

Rural Studio, Beneath the Roses

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As a force empowering architecture education, Auburn School of Architecture's Rural Studio has designed and built seventy-three official projects since its inception in 1993, in West Alabama. Many of these projects, with their students and teachers, have received regional, national, and international recognition for their ability to promote and to demand the education of citizen architects and for the high quality of architecture that often emerges in the learning process. This paper seeks to critique and to understand the way in which the *interior*, *interiority*, and the condition of "*being within*" are present in the Rural Studio built work. Interiority is a compelling strength in the Rural Studio work as it is the place where clients viscerally connect to the Architecture. This interiority is alluded to in the paintings and drawings of Samuel Mockbee, the Rural Studio's genius architect-teacher whose paintings were born of the place and often paralleled the architecture projects. His personal art-making was not a formal part of the Rural Studio design process; however, posthumously, AIA Gold Medal recipient Samuel Mockbee provides insight into the "DNA" of the Rural Studio interior through his paintings, their mythologies of place, and the secret inner life that they explore. This analysis asserts Rural Studio project interior types and then critiques exemplary projects of the types through the lens of Mockbee's paintings.

Interior types

Rural Studio interiors are the immediate spaces that the clients occupy once the students are finished designing and building. The interior is where clients and the community continue to live their lives, but usually in a different spatial condition than they had lived in before. A historical analysis of built projects reveals a significant evolution in the Rural Studio interior which parallels the trajectory of the thirteen year body of work. The original methodology for assessment and subsequent establishment of types includes study of built works, photographs, any available drawings and assessment of the available expressed motivations of the student architects and faculty. Within general programmatic project distinctions of residential interiors, commercial interiors, and landscape interiors, the interiors can be further classified according to four dominant interior formal types that have emerged: *turtle interiors* (closed), *big roof spill out interiors* (open), *roof as interior*, and *ascension interiors*. Other interior and non-interior classification types and ranges of types not discussed in this paper include materiality, program, structure, process, and pedagogical goals. This critique focuses on the four primary interior types. Although Rural Studio interiors are inevitably intertwined due to factors of proximity, collective threads, material experimentation, and especially place, the evolution and influence of the interior types can be tied to specific representative projects.

Paintings and Interiority

Mockbee's paintings capture space and give life to an intricate mythology of the impoverished clients he met in Hale County. Mockbee's wife, Jackie, has preserved his notebooks and sketchbooks with explorations and descriptions of the mythology in intricate detail, vividly capturing the incarnated variations of the people he met often fused with other southern legends.¹ The saturated colors of Mockbee's imagery reveal his perception and internalization of the psychology of the place with its embedded desires, fears, secrets and injustices. Despite all of the generous press on the phenomenon of the Rural Studio, there is very little scholarship on Mockbee's body of artwork. It is noteworthy that in one of only three significant essays on the topic, art critic Lawrence Chua devotes three of the eleven paragraphs to interior issues. Chua refers to Mockbee's work as "a shelter" and "a mirror," writing, "To paint something is to bring it inside."² Chua's gives perspective on Mockbee's absorption of his environment, "Painting interiorizes the world. It creates an interior space in which meaning is placed. In the space, appearance and meaning cease to be separate categories. The exterior of the world and the interior of the viewer coincide, however briefly."³ Birmingham Museum of Art's David Moos echoed an observation of this process for Mockbee stating, "Mockbee's assertion that architecture, if it was to express something profound about place, had to proceed from knowledge of that place commenced with drawing and painting. For him, pictorial reality was the essential foundation to the built world."⁴

