

Understanding the Impact of Social Design Practices in Hale County, Alabama

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in the History of Decorative Arts and Design

MA Program in the History of Decorative Arts and Design
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution;
and Parsons The New School for Design
2012

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to the History of Decorative Arts and Design Program of Parsons the New School for Design for its support. I would particularly like to thank my thesis advisor, Ioanna Theocharopoulou, as well as my secondary reader, Cameron Tonkinwise.

For writing support, I would like to thank Caitlin Goodrich for her immense help. Additionally, I am grateful to numerous people in Greensboro for aiding me with field research. These include staff members at the organizations I visited—Andrew Freear, Pam Dorr, Elena Barthel, Marion McLeroy, Christi Talbert, and Matt Leavell—in addition to numerous Rural Studio students and additional HERO staff. I would also especially like to thank Greensboro community members Steve Gentry, Anne Bailey, and Ola Mae Hobson.

Special thanks to Candace Rimes, David Frazier, Ingunn Opsahl, Robin Mooty, Cassandra Kellogg, Zane Morgan, Garwen Chen, Ramell Ross, Willy Crichton and JaQuile Miller.

I am sincerely grateful for my boss at Worldstudio, Mark Randall, who continues to be an inspiration and a remarkable mentor.

Extra special thanks to my brother, Ben Whipple, who graciously hosted me in Birmingham on occasion and also for his incredible support. Thanks to mom for excellent remote moral support.

Introduction

In recent years, much attention in the design community has been given to projects addressing social change. Numerous university design programs around the United States are beginning to offer courses and even degrees in this specialization of design, non-profits dedicated to this practice are forming at unprecedented rates, and the topic is being covered in a wide variety of media, including books, blogs, and museum exhibitions. Social sustainability in design is certainly not a new idea, but it has been moving towards the forefront of the design world's collective consciousness more than ever before. There is no doubt that this shift in values and awareness is an important and much-needed evolution for the design community, but there is still a great deal of research to be done to investigate the actual impact of designers engaging in social design practice. Exploring this impact includes addressing how design fits into a holistic but complicated definition of sustainability, which addresses not only social systems but also ecological and economic systems.

Even though socially responsible design has captured the creative consciousness of the design world at the moment, it is certainly not a new concept or practice. The history of designers being consciously aware of using their skills to create positive change in communities or to bring about social equality has existed for as long as the professionalization of design. It is widely accepted that the field of design emerged along with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. After becoming aware of the oppressive working conditions and decreased quality of life that the Industrial

Revolution created amongst so many workers, William Morris, John Ruskin, and other prominent Arts and Crafts movement designers aimed to produce thoughtful products and structures that would be more just in their manufacturing by being less oppressive to workers.¹

Since the time of the Arts and Crafts movement, many prominent twentieth-century designers have made social justice a central theme of their work—conceiving of or implementing projects in hopes of increasing quality of life for disenfranchised groups of people. Some notable successful examples include Frank Lloyd Wright,² Walter Gropius, R. Buckminster Fuller, and Victor Papanek.³ Notable contemporaries are Diébédo Francis Kéré⁴ (architect), Emily Pilloton⁵ (product designer) and Candy Chang⁶ (graphic designer and urban planner).

¹ For selected writings on labor and social consciousness from these Arts and Crafts movement designers see: William Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, vii.

² See Wright’s critique of the Arts and Crafts movement in Frank Lloyd Wright, “The Art and Craft of the Machine,” in *Catalogue of the Fourteenth Annual Exhibition of the Chicago Architectural* (Club Chicago: RR Donnelley & Sons, 1901).

³ For selected socially conscious writings from these designers see: Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: Horizon, 1958); Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969); and Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World* (London: Paladin, 1974). Also see Gilbert Herbert, *The Dream of the Factory-Made House: Walter Gropius and Konrad Wachsmann* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1984).

⁴ For a project example see “Primary School” in Andres Lepik, *Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 33-42.

⁵ Emily Pilloton, *Design Revolution: 100 Products That Empower People* (New York, NY: Metropolis Books, 2009).

⁶ Candy Chang, Candy Chang Website, <http://www.candychang.com>.

The Modernism design movement of the 1930s and 40s may be considered the next social design movement to follow Arts and Crafts, as many of the modernist ideas aimed to explore universal forms and structures that would be equally accessible and beneficial to all sectors of society, thus creating more equality through design.⁷ To describe it in broad strokes, social change from the Modernist approach was to happen from the top-down through equality from universality of the built environment, which proved to be problematic in implementation because universality inherently denies diversity. As an advancement of the Modernist movement and also influenced by Post-modernist ideas of inclusion, the current movement of social change within the design industry is much more focused on grass-roots strategies and localized interventions than the Modernist-era's top-down solutions. As evidence of this, contemporary social design projects are becoming more and more bespoke in nature—they are tailored to a specific community, taking into account a specific site and its issues. Oftentimes designers will partner with community activists and their already existing grass-roots campaigns in order to gain a deeper understanding of engaging with a specific community.⁸

Although understanding of what design is has generally moved beyond strict universal notions of Modernism, the essential nature of the field is inherently top-down. Papanek eloquently defines design as the “conscious and

⁷ For a selected Modernist texts addressing equality through universality see Le Corbusier, Jean-Louis Cohen, and John Goodman, *Toward an Architecture* (Los Angeles, Calif: Getty Research Institute, 2007).

⁸ For a most recently published overview of the contemporary social design landscape that encompasses these sentiments see: Andrew Shea, *Designing for Social Change: Strategies for Community-Based Graphic Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012).

intuitive effort to impose meaningful order.”⁹ Since “top-downness” is embedded in the very nature of design as a profession, the current social design movement struggles to reconcile the lessons learned from the modernist movement about exclusion and disenfranchisement with finding relevance as a tool for grass-roots change. The tension between top-down design and bottom-up, grass-roots social change is evident because, up to this point, a disproportionate amount of importance has been placed on the “design solution” rather than understanding the real change that takes place after the design is implemented—the *impact* of the design. Part of this is due to the relatively young nature of the movement (little time has passed in order to observe significant social change), but I would argue that it is primarily due to the nature of design itself.

I frequently use the term “social design,” in this paper; in this context I am referring to the act of a designer consciously using his or her creative agency to attempt to make a positive change in society, most likely by increasing the quality of life for individuals or a community. Arguably, almost every kind of design can be considered social design because design acts as a physical manifestation of our society’s values; with little exception, save the most imaginative designs, the built environment that surrounds us reinforces these values. However, for the purpose of this paper I will refer to design that has an intended motive of affecting social justice.

To closely examine the impact of contemporary social design, I chose to examine a case study of Hale County, Alabama. This sparsely populated and incredibly underserved rural county is currently a hot-bed of social design

⁹ Papanek, 4.

practitioners, many of whom have relocated to the community intent on bringing positive change. Beginning with the Rural Studio (a design-build program at the Auburn University School of Architecture), which was founded in Hale County almost 20 years ago,¹⁰ a slew of design-centric organizations have made their homes in the community in recent years. As the oldest of these Hale County organizations, the Rural Studio has become a well established and reputable institution in the architecture community. The other organization I will address is Hale Empowerment & Revitalization Organization (HERO), which has several subsidiary organizations such as PieLab, Habitat for Humanity, Working Hale, HERO Bike and AmeriCorps VISTA.¹¹ Both of these organizations are practicing social design in Hale County—and are located about 10 miles from each other—but they have very different methods of implementing design solutions in the community.

Methodology

From the outset of this project, I aimed to analyze the impact of the social design organizations in Hale County—working in relatively the same space—on the community. Much has been written about the individual organizations and the projects they undertake, but very little has addressed any change that has happened in the community over the past 20 years as a result of the organizations' work. What does it mean for Hale County residents to have these

¹⁰ Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 1.

¹¹ Pam Dorr, HERO executive director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

social designers practicing there? How have the projects made any difference in their lives? What are the results of these designers' work—positive or negative, intended or unintended?

My primary method of research was to travel to Hale County to live in Greensboro for seven weeks to do ethnographic field observations—documenting with a notepad and camera—to learn as much as I could about the lives of the designers and the community members. I arranged formal interviews with staff located in Hale County from each of the organizations I write about here, and in some cases conducted follow-up in-person or phone interviews. From the Rural Studio I interviewed Andrew Freear, executive director, and Elena Barthel, professor. From HERO I interviewed: Pam Dorr, executive director; Ramell Ross, Working Hale program manager; Willy Crichton, Habitat for Humanity program director; and Katie Walch, volunteer coordinator, disaster case manager, and project manager. From the Alabama Innovation Engine I interviewed Matt Leavell, the director.

I spoke more informally and at great lengths with numerous Rural Studio students, as well as other HERO staff members and also local participants in the Teach for America program living in Greensboro. I was invited to attend two separate day-long critiques at the Rural Studio where the students presented their work to staff members and visiting critics at major milestones of their projects. I also was invited to see two guest lecturers at the Rural Studio: one by

John Peterson, founder and president of Public Architecture,¹² and one by Marlon Blackwell, founder and principal of Marlon Blackwell Architect.¹³

I visited and photographed a vast majority of the Rural Studio and HERO projects in-person. For locating the Rural Studio projects, I was guided by a map made available at the main office (see Appendix 1). I was guided to projects not located on the map by various Rural Studio students. For the HERO projects, Pam Dorr directed me to the locations during our interview. I was also visiting during the Rural Studio's Spring 2011 "neck-down" event (more about this on page 29), and participated in it by working construction on the Safe House Museum project (more about this project on page 34).

For insight into the community's perspective, I arranged interviews with several locals. I spoke with Steve Gentry, a councilman for the city of Greensboro; Anne Bailey, owner of a Greensboro hardware store and a bed-and-breakfast in Newbern; Mickey Harrow, owner of Harrow Real Estate;¹⁴ Ola Mae Hobson, recent recipient of a Habitat for Humanity home; Joanne Davis, recipient of a recent Rural Studio \$20K House; and Melvin Webster, participant in Working Hale Pecans! project at PieLab. I also spoke with several staff members from

¹² Public Architecture, "Staff," <http://www.publicarchitecture.org/people/Staff.htm> (accessed 6/13/12).

¹³ Marlon Blackwell Architect, <http://www.marlonblackwell.com/index.html> (accessed 6/13/12).

¹⁴ Harrow is one of the most prolific landowners in Greensboro and is landlord to many of the Rural Studio students. He was also the landowner of the apartment that I sublet during my stay.

Project Horseshoe Farms, a healthcare-based, non-design related local nonprofit¹⁵ that wished to have their comments be off the record.

I subscribed to and read the local weekly newspaper, the *Greensboro Watchman*,¹⁶ for 7 months prior to my field research stint, and have remained a subscriber through the process of compiling this research. I attended several events that were open to the community during my time in Hale County; these include: the dedication ceremony for Ola Mae Hobson's Habitat for Humanity house; the Hale County Farm-City Luncheon; a special event at PieLab that included a 5-course meal, a blues musician performance, and a photography exhibition; a fashion show held by the Daughter of Elks, an elderly African-American women's service organization; a church service at St. Paul's Episcopal Church; a musical recital at a Mennonite church near Newbern; and a community-wide Thanksgiving church service, which is one of two times per year that Greensboro has an integrated service with congregations from several African-American and white churches (as explained to me by Anne Bailey). I also spent a day observing a local middle school math classroom with a Teach for America teacher, JaQuile Miller.

Additionally, I conducted telephone interviews Ryan Clifford, associate director at the Maryland Institute College of Art's Center for Design Practice, and Charlie Cannon, associate professor of Industrial Design at the Rhode Island School of Design, because they each have been involved in bringing groups of

¹⁵ Project Horseshoe Farm, "Welcome to Project Horseshoe Farm," <http://www.projecthsf.org/index.php> (accessed 6/13/12).

¹⁶ *The Greensboro Watchman*: Vol.133, No. 36 (2/3/11) – Vol. 134, No. 52 (5/24/12).

students from their respective schools to Hale County for projects. I also had numerous discussions with Robin Mooty, a former PieLab staff member that helped to get the organization started.

The above-mentioned interviews and events account for a majority of the substance for my qualitative data. The quantitative data measurements for factors that influence quality of life—job creation, unemployment rate, income level, health statistics, housing statistics, etc.—for Hale County residents are important to note but are also highly problematic for addressing the impact of these organizations. Since the Rural Studio has been in existence for almost 20 years, for example, it is possible to see changes in these areas during this time. However, whether or not the changes can be directly attributed to the work of the Rural Studio is unclear. On the economic front, agriculture has historically been the driving force of fiscal strength, or lack thereof, for the community of Hale County and remains so today.¹⁷ In recent years, the industrialization of agriculture has dictated much of the area's economic pursuits, as farmers adjust their methods and crops in reaction to changes happening worldwide. Globalization and modernization of other production industries have also had great influence over changes to the community in recent years.¹⁸ WalMart has yet to infiltrate Hale County, but if it did, the economic boon it would bring would be greater and more rapid than anything the Rural Studio or HERO have done to

¹⁷ Hale County Heritage Book Committee (Hale County, Alabama.), *The Heritage of Hale County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage Pub. Consultants, 2001), 34, 70-72. Also verified by several locals.

