

## Samuel Mockbee



I grew up between 1949 and 1969 in a large middle-class family in a small village. My parents had a painting business with an associated shop and nine children. This background taught me the value of simplicity and the everyday.

Before studying architecture, I followed an education in concrete, steel and wood construction. And after graduating as an architect in 1984, my view on architecture was still largely based on the beauty of a successful construction. And the purity and visibility of the construction in the architecture of Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, Cedric Price, not to mention Jan Duiker and Frank van Klingeren, continues to be a source of inspiration.

As an architect in the construction office of the Ministry of Education in Mozambique between 1988 and 1992, I experienced how the profession requires a strong social and cultural commitment. I came to see architecture as something

Harris (Butterfly) House, 1997. The Harris family's 600 square-foot new home is semi-roofed and fully ventilated.



Bryant (Hay Bale) House, 1991.

embedded in a certain time and place – and being backed by a strong sense of community. A building should be made on location with what’s available on site. Hence, the architect’s dilemma is how to use the available resources, talent and craftsmanship to create something that improves the conditions of users.

After my return, I taught at the Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) as an office-based architect. Inspired by the experiences in Mozambique and my students’ drive to create an extroverted and boundless architecture, I decided to lecture about my work in Mozambique – and so developed the Architecture of Scarcity. Subsequently, my students would investigate the visions of selected architects around this theme and hopefully become inspired themselves.

As I prepared for the seminar, I was put on the trail of Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee. He was convinced that everyone, rich or poor, deserved “a shelter for the soul”. At the heart of his being and thinking as an architect was the pursuit of justice and mutual respect between all people.

Mockbee was an architect who could have easily had a career path that focused on high-net-worth clients. Instead, he chose to embark on an idealistic and unfamiliar quest that put education at the core of his practice.

## Samuel Mockbee, 1944–2001

Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee, a fifth-generation Mississippian, was born 23 December 1944 in Meridian. In 1974, he graduated from the Department of Architecture, Design and Construction at Auburn University.

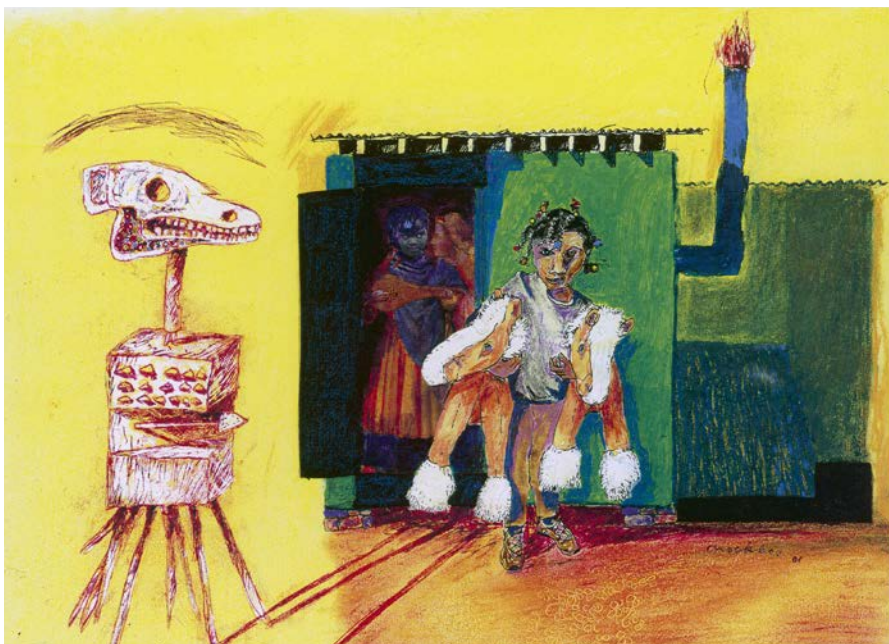
After having an architectural practice first alone and later with Thomas Goodman, he formed a partnership with Coleman Coker in 1983. The firm MockbeeCoker gained a reputation for designs fusing traditional American South architecture with the language of modernism.

In 1993, Mockbee and his friend and colleague from Auburn University, Professor D.K. Ruth, founded Rural Studio, which put education at the heart of his architecture. Rural Studio’s mission was to create an educational program to train ‘citizen architects’ – architects who fully understood the importance of their decisions. These civic-minded architects would become an integral part of the community in which they worked – in the most democratic way possible.

Among the many awards Mockbee received for his work with Rural Studio, he received a MacArthur fellowship – the “Genius Grant” – in 2000 for connecting social consciousness and unconventional design. Sambo died on 30 December 2001 from complications of leukemia.



Portrait of Samuel Mockbee (2001) in front of *The Children of Eutaw Pose Before Their Ancient Cabins*.



