

The Paradox of Representation and Practice in the Auburn University Rural Studio

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This article evaluates the Auburn University Rural Studio, a design-build community-outreach program located in Hale County, Alabama. As humanitarian architecture, the program has received significant attention in the architectural and popular media. Little attention has been paid, however, to the representational strategies that shape Rural Studio participants' self-understanding, the public's appreciation of its practices, and ultimately, the program's ethical premise. Through an examination of a series of representations surrounding the program, this article concludes that institutional and economic systems that require conflict-free depictions of the poor and their environments limit the program's critical function.

When attempting to analyze the humanitarian impulses of the profession of architecture, one is faced with a crisis of representation. Still, the idea of architects who hope to “do good” in the world has gained momentum in the last decade, whether described as “public interest,” “community,” “humanitarian,” or “activist” design. In the United States, the Auburn University Rural Studio is one program that unquestionably defines discussions on contemporary architects' responsibility to the underprivileged. Its canonical status is demonstrated by its inclusion in almost all major publications on this subject in the last decade, including *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service through Architecture*; *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*; *Design Like You Give a Damn*; and MoMA's *Small Scale, Big Change*.¹ This status makes it an excellent case through which to consider the types of representation that organize humanitarian engagements in the field of architecture today. Contemporary representations are not the first attempts to capture the social and built fabric of Hale County for a national audience. After providing a brief background on the founding of the Rural Studio, the article will use previous representations as points of comparison, read in relation to social questions and vernacular building, to demonstrate that current representations of the Rural Studio eschew the self-criticality exhibited in previous efforts.

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The Rural Studio is a design-build community-outreach program founded by Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee and D.K. Ruth. In the spring semester of 1992 Ruth and Mockbee found themselves in a rented house near Auburn’s campus discussing the possibility of a venue for Mockbee’s interest in crossing professional and cultural boundaries.² A year later they received a start-up grant sponsored by the energy company Alabama Power and administered by the university’s outreach program. Mockbee later stated that his interest in social justice was an outgrowth of his admiration for civil rights advocates, including James Chaney, a young African-American man from Mockbee’s hometown of Meridian, Mississippi, who was killed by the Klu Klux Klan in 1964.³ In the 1980s Mockbee had begun playing with the idea of building for the poor in a proposed project for a Catholic charity organization near his home in Canton, Mississippi. While that project never found funding, it planted the seed of an idea.⁴

At the end of a turbulent decade personally and a rough period for his private architectural practice, Mockbee accepted a position at Auburn to improve his financial security. However, conflicts with other faculty members and distance from family soon made the idea of having a studio in a location mid-way between Auburn and his home in Canton appealing. The idea of a hands-on studio also fit well with Auburn’s identity. As a land-grant institution, a mission of service is embedded in its charter. Auburn’s architecture school already had students constructing buildings in the city of Auburn. This activity had been brought to it in the 1970s by the architect and professor Robert Faust. As a student at the University of Oklahoma, Faust had supervised and participated in construction projects for Bruce Goff. Soon after being hired by Auburn, he had acquired land in the city and begun several for-profit construction projects. Auburn’s administration allowed students to spend one term building for Faust as a substitute for a study-abroad option in the curriculum.⁵ Faust’s studios provided a precedent at Auburn for the type of student participation Mockbee envisioned. Though the Rural Studio began with only a dozen students, over the next ten years excitement around the effort swelled.

Today the program takes third- and fifth-year architecture students from the university into rural Alabama to design and construct projects for poor residents. Students, working in teams, engage with real-life clients while experimenting with construction techniques. The Rural Studio is based out of the town of Newbern, which lies three and a half hours to the west of Auburn’s main campus and two hours from the closest metropolitan area. The program serves only the population of Hale County, a 644-square-mile area in western Alabama’s Black Belt region. The Black Belt was historically a rich agricultural area, including many cotton plantations, but the decline of agricultural productivity in the area has left few jobs outside a struggling catfish-farming industry. According to the latest census, 15,388 people live in Hale County. Of these, 58 percent are African Americans, and

25.9 percent live below the poverty line (though in 1992 the number was much higher).⁶ The area’s sparse population means it lacks building inspectors and unions. This makes the prospect of student architects working on construction sites less challenging than in most urban areas.

Generally, design-build education, as a pedagogical practice, shifts architecture students’ focus from representation to making, experience and service. It does so through a combination of hands-on learning and community engagement. Hands-on education for architects has a history that long predates the Rural Studio. The first cited example is John Ruskin’s “Hinksey Diggers,” a group of Oxford students who built a road to a slum near their campus in 1874.⁷ In the United States, the earliest examples occurred in the 1930s, including a program at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in which students built small houses of plywood and other newly available standardized materials.⁸ The practice has gained and lost popularity according to shifts in professional agendas, social-welfare policy, views on volunteerism, and dominant educational philosophies, but scholars of the subject generally agree that since the early 1990s it has grown in popularity, especially as a method of teaching social or ethical agendas.⁹

Today the Rural Studio is the most highly visible and iconic example of community design-build education. This is partially due to the popularity of Mockbee himself. He was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2000, and many exhibitions, books, news articles, and documentaries have captured his colorful personality and unique wit. Mockbee’s death in late 2001 further cemented his legacy as a visionary. The large amount of publicity given the program (especially through the circulation of images of its projects, students and beneficiaries) has been a staple of the architectural press for the last two decades. The 2013–2014 academic year marked the program’s twentieth anniversary, an occasion for a redoubling of publicity and fundraising. The studio’s influence has continued to unfold not only through hundreds of program alumni, some of whom have continued this type of work, but also through countless young designers whose only contact with the work is through representations in the media.¹⁰