¹⁸ Mickey Harrow, local land owner, in conversation with the author, 11/7/11.

this point. In *The Development Dictionary, A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, Vandana Shiva writes about the negative side of unsustainable economic development like that of WalMart coming to town:

New limits are now faced by the development process itself, and more seriously, survival itself is threatened, especially of the poor. New poverty is created, and this growing poverty itself becomes evidence of the developmental crisis. To see it involves, first, a recognition that the categories of productivity and growth, which have been taken to be positive, progressive and universal, are in reality politically, spatially and temporarily restricted in character. When viewed from the point of view of nature's productivity and growth, and the people's production of sustenance, they are actually found to be ecologically destructive and a source of class, cultural and gender inequality.¹⁹

However, the "WalMart" type of growth is not holistically sustainable and can be detrimental to the quality of life in a community in the long run, which is why I learned much more about the impact of these organizations through interviewing the various stakeholders and visiting project sites rather than analyzing statistical data about Hale County.

Overall Impressions

The surprising result of this research was that these design organizations have produced very little measurable impact on the community as a whole to date; my general observation was that the quality of life for a majority of the community has remained relatively the same since the organizations have been working in the area. Through their programs and projects, the organizations have touched individual lives in very profound ways, but the community still struggles as a disproportionate number of its residents are disenfranchised and hopelessly

¹⁹ Vandana Shiva, "Resources," in *The Development Dictionary: a Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 1992), 284.

stuck in the cycle of poverty. Hale County remains a prime example of the many social justice crises that exist in too many rural American cities today, despite being a hot-bed for social design practice. However, the absence of explicit measurable impact does not mean that these organizations will not enable bold positive changes in the future. Sustainable growth and social change take a long time to happen, and if these organizations are using ethical and thoughtful methods, then they are likely laying the groundwork for design to be a powerful tool to increase quality of life for the community. In fact, the more slow and thoughtful the growth is, the more sustainable and long-lasting it is likely to be. The success stories and best practices that have resulted thus far are clues to the potential larger-scale changes that may come in the future.

I do not claim to be able to represent the organizations' methods or results in their entirety—the information I have included here is what stood out to me as most notable and potentially informative for others working in this field. Despite any false stereotypes about of simplicity of rural living, the social landscape of this rural community is immensely complex and can only be completely understood by someone who is deeply entrenched with living it day-to-day. I also will briefly write about two other organizations, Project M and Alabama Innovation Engine, that have been influenced by the social design work in Hale County, and have implemented some projects there themselves.

Chapter 1: Place

In order to get a better sense of the social design practices in Hale County, it is important to understand more about the place itself. It is located in the Black Belt, which refers to the distinct topsoil of the region that stretches from Texas to Maryland. The Black Belt also happens to be one of the most impoverished areas of the United States, with 24.6 percent of people living below the poverty level.²⁰ It is a very sparsely populated rural community; the population of Hale County is currently 15,760, and the population of Greensboro, the county seat where most of the social design practices are headquartered, is 2,527.²¹ Hale County is an under-served area of the country with very complex social structures and a rich and tumultuous social and economic history. The poverty has historic roots—James Agee and Walker Evans wrote about it in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which includes some of the most famous photographs of the effects of the Great Depression in America with vivid imagery of tenant sharecroppers and their families.²²

The area was not always economically disadvantaged, as evidenced by the dilapidated but stately buildings that line Main Street in Greensboro (fig.1). Since its incorporation in 1823, the town has seen many ups and downs. It began as a promising settlement with robust business and culture and received a

²⁰ This poverty rate is 1.78 times the national average and 1.44 times the average in Alabama.

²¹ US Census Data

²² James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941).

debilitating blow when the Confederacy lost the Civil War. The author of *The Heritage of Hale County, AL* explains:

Life in the vigorous town was altered by the Civil War, with a large number of men enlisting to serve the Confederacy.... When the Union troops converged on this part of Alabama near the end of the war, Greensboro was by-passed; there was no industry vital to the Confederacy here. Though the economy was crippled, the town and its buildings were spared.²³

The town was able to recover, primarily with the aid of its robust cotton industry.²⁴

This stable growth continued through the mid-twentieth century; even though slavery was abolished after the Civil War, the cotton industry was fueled by the exploitation of African-American labor until both advances in mechanized agriculture and the civil rights movement allowed for change (fig. 2).²⁵

Sharecropping, the new “legal” form of slavery after the Civil War, was widely practiced in the region and allowed plantation owners to continue their enterprises. *The Heritage of Hale County, AL* explains,

... most southern landlords learned that necessity (hunger), the realities of the marketplace, the power of contracts enforced by laws and the courts, and the occasional violence and intimidation could restore much of the control they had previously enjoyed as slaveholders.²⁶

The residual implications of this abuse and injustice have clung to many rural southern communities to this day—both in the extremely disproportionate

²³ Hale County Heritage Book Committee (Hale County, Ala.), 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 34, 72.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

economic status of African-Americans and the racial tension that manifests in a power struggle for resources and leadership.

Since the cotton industry left the area in the mid-twentieth century, agriculture has remained the primary industry, but crops have changed depending on supply and demand. Soybeans were a popular crop after cotton, but only for about 10 or 15 years in the 1960s and 70s.²⁷ The crop arrived in Hale due to the availability of cheap land from failed cotton crops, but then the market dropped out because of significant increases in foreign soybean imports.²⁸ Also, soybeans were never processed in Hale—only grown there and then shipped elsewhere to be processed.²⁹ Catfish farms were introduced around the same time as soybeans and thrived; the fish remain the primary crop today (fig. 3) despite the fact that the local catfish market has passed its prime due to competition from Asian markets.³⁰

Looking to the social landscape, the most prevalent issue is the racial divide between whites and African-Americans.³¹ Two of the most segregated sectors of society in Hale County are also the two most powerful civic sectors that could most powerfully enable change: education and politics. Both schools and political parties are divided strictly by color. While none of the schools in the area perform particularly well compared to the rest of the country, the African-

²⁷ Hale County Heritage Book Committee (Hale County, Ala.), 72.

²⁸ Mickey Harrow, in conversation with the author, 11/7/11.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ As discussed with numerous locals.

American public schools are considered to perform far worse than the white private schools. Of course, the schools are not legally segregated, but white leadership in the community fights hard to maintain provisions that keep it that way.³² In the government, African-Americans are generally aligned with the Democratic Party, and whites are generally aligned with the Republicans.³³

There is a very strong but very sensitive interpersonal web that connects all the members of this small, rural town. On one level, the social landscape appears to be divided into distinct groups that have little interaction or mobility between one another: middle-to-upper class land-owning whites, African-Americans living at or below the poverty level, and the “visitors”—mostly young white people in town anywhere from a few weeks to two or three years to work with the HERO or to attend the Rural Studio.³⁴ But the interpersonal web still exists across group lines, and the seemingly segregated groups are connected in ways that are very complex and have developed over generations.

Beyond the issue of racial tension and segregation, rural communities across the country are dealing with many of the same issues found in cities, but these issues are often exacerbated because of the inherent lack of access to

³² Anne Bailey, local business owner, in conversation with the author, 11/7/11. Verified by local Teach for America teacher, JaQuile Miller.

³³ Mickey Harrow, in conversation with the author, 11/7/11.

³⁴ Of course there are exceptions to these generalizations, such as middle-class and business-owning African-Americans or white families living far below the poverty level, but these over-generalized categories work well enough to explain the largest social groups. There is also a colony of Mennonites that live not very far outside Greensboro, which is a bit more segregated than the other groups.

resources and services that come with rural living.³⁵ As a prime example, the current conditions of low-income rural housing are exceptionally grim, with the main issues being affordability and quality. According to a report by the Housing Assistance Council in 2006, “Housing in Rural America,” “Approximately 5.2 million, or just under one quarter of rural households, pay more than 30 percent of their monthly income for housing costs and are considered ‘cost-burdened.’”³⁶ Incomes remain low in rural areas and are generally not increasing as fast as the cost of housing—for both renters or owners. The HAC report also includes a statistic from the 2003 American Housing Survey, which found that “1.5 million or 6.6 percent of rural homes are considered substandard, which is a slightly higher rate than for metropolitan areas.”³⁷ According to these statistics, there are approximately 6.7 million people in the rural United States in need of relief from a housing crisis. The two organizations that are the main focus of this paper, the Rural Studio and HERO, both tackle housing as one of their main issues.

In comparison to the social and economic challenges, Hale County’s environmental challenges are much less severe, although they do exist. The rural nature of the place allows for a much more symbiotic relationship between the environment and the people. The opportunity to interface in a meaningful way with nature is much more prevalent and land is one of the most bountiful

³⁵ See the “Rural Social Work” section in National Association of Social Workers, *Social Work Speaks: National Association of Social Workers Policy Statements, 2003-2006* (Baltimore, MD: NASW Press, 2003), 298-303. For access issues in particular, see “Access Delivery Systems” on p. 299.

³⁶ Housing assistance Council, “Housing in Rural America,” (Washington D.C.: HAC, 2006), 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

commodities available. Living a more sustainable life less focused on consumption is easier because there is simply less access to consumable goods, which also necessitates a high level of self-sufficiency. The primary area in which Hale County struggles environmentally is with its food systems, as it should be considered a food desert due to the lack of access to a variety of fresh, locally grown food.³⁸ Even though the area's primary economic industry is agriculture, the crops are extremely homogenous, with catfish accounting for the vast majority of the area's output. There are only two grocery stores in the town, and they do not offer a robust selection of produce or other nutritious food.

It is evident that Hale County faces many social, economic and environmental challenges. As I tried to understand the impact of the social designers in this community, I hoped to see how their work might intersect with each of these areas, as they are closely tied with a contemporary understanding of sustainability in a holistic sense. As an excerpt from *Our Common Future*—a report published in 1987 by the UN's World Commission on Environmental Development—explains:

Failure to manage the environment and to sustain development threaten to overwhelm all countries. Environmental and development are not separate challenges; they are inexorably linked. Development cannot subsist upon a deteriorating environmental resource base; the environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out of account the costs of environmental destruction. These problems cannot be treated separately by fragmented institutions and policies. They are linked in a complex system of cause and effect.³⁹

³⁸ Elena Barthel, Rural Studio professor, in discussion with the author, 10/24/11.

³⁹ Michael Allaby, *Thinking Green: An Anthology of Essential Ecological Writing* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989), 250.

The social, economic and environmental challenges outlined in this chapter were in the back of my mind as I observed the work and methods of the organizations I write about here. The question of impact is not simply about what is meaningful, but more importantly about what is sustainable and how the organizations' work adds to the overall strength of the community and its ability to grow in a way that will last and is more healthy for all.

Chapter 2: The Rural Studio

About the Organization

The Rural Studio is a design-build program at Auburn University that addresses issues of the rural built environment while simultaneously educating its students on architecture, building construction, and design. The program was founded in 1993 under the leadership of architects Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee and D.K. Ruth.⁴⁰ Its aim is to provide opportunities for students in the College of Architecture, Design and Construction to gain real-world experience building structures that meet the needs of the community surrounding the Rural Studio, thereby creating “citizen architects.”⁴¹

The program is located in the town of Newbern—just a 10-minute drive south from Greensboro. The Rural Studio’s campus consists of a cluster of buildings that make up a majority of “downtown” Newbern. As the program currently exists, there are three kinds of students: third-year students, thesis students, and outreach students.⁴² The third-year students come to Newbern for one semester (they have the option of this or studying abroad in Europe). In the past, third-year students would work together to design and build a “charity house”—a single-family home donated at no cost to a member of the community. More recently, third-year students have embarked on a multi-phase, five-year project called the “Rural Studio Revolution” in which all of the projects look

⁴⁰ Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio*, 1.

⁴¹ See especially the film: *Citizen Architect: Samuel Mockbee and the Spirit of the Rural Studio*, DVD, directed by Sam Wainwright Douglas (Austin, TX: Big Beard Films, 2010).

⁴² The current Rural Studio program structure was described to the author by numerous staff members and students.

inward, aiming to make the Studio a more responsible member of the community by examining and redesigning the ways they consume and dispose of food and materials.⁴³ The students use themselves as a case study to ask the question “how can design create a sustainable future for rural communities?”⁴⁴ Some of the projects coming out of the Rural Studio Revolution are a farm and greenhouse (with a corresponding “diet”), a recycling center, and a visual campaign to convey ideas of conservation.⁴⁵

The thesis students at the Rural Studio are divided into groups of four and work together in these teams to complete a large-scale civic structure. The thesis program technically lasts one year, but most of the students stay for an additional year due to the scope of the projects.⁴⁶ These students, under Rural Studio staff supervision, are charged with creating every aspect of the civic structure: designing, building, sourcing materials, client relations, fundraising, budgeting, labor, etc.⁴⁷ These projects are primarily located in Hale County, but some have been built in the neighboring counties of Perry, Marengo, and Dallas (see map in Appendix 1). There is one project site, Lions Park in Greensboro, on which several thesis teams have worked because it has a multi-year, multi-phase

⁴³ Elena Barthel, Rural Studio professor, in discussion with the author, 10/24/11. Barthel teaches the third-year students.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

⁴⁷ As observed in studio critiques as well as in various discussions with Rural Studio staff and students.

master plan.⁴⁸ Other recent projects include: a fire station and town hall for Newbern; the Safe House, an African-American history museum in Greensboro; an animal shelter; a Boys & Girls Club for both Greensboro and Akron; two churches; and the HERO offices.