*Aldo Rossi arrives at Lucy's house, 2001, painting by Samuel Mockbee.*

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## MockbeeCoker: Thought and process

Samuel Mockbee and Coleman Coker started their architectural practice in 1983. They opposed a business-minded architecture that strove for minimal production and maximum personal gain. Instead of focusing on such petty concerns as aesthetics and profit, MockbeeCoker's architecture was founded on issues around social responsibility, stewardship and nurturing culture.

They believed Western society relied too heavily on embracing scientific truths and subordinating personal views. And now, instead of gaining the intended clarity, society



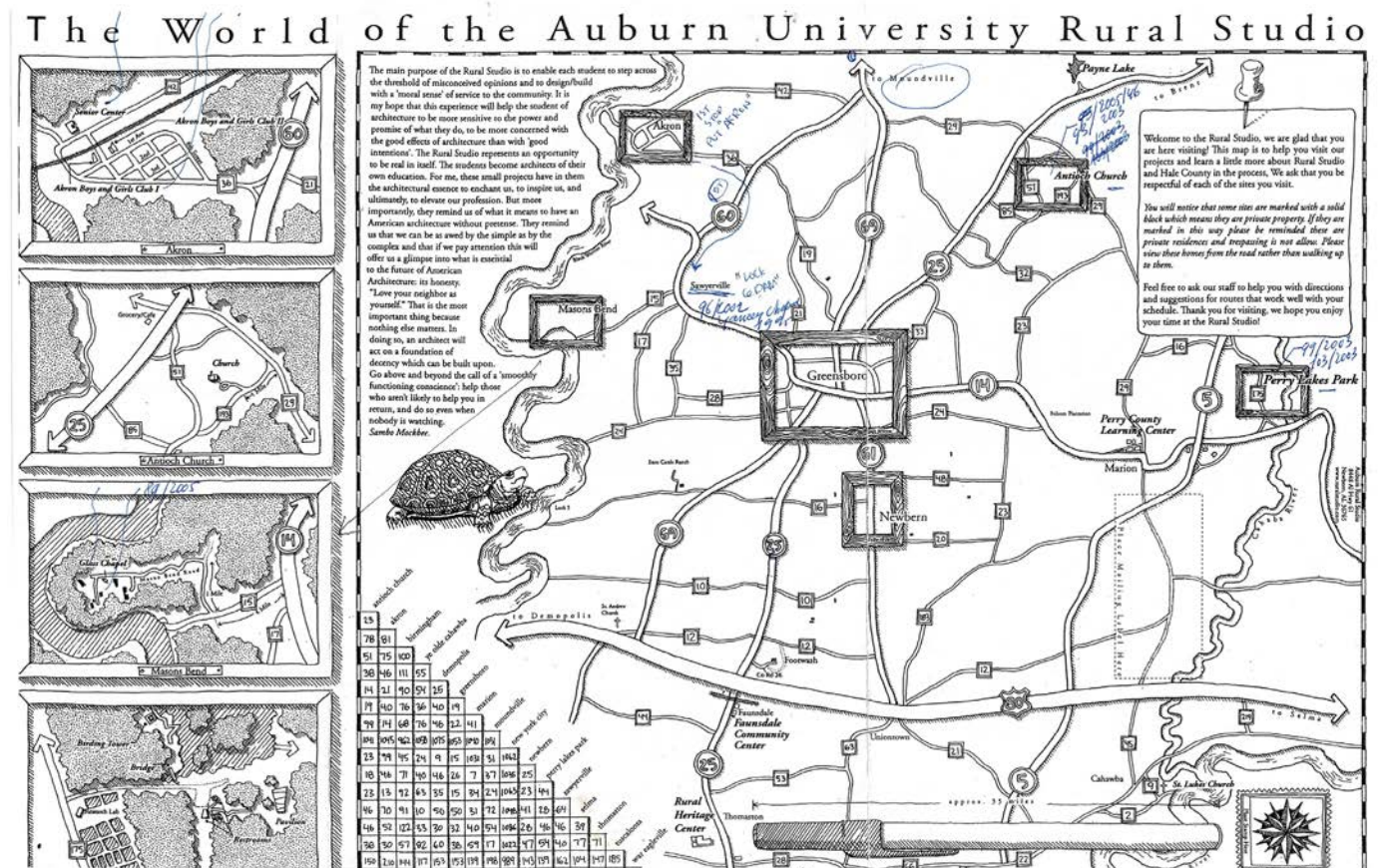
Cook House Oxford, Mississippi, 1991. View from southwest. The building bears an aesthetic similarity to Rural Studio buildings.

could no longer see the world as it actually was. Architects no longer had enough of a grasp of life's subtleties to find true and unique answers to the different ways people lived.

And here is where MockbeeCoker stepped up. They saw architecture as a way to step over the threshold of injustice to seek and expose what real necessities were required by users. And their vision for what's required to create meaningful architecture involved paintings, drawings and writings as part of the process – and these all formed a consistent whole. Their art and architecture sought to be about eternal things: truth, beauty and moral responsibility.