Though the Rural Studio is iconic within the American architecture profession, some disagree about its positive impact. Critics typically question whether it allows designers to profit from the poor without bringing real change to the social structures that cause impoverished conditions. For example, in 2009 Patricio del Real offered a trenchant critique of the studio’s practices in his article “‘Ye Shall Receive’: The Rural Studio and the Gift of Architecture.” As he wrote, “The Rural Studio does not go beyond a mere instrumental use of the belief in the transformative power of aesthetics, hiding disciplinary power behind good intentions.”¹¹ By forcing the inhabitants of Hale County to accept the value-laden gift of design, this line of thinking goes, the Rural Studio supplants local agency while reproducing existing power relations.

Though del Real's critique offers some insights, it provides only a partial analysis of the dynamics at work in Hale. Such a critique, based on outsider/insider designations, re-plays the assumption that Rural Studio clients are an intact and coherent community set apart from and antagonistic toward "experts" who build in their midst. More importantly, it leaves little room for further development and debate, merely rehearsing existing views of both professionals and the poor. This article argues that both the celebratory view commonly promoted in design publications and the hard-line critique by those such as del Real have thus far been very limited in their analytic power. The goal of this article, then, is to bring to light more productive questions about the relationship between architects, representation, and economies of practice in order to break the stalemate between practitioners eager for action and academics set on critique.

The article addresses this standoff by unpacking the representations and practices produced by and about Mockbee and the Rural Studio. It starts from the premise that Mockbee's own narrative and artistic representations were intended to reposition the architect in society. To understand Mockbee's views on this topic, the materials examined here include works of art he produced, his writing and lectures, and Rural Studio projects built under his direction. The article then takes the reader through existing depictions of Hale County by artists and others in order to demonstrate existing patterns of representation in the region. Finally, the article considers representation and practice in the Rural Studio since Mockbee's death, when it has continued under the leadership of Andrew Freear. The goal here is to understand the transformations that have been required for the Rural Studio to continue to function in an environment of changing institutional and economic conditions.

Considering these artifacts in light of literature on vernacular architecture, especially that produced at the same time as the Rural Studio's founding, offers a fresh perspective into the premises and evolution of the program. This literature helps demonstrate how the studio's founders used representations of poor people and their environments to articulate an ethical position. Better understanding this position reveals a paradox inherent to the Rural Studio, and ultimately to the practice of community design-build education. As with humanitarian architecture more generally, balancing social goals with the need to sustain ongoing sources of funding creates a constant tension. In particular, the Rural Studio's existence today relies on donations, grants, and university fees. This economy requires demonstrable "feel good" outputs, bled of conflict and complexity. While the agenda of such programs is to present alternative models of ethics and practice, the requirement to represent only the good limits the critical positions that engagements with the poor inevitably awaken.

REPRESENTATION AND THE PRACTICE OF A CORRUPT VERNACULAR

The question of representation in architecture — from the details of Beaux Arts renderings to the model-making of Rem Koolhaas's OMA — has its own literature and history.¹² While the whole question is fascinating, I am primarily concerned here with the relationship between representation and the physical construction of buildings by their designers. The representing/building question defines what is "alternative" about design-build education. Educators typically argue that students learn better (or at least differently) how to "be architects" when they are exposed to the challenges of physically constructing a building. The contrast between drawing a hypothetical building in a typical studio course and constructing a real one at a specific time and place is one of the purest critiques of the division of labor that many see as the profession's Achilles heal.¹³

My concern for the relationship between representation and building/builders gains insight from scholarship on vernacular architecture. In 1990 Henry Glassie defined the "true" vernacular as occurring when "divisions in architectural work — design, construction and use — are brought into unity in a single individual," or at least when a constant and intimate connection exists between user, builder and designer. Any form of representation beyond face-to-face exchange demonstrated for Glassie a step toward stratification and economic exploitation. As he stated plainly, "the existence of plans is an indicator of cultural weakening."¹⁴ And this weakening contributes to the loss of an "egalitarian political ethic."¹⁵ While other scholars have gone on to unsettle Glassie's narrative of loss and his idealized version of traditional culture, his understanding of vernacular ethics reflected the historic moment in which he wrote.

It is not coincidental that renewed interest in the vernacular and in community-based design-build pedagogy emerged side by side in the early 1990s. The emphasis on elaborate representational strategies in postmodern architecture and postmodern theory's separation from day-to-day life pushed scholars and architects alike to reinvest in what they considered an opposite condition. Community design-build teaching shares the premise of Glassie's vernacular: if students are responsible for designing, building, and directly interacting with users, the results will be empowerment, reinforcement of culture, and an egalitarian ethic. Notably, D.K. Ruth, the Rural Studio's less well-known founder, originally intended it to be a preservation studio focused on restoring historic structures in Hale County.¹⁶ While the studio evolved in other directions, appreciation for the vernacular is at the heart of the Rural Studio's ethical premise.¹⁷ Under Mockbee, students were encouraged to produce only schematic plans and to then adjust designs in the construction process.

