

The Work of Robert L. Faust: A Case Study of Design-Build in the Academy

For more than forty years Robert Faust taught in the Architecture program at Auburn University (1968 – 2011). He balanced his responsibilities as an academic with a small but substantial body of professional work. These built projects, which he constructed himself with a team of students, helped him to clarify his personal theories about space, material and Architecture.

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INTRODUCTION

By studying the work of an architect like Robert Faust, it becomes apparent that there is a history of the architect-led Design Build process, especially as it exists in academia that needs to be considered. If we were to only look at the exceptional teaching environments that pursued design and construction, like Taliesin and the Rural Studio, the other noteworthy individuals who produced fascinating work under ambiguous legal and ethical conditions would be overlooked. The work of these architects and their students is often characterized by unusual forms, regional design motifs, unusual material choices and a committed involvement in the construction process. The degree to which they were involved in construction was often tempered by the real concern that they would face critique from their colleagues or discipline from State Registration Boards. Because of this, these architects and educators learned that they often had to exist on the periphery, or exclusively in academia, or they found areas of legal ambiguity in which they could continue their practice.

When we look specifically at the career of Robert Faust, we can see how the influence of Taliesin migrated across the country from Arizona and Wisconsin; through Louisiana, Iowa and Oklahoma; and arrived in 1968 in Auburn, Alabama. This is not an attempt at historical validation or a means to suggest that the Rural Studio is in fact the “Redneck Taliesin” as it has often been called. But more importantly, as we look at this period of time, it helps to underscore some of the current problems and successes of contemporary design build projects conducted in the academy.

Three issues that are visible in Faust’s work, and that reappear in academic design build are: the question of ethics and the architect’s role in relation to construction; the question of job site rigor and the limits of craft; and finally the calibration of projects such that form and construction methods are integrated.



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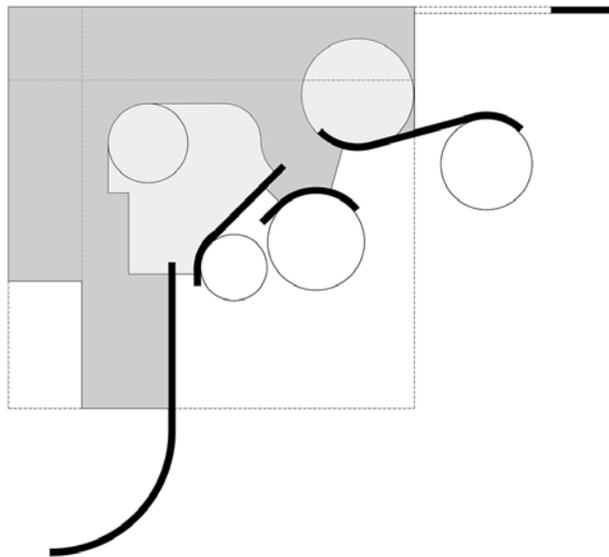
This is not to say that the way these issues were approached by Faust and the subsequent directors of the Rural Studio were exactly the same, but more to suggest that when Samuel Mockbee, the founder of the Rural Studio, talked about ethics he did so with an understanding of the problems Faust had encountered. Also, this is not to say that when Andrew Freear, the current director of the Rural Studio talks about craft and job site rigor, he is doing so with a complete awareness of Faust’s work.

To engage the question of ethics in more detail, Faust stated in an interview “... you know why design build was such a big deal? Because it was unethical; you could lose your license”.¹ It is within this legal context during the 1970s and 1980s that many of the early design build academic programs appeared. They emerged as experiments led by maverick faculty that challenged contract law and construction conventions. In the case of the Rural Studio, it is clear that Faust’s practice provided examples to follow and many to avoid. One can find evidence to substantiate the idea that the pairing of student design build with service learning is a direct response to the question of ethics. Mockbee’s call to educate “citizen architects” can be seen as an attempt to reframe the question of ethics so that it had less to do with the idea that architects would enrich themselves through a direct involvement in the construction process and toward a new idea that architects had specific social responsibilities.² The success of this argument has been rather obvious. Contemporary design build projects that neglect service learning opportunities return the dialogue squarely back to the 1970s where learning about construction or the mechanisms of project financing struggle to sustain a meaningful academic environment.

