



ANSWERING THE CHALLENGE

Rural Studio’s 20K House

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Rusty is the Associate Chair of the Auburn University Program of Architecture and the Rural Studio Associate Director. He is a nationally-recognized teacher and scholar. Rusty’s honors related to teaching excellence include the receipt of the American Institute of Architects National Teaching Honor Award along with the American Institute of Architecture Students National Teaching Honor Award. Rusty was educated at both Auburn University and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1968, civil rights activist Whitney M. Young, Jr. publicly challenged both the professional and academic institutions of architecture to take responsibility for our role in the link between poverty, opportunity, and the built environment. He posited that safe, dignified, and affordable housing was a basic human right, and that as individual practitioners we were both morally and ethically bound to act. But perhaps more profoundly, Young went on to say that, beyond the responsibility we bare as individuals, as a discipline, we have a professional obligation to take a leadership role in addressing the failures in our ability to tackle the systemic problems in our country that contribute to the poverty and lack of opportunity afforded to the American poor.¹

Decades later, while working to redefine environmentalism in the very same inner-city New York neighborhoods that Young cited as examples in his challenge, the visionary founder of Sustainable South Bronx, Majora Carter, stated:

“Economic degradation begets environmental degradation. And environmental degradation begets social degradation. The linkage is absolute. No

exceptions. It is not a menu. You can’t pick and choose which one of those three you’d like to address. You’ve got to address them all.”²

Indeed, it is strange that the discipline of architecture continues to separate the issues of environmental stewardship, social justice, building performance, and community engagement into areas of sub-specialization within the field. As an alternative, Auburn University’s Rural Studio seeks to synthetically and holistically address every aspect of a sustainable world including nature, the economy, societal conditions, individual health, and well-being.

By addressing the insufficient housing and community infrastructure needs of the Black Belt, Rural Studio offers a corrective answer to Whitney Young’s call to action. Rural Studio engages in many types of public and private projects. Rural Studio students have designed and built more than 175 homes and community projects in west Alabama. Since its inception, more than 800 architecture students have experienced the substantive impact of architecture firsthand. In the most recent decade, Rural Studio has expanded beyond its original focus on housing to also include in its portfolio much needed community infrastructure including public parks, playgrounds, and sports facilities where none existed before. Rural studio has designed and built Boys and Girls Clubs and Scouting facilities, where disadvantaged youth can gather and spend time after school. In Rural Studio’s own hometown of Newbern, Alabama, students have provided a much-needed fire station, a town hall, and a community library. All of these projects have contributed to the enhanced safety, security, welfare, and educational opportunities of our neighbors.

In Rural Studio’s ongoing project, most commonly referred to as the “20K House,” students are faced with the challenge of designing a mass-market house that can be built by a contractor in a market-rate economy for less than \$20,000. The 20K House began in 2005 as an Rural Studio research project in Hale County to address the need for well-designed affordable housing while simultaneously creating an industry of small, local home building. The initial experiments all consisted of single bedroom homes, but most recently Rural Studio has expanded the program to include models that have two bedrooms. To date, Rural Studio has designed and built seventeen prototypes for the 20K House in and around Hale County.

The 20k Project seeks to create dignified houses that afford responsible home ownership as a real possibility for everyone. With this as the ultimate goal, and after intense scrutiny and testing of the prototypes, Rural Studio has developed the foundation for what is referred to as the “20K House Product line.” The Initial product line includes three one-bedroom houses named for their owners: Dave’s House (2009), MacArthur’s House (2010), and Joanne’s House (2011). Future additions to the 20K House Product Line will include multiple bedroom options of existing prototypes such as: Bobby’s House (2014), Michelle’s House (2014), and Sylvia’s House (2014), as well as homes with integrated accessibility and storm sheltering features such as Turner’s House (2012) and Eddie’s House (2013).

In the last ten years, at least seventy-two architecture students have invested over 127,900 hours in the

design and construction of the 20K House. In taking the 20K House from “Project to Product,” Rural Studio has continued to engage with outside consultants to aid in aligning the 20K House documents with the current International Residential Code as well as Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines. Two model homes for the 20K House Product Line have been built in Hale County, with a third currently under construction. These public models will be used for showing the homes to potential clients, as well as for environmental performance testing and other interests of Rural Studio. As a next step, Rural Studio has recently partnered with several developers to field test the constructability and performance of the 20K House Product Line outside of the Studio’s direct oversight and control. Once field tests have been deemed successful, the ultimate goal is twofold: One goal is to develop a set of construction documents and specifications sufficient for construction in a climate similar to central Alabama and easily adjusted to meet the building requirements of other areas beyond our region; “The second goal of this project is to provide reliable and adaptable plans for anyone interested in constructing housing that is dignified, affordable, and sustainable.

Samuel Mockbee once famously stated:

“Everyone, rich or poor, deserves a shelter for the soul, architects should lead in procuring social and environmental change. [...] 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.”³

Staying true to this founding principle of active engagement, Rural Studio continues to produce ideas and methods that can be useful not only to the communities of rural west Alabama but also our lessons-learned and best practices may transfer to academic and professional endeavors around the world.” to this: “Staying true to the founding principle of active engagement, Rural Studio continues to produce ideas and promote academic and practical and methods that can be useful not only to West Alabama but to professional and academic endeavors around the world.



If you’d like to read more about the 20K House, please visit the Rural Studio website at <http://www.ruralstudio.org/initiatives/20k-house>.

Works Cited

Whitney M. Young, Jr., “Keynote Address” (American Institute of Architects Annual Meeting, Portland, Oregon, June 25, 1968).

Majora Carter, as quoted by Ray C. Anderson, Confessions of a Radical Industrialist: Profits, People, Purpose – Doing Business by Respecting the Earth. (New York: St. Martin Press, 2009), p. 257.

Samuel Mockbee quoted in, Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, *Proceed and be Bold: Rural Studio after Samuel Mockbee*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), p. 7.

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- Samuel Mockbee