The noblesse of the vernacular also became a platform for the emergence of debates around aesthetic politics. Lisa

R. Peattie demonstrated this concept in a 1992 article, “Aesthetic Politics: Shantytown or New Vernacular?”¹⁸ Peattie’s main interest was in how economically depressed areas are “seen” by academics and policymakers. She outlined how the perceptions of beauty in the landscapes of the poor — which she defined as simple, irregular and perishable — become positive symbols when appropriated by those living “non-traditional lives.”¹⁹ She pointed out that as an outsider to a squatter settlement, she could appreciate aesthetic qualities that were, for inhabitants, “violated by a sense of social inferiority.”²⁰ Peattie rightfully pointed out how her historical moment, the early 1990s, was characterized by growing respect for and protection of historic buildings in the wake of decades of urban renewal.²¹ Reflecting this moment, she proposed that the recognition of the aesthetics of “humane architecture” (as opposed to the “aesthetics of corporate power”²²) could lead to public recognition of the rights of the poor.

The Rural Studio’s founders similarly believed that such an aesthetic revolution could change the way students and the public saw Alabama’s rural poor. As Mockbee wrote:

If architecture is going to inspire community, or stimulate the status quo in making responsible environmental and social structural changes now and in the future, it will take what I call the “subversive leadership” of academicians and practitioners to remind the student of architecture that theory and practice are not only interwoven with one’s culture but with the responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency, and challenging the power of the status quo.²³

The main strategy in this provocation was aesthetic. Mockbee often argued that poor people deserved aesthetically interesting buildings as much as the rich. In contrast to other programs such as Habitat for Humanity, which provided standardized homes for the poor with little or no design innovation, Mockbee felt that respecting the poor meant offering “architecture for the soul.”²⁴ Scholars have argued that this reinvestment in aesthetics is largely responsible for the program’s popularity and influence.²⁵ Community design in the 1960s and 1970s intentionally downplayed architectural achievement in favor of community participation. In the process, many argued, architects eliminated their own position as relevant players in society.²⁶ Mockbee posited that aesthetics could be its own terrain of struggle, not opposed to community interests but in support of them. He thus reasserted the architect’s claim to political efficacy.

By 2001, when Ananya Roy wrote her influential piece “Traditions of the Modern: A Corrupt View,” the dichotomous opposition of tradition and modernity had pretty well been put to bed. In this work, Roy examined the construction of modernity through the trope of tradition and the selective celebration of some so-called traditions by those with the power to represent. To freeze the environments of the poor

and celebrate them as inherently anti-modern, Roy argued, is to deny the poor participation in the modern condition. Discarding simple notions of the authentic, she argued that the “articulation of the traditional and the modern acts as an axis of identity and power.” This axis can be expanded on and subverted by a “surplus” of meaning that does not conform to predetermined categories. This surplus corrupts both the modern and the traditional — but in a productive manner that opens new directions for analysis and practice.²⁷

My premise in this article is that the crisis of representation in the field of humanitarian architecture can be just such an opportunity for productive new directions. To date, critics and proponents alike have focused their attention on the question of whether or not architects are in fact “doing good,” as they claim. Instead, representation must be understood as its own practice and as part of a complex system that supports some actors and geographies and hides others. If one considers the multiple narratives about the Rural Studio simultaneously — including those that describe it as authentic, postmodern, developmental, local and national — even more productive questions emerge.

To summarize, the Rural Studio’s founders originally understood its social interventions through the view that, first, the unification of the design, construction and use leads to “egalitarian political ethic,” and, second, that reforms to aesthetic representations lead to recognition of underrepresented populations politically. These ideas corresponded with thinking on the subject of representation and construction in “traditional” communities in the early 1990s. However, the limitations of these positions revealed themselves over the following decade, not just to critics, but also to those in charge of organizing the studio. The qualities for which the studio was initially praised have thus been the same elements that have destabilized its legitimacy over time. Currently, the Rural Studio’s work is vulnerable to critique for both its representations of the poor and its implications with regard to the practical possibility of architecture to address inequality and prejudice.

To better understand these critiques and their relationship to humanitarian architecture, the remainder of this essay explores how the types of representation produced by and about Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio relate to the practice of implementing designs.

REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION: A PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY

Mockbee’s art, architecture and lectures are different parts of a strategy he hoped would affect not just conditions in Hale County, but also the values and practices of architects and other professionals in the United States. While best known for his architectural and educational contributions, Mockbee saw his extensive body of painting and sculpture as central to

his work and mission. He wrote, “For me, drawing and painting are the initial influences for the making of architecture. The sketch is always out front. It sees ahead and deeper.”²⁸

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Mockbee produced a body of work that meditated on the poverty, place and people of Hale County. These works allowed him to express what he called a “personal mythology,” a visual narrative that included fantastical characters based on his clients and on anthropomorphized aspects of the natural environment. The liberal use of color and a sketchy looseness, which may be compared to the work of Expressionists like Wassily Kandinsky, characterized his artistic style.²⁹ Mockbee’s use of nontraditional material and found objects also referenced artists like Robert Rauschenberg.³⁰ While literally incorporating elements from the local landscape including dried gourds, found wood, tires, beaver sticks, and red dirt, his paintings tried to capture both the aura of the landscape and the people who inhabited it.



FIGURE 1. *The Black Warrior.* Samuel Mockbee, 1996. Materials: oil on canvas mounted on plywood with wood, found wood, metal and corrugated metal, beaver sticks, bottles, gourds, garden clipper, string, and tape. Courtesy of Jackie Mockbee and family.

