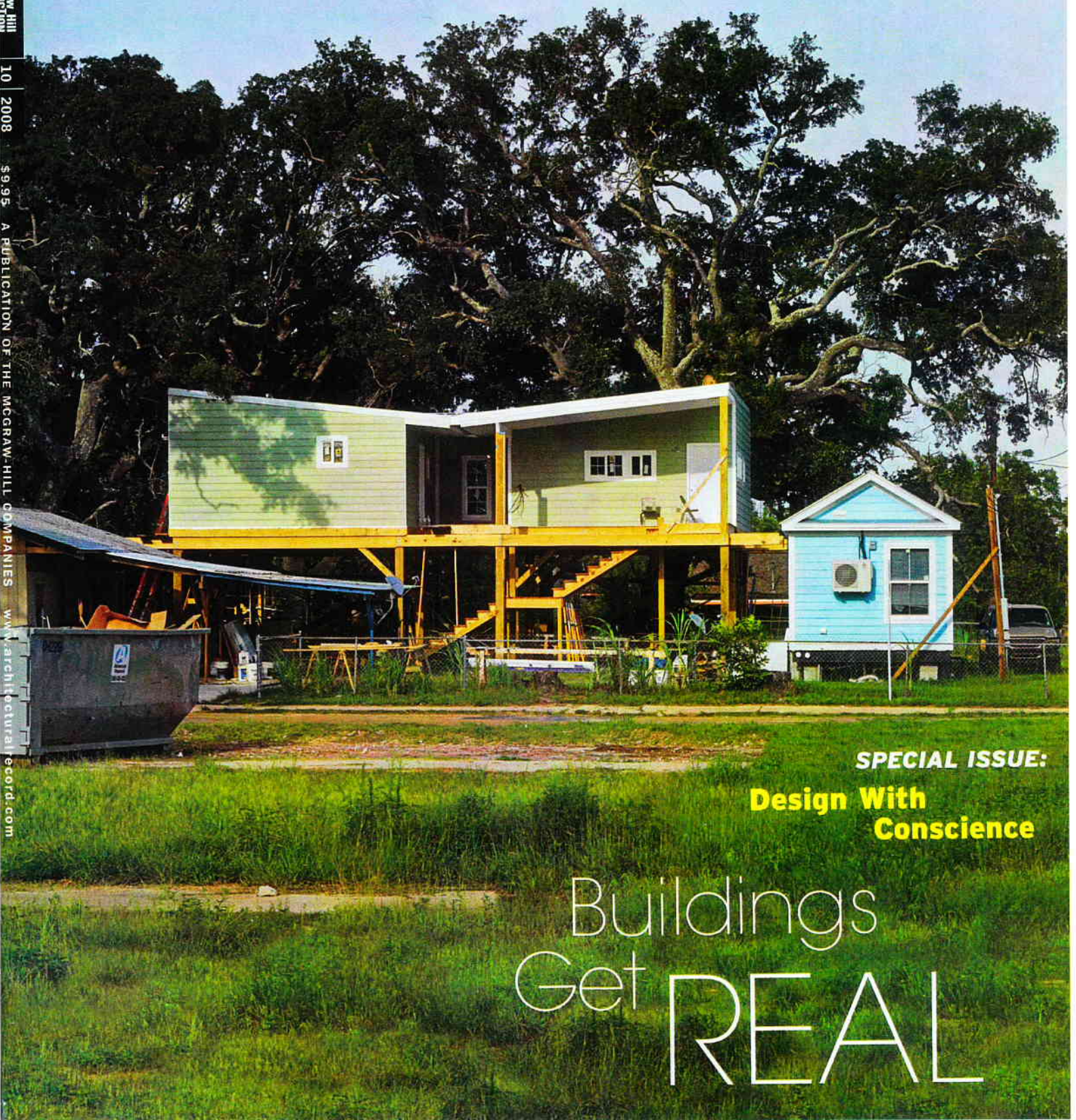


# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

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**SPECIAL ISSUE:**

**Design With  
Conscience**

Buildings  
Get **REAL**

By David Sokol

Since the inauguration of the Yale Building Project in 1967, bolstered by Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio work through the 1990s, design-build workshops have flowered in universities throughout the U.S. From the start, student-run design-build conflated with community action, and as a result these real-world classrooms have produced landmark examples of socially responsible architecture. This academic phenomenon continues to achieve practical solutions that inspire the design community at large and produce young activists as well as knowledgeable architects. Recently, we invited several leading professors to join us in a telephone roundtable to discuss the surging popularity of design-build studios, the challenges they still face, and the impact of completed projects on designers and their clients. (Go to [architecturalrecord.com](http://architecturalrecord.com) for the unabbreviated text.)

# TEACHING BY

# EXA



In 2004, DesignBuildBLUFF moved its studio to Bluff, Utah, to work more closely with the Navajo Indian Reservation. For their first undertaking there, students built a home for Rosie Joe, a single mother working three jobs. The design is an exercise in local ingenuity: The house features a rammed-earth Trombe wall, its ceilings and roofs are made of recycled pallets, and discarded road signs clad interior walls.



# DMPL E

Design-build  
educators talk  
pedagogy and  
realpolitick

**Steve Badanes** In addition to cofounding Jersey Devil and teaching at Yestermorrow Design/Build School, Badanes has conducted design-build workshops at schools from Helsinki to San Diego. At the University of Washington in Seattle, he runs the Howard S. Wright Neighborhood Design/Build Studio, producing small-scale work for Seattle nonprofits.

**Thomas Dutton** Professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, Dutton established the Over-the-Rhine Design/Build Studio in 1996 to design and rehabilitate housing for residents of the namesake Cincinnati neighborhood. That was followed by the founding in 2002 of The Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine, in Cincinnati, and in 2006, the Over-the-Rhine Residency Program for students.