ROBERT L. FAUST

In 1968, Robert (Bob) L. Faust arrived in Auburn, Alabama to begin a teaching career that would last until the spring of 2011 when he retired. Faust taught Architecture Studio and Building Assembly classes, as well as a seminar entitled “The American School” that focused on the writings and theories of Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Goff. He also practiced architecture. During the early years of his tenure, Auburn

Figure 1: Photograph of the Barksdale Vision Clinic in Auburn, Alabama, photograph by Daniel Wicke.



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University was on the quarter system which allowed Faust to teach for six months and then work on architectural projects for the remaining six months. It was an even split of his time, and a deal that was made possible with agreement from the school administration.³ In this regard, Faust was no different from any of the other Academic/ Practitioners who often form the reputational core of Architecture schools. The primary difference was that he was building many his own projects, and in some cases he was also the property owner and client.

Faust's architectural work was innovative and controversial, especially for a small town in Alabama. The buildings and the unrealized projects represent a very personalized and eccentric approach to design. You could hear Faust speak about his own design philosophy and process when he critiqued the work of his students. He would constantly push them to find forms that were unusual and without obvious precedent. He encouraged students to find their own voice and to use Architecture as a way to express their own individual artistic desires. If a project looked boring and uninteresting, he would suggest that the student disassociate themselves from the object they had made; turn it upside down or rip it apart, and imagine the new object as the project. Despite the freedom he advocated in the design process, Bob also insisted on a rigor in the execution of the project. Drawings needed to be crisp, beautiful and accurate. Geometries that would be essential to the construction process needed to be unambiguous in the models and drawings. Models were always a fundamental component of Bob's process, and his students were encouraged to study form and space initially through models.

Luckily, Faust found like-minded clients in Auburn. He worked with Medical Doctors and University Professors, who either wanted something unusual for themselves or were looking to invest money in real estate. During the 1970s, at the height of Post Modernism in the Northeast, Auburn had just entered a Modernist period, constructing Campus Buildings that borrowed heavily upon the mid-century Modernist work of Eero Saarinen and Marcel Breuer. In other words there was a climate; culturally and intellectually that appreciated and encouraged Bob's work, and he found clients committed to his unusual artistic sensibilities. As a professor, Faust had access to a curious and energetic work

Figure 2: Plan diagram of the Barksdale Vision Clinic.

force. Many students were exposed to Faust's demand for meticulousness in their studio work, their building assembly course assignments, and as an employee on one of his job sites.

THE YEARS WORKING WITH BRUCE GOFF

Although he was from the South, Faust was not a native Alabamian. Faust recounts that he "came (to Auburn) looking for a teaching job, and stayed because of the cheap land and the opportunity to experiment." Originally from New Orleans, he attended the Architecture School at Tulane for a short time before transferring to the University of Oklahoma. The school there was under the leadership of Bruce Goff and in Faust's young opinion offered an exciting alternative to the traditional education being offered at Tulane. This was the beginning a long and fruitful interaction with Goff that involved both education and employment. It was under Goff's direction that many of Faust's design philosophies began to develop. Faust graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1956.

After two years of post-graduation service in the U.S. Navy, he returned to New Orleans and was contacted by Goff to provide design and construction supervision services for a house commission in Biloxi, Mississippi. As Faust recalls, "although I worked for Goff, I never actually worked in his office in Oklahoma."⁴ From 1958 until 1961 he served as a local associate for Goff, and spent much of his time on site for the design and construction of both the Gryder House and the Guttman House. It was here that he learned as much as he could about construction and craft. His time on site was spent learning from the builders, he did not feel like he was smarter than they were or could do a better job than them, he was just profoundly curious.

The Guttman house, designed in 1958, was unfortunately destroyed by fire. The Gryder House, designed around the same time is an excellent example of Goff's attitude about organic architecture, the design philosophy he appropriated from Wright and advanced into his own recognizable style: curvilinear form derived from biological referents, apertures that look like eyes or gills, and the use of layered screen walls that accentuate the geometrical complexity of the plan. It was on this project, which involved Faust from the earliest presentation drawings to site observation, where he learned a great deal about construction. Seen today the house appears to be in excellent condition, evidence that it was exceedingly well built and resilient to the harsh Gulf Coast climate.

