has become the most popular residence area for students, said John W. Kerr, director of communications and marketing for Spring Hill. These structures are keys to the Spring Hill college experience, he said.

"TAG has done a lot of work with the college over the years, so they understand the importance we place on the residence life for students, which helps them develop. We emphasize that as part of the Catholic Jesuit mission is preparing the students to be leaders for others," Kerr explained. "Student life experience is just as important as academic experiences. They go hand in hand. Students always refer to us as a community, which is very telling. A bond is formed with the place, and the location and environment here. It's very much a community oriented environment for students."

Kerr says students regularly revisit the Spring Hill College long after graduation. Many, like Viragh, actively support their alma mater for the rest of their lives. Thanks to the longevity and strength of concrete, the buildings will remain as long as their fond memories.

■ Wendi Lewis

