CONSTRUCTING
A NEW
AGENDA

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"Ariadne's Mystery" first published in English in ANY, vol. 5 (March/April 1994). "Trajet" means passage, crossing, journey, way; as a verb, "parcourir" means to travel through or traverse, and so see or look over; and a "parcours" is then such a course, line, way. The conceptual use Deleuze makes of the pair of terms seems to be connected with two problems: (i) the "trajectory" or "goings-through" suggested by the terms may be said to make or show a space, or to involve a time, that is not pregiven or predetermined as by a prior plan, (ii) the "jet" in "trajets" comes from the sense of "throwing" that Latin puts into such words as "subject" and "object": one might say that "trajets" here refer to a kind of "throwing-through" space and time prior to one given by the traditional sense of objects represented for subjects.

INTRODUCTION

The Rural Studio / Samuel Mockbee

"All architects expect and hope their work will act in some sense as a servant for humanity—to make a better world." For Samuel Mockbee, this hope became a reality through the creation of the Rural Studio, a design/build program that introduces architecture students at Auburn University to the cultural, economic, and social situations of poor communities in the rural South. In the early 1990s, Mockbee and groups of students began working with individual families and neighborhood residents in need of housing and public facilities. The studio projects, ranging from smokehouses to playgrounds to chapels, are inexpensive, sustainable, and innovative in design, drawing inspiration from regional tendencies and unconventional materials such as salvaged car windshields and tires, old railroad ties, and hay bales. The resulting buildings demonstrate that inventive and creative design need not be technologically advanced or prohibitively expensive.

In his essay "The Rural Studio," Mockbee discusses his view of the architect's role in contemporary society. He writes of the necessity for "subversive leadership," of the need to recognize the interconnectedness of spheres of life, of the architect's responsibility to disrupt normative and accepted social relationships. "People and place matter," Mockbee declares, and it is the architect's responsibility to keep both in mind despite increasing pressure from late-capitalist culture.

His language is undeniably humanist and is at times tinged with mysticism: "there is something divine in a work of architecture," he declares, "and we must maintain faith in the wonder of architecture to bring us into accord with the natural world, the supernatural world, with our fellow human beings and the great unknown." This emotional view carries over into Mockbee's architectural process, which begins with the sketch and relates closely...
to drawing and painting. Thus Mockbee appears as an architect/artist in the tradition of the Renaissance man, yet he rejects the model of the gentleman architect in favor of the hands-on builder.

In an era of "starchitects" and signature buildings, Mockbee's approach to architecture stands out as remarkably different, a difference that has garnered much positive attention. Even after Mockbee's death in 2007, the Rural Studio has continued to thrive, inspiring professionals, academics, and students to strive for what he called "an architecture of honesty."

SAMUEL MOCKBEE
THE RURAL STUDIO

Courtesy of Jackie Mockbee and Wiley Publishing.

For every architect there is a creative moment when he or she plugs into the Muse and generates, from Chaos, a sketch that builds order. The sketch is a mark that suggests the possibility of an idea and an ideal. Taking this act further and applying it to all of us is about making some mark in one's lifetime that can be given the title of Architecture; a mark that will remain after the power of one's living imagination is gone.

All architects expect and hope their work will act in some sense as a servant for humanity—to make a better world. That is the search we should always be undertaking and, again, there are no clear-cut definitions or assumed pathways. Therefore it is important to give critical attention to some basic issues that every architect, regardless of time and place, will have to face. Issues that Alberti called choosing between fortune and virtue. Issues not as questions of judgment but questions of value and principle. What I am going to try and show is my own search in dealing with these issues.
Architects are by nature and pursuit leaders and teachers. If architecture is going to inspire a community, or stimulate the status quo into making responsible environmental and social structural changes now and in the future, it will take what I call the “subversive leadership” of academicians and practitioners to remind the student of architecture that theory and practice are not only intertwined with one’s culture but with the responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency, and of challenging the power of the status quo.

