AMY BULLINGTON

Amy is a registered architect and graduated in 2015 with a master’s from the City and Regional Planning program at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. As part of her work at Auburn University, she spent two years at Rural Studio where she teamed with another student to design and build Christine’s House. At UNC, her master’s research focused on the potential for community design in the Triangle, and she was awarded the 2015 AICP Outstanding Student Award. Amy is a project architect at CaleScapes, an art and architecture collaborative located in Raleigh, North Carolina.

I n t r o d u c t i o n: Hale County, Alabama

There is no interstate in Hale County, Alabama. I-20 stretches east to west just north of the county’s border, connecting Tuscaloosa, Alabama to Meridian, Mississippi and Highway 80 cuts across its southwest corner linking Selma, Alabama to nearby Demopolis. Within Hale County, two-lane state routes cut through an open landscape of fields and catfish ponds, interrupted by the occasional small municipality: Moundville, Akron, Greensboro, Newbern.

Hale County is part of the Black Belt, a region that stretches across central Alabama and northeast Mississippi and is known for its dark, fertile soil.1 In 1936, as part of an assignment to record the condition of sharecroppers, many locals still bristle at the publication’s stark depiction of the region.4 As Christenberry’s work points out, poverty is not the only story of Hale County. There is also incredible beauty apparent in the landscape, the rich vernacular, and the many residents who feel a strong connection to the land. The reality of this place, like any other, is complex.

Today Hale County has an estimated population of more than 15,000 residents, spread out over approximately 640 square miles. More than half of the county’s residents identify as African American, less than fifteen percent of those twenty-five years or older hold a bachelor’s degree, and more than a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line.3 Greensboro, the largest city as well as the county seat, was once the center of the booming cotton industry; today it boasts of being the Catfish Capital of Alabama. The city’s downtown is listed in the National Register of Historic Places with approximately 150 historic structures, sixty of which predate the Civil War.

The northern part of the county is home to Moundville Archeological Park, which gets its name from a cluster of earthen mounds ranging from three feet to fifty-seven feet high, evidence of an ancient Native American settlement.2 The Black Warrior River winds along the western boundary of the county, and a portion of the Talladega National Forest covers the county’s northeast corner. Between these landmarks, the landscape is marked with barns, silos, farmhouses, catfish ponds, and open fields – a postcard of the picturesque American South.

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In the 1960s, inspired by Evans’ work, artist William Christenberry began to document the landscape of Hale County. Born just north of the county line, in Tuscaloosa, Christenberry grew up in Hale County and described it as the landscape of his childhood.2 For more than four decades, his work has marked the passage of time throughout the county, revealing the area’s surreal beauty and enigmatic allure. Taken along with the work of Agee and Walker, Christenberry’s images underscore the inherent complexity of the Black Belt.

In recognition of Rural Studio’s work, Samuel Mockbee was posthumously awarded the AIA Gold Medal, the American Institute of Architects’ highest honor. Andrew Freear, director of the studio since Mockbee’s death in 2001, received the 2006 Ralph Erskine Award for Architecture, an international honor reserved for “innovation in architecture and urban design with regard to social, ecological and aesthetic aspects.”8 Most recently, the Rural Studio was recognized with the AIA’s 2015 Whitney M. Young Jr. Award, named for the civil rights activist who challenged American architects to produce work relevant to the nation’s pressing social issues.
The program’s website succinctly states, “Rural Studio is an undergraduate program of the School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture at Auburn University. We have been in Hale County since 1995, where we hope we have been a good neighbor and friend to the community.” Through an approach that is grounded in its context, the Rural Studio illustrates the potential of creative work at the intersection of planning and design. Projects completed over the past two decades, Rural Studio projects have celebrated the uniqueness of Hale County by integrating art and culture into community revitalization work.

