

Casting Our Buckets Down

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Learning to Build While Building to Learn

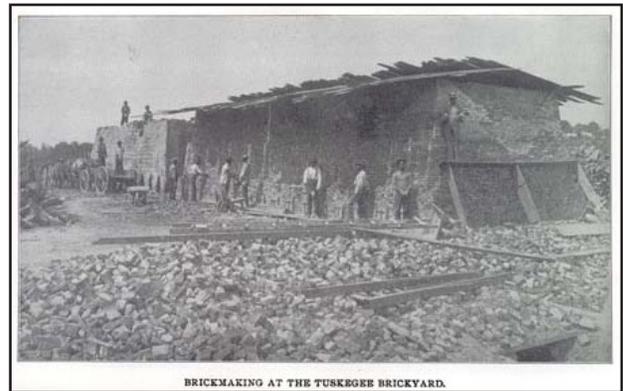
At the end of the Civil War, more than four million slaves were free, and by 1870, according to the last report of the Freedmen's Bureau, over 240,000 freedmen were engaged in systematic education.¹ After hearing of the Hampton Institute, begun before the war in 1861, Booker T. Washington traveled 500 miles to enroll in the school.²

The war had devastated the southern American landscape and divided its races. After completing his education and securing his first teaching appointment at Tuskegee Institute, where he was hired to establish the school in 1881, Washington understood that education was the key to securing a place for his race in the new republic, uniting southerners, and rebuilding the nation.³

Arriving in Tuskegee, young 25 five year old Washington had expected to visit the campus of the school he had been selected to lead. Lewis Adams an ex-slave skilled artisan had successfully maneuvered to gain support and secured a \$2,000 annual appropriation in 1880 to begin his long planned vision of a school to train for the freed slaves; but, Washington immediately discovered there was no Campus, and further the funds could only be utilized to hire teachers.⁴

Working with students, faculty and the community, Washington built the Tuskegee campus with bricks formed from the ground beneath their feet. Tuskegee became the incubator for Washington's pedagogy, training many architects and master builders. The biggest impact the Tuskegee model

had on institutional architecture was the establishment of Rosenwald Schools where more than 5300 campuses were built by blacks. Those erected between 1913 and 1920 were designed at Tuskegee. Faculty and graduates went on to design, build and help establish black communities across the country.⁵ Recognizing southern whites as a strategic, though improbable partner, Washington developed economically beneficial relationships with local and, eventually, regional builders, selling them bricks manufactured at Tuskegee. In this way, he saw the two races as collaborators in a common effort, a sentiment Washington made clear in his speech, "Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are", at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895.⁶



BRICKMAKING AT THE TUSKEGEE BRICKYARD.

Driven by self preservation and a desire for self sufficiency, southern blacks after the civil war, led by men like Booker T. Washington, found ways to overcome adversity and recognize unlikely resources to empower the race economically and industrially. African Americans would again play a central role, en masse, in a design moment in the United

States nearly 150 years later, following the events of August 29, 2005.

Hurricane Katrina

When the storm hit, my first academic appointment at Kansas State University was less than a week underway.

Prior to teaching, I had spent seven years in professional practice, six of those years as executive director of Project Locus, a 501c3 nonprofit organization committed to the sensitive construction of public structures in areas of need. Although the organization was inspired by the work of an academic program, Auburn's Rural Studio, and while we worked with architecture students to implement community-based design-build projects, our work was not scholarly, did not carry the burden of academic rigor, and was more a product of social justice, activism and compassion.

At K-State, working in Kansas 'ghost' towns, I began to develop a community-based design-build approach that would address student performance criteria, required mastery of content, applied skills and critical thinking about the discipline of architecture and building science, and could be peer reviewed and widely disseminated. The intent was to develop an academic design-build practice that could be critical and compassionate at once.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, the focus of my work shifted from Kansas to Louisiana. While I recognized the need for academic responsibility, the devastation in New Orleans immediately made the objectives of rigor and scholarly research secondary to the compulsion to act.

Arkansas Summit

Working in cooperation with the Arkansas University School of Architecture, Tulane University and the Reinhabiting NOLA conference, we developed a workshop intended to examine the causes and effects of the disaster, consider the needs of the New Orleans community based on feedback from residents and experts on the ground, and to propose ideas for immediate responses.

Just over three months after the storm, more than three dozen academics, professionals and members

ARKANSAS SUMMIT

RE-INHABITING NEW ORLEANS

Bringing together members of the design and architecture community at-large, and all disciplines to discuss the causes and state of the disaster, assess the needs of those affected, and develop a comprehensive plan for the restoration of both physical and social structures, including housing, commercial and civic infrastructure.