For example, in his painting *The Black Warrior*, named for the river that winds through Hale County, Mockbee depicted a goddess-like figure riding aback a giant turtle. The work employs such materials as rusted metal, sticks, and dried gourds (FIG. 1). By Mockbee’s account, the turtle represented one Rural Studio client, Shepherd Bryant, while the hand-woman-goddess represented Bryant’s granddaughter, Apple. The rope that lashes the figures together symbolized the ties that bind all beings through fate.³¹

In another painting, *Lizquina: Mother Goddess* (later renamed *Lucy’s Paramour*), a female deity rises diagonally across the canvas on wings of flame. Her head is comprised of painted tree bark and shredded tire (FIG. 2). Beaver sticks attached to the painting’s surface indicate dynamism and movement. A tangled rope suspended from thin wires circles the neck of a male figure uncomfortably dangling at the right edge of the composition.³² Mockbee described this painting

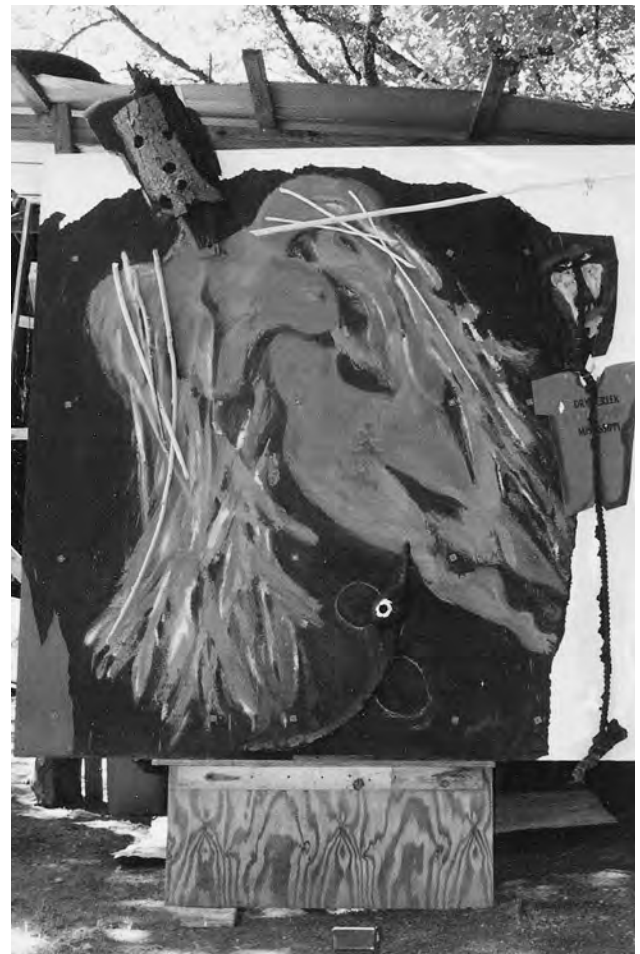


FIGURE 2. *Lizquina: The Mother Goddess (later renamed Lucy’s Paramour).* Samuel Mockbee, 1995. Installed in Canton, Mississippi. Materials: oil on wood with rubber tires, tree bark, found wood, metal lawn-mower chain, rope, beaver sticks, and gourds. Courtesy of Jackie Mockbee and family.

FIGURE 3. Cover of Le Corbusier's *Poésie sur Alger*. Written 1942, published 1950.



as part of a process of understanding one family with whom he worked at the Rural Studio. The winged figure represented the spirit of the family's matriarch, while the suspended male figure depicted the mostly absent father of her five children. Through art, Mockbee hoped to consider both mother and father in their historical and cultural contexts, rather than imposing a preconceived morality on their situation.³³

Architects have a troubled history of objectifying representations of the Other. In this regard, Mockbee's representation of poor African-American women, especially in *Lizquina*, demands comparison to Le Corbusier's highly problematic depiction of Muslim women in *Le Poésie sur Alger* (FIG. 3). Zeynep Celik famously dismantled Le Corbusier's sexism and his metaphorical possession and "saving" of Algiers and its inhabitants.³⁴ Yet, while Le Corbusier's designs for Algiers separated the colonized from the colonizing, Mockbee's work attempted to cross cultural boundaries through the evocation of a common human experience. As he wrote:

The paintings which began the work of the Rural Studio try to establish a discourse between those of us who have become mentally and morally stalled in modern obligations and these families who have no prospect of such obligations. The paintings are by no means an attempt to aestheticise poverty. It's about stepping across a social impasse into an honesty that refuses to gloss over inescapable facts. It's an honesty that permits differences to exist side by side with great tolerance and respect.³⁵

Mockbee saw the Other as apart and different. Yet his goal was not to preserve or eliminate this difference, but to understand and celebrate it. This desire to cross boundaries comes from an attitude toward history common among mod-

ern Southern artists. The layering of real and fictive histories colors many Southerners' understanding of the region's troubled past. "Sadly," Mockbee wrote, "for the most part, the South's past has more affection for fiction and false values than it does for facing the truth. Fortunately, in my lifetime, the suffering and brutality attached to those false values have been challenged by people with the courage to accept responsibility."³⁶ Influenced by William Faulkner, Mockbee believed the past always haunts the present, and he left the modernist teleology behind in search of a different kind of architectural humanism. The difference between Le Corbusier's and Mockbee's representations provides a fertile starting point for considering the unique qualities of humanitarian architecture today.

To understand Mockbee's position on representation and participation requires understanding his earlier attempts to represent regional and national values. Prior to his work at Auburn, Mockbee helped design two major exhibitions: the Mississippi Pavilion at the 1984 Louisiana World Expo in New Orleans, and the Design USA exhibit, which traveled to the Soviet Union as propaganda for the United States Information Agency in 1989.³⁷ Descriptions of Mockbee in books and exhibitions rarely emphasize this portion of his pre-Rural Studio experience, perhaps because it is difficult to understand its significance in relation to the "folksy" aesthetic of early Rural Studio projects.

