

## COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

2002 ACSA Award Winners

### Okolona Downtown Park

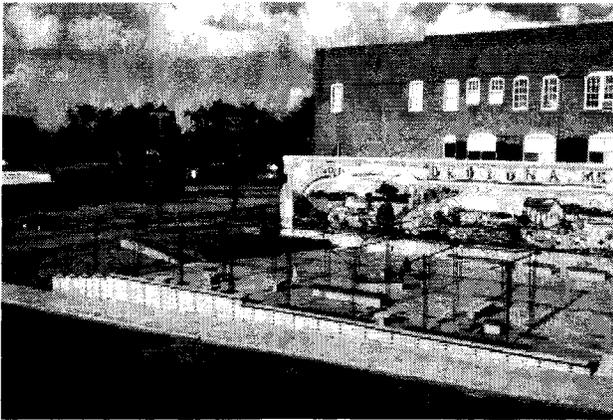
A Collaborative Design-Build Project by  
Third-Year Architecture Students.

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**Note:** This project was completed in 1999, when the authors were teaching at Mississippi State University.



Okolona, Mississippi is a town of 3000 located in northeast Mississippi. Once a prosperous railroad town and trading center, the town in recent years has become a bedroom community with people traveling to Tupelo to work, and recognizes the need to re-vitalize its economic base and invest in its public space. The public image of the town has declined in recent years, as buildings suffer neglect through disinvestment, and as the town's limited resources get spent on "essentials," like schools and police, not on maintenance of the public realm. And like other small Mississippi towns, Okolona was once a racially-segregated town with white people living on one side of town and African-Americans the other, and must continually find opportunities to bridge the gap that still exists between the races.

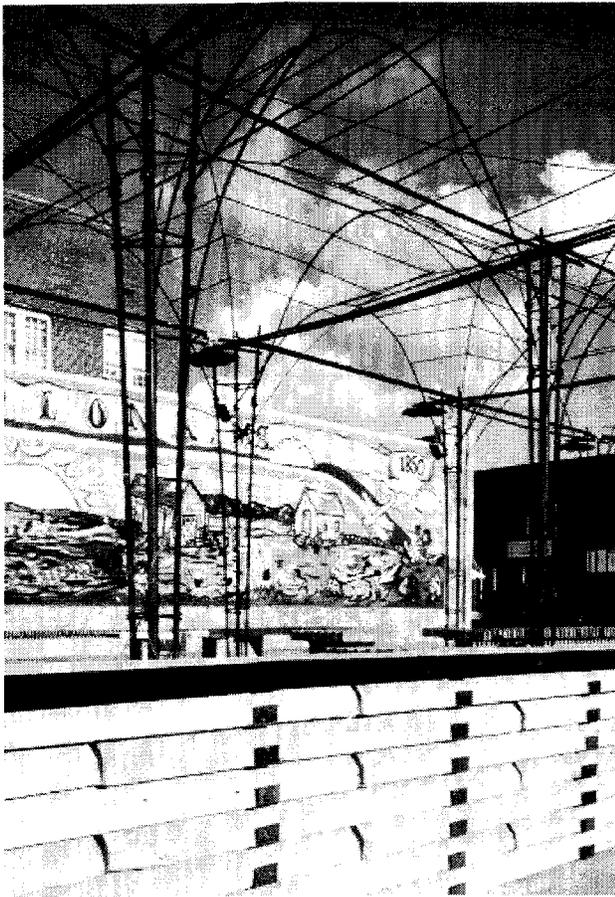
In 1997, a diverse group of concerned citizens met to discuss the idea of building a small park in downtown Okolona, in a location that neither race would "own." They envisioned the park as a "common ground" that would provide the community with a collaborative project on which to focus its energies in a highly-public manner

during planning and construction. Their vision for the park after completion, was that it would be a place for public events, such as church performances, school events, a farmer's market, and election rallies. They also envisioned a space with shade for the occasional passerby or lunchtime relaxation. The space is the site of two former downtown buildings, 140' x 50', at the corner of Main and Olive Streets.

