



LESSONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Looking at the Impact of the Rural Studio

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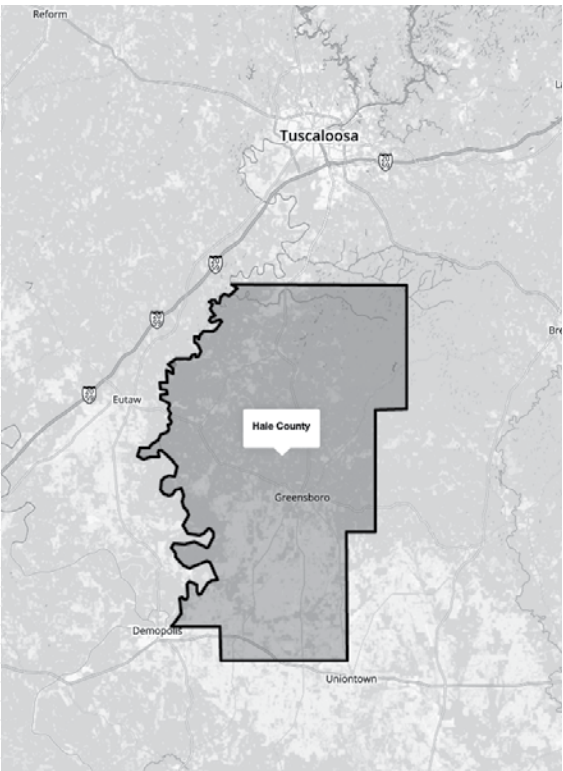


Figure 1 - Hale County, Alabama. Source: Mapbox.

Introduction: 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 cross 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 in the American South, author James Agee and photographer Walker Evans spent two months documenting the people and landscape of Hale County. Their findings, published in the 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, revealed the difficult lives of the rural poor. Evans' photographs are arresting and haunting, capturing both the poverty and humanity of their subjects.

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.

While *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* accurately documented the conditions facing sharecroppers, many locals still bristle at the publication's stark depiction of the region.³ 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.⁴ Greensboro, the largest city as well as the county seat, was once the center of the booming cotton industry;⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.

Practice: The Rural Studio

More than twenty years ago, drawn by this rich landscape, Auburn University professors Samuel Mockbee and D.K. Ruth founded a "design-build" program in Hale County. To date, over 600 students have been a part of the Rural Studio, designing and building more than 150 projects throughout the Black Belt region.⁸

In recognition of Rural Studio's work, Samuel Mockbee won a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant in 2000 and in 2004 he 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."⁹ 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 1993, 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. 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 Uniontown. 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 \$27,500.¹⁰

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 built in the late 1990s and early 2000s to provide work space and student housing, and a commercial kitchen was added in 2010 to complement the studio’s efforts to produce its own food. In the years since, a Storehouse and a Solar Greenhouse have been built to support Morrisette Farm’s continued growth, and a Woodshop is also being built to

provide additional space for students to fabricate the ever-changing construction mocks-ups that dot the back lawn.

The eight buildings comprising downtown Newbern are less than a mile north of the Morrisette House. Two are long-standing community landmarks: the Newbern Post Office and Newbern Mercantile. Three are older structures used as Rural Studio facilities, and the remaining are projects completed by Rural Studio students over the past decade: the Newbern Fire Station, Newbern Town Hall, and Newbern Library. Each of these projects signifies a milestone for the town: the Fire Station was its first new public building in more than a century,¹¹ the Town Hall provides much needed space for town council and community meetings, and the Library most recently transformed the vacant Old Bank Building into Newbern’s first public internet access point.¹²

While Rural Studio’s investment in the Morrisette property speaks of the deep roots it has established in Hale County, the studio’s thoughtful work for its neighbors in Newbern tells the full story of its impact. The effect on downtown Newbern is perhaps most obvious; however, the studio’s influence extends into the surrounding community. The Newbern Baseball Club, located two miles northeast of downtown, has long been a central gathering space, hosting regional baseball games for more than a century. The Rural Studio completed a careful renovation of these facilities in 2001, strengthening this longstanding hub of community activity.¹³

In 2004 the Rural Studio began the 20K House project, an initiative to design and build prototypes of small houses that can be constructed for a total of \$20,000, inclusive of 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.

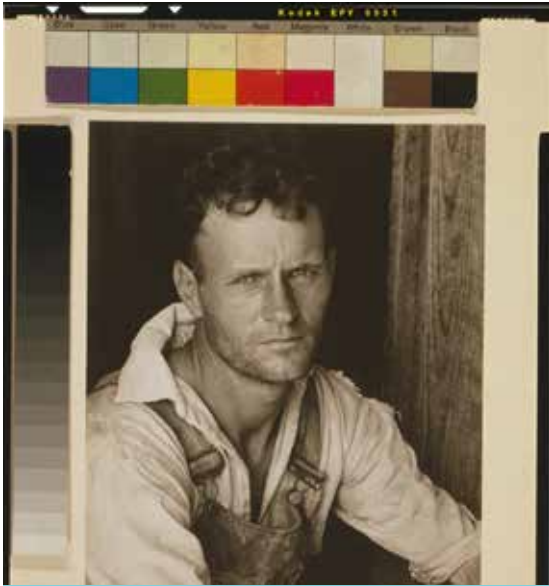


Figure 2 - Floyd Burroughs, Sharecropper. Source: Walker Evans, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog.

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.



Figure 3 - Red Building in Forest, Hale County, Alabama, 1983. Source: William Christenberry, NPR.org



Figure 4 - Newbern, AL. Photo Credit arwcheek flickr photostream, April 2014.

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.”¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

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. With the exception of 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.”¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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 of a place, have the potential to empower communities and explore larger issues such as sustainability and social justice. While Rural Studio’s work is deeply embedded in western Alabama, its work on the 20K House illustrates the potential to expand this conversation to a wider audience.

As Samuel Mockbee pointed out, architecture is, at its core, “a discipline rooted in community and its environmental, social, political, and esthetic issues.”²⁰ Rural Studio’s continued commitment to these ideals underscores the potential of community development work that celebrates a community while also empowering it.



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 Hursley.

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Figure 5 - Newbern Baseball Club. Photo Credit Tim Hursley.

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