The Mississippi Exhibition used space frames and two-dimensional facades to suggest a small town. The virtual environment was supplemented by real elements like live plants (Mockbee wanted kudzu, but it would not grow inside the venue) and handcrafts. The lively hybrid between traditional forms and modern (or perhaps postmodern) references made the pavilion one of the most popular in the Expo (FIG. 4). The Design USA exhibit used a more abstract space frame to organize circulation and display cutting-edge graphic design, products, and technologies (FIG. 5).

The group of graphic designers and architects behind these exhibits called themselves the Yoknapatawpha Exhibit Group after the fictitious county in which all of Faulkner's novels unfold. Mockbee's involvement in these meditations on regional and American values provides an interesting addition to literature on the place of exhibits in shaping identity and values.³⁸ These interactive environments allowed him to consider regional pride, national values, postmodern aesthetics, and the display of culture for public consumption. All of these elements, though differently configured, resurface in his Rural Studio work.

Mockbee translated these lessons on representation and participation to Hale County with the help of a Graham Foundation grant. In 1993 he applied for and was awarded a grant for a film, never released, entitled "The Nurturing of Culture in the Rural South: An Architectonic Documentary." He later wrote that he used the money to produce a set of large murals. The resulting work, *Children of Eutaw before Their Ancient Cabins*, is a mythical landscape that children participated in building and could occupy (FIG. 6). As Mockbee described it, this



FIGURE 4. *Mississippi Pavilion, New Orleans World Expo, 1984. Design by Mockbee Coker Howorth Architects, 3D International, and Communication Arts Company. Courtesy of Hap Owen of Communication Arts Company.*

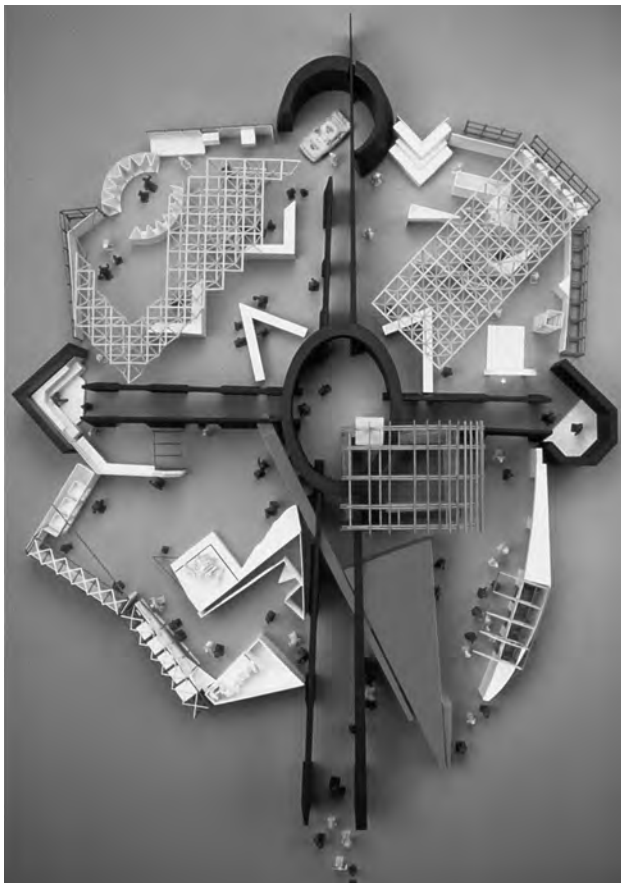


FIGURE 5. *Design USA Exhibit. Model of exhibit, 1989. Design by Samuel Mockbee, Bud Holloman, and Communication Arts Company with the United States Department of Information. Courtesy Hap Owen of Communication Arts Company.*



FIGURE 6. *Mockbee and his artwork The Children of Eutaw before Their Ancient Cabins, 1992. Photo by Timothy Hursley, 2001.*



FIGURE 7. *Mason's Bend Community Center/"Glass Chapel," Samuel Mockbee (studio director) and students of the Rural Studio, 2000. Mason's Bend, Hale County, Alabama. Built with recycled windshields and rammed earth. Photo by author, summer 2010.*

was “an attempt to extend the study of architecture into what I hoped would be a wider human landscape. I am interested in what might prompt and make possible a process of entering a taboo landscape, in my case, the economic poverty of the Deep South.”³⁹ Using art as a gateway, Mockbee's body of work continued to explore the people and environment of Hale County through participatory projects and representations focused on crossing boundaries. The idea that these actions “nurture culture” also continued to align with Glassie's reading of the relationship between participation and culture in traditional societies.

Beyond organizational principles — appreciation of the vernacular, understanding of clients, graphic impact, and participation — the aesthetic quality of Rural Studio work under Mockbee's direction had its own special character. Like any design studio, students have ultimate control over the design of each Rural Studio structure. The studio director and other instructors only guide them to use their own creative ideas to satisfy the needs of clients. Yet, despite the diversity of authors, trends in the overall “look” of projects were apparent. During the period when Mockbee was director, the projects reflected the aesthetic he had developed in his private practice. These early projects combined a Southern rural vernacular with more modern and sculptural forms. Due to the scarce resources available to the program at first, they often employed reused rather than standard building materials. For example, students built a community meeting space, called informally the “glass chapel,” of reused car windshields and compacted red earth (FIG. 7). In another project, students designed a home for an elderly woman using walls of stacked carpet tiles. The nature of the materials required a certain amount of experimentation, which students embraced as conceptually interesting features. While the architectural press perceived these projects as ingeniously creative,

the unusual aesthetic and an association with “trashiness” among some locals also speaks to the varied perception of aesthetic quality among differently positioned individuals. As Peattie has noted, what one group may see as fragile and culturally valuable, another may see as cheap and unmodern.