Mockbee was attuned to this interior quality in his architecture, and his art echoed the search for the deep interior of Hale. "Being within" is a dominant theme. Recurrent sub-themes pervade the painted space, which extends beyond the canvas to pull the viewer into the scene in various ways. Due to their large scale and Mockbee's scale in relation to the making of the paintings, the paintings have more space than his drawings. Drawn mockups of the same image as in the paintings are perceptually flatter without the visceral quality of being taken in by the painting. The paintings read at multiple scales. Details reveal this intention, drawing the viewer in close, until the viewer is standing in the space

of the painting. Some such as the early *The Children of Eutaw Pose Before Their Ancient Cabins* (1992) require occupation. To make his paintings he stretched the actual interior space of his Newbern studio. He cut out a floor for one piece and for another, like a "wacked out" Gordon Matta Clark, he cut out a giant hole in the wall to the outside then made a room of blue tarps that was as much a part of a giant painting as the paint on the canvas. The side room glowed with blue light. His characters in the final *Alberta's Ascension* (1999) appear to look past the picture plane into the truth about the poverty, still abundant, and into the truth about the lasting effects of a deep history of racial inequality in the southern Black Belt.

Chua also notes the similarity of Mockbee's fictitious world to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.⁵ Less specific but similar to the way in which Faulkner invented Yoknapatawpha County from Lafayette County, Mississippi as the setting of most of his major stories, Mockbee, also a Mississippian, drew from the real Hale County to generate an allegorical and intricate parallel world on canvas and on paper. Unlike Faulkner's archetypal casts, Mockbee's characters are less real, and more spectacular. Shortly after his untimely death Mockbee's paintings were exhibited with the Rural Studio's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the Whitney Biennale. Before this honor the Whitney's Contemporary Art Curator, Larry Rinder, wrote about a visit to Mockbee's Newbern studio which he anticipated to be a more pragmatic studio like an architect's, recounting, "No, it was a place of fantasy: raw, mythic, uncensored images of the people we had just seen, the everyday inhabitants of the Rural Studio homes. Painted, collaged and cobbled together from branches and other found materials, these portraits and tableaux presented Sambo's inner vision of his clients revealed as characters in an uncertain yet timeless drama of passion, love, and pain."⁶ (Larry Rinder) He often captured the faces of the local people and of his likeness in relationship with them, again seen in *Alberta's Ascension* (1999). Alberta Bryant is the wife of Shepard Bryant. Shepard Bryant, a client and a fisherman on the Black Warrior River, is an ever present figure in the imagery, often appearing as a turtle that is the foundation of the painted space. Usually the turtle is restrained. Isolating familiar objects from the

real Hale County, Mockbee infuses them with amplified persona and essential meaning in their new spatial contexts. The extractions weave together in multiple dimensions, borrowing aspects of the real – chickens, angels, hands, faces, feet, animal skulls, butterflies, beaver sticks, birds, ropes, gourds, fire – placed in symbolic and compositional relationships in the space of the paintings. Often dominated by the theme of the turtle with its essential ability to open and close, the assemblages are familiar like dreams of the real which make sense during sleep and then lose coherence upon awakening.

Paintings and Architecture

In critiques with students he usually talked of evocative things like beauty, sex, death, sugar, and dust; however the presence of the interior was always latent in his arsenal of provocations, transcending all others when necessary. Writer William Levinson heard him tell a student about a project, "...it's the details of the interior space that are going to make or break it."⁷ Not only aware of the spatial qualities that architecture possessed, he talked about the sounds and smells that accompanied the interiors once the clients took possession. Observing the interior spaces where many of the clients often lived, he talked about the distinctive smell of poverty and how once you smelled it, you could never forget it. It became part of you, he said.⁸ Rural Studio "Charity Houses" are not air-conditioned. Varying degrees of enclosure are formed in outdoor "rooms," or interiors by extension. Auburn students, many of whom are the children of suburbia, learn about basic desires and needs for shelter. "They learn humility," states Ben Kelly the school's accountant.⁹ The interiors that they design are often foreign to their own experiences, which is a source of constant outside discussion. Architectural photographer Tim Hursley is committed to capturing the Rural Studio projects and the process in photographs. Recognizing the precariousness of the social debate, one look at his photograph of the interior of Shepard Bryant's living space before Bryant received the first Rural Studio Charity House convinces most critics of the value of the students' sincere labor.

