For the last several decades, native Charlestonian Ronald Wayne Ramsey has focused on meticulously documenting historic buildings—particularly those slated for demolition to make way for hotels and condominiums—in Charleston. As old buildings in the historically minded city become condemned and readied for demolition, he secretly inside and liberates various seemingly mundane objects from their impending destruction: hinges, shutter dogs, decorative ironwork, doorknobs, and other ubiquitous building artifacts gain new relevance once they become part of his salvaged collection, which traces architectural styles from Charleston’s rich building legacy. Along with these objects, Ramsey creates fastidiously detailed drawings of old building facades in the city. As a self-taught artist with a keen eye for detail—as well as a desire to document fully the historic styles in Charleston—Ramsey creates drawings that are strikingly realistic and provide excellent renderings of buildings that now no longer exist.

For the exhibition *Ahead of the Wrecking Ball*, the Halsey Institute presents a large selection of Ramsey’s drawings from the last thirty years. The show will also feature arrays of objects he has collected, along with notebooks he has filled with ephemera from many of his favorite buildings now gone (stationery, business receipts, newspaper clippings, and advertisements). Here in the birthplace of the preservation movement in America, Ahead of the Wrecking Ball reveals one man’s relentless efforts to painstakingly chronicle the very buildings that give Charleston its historic renown.

**LOCATION:**
161 Calhoun Street
Charleston, SC 29401
halsey.cofc.edu

**PARKING:**
Available in the St. Philip St. and George St. garages

**GALLERY HOURS:**
Monday – Saturday, 11:00 AM – 4:00 PM during exhibitions, or by appointment
Open until 7:00 PM on Thursdays

**CONTACT:**
843.953.4422 or halsey@cofc.edu

**BLOG:**
Join the conversation! halsey.cofc.edu/edu/blog

**GUIDED GROUP TOURS BY APPOINTMENT:**
Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to various time lengths, group sizes, and ages. Contact Education Coordinator Maya McGauley at McgauleyM@cofc.edu or call (843) 953-5659.

**MISSION:**
The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

**Ahead of the Wrecking Ball:**
Ronald Ramsey and the Preservation of Charleston
January 20 – March 4, 2017

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Ramsey, who may have been influenced by them and their reproductions. With sophisticated elevations of the structures that stood on them or nearby. As other surveyors did, lines for surveys attached to deeds, he nevertheless often felt compelled to embellish his linear plats in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While his “real” job was to note property and lot structures like churches and dwellings that seemed important enough to somehow signify. In some pieces, elements vary from simple to sophisticated, imparting both an innocent sense of drawings bring: that brick by brick, pane by pane, shingle by shingle, he has not so much drawn a building as reconstructed it.

In his depictions of Four Mile House, and other destroyed buildings, such as a fortress-like hotel on Rivers Avenue, Ramsey repeats, in his own special way, what other artists did in the nineteenth century. When, for example, the early St. Philip’s Church burned in 1835, two native sons, artist John Blake White and planter Thomas Middleton, immediately tried to resurrect it, to ensure that if it did not survive physically, it could at least exist on canvas to give others an idea of its beauty. When another fire three years later destroyed the 1784 synagogue of Kahal Kadoach Beth Elohim on Hasell Street, local artist Solomon Nunez Caravelly immediately did the same, giving us interior and exterior paintings. Like them, Ramsey has recently defined time by reconstructions in line a once-handsome wooden house on Spring Street that burned in October 2016.

While Ramsey’s work displays parallels with the work of artists in the early life of the city, he most neatly in with those of the first part of the twentieth century, the era between the World Wars, which saw a burst of creativity in the arts that has earned it the name of the Charleston Renaissance. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith and her father D. E. Huger Smith launched the movement in their tribute to the built environment in a portfolio of twenty drawings of the Priole House, followed by a book of dwelling houses of the city. Alice Smith, the artist, like the poets and writers and artists of that era, found herself in a time of rapid change, fueled in part by a tourism boom that bolstered the local economy. It was a cruel period, when a distinctive way of life was giving way to modernization, and when the tangible fabric of the city was being lost. Guillaume Huyard, to gain fame with his novel Porgy (1925), first used poetry to give voice to what he saw happening: “Shutter, shutter, shutter,” he wrote in “Chaunt for an Old Town” (1923) as he witnessed wrecking balls and building crews demolishing old buildings. Whole blocks of the city were vanishing, he wrote, with “ancient fragile pavements like faint pastel maps” disappearing, replaced by “all asphalt and concrete.” Steeples no longer ruled the skyline as developers instead dedicated themselves to building “hotel[s] the mate of twenty others in great American cities.”

