



**The Neilsons' Stats »**

**Owners:** Michael and Susan Neilson

**Location:** Spring Island, S.C.

**Year built:** 2003

**Square footage:** 5,464 heated and cooled, plus 3,894 unheated, including porches

**Accommodations:** 5 bedrooms, 5.5 baths

**Time to complete:** 18 months

# Spring Island Splendor

Discover one couple's family-friendly retreat, nestled among the storied Southern oaks.

**Allison Hersh** explores this relaxed Lowcountry haven.

» Photography by **Richard Leo Johnson**

**S**usan and Mike Neilson lived in a traditional Colonial-style home in Connecticut for many years before they decided to head South for retirement, building a stylish barrier-island retreat in the heart of the South Carolina Lowcountry.

"We love typical Southern architecture," Susan raves. "We wanted a home that would be defined by casual elegance."

## A Natural Compound

However, "typical Southern architecture" didn't mean exclusively Southern. The Neilsons wanted a relaxed home

that would reflect the architectural charm of a Lowcountry plantation and the informal style of Caribbean. But first, they needed an ideal location. The couple found the perfect placement for their quiet retreat in Spring Island, a luxurious community near Beaufort offering a wide range of amenities within an eco-friendly 3,000-acre setting.

"Spring Island is a unique community, unlike any other," Susan says. "It's basically a nature preserve. It's beautiful, and there's a strong commitment to maintaining the island the way it is and to being responsible stewards of the land."



## Home Tour

When the Neilsons first glimpsed the 2.5-acre property, it was a dense, thick forest. In the Spring Island tradition of respecting the natural landscape, they worked closely with design principal Jim Strickland of Historical Concepts, a traditional Southern architecture firm in Atlanta, to preserve as many existing live oaks as possible. They integrated the trees into the design of the main house and the surrounding outbuildings.

The guesthouse is one such outbuilding that quite literally embraces the surrounding trees. The innovative H-shaped layout wraps around two massive live oaks. A narrow breezeway tucked between the tree trunks connects the two halves of the guesthouse.

"The house has a strong sense of place and becomes one with nature," says Strickland, a founder and senior partner at Historical Concepts. "Beneath the shade of the live oaks, it has a subdued elegance."

### Southeast Meets West Indies

A rich interplay of materials, styles and cultures runs throughout the home. In a tribute to Southern plantation style, the outbuildings are reminiscent of the utilitarian workers' cottages that once dotted the Carolina coast. The main house also draws heavily from Southern vernacular



The main house is an open, airy design evoking Caribbean architecture, complete with exposed rafters, ceiling fans and distressed surfaces. However, classical elements such as painted wood siding and Greek Revival-style pilasters embellish the interior walls, embracing traditional Lowcountry style.



**Home Tour**

style, featuring handmade brick steps leading to an oversized veranda that invites visitors to linger over a glass of sweet tea. The metal roof and tabby accents serve as tributes to indigenous Lowcountry materials, but a row of glass and mahogany French doors—outfitted with Caribbean-style shutters—brings a flourish of international flavor to the exterior façade.

The interior design also adds visual interest at every turn. The main house is an open, airy design evoking Caribbean architecture, complete with exposed rafters, ceiling fans and distressed surfaces. However, classical elements such as painted wood siding and Greek Revival-style pilasters embellish the interior walls, embracing traditional Lowcountry style. The color palette—earth tones reminiscent of tidal grasses and palmettos—evokes the comfort and ease of marsh-side living.

Strickland and his team incorporated elegant influences by adding antique doors from Paris and ornate antique moldings throughout the main house. These vintage touches contrast nicely with more modern elements like the steel-and-wood spiral staircase, creating subtle yet eye-catching dichotomies throughout the residence. The end result is a warm, inviting environment that encourages guests to linger and revel in the details.

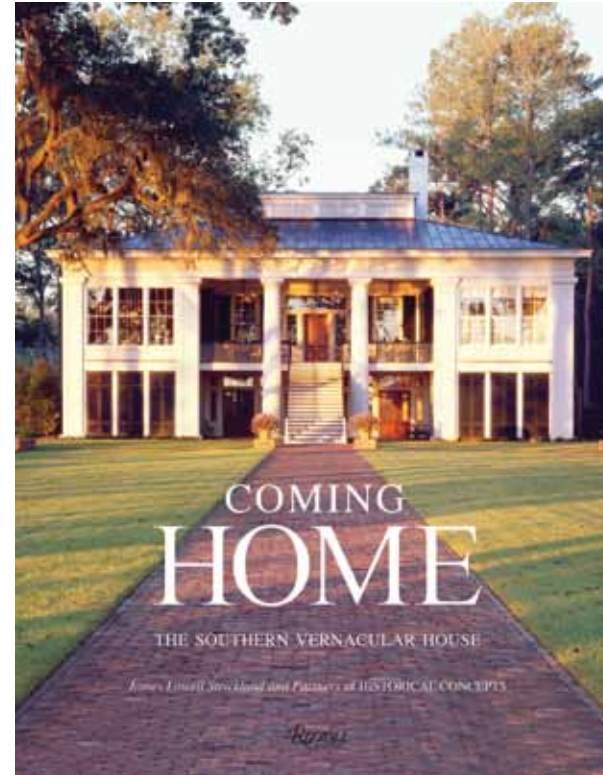
**Not a single room goes unused or unappreciated, including an adjacent carriage house outfitted with oversized barn doors and a striking rooftop “lantern” structure that contains a family room, guest room and office.**