They also recognized the contradictions of everyday life in Alabama south of the Tennessee River and east of the Mississippi River – 'the South' of the United States of America. It's here they derived the essence of their architecture.

It's a countryside of extremes and still dominated by abandoned and restored architectural relics of the successes of 19<sup>th</sup>-century agriculture – and acting as living memories



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for those “left behind”. The vastness and uniqueness of this region, where Mockbee and Coker also lived and worked, inspired their own interpretation of a regional architecture.

Seeking a balance between those particular contradictions that still survive in the South – between tradition and the arbitrary, misunderstanding and knowledge, wisdom and mystery – their architecture crossed both place and time. In this way they could ‘safeguard’ the local traditions, images and myths for the future.



Bryant (Hay Bale) House, the Rural Studio’s first house has walls made of hay bales.

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## Samuel Mockbee: Architecture of decency

Samuel Mockbee’s career began rather successfully, but he did not feel he was taking on his civic responsibility as an architect. He referred to a quote by the poet and psychiatrist William Carlos Williams (1883–1963): “The best architect is that person with the deepest insight into life in a community.”

**“The best architect is that person with the deepest insight into life in a community.”**

© William Carlos Williams

Many architects expect and hope their work will serve humanity and help make a better world. They see architecture as a quest with much ambiguity and following paths-less-trodden. But at the core, architects all have to make some basic choices, regardless of time and place. Renaissance architect Léon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) called it the choice between fortune and virtue.

Obviously, Mockbee chose for virtue. And, as mentioned, he used drawing and painting as a starting point to explore his engagement with a particular project.

To form the chapel’s walls, the students filled the 1000 donated tires with soil until they became rock hard. To fortify the tire frames, they inserted reinforcing bars, then wrapped the tires in wire mesh and coated them with stucco.



The narrow, dark entry leads to a little stream running into a trough.





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He believed it was important to give free rein to the imagination without any influence from a preconceived form – to create an image that represented a possible idea. At this early stage, he believed his imagination likely had a better understanding of what should come later.

By creating large murals, Mockbee attempted to expand the study of architecture to a broader human perspective. It was a way to gain insight into the economic poverty of the community in which he lived and worked. But it went beyond looking at the effects of poverty. Instead, he saw it as a way for architects to step over the threshold of that injustice and address the real needs of neglected fellow citizens. It came down to the question: How could he as an architect bring relief in a practical way?

On the one hand, according to Mockbee, the architectural profession has an ethical responsibility to help improve the living conditions of the poor. On the other hand, the profession must challenge the presented circumstances by implementing responsible ecological and social changes.

And driven by a pursuit for justice, honesty and mutual respect between all people, Mockbee was able to focus his genius to express these principles by creating buildings of profound beauty.

For Mockbee, the relatively smaller design projects also had to have the architectural strength to delight, inspire and ultimately elevate the profession at large. But it was even more important for him to have an unpretentious architecture – one that impressed with both the simple and the complex. In other words, it had to be honest. And indeed, his inventive designs, inspired by the local shapes, are imbued with ingenious construction solutions and unique applications of collected, recycled or repurposed material.

Mockbee described his architecture as contemporary modernism rooted in the southern culture of the United States. He certainly found inspiration in local sources such as the multiformity of overhanging tin roofs, the rusting metal caravans and all the expansive verandas. His designs tended towards asymmetry and peculiarity. “I’m drawn to anything that has a quirkiness to it, a mystery to it,” he said.

**“I’m drawn to anything that has a quirkiness to it, a mystery to it.”**

© Samuel Mockbee

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## Rural Studio: proceed and be bold

Samuel Mockbee believed that architecture should be about great design. He also believed it should have an agenda of social transformation. This involved a process of getting to know the people who you were building for so you are then best able to help them. “What is required,” says Mockbee, “is the replacement of abstract opinions with knowledge based on real human contact and personal realization applied to the work at hand.”

Everyone deserved their own refuge, according to Mockbee. And he believed architects should be at the forefront of not only providing this refuge but also bringing about social and environmental change. He also recognized that most architects had unfortunately lost their moral compass and were “lapdogs of the rich”.

So, if a profession needs reform, he figured education would be the place to start. “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,” he said. He also believed the teachings of “the classroom of the community” – where students often had their first contact with real poverty – would have a much more long-term impact.

This vision of architecture as pedagogical and social activism only developed step by step for Mockbee. In the late 1970s, after graduating as an architect from Auburn University and practicing in Canton, Mississippi, he was disturbed by the inequalities that still prevailed, even after the Civil Rights movement. He soon came to realize his own rather privileged life was made possible at the expense of African-Americans in his community.

In the early 1980s, he had an opportunity to address his weighted conscience through a housing initiative in Canton, which aimed to renovate existing homes and build new ones for needy families. While participating in this initiative, which provided his first meaningful encounter with poor African-Americans, Mockbee gained vital insights into issues of community, class and race.

“What is required, is the replacement of abstract opinions with knowledge based on real human contact and personal realization applied to the work at hand.”

