



Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: *Community Architecture*



This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition
Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture
organized by David Moos at the Birmingham Museum of Art

This exhibition is sponsored by Altria Group, Inc.

Additional support has been provided by:
The Comer Foundation, Interface, Inc., the Rich's Fund of the
Federated Department Stores Foundation and the Graham Foundation

Exhibition schedule:
Birmingham Museum of Art
Birmingham, AL
5 October 2003 to 4 January, 2004

National Building Museum
Washington, DC
22 May to 6 September, 2004

Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art
Scottsdale, AZ
25 September, 2004 to 2 January 2, 2005

Published by:
Birmingham Museum of Art
2000 Eighth Avenue North
Birmingham, Alabama 35203
www.artsBMA.org

Copyright ©2003
Birmingham Museum of Art and the authors

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form, or
by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photo-
copying—without permission by the publisher.

ISBN 0-931394-52-X

Available through D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10013
Tel: (212) 627-1999 Fax: (212) 627-9484

Printed and bound in the UK by Butler & Tanner
(This book has been printed on paper which is 75% recycled from de-inked
post consumer waste using inks which are vegetable based.)

Art Direction and Design by:
Tom Bejgrowicz/VRA, Birmingham, AL

All Rural Studio photography, unless otherwise indicated,
© Timothy Hursley, all rights reserved.

Additional photography by:
Robert Linthout, M. Sean Pathasema and Cynthia Connolly

Front cover:

(top)

Detail of Samuel Mockbee, *The Black Warrior*, 1996, Oil on canvas
mounted on plywood with wood, found wood, metal and corrugated
metal, beaver sticks, bottles, gourds, garden clipper, string and
tape, 174 x 96 inches. Courtesy Jackie Mockbee and Family.

(bottom)

Rural Studio, *The Lucy House*, Mason's Bend, Hale County, AL,
2001-2002, Outreach Studio Project. Photograph by Timothy
Hursley.

Back cover:

Samuel Mockbee, *Preliminary Sketch: Fabrications, Full Scale*
(*Elevation with photos*), 1997, Pen, ink and colored pencil on paper
with photo collage and Duct tape, 14 x 17 inches. Courtesy of Max
Protetch Gallery, New York.

Frontispiece:

(top)

Detail of Samuel Mockbee, *Lizquina: Mother Goddess* also
called *Lucy's Paramour*, 1993-1995, Oil on wood with rubber
tires, tree bark, found wood, metal, lawn mower chain, rope,
beaver sticks and gourd, 114 x 104 inches. Courtesy Jackie
Mockbee and Family.

(bottom)

Rural Studio, *The Yancey Chapel*, Sawyerville, Hale County, AL,
1995, Thesis Project. Photograph by Timothy Hursley.

INTRODUCTION: A SENSE OF WONDER

Gail Trechsel and David Moos

On one of his notebook pages that bears the heading, "The Sketch of an Architect," Samuel Mockbee set out the parameters through which he defined his creative enterprise:

- I Moral Sense
- II Ability to Observe (truth)
- III Sense of Wonder (beauty)¹

Linking ethical, social, and poetic realities would be Mockbee's fate. At the core of his being, and at the center of his thinking as an architect, was the drive for justice and a mutual respect for all human beings. Mockbee possessed the genial ability to express his moral principles and his ideals of fairness through the creation of buildings of profound beauty. The houses, community centers, churches, meeting pavilions, playgrounds, and other essential structures that he presided over at the Rural Studio both reflect and transcend their cultural context. Inflected by southern vernacular form, Mockbee's inventive design was infused with resourceful construction solutions and unique applications of salvaged, recycled, or reapplied materials. For Hale County, Alabama—a place synonymous with chronic definitions of poverty—Mockbee conceived of architecture as not merely entailing great design, but also encompassing an agenda of social transformation, an organic process of helping people by coming to know them. "What is required," Mockbee asserted, "is the replacement of abstract opinions with knowledge based on real human contact and personal realization applied to the work."²