Hursley

The photographic documentation of the Rural Studio's architecture is deserving of another chapter. It is important to note here in particular, that Tim Hursley the defacto Rural Studio photographer, devotes serious attention to the project interiors.¹⁰ In the original Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley Rural Studio book of 2002, 38 percent of the photographs are interior shots. In their second Rural Studio book, the ratio increases over 40 percent. Hursley became linked with the Rural Studio because he originally photographed the architecture for upscale clients of Mockbee and his business partner Coleman Coker.¹¹ Hursley's photographs of Rural Studio interiors capture the clients post-occupancy. The images tell stories of the people. Usually shot with a wide angled lens, the photographs are a further abstraction of the reality of the space and the people because the spaces appear more voluminous than in reality. Hursley's photographs relate less to the reality of the space and speak more to a mental perception of the space, which stretches the spiritual possibilities for their occupants, "uplifting them." Mockbee said, "The work has to be elevated it is about raising ones spirits as well."¹²

DNA

Similar to the collage techniques and uncontextualization of the familiar utilized by Mockbee in his paintings, his students and students after him create interiors by taking familiar materials out of context and using them in unorthodox ways -- for example, a house of stacked carpet, a chapel of rammed earth and chevy caprice windshields, a house of hay bales, wax impregnated corrugated cardboard bales, and anything else that will bale. Quotes from the southern vernacular building language such as barns, tobacco barns, silos, porches, sheds, and even Greek Revival pediments appear repeatedly in the Rural Studio built work. Clients move in and occupy the interiors which sponsor possession as the clients make the spaces their own by cladding and decorating the space to their taste. In the Lucy House, Lucy went into debt by purchasing Victorian style furniture that she felt did justice to the gift of the new house. The interiors fuel aspiration and dignity.

Interior Type: Critique

Turtle Interior

The interior types are closely related in lineage, beginning with the Turtle Interior type. Shepard and Alberta Bryant's *Haybale House 1994*, the original Rural Studio project, epitomizes the Turtle Interior type. Located in an area along the banks of the Black Warrior River, the house is characterized by tight interiors with very specific programmatic uses of space. Like the giant old turtles that Mr. Bryant caught in the river, the Turtle Type is low to the ground and heavy. It is easier to warm in the winter, and potentially cooler than un-airconditioned southern houses because of the thermal mass of the haybale walls. It is hermetically sealed with only punched openings and three protrusions for sleeping quarters. Windows and doors open on the horizontal direction to connect to the porch, the most important living space. Because the Bryants have always kept the lower windows covered, the light comes in from transom ventilation windows as a glow from a slot above. Otherwise it is kept very dark inside. As the exemplifier project of the Turtle Interior the house is low and bound to the Bryant's land, like its owners. In keeping close to the ground they have little can get in and out of the house easily. A big roof structure or shell is fused onto the walls and escapes from them only over the porch area. The type correlates to multiple Mockbee turtle paintings. In particular the series of drawings leading up to *Alberta's Ascension* painting reveal the power of the turtle as the foundation for the body of work. Like the type, the turtle is heavy and slow at the bottom of the painting. It gets heavier through the multiple iterations. In the painting, Alberta is on top of the shell holding the hand of a winged bird deliverer. The shelter of the house interior, the safe shell, has allowed her spirit to rise above her impoverished existence.

