

# Materials Idea and Community: The Wheelbarrow Summer Theater Atlanta, Georgia

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This portable theater project was designed and constructed for a gospel and neighborhood inner city festival. The project was completed (designed and built) under the supervision of two faculty members by fourth year architecture students as a collaborative effort with the community. Over twenty thousand dollars in funds were raised completely by the students and donated to the theater. The entire project was erected on site in two weeks and dismantled in one day for use the next year. The planning process took over four months and included several full scale mock ups to test connections and materials.

## THE REYNOLDSTOWN CONTEXT

Reynoldstown is a small community close to downtown Atlanta, within the vicinity of Fulton County Stadium. It is one of the oldest African-American neighborhoods in Atlanta and may have been the first community established here by former slaves. Now, like so many inner city areas, it faces serious challenges -- urban flight, poverty, drugs, and crime. Although the problems are great, Reynoldstown has refused to surrender to them and its residents are working to renew their community. The buildings on the streets vary in use. Some are homes of established low-income families, other are derelict drug houses which have overtaken many of the streets. The old vernacular wood frame houses sell for between thirty thousand dollars and are being bought by local people to renovate them.

Reynoldstown is a community of about 1,200 families with a very organized beautification plan. This is lead by 12 block captains who can offer grants to residents to renovate, paint or landscape their homes. These efforts have been spearheaded by the Reynoldstown Revitalization Corporation (RRC). The RRC is based on the belief that the individuals and families of Reynoldstown must be actively involved in solving their own problems. To achieve its goals, the RRC has focused on many areas, including housing, unemployment and health care. The RRC has purchased and renovated an apartment complex to provide affordable housing. Leaders of Reynoldstown have taken a courageous personal

stance in the war against drugs, publishing the location of drug houses in the community newsletter. Thomas Hughley, a leading citizen has requested that anyone with information concerning drug houses give that information to him so that he, in turn, can contact the police who can then take the necessary steps to close these houses.

As part of its revitalization efforts, the RRC is working to establish a community theater—to be called the Wheelbarrow Theater—that will, according to its mission statement, utilize Art as a community development tool to address social concerns within the community and to build a sense of community.

In the fall of 1995, members of the RRC contacted the Southern College of Technology's School of Architecture. The school agreed to design and build a movable theater for Reynoldstown. Students and faculty worked together to complete the project. One may wonder how a theater can combat the ills of the inner city. Our answer: a theater shows off people, and people are Reynoldstown's greatest strength. A theater will build civic pride and hope that will bind the community together.

The project began with numerous meetings with the local leaders to determine the needs and interests of the community in such a project. A local architect, Joseph Amisano, FAIA conceived the idea of building a small summer theater based on a Canadian Shakespeare theater he has seen. Over a one year period the ideas were developed and carried to fruition. The project began with a roundtable lecture on theater design held at the school. The students were divided in 19 groups so that there could be one fourth year representative on each group. This was done in order to carry out the project and to insure continuity. It insured that at least one representative from the class would be the lead designer.

The designs were then shortlisted by community leaders and School faculty members into a group of five. These students then presented their schemes at a statewide AIA convention jury. This gave a link to the local practitioners who began to understand the need for the project.

A winning scheme was selected by the jury. Following this, a Community Town Hall meeting was called in

Reynoldstown where all the competing schemes were displayed and the winning team asked to present their ideas to the students during this early phase of design.

The lead designer Nathan Leavitt then worked with two other students to complete a set of design development drawings over a five week period. The design was greatly refined through a series of perspective drawings and models until construction documents began.

The material search then began after a preliminary list of the materials required was written. It is amazing to see quiet members of the class become very vocal and active in the materials gathering process. The materials were prefabricated in our wood shop in the school and stored on site, this process took about ten weeks of intense effort. The tower was built on site to work out the structural and aesthetic needs and particularly the connections of the members. The Wall team built a mock up panel of two bays of the wall to test out the mounting of doors to the vertical members. The stage team built a mock up stage and tested it for structural and acoustic soundness. The jury was held outside and students presented their work at full scale while referring back to construction drawings. The students often noted how they had to change elements in the design to actually build them.

We then delivered a thirty foot long stake body truckload of materials to the jobsite with the help of our schools plant operations department. We unloaded the materials into a secured area of a tennis court on site. We then began to assemble the door wall on site in the area of the basketball court. We had finished about one quarter of the wall when we temporarily braced the wall and packed up our materials. I received a call early next Monday morning from a distraught student. It was explained to me that all of our work had been destroyed by members of the neighborhood.

The shock was not that the work was dismantled but in the idea that the racial tensions in Atlanta still ran very deep. We were in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city and in our vest for the project completion we had closed the basketball court. This may be why the project was demolished. It was a great lesson and helped reveal how out of touch volunteer groups can become with community needs. I once met a priest who told me about a church group who built a worship space near Saltillo, Mexico donated by a steel framed manufacturer in Texas. The group came into a small town and in a very organized fashion constructed the building in one week. The day the group left the building was totally dismantled by the community. This teaches a valuable lesson - the community must be involved closely throughout the whole process.

## DESIGN STATEMENT

Reynoldstown in a small community close to downtown Atlanta, it is one of the oldest African-American neighborhoods and was established by former slaves. It faces the normal challenges of inner cities decay, urban flight, poverty, drugs and crime. Somehow this area of the city has risen above

its problems—the theater is one way they have done this. The site is on the covered basketball court of an abandoned school which was donated to the neighborhood group.

The concept driving this project centers on the making of an architectural quilt. In this neighborhood, quilting is a popular communal act with ideas constantly emerging during the act of making. Here the neighborhood was the quilt. The elements were designed to tie the project into the neighborhood.

