

BY BECKY MANN

Coming home

after earning a master's degree in architecture from Clemson University in 1999, Catherine Smith spent a couple of years in Greenville. Then she and her husband, a photographer, decided that New Orleans would be a better venue for his profession, so the couple became transplants.

A year after the move, Catherine's husband passed away. Two years after that, in rapid fire succession, she suffered the death of her father and along with everyone else in New Orleans, the loss of much of the city's history and beauty with Hurricane Katrina. Then came a period of rebuilding for the architect and her adopted city.



Dog Trot House
Poplarville, Mississippi

Smith had evacuated to Atlanta when the hurricane struck and traveled back to her hometown of Spartanburg when flooding occurred. Just weeks after the disaster, she was back at work in New Iberia, Louisiana, where the company she worked for, Waggonner & Ball, had established temporary headquarters.

Having lost so much before the hurricane, Smith was spared from the worst of the storm's wrath. "While my neighborhood flooded, the floor of my house was six inches higher than the water," she says. "I still had a significant amount of damage under the house and in the storage building, but I was the only one on my street not to have water inside my house."

Every day brought thoughts of leaving, but Smith decided to stay. "I felt that the office wanted me, and I still had a job," she says. "And as an architect, I felt that this was where I was needed most. Rebuilding the city was the focus of our efforts after that."

Thanks to a government contract, Waggonner & Ball performed FEMA assessments, identifying damage levels for residential properties. This work allowed the firm to not only maintain its staff of 18, but to offer employment to a half dozen other architects in the area as well.

In 2006, the firm began alterations to the U.S. Custom House, an 1880s-era national historic landmark that occupies a city block in the French Quarter. The building had suffered a complete roof failure in the storm, something Smith terms a happy accident in that it allowed for removal of a non-historic and detrimental renovation that had taken place in the seventies.

The three-year project meant that the building could survive the hurricane's damage. "I'm pretty proud of the fact that I survived that project," Smith says, of the \$30 million complete restoration of a 300,000 square foot structure.

Smith was still working on reports for the Custom House project when she returned to the Upstate in October 2009. She established Catherine Smith Architect, LLC, a one woman/one dog operation that focuses on renovations and new designs of all sizes — everything from closets to new construction.



"My focus is on personalized attention with thoughtful, considerate, honest and efficient service," she says.

Smith brings to this business experience with a number of nationally recognized projects, including an AIA award winner in Poplarville, Mississippi that started small and grew. "The clients had asked us to start with what was going to be the guest house for a weekend retreat," she says. "As the project evolved, they liked it more and more, and they finally decided they didn't need to build a big house. The guest house became the main house for weekends and vacation retreats."

Returning home after eight years away left Smith feeling lost, literally. "Greenville has changed dramatically," she says. "Before I left, the pedestrian bridge was just a conversation point. It hadn't been started at that point in time, and there are probably eight or ten new buildings that weren't here when I left. Downtown and the West End are just incredible and beautiful."

Home is not only where she resides but the focus of her work here, as she creates environments in which people live. "The only thing I've ever wanted to work on is houses," she says. "I like working for the people who are actually going to use the space."

And how does it feel to be back? "Changes or not, it definitely feels like I'm home," she says. "I'm happier than I've been in a very, very long time." 