The Rural Studio has undergone an enormous transformation over the years as the success and failures of early projects have informed new initiatives and the program has become increasingly embedded in the community.⁴⁹ Under Sambo's direction, the projects tended to be more "folk" architecture; they had a whimsical aesthetic and were built with experimental and imperfect building techniques using non-traditional building materials, often re-purposing discarded and donated elements. Sambo's charming personality and bold philosophies were a large part of the Rural Studio experience; he poetically passed on many simple but powerful lessons to his students about how architecture can change the world. He was a truly charismatic character, inspiring a great deal of people that had the privilege to work with him.

When Sambo died unexpectedly of leukemia in 2001, Andrew Freear, a Rural Studio staff member at the time, took over as director of the program, a position he holds today.⁵⁰ As the Rural Studio has gained notoriety and visibility (and thus gained resources and support), the students have been more prolific

⁴⁸ As observed by the author in a studio critique of the then current Lions Park project team, in which they gave an overview of all the phases for visiting critics.

⁴⁹ For more detailed information about the evolution of the Rural Studio, see Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Proceed and Be Bold: Rural Studio After Samuel Mockbee* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

each semester, creating more projects on greater scales.⁵¹ The projects have advanced technically and become more structurally sophisticated, which has also led to a more simple and clean aesthetic.⁵² In the early years of the Rural Studio, Sambo's larger-than-life personality, wisdom, and artistry atoned for the "crafty" nature of the buildings, but once he was gone it became essential to ratchet up the construction quality.

The outreach program is open to anyone (non-Auburn students and professionals) and, since 2004, these students have worked on the \$20K House project—a new initiative under Freear that represents an innovative philosophical approach to addressing housing needs in the community.⁵³ In contrast to the one-off projects that the studio typically builds, the \$20K House project aims to design an easily replicated plan for construction that can be built for \$20,000, including materials and labor. Another constraint is that the house has to be built in three to four weeks by three to four people.⁵⁴ Freear was educated in the UK by renowned architects influenced by the era of massive reconstruction following World War II. He sees an opportunity for the Rural Studio to contribute to the reconstruction of the post-Civil War South, as many of its rural residents have

⁵¹ Ibid., 10.

⁵² Ibid., 12.

⁵³ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

⁵⁴ Andrew Freear, "Rural Studio and the \$20K House," MoMA Blog, posted October 7, 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/10/07/rural-studio-and-the-20k-house.

been trapped in the cycle of poverty since this time.⁵⁵ To date, 10 \$20K House designs have been drafted and built, and there is another currently in development. Each semester, the \$20K Houses attempt to improve upon the previous years' designs.⁵⁶

It is important to note that \$20,000 is not an arbitrary amount. As the catalog for the 2010 MoMA exhibition, *Small Scale, Big Change*—in which the most recently completed \$20K House was featured—explains:

The starting point for the project is the Rural Housing Service's Section 502 Direct Loan, a federal program that allows qualified residents—those without sufficient credit to qualify for a standard loan and with income only from public assistance or Social Security—to borrow money (up to \$124,000 in 2010) to buy a house. Of the 6,427 households in Hale County, 40 percent are eligible to apply for this loan... the majority of whom are elderly or disabled.⁵⁷

The Section 502 Direct Loan is available for disadvantaged people across the country—eligible incomes and subsequent loan amounts vary from county to county. Since rural Alabama is once of the most impoverished areas in the country, the \$20K House essentially represents a solution for the lowest common denominator. The government's Section 502 Direct Loan budget for this fiscal year is \$2.4 billion,⁵⁸ so there are a great number of people with access to funding for affordable housing who could potentially benefit from the \$20K House

⁵⁵ Krista Tippet, 2010, "Rural Studio and an Architecture of Decency," Krista Tippet on Being, Podcast audio program, St. Paul, MN: American Public Media, June 3
<http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2010/architecture-of-decency>.

⁵⁶ See also the blog for the \$20K House project: Rural Studio, "20K House,"
<http://20khouse.ruralstudioblogs.org/>.

⁵⁷ Lepik, 73.

⁵⁸ National Rural Housing Coalition, "502," <http://ruralhousingcoalition.org/502>.

project. The Rural Studio recently hired a new staff member, Marion McLeroy, a former Rural Studio student living in New York City, to take the three most recent iterations of the house plans and those of the house currently under development that focuses on accessibility, and turn them into a product that will be sold in the area, competing with the trailer home market.⁵⁹

However, the project's goal is to reach only western rural Alabama,⁶⁰ which raises issues of scalability and questions of how to address America's housing problem in a variety of regions. Additionally, the \$20K homes are designed specifically for the climate conditions of western Alabama. As evidence, the most recently completed \$20K home team used the *Builder's Guide to Mixed and Humid Climates* by Joseph W. Lstiburek as a reference for learning how to design for the area's specific climate.⁶¹ The team is attempted to create passive climate systems to cut down on energy costs, which may only work optimally in regions with a climate similar to that of western Alabama.

The \$20K House also answers to critics such as Patricio del Real, a PhD Candidate in architecture history and theory at Columbia University, who suggests that the Rural Studio is "casting the spell of architecture over the community, grounding its enchantment through ritual negotiations that reproduce

⁵⁹ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ ems0022, "Builder's Guide to Mixed and Humid Climates," \$20K House, posted 12/2012, <http://20khouse.ruralstudioblogs.org/>.

elite values aimed at transforming the lives of common people.”⁶² Del Real argues that by giving the homes and buildings for free, the Rural Studio is socially enslaving a population of impoverished people into a “gifting” relationship that has hidden associated costs.⁶³ While this critique may apply to other Rural Studio projects (the “charity” houses in particular), the \$20K House project side steps this critique because the ultimate goal is for the homeowners to pay for the house with a Section 502 Direct Loan, for which they will have to pay a mortgage. This changes the dynamic of the exchange from a giver/receiver social relationship to a more traditional market exchange, thereby empowering the consumer.

Methods

Above all, the Rural Studio aims to give its students an outstanding education in architecture, and the pedagogical methods it employs are at the forefront of its agenda.⁶⁴ I will not go into great detail here about the teaching methods, but the faculty dictates an intensely rigorous and thoughtful educational process that students uphold. The teams of students engage in an iterative design process while also acting as project managers, orchestrating every aspect of translating their designs into real structures. The faculty also guides the students in the use of foundational design tools, such as drawing, watercolor,

⁶² Patricio Del Real, “‘Ye Shall Receive:’ The Rural Studio and the Gift of Architecture,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 62, 4 (2009): 123.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Elena Barthel, Rural Studio professor, in discussion with the author, 10/24/11.

model making, and computer-aided design.⁶⁵ The students are exposed to a large dose of historical context as they tour spaces such as old plantations and expansive barns, orienting themselves to vernacular forms that have stood the test of time.⁶⁶

Even though the Rural Studio focuses much of its energy on the student's education, there is still a significant component of the program that interfaces with the community, and this is primarily what I will focus on in this paper. One of the most powerful methods employed by the Rural Studio to bring positive social change is for staff members to become members of the community themselves.⁶⁷ With this *embedded* approach, the Rural Studio hopes to establish an institutional presence over an open-ended period of time, as a neighbor, thus gaining deeper knowledge of the community, its strengths, and its needs. What may at first seem like a problem that needs fixing to an outsider is more likely a symptom of a deeply rooted and complex issue that cannot be revealed over a short period of time. Conversely, the embedded approach leads to a better understanding of the community's strengths, which can be leveraged by the designer through the built environment to increase the quality of life for community members.⁶⁸ With this deeper understanding, the Rural Studio can

⁶⁵ As observed in studio critiques.

⁶⁶ As observed in conversation with numerous Rural Studio students.

⁶⁷ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

⁶⁸ In their book, *Expanding Architecture: Design As Activism*, Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford include an entire chapter called "Asset-Based Approaches," highlighting projects that leverage a community's assets as a design solution. Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford, eds., "Asset-Based

more efficiently attempt to increase the quality of life for community citizens because it can address the true issues, rather than simply the symptoms these issues create.

Besides a deeper understanding of the community, the embedded approach builds a mutual trust between the institution and the community members. This trust is a key element for the Rural Studio to build strong and effective community partnerships. In a tight-knit community like Greensboro, interpersonal relationships are valuable resources that are often hard to come by, but through the combination of time and the demonstration of reliability, they have a chance of developing.⁶⁹

The embedded nature of the organization applies to the institution as a whole, but unfortunately does not apply to the individual students, who regularly cycle in and out of the community (per the nature of a university program). The staff does its best to pass on collective knowledge of the community's culture and is careful to help the students understand that their interactions with the community should be very thoughtful and not to be taken lightly.⁷⁰ Many of the thesis students end up living in Hale for two to three years—a great deal of time compared to the timeline of most contemporary social design projects. However, this time spent in the community hardly compares to the time local residents have called Hale County home as the majority have lived there their whole lives

Approaches" in *Expanding Architecture: Design As Activism* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2008), 122-145.

⁶⁹ See the chapter "Build Trust" in Shea, 26-27.

⁷⁰ As discussed with numerous Rural Studio students.

(and likely come from families from the area as well). This comparatively short timeline can potentially be an obstacle to the embedded approach, as *Social Work in Rural Communities* explains:

Smaller communities operate on a highly personalized basis. They rely upon primary institutions, such as the church, the family, and the peer group, for their decisions and values. People in rural communities often want to know and to work with others in the community—especially those who provide services—on a personal basis. Therefore, effective rural professionals in all disciplines find that they must first spend time learning the community and its people and allowing the community to come to know them before they can be effective in carrying out their responsibilities.⁷¹

However, the vast institutional wisdom of the Rural Studio helps speed up the process of the students becoming trusted participants in community life—it happens much more quickly and with greater ease than if an outsider with few ties to the community were to perform social work there. It is my impression that the Rural Studio staff is well aware of this advantage and continues to place a great deal of importance on the valuable trust that the organization has built within the community, which is essential to its effectiveness.

Another method employed by the Rural Studio related to its longevity in a singular community is that it retains an ever-growing body of knowledge about the effectiveness and maintenance needs of its projects. As Dean writes in *Proceed and Be Bold*, “[Freeear] uses the growing collection of studio buildings as teaching tools—‘an encyclopedia of projects,’ he calls them—and tries to draw lessons from nearly every act.”⁷² Instead of just handing over a project to a client

⁷¹Leon H. Ginsberg, *Social Work in Rural Communities* (Alexandria, Va: Council on Social Work Education, 2005), 7.

⁷² Dean and Hursley, *Proceed*, 10.

once the structure is built (as is too often the standard practice in design), Rural Studio staff members make themselves available for any maintenance issue that may arise. For the most part, they retain access to the past projects so they can observe which ones have thrived and which ones have fallen into disrepair.⁷³ A project in disrepair may result from the students' craftsmanship and building methods, from the lifestyle of the resident/owner, or a combination of the two. Understanding how the structures wear over time helps to inform material choices and construction techniques of future projects. There also is a social dynamic to this method as well, because the Rural Studio can grow to understand which clients are more likely to keep their homes or civic structures in good condition depending on their life situations.

At the beginning of each semester, there is an event called "neck-down," a blitz of manual labor for a week-long period.⁷⁴ The newest students are divided among the in-progress thesis projects to give the construction a boost, and some students are also sent to completed projects to perform maintenance work. This event not only exposes students to the inner workings of a past project, but also sets the tone for another method the Rural Studio uses: to design with an emphasis on requiring as little maintenance as possible on the part of the homeowner or client.⁷⁵ More often than not, the recipient of a structure has very little means—economic and physical—to perform maintenance duties.

"Designing for low maintenance" is a common practice for many built

⁷³ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

⁷⁴ The author was present for this event in the Spring semester of 2011.

⁷⁵ Elena Barthel, Rural Studio professor, in discussion with the author, 10/24/11.

environment projects addressing low income,⁷⁶ but the Rural Studio puts emphasis on this practice at every phase of development, and a student is exposed to it from week one at “neck down.”

Whenever possible, the Rural Studio uses itself as a guinea pig and tests new materials, construction methods, and systems.⁷⁷ The “pods” (fig. 4)—a cluster of quirky living spaces located in the back yard of the main campus building, Morisette, are an early example of this.⁷⁸ They were built by students over a period of time under the direction of Sambo, partially as an exploration of using unconventional building materials, such as cardboard and license plates. By living in these idiosyncratic spaces themselves, students are able to learn first-hand about the ramifications of stretching materials beyond their intended use.⁷⁹ Additionally, full-scale models of the thesis projects are often built as prototypes to test the form and function of the structures.⁸⁰ The new third-year “Rural Studio Revolution” project is perhaps the boldest example of self-experimentation and reflection.

Up to this point, the Rural Studio has been a design institution primarily focused on the discipline of architecture. With very little exception, all students and staff come from an architectural educational background. A method not

⁷⁶ For more information of general practices of architecture for affordable housing, see: Sam Davis, *The Architecture of Affordable Housing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

⁷⁷ Elena Barthel, Rural Studio professor, in discussion with the author, 10/24/11.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio*, 70 – 83.