© Samuel Mockbee

He came to understand that ignorance of “the other” and economic inequality, rather than just race, were key features that made the difference. He also experienced that once he and others entered this world, this was actually the first step towards enhancing mutual respect and diminishing prejudice.

While Mockbee certainly could have chosen for a more lucrative career, he instead chose for a more idealistic and unfamiliar path by making education the core of his practice. The strength of his professional skills makes this dedication all the more inspiring.

He and Rural Studio cofounder D.K. Ruth – no less than the Dean of the architecture school at Auburn University – both wanted to improve conditions both inside and outside architecture. They wanted an education system that took the students out of college and pushed them into the world.

And certainly, the knowledge Mockbee and his students discovered in Hale County could never have been taught – only experienced. And while it was a bold idea to offer residential homes to disenfranchised residents of Hale County, it was bolder still to allow the students take responsibility for the entire architecture process. It reflected his passion that architecture education should go beyond “paper architecture” and towards making real buildings and instilling “a moral sense of service to the community”.

To this day, Rural Studio offers second- and fifth-year students an education similar to the architectural studies at Auburn University. It represents an architecture that encompasses not only practical architectural education and social welfare for all, but also the use of ingenious construction techniques and materials that are donated, preserved and/or recycled – meager budgets being the mother of invention.

Second-year architecture students can choose to spend a quarter of their time in Rural Studio in a group of about 15 students, solving every aspect of architecture – from the initial meeting with the user to determine needs and wishes, to the preparatory creative design phase, through to the actual construction. They also receive lectures on building materials and construction methods and architectural history, during which students visit nearby farms and pre-war homes.



Three Rural Studio students with Jan Timmers in front of a double house under construction by the students. The houses will be occupied by homeless families as a transition to a permanent home.

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© Samuel Mockbee

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Each house takes about a year to complete. Anything built by a previous group remained – although unbuilt designs are subject to change.

About 15 fifth-year graduate students will stay in the studio for a full academic year. They design and build as a team three projects from start to finish – establishing deeper relationships with each other and with the community.

Although Rural Studio initially works only on homes for underprivileged residents of Hale County, it quickly expanded its work to provide buildings that revitalize and even reshape larger social realms. Onward and upward.

Samuel Mockbee teaching at the Red Barn.



Projects

## Harris (Butterfly) House, 1997

The Harris family's 600 square-foot new home is semi-roofed and fully ventilated. The wing-like zinc roof of the veranda, supported by sharply curved beams, explains the nickname 'Butterfly House'. Two intersecting rectangles of the roof create a 250 square-foot porch and give the impression that the house is ready to fly. And like a butterfly, it's light and airy.

The steeply sloped roof collects rainwater in a reservoir for use in the toilet and laundry. The main purpose of the dramatic roof is to channel cool breezes – the design's starting point was in fact optimizing natural ventilation. A wall fan and adjustable skylights suck air through the house. In winter, awnings cover the skylights and a wood-burning stove keeps the one-bedroom house cozy.



Anderson and Ora Le Harris on the veranda of their 'Butterfly House' shortly after its completion.



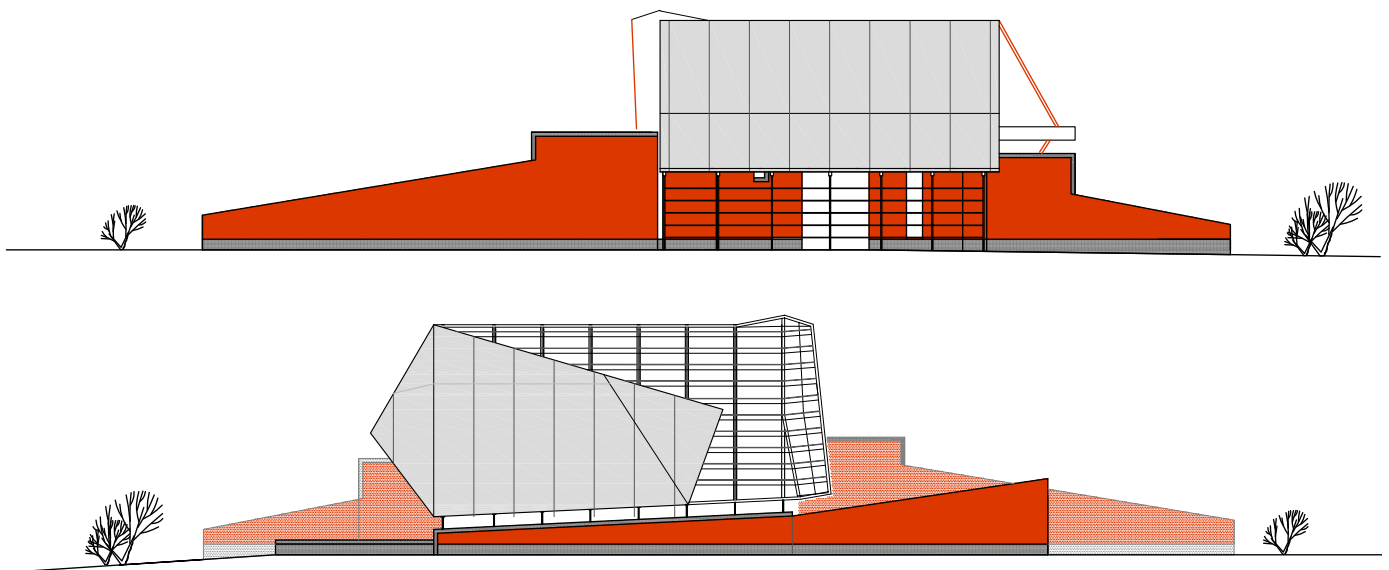
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## Mason's Bend Community Center, 2000