Last year, I was asked to participate in an AIA [American Institute of Architects] Design Conference, along with two other architects and the English architect Michael Hopkins. Each of us gave lectures during the day and then participated in an after-dinner panel discussion that evening. Primarily, the question-and-answers session that evening settled around questions about how an architect receives and executes major commissions. Each of the other architects was giving their answers to the question when Michael Hopkins interjected somewhat matter-of-factly that the evening before he had received a “fax on his pillow” informing him that he had just received yet another commission from one of his major clients in England. Later on someone made the observation that Hopkins was working for the richest woman in the world—the Queen of England—while I was working for the poorest man in the world, Shepard Bryant (the client and recipient of The Rural Studio’s first charity house, the Hay Bale House in Mason’s Bend, Alabama). They noted at the same time that my work and the work of Michael Hopkins represented two very different approaches to the practice of architecture. They wondered what the implications of this were. The question was directed at me and I answered that it probably had more to do with our nature than with any convictions—more to do with our own private (and somewhat selfish) desires rather than any commitment to public virtue.

But as far as my own convictions went, I believe that architects are given a gift of second sight and when we see something that others can’t we should act, and we shouldn’t wait for decisions to be made by politicians or multinational corporations. Architects should always be in the initial critical decision-making position in order to challenge the power of the status quo. We need to understand that when a decision is made, a position has already been taken. Architects should not be consigned to only problem-solving after the fact.

People then turned to Michael Hopkins for his answer. He replied, “Maybe architects shouldn’t be in the position to make those kinds of decisions.” I took this to mean issues affecting social, economic, political or environmental decisions, and also staying away from making subversive decisions.

At first I was somewhat stunned by his answer and then reflected that perhaps here was a man who could be speaking for most practicing architects.

I do not believe that courage has gone out of the profession, but we tend to be narrow in the scope of our thinking and underestimate our natural capacity to be subversive leaders and teachers. In other words, the more we practise, the more restricted we become in our critical thinking and our life styles.

Critical thought requires looking beyond architecture towards an enhanced understanding of the whole to which it belongs. Accordingly, the role of architecture should be placed in relation to other issues of education, healthcare, transportation, recreation, law enforcement, employment, the environment, the collective community that impacts on the lives of both the rich and the poor.

The political and environmental needs of our day require taking subversive leadership as well as an awareness that where you are, how you got there, and why you are still there, are more important than you think they are.
Architecture, more than any other art form, is a social art and must rest on the social and cultural base of its time and place. For those of us who design and build, we must do so with an awareness of a more socially responsive architecture. The practice of architecture not only requires participation in the profession but it also requires civic engagement. As a social art, architecture must be made where it is and out of what exists there. The dilemma for every architect is how to advance our profession and our community with our talents rather than our talents being used to compromise them.

We must use the opportunity to survey our own backyards either to see what makes them special, individual and beautiful, or to note the unjust power of the status quo, or the indifference of the religious or intellectual community in dealing with social complicity or the nurturing of the environment. Peering out at your contemporary landscape is required before commitments to inspire can be started, accomplished and finished.

People and place matter. Architecture is a continually developing profession now under the influence of consumer-driven culture. The profession is becoming part of the corporate world and corporations (citizens of no place or any place) increasingly resemble nation states. Of the world’s largest 100 economies, 49 are countries and 51 are corporations. The 200 largest corporations employ only three-quarters of one percent of the world’s work force.

During the next twenty-five years forces in the world of politics, economics and the environment will be driven by two factors: a demographic explosion that will double the population in undeveloped countries; and a technological explosion of robotics, biotechnology, lasers, optics and telecommunications in developed countries. These two factors will have a major impact on the natural environment. The architect’s role will be to make architecture labour under the given conditions of a particular place, whether it is Winston County, Mississippi; Mason Bend, Alabama; or Mascot, Australia. It is not prudent to sit back as architects and rely on the corporate world’s scientists and technology experts to decide which problems to solve. It is in the architect’s own interest to assert his or her values—values that we should respect, and the greater good.

It is also obvious that the place one is inspired by is of profound importance. The chance of not being from that place is not a crippling deficiency that will render one incapable of inspiration. What is important is using one’s talent, intellect and energy in order to gain an appreciation and affection for people and place.

Architecture will make itself understood. There is something divine in a work of architecture, and we must maintain faith in the wonder of architecture to bring us into accord with the natural world, with the supernatural world, with our fellow human beings, and with the great unknown.

I’d like to explain a little about my background—about being blessed and cursed as a Southerner. Coleman Coker, my partner, and I grew up in North Mississippi. We are first cousins, six generations removed. As Southerners our heritage is part of our character. My great grandfather rode with the Mississippi Partisan Rangers under Colonel WC. Falkner and later General Forrest. These were my heroes growing up in the segregated South of the 1950s and the early 1960s. I grew up recreating the great battles of Brice’s Crossroads and visiting the battlefields of Vicksburg and Shiloh.

