

Making Architecture, Making Community The Pedagogy of an Urban “Rural Studio”

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“...responsible architects think very much in terms of the whole community.” - Walter Gropius

The title “Making Architecture, Making Community” implies a genuine attempt to explore the feasibility of a university’s urban architecture program to reach communities and individuals in need of design, construction and basic architectural services. Through a wide-range of “hands-on” community driven projects students would learn construction basics and building techniques that would further enhance their technical knowledge and design ability. Standard design studios would be replaced by design-build courses that would realize several small or large scale projects per year with students working together with faculty, professionals and community members. Practical application would further student understanding of the building process as well as build coursework based on community effort and outreach. Can a “design-build”, community based architecture education work in an urban environment? Can pedagogy similar to the University of Auburn’s “Rural Studio” work in an urban environment? What could an urban design-build outreach program achieve?

The Rural Studio

Operating on an annual budget of less than a \$500,000 per year, the University of Auburn’s Rural Studio is impacting a segment of Alabama’s population that would have otherwise been forgotten. Hale County, one of the nation’s poorest counties is seeing tremendous benefit in the 4-7 annual projects the Rural Studio designs and constructs for the community. The community and the Rural Studio’s students are being impacted on both a social and architectural level.

The ideology of founder Samuel Mockbee was simple, "provide a decent community for all citizens." The mission statement of the program is: "The Rural Studio is to enable each participating student to cross the threshold of misconceived opinions to create/design/build and to allow students to put their educational values to work as citizens of a community. The Rural Studio seeks solutions to the needs of the community within the community's own context, not from outside it. Abstract ideas based upon knowledge and study are transformed into workable solutions forged by real human contact, personal realization, and a gained appreciation for the culture."

(www.ruralstudio.com)

The rural studio was founded on the basis of improving living conditions for the poor and underprivileged people of rural Alabama. The goal is to work with collaborating architects and faculty to build community projects and single family homes with a hands-on "shares the sweat" approach to design. "The students who attend the Rural Studio expand their design knowledge through actually building what they have designed.

Utilizing the concept of 'context-based learning'".(www.ruralstudio.com)

Taken from the Rural Studio's webpage is the following section pertaining to the program's goals:

Working from its most vital ideology, teaching students through context-based learning, that is, actually living in and becoming part of the community and designing and building houses within the community, the Rural Studio has established four main goals:

1. To give students of the School of Architecture the opportunity to learn the critical skills of planning, designing, and building in a concrete, practical, and socially responsible manner.
2. To form leadership qualities in students by instilling the social ethics of professionalism, volunteerism, individual responsibility, and community service.
3. To help communities, through partnerships with the state and local welfare agencies, provide suitable and dignified housing.

4. To develop materials, methods, and technologies that will house the rural poor in dignity and mitigate the effects of poverty upon rural living conditions.

In an interview with NPR, program director D.K. Ruth said that the students are working together to come against stereo-types. They are “citizen architects” working with and for “citizens”. Ruth says that all students and community members have a say in the designs and that students are addressing community needs as their own personal needs. They aren’t just making paper architecture but community. More is riding on the students than a traditional studio, “if they screw up, they screw someone’s life up”. (NPR)

The Curriculum / Pedagogy of the Rural Studio

The Rural Studio offers three different and distinct programs through the University of Auburn. Entrance into the programs is highly competitive and extremely selective. Students are chosen through an application process that emphasizes the relevance of the experience for students’ overall curricular objectives. Student work and labor is strictly on a volunteer basis.

The first option is for second-year students to spend a year completing their studios in a two semester format in which they live in Hale County. Each annual studio completes one single-family house for the community. The Fall semester is spent on schematic design and design development while the Spring semester is spent on construction documents and construction itself. More often than not, building will carry the students on through the summer.

The second option is for thesis students completing their fifth and final year to work in teams of 3-5 to complete their own Hale County community project. Projects range from chapels, community centers, to a little league baseball field. From start to finish the students work together in design and construction while completing the University’s thesis requirements.

The final option is summer outreach program that offers students and architects from all backgrounds to spend a summer in Hale County in an outreach capacity.

One of the more unique aspects of the curriculum is bridging multiple studios into one project. Students learn quickly how to adapt to a group design project in order to proceed in design and construction in a timely manner. (Pearson 89)

The Curriculum/Pedagogy of the Bauhaus

The pedagogy of the Bauhaus was centered around designing and building. Courses and curriculum were structured in a way that each was dependent on the other. Theory, practical, and preliminary classes were intertwined with courses in the arts and in turn coincided with instruction in material and color exploration and theory, all of which resulted in a design and then a built work. Students worked with faculty artists, architects and designers in creating various distinct projects. Furniture making, painting, textiles, print making, and architecture worked in harmony with the ideology of modernist architect Walter Gropius and the faculty of the Bauhaus. Students were able to see their own projects come to fruition. Though the Bauhaus was not consumed near as much with a “design-build” philosophy as say, the Rural Studio, its core curriculum was based on an ideology of exploration through making. It was this ideology of making that caused a revolution in architecture, industrial design, and the arts as a whole.

Other Architecture Outreach Programs

Other outreach architecture education programs that enjoy a diverse pedagogy: Architects without Borders offers aid and services throughout the world. Free Skool is a community-lead education resource that brings teachers and professionals together throughout the community together to offer education on various subjects free of charge. Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative is a university-based community service organization committed to improving the quality of urban places through technical design assistance, research, education, and advocacy. Studio 804 in a university-based studio

program which allows final-year masters students to design and build low to moderate level income, single family housing. The home is eventually sold to a qualifying resident.

