The Rural Studio
In 1993, Samuel Mockbee and Dennis K. Ruth established the Auburn University Rural Studio within the School of Architecture. Conceived as a method to improve the living conditions in western rural Alabama and to include hands-on experience in an architectural pedagogy, it began designing and building homes that same fall. Rural Studio is an off-campus design-build program that is known for recycling, reusing, and remaking.

After his death in 2001, Mockbee was succeeded by Andrew Freear as director. Since that time, Rural Studio has expanded the scope and complexity of its projects, focusing largely on community-oriented work. Projects have become multi-year, multi-phase efforts across multiple counties. The students work within the community to define solutions, fundraise, design and, ultimately, build remarkable projects. The Studio continually questions what should be built, rather than what can be built, both for the performance and operation of the projects. To date, Rural Studio has built more than 160 projects and educated more than 700 “Citizen Architects”.

The Rural Studio particularly focuses on working with local municipalities and advisory boards. The projects are typically completed in 18 to 24 months and are built by teams of three to five 5th year students. This means that the students spend their entire 5th year of architecture school in Hale County and then generally stay a year after graduation to build the project. Through their Studio class, the students formulate sustainable building programs, write grants, make community presentations, design, and build their projects from foundation to roof.

One of the most challenging of all Rural Studio projects, the 20K House, seeks to provide a well-built, affordable housing alternative to the ubiquitous mobile home for local clients. The homes can be built by local contractors for $20,000. The 20K House project gets its name from the highest realistic mortgage a person receiving median Social Security checks can maintain.

Seven years after building a volunteer fire station in downtown Newbern, Rural Studio designed and built a Town Hall for the community. Located just north of the Fire Station, the Town Hall
creates a civic square in which the Fire Station and Town Hall form the north and south walls of a public courtyard space. The Newbern Volunteer Fire Department and the Town Hall are the first new public buildings in Newbern in 110 years. The fire department houses three fire trucks and satisfies the town's needs for a place to house elections, council meetings, volunteer firefighter classes, fund-raising, and community gatherings.

The Rural Heritage Foundation secured $190,000 from HUD to refurbish an old school building to serve as its headquarters. The Rural Studio was invited to design and construct a new vision for the Rural Heritage Center Headquarters building in several phases. Phase 1 consisted of a “modernist” glass-box gift shop, gallery space, and restrooms. Phase 2 focused on significant landscape modifications including parking spaces, a rebuilt exterior envelope, and a large sign for greater visibility from the highway. An outdoor stage, a commercial kitchen, and Mama Nem’s restaurant were also added.

The most recent project was a small library in downtown Newbern – the result of a meeting between a group of community leaders and the Rural Studio. The community leaders understood that the library could become a social center, providing such resources as after-school programming, computer access, and the first public internet point for the small community. The Newbern Library is an adaptive reuse of a bank built in 1906. The student team navigated the project through conception, fund raising, design, construction management, and physical construction. Bookshelves center a new space within the width of the old building. Complementing the larger public space, a series of alcoves within the bookshelves accommodate computers, private study nooks, window seats, storage closets, bathrooms, and access to the outdoors. The artifacts from the original building were repurposed and preserved inside the new space. A courtyard to the north of the building provides library patrons with shaded outdoor reading and activity space. In 975 days, the students removed 8,200 bricks by hand, installed 362 sheets of plywood, drilled 4,942 holes in a ceiling, collected $63,000 in donated materials, and received more than 7,000 books for the library. “They say it
takes a village to raise a child. It takes a really big village to raise a library,” says Ashley Clark, a Rural Studio student.

Other community projects have included the Greensboro Boys & Girls Club facility, the Safe House Black Historic Museum in Greensboro, the Akron Senior Center, and the Antioch Baptist Church in northwest Perry County.

The program has won 33 national and international awards since 1995, including the 2015 Presidential Citation and the Whitney M. Young Jr. Award from the American Institute of Architects. Steve Dumez, FAIA, in support of Rural Studio’s nomination said, “Over its 20 year existence, the Rural Studio has not only influenced the academic community in inspiring institutions across the country to establish their own community based studio programs, but they have arguably shown the way for the entire profession by raising awareness on the importance of designing for underserved communities.”

Rural Studio has produced three books and made more than 200 presentations across the country and the world. In the first seven months of 2015, the program has been featured twenty-two times in the media, including local and national web news, public radio, and architecture-related magazines and newsletters. Supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, photographer Tim Hursley and filmmaker Dave Anderson set out to portray twenty years of work in Hale County, Alabama. What they found resulted in Rural Studio: Love Stories.

The measure of success of the Rural Studio may be in its built projects, but its biggest success is measured by its effect upon the lives of the students, faculty, families, and communities it touches.

**LINKS**

Instagram [https://instagram.com/ruralstudio/](https://instagram.com/ruralstudio/)
Twitter [https://twitter.com/ruralstudio](https://twitter.com/ruralstudio)
Video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=704hR8KLCfo&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=704hR8KLCfo&feature=youtu.be)
Awards [http://www.ruralstudio.org/about/awards](http://www.ruralstudio.org/about/awards)
Media Coverage [http://www.ruralstudio.org/about/media-coverage](http://www.ruralstudio.org/about/media-coverage)
METRICS

21  Years of Service in Rural Alabama
700  Students Educated
160  Projects Built
4  Counties in Rural West Alabama Served
16  Different Versions of the 20k House
2  Public Parks Renovated with Facilities Added in Perry County and Greensboro
3  Boys and Girls Clubs in Greensboro and Akron
3  Churches Built or Renovated in Hale and Perry Counties
1  Public Library in Newbern
2  Baseball Fields in Newbern
1  Museum, Safe House Black History in Greensboro
1  Animal Shelter in Hale County
1  Learning Center in Perry County
1  Fire Station in Newbern
1  Town Hall in Newbern
2  Farmer’s Markets in Greensboro and Thomaston
1  Rural Heritage Center, Restaurant & Gift Shop in Thomaston

Many  Playgrounds, Wheelchair Ramps, Roofs, Repairs and Makeovers