Projects: Newbern, Alabama

The Rural Studio’s headquarters is located in Newbern, about a ten-minute drive south of Greensboro. A cluster of buildings signifies downtown, and a flashing traffic light slows the occasional car travelling through on AL-61 to Unicount. By any measure Newbern is a small town; it is home to less than 200 residents. The majority identify as African American, more than a third live below the poverty line, and the median household income stands at just $27,500.1

While Rural Studio’s work is located throughout the Black Belt region, this unassuming small town is at its heart. The studio’s main campus, located in an 1890s Victorian farmhouse known as the Morrisette House, is a timeline of the organization’s growth: the Supershed and Pods were designed in 2010 to complement the studio’s efforts to produce building materials and labor by a local contractor. Dave’s House, 20K v08, was constructed in Newbern in 2009, and in 2014, three more prototypes were built for community members. The latest iteration (20Kv17) was recently completed for two Newbern residents, Geraldine Braxton and her son Patrick.

Frances Sullivan was born and raised in Newbern and served as postmaster at the Newbern Post Office for more than twenty years. In an essay included in The Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County, she outlines the changes that the Rural Studio has brought to Newbern, concluding, “For me, Rural Studio’s impact on Newbern is ultimately described in the word ‘opportunity.’ It is the opportunity for an individual to have a better home, for the community to have a better fire department, for the town council and mayor and citizens to have a town hall for community meetings and functions, and for our youth to have doors opened for their future. . . . It may be years from now before we can know the full impact of the Rural Studio’s presence, but today we find a sense of community that includes both what the town was and what it can become.”14

Lessons: The Importance of Place

Rural Studio projects speak to the potential to celebrate the unique character of a place by integrating art and culture into community revitalization work. The studio’s deep roots in Hale County have led to a design process that is centered on learning from and engaging with the community. Projects often convey a sense of belonging nowhere else. The keys to Rural Studio’s success are embodied by commitment to community, authenticity of work, and local ownership of projects.

Commitment to community. In 2013, Rural Studio celebrated its twentieth anniversary. For more than two decades students and faculty have left Auburn University’s main campus and travelled almost 150 miles to live and work in western Alabama. Living in Hale County has allowed students to begin to understand what it’s like to live in a rural area, and, more importantly, what it’s like to live in the community for which they are designing. In many cases, this on-the-ground experience has enabled designers to go beyond demographic data and develop a deeper understanding and connection to the community, a critical skill for both architects and planners alike.
Rural Studio’s longevity has further underscored its commitment to Hale County, and multi-year projects such as Lions Park in Greensboro have allowed the studio to continue to build trust and deepen relationships. The studio has demonstrated a willingness to engage in ongoing conversations about its work and its rootedness speaks directly to its accountability. As Andrew Freear states, “Any good we’ve done has been an outcome of remaining in this place for twenty years and building trust – showing ourselves to be good, and permanent, neighbors.”

Authenticity of work. A natural outcome of this rootedness and longevity is the authenticity of Rural Studio’s work. The rich southern vernacular is a common thread throughout projects, expressed in both form and materiality. The gathering space of the front porch is a defining element of the Bryant (Hay Bale) House, and porches continue to be central components of 20K House prototypes. Other projects celebrate local materials: the walls of the Glass Chapel in Mason’s Bend are built from the region’s abundant red clay, while the walls of Lions Park Scout Hut take advantage of small diameter pine timbers (“thinnings”) that are abundant in the nearby Talladega National Forest.

Ultimately, projects are unique to the people and place for which they were designed; this connection to the vernacular serves as a counterpoint to common criticisms of modern architecture’s coldness (and New Urbanism’s “faux-ness”). Timothy Hursley’s photographs of the Butterfly House in Mason’s Bend, taken after Anderson and Ora Lee Harris had lived there for four years, show a home personalized by its occupants, in contrast to the carefully staged modern residential architecture lampooned on websites such as UnhappyHipsters.com.

The authenticity of Rural Studio’s work is also exemplified in its approach to sustainability. Instead of blindly pursuing the latest technological innovations, the studio’s efforts are rooted in developing an authentic representation of what is most sustainable for a particular community. Both people and place are paramount in what is called sustainability with a small “s” making thoughtful design decisions so that buildings can be maintained with limited resources.

