

## Equipmentality and Architecture: Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio

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Figure 1. Butterfly House (1997).

Equipmentality reveals the tangible structure of things (such as in the case of a hammer, a tool upon which we can depend for the action of hammering, a soft pair of shoes or a cozy bed, artifacts that we use daily for walking or resting, respectively). Being a phenomenological attribute, equipmentality reveals a circumspective, material kind of insight, part of our everyday living, which is called by Heidegger as "readiness-to-hand". Subjects rely on things that are connected to their environment and emotions, things to which they are accustomed to. The habitual, customary quality of equipmentality is etymologically related to the Latin verb *habitare*, to reside, to dwell. Dwelling deals with what is familiar to subjects; with particular states of mind where they can linger (such as in the case of deep, collective memories); with meaningful aromas, whispers, and shadows that evoke a defined sense of place. Dwelling focuses on things that exist "in-order-to". Following Heidegger's thinking,

"(T)he work produced refers not only to the "towards-which" of its usability and the "whereof" of which it consists: under simple craft conditions, it also has an assignment to the person who is to use it or wear it" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 100).

Dwelling, or everyday living design, is strongly revealed by the work of Samuel "Sambo" Mockbee, a former architect, professor of architecture and co-founder (with professor D.K. Ruth) of the Rural Studio, an Auburn University architectural program in Hale County, Alabama. The Rural Studio gives a dynamic role to users, extending to neighborhoods the opportunity to become familiar and contribute with new buildings. The Rural Studio considers what exists in Hale County, where 30% of the population lives in poverty and 1,400 homes are considered substandard (i.e., without electricity or running water), making an impact on the environment without ignoring or destroying it. Its design alternatives

keep new construction besides old homes and original spaces, and create affordable, nourishing, and usefully innovative design for communities stricken with poverty. Instead of basic housing alternatives such as the ones produced by Habitat for Humanity, or identical, mass-produced construction, reliability (that is, the capacity of depending upon a community's sense of place) is strengthened by creating custom-made habitat at affordable costs. Windshields, automobile tires, hay bales wrapped in polyurethane, and carpet tiles, are some of the ingenious elements that the Rural Studio uses and/or recycles as construction materials: materials that otherwise would have been discarded.

Architectural students from the Rural Studio become a driving force of the design process. The Rural Studio involves the work of second and fifth-year students. Second-year students learn social and ethical issues related to architecture, interviewing several families in order to design and build a house for a semester. Fifth-year students stay at the studio an entire academic year, building community-based projects. Student designs bloom into low-budget living alternatives. Yet, the students' involvement in the design process is considered by some as paternalistic; they are perceived as white middle-class individuals creating shelter for poor blacks. Mockbee's opinion is as follows: "(The Rural Studio) is a two way street. We don't judge or ask questions. No one is feeling like anyone is taking advantage of anyone" (Oppenheimer Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio* 12). Yet, at this point, can this interaction be considered one-to-one?

Honesty becomes a standard for the Rural Studio. Honesty focuses their goal on helping others by means of an equipmental structure, designing alternatives that are familiar or tangible to their clients. Mockbee states, "There's an honesty that exists here. It's good to see our students respect clients they wouldn't have acknowledged on the street before" (Oppenheimer Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio* 13). In other words, for Mockbee, by addressing values such as truth and beauty, architecture has a moral bottom line. "Architecture has to be greater than just architecture... It has to address social values, as well as technical and aesthetic values" (Sittenfeld 296). To obtain new, low-budget habitat, clients share their needs and wishes in return.

Yet, at first glance it seems too good to be true -sometimes it takes time to earn the trust of the community. For instance, the Harris family needs persuasion to accept the offer; they initially think that the Rural Studio wants to exchange their few belongings for a new house. The Harris House (1997), also known as the "Butterfly House" for the tin roof of the porch, is an example of the Rural Studio's private dwelling or residential work (Figure 1). Its fully ventilated porch is the Harris family's center of activities: it occupies nearly half of the 600-square feet of the new house. The butterfly-shape of the roof helps to ventilate the porch as well as collecting water for a cistern that can be used for laundry and toilets. Yet, after looking at this house, who would deny its resemblance to a butterfly reaching for the sky? To a family escaping from the claws of poverty?