Yancey Chapel 1995, is a transition project, a hybrid between the Turtle Interior and the Big Roof Spill Out Interior type. It is the heavy waterlogged turtle hoisted into the air as seen in *The Ascension of Shepard Bryant 1999*. The shell begins to break up and the roof is still close to the ground like the Haybale house, but the interior space fuses with the sloped ground and burrows in. A primary approach brings

the viewer upon a roof (a shell) hovering low over the land. A major interior axis brings the viewer into the land drops out to form the excavated interior. Another transition project from Turtle to Big Roof spill out, the *Butterfly House 1997*, is also a clear transition interior. In it the turtle shell flips upwards and becomes a convex roof. This flip up allows for more light to enter into the dwelling and allows more openness and connection to the exterior, particularly to the main double high screened porch room. It is brighter inside than the first house. The screening of the porch allows for full ventilation of the porch and sets up more opportunity for cross ventilation into the main interior room of the dwelling. Unlike the closed feeling in the Haybale House, the architectural butterfly move extends the space. In the Butterfly House, Mrs. Harris collaged the walls with clippings from magazines and print creating a unique interior lining, a masterpiece in itself. (Visiting the Harris House in a memorial procession after Sambo's death felt like visiting his close family, a picture of him sat on the table next to Mrs. Harris who graciously received condolences with the pride of a grandmother.¹³)

Big Roof Spill Out Interior Type

Akron Pavilion 1996, is the consummate example of the Big Roof Spill Out Interior type. It is larger than its precursor the Butterfly House. It quotes the Butterfly roof and then amplifies it. It is a fusion of the Butterfly roof and the floating roof of Yancey. The pure distillation of the roof form is such a dramatic move to create the interior that no additional enclosure is necessary. It is the butterfly alighting on the back of the turtle.

Antioch Baptist Church 2002, is a transition project from Big Roof Spill Out to the Roof as Interior type. It has a weighty appearance like many of its Turtle Interior predecessors, yet it hides a volume of well lit space. This space is protected from the outside view, and in contrast to the standard heavy interior, it is surprisingly open. Formally a box of space is wrapped by a planar roof which prioritizes a single view to the graveyard beyond. The roof emerges from the ground, wraps the box, and then stops short of the opposite ground allowing the view. The floating roof at Akron is returned back into the ground at Antioch.

Roof as Interior Type

Newbern Volunteer Fire Station 2005, is an interior made only by a roof. The enclosure is the roof plane which wraps a space. An enclosing silver shell folds over the space without the opaque material touching the ground. A lining of translucent and transparent material emerges from the interior of the shell and slips to the ground allowing a directly viewed and felt connection between inside and outside. The liner shell is composed predominantly of operable doors and window that enable further blurring of the interior /exterior boundary. When closed, the fire house is the meta-interior – a sealed container that is a place from where things originate and go out.

Perry Lakes Pavilion 2002, is the predominant exemplifier project of the Roof as Interior Type. Two planes hover above the ground while sandwiching a space in between. It can be read as two separate planes or as one roof plane that has delaminated. Because of the materiality of the underside of the top plane, the metal surface reflects light, extending a canopy of light beyond the physical boundary of the structure. Open on all sides, the pavilion is a combination of the hoisted turtle from *The Ascension of Shepard Bryant 1999*, and Mockbee's turtle shell sitting up on sticks seen in both the *The Black Warrior (1996)* painting and the *Master Knot of Faith (1997)*¹⁴ etching. The project anticipates a great flood when the bottom platform plane will be covered by water. This flooding will erase the bottom orthogonal plane allowing the architecture to transcend the sandwiched space and elevate the perceived platform of occupation to the top animated plane at the dramatic height of the trees. This wish for the shifting of the dominant space upwards foreshadows the Rural Studio's recently completed Perry Lakes Tower positioning the Pavilion as a transition project to the Ascension Interior in our critique.

