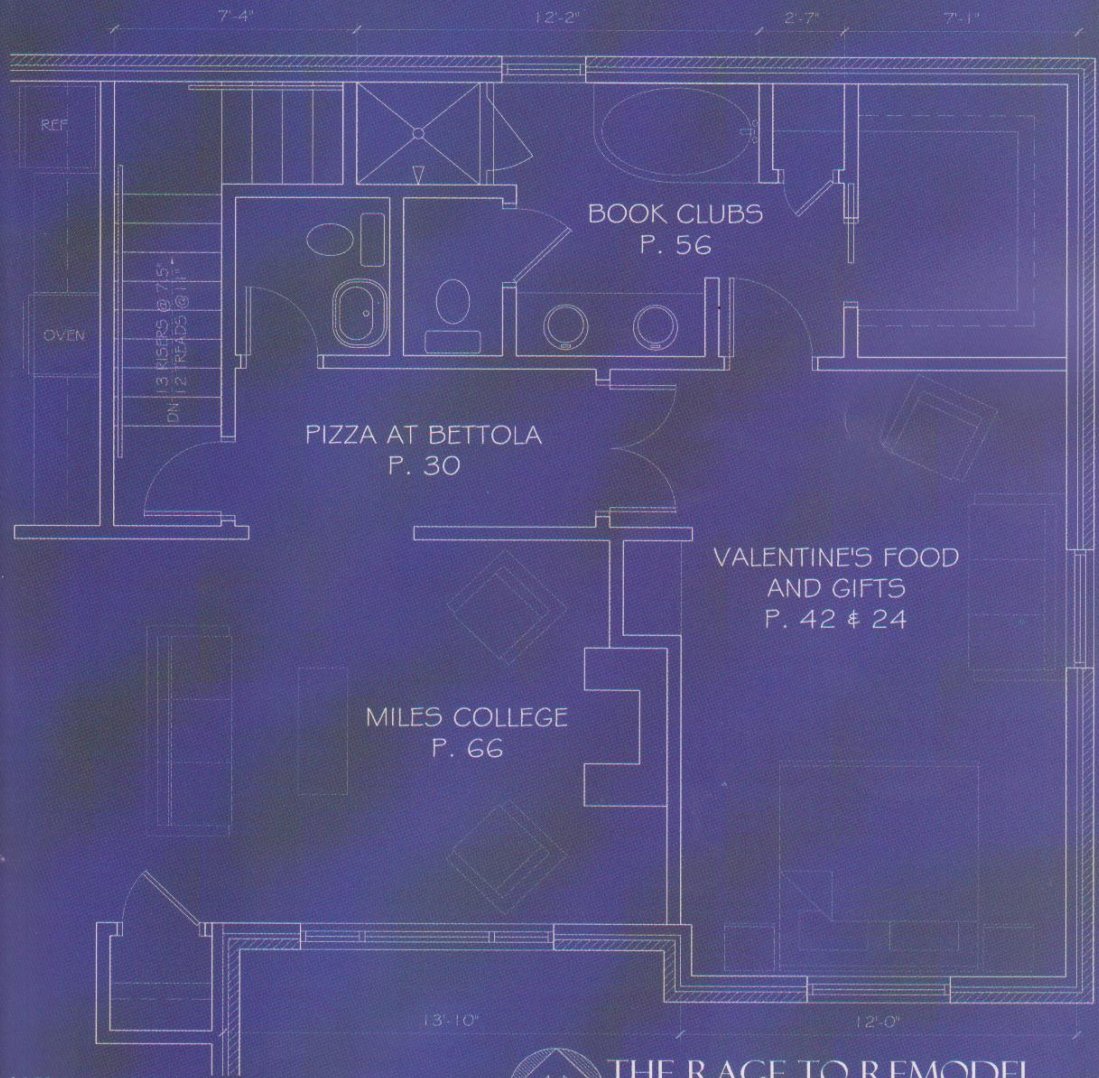


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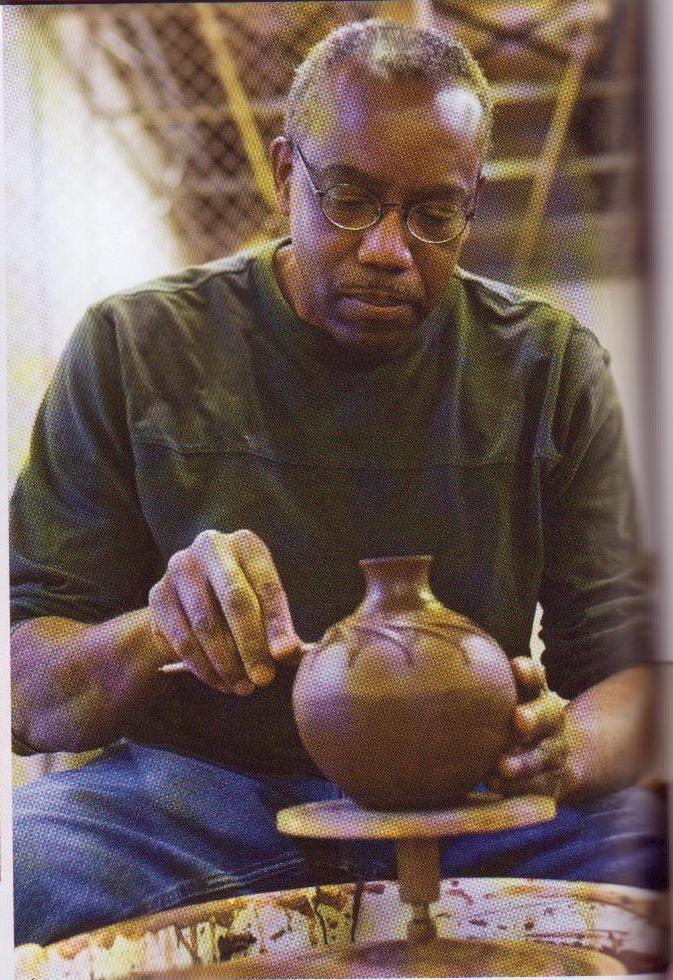
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THE RAGE TO REMODEL

WHAT BUILDERS, REALTORS, AND PRESERVATIONISTS SAY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Some of Larry Allen's decorative pottery.
Allen at work on a piece in the new studio.
One of Tena Payne's ammonite fossils,
which she uses as her imprint.



TENA PAYNE CRAFTED A NAME for herself and founded a family business with her artisan dinnerware. Larry Allen's stunning decorative pottery is in collections across the country. Now the two of them are working to make a creative space for other artists—advanced and beginner.

Their idea, and its new and unique reality are quite accommodating. Cahaba ClayWorks, open for less than a year, is an interactive clay facility with classrooms, galleries, artist spaces, separate studios for its founders, and plenty of room to grow.

When Payne and Allen outgrew the studio space they had shared for two years, they wanted to find a place that would accommodate not only their work but also that of other artists. They bought the old Miraflex watch factory in Leeds, and Cahaba ClayWorks was formed.

Abandoned and in disrepair, the building looked promising only to someone with vision. Allen says he knew immediately this was the place. "The space lends itself to what we're doing. It flows into what we do," he says. Even the long row of plugs for the classroom's electric wheels was already in place. The building was home to a sewing factory after the watch business closed. But it took some work to get it ready to house Payne and Allen's vision. "We removed 92 tons of debris" from the 24,000-square-foot facility, Payne says.

The Cahaba ClayWorks dream is now taking shape, allowing people interested in exploring the art of working with clay to do it in an inspiring, creative environment.

"One of the hardest things for a ceramic artist is setting up a working studio in an efficient manner," Allen says. It's expensive and calls for a dedicated space. "There's nothing else like what we're doing (in this area)," he says. "Other, larger metropolitan cities have multiple ceramic facilities. This area is underserved. We want to serve it by having the kind of facility where artists can have a place to come work and leave the mess behind."

But Cahaba ClayWorks is about much more than throwing pots. Here, budding artists can learn, established artists can create, and art lovers can peruse and purchase.

There's a white-walled gallery in the front of the building with pottery by Payne and Allen and colorful paintings by local artists Gudrun Rominger and Cathy Catalano. Glass artist Christopher Champion rents space in the interior of the building, as does potter-turned-photographer Louis Hill. There are rooms to rent for three others.

Payne says a couple of her colleges are interested in having kiln-building classes, and one day the large concrete pad outside will hold a gas-fired kiln. The Alabama Designer Craftsmen organization has never had a permanent home to display its members' three-dimensional works. Now several spaces await their fine, traditional crafts.