⁸⁰ As observed in studio critiques.

employed by the Rural Studio—which I believe is a detriment to the Studio and also the community—is to become more interdisciplinary. Many of the projects could be greatly enhanced by including Auburn students from other majors such as building science, interior design, anthropology, etc. As Victor Margolin explains in an essay:

The power of design is in conception and planning, first generating an idea and then embodying that idea in a product, whether an object, system, or environment. To the degree that design has been historically recognized as an art of giving shape to commodities, insufficient attention has been paid to the types of knowledge that would enable designers to work with other professionals in engineering, the natural sciences, and the social sciences. As a result, most design students are exposed to a limited range of situations in which design might be an intervention. This type of socialization, which begins in school and continues in the design magazines and at professional conferences, reinforces a narrow image of product design.⁸¹

This passage is about product design, but is also relevant to the Rural Studio's relationship to the singular discipline of architecture. While it pushes the boundaries of the definition of design within this one category, by remaining an organization that focuses strictly on architecture, the Rural Studio is clinging to a hierarchical view of design that is potentially limiting.

The Rural Studio is an exceedingly insular organization; they are extremely particular about who they work with, which organizations they partner with, and which people they allow to visit and interface with the students and staff. The vast majority of the Rural Studio's non-local staff are people that have been through the program themselves—often they are students hired on to teach

⁸¹ Victor Margolin, "Design for a Sustainable World," *Design Issues*, 14 (2), (1998), 87.

after they finish their projects.⁸² The Rural Studio has a small network of architects and engineers that it utilizes as consultants on the students' projects. Even though the building codes in this area of rural Alabama are virtually non-existent, it maintains extremely high standards of safety engineering and brings in outside help for this.⁸³ However, the Rural Studio culture is very tight-knit and only a select group of people are privy to it.

There is not a great deal of exchange between the other organizations in Greensboro. There is actually a great deal of tension between the Rural Studio and HERO, primarily dealing with this issue of visibility and also associations with outside organizations. While at one time these two organizations used to work closely together,⁸⁴ Andrew Freear explained to me about why the two organizations do not work together: "They just got into bed with the wrong people,"⁸⁵ he said, referring to John Bielenberg and his Project M organization (more about this organization later in this paper). Freear strongly disagrees with Beilenberg's approach to social design practice—so much so that he believes it would be detrimental to the image and effectiveness of the Rural Studio to be linked to his organization. By supporting and facilitating the work of Project M in Greensboro, HERO inadvertently cut ties with the Rural Studio.

⁸² As observed by the author.

⁸³ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

⁸⁴ Dean and Hursley, *Proceed*, 57. Building out office space for HERO was a Rural Studio project in 2002. Also verified by staff of both organizations.

⁸⁵ Freear.

While the extremely exclusive nature of the Rural Studio program mostly serves the organization and the community well because it allows the Rural Studio to maintain complete control over the valuable trust that has been built within the community, the severance of ties with HERO could actually be a detriment to the local community. It no longer allows for the exchange of best practices between the two organizations, which have a great deal of overlap in their projects and location. I believe that the community suffers from the disconnect between the Rural Studio and HERO because valuable collaboration between the two organizations is no longer an option.

One important detail to note about the Rural Studio's operation is that its source of funding remains relatively stable and secure from year to year.⁸⁶ Its funding streams are somewhat typical of other non-profits; it receives money from private donors, from Auburn University (which receives money from the students' tuition), and from various grants and foundations.⁸⁷ The students are tasked with raising a portion of funding and in-kind donations for the projects themselves (they also provide "sweat-equity"), but funds to cover the administrative and operating costs of the program are secure for the most part.

There are countless other methods that the Rural Studio employs in order to effectively do its work of both educating its students and existing as an institutional member of its community; the methods listed here are those that struck me as particularly poignant. Additionally, the organization does not have

⁸⁶ Dean and Hursley, *Proceed*, 10. Auburn University committed \$400,000 per year to the studio shortly after Mockbee's death.

⁸⁷ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

an explicit list of methods and practices. The way in which it operates and interfaces with the community changes organically as it adjusts best practices based on successes and failures.

Project Highlights

Lions Park (fig. 5) - A public park on which several different teams of students have worked over the years. A multi-year, multi-phase master plan exists for the park. Some of the phases have included a skate park, baseball fields, concessions and bathrooms, and a playground. It is primarily utilized by the community during sports seasons and is mostly vacant during the off-seasons, but it represents a powerful partnership with formerly politically contentious groups of people.⁸⁸

Safe House Museum (fig. 6) - A recently completed African-American history museum located where Martin Luther King Jr. was protected for the night when he came through town and the Klu Klux Klan attempted to assassinate him. Even with its beautiful new space, the museum is struggling to activate its board and leverage its space for programming.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ As observed by the author in a studio critique of the then current Lions Park project team, in which they gave an overview of all the phases for visiting critics.

⁸⁹ In discussion with the Safe House Museum student project team.

The Hay Bale House (fig. 7) – One of the first charity houses completed under Mockbee that remains in pristine condition and is very well maintained.⁹⁰

Masons Bend Chapel (fig. 8) - Also completed under Mockbee, this modern chapel, located near the carpet tile house, is made of car windshield glass and today lies unused. As explained in *Proceed and Be Bold*:

Freear has made the programming of buildings more precise. He wants to avoid the fate that has befallen the ‘windshield chapel’ (2000) in Mason’s Bend. The unfulfilled hope was that it would become a community center, housing a health facility and making computers and Internet available to people in the area. Instead, the building has become an infrequently used chapel; no one owns it and no one takes care of it.⁹¹

Hale County Hospital (fig. 9) - A courtyard at the local hospital that is well maintained and used by staff and patients.⁹²

Impact

To date, students at the Rural Studio have completed approximately 120 “official” projects, which is concrete evidence of the organization’s impact on the community.⁹³ However, it does not capture the numerous “side project” structures that have been built over the years by Rural Studio students and staff. Some of these projects I encountered include:

⁹⁰ Documented in Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio*, 17-31. Current condition observed by the author.

⁹¹ Dean and Hursley, *Proceed*, 12.

⁹² As observed by the author.

⁹³ Lepik, 73.

- Interior renovations of an in-law suite at a Newbern resident Anne Bailey's home, which they now rent to visitors as a bed-and-breakfast.⁹⁴
- Numerous interior renovations to the rental properties that students lease during their stay.⁹⁵
- "Outside In" - a social program conducted by an outreach student in an attempt to create a neutral space for people of different races to come together in fellowship.⁹⁶
- Staff members re-drawing plans of the Greensboro Town Hall pro-bono.⁹⁷

These side projects, in addition to the numerous "official" projects, are evidence that the Rural Studio brings Hale County access to architects—a resource that is not typically readily available to rural or economically depressed areas.

The Rural Studio also has created a small number of jobs for local residents. Currently, there are four staff members from Hale County and who were not previously associated with the Rural Studio or Auburn: two administrative staff, a chef and a maintenance man.⁹⁸ A full-time job with a decent salary can be extremely difficult to come by in Hale County. Additionally, the organization employs a few local contractors and construction workers on a

⁹⁴ As observed by the author.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Anne Bailey, in conversation with the author, 11/7/11. Also see deck of cards: Emily K Chaffe, "Outside In: A Community Space for Hale County" (Birmingham, AL: ADShop, 2004). This set of 50 cards that accompanied the program has stunning photographs of community members on the front and written text of their thoughts on community on the back.

⁹⁷ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11.

⁹⁸ As observed by the author.

project-by-project basis. The Rural Studio, students and staff, collectively, could be considered one of the main clients of many businesses in Greensboro and Newbern. The area real estate agent, gas stations, hardware stores, and restaurants also receive a large portion of revenue from the Rural Studio and its visitors. G.B. Woods, the former owner of the General Store in Newbern located directly next to the Rural Studio's studio space, recently retired modestly in 2011, primarily supported by selling the students Coca-Cola and snacks during work breaks.⁹⁹

One of the most overlooked but powerful unintended consequences of the Rural Studio is the attraction to Hale County it created for many within the social design community. If the Rural Studio had not established itself in this remote and forgotten community, the other organizations currently operating there (HERO and its subsidiaries, Project M, etc.) would likely not be there either. HERO has existed almost as long as the Rural Studio, but Pam Dorr became HERO's director after she completed the outreach program at the Rural Studio during the 2003-2004 academic year, and has leveraged it as the design-centric organization with many subsidiary organizations that it is today.¹⁰⁰ The critical mass of young college-aged designers makes Greensboro a more attractive place for others looking to do short-term social design projects. HERO has cultivated many resources for outsiders (in the design community and otherwise) to support their work implementing projects in Hale County, including setting up the projects themselves and providing lodging in a bunkhouse built for volunteers

⁹⁹ In discussion with Rural Studio students.

¹⁰⁰ Pam Dorr, HERO Executive Director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

coming through town.¹⁰¹ Effectively, the Rural Studio opened the community to Pam Dorr who then opened the community to countless outside organizations.

By far the greatest intended impact the Rural Studio has achieved in the area of design for positive social change is the exposure of its students to the combination of a remarkable design-build education and a way of life in an under-served community.¹⁰² The program has birthed a legion of architects that have seen firsthand how design can serve the greater good. To complete the Rural Studio program is an extremely empowering experience that requires hard work (mental and physical) and almost always results in an outstanding portfolio piece. I spoke with David Frazier, a current Rural Studio thesis student who is working on building a town hall for Newbern. “My Rural Studio experience has been rich,” said Frazier. “I have learned a great deal about design and construction through the physical act of building. I am privileged to have been immersed in the community and know that my project has improved the quality of life there.”¹⁰³

Ingunn Opsahl is a Rural Studio outreach student currently working on the \$20K house project. She explained the value of her program writing, “Being at the Rural Studio has been quite amazing. I've never learned so much about architecture, the community it touches and myself in one year. Because we're

¹⁰¹ Pam Dorr, HERO Executive Director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹⁰² Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio*, 3.

¹⁰³ David Frazier, Rural Studio student, in an email to the author, 6/9/12.

building our design you start to think about how you could make your design easier to build, that's something I've never thought about before.”¹⁰⁴

The students and staff are the heart of the program, and it is clear that they gain great benefits from their experience. Moving past the students and staff and through other spheres of influence, understanding the impact of the Rural Studio becomes much more murky and complicated. The next-closest constituency would be the clients themselves—the recipients of a new home or a facility from the Rural Studio. In the most direct way, they now have the basic human need of shelter met, which is necessary for achieving the most fundamental level of quality of life.

Adequate shelter (or even far above adequate, in the case of Rural Studio projects) is an obvious and straight-forward benefit to the client. However, I am interested in looking beyond this fundamental benefit to examine how else a client's life may change. If you live in extreme poverty and your housing conditions are barely tolerable, what does it mean for you to receive a brand-new, dignified home? It can mean many different things to many different people depending on their resources, agency, personality, etc. In some cases, it might mean a “new lease on life” and a pivotal boost necessary for continuing to live a decent life. For others, it may only be a temporary solution that addresses just one symptom of a more deeply engrained dysfunction—either individual or systematic.

One recent \$20K House recipient I spoke with, Joanne Davis, was more than thrilled about her home.¹⁰⁵ She had nothing but positive feedback about her

¹⁰⁴ Ingunn Opsahl, Rural Studio student, in an email to the author, 6/10/12.

experience working with the Rural Studio and living in the house thus far. When I asked her what she liked best about the house (fig. 10), she quickly replied, “everything.” When I asked her how her life was different after receiving the house, she said the main difference was that she now has privacy and her own space. Prior to her \$20K home, she shared a small trailer home with her sister and her family where she didn’t have her own room.¹⁰⁶ Having her own house has clearly made a significant positive impact in Davis’s quality of life.

Presumably, all of the Rural Studio homeowners are equally delighted to receive such a powerful gift. However, not all of them continually reap the benefits of it. The most notable demonstration of this is the group of projects located in the North Ward neighborhood. There are four \$20K Houses and a \$32K house, none of which the original owners live in today (fig. 11).¹⁰⁷ Currently, HERO owns all of the houses and leases them to out-of-town staff and volunteers.¹⁰⁸ Some other Rural Studio-built homes have remained in the possession of the original homeowners, but the structures have fallen into disrepair—it is arguable whether or not the homeowners “let” this happen or if it happens due to circumstances beyond their control. It is important to note that this is not the normal outcome, but it does occasionally occur.

¹⁰⁵ Joanne Davis, in discussion with the author, 11/22/11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ As observed by the author and in discussion with current residents of the houses, who are HERO staff members.

¹⁰⁸ Pam Dorr, HERO Executive Director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

Also, it is important to make a distinction between the longevity and impact of the residential projects versus the impact of the civic projects. With the civic projects, clients are most often not a person or a family, but a group of people or an organization. The audience of the structure may extend far beyond the clients (such as Rural Heritage Center visitors, citizens of Newbern for the Newbern Fire Department, or the entire city of Greensboro for Lions Park). In some cases, the clients will leverage their new infrastructure to launch their organizations into a new level of usefulness or community engagement, such as with Lions Park (see p. 43). In other cases, a structure is built but no one is willing to take programmatic ownership of it, so the structure goes underutilized or even unused (as was the case with the windshield chapel at Mason's Bend).