A Case for an Urban “Rural Studio”

"...provide a decent community for all citizens." – Samuel Mockbee

There is a need for a refocus in architecture education.

In their book “Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice” Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang present seven separate but interlocking goals. They believe the goals, if pursued by all, could better address the problems faced by “our communities, our nation, and our planet.”

The goals are as follows:

1. An Enriched Mission

This category redefines the institution of architecture. It is an understanding that the meaning of architecture entails much more than drawing and designing. It is a responsibility that the architect has to his/her environment, community, and self. It is building to beautify, building for human needs, building for urban spaces, preserving the planet.

2. Diversity with Dignity

This celebrates the diversity of curriculum offered at various architecture institutes.

3. Standards Without Standardization

Contrary to the modernist way of thought, this category urges standards to be raised in education and practice but with less focus on standardization and

conformity. Standardization is the demise of a profession based on creativity and exploration.

4. A Connected Curriculum

A broad curriculum focuses on problems beyond architecture and touches on ethical issues, philosophy, and history. A flexible curriculum allows for exploration in the various fields of architecture and design. The single most important and greatest challenge, according to the authors, is making the connection both within the architecture curriculum and between architecture and other disciplines.

5. A Climate for Learning

Some of the major characteristics of a healthy leaning climate are; openness, fair play, clarity of communication, inclusiveness, tolerance, caring, joyfulness, and commonly held purposes.

6. A Unified Profession

Ultimately, education and the profession must share the same goals and ideals in order to further enrich the practice and continuing education. There must be a partnership of trust, respect and communication between them to address the greater needs of the community, the built environment and society.

7. Service to the Nation

There are four broad strategies that the author notes: establish a climate of engagement, clarify the public benefits of architecture, promote the creation of new knowledge and stress the critical importance of ethical professional behavior.

These seven goals are extremely pertinent for a design-build school mostly because it creates a uniform ideology.

Samuel Mockbee felt that both education and professional architecture needed to change. The root of change would take place with the student. “If architecture is going to nudge, cajole, and inspire a community to challenge the status quo into making responsible changes, it will take the subversive leadership of academics and practitioners who keep reminding students of the profession’s responsibilities.

The Rural Studio is the most noteworthy example of a university-based, community outreach driven, hands-on, design-build education. It takes the normal and mundane tasks of typical studio education to the extreme. “Abstract drawing projects” and “solipsistic architectural theorizing” are replaced by what Mockbee called “the classroom of the community.” (Oppenheimer and Hursley)

What Mockbee was able to achieve with the Rural Studio should not be limited to the rural Alabama. Universities should embrace non-traditional forms of architectural education. The feasibility of an urban “Rural Studio” should not be overlooked. With more and more emphasis continually being attached to the importance of developing a well-planned urban environment, universities and practitioners should likewise embrace a program that teaches students to reach out into our communities through designing and building projects for the greater good of the city.

Though much of the emphasis of the Rural Studio is living among the clients and experiencing their community, an urban version would function with students traditionally living spread throughout the city. Students would have the opportunity to interact with and establish relationships with the community that they are living in. Students would have the possibility to become aware of and address his/her community’s needs. These needs could readily be adapted into a multi-student design-build project.

Another vital need of the Rural Studio support from local architects and to realize student projects. Professionals help students understand enclosure systems, structures, mechanical systems, and the many various details associated with building documents and construction.

Essential to the vitality of architecture the architect is the city. The vast majority of the profession is made up of designers and architects practicing in our nation's most urban areas. The wealth of knowledge and practical experience in these firms is nearly overwhelming. Students, and faculty alike, would have ample opportunity to learn valuable techniques and standards in architecture. Likewise, the professional would be given an opportunity to interact with students, faculty and community members mentoring, teaching, and giving advice where and when needed.

The possible number of projects is nearly endless. There such a need for rehabilitation in our cities that students would have the opportunity to explore many facets of design. They could work with a community to build a community center, re-envision many of the dilapidated interior spaces of our downtown, or help to build a park bathroom facility.

Urban resources for students are nearly as endless. The city offers multiple libraries, museums, rebuilding centers, and as mentioned before, a plethora of professionals. Students would have the ability to access the local AIA and LEED® chapters. Transportation is another great benefit students could have access to. Students would have an opportunity to give inner cities and outlying suburbs a unique identity through their designs. It could also help some communities to strengthen through fellowship and common bonds. Similar to the tentacles of an octopus, the Urban "Rural Studio" would be spread through the city connected by the common bond of community outreach through design.

In conclusion, the ability to create and maintain a school based on community outreach through design and building is certainly not as unobtainable as one may think. As discussed before in the text, there needs to be shift in our thinking of architecture education. The teaching of strictly hypothetically design and theory produces students who are knowledgeable of just that. Schools that offer the occasional design-build studio will not succeed in the same capacity as a program based solely on community outreach. A school that is based on design-build in an outreach capacity will produce students that

have a greater understanding of a practical approach to building. They will have a greater grasp on building construction and they will have a foundation of putting others first. Student would ultimately walk away with a sense of accomplishment along with the skills of designing and building. The community would benefit from new enriched neighborhoods and a heightened knowledge of design and education.

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