Third-year Rural Studio students themselves continue to live in small “pods” built of recycled materials like cardboard and license plates (FIG. 8). This rough and makeshift setting is a practical solution to the need for student housing, but it also establishes a practice meant to close the space between students and their poor clients. That students must occupy their own creations before trying out building techniques in clients' homes is a symbolic but still significant gesture. The modest residences require students to sleep under mosquito netting and deal with the damp walls and heat that result from previous students failed experiments.⁴⁰ Students thus learn first-hand the dangers of experimenting on the environments of the poor. Taking students outside their comfortable lives is one main purpose of the studio.

In a discussion at SCI-Arc in 1996, Mockbee said that his main goal was to help students shed their preconceptions about the people of Hale, about poverty, and about the role of the architect in society.⁴¹ According to Mockbee, this can only occur through immersion in an unfamiliar landscape, accompanied by a commitment to represent and interact with its unfamiliar inhabitants through art and architecture.⁴² Through his art and direction of the Rural Studio, he pushed students to consider the region and people viscerally, instead of distancing themselves from experience through abstract representations.

Mockbee communicated his position toward region and experience as a new type of authenticity. As he wrote, “We



FIGURE 8. *Student-built supershed and “pods.” Samuel Mockbee (studio director) and students of the Rural Studio, 1997–2001. Newbern, Hale County, Alabama. Built with recycled and salvaged materials. Photo by Timothy Hursley.*

don't try to be Southern, we just end up that way because we try to be authentic."⁴³ If one reads Mockbee's work from a postmodern perspective rather than as part of a modernist tradition, this pursuit of authenticity yields interesting insights. As postmodern art, Mockbee's paintings demonstrated a conflicted position with regard to their subjects. As postmodern architecture, the exhibitions synthesized tradition and technology. And as a postmodern version of humanitarian engagement, the Rural Studio under his direction undermined subject positions, but also reinforced the position of the interpreter as someone with the power to cross boundaries and unsettle norms.

Consistent with thinking in the early 1990s about the ethics of participation in construction in traditional societies, Mockbee emphasized the process of engagement over its products. He combined this with an idea of aesthetic politics that sought to represent in new and challenging ways a heretofore unrepresented aspect of reality. Better understanding architects' emphasis on process and their problem with properly representing practice can help clarify some of the paradoxes that continue to define the practice of humanitarian architecture today.

TRADITIONS OF REPRESENTATION IN HALE COUNTY

To clarify Mockbee's position, it is helpful to consider past representations of Hale County. Mockbee was not the first artist to use aesthetic experiences to create empathy for the poor of Hale County. One of the great genre-defying works of twentieth-century America, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans, took place within Hale County. *Fortune* magazine and the Farm Security Administration originally funded this work in the summer of 1936, with the goal of depicting rural poverty in America. The work brought Agee and Evans into the landscapes and homes of three white tenant families (FIG. 9). In its final book form, a text by Agee is accompanied by Evans's black-and-white photos of people, buildings and landscapes. The book has been vastly influential for its combination of photojournalism and experimental narrative techniques. One scholar called it a "'representative anecdote' for the problem of representing social and political consciousness in the age of mechanical reproduction."⁴⁴ The Great Depression provoked artists and scholars to rethink the meaning of poverty and human dignity within an unequal nation. Agee and Evans combined text and image to articulate their struggle to go beyond simple representation to "recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communicating, analysis and defense."⁴⁵

While Evans's photos are still and staid, Agee's portrayal of the tenant families is active and wandering. In tension with photos that appear only to capture the families in their everyday state, Agee's text places the two young men inside



FIGURE 9. *Schoolhouse, Alabama, N.D. (likely 1936)* Walker Evans, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF342-To1-008257-A.

the narrative.⁴⁶ Indeed, it focuses not on capturing the truth of the families' lives, but on how Agee and Evans experienced a different way of life, and in turn came to question their own privilege. Ultimately, a loss of critical distance, demonstrated by the frantic, overly descriptive quality of the narrative, undermines the authority of the work. In one scene, Agee admires the beauty of a pair of African-American youths walking peacefully down a dirt road. He runs after them to ask for a photograph, only to frighten them and shatter their calm — "because," he later wrote, "in that country no negro safely walks away from a white man, or even appears not to listen when he is talking."⁴⁷ After the incident, Agee felt shame and self-hatred, aware that his very presence, despite good intentions, was dangerous and disruptive given the histories of violence that haunted the region.

Scholars have suggested that, in its time, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was a critique of photojournalism. It contradicted the "realist" approach promoted by the federal government as part of the publicity campaign behind the New Deal.⁴⁸ Agee and Evans resisted the trend among many American artists who hoped to use technology and storytelling to document the "real" America. After eight weeks of research, the two found the project of representing the reality of these poor families far from simple. Interestingly, the book enjoyed renewed popularity in the 1960s when many young people, driven by social impulse, volunteered in Appalachia and other poor areas.⁴⁹ The book gives the reader a window onto Agee and Evans's experiences of rural poverty in all its complexity. No matter how hard they tried to record, analyze and defend, their efforts always fell short.