How do the Harris family feel about the shack without heat or indoor plumbing they inhabited until 1997 after moving to their new house? How do they feel now about their new home? Indeed, their new home has an entrance ramp and wide doors for Mrs. Harris's wheelchair, but the owners still have fond memories about their old shack, where they had more space. Their old house stands besides the new one. This building arrangement between the "old" and the "new" is rather common. It can be seen worldwide in vernacular architecture: in rural communities, where new houses are built, many families avoid dismantling or demolishing their old houses for different reasons (e.g., for alternative activities and/or expansion, for convenience, or to keep ties with the past). In this context, the role of the Rural Studio becomes relevant. More than mere "developers", the Rural Studio works upon helicoidal or radial patterns of thinking, as part of which users/clients, instructors, students, and government agencies lead to the same event: a house; a place to live as a family; a place to "dwell".

The Sanders-Dudley House (2001) was finished by second-year students for a big family - a mother and six children. Its 1500-square-foot ground floor plus a 200-square-foot loft displayed its living spaces at its center and its bedrooms on both ends of the structure, according to Ms. Sanders-Dudley's requests: a private place with a window, a fireplace, a master bedroom away from the children's rooms, a family room, an entry and a dining room. Rammed-earth walls, made of local clay and Port-

land cement compacted with pneumatic tampers (Oppenheimer Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio* 11), provided its appearance with a vernacular, warm, and versatile look, detached from a modern spectrum. This house could also be considered practical, cost-effective, and fire-resistant. Completed, it cost about \$40,000, with room for expansion.

Music Man's House (2003) is a tall and narrow 600-square-foot structure (Figure 2). This new house is built on a property owned by Jimmy Lee Matthews, known as Music Man; an enthusiastic African American man from whom students learn deep lessons about life and the world.

The vertical proportions of Music Man's House are determined by his needs; he can be considered a "junk collector". The interior is divided into two major areas: an undivided living area and a bathroom area. In the living area, the furniture has been structured into a lateral brace system that glides to give room to Music Man's possessions.

The total cost of Music Man's House –including septic tank and landscaping- was \$28,000. Some of the construction materials –timber, chicken wire, glass bottles- were found on site. Four dilapidated structures remain on the property: one belonged to Music Man's late mother, another to his uncle, in addition to two deteriorated trailers.

In the early 1980's, Mockbee's architectural practice with Coleman Coker and the firm Mockbee Coker was blooming; yet, something was missing: an existential bliss; a way to dwell in his own projects and to help his clients find a dwelling. Then, a Catholic nun named Sister Grace Mary, from Madison County, Mississippi, provided clients with the precursor of the Rural Studio Houses: a "charity house". Sister Grace Mary's projects consisted of moving houses away from a flood district. Mockbee's clients – Fouts Johnson, his wife and their seven children – were living in a shanty. Their new 1,000 square foot house was built with donations and volunteer work for a total of \$7,000.

For Norberg-Schulz, a house or home is "(t)he stage where private dwelling takes place... which may be characterized as a "refuge" where (a hu)man gathers and expresses those memories which make up his (her) personal world" (Norberg-Schulz 13). According to the meaning of the German word

*bauen*, building is really dwelling (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 148). For dwelling to occur, a building should stand in it in order to gather – paraphrasing Heidegger – earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. In order to express its forms and meanings, a building ought to have a location as a point of departure. Thus, the need for a dwelling provides a need for a place. This is how Mockbee finds Hale County for his Rural Studio.

"In Hale County, Alabama, you see ghost buildings, abandoned barns, tumbledown shanties, and rusted trailers – fragile remnants of a more prosperous agrarian past. You see old people sitting quietly on sagging porches and scruffy chicken hens noisily pecking and wandering on hard dirt yards. Hale is a left-behind place. But it is also a land of dense piney woods, fragrant crop furrows, and hypnotic rolling hills. It is the land of the Black Warrior River, 'drifting among the dreams of the neglected... his ancient liquid light flowing toward (you and) the unknown', as an architect named Samuel Mockbee wrote in a poetic moment" (Oppenheimer Dean and Hursley, *Rural Studio* 1).