Mockbee's notebooks also diagram his methodology for the Rural Studio, elucidating his belief that each component of the building process is intimately connected with every other. The new strategy that he and D. K. Ruth, chair of the department of architecture at Auburn University, devised for the teaching of architecture stemmed from a desire to make things better—within the discipline of architecture and beyond. They sought to develop a system of instruction that took the students out of the classroom of the university and thrust them into the classroom of the world. Second-year architecture students can elect to spend one quarter at the Rural Studio, working in a group of about fifteen, solving each aspect of what architecture is: from initially meeting with the client in order to determine needs and desires, to the preliminary creative and design phase, to the structural and engineering stage, and finally undertaking actual construction. Fifth-year, or thesis students, spend an entire year working in teams of three or four undertaking projects from inception to completion. In this manner students develop deep working relationships (among themselves and with clients), acquire a better understanding of teamwork and compromise, while learning that design and construction are a continuum. If the Rural Studio was initially concerned with providing houses for disadvantaged Hale County residents, it rapidly increased its scope to provide structures that have reinvigorated, indeed reimagined, the larger social environment.

Mockbee's holistic vision of architecture as pedagogy and social activism developed incrementally. In the late-1970s, after he himself had graduated from Auburn University with a degree in architecture and was practicing in Canton, Mississippi, he began to be troubled by the inequities that still pervaded the South following the Civil Rights movement. The lingering awareness that his own life of opportunity was enabled at the expense of African-Americans in his community began to weigh on his conscience. An occasion to address this concern presented itself in the early 1980s through a Canton housing initiative that sought to renovate existing houses and provide new ones for needy families.

¹ Samuel Mockbee, *Notebook*, 1996. The title page inscription gives the date of each notebook. In many cases Mockbee often later revised or added pages of writing and sketches. All Notebooks are courtesy of Jackie Mockbee and Family.

² Randolph Bates, "Interview with Samuel Mockbee," in *Mockbee Coker: Thought and Process*, Lori Ryker, ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 99.

As he participated in this enterprise, which provided his first meaningful encounter with poor African-Americans, Mockbee gained essential insight into issues of community, class, and race. He understood that ignorance of “the other” and economic disparity, rather than merely race, were the key characteristics that defined difference. Once Mockbee and those working closely with him crossed into the other world—or to use the phrase that came to symbolize the entry of Auburn students into the lives of Hale County residents, once they “stepped over the threshold”—mutual respect grew and preconceptions abated.

Mockbee would sometimes illustrate lectures about the Rural Studio by showing a slide of a view of Greensboro, Alabama, taken in 1936 by Walker Evans. He would point out that, with the exception of one building that had burned down, the town looked just the same. He would then flash an image of the town taken in the 1990s. “What is sad about the two photographs,” Mockbee would say, “is that in those sixty years not a damn thing has changed for some of our citizens and yet we still continue to believe things are getting better, but they are not....”³ The Rural Studio endeavored to change this picture. Ruth and Mockbee selected Hale County, in the heart of Alabama’s Black Belt,⁴ located over 100 miles from Auburn’s campus, because the majority of residents are mired in a cycle of poverty that dates back to Reconstruction.⁵ Here Mockbee could implement the essence of his own epiphany and confer the sense of wonder that architecture-in-action is capable of delivering. As Mockbee led his students on the path to becoming “citizen architects,” he defined through his own humanistic and profoundly idealistic vision of responsibility the intersection of architecture with community.

Mockbee’s work at the Rural Studio is now internationally known. Following exhibitions at the Max Protetch Gallery, New York; the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati; his posthumous inclusion in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, New York; and the publication of Andrea Oppenheimer Dean’s comprehensive, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency* (2002), Mockbee’s undertaking has entered mainstream consciousness. What is often missing from the story of “The Hero of Hale County” (as a feature in *Architectural Record* dubbed Mockbee in its title), however, is the fact that Mockbee was a successful architect who, throughout most of the 1990s, continued to maintain his partnership and professional practice with Coleman Coker in Memphis. In 1995, as the Rural Studio was gaining early maturity, a monograph, *Mockbee Coker: Thought and Process*, published by Princeton Architecture Press, documented the sleek and ambitious private houses that the firm specialized in. Indeed, the so-called Pickwick House, located in Shiloh Falls, Tennessee, was not only featured on the cover of *Architectural Record* but also appeared in several coffee-table volumes such as *The New American House 2: Innovation in Residential Design and Construction* (1997) and *Modern House 2* (2000).

