

# Define the design

## Two Women Redefining the Interior Landscape of Downtown

By Rachael Pigg-Wisner

Photography by Matt Odom and Robinson Home

**Y**ou probably already got the memo. But if you haven't, you have now: Downtown Macon is making a comeback, and two young women are helping drive the train.

Michelle Garlington (of Michelle Garlington Interiors LLC) and Carrie Robinson (Robinson Home) are two Macon designers who have collaborated since 2015.

Meeting them in the chic but cozy NewTown space on Poplar Street was appropriate. The NewTown renovation was the first collaborative project for Michelle and Carrie. They joined forces to re-envision not only the design but also the office concept itself.

NewTown Macon began its transformation in late 2015. NewTown CEO Josh Rogers enlisted Michelle and Carrie's help for an innovative project - a "mixed-use office environment" for Josh and his team.

Coming from years of corporate/commercial design experience, Michelle was ideal for the project.

"I realize now that I was channeling my experience as a 'work-from-homer,'" she said, "to build the collaborative work environment I was seeking in the local market, and the experience was a game-changer."

Carrie paired her sleek, interior magic with Michelle's brainchild for the space, a "flipped floor plan." Walking in the doors of NewTown has the vibe of walking through the backdoor of a friend's home, with its hospitality/kitchen area directly in the front.





Carrie Robinson and Michelle Garlington

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*“Carrie and Michelle are a design dream-team for downtown,” said NewTown President Josh Rogers. “From bars to restaurants to office space, Carrie and Michelle’s designs continue to raise the bar for each business they help. Carrie and Michelle are defining an aesthetic for downtown’s revitalization that is beautiful, while still being truly, uniquely Macon. Today, successful businesses have to look the part, and Carrie and Michelle can help any entrepreneur bring the best looking version of themselves to physical form, and the businesses they help see that investment return many times over in sales.”*

On the “co-workers” side of the space there’s a long contemporary table. Co-workers are welcome to brainstorm collaboratively. They pay for a membership or can rent an office or conference space. Michelle specified glass walls throughout the interior, allowing light to permeate the building and create the illusion of more expansive rooms, while maintaining the intimacy of a traditional office space.

NewTown was the duo’s first official collaboration, but Carrie and Michelle’s friendship began several years ago, when they met in Knoxville, Tenn., at a real estate development training. Carrie was abuzz with her latest plans, a retail shop in downtown Macon. The chance meeting was a life-changer for both women. At the time, Michelle and her husband, Ethiel, had no intentions of leaving Knoxville.

“Ethiel was a fifth-generation Knoxvillean. We had already chosen our burial plots,” she said with a laugh. But Carrie’s passion for her craft and her faith in the potential of downtown Macon intrigued Michelle.

Carrie had grown up in Asheville, N.C., and attended Mercer where she obtained her undergraduate degree in Art and Photography.

After completing her master’s from SCAD in interior design, Carrie returned to Macon to take on the role of Historic Macon Foundation’s new preservation designer, where she worked for more than four years, leading the restoration of more than 20 properties. The historic design/restoration world took notice. HMF gained recognition nationally for its groundbreaking (excuse the pun) approach to historic revitalization.

While these innovations were taking place in Macon, Michelle was working with commercial interiors, first in Athens where she completed her master’s in Historic Preservation, then in Knoxville. Michelle helped design some large capital-building projects for the University of Georgia, then used her experience later in Knoxville with Workspace Interiors and Barber McMurray Architects.

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“When I left design school and began pursuing the graduate degree in Historic Preservation,” Michelle said, “my goal was to combine the two disciplines, ideally reusing historic structures in adaptive and creative new ways.” But the economy had dipped when she entered the work force, so she found herself immersed in new corporate interior design, a fun gig but a far cry from her passion for preservation.

Michelle and Ethiel, who heads up the Historic Macon Foundation, were skeptical when they trekked to Macon. But within an hour, the two became “smitten.” She described the energy as “pulsating” - old buildings reimagined as restaurants, stores, brewpubs, studios. Macon may have been a little behind the national trends for historic renos, but it was quickly gaining ground.

The Garlingtons, like Carrie and her husband, Will, saw the Macon renaissance as an opportunity for their own professional reawakening. For Carrie, whose passion for local preservation is infectious, the moment is now: “Macon is now primed for this development and the infrastructure is here. It has historic property after historic property, just waiting for the opportunity.”

The NewTown collaboration allowed Carrie and Michelle to blend their talents seamlessly. Michelle, the self-described “nerd in the equation,” manages the “nuts and bolts” (making sure things are up to code and going according to plan), while Carrie oversees what she describes as “the big, rambling, creative picture.” Carrie typically chooses the finishes, her preference being “tailored and classic interiors that stand the test of time.”

Carrie’s talent for creating classic spaces displays itself throughout downtown, from the Loft/Condo project on 551 Cherry Street to many downtown residences. She also has exploded in the hospitality side of things, having designed the lovely El Camino restaurant and the family-friendly Piedmont Brew Pub.

New to Macon, Michelle worked with the Commercial Furnishings team to complete local education projects, most notably the Mercer Innovation Center. She continues to design with Bruce Johnson, Commercial Furnishings' owner, and is currently wrapping up a project for him in Milledgeville. She also helped Blake Lisenby reinvigorate his mid-century office building on Walnut. Additionally, she and Carrie spread the co-working concept to a space Jim Daws completed, The Offices, next door to The Brick restaurant.

Whether working collaboratively or independently, these two women are a force of change. The renaissance of Macon has mirrored itself in Carrie's and Michelle's professional lives. Each has channeled her talents and experience to reimagine a once forgotten, now burgeoning community, and in doing so, have recreated, to use Michelle's words, "how people work, live, and play in downtown Macon."



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