ALBERT C. LEDNER AND NEW ORLEANS

After working for Bruce Goff, Faust spent several years trying unsuccessfully to build a practice in Mississippi. In 1964 through 1965, Faust returned to New Orleans and worked in the office of Albert C. Ledner.⁵ Ledner had spent some time in Taliesin working with Frank Lloyd Wright, just before he graduated from Tulane. Even though this experience only lasted six months, it had an enormous impact on Ledner's work and architectural philosophy. As one looks through the New Orleans work, there is ample visual evidence of Wright's influence: the importance of using local materials, the importance of the local landscape in the articulation of form and decorative elements, and constant experimentation with under-utilized or unconventional building materials. According to Faust, Ledner was also the architect that taught him how to avoid the problems associated with executing design build services on a residential project. If the owner was also the general contractor, it created an ambiguous condition not covered by the AIA code of ethics that allowed the Architect to be more involved with specific aspects of the construction.



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Figure 3: Interior Photograph of "Quadrapad", Auburn, Alabama, photograph by Daniel Wicke.



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Although not recognized nationally, Ledner’s work is beginning to be studied and written about both in popular media and in more serious scholarship. One of his most well known projects that has received recent attention is the National Maritime Union Joseph Curran Annex. Ledner had completed some smaller buildings for the Maritime Union in New Orleans and was subsequently selected as their Architect for several large buildings they commissioned in New York City in the 1960s. The Annex building, with its round windows in the dormitory rooms for sailors, has been recently renovated into the Dream Downtown Hotel. Faust had worked on this project when he was in the office, and spent most of his time working on design drawings and construction documents. When Faust finally left New Orleans in 1965, he first began teaching at the University of Iowa, where he stayed for 3 years before making his way to Alabama. The architect that left New Orleans to pursue a career in teaching had learned a great deal in the ten years since he had graduated from Oklahoma.

THE WORK: “CORRUGATED ALABAMA”

Upon his arrival in Auburn, Faust began teaching and immediately began looking for opportunities to design and build. He understood, from Ledner and Goff, that one of the easiest ways to proceed with architectural experiments was to be his own client. He found a large parcel of land in the Northeast quadrant of the city and began a project that would last for more than twenty years that he called “Corrugated Alabama”. His strategy was simple, to build two townhouses, raise funds and build the next two. As he built each pair, he would live in the newest unit and rent out the others. This process continued until 1986, with Faust living in the last corner unit of the complex to this day. Students were involved in this endeavor the entire time. Although Faust was the author of the design, students provided much of the paid labor to complete the projects. Twenty years of Architecture graduates have stories of working on one of Faust’s projects. Most storied focus on the jobsite expectations and Faust’s demand for quality in their work. Former students share similar stories of lining up nail heads, of perfectly joined wall framing, of digging trenches for footings with a carpenter’s square.⁶ This treatment of construction elements no one would ever see was an important element that made Faust’s projects different, if not inspirational to his students.

There are ten units altogether, unified by a consistent palette of concrete block walls, and corrugated steel panels. Windows and doors are always slid in

Figure 4: Interior Photograph of “Corrugated Alabama”, Auburn, Alabama, photograph by Daniel Wicke.



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between the gaps of a concrete wall and a metal wall. The block walls are often the linear datum against which the undulating corrugated walls have a more pronounced presence. Cuts into the ground are made to either provide clear access to the unit, or to counter formal moves made in the corrugated walls overhead. The interior of the units are completely custom built by Faust and the students, with built in furniture and storage. The interior materials are equally consistent, large sheets of rough-finished fir plywood, 2x4 pine and black Formica sheets. A common wall treatment was to finish stairs and mechanical closets in the fir plywood, while the exterior walls were built up with layers of plywood sheathing, the Formica sheet would be adhered to the sheathing, and pine 2x4s would be ripped in half and nailed vertically to the wall and ceiling. Light fixtures and even art would have to be carefully planned for placement within this intense system of lines.