### *A Gateway*

The gateway adjoins the small pedestrian scale of the neighborhood and acts as a signal of the theater. It's symbolic white sheets move with the breezes and become a threshold for the procession to the theater. It was constructed by local young architects and donated to the community for a cost of \$300.00.

### *A Tower*

The entry tower acts as a landmark for the neighborhood—it is made of wooden members in a trusslike form. The open frame echoes the factory towers and steel trestles of local rail yards. Two steel rings form a vertical shaft of space within which the Reynoldstown "On the Rise" flag is raised and lowered through. At the base is the ticket counter and three benches for use after shows and during the year as a communal space. The floor of this area is made of scrap pieces of end grain lumber.

### *Wall of Doors*

The door is the quilt. The wall is made from over one hundred doors which were donated to the project. It measures fourteen feet high and over seventy feet long. Each door is symbolically different in color texture and construction. Like the members of the neighborhood—each is different. They express the ad hoc found art quality present in the neighborhood—where the Shotgun Shack and Dog Trot house coexist with the loud Coca Cola billboard hovering above—or where a street facing porch becomes a theater at night—its slow moving inhabitants slowly rocking back and forth.

The doors were mounted within a wooden frame which allowed for variation in width and height but maintained an entry cadence. The wall was painted by local children and its components were stored after the show. It acts as a greater, a threshold to the theater and a backdrop against which all activity takes place. Lighting was designed within the wall to allow it to glow at night.

### *The Stage*

The stage was designed to be flexible and allow for the components to be stored easily and with the most ease of construction. The platforms fold to allow for storage. On opening night 100 gospel singers performed on the platform. The proscenium was made from a local quilters group and by a local artisan.

## TYPE OF CONSTRUCTION

The construction was of wooden framing members with metal fasteners. The entire theater was dismantled and stored in a large bomb resistant trailer we purchased from a local Air Force surplus yard. It will be reassembled next year for the next festival.

## STUDENT COMMENTS

### Nathan Leavitt

Design Build in School - What that really entail, and how does it affect the students? It is a unique experience, and I am the only one in our class to have seen it through every step of the project. I was on the original design team. Our team met last year to discuss the project and felt we designed a project with a strong image. We also were concerned with constructability. Let me share with you our original design statement:

After a brief encounter with the area of Reynoldstown we noticed the strong need for a space that could not only add to the community but add to it's life. We propose to create a festival like atmosphere beginning with the street. Decorative banners will lead to a small scale park and a procession. The first point of entry is through a gateway and food court area. The procession continues to a more small tower becoming a knuckle to the next space. Leaving one with the element of anticipation the space then expands into an outdoor festival area. The theater and its stage becomes the focal point for the approach.

As day becomes night, the festival area grows dark and the theater comes to life, people move in to the covered theater space for the climax of the day. In this project we tried to make the theater reach out to the neighborhood and set a tone of pride. Forms and materials were kept simple. The project is mostly constructed of wood members and metal connections. Hopefully we have created a structure that people will relate to.

### *Contract Documents*

I approached the next phase thinking the design was for the most part complete. I could not have been more wrong. There were many people with different ideas and concerns and it was left up to the construction document team to sort through and satisfy them. One client representative wanted us to build as little as possible, another wanted us to build much more than we had designed. We presented numerous layouts of the tower, stage and door wall and as it developed everything was in a state of flux.

### James Campbell

One of the deciding factors in my choosing architecture school was the possibility of influencing people in their daily lives by the way of built form. This project has allowed me to play an integral part in the revitalization of a community. I feel strongly that the project can be a success, but not by the theater alone. The project allowed for intimate work between

students and the client during the conceptual stages and allowed for the hands on building of the project

I feel that this has been an unforgettable experience. To be involved with a project with all of these possibilities is very exciting. This has offered the chance to do more than build models. I imagine the children's eyes as they watch a puppet show or magician and know I was a part in that. This course offered valuable lessons in communication, organization, follow through and team work.

### David Ruff

This is a story of procedure, oddities, humor, procession, accountability, mishaps, tension, stress, habits, sequence, clowning and fine team work. I am going to relate the process of the students organization on the tower team. It was late in the evening when I came into the studio world one night. I found Nathan, the lead designer and another student discussing how the class should organize themselves. I thought his was a great idea because it gave each student the chance to choose an area of interest. The areas were: contract documents, material gathering, quality control, scheduling, public relations and the journal.

The diverse range of these jobs helped provide us with a comfortable working environment. After this, the students were then able to choose between the tower, wall or stage teams. This also had a backlash and I now see the projects became three very distinct works. I believe the tower is now a point in space. So I was the video maker and this was my comfort zone, or my little blankie if you will. The year has been devoid of the constant stress of our normal classes. It has been a needed relief because I was close to snapping. I once heard this quote which summarizes my experience - "And now I have finished a work that neither the wrath of love, nor fire, nor the sword, nor devouring age shall be able to destroy."

### Students Participating in the Reynoldstown:

Wall Team: Santiago Itturalde, Leigh Gomez, Linton Turner, Charlotte Collins, Joe Adams, Roderick Cloud, Nikal Conti;  
Tower Team: Nathan Leavitt, Gary Sanders, Donlad Son, Ryan Lee, David Ruff, Shannon Mallory; Stage Team: Jim Campbell, Mary O'Gwynn, Thayne Muller, Ada Yuen, Ryan McKinney, Allison Hardy

### Faculty:

William J. Carpenter  
James McKay

### Consultants:

Joseph Amisano FAIA, Louis Maza, John Harris

### Client:

The Reynoldstown Revitalization Corporation, Young Hughley; Executive Director

This paper is an edited excerpt from a forthcoming book title *Learning by Building* by Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.