Mockbee described the building as a chapel, with a front window and adobe walls inspired by forms in the surrounding environment. Like the other buildings of the hamlet, this building embraces the ground. It rests on a broad base of rammed earth, which merges with the iron-colored road. The view of the back looks like an old barn.

The overall design was dictated by its location: a triangular piece of land adjacent to the property of three of the four major families of Mason's Bend and belonging to the owner of the 'Butterfly House'. In exchange for the use of his land, Rural Studio moved an old bus where one of Harris's sons lived, from the property to Harris' backyard. What started as a closed structure in the design ended up as an open pavilion whose footprint of 15x30 feet is similar to that of the old bus.

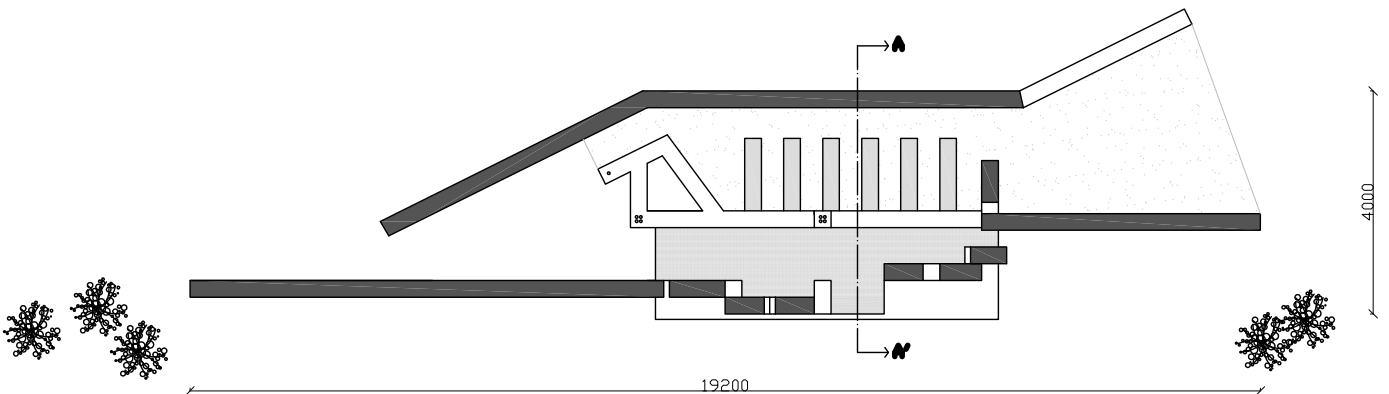
The project's rammed earth walls, which are long and low to suggest the shape of a prow, provide strength. And the folded metal and glass roof provides the desired contemporary look. The building leads visitors through a narrow entrance, covered by a fold of aluminum, to a central nave topped by a glass membrane. The distinction between the raised nave with gravel floor, and lower aisle covered with black concrete, is accentuated by a kink in the roof, which explains the barn-like appearance of the rear façade.



Front and back of Mason's Bend Community Center.

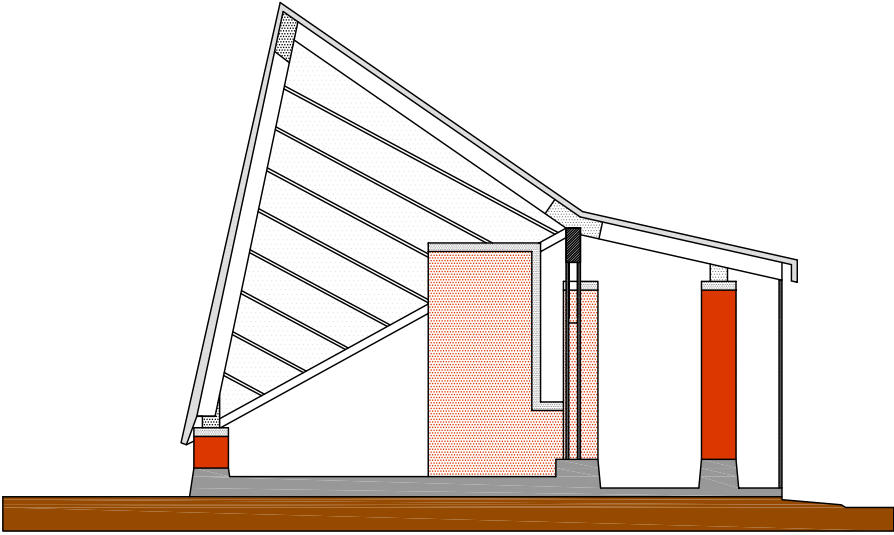


A façade of car windows partially covers a raised nave and aisle.