Ascension Interiors

Lastly, the Ascension Interior type is defined as an uplifting interior, characterized by a solid grounding or burrowing, like Yancey, paired with a focus upward. The Roof as plane has lost its predominance in this evolved Rural Studio Interior. The Prayer Room at the *Lucy*

House 2002, is the first clear Ascension Interior. Attached to the Lucy House of stacked carpet tiles, the vertically elongated crooked exterior form of the room is a clear signifier of a special place contained inside. It is a place of mystery and intrigue in its uniqueness from the rest of the house which is a turtle variation. Like other Rural Studio Ascension interiors, the Lucy room looks to the sky as the space spills up and out. Its base is buried in the ground as a safe basement room. Reading it as an extension of the turtle analogy, the shell is tapped on its back and splits open, letting light into the interior as in the painting *Apple Holding Flowers ~1996*. In the painting, Mockbee's mystical hand goddess, Apple, perches on the turtle shell summoning a fury of organic shapes into the sky. It can be read as her channeling the interior, shifting the occupant's focus up into the sky, which compositionally fills the majority of the painting.

Buried in the earth while capturing the sky, Samuel Mockbee's¹⁵ *Sub Rosa* project ***Sub Rosa Pantheon*** reveals the dissipation of the roof and the opportunity to transcend the earth. In *subrosa* the roof is eliminated and is replaced by a nighttime canopy of stars. Linear steel flowers (roses) shoot up through the oculus into the sky. Drawings for his *Sub Rosa* project, built by his daughter Carol after his untimely death, iconically reveal the upward progression of this deep interior condition born of the place. *Sub Rosa* provides the foundation conditions for the future of the Rural Studio work. Jackie Mockbee states, "Sambo said that this was the most important project of his career."¹⁶ Mockbee's WTC memorial proposal¹⁷, drawn in his hospital bed before his death, is an extension of *Sub Rosa*. It is the same interior void idea with the view up and out to the sky as the predominant feature of the dramatic excavated interior.

The final Ascension interior, the *Perry Lakes Birding Tower*, is the pathway up into the sky predicted and desired by Mockbee. From the ground, it captures the sky view, up to the top of the tower, like the view from his WTC excavation. The leap in scale changes the future of the Rural Studio. It is the largest and most ambitious Rural Studio project. It is an interior isolation, a stair launching up into the trees. Even though it is exterior, the stairs occupy a long vertical interior space. The team and Freear studied the trees in order to place

the tower for maximizing the room in the top of the trees. Progressing up into the tree canopy room, the visitor escapes the earth. The visitor emerges over the tree canopy for the long view of the landscape and becomes one of Mockbee's painted birds.

Endnotes

¹ Conversation with Jackie Mockbee. 2006

² Lawrence Chua, "In Praise of Shadows, The Rural Mythology of Samuel Mockbee," in *RURAL STUDIO Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*, by Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 163-174.

³ Chua, 166.

⁴ Moos *Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture*, ed. David Moos and Gail Trechsel (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 2003).

⁵ Chua, 163.

⁶ Larry Rinder, "Essay," in *Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture*, Samuel Mockbee, ed. David Moos and Gail Trechsel (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 2003).

⁷ William Levinson, "Essay," in *Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture*, Samuel Mockbee, ed. David Moos and Gail Trechsel (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 2003).

⁸ Conversation with Samuel Mockbee, Fall 2000.

⁹ Conversation with Ben Kelly, September 25, 2006.

¹⁰ Evident in both of the Oppenheimer Dean and Hursley books.

¹¹ Conversation with XXXX.

¹² Samuel Mockbee, *Rural Studio: Citizen Architect*, exhibition video.

¹³ Co-author visit to Mason's Bend, 2001.

¹⁴ David Moos, *Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture*, Samuel Mockbee, ed. David Moos and Gail Trechsel (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 2003).

¹⁵ Carol C. Mockbee, Sambo's daughter, completed the Sub Rosa Pantheon in 2004, after his untimely death.

¹⁶ Jackie Mockbee, "Another Dimension of Sambo," in *PROCEED AND BE BOLD Rural Studio After Samuel Mockbee*, by Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 172-173.

¹⁷ Max Protetch, *A New World Trade Center: Design Proposals from Leading Architects Worldwide*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 96-97.