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of the New Orleans community met at the Arkansas Summit in Fayetteville. The results of the conference were the formation of an intercollegiate, interdisciplinary consortium of design and planning programs, which became CITYbuild, and the commitment of the new members of that consortium to develop academic research projects addressing the rebuilding of New Orleans. Two years after the storm, of the more than twenty projects implemented by consortium schools, six were developed by members in attendance in Arkansas. Despite widespread opinion in the academy and the pro-

fession that any response to the disaster would be hasty, irresponsible, and even futile, was the arrival at a consensus of the participants that immediate and direct action was necessary. This was perhaps the most important outcome of the conference.

It was apparent to the members of the Summit that, due to the level of destruction in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast, the lack of resources and precedent models we were faced with the uncommon challenge of creating a new type of cooperative entity that moved between universities, disciplines, and cultures.

With the Tulane City Center at the center of the effort, we developed the operating procedures and ethical standards of practice for participating institutions including rights and responsibilities of practitioners and clients, as well as policies concerning accountability, mutual benefit, publication and our relationship to local government and the private sector.

By the end of 2006, more than twenty two partnering schools working in nearly every neighborhood in the city had implemented some of the first construction projects since the storm. We completed sixteen structures from urban furniture to multi-family housing, generating more than two hundred designs and project proposals, and contributed over \$250,000 in dedicated resources resulting in an estimated \$1.5 million dollars in total economic impact.⁷

There was an obvious attraction of the participants to working in New Orleans post-Katrina due to the seemingly endless possibilities in terms of partnerships, program, scope of work, and site. However, despite the devastation, the city was not a blank slate. Having weathered nearly three hundred years of storms and floods, New Orleans' built environment, though crippled, survived. Its communities, though dispersed, were strong and functioning.

In effect, the work was motivated less by the potential for design freedom than by a moral imperative to help restore, and a desire to become a part of, the rich urban fabric, social networks and lives of the residents of a great but crippled American city; a city that we grew to love. The process and products of that work were not charity, not an oversimplified "do-gooder" architecture, but an act of solidarity with intent.

Although born of grassroots community building, projects were critical and sensitive in terms of architecture and context. The work had social, environmental, economic and political implications. New, innovative technologies and methodologies were employed, and the educational benefit to the student was at the forefront.

Partners experienced a real integration with communities. Unlike an exclusive, culturally insensitive, top-down approach in which people would be asked to accept design proposals without input, due to ignorance or desperation, projects were instead developed not just *for*, but in direct cooperation *with* the community.

While the purpose of collaboration was initially a prudent response to the overwhelming devastation, the tremendous task at hand, and the odds against short term recovery aided by small scale, institutional design build projects, it became apparent that our collaboration ensured project success due to shared expertise and shared resources. Although individual projects may not have been considered significant in terms of scope or impact, the many small scale projects implemented quickly city-wide, the collective body of work, had a considerable impact, not singularly, but as a whole.

The transferable knowledge gained by the consortium was a new standard of practice. We developed a new process for addressing marginalized or compromised urban contexts collectively, despite contingencies, through coordinating various institutions, disciplines, skill sets, resources, and agendas. We arrived at comprehensive design solutions for community building that have a strategic, immediate, and measurable impact.

Our work in New Orleans has become a model for urban study in design and planning and has increased the capacity of participating institutions, organizations and programs to continue that work in other urban contexts.

House of Dance and Feathers

Before Katrina, Ronald Lewis, president of the Big Nine Social Aid and Pleasure Club, honorary chief of the Choctaw Hunters, and member of the North Side Skull and Bones skeleton crew, had made great headway in educating the Lower Ninth Ward

community about the Mardi Gras Indian culture and in passing down the rich traditions to a younger generation. Working out of a shed he built with his sons in the back yard of his home on Tupelo Street, Ronald had amassed a collection of photographs, hand sewn bead work and feathered regalia which he eventually referred to as the House of Dance and Feathers Mardi Gras Indian Museum. By the time the storm waters had receded, Ronald had lost his home, his shed, and ninety five percent of his permanent collection.

At the Arkansas Summit, anthropologist Rachel Bruenlin of the Neighborhood Story Project, a New Orleans based nonprofit, presented Ronald's story. After the conference, colleague Larry Bowne, team members Caitlin Heckathorn and Tomas Martinek, and I decided to call Rachel and her partner, Dan Etheridge of the Tulane city Center, to volunteer to take on the reconstruction of the museum. Initially, we intended to rebuild the museum in two weeks for less than \$15,000 dollars during winter break. Two months later, in February 2006, when I met Ronald for the first time at his home in exile in Thibodaux, Louisiana, he told me that although the House of Dance and Feathers was his future, his home was his life. Leaving him that day, it was apparent that we would have to rebuild his home, as well. The project scope had more than doubled, both in terms of time and money. This was the first of many challenges.