Long walls of rammed earth and a high folded roof of metal and glass form a distinctive profile in Mason's Bend.

Section of Mason's Bend Community Center.



The building leads visitors through a narrow entrance to a space used as a meeting place and chapel.



Mason's Bend Community Center.



## Akron Boys and Girls Club, 2001

Rural Studio students hoped that repurposing the former grocery store, which fills a triangular site at the city's busiest intersection, would help revitalize Akron. The students decided to leave the walls untouched except for cleaning them. They covered the structure with a slanted roof, built anomalous interior walls, and constructed a metal-clad extension containing a classroom and computer room, restrooms, and utility room.



The 'Akron Boys and Girls Club' sits inside the walls of the old grocery.

The idea was that the new would emerge from the old. Aesthetically, the biggest intervention was the slender roof plane that contrasts with heavy blue steel trusses. At dusk, the light inside and the blue metal frame transform the building into a blue lantern behind warm brick walls. An outsized bay window overlooking Main Street draws attention to the club's downtown presence – turning the interior into a stage and bringing the city inside.



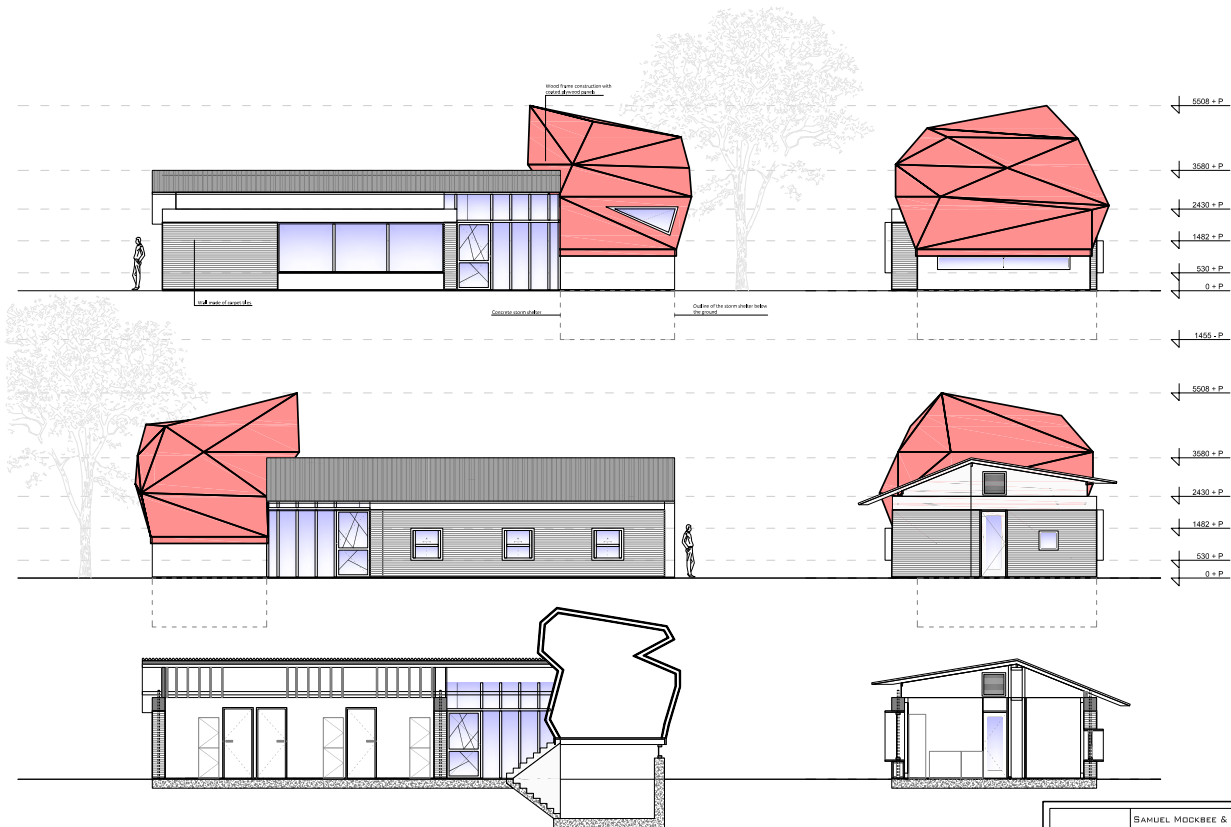
'Akron Boys and Girls Club', although the building is dimmed during the day, at dusk it glows like a blue lantern.