"Other, larger cities have ceramic [studios]. We want the kind of facility where artists can have a place to come work and leave the mess behind." LARRY ALLEN

An enormous room a few steps beyond the first gallery is Payne's studio, home to her Earthborn Pottery. Rolling racks hold mugs and goblets of greenware awaiting glaze and fire. Her husband, Wynn, son, Nathan, and his wife, Katie, all work here, too. She needs their help. Her pieces, available locally at The Cook Store in Mountain Brook Village, are on both private and public tables around the country. Beautiful and practical, her mineral-glazed, organically shaped plates, platters, and bowls go from oven to table at a growing number of five-star restaurants and resorts—MGM Bellagio in Las Vegas to Birmingham's own Hot and Hot Fish Club, which placed the initial order that got Payne out of her basement and into full-time art.

Orders like the one she recently received from the new Jia restaurant at Beau Rivage in Biloxi, Mississippi, keep her busy. She and her family are exhausted and proud after recently filling an order for 10 dozen pieces of 14 different styles of dinnerware for that restaurant. For orders like that, she makes an original piece, her son creates a die to press them, but "every piece is touched" and all are finished by hand, she says. Each piece features

Payne's distinctive logo—the imprint of an ammonite. She has a box full of the fossils.

Payne's own pottery wheel is tucked into a clay-splattered corner. She throws in front of a mirror so she can fully see what she's doing. When she demonstrates, her hands wet and red with her iron-rich clay, a block becomes a bowl in about five minutes.

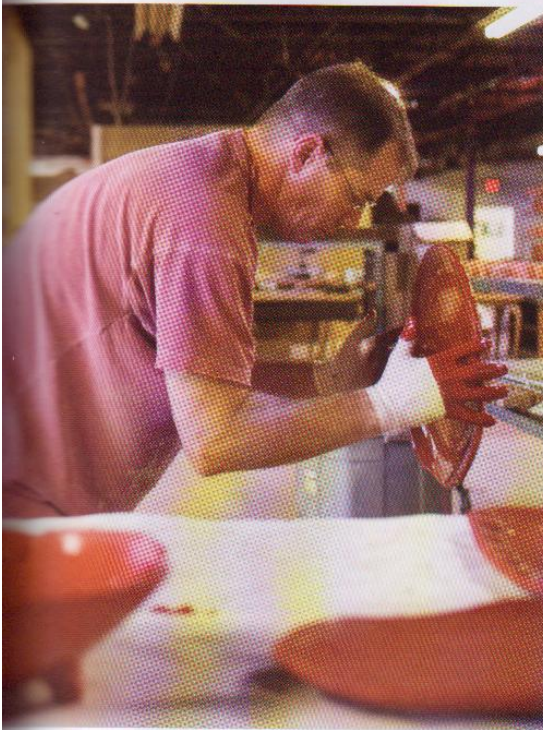
Allen's airy L.A. Pottery studio, with two doors open to the outside and NPR on the radio, is on the other side of the building. Here, he meticulously—and with a free hand—carves intricate shapes onto his pots made from a rich, dark clay called Cassius Clay. His technique, in which a surface layer of clay is carved away, is called sgraffito (from the Italian word sgraffire meaning, literally, "to scratch"). His impressive vessels of contrasting matte black and glossy red glaze are inspired by Native American art and African art, he says.

Between the two artists' workspaces is a fully outfitted studio where 10 electric wheels await willing hands. Nearby, a lovely and impressive antique treadle wheel reminds them of the history of their medium. Students learn from both Payne and Allen and work with quality materials. Their greenware pieces—cups, bowls, and vases—rest on a small table. "This is everything you would want as a clay artist," Payne says.

Cahaba ClayWorks offers classes for beginners as well as more advanced, independent artists. Personal instruction and practice time are available here. While memberships allow the most access to the space and its equipment, children's classes, birthday parties, and parent-child sessions are also offered.

"I just want people to enjoy their time here," Payne says. "I want them to realize that feeling of accomplishment when you achieve something out of the ordinary." No doubt these two dedicated artists will nurture others. And there's no telling what will take shape next at Cahaba ClayWorks. ♦

Cahaba ClayWorks is at 7575 Parkway Drive in Leeds.
The phone number is (205) 702-4180.



LEFT: Tena's husband shapes thrown pottery into the glaze.
MIDDLE AND FAR RIGHT: Pieces of Tena Payne's decorated dinnerware and the artist at her pottery wheel.