One misconception I had as I began my field research is that most people in the small town of Greensboro would be well aware of the Rural Studio and the work it is doing in the community, and have some kind of opinion about that work. I assumed that appreciation (or lack there of) by members of the community would be evidence of the positive impact of the organization, and thought I could gain a better understanding of the impact through conversations with random locals. Part of this assumption was based upon the false stereotype that, in a small community, everyone would know everyone else's business. I was surprised to discover that in my casual day-to-day encounters, many may or may not have heard about the Rural Studio and most often did not have any kind of opinion about what the organization was doing, and therefore saw no value or impact in the program's presence in the community. It seems as if the only

people able to address the organization's value were those that had been directly affected by the Rural Studio (e.g. a Rural Studio client, a business patronized by the Rural Studio, or a one-time Rural Studio employee). I realized that I needed to be more targeted about whom I discussed the impact with if I wanted to gain insight from community members. Participants in the other design and non-profit groups of non-locals were usually aware of the Rural Studio's practice and could discuss its impact.

Despite the fact that the average person in Greensboro is not familiar with what the Rural Studio does or how it might affect his or her life, Rural Studio staff member Elena Barthel believes that the imaginations of some town leaders have expanded when it comes to the ways in which to approach community issues because they have witnessed the Rural Studio's work.¹⁰⁹ One notable example of this is Steve Gentry, a council member I spoke with at Barthel's suggestion.¹¹⁰ In Greensboro, the bipartisan council works directly with the mayor to oversee the city's operations and budget. Gentry is a major champion of the Rural Studio and the work it does; he has worked with the organization directly on the Lions Park project as the land is partially owned by the city.¹¹¹ After seeing first-hand the resources of the Rural Studio and being impressed by the work it did, Gentry requested that the Rural Studio partner with him on another project he believed

¹⁰⁹ Elena Barthel, Rural Studio professor, in discussion with the author, 10/24/11.

¹¹⁰ Steve Gentry, Greensboro Councilman, in discussion with the author, 11/20/11.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

would be positive for the community—a farmer’s market.¹¹² In the summer of 2011, stalls were built by Rural Studio staff members in their free time, and HERO was enlisted to assist with marketing, presumably because it has greater visibility within the community (fig. 12).¹¹³

Gentry said that he sees value in the Rural Studio through both the resources it brings to town that would not otherwise be there and through its willingness and capacity to solve problems that are brought before the organization by the community. With the Lions Park project, he cited how the Rural Studio was able to offer legal assistance through Auburn to help with parsing out the liability ramifications of the property. He was also impressed by Rural Studio staff members’ professionalism and selflessness. He even said in our conversation that the Rural Studio can “teach us to be leaders.”¹¹⁴

The Lions Park project is a powerful example of how the Rural Studio impacted the imaginations of city leadership. It represents a racially neutral space since it is owned by three different groups—the Lions Club (a traditionally white male service organization), the city government (currently predominantly African-American leadership), and the Hale County Parks Committee.¹¹⁵ It is significant for leadership from both sides of this racially divided community to work closely together on a project. Because of the work that the Rural Studio has

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Elena Barthel, Rural Studio professor, in discussion with the author, 10/24/11. Verified by Steve Gentry.

¹¹⁴ Steve Gentry, Greensboro Councilman, in discussion with the author, 11/20/11.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Also in discussion with Andrew Freear.

done on the park—which is part of a multi-year, multi-phase master plan—the stakeholders have decided to form a Parks and Recreation Board that will be given its own budget to go towards future park development and maintenance.¹¹⁶ The Board hopes to go on to develop the city’s four other parks.¹¹⁷ Not only is this an indication of leadership valuing public space and its capacity to strengthen a town, but it is a constructive way for the divided groups to come together and solve a problem that equally benefits all.

Gentry is not the only community leader who has worked directly with the Rural Studio. As Dean and Hursley explain in *Proceed*:

Fifth-year students once chose their own thesis projects, but now community leaders come to the studio seeking design and construction help. The Perry Lakes Park project was initiated by Probate Judge Donald Cook and Mayor Edward Daniel of Marion, Perry County’s seat. When the directors of the Thomaston Rural Heritage Center received a grant to renovate their building and create a handful of jobs, they sought the studio’s help.¹¹⁸

The impact of the Rural Studio is clear for those directly affected by the program, but what is much more complex is the impact—absolute or perceived—on the rest of the community. As I mentioned before, few people outside of the direct sphere of influence seem to understand what the Rural Studio is doing, much less see any value in it. However, by working more and more with community leaders, the Rural Studio can make an indirect impact in these people’s lives through the expanded imagination of those leaders as they continue to make decisions for the city.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. Also in discussion with Andrew Freeear.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Dean and Hursley, *Proceed*, 11.

Chapter 3: HERO

About the Organization

HERO's website states that the organization's mission is to: "work as a catalyst for community development in areas of the Alabama Black Belt to end rural poverty. As a non-profit housing resource center, HERO provides community resources and housing education."¹¹⁹ HERO assists the community in three main areas: housing resources, job training and economic development, and community resources.¹²⁰ Although its mission does not include any explicit mention of design, it uses design as one of its main tools to carry out its work. Executive Director Pam Dorr has a professional background primarily as a designer and design project manager.¹²¹ A large percentage of the staff HERO hires and the volunteers with whom it works come from design backgrounds as well.¹²² Additionally, several of the outside organizations with which HERO works have design-centric missions. HERO is the umbrella organization for local chapters of Habitat for Humanity,¹²³ Working Hale,¹²⁴ HERO Bike,¹²⁵ and

¹¹⁹ Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization, "Mission," <http://herohousing.org/about.php> (accessed 2/15/12).

¹²⁰ Pam Dorr, HERO Executive Director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² As observed by the author.

¹²³ There is a class at Auburn's School of Architecture called "Design Habitat" that has provided options for plans. Ola Mae, a recent client, was able to pick her house design from three designs that came from the class. (As discussed with Willy Crichton, Habitat for Humanity program director at HERO.)

¹²⁴ A HERO program whose predecessor was YouthBuild, a nation-wide program. See YouthBuild USA, <https://youthbuild.org/>.

AmeriCorps VISTA.¹²⁶ Additionally, HERO has acted as the local partner organization for the social design groups Project M and the Hale County Rural Poverty Project from the Aspen Design Summit (more about the Aspen Design Summit later, in the “Alabama Innovation Engine” section).

HERO was founded by local residents in 1994, around the same time that the Rural Studio came to Hale County.¹²⁷ It was a locally run organization until Pam Dorr became its executive director in 2005.¹²⁸ A 2009 article in *Metropolitan Home* about Dorr’s first years in Greensboro cites her as the mastermind behind the Rural Studio’s \$20K House project. The author writes:

But Dorr's insight—someone who can afford only a \$20,000 mortgage should be able to buy a \$20,000 house—has changed the culture of Rural Studio. Freear is determined to keep building prototypes until they find one a bank and a regular contractor can embrace. "For me, it's a fantastic counterpoint to the other things we do out here," he explains. So maybe Mockbee and Dorr, who never met, are two halves of a single equation. After all, the 20K house... arrived in west Alabama because Mockbee wanted more people stirring more pots. And Dorr, as it turns out, is a world-class pot-stirrer.¹²⁹

Since Dorr became executive director, HERO has undergone many programmatic changes and has greatly expanded its services.

In order to address the housing crisis in Hale County, HERO has a robust program of housing resources available to the community. Along with

¹²⁵ Formerly BikeLab, affiliated with Project M, the global Bamboo Bike Studio and the local Alabamboo Bike program.

¹²⁶ Pam Dorr, HERO Executive Director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Anne Bailey, local business owner, in conversation with the author, 11/7/11.

¹²⁹ Karrie Jacobs. "How We Live: The 20K House." *Metropolitan Home*. 41 (2), (March 2009): 38.

implementing the Habitat for Humanity program, it independently builds affordable, environmentally-conscious homes for low-income families that are sometimes ineligible for the Habitat program.¹³⁰ HERO is one of the largest property owners in town, as it buys many foreclosed homes and other properties through associations with state government programs.¹³¹ It facilitates rental opportunities for families, either with its own properties or associations with local landlords. It provides home repair assistance, through both financial and labor means; oftentimes the labor is provided by volunteers visiting Greensboro to partner with HERO.¹³² It provides homebuyer education and facilitates the process of purchasing homes primarily by building a potential homeowner's credit.¹³³ HERO also has worked with FEMA to address disaster relief, most recently with the tornadoes that hit the area in April of 2011.¹³⁴

Facilitating the building of individual's credit has been a recent focus of HERO in the economic development category—not just for potential homeowners but for everyone.¹³⁵ Building credit is a major hindrance for low-income people in rural areas looking to increase their economic agency. Large banking institutions' reach often does not touch extremely rural communities, and the small local banks are problematic because of prevalent ingrained social

¹³⁰ Pam Dorr, HERO Executive Director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

biases.¹³⁶ HERO educates community members about building their credit and even co-signs for credit cards to start the process.¹³⁷ It also provides job training and employment opportunities for young single mothers enrolled in the government food-stamp program.¹³⁸

HERO's "community resources" category of assistance is essentially a catchall description for other services it provides that benefit the community.¹³⁹ One of its most popular and widely utilized programs is utility assistance. HERO acts as a middleman for dispersing government funding to help locals pay their utility bills.¹⁴⁰ HERO also operates as an employer for several government-funded jobs; the government provides the salary and HERO utilizes their labor. This type of staff includes senior citizens, food stamp program participants, and minimum-security prisoners. The jobs these individuals do include working at the local thrift store, PieLab, construction work and various other manual labor jobs.¹⁴¹ HERO also runs a food pantry.¹⁴² Additionally, HERO acts as a community partner for outside volunteer groups that wish to visit and do

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ In discussion with Katie Walch, HERO staff member.

¹⁴⁰ Dorr.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

service—this includes design groups,¹⁴³ church groups, and even a martial arts group called “The Ultimate Black Belt Test” that comes to town each year.¹⁴⁴ To accommodate these volunteers, HERO has renovated a building near its office to serve as a bunkhouse for up to twelve people (fig. 13).¹⁴⁵

PieLab is a business and a resource that encompasses many of these programs in a single space (fig. 14). It was founded in Greensboro by a Project M group in 2009 as a pop-up pie shop and design studio and has since been taken over by HERO and evolved into a relatively upscale restaurant with a full menu and community space.¹⁴⁶ The restaurant employs a combination of locals and government program workers.¹⁴⁷ It is the hub for the Pecans! program, a social entrepreneurial endeavor that employs Working Hale participants to make baked goods out of a prevalent local resource—pecans (fig. 15).¹⁴⁸ PieLab aims to be a racially neutral space where a cross-section of people convivially come

¹⁴³ For an example of one of these projects, see: MICA Social Studio, Center for Design Practice, “HERO,” <http://www.micasocialdesign.com/hero/> (accessed on 6/13/12). Also, as in discussion with Ryan Clifford, associate director at the Maryland Institute College of Art’s Center for Design Practice, and Charlie Cannon, associate professor of Industrial Design at the Rhode Island School of Design—each of whom have brought groups of students to do projects in Hale with HERO and the Alabama Innovation Engine.

¹⁴⁴ Pam Dorr, HERO Executive Director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ The idea for PieLab actually originated at a Project M session in Belfast, Maine and was later implemented in Greensboro (D.K. Holland, “Helter Skelter: Can Thinking Wrong Be Absolutely Right?,” *Communication Arts*, Accessed 2/16/12, <http://www.commart.com/Columns.aspx?pub=4398&pageid=1442> (page 2 of 3)).

¹⁴⁷ Dorr.

¹⁴⁸ See: PieLab Designers, “Pecans!” *Design Ignites Change*, <http://designigniteschange.org/projects/137-pecans> (accessed on 6/13/12).

together.¹⁴⁹ However, the cost of a meal (around \$7) is prohibitive for the low-income locals,¹⁵⁰ thus out-of-town visitors make up a large portion of the customer base.¹⁵¹

Working Hale¹⁵² is another well-utilized HERO program. It started as a local chapter of YouthBuild, a national program where youth get assistance completing their GEDs while they receive job training in the construction industry building low-income housing.¹⁵³ HERO provides both GED education as well as job training and also includes leadership development. Working Hale is HERO's version of YouthBuild, which also includes job training in the fields of hospitality (with PieLab), product manufacturing (with HERO Bike), and retail (with the thrift store).¹⁵⁴ Under YouthBuild students also receive a stipend for their job training, but unfortunately Working Hale does not have the financial resources to provide a stipend.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ For an important article on PieLab, see: John T. Edge, "Pie + Design = Change," *The New York Times Magazine*, Published 10/8/10, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/magazine/10pielab-t.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁵⁰ As observed by the author.

¹⁵¹ In discussion with Christy Talbert, HERO employee and Pecans! product manager.

¹⁵² "Working Hale"—previously "YouthBuild"—is now called "HEROyouth." See www.herohousing.org (accessed 6/13/12).

