

Big Woods, Rowan County, Eastern Kentucky

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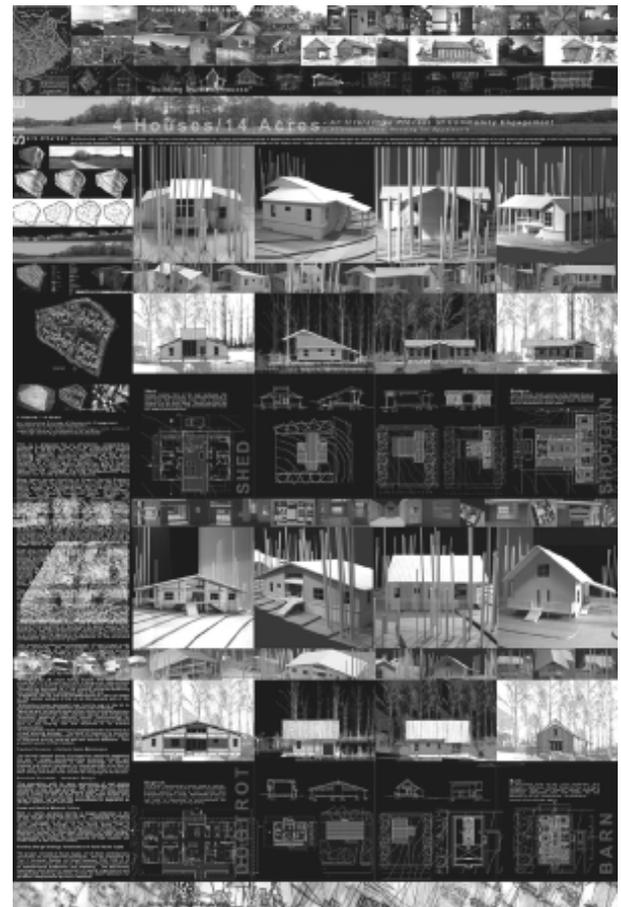
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UNIVERSITY-BASED COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

A Fruitful Partnership

This project is the inaugural effort of a unique partnership between the state housing finance agency of the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the largest land grant university in the state. An endowment from the housing finance agency became a means of engaging the university in improving the quality of housing across the state. A unique partnership that offered funding for educational initiatives within the university, the endowment provided students with an opportunity to work with a non-profit housing provider on a bricks-and-mortar project that would be built through the backing of the housing finance agency. The first such project focused on a 14-acre site in a rural region of Eastern Kentucky to be developed for low-income residents with universal needs.

Resources from the endowment enabled the school to implement a practice-based model for this initiative that included the hiring of a visiting professor and practitioner to complement the teaching and design experience of resident faculty members. Through that collaboration, students were introduced to practical and theoretical elements of seminar followed by the second-semester design



affordable housing design, first in a semester-long studio. Other important partnerships were forged and integrated into the classroom: a series of town meetings between students, faculty, and low-income residents to develop the program for housing prototypes; regular meetings between students, faculty and practitioners to review work in the studio; frequent meetings between students, faculty, and the non-profit (FAHE) housing developer to address standards of design, accessibility and affordability; and an exhibition and presentation of student work to synthesize the research and development process for members of the professional community and the general public.

The groundbreaking research initiative, guided by an endowed visiting professor with affordable housing expertise, offered students a unique opportunity: To collaborate with state housing officials, civic leaders, local architects and landscape architects, a non-profit housing developer, future residents, and the broader community in creating studies for Big Woods, a bricks-and-mortar project. The university/ state partnership led to an innovative, interactive, community-based approach for the design of low-cost housing at the edge of Appalachia in Eastern Kentucky. Begun as a design research process by university students, and formalized through the development of a parallel proposal by the visiting professor, the project was handed off to a non-profit (FAHE) developer, who has engaged local professionals in completing and constructing the project for occupancy by low-income families pre-approved for federal housing loans.

BIG WOODS: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Students and faculty were asked to provide programmatic and design solutions for a 14-acre rural tract in a largely undeveloped area of northeastern Kentucky, at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains—an area characterized by scattered farm buildings and mobile homes. The project program, as presented by the non-profit developer, member of the Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises (FAHE): 28 low-cost, 3-5 bedroom, 2 bath, single-family residences with enclosed areas ranging from 1200-1450 square feet. All houses were to include aspects of Tier 1 Universal Design and some of the prototypes were to be suitable for FDOT off-site manufacture with on-site as-

sembly. Typical Resident: Low-income families, pre-approved for federal housing assistance. Average annual income for these families is approximately \$15,000.

Phase 1 of this project consisted of a fall semester seminar in which students explored the cultural, political, economic, and technical issues associated with affordable housing. In the course of the seminar, students created a “library” of innovative case studies in affordable housing. Their research included examples of alternative building materials (e.g., straw bale construction), extant housing policy initiatives (e.g., HUD’s HOPEVI program for the redevelopment of existing public housing), and design and program innovations (e.g., flexible unit design meant to adapt to changing and variable user needs).

Phase 2 of the project shifted focus from the classroom to the design studio. This phase introduced the students to Big Woods, the specific case study that would be addressed by the group during the spring term. Under the guidance of a visiting professor with expertise in affordable housing design and four resident studio faculty, the students engaged in site-specific design investigations. Students were required to develop the program for the project and to create a site plan for the development. Most significantly, and in tandem with their more traditional design studio explorations, students and faculty participated in a nine-month series of community town meetings with the future residents and neighbors of Big Woods. Those meetings figured significantly in the work of the studio: Information gathered in conversation with future residents and community members shaped the project program and inflected student design proposals. Students presented their design solutions to a forum of local residents, architects, developers, state housing officials, and the community—who expressed their preferences, concerns, and sensibilities in response. To maintain wide community access to the design process, an interactive website was created and updated throughout the semester as the students’ projects developed. Phase Two of this process concluded with a final presentation of the student work. In engaged attendance at the final review: Area residents, developers, housing and civic leaders—as well as the professional and academic community. The presentation and exhibition, held in a down-

town storefront gallery on Main Street, added numerous passers-by to the discussion of rural housing throughout the state.

Phase 3 of the project shifted focus again. In this phase, the visiting design professor in affordable housing authored a master plan and house designs for Big Woods. The work drew from the research and collaborative investigations of the students, faculty, and community. This master proposal was presented to all the constituents of the project, to the governor's annual housing conference of state housing officials and policy makers, and to the presiding county officials governing land use and planning. With state architects and the non-profit developer, the project has since been prepared for construction. Under the supervision of the state housing finance agency, the project is on its way to completion with occupancy expected in 2005/2006.

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

A Prototype for Education

This is the first in a series of collaborations among the state housing finance agency; the university; non-profit developers; visiting affordable housing

experts; local professionals from the architecture, design, and construction industries; and local communities. The interaction among students and external constituents has created a unique dynamic for community and profession-based pedagogy.

The initiative utilizes the teaching, research, and outreach resources of an architecture school to elevate the design efforts of low-cost housing providers. Similarly, it serves to integrate architecture education, community and civic engagement, and professional practice by bringing together a diverse network of individuals, organizations, and agencies to enrich learning experiences for students, broadening the arena in which design concepts are introduced, discussed, and eventually realized. The measure of its success will rest in the education that students receive about design, the design process, its impact on our communities, and our communities' positive introduction to the possibilities of design to make a better world. (1)

NOTES

(1) Text (edited): Mark Royce, University of Kentucky.