We were asked to submit an "idea sketch" based on the town's original conception so that they could seek funding to carry out the project. The director of the Okolona Area Chamber of Commerce put together \$24,000 through diligent fundraising from a variety of Public and Private sources. The Chamber initiated work on the park before we were involved by organizing a group of high school students to paint a mural on the side of the building next to the park.

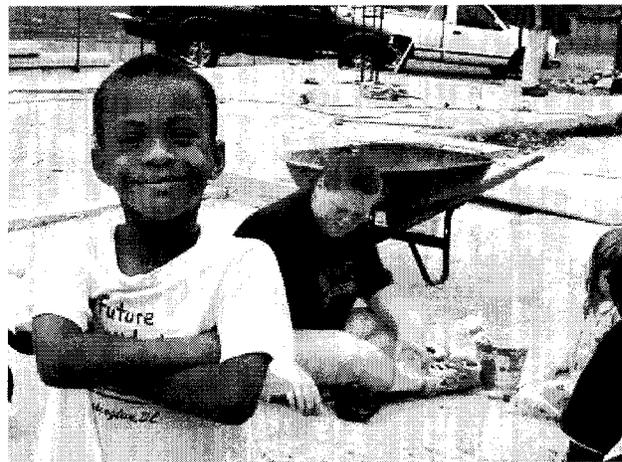
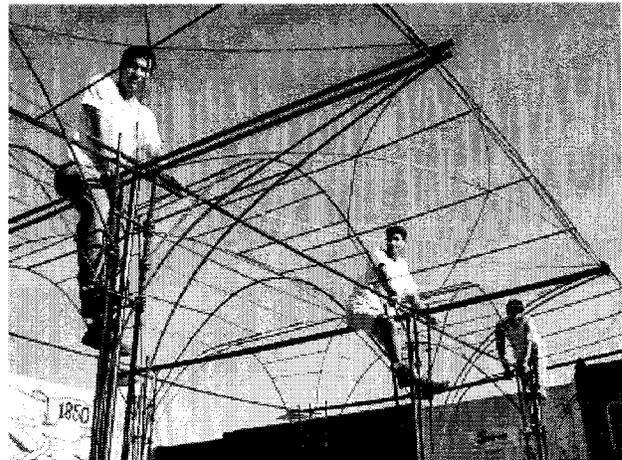
In the Spring of 1999, the third-year undergraduate architectural design studio at Mississippi State University became involved to design and construct the park. A guiding theme throughout the project was the idea of the "doubletake;" the phenomenon we experience when we notice something, but have to look twice, or for an extended period of time to really understand what it is we are seeing. This idea grew out of our observations of the town during initial visits: what appears at first glance to be a shoddy, neglected town is, on second look, a town made up of some rather special buildings and spaces.

The students spent several weeks getting to know the town, through drawings, community interviews, surveys and photography. This initial immersion into the community was not always easy or pleasant for the students. Several students received treatment from town residents that could be described as hostile, questioning why we were there, why we were taking photos. During discussions back at school regarding the discoveries the students were making, it was revealed that many students were not certain we should be there; that many felt uncomfortable in our "intrusion" into the town. We sensed that class morale was beginning to suffer. Patsy Gregory, the Director of the Okolona Area Chamber of Commerce, and the primary figure in getting this park off the ground, organized a diverse group of citizens—young and old, black and white, newcomers and long-term residents—to have a meeting with us to share their feelings about Okolona. We met one evening in the Town Hall, and the resi-



dents took turns telling their stories. Some recounted their several-generation family histories in the town; others about why they so desperately wanted to get Okolona out of its "funk;" others about the bright future they imagined for the town. At times it got emotional, and the evening ended with a very-noticeable change in the attitudes of the students. It was easy to see that some people in Okolona did appreciate our presence, were optimistic about our efforts, were going to be supportive during the construction. It was a critical moment.