There is a clear progression in the formal strategies at play in the design of each pairing. The first two units are intersecting cylinders divided by three angled concrete block walls. The space between the walls is then divided into a cube of inhabitable space and a void of exterior space. In the middle units built in the early 1980s, Faust wanted to break the monotony of the townhouse and created a walk through space, where the units are entered from the interior of the block. This open interior space is identified by a screen of corrugated metal cut into a profile of curvilinear shapes. The ground material changes and the building occupants share this informal entry vestibule. The final unit which brings the complex to the corner is quite simple, the largest windows being in the back and the one in the front being a single circular window. There are other projects of note that were designed and later built by Faust and his team of students. For the purpose of this paper attention has been directed at this one project.

ETHICS, RIGOR AND CALIBRATION

The question of ethics has been previously covered. If the architect was the client, there could be no conflict between a design fee based on construction and the architect controlling construction. It could be argued that this game, played well by Ledner and Faust was also a limited endeavor with a predictable outcome. It is only with the introduction of service learning that the concern about ethics is transformed from the realm of a business transaction to the realm

Figure 5: Exterior Photograph of "Corrugated Alabama", Auburn, Alabama, photograph by Daniel Wicke.



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Figure 6: Plan of "Corrugated Alabama", Auburn, Alabama.

ENDNOTES

1. Beard, Jeffery et al. "Design Build: Planning through Development". McGraw-Hill, 2001, Chapter 2, page 21. This book provides a brief explanation of the legal battles in the 1980s that resulted in the revision of the California AIA Code of Ethics that allowed Design Build to become an accepted delivery method.
2. From the 1954 "Standards of Professional Practice" of the American Institute of Architects, under Mandatory Standards, *Item 7. An Architect shall not engage in building contracting.* <http://ethics.iit.edu/ecodes/node/3032>
3. Much of the direct information from Professor Faust came from a series of interviews and visits to his office that were conducted between April of 2011 and September of 2013.
4. DeLong, David "Bruce Goff: Toward Absolute Architecture". The MIT Press, 1988. This book has a chapter about the Mississippi Houses and lists of contributors.
5. Much of the research on Albert Ledner is currently online. <http://www.regional-modernism.com/search/label/Albert%20Ledner>
6. Interviews with former students were conducted between April 2011 and September 2013. The story about the footing trench was offered by Seab Tuck, Principal of Tuck Hinton Architects in Nashville, Tennessee.
7. When asked about Faust's influence on the Rural Studio, Freear answered "job site rigor, that is what we are striving for..." from an interview in August 2013.

of society at large. Contemporary design build projects in the academy continue to struggle with this dilemma.

This type of work brings up two other fascinating questions. The first is about the rigor required to execute a high level of craft on construction projects, especially on the building elements no one will ever see. The stories of perfectly orthogonal trenches cut into the ground, or perfectly framed walls are heard frequently when discussing Faust's work. This is an issue that architect led design build struggles with. There is a roughness to some design build projects that can be seen as admirable, a function of challenging the construction process. But there is this other model presented by Faust, that everything should be meticulous, and if you can't get the first moves right, the moves you made when no one was looking, how can you get the subsequent details or finishes right? Andrew Freear, the current director of the Rural Studio talks about how this meticulousness in Faust's work is something he continues to strive for in his students work.⁷

The second question Faust's work reveals is one of calibration. How is the design process effected when the designer knows they are also responsible for executing the construction? In Faust's work it tends to exhibit itself in a couple of different formal ways. The first is a recurring separation of a normative inhabitable volume surrounded by screen walls. This is a formal device that can be seen in almost all of his work. By seperating the living space from the screen, experiments that fail do not make the interior unihabitable. The second way is that the plans are always complicated by curvilinear geometries that get increasingly intricate as Faust becomes better at building these shapes. His projects exhibits a knowledge of material performance that comes only from hands on experience.

There is an emerging history of these architects, who practiced in the 1970s, and pushed the limits of design build making it a recognized delivery method today. It is easy to forget their contributions to a system that is accepted today without discussion. Robert Faust, through his teaching and practice, provides an enticing starting point to help reveal this history.