

Sunloft Center — a little architecture, a little history

Staying out of the many new — and old — buildings going up or being renovated around here is a problem. Every sign of progress makes me want to dash inside and find out what's going on.

From the Ice House to the courthouse, from the Harbor Center to Sunloft Center, I feel duty bound to try to find answers to my questions because I have a hunch I'm not the only person wondering what's up.

So, when Sunloft Center architect Bill Pantsari called last week to see if I was interested in a tour of the work being done on the facade, I told him to get a hard hat ready for me.

One reason is that I'd been hearing comments from Punta Gorda residents a little concerned the bright pastel paint jobs on some of the 24 facades of the building were a harbinger of facades to come.

Bill put that fear to rest right away, dismissing them as primer surfaces that will soon be covered up with the facade materials.

And that's the real reason he phoned me; work crews were in the process of applying the tabby finish to areas of the facade, and Bill is really into tabby.

He has a company, called

Tabby Construction, that is doing the Sunloft tabby work.

"I'm also trying to write a book about coastal architecture," he said. "There are tabby ruins all over the coast. That's why tabby is called coastal concrete."

For those of you who missed or don't remember my column from May, let me reacquaint you with this oldtime building material. Tabby is a cement mixture first made along the coast by the Spaniards in the early 1500s. Known as *tapia* back then, it was made by burning shells to extract lime, then mixing it with sand and shells and pounding layers of it into place in great wooden molds to form durable walls and pillars.

Bill said the English became familiar with the material they called tabby when they tried — and failed — to burn down tabby structures in St. Augustine.

"It's very strong stuff," he said.

Needless to say, given the amount of labor needed and its weight, tabby fell out of favor as a building material. It is only now seeing a renaissance after the development of more modern construction methods, according to Pantsari.

"It's a veneer now," he said, "but it is much heavier and thicker than stucco to hold the shell. It gives an authentic coastal feel. I think that's especially important in Punta Gorda."

We spent some time walking through the Sunloft complex looking at tabby work in progress. It doesn't look that hard to do; essentially a scratch coat of mortar is troweled on followed by a white finish coat of mortar made with white sand that is then blown with shell and then sealed.

But Pantsari said quality materials and skilled workers are needed if it is to be done right and pointed to the corners his crews had finished as evidence.

"We brought the corner beads in all the way from California," he said, holding one up. The pricey corner beads result in a complete tabby corner instead of a seam covered with cheesy, plastic corner bead.

Because of the fence and screen around the Sunloft Center, it's difficult to get far enough away to get the full visual effect of the tabby finish. Look up at the second floor on the West Marion Avenue side for the best view.

From my up-close perspective, it looked great; kind of like one of those new pebble pool surfaces many

homeowners are installing. It feels remarkably smooth and seems a perfect choice for a historic little waterfront town like Punta Gorda.

“You would have to go up to St. Simon’s Island (Georgia) to see something like this,” Pantsari said pointing with pride to one of the perfectly applied tabby walls.

Though not as expensive as brick, tabby costs more than stucco, so don’t expect it to be the most prevalent facade element.

Pantsari said it will be on parts of nine facades as well as some interior areas. As I pointed out in an earlier column, the various bricks and stucco colors that will make up the rest of the facade aren’t too hard on the eyes, either.

To help give admirers their shell fix, he’s already stockpiling tabby benches and pots to be used in the public areas of the building.

A few lucky homeowners in the historic district won’t even have to go to Sunloft Center to see tabby. All they have to do is crawl under their house.

“Some historic district houses still have tabby piers underneath them,” Pantsari said.

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Bill Pantsari, right, and Dan Starling, who has 30 years of experience and is supervising the Sunloft job, stand by the mixer in front of a finished wall of tabby.
Gordon Bower Punta Gorda Herald Editor



Sunloft Center will feature not only tabby facade elements but pots, as well as benches, with tabby finishes. The components of a tabby facade are simple — white sand and mortar, below, and crushed shell, scallops, in this case. The Sunloft Center will also use oyster and coquina shells.



Above, before completion, a corner shows the gray scratch coat



Left, Pantsari holds one of the expensive corner beads, just seen peeking out of the unfinished corner in the top photo and necessary for a perfectly crafted tabby corner like this one in the photo below.



Above, a worker blows on the wet final coat, which is then troweled and blown with shell from this blower/hopper combination, below.