Following this, the students started designing schemes for their vision of the park. Decision-making during the design process was governed by the idea of consensus-building. Collaborative efforts didn't come easy as the normal architectural education places an emphasis on original thought and individual creative acts. Getting all thirty-two students to share and develop ideas was only possible through a series of discussions. All students in the class proposed individual schemes for the park at the beginning of the design phase. In discussing the projects, we identified "large" principles that were embedded in numerous schemes: shading, sitting, performance, edge-making, vegetation, etc. When consensus was reached on the set of



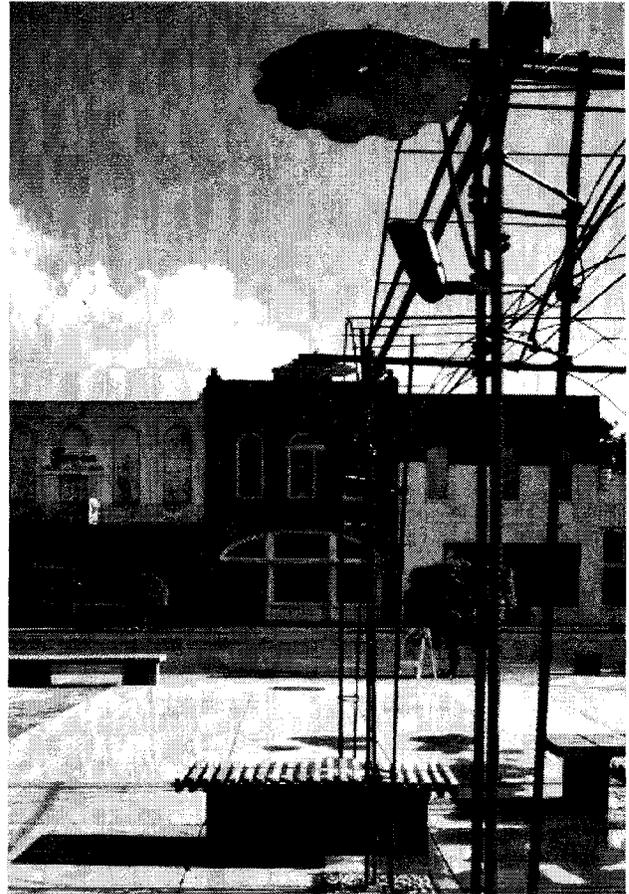
principles, the class divided itself up into teams which focused on finding specific solutions which would meet the expectations set forth in the principles. In each step, we sought consensus for the design proposals, and no design proposal was "approved" until consensus was reached. The principles eventually led to the specific elements for the park: a wisteria arbor, a stage, benches, a retaining wall, paving to address the rift between the two existing slabs, and landscaping. Consensus-seeking prompted lengthy discussions about the relative merits of different proposals, and insured that all participants were on the same page as we went forth. Following group approval, the teams began building mockups of the elements for a town meeting at mid-term to receive community feedback and approval at a town meeting called for the purpose. Further investigations into materials and costs were made. Leadership emerged. Students took on different roles and responsibilities: one developed project management methods, while another negotiated with suppliers; project needs directed the students' energy and focus. A local carpenter took an interest in the project, participated in its construction and in effect taught the students his craft. Trial and error occurred in the



field. Each student found his or her specific role in the project according to interest and aptitude.