**Little Big House**

Much to Mike and Susan’s delight, their “guests” often include family. Children and grandchildren enjoy holidays and vacations at the relaxing refuge, taking advantage of the comfortable yet luxurious guesthouse protectively nestled in the trees.

“There’s plenty of room for everyone,” says Susan, who also enjoys cooking and entertaining at home. “This is a wonderful place in which to entertain. It really opens up, and the rooms all flow into one another. We’ve had dinner parties for six and parties for up to 100 guests.”

On a daily basis, however, life at the Neilson home is a much simpler affair. Susan, a retired lawyer, and Mike, a retired banker, enjoy sipping coffee and reading the newspaper each morning in the bright day-room, with its high ceilings and generous windows. In the evening, they often escape to the family room for cocktails. Not a single



**A Celebration of Southern Style**

Have you ever wondered what makes Southern homes so “come-on-in” comfortable and “kick-off-your-shoes” cozy? A new book with photographs by Savannah magazine photographer **Richard Leo Johnson** holds the answers.

“Coming Home: The Southern Vernacular House” (Rizzoli International Publications Inc., \$45), a new book by James Lowell Strickland and Susan Sully, goes right to the heart of Southern style, exploring the time-honored materials, artisanal craftsmanship and elegant interiors that define the region’s architectural traditions. A sourcebook of great ideas and innovative details, “Coming Home” showcases more than a dozen exceptional residences created by Historical Concepts, an Atlanta architecture and design firm that has built classic, stylish homes throughout the Southeast.

“To me, Southern architecture is a soft breeze on a porch, iced tea on a hot day, the fragrance of magnolias, the brilliant treat of azaleas in bloom, the smell of freshly cut grass, taking a nap on a third-generation glider and the sound of a screen door’s welcome,” muses Strickland, president and senior partner at Historical Concepts. “It’s a place that wraps you in comfort. It can be majestic or humble, but it is always welcoming.”

“Coming Home” serves as a loving tribute to the wide range of styles and influences that combine to form Southern vernacular architecture. From an elegant Beaufort-style house defined by classic revival details to a quaint Palmetto Bluff cottage accented with louvered shutters and a corrugated metal roof, each of the homes in the book has a story to tell. Mike and Susan Neilson’s luxe Spring Island sanctuary has its own chapter in this homage to Southern homes.

Although Southern vernacular architecture draws elements from traditional Georgian, Federal and Greek Revival styles, it’s ultimately about creating an environment with a powerful sense of place.

“The notion of home is a strong one that evokes a personal anthology of memories,” Sully says. “Whether it recalls the places where we lived as children, the houses of beloved grandparents where generations of family gathered together on special occasions or even our secret dreams of home, the notion almost always conjures the sense of comfort, ease and security that we all long for and strive to re-create.”





## Home Tour



room goes unused or unappreciated, including an adjacent carriage house outfitted with oversized barn doors and a striking roof-top “lantern” structure that contains a family room, guest room and office.

“Mike and I use all the rooms in the house,” Susan explains. “Sometimes we eat dinner in the kitchen, sometimes we eat outside. We love the blending of indoor and outdoor living. It’s a very livable style.”

Susan loves the fact that the compound is divided up into a main house with several smaller outbuildings. She cherishes the breezy blend of sophisticated and rustic details that make this house a home. Above all, she adores the casual comfort of this Spring Island sanctuary, which lifts her spirits every time she enters the front door.

“When you walk into the house, you can smell the fragrance of the wood and see the tall ceilings,” she enthuses. “It’s a happy and airy house. It truly has exceeded our expectations on every level.” ■

### The Neilsons’ Referrals »

**Architects/planners:** Jim Strickland (design principal) and Marty Mullin (project architect), Historical Concepts

**Interior designer:** Miriam Jordan Ricks, Miriam Jordan Interiors

**Contractor/builder:** David Steele

**Paint/wallpaper:** Sherwin Williams

**Windows/doors:** Kolbe & Kolbe windows, custom doors by architect/builder

**Kitchen/bath design:** Historical Concepts

**Lighting design:** Eloise Pickard, Sandy Springs Gallery

**Landscape/hardscape design:** Don Hooten, Hooten Land Design Inc.

**Landscaper:** The Greenery

**Art:** Jim Palmer “Quiet Sentinel” and Addison Palmer “Barn”