The strength of Mockbee’s professional abilities makes his commitment to the Rural Studio all the more poignant. Mockbee was an architect who could easily have continued on a career path catering to wealthy clients. Instead, he chose, with Emersonian idealism, to embark on an untested project, to make pedagogy the conceptual center of his practice. The kind of knowledge that Mockbee discovered with his students in Hale County can only be lived. Bold is the idea of providing homes for the disenfranchised residents of Hale County; more radical, however, is the commitment to having undergraduate students assume responsibility for the entire architectural process. Both these moves define the essence of empowerment, and it took great courage for Mockbee to pursue his convictions. Early on, he knew what was at stake. In a 1994 notebook, the frontispiece, which Mockbee inscribed using a quill pen and his finest grandiose script, he inscribed the following: “Rural Studio / Greensboro, Alabama / January 1994 / ‘I will fight until I die against the cruelty of small ambition.’ Anon. – (a friend of W. B. Yeats from his boyhood).”⁶ Such words,

³ Quoted from Mockbee’s lecture, Rotary Club of Birmingham, January 31, 2001.

⁴ “The Black Belt, [is] a multicounty crescent of geography named in the early nineteenth century for its soil but soon, and as frequently, identified with its large African American population....In the 1850s the Black Belt of Alabama was one of the richest regions of plantation slavery in America. During the twentieth century, the effects of generations of soil erosion combined with the invasion of the boll weevil and the collapse of the cotton market all but destroyed the region’s row crop farming.” See Allen Tullis, “Alabama Bound, Unbound,” in Trudy Wilner Stack, *Christenberry Reconstruction: The Art of William Christenberry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 14.

⁵ The twelve-county Black Belt of Alabama ranks near the bottom of the nation in most major statistical categories such as Poverty, Infant Deaths, Quality of Education and Healthcare, Births to Single Mothers, Unemployment, and Life Expectancy. For a comprehensive analysis, see the special series of reports “The Black Belt: Alabama’s Third World,” *The Birmingham News*, May 12, 2002, 1A, 11A-14A.

⁶ Samuel Mockbee, Notebook, 1994.

the most audacious, innovative, and effective architecture program in the United States.

This exhibition at the Birmingham Museum of Art began when Samuel Mockbee was initially engaged to mount what would become the major exhibition of his work with the Rural Studio. As dates were discussed and preliminary decisions made, the project acquired additional focus. Mockbee and the Rural Studio would make a proposal to improve the museum's outdoor sculpture garden by building a structure that would rebuff incessant noise from nearby Interstate 20. A rough model was built and preparatory thinking commenced. The sculpture garden project was to be the monumental built component of the exhibition. An exhibition tour would be organized, a catalog produced, and a great opening party would be given at the museum.

Two projects preoccupied Mockbee as he lay dying in a hospital room in Jackson, Mississippi, late-December 2001. One was his submission to an exhibition of architects' responses to the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001; the other was a major building expansion of the Birmingham Museum of Art. Mockbee had recently agreed to take on this project and to make a proposal for what would have become his largest undertaking. The project—of expanding Alabama's premier art museum for the twenty-first century—appealed to him because it could exemplify the diverse motives of his imagination and intellect. In the final conversation, Mockbee said that he would make an ambitious, challenging design proposal. "If you don't like it," he said, preempting concessions, "we won't dance, no hard feelings." There are few words with which to capture the fact that Mockbee died at the true height of his creative powers, poised at the threshold of doing truly great deeds that could affect the course of a city, reshape an entire rural environment.