¹⁵³ In discussion with Ramell Ross, Working Hale program manager.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Methods

As the large number and variety of programs indicate, HERO is constantly adjusting its outreach primarily based on funding streams, but also reacting to community needs.¹⁵⁶ As is the case with many non-profits, the organization has very few steady and unrestricted sources of funding, so it needs to apply for government and private grants to do much of its work. HERO does extensive research about the government programs available in its area and becomes an institutional participant in those programs in order to bring more resources to Hale County.¹⁵⁷

Design is not an explicit element of HERO's operations but a strong underlying tool it uses to serve the community.¹⁵⁸ In a broad sense, the way HERO implements its programs is in line with theories of design thinking. When I asked Dorr about how she uses design, she said that the organization uses a creative iterative process and is constantly adjusting and developing its programs.¹⁵⁹ It is as if its programs are prototypes that are always being field-tested and adjusted based on feedback and funding. Dorr also cited that she appreciates her staff member's design skills because she often asks them to create services and things that did not previously exist.¹⁶⁰ In essence, HERO can

¹⁵⁶ In discussion with Katie Walch, HERO staff member.

¹⁵⁷ Pam Dorr, HERO executive director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11. Verified by Kate Walch.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

be described as a social work agency that is staffed by mostly designers and creatives.

HERO has a very open-door policy for accepting resources, which includes other organizations or individuals that wish to do work, design or otherwise, in Hale County. Dorr believes that to turn down a potential partner would be denying Hale County of a resource that it would not otherwise have access to, since access to most types of services is very limited, just as in other rural communities.¹⁶¹ At peak times, HERO hosts nearly 300 volunteers per month who do work in Hale County.¹⁶²

This open-door policy is in stark contrast to the Rural Studio's exclusive nature, which often causes tension between the two organizations due to their close proximity. While it is legitimate to be inclusive of the number of resources coming into the community, it would benefit HERO to be more exclusive with only resources that will bring thoughtful, sustainable change. This applies not only to the organizations that come to Greensboro to do projects, but also the various funding streams (typically government programs) that HERO funnels into the community.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

Impact

A large part of HERO's quantitative impact is the number of community members it reaches through each of its programs. Here are some of the highlights, as given to me by Pam Dorr (during her time as executive director):¹⁶³

- Habitat for Humanity houses built: 12
- Housing counseling; 200 families/year for 6 years
- YouthBuild and Working Hale: 18 students the first year and then 54 students/year for 3 years
- Utility assistance: 1,800 families/year
- April 2011 tornado FEMA relief: 180 families
- Job training for food stamp recipients: 8 employed
- Government subsidized employment programs: 16 employed
- Job creation: 11 jobs
- Minimum-security prison work release program: 5 employed/year for 7 years
- Home repair for government grant after Hurricane Katrina: 56 homes
- 2008 tornado home repair with the Red Cross: 28 homes
- Buy-a-meter project with Project M: 128 families
- Energy efficiency weatherization program: 75 families

While there may be a considerable amount of repeats represented in these numbers (e.g. a family may have received utility assistance in multiple different

¹⁶³ Pam Dorr, HERO executive director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

years), the number of people directly affected by HERO programs is considerable, particularly given the low population density of the area.

As an example of the more indirect impact on the community, the large number of volunteers that HERO supports (as mentioned before, it can be up to 300 people/month during peak times) are all potential patrons of local businesses that would not otherwise have access to the area.

HERO has relatively great visibility within the community and many of the low-income community members have received some sort of assistance from HERO. Vast majorities of the people that receive assistance from HERO are African-Americans living below the poverty line and are deeply entrenched within the cycle of poverty.¹⁶⁴ This sector of the population represents a demographic that has little to no agency by the standards of the rest of the population—people at higher socioeconomic levels. In contrast to the Rural Studio, which has worked with clients at all different levels of the socioeconomic scale, HERO works almost exclusively with the most disadvantaged portions of the population.

This population of Hale County—the one most deeply entrenched in the cycle of poverty—proves to be extremely challenging to work with to make long-lasting change in their lives through social work.¹⁶⁵ One powerful example relayed to me by a HERO staff member Ramell Ross was a student who participated in the YouthBuild program, David.¹⁶⁶ His home life was extremely chaotic—he was severely abused by his father throughout his life and dropped

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ In discussion with Katie Walch, HERO staff member.

¹⁶⁶ In discussion with Ramell Ross, Working Hale program manager.

out of school because he didn't have the proper support in order to complete a traditional education. He began working with YouthBuild and showed great promise and willingness to turn his life around. He captured the hearts of HERO workers who made every effort to support him; they arranged a job for David at PieLab and even provided housing for him so he could leave his dysfunctional home life. However, soon he began to exhibit very aggressive behaviors and started to get into fights at work and with other YouthBuild students. He was given many chances to change but the fighting escalated to a point where he lost his job and had to be kicked out of his housing situation. He lost touch with HERO and the staff learned that he fell into his father's footsteps, a man who had also been given many chances by the community but always reverted to the allure of criminal activity. What could have helped David? How would HERO's resources been best used to change the course of his life? Was there anything the organization could do and, if not, what does that mean for students like him in the future of the program?

Many members of Greensboro's higher socioeconomic levels see HERO's work as detrimental to the community.¹⁶⁷ Often aligned with Republican Party ideals or conservative values, more advantaged members of the community believe that individuals in disadvantaged situations put themselves there and should be responsible for pulling themselves up by their bootstraps; they see HERO assistance as a wasteful handout.¹⁶⁸ This thinking is very black-and-white

¹⁶⁷ In discussion with several locals.

¹⁶⁸ Mickey Harrow, local land owner, in conversation with the author, 11/7/11. Also Steve Gentry, Greensboro Councilman, in discussion with the author, 11/20/11.

and does not account for the systemic forces of poverty, which have little to do with an individual's ability. However, if HERO's work is simply a band-aid that only addresses symptoms and not the deeper issues, then it might be a waste of resources, but not for the same reasons that some self-sufficiency proponents might think.

When I spoke with Councilman Steve Gentry about HERO's work, he expressed a great deal of concern. He believes that HERO's operation is a handout that exploits and maintains poverty in the community.¹⁶⁹ He is concerned that HERO's presence and increasing notoriety is turning Greensboro into a hot-bed for charity, which will threaten the local character and identity.¹⁷⁰ He is aware of the prejudiced divisions in the community and believes that HERO's outreach reinforces these prejudices rather than alleviates them.¹⁷¹ This is only one man's opinion and is not necessarily indicative of other opinions in the community, but it does give interesting insight into how some of the more well-off locals might view HERO's work. I did encounter other people opposed to HERO; for the most part, their opposition involved a conflict with the way HERO is operated, a lack of transparency being the biggest complaint.¹⁷²

Discussing the impact of HERO's work and its perception in the community is problematic because the people who receive the most benefit from

¹⁶⁹ Steve Gentry, Greensboro Councilman, in discussion with the author, 11/20/11.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² In discussion with several locals.

its work—and who would ideally champion HERO to the rest of the community—are the people most ignored by the community and in the worst position to be advocates because they are just trying to get by.¹⁷³ HERO's staff works incredibly hard to do what they can to alleviate poverty in Hale County and bring in resources to revitalize the community, but this work is largely thankless in the overall community.¹⁷⁴

While it is exceedingly honorable for HERO to focus its work on the most disadvantaged groups, the organization should strengthen its ties with community leaders—such as council member Steve Gentry—to become more sustainable despite philosophical differences regarding social work. By making an impact at higher socio-political levels, HERO can hopefully empower community leaders to make better decisions through the powerful tools of design and design thinking.

¹⁷³ As observed by the author.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Other Organizations

The Rural Studio and HERO (and HERO's numerous subsidiary organizations) are the most conspicuous and active of the design organizations working in Hale County, but there are several other organizations that are important to note as well: Project M and the Alabama Engine. These other organizations do not maintain a full-time presence in the community, but their activity in Hale County and nearby Birmingham cements Western Alabama's status as a magnet for social design practice.

Project M

Project M was founded in 2000 by John Bielenberg¹⁷⁵ and can be described as an extended retreat for designers interested in implementing social design projects. The program primarily consists of two-week sessions mostly held in impoverished areas around the world. There have been several sessions held in Greensboro over the years, and Dorr and Bielenberg work in close collaboration with one another.¹⁷⁶ Project M's website states that it is "a program for creative people who are already inspired to contribute to the greater good, and are looking for a platform to collaborate and generate ideas and projects bigger than themselves."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ See: Alyssa Walker, "Real World Studio," *GOOD*, posted 9/10/07, <http://www.good.is/post/real-world-studio/>.

¹⁷⁶ Pam Dorr, HERO executive director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹⁷⁷ Project M, <http://www.projectmlab.com/>, (accessed 2/16/12).

Bielenberg was influenced by Mockbee in starting this organization (hence the M). He explains the origins in an interview for *Graphics* magazine in 2005:

If you ask a designer to solve a problem, their first instinct is to make you something. It's really hard to get them to rewind the movie and say, "what is the best solution to this problem?" That requires a lot of abstract thinking, and learning. And some designers don't want to do that. They'd rather wallow in craft and rarefied aesthetics - "just let me do what I do." But that isn't problem solving. To teach that kind of thinking, I decided to mimic the best program that I had seen, the Rural Studio for Architecture, which Sam Mockbee set up in Hale County, Alabama.... the students not only produce fabulous work, which use sustainable, low-cost materials, but they connect with an entirely new group of people. And they not only design structures, but then they have to go out and actually build them, what Sam calls "architecture from the head, the heart and the hands." And I thought - man, this is what graphic design needs.¹⁷⁸

Project M participants are primarily design students or young professionals that come from relatively advantaged backgrounds compared to those in the communities in which they are held (the tuition is \$2,000/session).¹⁷⁹ Project M activity has trailed off in recent years (there is only one two-week session scheduled at this point for 2012)¹⁸⁰ as Bielenberg has transferred his attention and energy into other projects such as COMMON, a social entrepreneurship incubator,¹⁸¹ and Future Partners, a design firm.¹⁸² Hopefully another reason for its slow is because design schools are beginning to engage more and more in

¹⁷⁸ Andrew Zolli, "John Bielenberg: 'Solving Problems,'" *Graphics* 61, no. 355 (2005): 105.

¹⁷⁹ As observed by the author.

¹⁸⁰ Project M, <http://www.projectmlab.com/>, (accessed 2/16/12).

¹⁸¹ COMMON, "About Us," <http://www.common.is/about-common/> (accessed 6/13/12).

¹⁸² Future, "About," <http://futurepartners.is/About> (accessed 6/13/12).

this type of work and students interested in it do not need to look outside of their programs.¹⁸³

Project M has been criticized for taking a “helicopter” approach to social design;¹⁸⁴ the organization “parachutes” into a disadvantaged place and attempts to make an impact with a design project, only to depart a mere two weeks later.¹⁸⁵ It is no doubt an enriching experience for the participant to be taken out of his or her comfort zone while engaging in a creative blitz with other like-minded professionals, but what about the community that they descend upon in order to have this enriching experience? Unfortunately, the organization’s work in Greensboro shows that designers meddling in social change in a relatively unfamiliar community can result in negative repercussions and culture clashes, as evidenced by the following instances.

PieLab is one of the most enduring results of a Greensboro Project M session, but it had a rocky start. After Project M launched a pop-up pie shop, a couple of people involved in the project’s launch remained in Greensboro to help keep it going—and HERO incubated the business while these people stayed in Greensboro to implement it.¹⁸⁶ As part of the launch and branding, the PieLab workers made posters that read, “EAT PIE! FUCK CAKE” (fig. 16). A recent *New*

¹⁸³ As observed by the author. For example, select programs include: Impact! Design for Social Change and a MFA in Design for Social Innovation at the School of Visual Arts in New York City; a MA in Social Design and the Center for Design Practice at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD; Designmatters at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA.; and the Austin Center for Design in Austin, TX.

¹⁸⁴ Pam Dorr, HERO executive director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹⁸⁵ As observed by the author.

¹⁸⁶ Edge.

York Times Magazine article by John T. Edge about PieLab explains what happened next:

To the PieLab crew, the poster was an over-the-top exercise in sloganeering. To members of the Greensboro community, who followed the workings of PieLab on various Web sites, the document was a totem of the group's cultural insensitivities.

"The humor might have played well in Brooklyn," Buck said, taking pains to explain that the posters were never intended for local distribution. "But here it wasn't funny at all."

Posters quickly found their way into the hands of city and county powerbrokers. Things came to a head during a heated conversation in the street, which Pam Dorr, of HERO, playfully described as a "near riot."¹⁸⁷

This incident would have likely been avoided if the designers had lived in the community for a longer period in order to understand the cultural context of the work they were doing. To this day, many locals do not patronize PieLab, as a large portion of their customer base is out-of-town visitors.¹⁸⁸ That is not to say that PieLab has no value—it is used as an elegant event space and the location of several HERO programs—but the original intent of bringing together people from the local community in a neutral space was lost somewhere along the way, which can likely be attributed to the spirit of the "poster incident."

Another Project M project that produced mixed results was the Buy-a-Meter campaign. Participants in a 2007 Greensboro session decided to focus their efforts on the lack of running water that many of Greensboro's poorest residents experience.¹⁸⁹ They decided to create a print and social media campaign to raise money to buy a water meter and cover installation costs for as

¹⁸⁷ Edge.

¹⁸⁸ In discussion with Christy Talbert, HERO employee and Pecans! product manager.

