

## Answering the Challenge: Rural Studio's 20K House

Rusty Smith

In 1968 civil right activist Whitney M. Young, Jr. publicly challenged both the professional and academic institutions of architecture to take responsibility for our role in the linkage he saw between poverty, opportunity, and the built environment. He posited that safe, dignified, and affordable housing was a basic human right, and that as individual practitioners we were both morally and ethically bound to act. But perhaps more profoundly Young went on to say that beyond the responsibility we bore as individuals, as a discipline we have a professional obligation to take a leadership role in addressing the failures in our ability to tackle the systemic problems in our country that contribute to the poverty and lack of opportunity afforded to the American poor.<sup>1</sup> Decades later, while working to redefine the field of Environmental Equality in the very same inner-city New York neighborhoods that Young cited as examples in his challenge, the visionary founder of "Sustainable South Bronx" Majora Carter stated:

*"Economic degradation begets environmental degradation. And environmental degradation begets social degradation. The linkage is absolute. No exceptions. It is not a menu. You can't pick and choose which one of those three you'd like to address. You've got to address them all."<sup>2</sup>*

Echoing Carter's sentiment, we must all agree that in this day and age it is strange that as a discipline we continue to bifurcate the issues of Environmental Stewardship, Social Justice, Building Performance, and Community Engagement into areas of sub-specialization within the field of architectural practice. As an alternative, Auburn University's

Rural Studio seeks to synthetically and holistically address every aspect of a sustainable world including: nature, the economy, societal conditions, individual health, and wellbeing.

Rural Studio is a design-build program that represents a unique partnership between Auburn University and the rural communities of Alabama's Black Belt region. Founded in 1993 Rural Studio's work is grounded in the core philosophy that all people, regardless of economic status, should benefit from thoughtful and responsible design. The Studio is involved in the local architecture, landscape, politics, arts, crafts, music, food and the very rhythms of everyday life. As an academic initiative, Rural Studio empowers and encourages students to do the same, putting their educational values to work as both citizens and neighbors in our community. In our total immersion program, students live, eat, design and build in the community they serve. They come to appreciate local culture, build meaningful relationships, and experience the substantive impact of architecture firsthand. Students are taught to safeguard, preserve and enhance connections between the natural landscape, the built environment, and even one another.

Rural Studio is engaged in many types of public and private projects, including designing and building homes. In our ongoing project we refer to as the "20K House," our students are faced with the challenge of designing a mass-market house that can be built by a contractor in a market-rate economy for less than \$20,000. The 20K House began in 2005 as an ongoing Rural Studio research project to address the need for affordable housing in Hale County while simulta-

20K House Product Line, Rural Studio

Rural Studio:  
undergraduate program of the School of  
Architecture, Planning and Landscape  
Architecture at Auburn University (since 1993)

Rural Studio is a registered trademark of  
Auburn University

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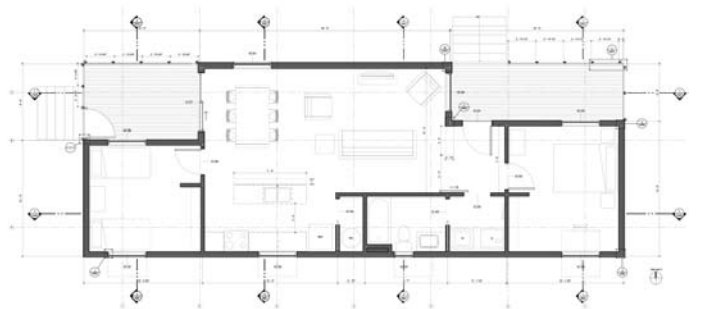
ALEX HENDERSON  
3rd Year Instructor | Newbern



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3 FIRST FLOOR PLAN



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neously creating an industry of small, local home building. The initial experiments all consisted of single bedroom homes, but most recently Rural Studio has expanded the program to include models that have two bedrooms. To date, Rural Studio has designed and built seventeen prototypes for the 20K House.