Later I came to realize the contradictions that existed in my world. That I came from an isolated area where lies were being confronted with the truth. That I came from the American South which was attached to fiction and false values and a willingness to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values.
Years ago, I was outside my home at Meridian, Mississippi, and I had to pull over and stop for a road grader. While I was waiting I noticed a graveyard and a particular grave. It was the grave of James Chaney. James Chaney was one of three civil rights workers killed in the summer of 1964. He would be a man of about my age today, but, more importantly, I have now come to believe and know that he defined who I am and who I am not. For me, he represents one of the true heroes of the South. And he is a true hero by the fact that he had the courage to risk his life and accept responsibility. His courage was a gift to me and to all of us. As architects we are given a gift and with it, a responsibility, though certainly more passive than James Chaney's. But the question for us is the same: do we have the courage to make our gift count for something?

The professional challenge, whether one is an architect in the rural American South or elsewhere in the world, is how to avoid being so stunned by the power of modern technology and economic affluence that one does not lose sight of the fact that people and place matter.

For me, drawing and painting are the initial influences for the making of architecture. The sketch is always our front, it sees ahead and deeper into what is already on the paper. The initial sketch is always an emotion, not a concept. In the beginning, it is important to let the imagination move freely without any influence from a preconceived form. It's a mark that suggests the possibility of an idea. For me, it's the act of drawing that allows the hand to come into accord with the heart. When that happens, there comes a moment when the marks of the sketch—it can be a pen mark or a computer mark—utter the first deeper knowledge of what will come later.

This brings us to the present phase in my quest as an architect. Even though my career had been developing successfully, I did not feel that I was maturing as a responsible architectural citizen. I believe what the poet William Carlos Williams prescribed about the best architect being the person "with the most profound insight into the lives of the community." So I applied to, and received, a Graham Foundation Grant to execute a series of large murals in an attempt to extend the study of architecture into what I hoped would be a wider human landscape. I am interested in what might prompt and make possible a process of entering a taboo landscape. In my case, the economic poverty of the Deep South; also in developing a discourse beyond merely looking at the effects of poverty but also at how architects can step over the threshold of injustice and address the true needs of a neglected American family and particularly the needs of their children. Of all Southerners, young children are the most likely to be living in poverty. In Mississippi, one in four lives below the poverty level. These children don't have the same advantages as the rest of America's children. They will come of age without any vision of how to rescue themselves from the curse of poverty.

Physical poverty is not an abstraction, but we almost never think of impoverishment as evidence of a world that exists. Much less do we imagine that it's a condition from which we may draw enlightenment in a very practical way. The paintings which began the work of the Rural Studio try to establish a discourse between those of us who have become mentally and morally stilled in modern obligations and these families who have no prospect of such obligations. The paintings are by no means an attempt to aestheticise poverty. It's about stepping across a social impasse into an honesty that refuses to gloss over inescapable facts. It's an honesty that permits differences to exist side by side with great tolerance and respect. Just as those of us who have had advantages can learn from this resilience, so can architecture learn something from an architecture of honesty. It is about stepping into the open and expressing the simple and the actual rather than the grand and the ostentatious.
It's not about your greatness as an architect but about your compassion. These paintings are an attempt at becoming an agency of understanding what is common and universal for all families. Architecture won't begin to alleviate all of these social woes. But what is necessary is a willingness to seek solutions to poverty in its own context, not outside it. What is required is the replacement of abstract opinions with knowledge based on real human contact and personal realization applied to the work and place.

This brings me to Auburn University’s Rural Studio. It had become clear to me that if architectural education was going to play any socially engaged role, it would be necessary to work with the segment of the profession that would one day be in a position to make decisions: the student. The main purpose of the Rural Studio is to enable each student to step across the threshold of misconceived opinions and to design/build with a “moral sense” of service to a community. It is my hope that this experience will help the student of architecture to be more sensitive to the power and promise of what they do, to be more concerned with the good effects of architecture than with “good intentions.” The Rural Studio represents an opportunity to be real in itself. The students become architects of their own education.

For me, these small projects have in them the architectural essence to enchant us, to inspire us, and ultimately, to elevate our profession. But more importantly, they remind us of what it means to have an American architecture without pretense. They remind us that we can be as moved by the simple as by the complex and that if we pay attention, this will offer us a glimpse into what is essential to the future of American Architecture: its honesty.

“Love your neighbour as yourself.” This is the most important thing because nothing else matters. In doing so, an