As mortals, we build to live at our leisure; to rely on things that are attached to us by meaning. Yet, not all buildings necessarily imply a concept of dwelling. The erection and demolition of Pruitt-Igoe - the housing project from the '50's originally planned by the City of St. Louis, Missouri and designed by Leinweber, Yamasaki & Hellmuth - provided a good lesson on the lack of sense of place. "The architects' task was constrained by the size and location of the site, the number of units, and the project density, all of which had been predetermined by the St. Louis Housing Authority... Even after the architects had switched to an all high-rise scheme, they faced continued pressure to keep costs to a bare minimum" (Bristol 354-355). Through the intervention of the federal Public Housing Authority, Pruitt-Igoe became a thirty-three 11-story apartment building complex, that was originally divided into two partitions: Pruitt (named after Wendell O. Pruitt, an African-American fighter pilot in World War II) for black residents, and Igoe (after William L. Igoe, a former representative in Congress) for whites. Yet, whites were unwilling to move in and soon the project only had black residents.

Social and political issues from the 50's-60's heavily conditioned the failure of this project – such as the

low income status of the families and the segregation involved in the original layout of the buildings. Pruitt-Igoe portrayed racial stereotypes created by white America: illiteracy, unemployment, and vandalism, among others. Yet, several architectural features helped turn this building complex into a shelter of crime, such as its "skip-stop" elevators (which only stopped at the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth floors); its communal spaces, or "glazed internal galleries"; and the poor quality of its finishes (hardware, windowpanes, kitchen cabinets). After failed attempts to rehabilitate the complex and years of remaining vacant, the St. Louis Housing Authority began the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings in the early 70's. In "The Language of Postmodern Architecture", architectural critic Charles Jencks made the date of one of its implosions famous (or infamous) as the day in which Modern Architecture died: July 15, 1972.

Enormous rifts are found between the Rural Studio's projects at Hale County and Pruitt Igoe. While the Rural Studio salvages dilapidated barns, trailers, and shanties besides new buildings as living structures, maintaining their ties with the past, Pruitt-Igoe was dead since its conception; its demolition was merely a formality. However, Pruitt-Igoe, more than the death of an architectural style, a group of buildings, or a place, starts as a housing complex for hundreds of low-income families without taking into consideration their existential background for its design and construction. When things (houses, apartments, architectural "styles") get deprived of their equipmental, material character, their organic context is taken away, and they become abstract targets in space without an authentic connection towards a world -- without usefulness. In this context, users are positioned in a passive, shallow role, ignoring any concerns about their future, and are expected to accept architectural production without questioning it. This is one of the assumptions that led to the death of Pruitt-Igoe and, by extension, modern architecture.

Occasionally, developers try to play the role of God; they try to fix or change the past in order to shoot an arrow into the future (i.e., into their bank accounts). We all know that, for some developers, the bottom line is profit and quantity (and not quality). Developers shall also remember that an existential past is already present in every user and every client. In other words, users shall also have

a hand in deciding what comes next; since users are familiar with their community, they shall bring to the fore their experiences and emotions about what, why, and where they are used or accustomed to.

Instead, Samuel Mockbee wanted his students to abandon themselves into the "classroom of the community" to bring things (buildings, construction materials, finishes) towards a world. "Things visit mortals with a world", Heidegger says, and when we understand their message we gain that existential foothold which is dwelling" (Norberg-Schulz 17). This alternative allowed clients to convey their needs more fluently: needs that could be used by students as a reliable source to produce seductive, arresting works of architecture. It also extends the ability to contribute to a project to users/clients. Mockbee left a legacy of experience, instruction, and hard work to the Rural Studio before his death from leukemia in late 2001. He received numerous awards in life, among them, a MacArthur "genius" Grant, as well as a posthumous AIA Gold Medal in 2004.

Recycling ingenious elements into construction materials for low-budget housing projects is a rigorous and demanding task. It requires teamwork. This teamwork shall be supported by government institutions, independent professionals (in the case of the Rural Studio, instructors and students), and users/clients. The main purpose of this teamwork is to promote integration between all of the roles involved in order to bring forward the best possible result in the design and construction process, to avoid the production of "dead buildings", and, paraphrasing Mockbee, to create buildings with a "soul".

#### ENDNOTES

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Figure 2. Music Man's House (2003).