After intense scrutiny and testing of these prototypes, Rural Studio has developed the foundation for what we refer to as the “20K House Product line.” The Initial product line includes three (3) one-bedroom houses named for their owners: Dave’s House (2009), MacArthur’s House (2010) and Joanne’s House (2011). Future additions to the 20k House Product Line will include multiple bedroom options such as: Bobby’s House (2014), Michelle’s House (2014) and Sylvia’s House (2014) as well as homes with integrated accessibility and storm sheltering features such as: Turners House (2012) and Eddie’s House (2013).

In taking the 20K House from “Project to Product,” Rural Studio has engaged with outside consultants to aid in aligning the 20K House documents with the current International Residential Code as well as Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and United States Department of Housing

and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines. To date, two model homes have been built in Hale County, with the third to be built in the fall of 2015. These public models will be used for showing the homes to potential clients, as well as for environmental performance testing and other interests of Rural Studio. As a next step Rural Studio has most recently partnered with several external developers to “field test” the constructability and performance of the 20k House Product Line outside of the Studio’s direct oversight and control. Once these field tests have been deemed successful it is the ultimate goal to develop a set of construction documents and specifications complete enough for construction in a climate similar to central Alabama, and easily adjusted to meet the building requirements of other areas beyond our region.

In total since 1993, Rural Studio has completed over 160 projects, and educated over 900 “citizen architects.” But perhaps more importantly, Rural Studio produces ideas and methods that can be useful not only to the communities of rural West Alabama, but our lessons-learned and best practices may also be transferred to other academic endeavors around the world. While we obviously

have a long way yet to go and there is much, much heavy lifting still to be done, In some small way it is the hope of Rural Studio that Whitney M. Young Jr. would see our ongoing work as a humble yet sustained response to his call for action almost half a century ago.

<sup>1</sup> Whitney M. Young, Jr., “Keynote Address” (American Institute of Architects Annual Meeting, Portland, Oregon, June 25, 1968)

<sup>2</sup> Majora Carter, as quoted by Ray C. Anderson, *Confessions of a Radical Industrialist: Profits, People, Purpose – Doing Business by Respecting the Earth*, St. Martin Press, NY, NY 2009, p. 257

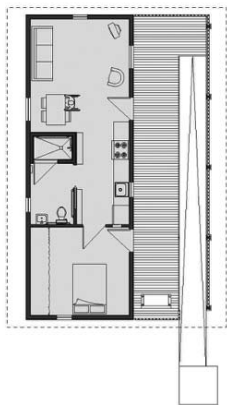
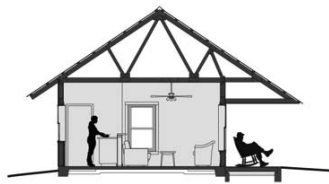
**Nota redazionale**

Rural studio è un Laboratorio di progettazione e costruzione congiunto di docenti e allievi nell’ambito di uno dei corsi di laurea della Scuola di Architettura, Pianificazione e Architettura del Paesaggio della Facoltà di Auburn in Alabama ed è attivo dal 1993. Il Laboratorio è diretto dal Professor Andrew Freear, affiancato nella Direzione dal Professor Rusty Smith, che ha accolto la richiesta di Firenze Architettura di presentare in questo numero della nostra rivista la ricerca e gli esiti del Laboratorio. L’esperienza muove da un forte coinvolgimento della Facoltà col territorio e le sue maggiori criticità come per esempio una mai risolta condizione di povertà. L’impegno tecnico e professionale si è così saldato a quello degli attivisti più impegnati sul fronte dei diritti civili e umani. Alla Redazione di Firenze Architettura è parso opportuno pubblicare direttamente nella lingua in cui è stato scritto questo articolo, in presa diretta con le condizioni reali del territorio in cui la Scuola di Auburn opera. La risposta alla sfida di cui si parla nel titolo è costituita dalla serie di case da 20.000 dollari che sono state progettate da professori e studenti per destinatari particolarmente indigenti individuati dalle comunità rurali locali.





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20K-11

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20K-12

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Pagine precedenti:  
1 - 2 - 3  
*Michelle's House (2014)*

4 - 5  
*Turners House (2012)*  
6 - 7  
*Eddie's House (2013)*

foto Rural Studio