This exhibition embodies our gratitude to Samuel Mockbee for the work that he did accomplish and the ingenious solutions he set in motion. His vision was durable as is amply evidenced by the projects featured in the Appendix of Rural Studio Projects 2001-2003 included in this publication and spanning the time since his death. Some of these most recent projects represent a new level of ambition and emphasis upon craftsmanship, attesting to the Rural Studio's ability to have built upon the strong foundation of Mockbee's germinal vision. Mockbee's creative breadth was protean: he circumscribed the scope of the Rural Studio's enterprise through painting, drawing, and poetry. These other media are abundantly represented in this exhibition and vividly portray the unique scope of his inspiration. His paintings are especially powerful renditions of the relationships that he shared with clients of the Rural Studio and of the attachment that he felt for Hale County—the verdant, at times mesmerizing landscape, almost overdetermined by its history.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the substantial support of Altria Group, Inc. Additional support has been provided from the Comer Foundation, the Rich's Fund of the Federated Department Stores Foundation, and the Graham Foundation. Special thanks are due Max Protetch and Josie Browne of the Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Jackie Mockbee and her family have loaned numerous paintings and the notebooks of Samuel Mockbee to this exhibition and for their willingness to do so we are grateful. Many of these works have never before been on view. Without the definitive photographs of Timothy Hursley and his willingness to accommodate our many requests, this publication would not have been possible.

We are grateful to all contributors—fellow architects, students, artists, critics, friends of Sambo's (as he was known to those closest to him)—who answered our call for submissions. The varied appraisals and homages form a vivid tribute to an irreplaceable man. Each individual contribution elaborates upon an aspect of Mockbee, from his larger-than-life personality to the inclusive idealism that he implemented at the Rural Studio. Only such a multiplicity of perspectives can begin to adequately circumscribe the nuances of Mockbee's complex contribution to architecture. VRA has expertly fit the many pieces of this puzzle together and produced an excellent catalog. Finally, our thanks are due to Andrew Freear, the key collaborator who has made realization of this exhibition possible. Like the students who helped Andrew prepare for this exhibition and install it in our galleries, he incarnates the best of Mockbee—enthusiasm, innovation, and a true sense of wonder. ■



Samuel Mockbee
and the
Rural Studio
Community
Architecture



Eye to I

Snapshots from
Birmingham, Alabama,
circa 1960



Events and Programs for

**Samuel Mockbee
and the Rural Studio
Community Architecture**

**Eye to I
Snapshots from Birmingham,
Alabama, circa 1960**

Lecture

Friday, October 3, 6:00 p.m., Steiner Auditorium

"The Rural Studio: The Legacy of Samuel Mockbee,"

by Andrew Freear, Co-Director of the Rural Studio

Members Opening

Friday, October 3, 7:00 p.m., Terrace Cafe, Cash Bar

ArtBreaks

Tuesday, October 7, 12:00 p.m., Lobby

"Samuel Mockbee: The Architect as Painter," by David Moos, Ph.D.,

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Tuesday, October 28, 12:00 p.m., Lobby

"Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio," by Cheryl Morgan,

Professor and Urban Studio Director, Auburn University

Center for Architecture and Urban Studies in Birmingham

Day Trip to Hale County to see the Rural Studio

Tuesday, November 18 ▪ call 205.254.2070 for more information or to register

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 02160
BIRMINGHAM, AL

Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio was organized by the Birmingham Museum of Art and was made possible through the generous support of Altria Group, Inc. Additional support has been provided by The Comer Foundation, the Rich's Fund of the Federated Department Stores Foundation, and the Graham Foundation. Eye to I has been made possible through the support of the Comer Foundation, with additional support from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Images, left to right: The Harris (Butterfly) House, 1997. Samuel Mockbee (2001) in front of *The Children of Eutaw Pose before Their Ancient Cabins*, 1992. © Timothy Hursley. Eye to I: Photos special to BMA exhibition.