



PHOTOGRAPH BY KAYM SHAMEL BASHA

The Rural Studio's Samuel Mockbee

This Auburn professor taught students the hammer-and-nail realities of architecture in Hale County, Alabama.

We'll build you a house for free," Auburn University professor Samuel Mockbee told Anderson Harris. At the time, Anderson and his wife, Ora Lee, lived in a jerry-built house with little insulation, a leaking roof, and paper-thin walls. A scarce and contaminated water source prevented them from simultaneously washing clothes and getting a decent glass of water.

In answer to the professor's offer, Anderson said, "I don't think I'll take one of those today." His life thus far precluded believing in a house-for-free promise. The elderly Hale County man relented after pleas from his daughter

on behalf of her mother who uses a wheelchair.

For generations, many people in Hale County have endured hardscrabble lives in unimaginable conditions. In many ways, life on this slice of earth near the Black Warrior River remains virtually unchanged from the days when James Agee and Walker Evans recorded its poverty in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

"It became really clear to me that this region of Alabama, because of its economic circumstances, would be the ideal spot for students to come and



top: "An architect's primary connection is always with people and places—and not just the superficial qualities of a place," says Samuel Mockbee. "I happened to be born and raised in the South, so this happens to be my place." **above:** Students built this row of housing units, called pods.

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Students cluster around Sambo at the pods. The one on the right consists of waxed corrugated cardboard.

help in a small way," says Samuel, called Sambo by most.

Today, Anderson and Ora Lee reside in the wheelchair-accessible Butterfly House—its soaring roofline suggests a winged creature. The angled roof allows rain to collect in a cistern. A sewer purification system keeps drinking water from two community wells clean.

Home, Sweet Home

The house is one of several structures designed and built by students of Auburn's Rural Studio, headquartered in Newbern, Alabama, near Greensboro. Sambo guides the program he cofounded in 1993 with D.K. Ruth, who looks after the studio's interests from the university campus.

The idea started simply. Remove architecture students from the cozy confines of Auburn. Pair teams of second-year and fifth-year thesis students with county residents as architects and clients. Have students design and build a home or other structure, primarily with donated and found materials, at a rough cost of \$20,000 to \$40,000 per project. Last year, the studio opened an outreach program that allows students from other architecture programs and disciplines to participate.

As they learn the nail-pounding

reality of architecture, students become part of the community. "The experience out here is like having a great love in your life," Sambo says. "Once you've had that great love, you want to recapture it at some point. I've had students who've gone to New York and to Nashville and done philanthropic work.

"[The Rural Studio] informs and conditions students in their own professional, ethical, and moral conduct when they get out in the world," Sambo explains. "Even though the Rural Studio has a reputation—and rightfully so—of dealing with social and environmental issues, ultimately what we're after is producing architecture." He adds, "We're not out here to use wacky materials for the sake of using wacky materials."

Waste Not, Want Not

Nonetheless, projects do, indeed, make use of unusual substances. There's the house constructed from stucco-covered hay bales; an artsy ballpark backstop made of Cyclone fencing; and a glistening community center that incorporates nearly 100 car windshields. Tiny houses, built by students and dubbed "pods," sit behind one of two donated farmhouses. These structures serve as the students' living quarters. One pod

glitters with the silvered sides of license plates turned backward. Another consists mostly of waxed corrugated cardboard. Rammed earth—red clay from the area mixed with cement—forms another home. Students swabbed insecticide on the mud-made walls after dirt daubers moved in mid-project. Dealing with such obstacles is part of the program's appeal.

Sambo spends much of his time at the rural outpost. But every Friday, the Mississippi native drives home to Canton, Mississippi, as he has since he joined the Auburn faculty in 1991. There, his wife, Jackie, and his teenage son, Julius, live. The couple's older daughters, Carol, Sarah Ann, and Margaret, are on their own.

Building for Life

Despite contributions made by the Rural Studio to this depressed area—among them a Boys & Girls Club, a

children's center, and several homes—Sambo quickly points out, "This is not an economic development program. Our number one goal is educating the students." That goal distinguishes the Rural Studio from that of organizations such as Habitat for Humanity.

Still, the tenor of the projects suggests the studio's purpose extends be-

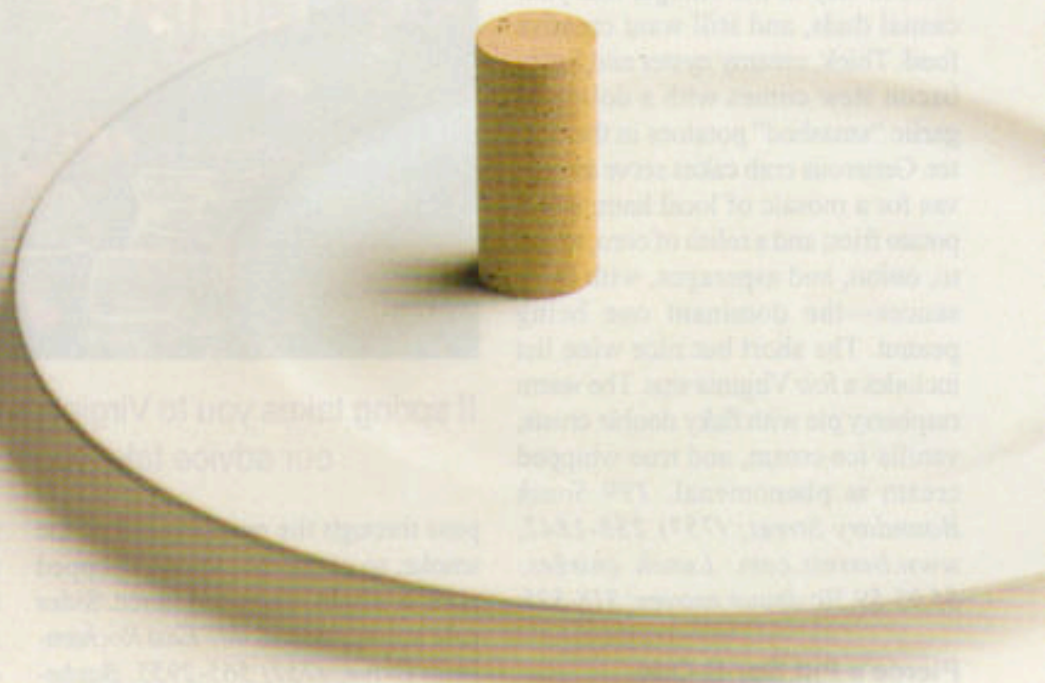
"This is not an economic development program. Our number one goal is educating the students."

Samuel Mockbee

yond mastery of brick and mortar, or even mud and hay. Last year, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation reinforced the studio's goals when the nonprofit awarded Sambo a "genius" grant of \$500,000. "The role of architecture is to improve civic life," he says. He hopes the studio's gradu-

ates realize at some point that their talent and experience and knowledge can make a difference in the world, that they can contribute in some decent way to make a community a better place to live." **NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON**

EDITOR'S NOTE: At press time, we learned Samuel "Sambo" Mockbee had passed away. But his story and that of the Rural Studio continue to be a worthy ones. "The program will continue," says D.K. Ruth, cofounder of the studio. "One of our goals was to build an infrastructure that would support the Rural Studio should either of us leave the university. We've got that in place; the Rural Studio is on very good footing." D.K. plans to direct the program, spending more time at the Newbern setting. "We'll miss his spirit and big-old-bear attitude," he says. "He made me see the world differently."



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