## Lucy's House, 2002

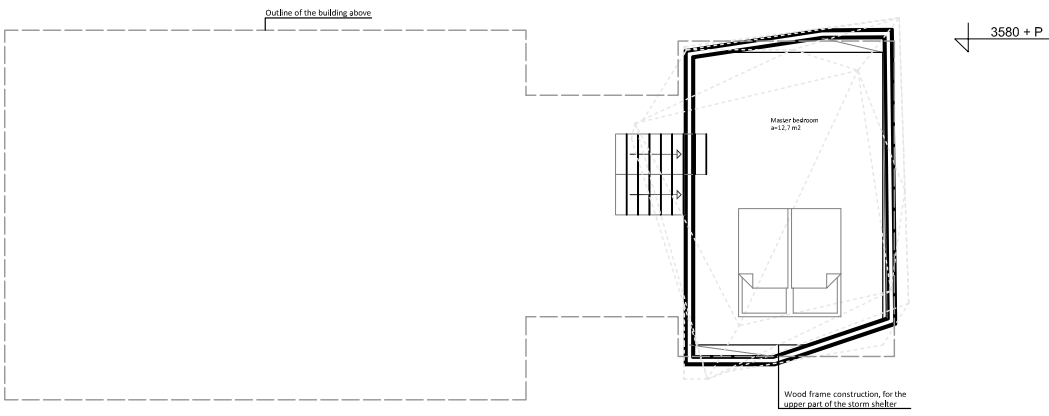
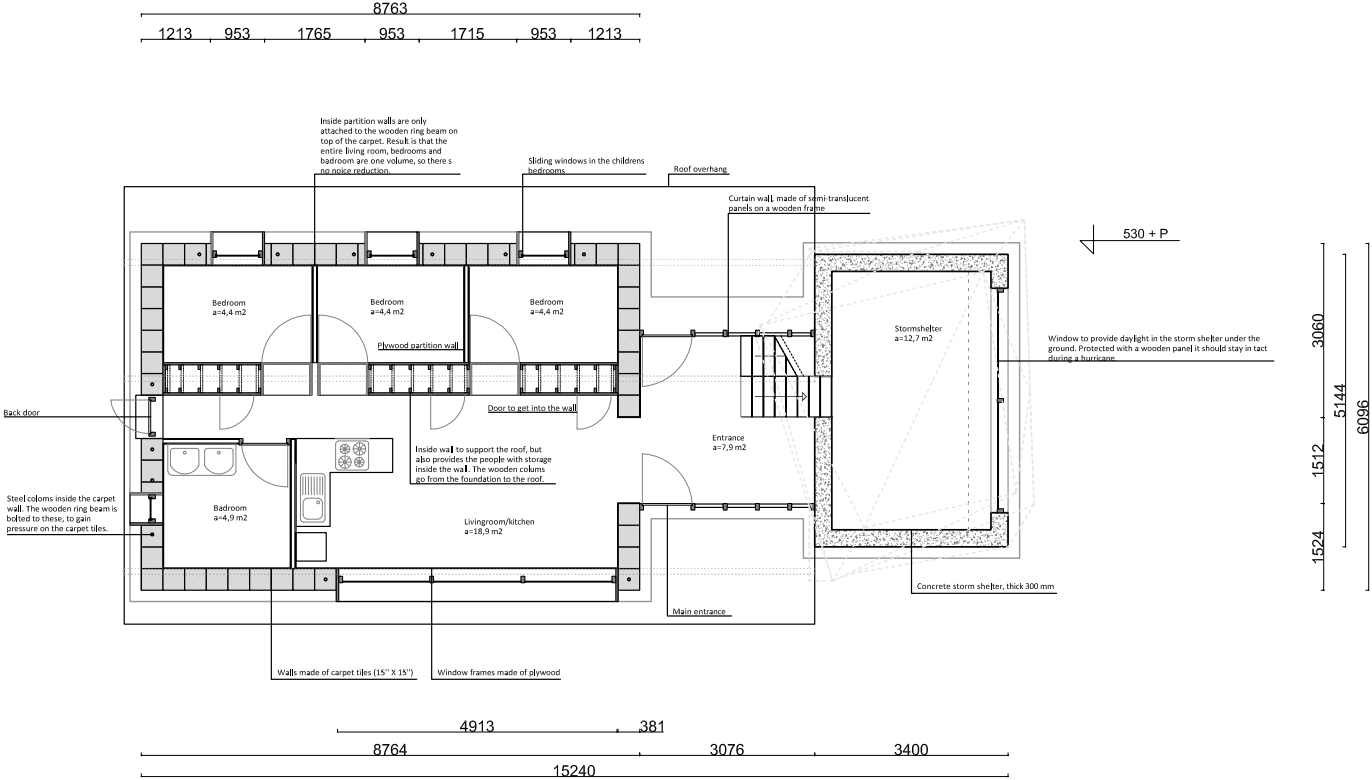
The preliminary drawing for the house shows three main elements: a two-story living area, a screened porch, and a simple tower containing the master bedroom upstairs and, a few steps below, a tornado shelter that doubles as a family room. The design was sponsored by a carpet manufacturer who was considering donating more materials to Rural Studio. Mockbee was very enthusiastic about the resulting exterior walls made from stacked and compressed surplus carpet tiles. He described the family room/tornado shelter as a spacious, cave-like and mystical space. Later, the porch was dropped and the originally simple tower was transformed into a serpentine succession of burgundy triangles clad with plywood and coated with waterproofing.