¹⁸⁹ Buyameter.org, <http://www.buyameter.org/> (accessed 2/16/12).

many households as possible.¹⁹⁰ They calculated the cost to be \$425 per household and set a goal of raising \$100,000. The project was successful in that it raised a portion of that money and brought water meters to approximately 128 families,¹⁹¹ but not all of those families were able to sustain the monthly water bill that went along with the meter. The biggest fallout was that the visual campaign they used to carry their message across the globe used visuals of explicit poverty to depict Hale County and some of the locals did not appreciate that representation of their community.¹⁹² There were photographs of dilapidated structures and downtrodden African-Americans with the slogan “Water is not a right in Hale County,” written across them (fig. 17).¹⁹³

Similar to the Rural Studio, one of the greatest values to be found in Project M is the empowering experience of the participant, but an essential difference between the Rural Studio and Project M is the timelines in which they work. Project M’s extremely reduced timeline simply does not allow for an informed understanding of the community, particularly in such a complex and deeply dysfunctional society as Hale County. A passage from *Social Work in Rural Communities* explains the problematic nature of an outsider entering a rural community to do social work—essentially the way Project M works:

People from small communities resent others from distant places (which may mean cities as close as 100 miles) who come to their towns and try to foster changes to make the community resemble the newcomer’s former

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Pam Dorr, HERO executive director, in discussion with the author, 10/26/11.

¹⁹² Edge.

¹⁹³ Buyameter.org.

residence. Some professionals who come to rural communities think that they must bring to their new locations the organizational structures, services, and ideologies that they new and respected in their former, often metropolitan, residences. Rural communities are generally unable to sustain such structures and systems. Also, small communities often reject the trappings of larger cities. Many rural residents continue to live in small communities because they resist and, at times, actively dislike metropolitan attitudes and behaviors.¹⁹⁴

Organizing and participating in a creative blitz—especially one with the goal of making a positive impact—is an estimable activity, but it should be presented more transparently as an experience more for the user and not as a benefit for the audience. Any interactions with the community must be very delicately undertaken in order to not cross ethical lines of exploiting the community for the needs of the designer. Additionally, it borders on unconscionable to posit the program as a benefit for an already disenfranchised community that has no say in what is being done to them.

Alabama Innovation Engine

A relatively new organization, Alabama Innovation Engine, is headquartered in Birmingham, AL (outside of Hale County), but grew out of the Hale County Rural Poverty Project at the 2009 Aspen Design Summit.¹⁹⁵ The project was initiated by the Winterhouse Group (of the *Design Observer*), and brought together leaders from all of the organizations mentioned in this paper

¹⁹⁴ Leon H. Ginsberg, *Social Work in Rural Communities* (Alexandria, Va: Council on Social Work Education, 2005), 8.

¹⁹⁵ Matt Leavell, Alabama Innovation Engine Director, in discussion with the author, 10/31/11.

and others.¹⁹⁶ William Drenttel, head of Winterhouse, saw an opportunity to expand the reach of social design through establishing a center for rural poverty in Hale County. In July of 2009, he writes in the *Design Observer*:

Hale County is ripe to become a national center for design research into rural poverty. It is uniquely positioned, given the convergence of design disciplines already in place there, the consequence of these initial efforts by architects and designers who have already established deep roots in the local communities.¹⁹⁷

To further this idea, he convened designers from Greensboro, as well as other leaders in the social design field, at the Aspen Design Summit to discuss moving forward.

As these groups came together to discuss taking action in Hale County, tensions ran high.¹⁹⁸ Andrew Freear was a vocal opponent of the idea of bringing a rural poverty center to Greensboro, believing that it would greatly stigmatize the community as well as the trusting relationship that his organization has cultivated.¹⁹⁹ After being enlightened to this misstep, the group spent several days brainstorming about what could be done instead. The result was the

¹⁹⁶ Aspen Editors, "Aspen Design Summit Report: Hale County Rural Poverty Project," *Design Observer*, posted 11/23/09, <http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/feature/aspen-design-summit-report-hale-county-rural-poverty-project/11927/>.

¹⁹⁷ William Drenttel, "Report from Hale County, Alabama," *Design Observer*, Posted 7/5/09, <http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/feature/report-from-hale-county-alabama/8877/>.

¹⁹⁸ Aspen Editors. See section "Initial Wariness."

¹⁹⁹ Andrew Freear, Rural Studio director, in discussion with the author, 11/13/11. Also Matt Leavell, Alabama Innovation Engine Director, in discussion with the author, 10/31/11.

Alabama Innovation Engine, an organization that acts as a connector and booster for social designers already working in the area.²⁰⁰

Since the 2009 Aspen Summit, the Engine has morphed into a real organization, run jointly by Auburn University and the University of Alabama.²⁰¹ The focus of the organization has shifted away from Hale County, as it is headquartered in Birmingham in the same space as Auburn's Urban Studio program.²⁰² The Engine was not founded with a specific project in mind, however its aim was to leverage the social design resources of this area of the country by finding willing local partners and community assets with which to work.²⁰³ The projects are to be community-lead, as opposed to dictated by the designers.²⁰⁴ The organization has been in existence for a little over a year and is still struggling to define its exact mission, but this is likely due to the time it is taking to first develop strong partnerships in order to make more sustainable change—by having locals become as invested as the designers. In addition to hosting university design studios who visit the area,²⁰⁵ the primary project it has

²⁰⁰ Aspen Editors, "Aspen Design Summit: Update 09.25.10," *Design Observer*, posted 9/25/10, <http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/feature/aspen-design-summit-update-092510/12337/>.

²⁰¹ Matt Leavell, Alabama Innovation Engine Director, in discussion with the author, 10/31/11.

²⁰² As observed by the author.

²⁰³ Leavell.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ See: Ken Zinser, "Oakmulgee Forestworks," *Design Ignites Change*, <http://designigniteschange.org/projects/446-oakmulgee-forestworks>; and "Rhode Island School of Design Innovation Studio," Alabama Innovation Engine, <http://alabamaengine.org/2011/05/rhode-island-school-of-design-innovation-studio/>.

undertaken thus far is to help develop the “blue way” trail along the Cahaba River, which will address water quality and also hope to have a positive economic impact for communities along the trail.²⁰⁶

While the Alabama Innovation Engine started out as a somewhat naïve idea, the social designers involved have come together to turn the mission around to something that has the potential to bring about sustainable social change through design. One of the main outcomes of this endeavor has been the increase of much-needed discourse about social design best practices in the Alabama design community and beyond. The Engine played a large part in organizing the Alabama Design Summit, an AIGA (the professional association for design) conference in July of 2011,²⁰⁷ which was a successful precedent to the new national AIGA social design initiative, *Design for Good*.

²⁰⁶ Matt Leavell, Alabama Innovation Engine Director, in discussion with the author, 10/31/11.

²⁰⁷ AIGA, “Designers Gather in Alabama to Address Community Challenges,” AIGA Website, Posted 7/21/11, <http://www.aiga.org/alabama-design-summit/>.

Conclusion

Unpacking the methods and impact of the work of these social design organizations is crucial to the advancement of the field of social design, as more and more designers use their creative agency to bring positive social change to communities across the globe. As previously mentioned, social design is currently a hot topic within the design community and there are many practitioners interested in exploring how to get into this kind of work. The best practices that can be gleaned from the work of the existing social design organizations are crucial for others that wish to do similar work, but it is still important to consider the context of this work because it is not “one size fits all.”

One reason that understanding impact has not been a priority of contemporary social design projects may be because “social change” is a difficult thing to measure. But this lack of direct, measurable impact points to a quality of social design—it is a very subtle social change tool that takes a great deal of time to develop. But it can also be a very powerful tool. The longer a designer can be embedded within a community, the better he or she can understand the community’s needs and assets and address the root issues of the community instead of simply the symptoms of these issues. As evidence of a prominent social design practitioner grasping this lesson, Emily Pilloton writes eloquently about the importance of being connected with the community in a blog post on *Fast Company* that is a response to an earlier blog post written by Bruce Nussbaum titled “Are Humanitarian Designers Imperialists?” in which he criticizes her Hippo Roller project:

We have made the mistake of being disconnected from the people and places for which we design. The Hippo Roller re-design project was in many ways the biggest error we have made as an organization. Our first project, we undertook the re-design of the water transport device produced and distributed in South Africa, quite simply, because we were a newly-formed organization excited to get started. We had yet to see the value of local work, and were drawn to the simplicity of a device that so clearly has the potential to improve life. In hindsight, the process of redesigning the Hippo Roller was misguided and disconnected because of its lack of direct collaboration with end users, and a minimal shared investment in its success. While the resulting redesigned Hippo Roller is effective, we realized that the process was not. At the conclusion of the project, we put a stake in the ground to only take on projects that are local (that is, where the designer and partner/client are in the same location and call that place home). That Mr. Nussbaum defined our organization's work by its anomaly is a gross misrepresentation.

Since the Hippo Roller project, we have stuck to the principle of working in our own backyards (in fact, Mr. Nussbaum even quotes this principle in our mission statement: "We start locally..."). Of 20 current projects, 18 are based in the U.S., run by local designers invested in their own communities, in places they understand, with people who are fellow citizens (the remaining two projects are in Mexico City, but designed and executed by a team of talented Mexican designers). We are still learning, but we know this local process to be more honest and productive than our Hippo Roller days.²⁰⁸

Giving another first-hand account of wisdom gained from practicing social design, Will Holman, a former participant in both the Rural Studio and HERO, poignantly writes in an article for the *Design Observer*:

My own experience has convinced me that long-term engagement with a place and a community is the best way to effect change, as long as it is approached self-critically and strives for iterative improvement. I am skeptical of prescriptive, outcome-based projects that garner a lot of press and then disappear once the participants drift on to newer, more exciting things. Change is messy, it's hard, and it doesn't resolve itself in neat timelines.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Emily Pilloton, "Are Humanitarian Designers Imperialists? Project H Responds," *Fast Company*, <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1661885/are-humanitarian-designers-imperialists-project-h-responds>.

²⁰⁹ Will Holman, "Lessons from the front line of social design," *Design Observer*, posted 1/16/12, <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/lessons-from-the-front-lines-of-social-design/31998/>.

Here, Pilloton and Holman write about a design process that is not immediate or based on metrics and measurement, but based on more qualitative and organic results. The design process itself is very intuitive and subjective, as are social dynamics between people; it is not surprising that the results of combining the two would also be difficult to measure. Therefore, much more thoughtful discourse around social design practices is imperative for advancing the field.

Currently, the most prevalent method of transferring best practices in social design is in the format of a toolkit—experienced social design practitioners publish guides with suggested steps for other designers to also engage in the practice. They are often stellar examples of graphic design but the content is over-simplified and the steps too stylized to really be helpful for a designer who wants to engage in a meaningful social design project (fig. 18). Notable examples of this are *IDEO's Human Centered Design Toolkit*²¹⁰ and its *Design for Social Impact Workbook and Toolkit*²¹¹. A step above a toolkit is a new organization, SEED (Social Economic Environmental Design)—akin to LEED certification for ecologically sustainable architecture—it aims to provide a set of metrics that can result in the certification of community-based social design projects.²¹²

Both the toolkits and SEED are steps in the right direction towards a more effective and ethical social design industry, but what is currently lacking in this

²¹⁰ IDEO, "Human Centered Design Toolkit," <http://www.ideo.com/work/human-centered-design-toolkit> (accessed on 6/9/12).

²¹¹ IDEO, "Design for Social Impact Workbook and Toolkit for the Rockefeller Foundation," <http://www.ideo.com/work/design-for-social-impact-workbook-and-toolkit> (accessed on 6/9/12).

²¹² SEED Network, "SEED Certification," The SEED Network Website, <http://www.seed-network.org/certification>.

discourse (and what I hope to achieve with this paper) is further levels of investigation by exploring the projects from the perspective of the end user. Instead of simply understanding these projects from the perspective of the designer, it is equally important to hear from the community in which the designer is working, as well as the historical and cultural context of the projects.