It was our initial intention that the project be supported by and be implemented through the department of architecture at Kansas State University. However, due to the accelerated pace and project logistics including distance, liability concerns and resource issues, we were unable to receive institutional support. As a result, we were forced to push the project deadline back to be completed during the summer of 2006 under the umbrella of Project Locus. This arrangement was optimal because it allowed us to be more inclusive in terms of the project team, including members from outside of the university. Also, it gave us increased access to funding with lower overhead and, in light of the fast pace, a less rigid management structure that allowed for a more flexible decision making process.

When we arrived at the site for the first time in March, 2006, to complete demolition and site analysis, we realized that there was still no power in the Lower Ninth Ward and that it may not be avail-



able well into the summer during construction. To provide us power for tools, Len Broberg and the environmental studies program at the University of Montana donated equipment for and installed a solar power system in an enclosed utility trailer that served as our sole power source for the entire term of the construction during the summer. We learned that not only could we complete a substantial construction project without using conventional coal generated electricity, but also, in many cases, without electricity at all.

The infrastructure disrupted by the storm included conventional construction materials streams. Not only was most local and regional production suspended, but material supply, including that of national chains, was depleted due to increased demand. To offset shortages, we prefabricated some components in Kansas to be transported to the site and utilized community-based resources and alternative streams, such as the Green Project, a New Orleans based construction materials reuse program. In one instance, the metal decking for the museum roof was supplied by the relative of Ronald's neighbor, Charles Napoleon. At a BBQ, through informal conversation, we discovered that Charles' brother's shed was soon to be demolished, and that we could salvage any aluminum decking we needed. We recovered the exact square footage necessary to cover the roof of the museum. If not for an impromptu, albeit habitual, community event, we would have had to purchase new metal roofing at a cost three times the national average due to material shortage and inflation. Ultimately, the reused material lent an unpredictable, unplanned aesthetic to the building that combined the old with the new, and helped to blend the museum into the surrounding context.



Through the success of the process, we learned that it was ideal to concentrate on small scale products that could have an immediate effect, utilizing pre-fabrication and other available technologies, and be produced quickly under flexible management, using alternative, innovative, and sustainable materials and methods. As a result, subsequent Project Locus and institutional studio projects have been designed to be lean, efficient operations with little or no overhead and minimal material and energy cost. They have maximized educational benefit and community impact. Subsequently, sponsoring institutions have not only been open to, but excited by the potentials afforded by that type of program structure.

Cast Down Your Buckets Where You Are

Since 2006, Project Locus has created and hosted an annual, national community-based design-build competition, the Design Build Challenge, held consecutively in New Orleans, Seattle and Boston, in which contestants are asked to develop and construct a design based on rigorous criteria in less than three days. Sparked by a conversation with Bryan Bell of Design Corps, the competition has included competitors from more than a dozen institutions including Yale, the University of Washington, and the University of Texas at Austin.

I have continued to develop a model for small scale institutional design-build projects at North Carolina State University, where eight students who were mandated to individually spend less than four hundred dollars for the semester, equal or less than the amount they would be expected to spend on materials in a typical design studio, while proposing new forms of urban infrastructure and taking advantage of renewable material waste streams, managed to contribute an estimated six

thousand dollars in dedicated resources to the city of Raleigh.

Since Katrina, I have researched the history of design-build and programs born out of adversity, or "design moments". I applied to, and in the fall of 2009, accepted a position at the School of Architecture at Tuskegee University. Tuskegee is a hallowed place, a place where the people have a history of doing for themselves, a place that, after the Civil War, Booker T. Washington and his students built from the ground beneath their feet.

At Tuskegee, we have begun developing several projects, including the design and construction of a museum in New Orleans dedicated to the wrongfully convicted, while continuing to develop a model of practice that does more with less, impacts community quickly and strategically, utilizes all available



innovative materials and methods, and is structurally social.

Booker T. Washington, in delivering his now famous speech at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, recognized our nation's greatest assets, more so than material or economic resources, are its citizens; and in order to rebuild a nation ravaged by disaster, we must not only re-fuse the physical fabric, but also the promise of its people.⁸ As a founder and educator at Tuskegee Institute, his greatest lessons were the inherent dignity in work and developing the value of the individual, through instructing the mind and the hand at once.⁹

Working on the House of Dance and Feathers, with CITYbuild, and on projects since, the process has become, rather than architectural, primarily a social one. And although, as we build, we think that we will be met at every turn with obstacles, prejudice and failure, what we draw up in our buckets is fresh, sparkling water, and what we create is an architecture of decency, an architecture that is both critical and compassionate.

ENDNOTES

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9. Ibid; *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*. p 147.