The tower, simple in Mockbee's early sketch, becomes twisted and rather dramatic.



SAMUEL MOCKBEE & RURAL STUDIO			
LUCY'S HOUSE			
DRAWING SECTIONS AND ELEVATIONS			
SCALE: 1:100	FORM: A3	DATE: 21-06-2012	
<b>RURAL STUDIO</b>			

Lucy's House.





The super-insulated walls are made of 72,000 individually stacked carpet tiles. The students stabilized the tiles with thin steel columns, covered the stacks with heavy wooden ring beams that applied pressure to the columns to re-tension the tiles into a dense mass that repelled water and fire. The carpet has been stored long enough to prevent the emission of harmful fumes and was also treated to deter vermin.

Like its predecessors, Lucy's House, built at a cost of \$32,000, was donated to its owner. The architecture is modern, albeit with a nod to rural Southern forms – chain, barns, caravans – and the demands of southwestern Alabama's prolonged heavy rains and blazing summer sun. To maintain the temperature of the living area without air conditioning, the house faces east, as does the only large window, a bay window shaded by the overhanging pitched roof.

There are only a few small openings in the rear façade, where there are three bedrooms for the children. Ceiling fans circulate air through the living area and over a low wall to the children's rooms, while an attic fan extracts warm air.

To keep the house cool, the only large opening faces east in the shadow of the overhanging shed roof. The tower, simple in Mockbee's early sketch, becomes twisted and rather dramatic. Unlike the Hay Bale and Butterfly Houses, which are also in Mason's Bend, Lucy's House is isolated from the small settlement. Her only neighbor is a relative's adjacent trailer.

# Supershed and Pods, 1997–2001

The Supershed and Pods promote closeness between students and between students and teachers.



Pods in a row under the Supershed.





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## Red Barn, 2003

The Red Barn, a former hay barn in Newbern's center, was converted into a design studio. Students from the Rural Studio cleaned up the shed and installed a staircase, which they covered with a fireproof coating. They hung windows and new shutters, laid wiring, and installed fans and lighting. Downstairs they installed toilets, an air-conditioned computer room, a photography darkroom, and a small laundry.

Today, the exterior of the Red Barn is still a rusty patchwork, with the windows glazed and mostly open. It now acts as Rural Studio's academic center. Lit up every night, it now truly part of the center of Newbern.



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## Afterword

More than any other art form, architecture is a social and cultural art that is embedded in time and place. Architectural practice requires not only participation in the profession itself, but also community engagement. As a social art, architecture is made on location and with what's available on site. The dilemma for any architect is how to use the available skill and talent to improve the community, while not compromising the profession. Architects must continually critically self-examine their perspectives to ensure these stay unique and personal while not contributing to any ongoing injustices.

Meanwhile, the forces in the world of politics, economics and the environment are strongly influenced by a population explosion in poorer countries and a technological explosion in richer countries. And these factors are having a huge influence on our natural environment. It should be the task of the architect to allow architecture to play a role in facing down these challenges. As an architect, it's not wise to sit back and leave the problem-solving to scientists and technology experts alone. Architects should take more responsibility. It's important to assert architectural values – values that also consider the common good.

Mockbee, like Lacaton & Vassal, showed in his projects a great socio-cultural commitment that transforms architecture from having a purely formal appearance to becoming something that arises out of necessity.

Like Peter Rich, Mockbee created places and spaces with his designs that improved the conditions of those they were meant to serve and support. And also, like Rich, Mockbee worked from the very beginning in close collaboration with users and communities.

Like Urban Think Tank, Mockbee used his architectural expertise to make communities livable again. He worked using a bottom-up approach in which architect, government and user have an equal input of ideas.

Like Anna Heringer, he used his architecture as a means to strengthen the cultural and individual confidence of the users.

Above all, Mockbee distinguished himself by making architectural education at Auburn University the core of his architecture.

By studying Samuel Mockbee's conception of architecture and design, one sees the timelessness and relevance of these views – particularly in our current age of material scarcity, housing shortages and disregard for housing rights.

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2012 seminar TU/eindhoven  
lecturer Jan Timmers

Lucy Harris relaxes in her living room. The walls are made of remnants of 72,000 carpet tiles.

