

Samuel Mockbee and the rural studio; Birmingham Museum of Art - Birmingham, AL

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Students in Auburn University's Rural Studio program, founded in 1993 by architect Samuel "Sambo" Mockbee (1944-2001), confront the problem of building for the residents of the Alabama counties known as the "Black Belt," one of the poorest areas in the United States. The students act not as caseworkers but as architects seeking to understand the needs and desires of their clients, and the resulting structures, developed in stages by successive groups of students, have taken the form of private residences, cafes, meeting halls, and churches. All are constructed at the lowest possible cost from readily accessible, mostly recycled materials.

This exhibition documented the social mission, design concerns, and collaborative pedagogy of the pioneering project. Though primarily made up of photographic and video documentation and architectural models, the show also included three buildings made especially for the occasion and Mockbee's own works of visual art. (The architect's paintings have an affinity with Chagall, another poet of the countryside who sought to express the rhythms of impoverished rural life in modernist compositions.) Because the exhibition structures--a baled cardboard video theater, a "Temple" made from bound carpet yarn, and a "Kissing Dome" built of bales of hay--are the first steps toward future projects, the show not only chronicled the studio's social mission but participated in it as well.

Mockbee had a thriving practice in Canton, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, noted for combining elements of rural, southern vernacular architecture with sophisticated modernism. He brought this aesthetic to the Rural Studio, whose focus on activism has never overshadowed its emphasis on innovative design. The angled roof of jerrybuilt residential shacks and roadside produce stands recurs throughout Rural Studio design, alongside a sleek modernist rectilinearity and unexpected flourishes. The structures made for the exhibition allowed the visitor to experience physically the Rural Studio's materials and building techniques. In the theater, as I sat on a bench made of stacked carpet tiles next to walls of baled cardboard, I became acutely aware of the cardboard's texture, density, and even aroma.

Photos of the residential Lucy House, 2001-2002, show a simple rectangular structure with a large, overhanging shed roof. The walls, made of stacked carpet tiles, are reminiscent of the stacked slate elements found in some suburban homes of the '50s. A large irregular polyhedron defines the roof and walls of the master bedroom, one end of which is built over a concrete-block tornado shelter. The structure thus combines elements of modernist architecture, suburban vernacular, and postmodernism--all within the context of rural subsistence-level housing.

Samuel Mockbee was not the only socially engaged architect who thought that modernist design could improve the lives of those in need, but he was one of the few who succeeded in bringing about immediately visible social change through architectural practice. This exhibition is a fitting tribute to the unique combination of utopianism and pragmatism that drives the Rural Studio even in his absence.

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