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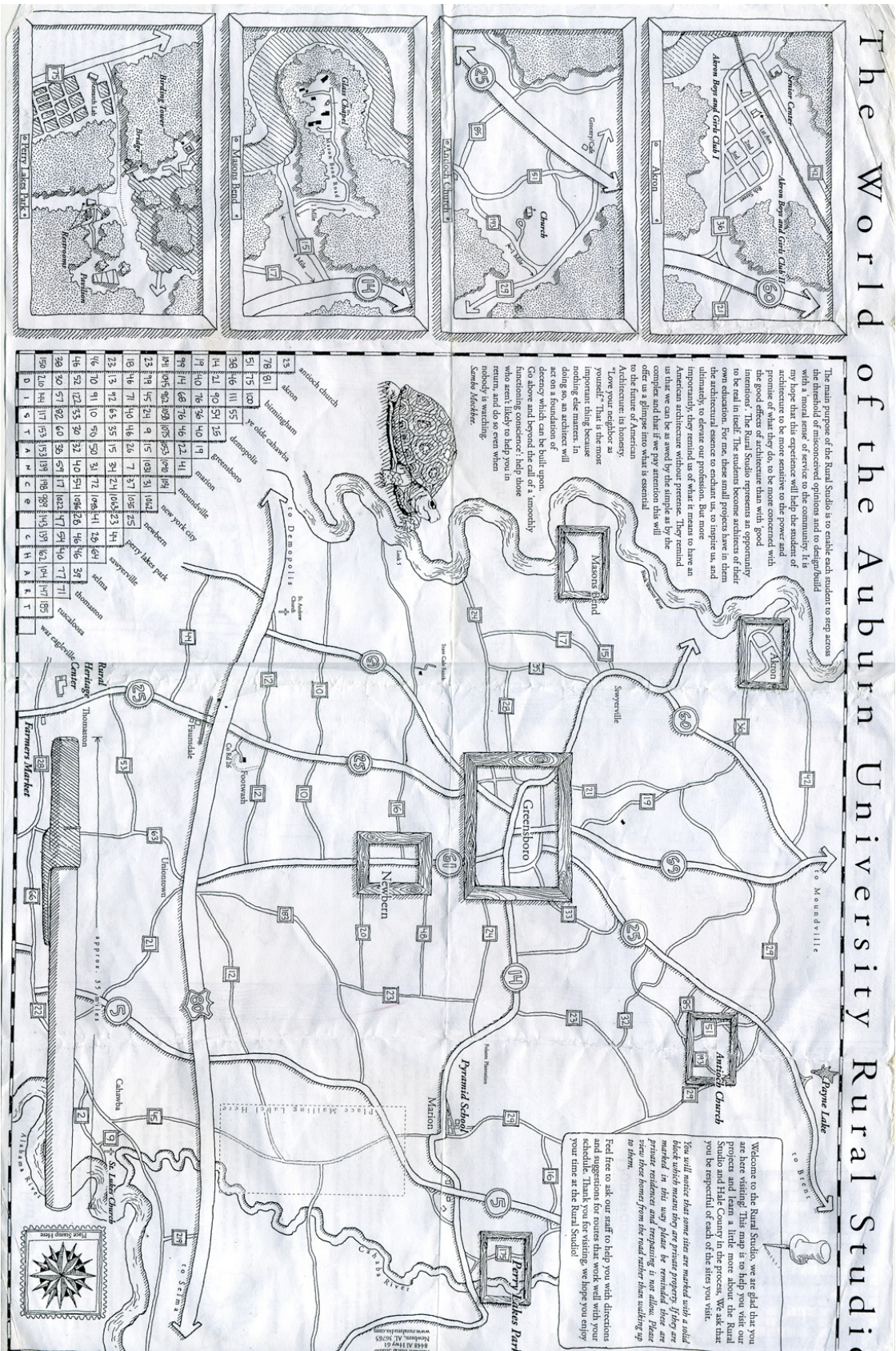
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Appendix 1: Rural Studio Map (front)



Appendix 1: Rural Studio Map (back)

Historic Hale County

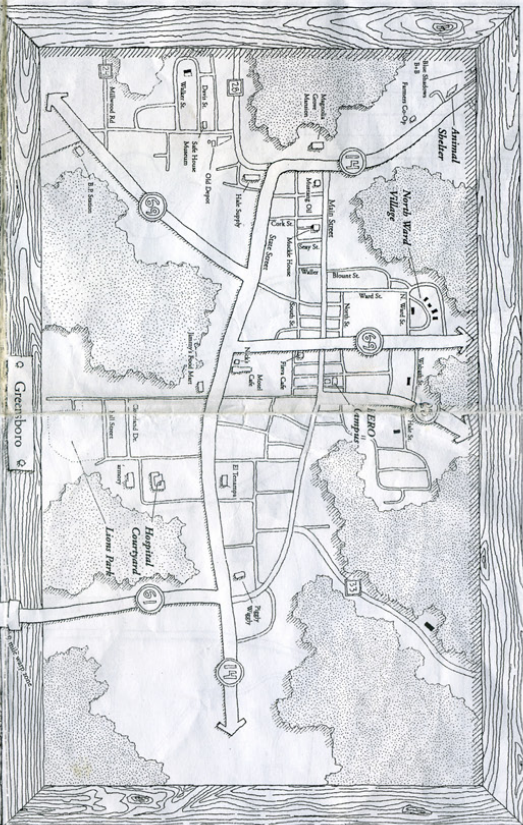
It is hard to comprehend the full scope and magnitude of the Hale County area when we realize that three famous Missions on the banks of the Warrior River in what is now northern Hale County were built by Spanish men of great vision before Columbus reached the New World. In the nineteenth century, the area was a frontier. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama.

The second history of West-Central Alabama, of course, began with the exploration of the Spanish frontiersman DeSoto, who before he set foot on the soil of Alabama, had explored the Mississippi, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Florida peninsula. He was the first European to set foot on the soil of Alabama. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama.

After centuries of steadily unbroken existence, the Hale County area was to change rapidly. Only two years after the first white settlement was made in Hale County, the village of Troy was given the name of Hale County. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama.

December 14, 1819 President Monroe signed the creation of Hale County. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama.

In terms of population, Hale County is relatively young, though, as you see, its origins go back to the first settlement of the area. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama. The Hale County area, once a frontier, is now a part of the history of the state of Alabama.



Rural Studio Projects Visitor Guide

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About the Rural Studio

History
In 1973, two Auburn University architecture professors, Dennis K. Ruth and the late Samuel Mockbae established the Auburn University Rural Studio in western Alabama within the university's School of Architecture. The Rural Studio, conceived as a strategy to improve the living conditions in rural Alabama while providing practical experience to architecture students, comprised its first project in 1974, "Hillier in a World." The studio has since grown to include a wide range of projects, including the most important residences of rural Alabama through its work at Auburn University's Rural Studio.

In September of 1998, Sambo was diagnosed with leukemia. The illness slowed him down but he remained committed to the expansion and lead of the Rural Studio. In December 2001, he died of complications from the disease. Despite his illness, Sambo Mockbae remained modest and modesty "down-to-earth" and his death. He was a warm, witty, and a great storyteller. He was a great teacher and a great mentor. He was a great friend and a great colleague. He was a great leader and a great role model. He was a great person and a great man.

2nd Year Program
Historically, the Rural Studio has accepted approximately fifteen 2nd year students per semester to design and build a century home. In the fall of 2009, the program will continue to accept new students to the program in Newbern. In addition to the multi-week design and construction of the century home, students are also required to complete Architectural History, Materials and Methods of Construction, and Woodwork.

3rd Year Program
The fifth-year design program expects students to live in Hale County for a full academic year or until the completion of their 3rd year. The program is designed to provide students with a comprehensive education in architecture, including design, construction, and business. The program is designed to provide students with a comprehensive education in architecture, including design, construction, and business. The program is designed to provide students with a comprehensive education in architecture, including design, construction, and business.

Donations
The Rural Studio is a non-profit organization and relies on the generosity of its community for support. If you would like to contribute towards the program, please visit our office administrators at the Mountain House in Newbern, Okla. We can make checks payable to Auburn Rural Studio and sent to 2007 N. Newbern, Ala. or to www.auburnruralstudio.com. Any contributions are tax deductible and much appreciated.

Games

Make the following words by filling in the letters in the crossword puzzle.

1. word: animal park
2. word: animal park
3. word: animal park
4. word: animal park
5. word: animal park
6. word: animal park
7. word: animal park
8. word: animal park
9. word: animal park
10. word: animal park
11. word: animal park
12. word: animal park
13. word: animal park
14. word: animal park
15. word: animal park
16. word: animal park
17. word: animal park
18. word: animal park
19. word: animal park
20. word: animal park



Images

Figure 1: Greensboro Main Street, Then and Now



Main Street, 2011. Photo by the author.



View of south side of Main Street in Greensboro (1873). From: Curb, Randall, and Willie Jean Arrington. *Historic Hale County*. Greensboro, Alabama: Greensboro Watchman, 1989.

Figure 1 (contd.)



Main Street, 2011. Photo by the author.

View of south side of Main Street in Greensboro (1873). From: Curb, Randall, and Willie Jean Arrington. *Historic Hale County*. Greensboro, Alabama: Greensboro Watchman, 1989.

Figure 2: Cotton Gin



Ruins of a cotton gin on Martin Luther King Drive in Greensboro, AL. Photo by the author, 2011.

Figure 3: Catfish Capital



Sign on Main Street. Photo by the author, 2011.



Water tower: "GREENSBORO: Catfish Capital of Alabama.".
Photo by the author, 2011.

Figure 4: The Pods



Housing pods for Rural Studio students using experimental building materials, by the Rural Studio, 2000. Photo by the author, 2011.



Details of housing pods for Rural Studio students using experimental building materials, by the Rural Studio, 2000. Photos by the author, 2011.

Figure 5: Lions Park



Lions Park gate, by the Rural Studio. Photo by the author, 2011.



Lions Park skate park by the Rural Studio, 2009. Photos by the author, 2011.

Figure 5 (contd.)



Lions Park playscape by the Rural Studio, 2011. Photo by Timothy Hursley, 2012. From *Architectural Record*, <http://archrecord.construction.com/features/humanitariandesign/united-states/Lions-Park-Playscape.asp> (accessed 6/10/12).



Lions Park concession stand by the Rural Studio, 2009. Photo by the author, 2011.

Figure 6: Safe House Museum



Safe House Museum by the Rural Studio, 2011. Photo by the author, 2011.

Figure 7: Hay Bale House



Hay Bale House by the Rural Studio, 1995. Photo by the author, 2011.

Figure 8: Mason's Bend Chapel



Glass Chapel at Mason's Bend by the Rural Studio, 2000.
Photo by the author, 2011.



Details of Glass Chapel at Mason's Bend by the Rural Studio, 2000. Interior (left) and debris (right). Photos by the author, 2011.

Figure 9: Hale County Hospital Courtyard



Hale County Hospital Courtyard by the Rural Studio, 2006. Photo by Timothy Hursley. From *Architect*, <http://www.architectmagazine.com/community-projects/hale-county-hospital-courtyard.aspx> (accessed 6/10/12).

Figure 10: Joanne's 20K House



Joanne on the porch of her 20K house. Photo by Danny Wicke. From the *Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303678704576442290085008956.html> (accessed on 6/10/12).



Joanne's 20K House student team. Photo by Danny Wicke. From the *Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303678704576442290085008956.html> (accessed on 6/10/12).

Figure 11: 20K Houses at North Ward



20K Houses in the North Ward subdivision, by the Rural Studio, 2008.
Photos by the Author, 2011.



Detail of 20K House in the North Ward subdivision, by the Rural Studio, 2008.
Photo by the Author, 2011.

Figure 11 (contd.)



Detail of 20K House in the North Ward subdivision, by the Rural Studio, 2008.
Photo by the Author, 2011.



Detail of 20K House in the North Ward subdivision, by the Rural Studio, 2008.
Photo by the Author, 2011.

Figure 12: Greensboro Farmers Market



The Greensboro Farmers Market, 2011. Photo from the Greensboro Farmers Market website, <http://thegreensborofarmersmarket.com/> (accessed on 6/10/12).



Detail of the Greensboro Farmers Market, 2011. Photo from the Greensboro Farmers Market website, <http://thegreensborofarmersmarket.com/> (accessed on 6/10/12).

Figure 13: HERO Bunkhouse



HERO Bunkhouse for volunteers. HERO Housing, CIMG2895. 2011, Digital Image. Available from: Flickr, http://www.flickr.com/photos/hero_housing/6307286444/in/set-72157627914297571 (accessed 6/10/12).



Interior detail of HERO Bunkhouse for volunteers. HERO Housing, CIMG2896. 2011, Digital Image. Available from: Flickr, http://www.flickr.com/photos/hero_housing/6307286444/in/set-72157627914297571 (accessed 6/10/12).

Figure 14: PieLab



PieLab exterior view. Photo by the author, 2011.



PieLab interior view. Photo by the author, 2011.

Figure 15: Pecans!



Working Hale students (left and center) and a PieLab staff member make spiced pecans for the Pecans! project. Photo by the author, 2011.



Detail of PieLab staff making spiced pecans. Photo by the author, 2011.

Figure 15 (contd.)



Packaging for pecan butter, pecan brittle, spiced pecans, and candy from the Pecans! project. Photos by the author, 2011.



Figure 16: EAT PIE! FUCK CAKE Poster



Poster by PieLab. Photo by the author, 2012.

Figure 17: Buy a Meter Project



Images of Project M's "Buy a Meter" campaign. Printed on Newsprint. From the Buy a Meter website, <http://www.buyameter.org/> (accessed on 6/10/12).

Figure 18: Social Design Toolkits



Image of IDEO's *Human Centered Design Toolkit*. From Open IDEO, <http://www.openideo.com/open/how-might-we-increase-the-availability-of-affordable-learning-tools-educational-for-children-in-the-developing-world/inspiration/start-an-innovation-academy-for-kids-using-ideo-s-hcd-toolkit/> (accessed on 6/10/12).



DESIGN CHALLENGES




The guidance underlying the design principles points to the following five challenges.

HOW MIGHT YOU...

- ...MODIFY THE WAY YOU WORK?
- ...EDUCATE OTHERS?
- ...DEVELOP NETWORKS?
- ...IDENTIFY FUNDING STREAMS?
- ...MODIFY YOUR STRUCTURE?

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Page from IDEO's *Design for Social Impact Workbook and Toolkit*. From IDEO, <http://www.ideo.com/work/design-for-social-impact-workbook-and-toolkit> (accessed on 6/10/12).