In the late 1960s another young man began his quest to represent Hale County. William Christenberry grew up in the northern part of Hale. Trained in fine arts and photogra-



FIGURE 10. *Facade of Warehouse, Newbern, Alabama, 1981.* © William Christenberry; courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. Since 2003 this building has been the headquarters of the Rural Studio in Newbern, Alabama. The building holds design studios and accommodates reviews during the early stages of the design process.

phy at the University of Alabama, he is now best known for his stunning photographs of decaying vernacular structures, including reshooting scenes originally shot by Evans in 1936 (FIG. 10).⁵⁰ In fact, his entire body of work since 1968 has concerned vernacular structures in Hale County. Christenberry's photographs usually feature individual buildings in bright light, saturated colors, and high contrast. He achieves this effect with a Kodak Brownie camera he has owned since childhood.⁵¹ The structures are always abandoned, often covered in kudzu, and show the effects of time, neglect, and harsh climate. His most famous sculptural works also focus on Hale County buildings. These are replications in exact detail, at a tiny scale, that mimic the patina and form of the original, set on a bed of red dirt. While the structures Christenberry photographs and sculpts seem frozen in time, his pilgrimages to rephotograph the same scenes again and again indicate a ritual aspect to his art.

Christenberry has defined his relationship to Hale as "possessing in the positive sense. It's all encompassing. It's emotional, spiritual, and in an actual, physical sense sums up what I am about."⁵² This connection between experience of place and production of self is especially interesting considering how Agee and Evans also used Hale to consider their identities. In his *Southern Monument* series, Christenberry constructs fantastical buildings that reference vernacular forms that evoke the histories of racial violence below the surface of the picturesque vernacular (FIG. 11). One *Southern Monument* replicates a rural shack made of corrugated metal, but with a pointed roof so exaggerated as to mimic the tall hats of Klan members. Such disturbing imagery disrupts

the viewer's attempt to see Hale as a static and peaceful place. "Although my work is largely celebratory," Christenberry said in an interview, "there is this dark side that permeates the South. How could I avoid the issues of the civil rights period and the terrible evil that manifests itself in the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)? . . . I think it is important to have an artist of my background attempt to come to grips with these issues."⁵³ On the surface, Christenberry's work could be read as romanticizing the past, but it is a romanticism that cannot settle with a troubled past.

The aesthetic similarities between the *Southern Monument* series and Mockbee's work are striking (COMPARE FIGS. 6 AND 11). They each feature overhanging roofs, dried gourds, rusted metal, sticks, red dirt, and bowling balls (which may be a reference to the folk art environments of Joe Minter). Whether or not Mockbee intentionally referenced Christenberry is unclear. Each may have drawn independently from the vernacular vocabulary of the region. On the other hand, Mockbee and Christenberry knew each other and were planning a collaboration when Mockbee passed away.⁵⁴ Through repetitive engagement and personal myth, both have defined themselves in relation to place and notions of time that aestheticize while challenging static readings.



FIGURE 11. *William Christenberry, Southern Monument XX, 1983–1994.* Courtesy of the artist and Hemphill Fine Arts.

Contemporary representations of Hale are less self-reflective. This quality results from the purpose of the images — which mostly document Rural Studio projects for publications and exhibitions. National visibility came to Mockbee and the Rural Studio through exhibitions at the Max Protetch Gallery, New York; the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati; the 2002 Whitney Biennial, New York; and in an exhibition in 2004 at the National Building Museum entitled “Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture.” Since Mockbee’s death, two full-length documentaries have celebrated his life and work, and profiles of him have appeared on ABC News and the Oprah Winfrey Show.⁵⁵ In addition, the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine have run stories about the program. More recently, MoMA included Rural Studio projects in its “Small Scale, Big Change” exhibition, while monographs on public-interest design have featured many of its projects.⁵⁶

Photographs by Timothy Hursley illustrate almost all published work on the Rural Studio. Hursley is an internationally known architectural photographer who follows the conventions of architectural photography by emphasizing the play of light and material. His compositions portray the families involved in the projects posed on the porches or in the living rooms of their new homes. In many of these images, subjects gaze straight into the camera unsmiling, perhaps a reference to Evans’s work. Yet these representations do not ask very challenging questions. As is typical with architectural photography, the structures are photographed soon after their completion, when their paint and colors are still fresh. The message is: These are decent houses for decent people. Everyone is happy with a job well done.

The display of these images in high-culture institutions like MoMA begs questions about an economy where glossy photos mounted in galleries allow distant audiences to consume images of the poor and their environments. Also interesting is that although Mockbee’s pre-Rural Studio work achieved some regional success and several national design awards, it never reached the level of exposure or enthusiasm that Rural Studio projects have received. The fact that Mockbee’s house designs offer a similar aesthetic to early Rural Studio projects makes this significant. Why are images of buildings in a regional and expressionist style especially celebrated when they are built for poor African-American families? Clearly, poor clients add a value associated with humanitarianism that houses for wealthy clients lack. The Rural Studio’s projects thus derive meaning not despite, but directly from their clients’ position at the margins of normal society. As a structural part of humanitarian architecture, images of projects must also reflect a confident and apolitical position. This demonstrates to the public, and especially to potential donors, that the program and its proponents deserve their attention.