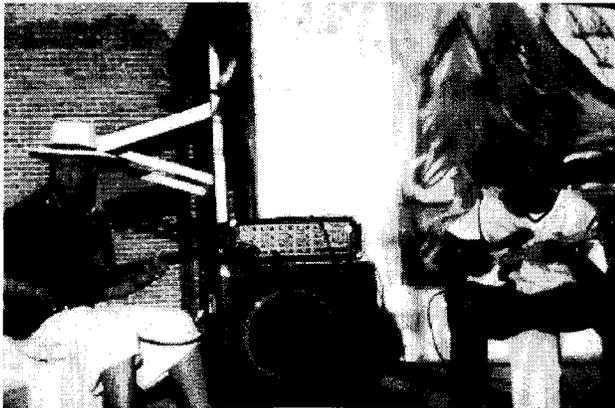
The “doubletake” was exemplified by using common materials in unorthodox ways: the wisteria arbor is made of common steel rebar but joined together by heating with an acetylene torch and wrapping. The retaining wall is constructed of concrete parking bumpers, but stacked in a running bond and held together by bent steel plates; the stage is pressure-treated lumber, detailed in a way that looks monolithic, but appears to float above the slab. The benches are constructed of 2x4 red cedar slats supported by ordinary concrete blocks and exposed steel framing. The paving is brick, but with concrete inserts into which local children placed their handprints.

Construction of the park was done in approximately seven weeks by the students and an assortment of community volunteers, who offered support by sharing in the labor, providing potluck meals, and encouraging our efforts with appreciation and enthusiasm. The importance of this community support is hard to overstate, both during construction and after. A noteworthy example: The closest residential neighbor to the park admitted to us (near the end of the project) that she was very pessimistic about it at the beginning. She had seen numerous community projects go unrealized in the past and was ready to write this one off as well. Her attitude began to change when she walked past the Chamber offices and saw, in the front window, the wooden model the class had built to communicate the design to the town. She decided it wasn't so bad. As the nearest neighbor, she also couldn't miss the daily construction activity. She volunteered to host the first potluck dinner held for us. As we got to know her, and her us, she opened her house up for bathroom use (she showed where she hid a key, in case we needed something while she was gone). One evening, when we were working very late, and no restaurants were open, she went to her family business—a catfish restaurant—cooked 50 hamburgers, and brought them by the site. Her motherly nature



was extended to the care of the students in other ways: one early Saturday morning she noticed a student sitting in his car waiting for the rain to quit. She insisted that he come in, and eat a “proper breakfast”—eggs, bacon, biscuits—before he go to the site. As the project drew to a conclusion, she took responsibility for providing the wisteria plants, and after we left, she became the unofficial caretaker for the vegetation, mowing, watering, pruning and weeding. Since then, she has become a part-time assistant in the Chamber offices. It's true to say that this project fundamentally changed her attitude towards her town, and our attitudes towards the town—as represented by her. She proved to us that one person can make a huge difference.

Another critical event: towards the end of the construction, literally five minutes after the stage was completed one late afternoon, a pickup truck pulled up with 4 musicians in the back. They proceeded to unload a drum set, amplifiers and equipment, and set up on the stage. We ran an extension cord to power their gear, and they started jamming. It turns out that one of them, a professional jazz musician from Minneapolis, was back in town for his grandmother's funeral. It was his first time back in sixteen years. He caught wind of the park from friends and they decided to come down for an impromptu jam



session. People passing by stopped to listen and dance, as the construction work continued in the background. As it got dark, the students set up some of our construction lights so they could continue. Some students played instruments as well, and joined in. They played on into the night, long after we had left. It was an important moment for us, in some ways signifying the emotional completion of the project. That night, we had the sense that the project was going to get done

on time, that the community was going to use it, that it would be a shared space for unplanned events.

The Chamber organized an official dedication ceremony for the park, and some 500 people showed up to hear a gospel choir sing on the stage, and participate in the burial of a time capsule. It was a hot, sunny day in May, an appropriate end to the project for both the town and students alike.

In the end, after a couple of years of reflection, we feel that the benefits of this type of collaborative project are important and numerous. As the product of thirty-two diverse minds, it proves to the students that there is value in collaborative practice, with results exceeding the capacities of any single person. For the community, it gave them a project to focus on, and it has enriched the public space of the city. Members of each group developed lasting friendships with the other, and developed intimate understanding of the values espoused by the other. For us, as teachers, it has proven beyond a doubt that this type of educational experience needs to be more fully embraced by architectural education.