City boosters called it progress, good for business; others called it barbarism. And rising to the challenge of safeguarding the past were artists like Elizabeth O’Neill Verner and Alfred Hutty, who featured the architecture of Charleston, grand buildings but also those in disrepair and in danger of disappearing, in their paintings and etchings. It is interesting to note that while Ramsey takes as his subject buildings now lost or in danger of demolition, unlike those before him he respects them too much to show them in a state of dilapidation or decay; no siding is gone, no doors are ajar, no shutters hang loose. Despite their condition, he shows them instead as they should be, formally dressed, in their original glory! Alfred Hutty’s love of the beauty of the city prompted him to attend the founding meeting of the organization that became the Preservation Society of Charleston, demonstrating the direct link between artistry and activism. The same impulse informs Ramsey, who often draws attention to less-celebrated vernacular buildings, the ones in danger of demolition. He has said he wants to meet with mayors of our local towns to show them that not only architectural icons but also more humble structures have grace of line and expression that can be returned to their proper states, as he portrays them.

Ramsey, a great collector of publications documenting Charleston (which is how our paths first crossed in the 1970s), may have imbued ideas and been influenced by those and other Charleston Renaissance artists and draftsmen. Many of his detailed drawings recall the interior and exterior elevations published in the White Pine series of pamphlets on American architecture produced in the 1920s; and many Historic American Building Survey (HABS) drawings of Charleston done in this era were disseminated widely. Charleston’s first great preservation architect, Albert Simons, came into prominence during the Renaissance era, and his elegant drawings of local woodwork, doorways, moldings, and the like are featured in The Early Architecture of Charleston, Randolphins of the Carolina Low Country and other iconic books on Charleston that anyone interested in the city would have encountered. Similarly for inovación, Richard Jenkins Bryan created pencil drawings for Ashton Deas’s The Early Ironwork of Charleston, another possible influence and forerunner of Ramsey’s spectacular drawings. Ramsey’s art resembles these predecessors, but his drawings are more dynamic: and have more personality.

In many ways, Ramsey also has much in common with the man considered the first modern artist in town, and the namesake of the Halsey Institute. Born in 1915, just after Alice Smith’s first architectural work was published, William Halsey studied with Elizabeth O’Neill Verner and was intrigued, as she was, by the life of the side street. Yet his vision was different from Verner’s, not as sentimental, often stripping away the vague human forms present in her etchings as well as Hutty’s. (One sees no human forms at all, or even trees, in Ramsey’s work, architecture is his sole focus.) As if taking Dullboe’s Heyward’s “shutter, shutter, shutter,” dictum as a directive—in art, at least—Halsey began to break up his realistic buildings into lines, angles, and planes. Ramsey has held on more strongly to realism than Halsey did, yet his structures stand in an unsanded, unbrushed space, sharing the innocence of early American primitivism that influenced 20th century artists like Halsey. Experimenting with form, Halsey laid on collage and used newsprint, as does Ramsey. Both are intrigued with the very texture of the city. Halsey salvaged shattered decorative pieces and architectural fragments and put them together in sculptures he called constructions. Ramsey has done something similar, but he has made it more personal. Almost as if he can feel the pain and shame and indignation of buildings overcome by time or neglect, he rescues and labels them, out so much reconfiguring as transforming them into architectural reliquaries.

This exhibition allows us to look into the private and passionate relationship of one man with his city. Others have come before him and more will follow; few, however, may ever be as compelling as he, for his work is fresh and unique. Seeing him in this continuum does not diminish him in the least but instead serves to honor both Ramsey himself and the tradition he is — simultaneously. Harlan Greene is the Head of Special Collections, Addlestone Library at the College of Charleston. A prize-winning author and archivist, he writes often on Lowcountry topics.