REPRESENTATION AFTER MOCKBEE: THE FREEAR STUDIO

After Mockbee’s death in late 2001, the Rural Studio evolved in several new directions. David Hinson, the head of the School of Architecture at Auburn University, has explained these changes as twofold. First, the scale of projects shifted from single-family homes to larger programs. These have required more work in order to gain “buy-in” from the community, and they have also required more accountability. Second, the Studio has shifted to a more iterative process, in which instructors maintain focus on one issue over several years and classes of students.⁵⁷

The first shift resulted from institutional and cultural changes within the university. After Mockbee’s death, the University finally committed permanent funding to the Rural Studio — not just for instructors’ salaries, but also for materials and supplies.⁵⁸ This means the program can now build with more typical materials. In addition, fifth-year, or “thesis” students now make longer time commitments. Indeed, they may stay one to two years in Hale County after graduation to complete their projects. With more time, students have more control over the design and execution of projects; instead, they may spend up to a year on research, planning, community engagement, and drawing before beginning construction. Many articulate the experience as analogous to an unpaid architectural internship. They are rewarded with the likelihood of publication of their designs, association with a well-known design studio, and the personal satisfaction of having contributed to the lives of locals.

The second shift is the product of a change in the program’s structure. Around 2001 the studio began to accept “outreach” students. These are individuals who are not enrolled in any Auburn program but who pay tuition to join the studio for a year. Early on, the outreach students took on the idea of the 20K house. The students hoped to build homes for less than \$20,000, a figure based on the Rural Development loan for which one early Rural Studio client qualified. For the last twelve years, teams of students have constructed one prototype per year, each building on the lessons of past models (FIG. 12). Interestingly, the original loan program has not funded any of these houses, because pathways to that source of funding have been blocked by credit, land tenure, and infrastructural issues.⁵⁹

To mark its twentieth anniversary, the studio managed to raise more than \$250,000 to build eight homes in one year. However, the success of this campaign (and the resonance of the affordable-home project with the media and with students) rested on the dubious premise that these are prototypes that will allow the systematic dissemination of quality housing in the area. Even though there is no evidence that housing equality will result from these experiments, the project fits well within an academic schedule and is well scaled to the abilities of young designers.



FIGURE 12. 20K House IX. Built by “outreach” students at the Auburn University Rural Studio under the direction of Andrew Freear (studio director) and Danny Wicke (20K instructor), 2009–2010. Photo by author, summer 2010.

Another multiyear project, Rural Studio Farm, has considered local economic and environmental sustainability.⁶⁰ Under this umbrella, students began a greenhouse and community garden on their own property in Newbern and helped organize a farmers market in a nearby town (FIG. 13). According to Freear, the initiative is in part a reaction to some

of the assumptions that had been layered onto the Rural Studio — namely, that it was a sustainable practice, locally focused, and in tune with the land.⁶¹ In fact, despite being a farming area, Hale County is a food desert, where diabetes and other poverty-related health issues are prevalent. In addition, the dispersed nature of the population requires that studio members constantly drive long distances and bring in material from outside the area. Conscious of the contradiction between images and reality, Freear and the students are now attempting to bring a more environmentally conscious perspective to their work.

During the biggest television event of 2013 in Alabama, the annual Auburn-Alabama football game, Auburn University aired an advertisement featuring Freear and the most recent 20K house. While video footage of students building it and Freear hugging an African-American woman on a porch played in the background, Freear obediently recited the line that “This is affordable, innovative and beautiful housing for families in rural communities.”⁶²

Numerous Rural Studio insiders will speak of their frustration with how the work is portrayed in the media. They emphasize that even the label of social or humanitarian architecture is one that has been pushed upon them.⁶³ Program administrators, too, emphasize that the main purpose of the program is to educate architects, not to “fight poverty.” Yet, representations like the Auburn commercial imply something much different. Today the studio’s continued funding depends on this disconnect between program goals and public perceptions.



FIGURE 13. Rural Studio greenhouse (under construction), 2011–2013. Photo by author, fall 2014.

PARADOX AND POTENTIAL

Compared to when it was run by Mockbee, the Rural Studio today holds firmly to professional boundaries, concentrating on growing students' expertise and solidifying their position as designers of good buildings. This can be seen in Freear's insistence on preplanning and documentation in drawings prior to the start of construction.

Whether Mockbee's or Freear's strategy is more justified is less important than understanding that both are part of a system that encourages certain patterns of representation and, in turn, practice. Rather than unsettling norms of the profession, these patterns mirror many of those that organize architectural practice more generally. These include the deployment of knowingly simplified or romantic representations, use of unpaid labor, and a constant need to engage in marketing to attract future work and funding. The representation of humanitarian architecture — be it on an organization's website, in exhibitions, or in books or journals — must conform to the economy that sustains its practice. The success of representations directly correlates to the amount of funding available for a program and for the architects and students involved in it. In this image economy, one quickly

encounters the limits of architectural design practice as it meets humanitarian aid.

Mockbee and Freear have successfully produced and then maintained a model of practice that has excited a generation of young designers. The question is whether the studio fulfills its original objectives. The layering of representations of Hale County demonstrates that social engagement and aesthetics provide fertile ground for self-critique and reflection on positionality and history. Yet simply associating vernacular building processes with "egalitarian politics" will not yield political or social progress. Nor will aesthetic politics that shine light onto the underrepresented create lasting change. Instead, I suggest that what is needed is a closer examination of the institutions that support these programs, and specifically their relationships to local and national political economies. Getting away from a view that focuses on whether or not architects decide to "do good" means asking what types of governmental and institutional configurations enable design professionals to actualize their ethical visions. Though Mockbee intended the Rural Studio to be critical and disruptive, institutional and economic systems that require conflict-free depictions of the poor and their environments ultimately obscure this critical function.

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