This careful approach requires both creativity and an understanding of context, as students study time-tested strategies for dealing with the Southern climate, translating design elements such as deep overhangs and cupolas to modern construction while also ensuring buildings are durable and require minimal maintenance.

This tailored, authentic approach to sustainability also encompasses the reuse of existing buildings, and, as Andrew Freear points out, the advantages extend well-beyond environmental benefits: “As the Rural Studio’s community projects have grown in size, one of the most important questions we have asked ourselves is: ‘What does it mean to be sustainable in west Alabama?’ . . . We think salvaging and repurposing buildings for the twenty-first century is the responsible solution, and recycling is an important part of the Rural Studio’s ethic. As the keepers of history and memories, old buildings preserve a sense of community and as regional signature they maintain a distinctive sense of place.”

Local ownership of projects. This sensitivity to place highlights the final key to Rural Studio’s success: its projects are ultimately owned by the community. The exception is the studio’s facilities, projects are built for community partners or individual homeowners. Accordingly, a project’s long-term success (or failure) often hinges on the clients, and projects ranging from affordable housing to community amenities serve as a means of empowering the community itself to begin to enact positive change.

While financial details such as land ownership and property taxes vary by project, the Rural Studio’s most successful initiatives are those with strong local buy-in. Over the past decade, Rural Studio has completed several projects at Lions Park, a 40-acre public park in Greensboro. The studio’s involvement was initiated by the Lions Park Committee, a group composed of representatives from Hale County, the City of Greensboro, and the Lions Club. Each of these groups had an ownership stake in the park, and the Rural Studio worked to unite them around a strategic vision for the park’s future. To date, baseball fields, restrooms, a skate park, a concession stand, and a playground have been completed, with funders including Baseball Tomorrow, Auburn University, the Tony Hawk Foundation, and money raised by local Lions Club members. Rural Studio is currently working to help transfer sole ownership of the park to the City of Greensboro and also set up a City Parks and Recreation Board.

These locally owned projects ultimately serve as a way to reinforce the value of western Alabama’s small rural communities. Through its work to empower community members and celebrate local culture, Rural Studio clearly states that the Black Belt region is a place with inherent dignity and beauty. In The Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County, Andrew Freear asserts, “Hale County is essential to what we do and what we
are. For the last twenty years we’ve designed and built for this particular place and its communities. We believe that design must start by observing the context and learning from it. Living where we work and being actively involved in the community helps us in creating appropriate designs. Rural Studio has, in turn, been profoundly shaped by the architecture and landscape of this corner of rural west Alabama and by the needs, concerns, and aspirations of its people.”

Conclusion
In many ways, Hale County is representative of much of the American South; in 2010, almost a quarter of the region’s population lived in areas considered rural. Many rural communities face issues similar to those faced by small towns in the Black Belt, and Rural Studio’s work points to the potential of creative solutions that celebrate the unique beauty of a place.

In a time of increasing globalization and mass production, Rural Studio is grounded in the fundamental idea that people and place matter. Stemming from this core belief is the idea that creative approaches, tailored to the unique character and place matter. For the last twenty years we’ve designed and built for this particular place and its communities. We believe that design must start by observing the context and learning from it. Living where we work and being actively involved in the community helps us in creating appropriate designs. Rural Studio has, in turn, been profoundly shaped by the architecture and landscape of this corner of rural west Alabama and by the needs, concerns, and aspirations of its people.”

To learn more about Rural Studio, check out the recent publication Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County, Alabama by Andrew Freear and Elena Barthel with Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and photography by Timothy Hunley.

Works Cited
 Freear and Elena Barthel with Andrea Oppenheimer Dean; and photography by Timothy Hunley. 2014. The Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County. Princeton Architectural Press; pg. 22.


Andrew Freear and Elena Barthel with Andrea Oppenheimer Dean; photography by Timothy Hunley. 2014. The Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County. Princeton Architectural Press; pg. 11.


Table 10: Rural Population (percent of total) - South Region: 24.2% . The South is defined by the United States Census Bureau as the eleven states stretching from Texas to Delaware.