**Andrew Freear** Freear is the Wiant Professor at Auburn University Rural Studio in Alabama, where he moved in 2000. Since Samuel Mockbee's death from complications of leukemia in 2002, Freear has directed the renowned program while also advising fifth-year undergraduate students' thesis projects.

**Adam Hopfner** Hopfner is a critic at the Yale School of Architecture, and since 2007, director of the Yale Building Project. This was founded

in 1967 by then department head Charles Moore and professor Kent Bloomer, and has since mostly produced affordable homes for deserving New Haven residents.

**David Lewis** Lewis is a cofounder of Lewis Tsutsumi Lewis—a recent Design Vanguard firm in 2000—and an associate professor of architecture at Parsons The New School for Design. Since 2007, he has directed The Design Workshop there, a design-build studio founded by Karen Van Lengen in 1997, and further developed by Peter Wheelwright with Terry Erickson.

**Hank Louis** Louis is an adjunct professor of architecture at the University of Utah College of Architecture + Planning, which supports DesignBuildBLUFF. That design-build studio, launched in 2000, creates sustainable homes on the Navajo National Indian Reservation located outside Bluff, Utah.

**Dan Rockhill** Rockhill's eponymous firm has been widely recognized for Modernist work that resonates with the landscape and culture of Kansas, and the affordable buildings realized by his University of Kansas design-build workshop Studio 804 have earned two AIA Honor Awards, the NCARB Prize, and other accolades.

**ARCHITECTURAL RECORD:** Are design-build studios more popular than ever?

**Steve Badanes:** The students at the University of Washington come here specifically for the Neighborhood Design/Build Studio. That's true for a lot of other programs.

**Adam Hopfner:** That's why I went to Yale, and it's why a vast majority of the graduate students come here today. Although design-build workshops have been going on for decades, they are now becoming recognized as great learning vehicles.

**Hank Louis:** Ours is probably the most fledgling of the programs represented at this roundtable, but I'm getting word from students now that they're coming for DesignBuildBLUFF. That worries me, because we don't have room for everybody.

**AR:** Surely some students are more intrigued by design-build and others more by the social engagement. How do you balance their needs?

**Badanes:** There are students who are interested in the social-justice issues and underserved communities. And then there's



an architecture student who wants to build and become a better designer: There's a high level of frustration from looking at a computer screen all day.

**David Lewis:** In addition to students wanting to bridge social responsibility and the tectonics of architecture, a number of my Parsons students have done internships at larger firms where often they've been involved in projects up to schematic design, particularly with firms doing large works in Asia and the Middle East; they have no sense of how things go together because it's not their responsibility. We have students coming in with the experience of doing million-square-foot malls, but they want to experience the exact opposite as a pedagogical challenge to themselves.

**Andrew Freear:** Design-build also exposes students to working in teams and accepting that they may not be great at everything. Like most people on this roundtable, I went through an education that was essentially a star system: You sit at your desk and you're expected to be wonderful at everything.

**Louis:** My students come for the hands-on experience. But once we get to the Navajo reservation, the whole social aspect of it becomes very strong and there's a love affair that develops between the Navajo family and these students. They come back to remodel parts of the house that don't seem to be working.

**AR:** *Do any of you consciously try to differentiate your design-build studio from those of your colleagues?*

**Lewis:** We respond not to other design-build programs but to local conditions—the constraints, obligations, possibilities, and opportunities that exist. Inevitably you learn from the other programs to find out what works and what hasn't. But the internal

logistics of, say, trying to build in New York City helps shape the identity of the program. Geography and institution proclaim the condition more than the comparative method.

**Hopfner:** To build in New York or to build in the City of New Haven is much different from building in Hale County. And a lot of that is what shapes the program.

**AR:** *Hank Louis organized a project in Africa, and David Lewis has led Parsons students to create a park pavilion in the Catskills town of Margaretville, New York. If geography and institution shape your design-build programs, does that identity shift when you work outside your typical places?*

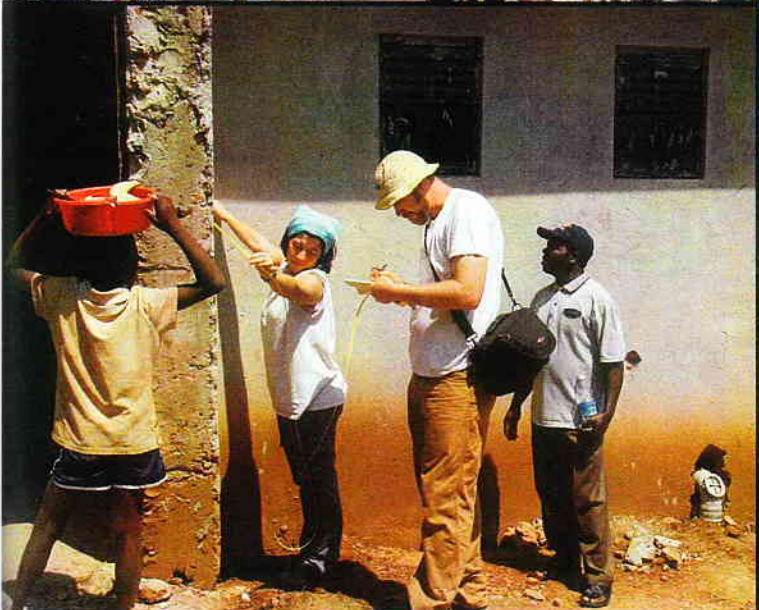
**Louis:** The reason we went to Uganda is that a Ugandan coalition came to see our work and asked us to build a clinic there. Last year we didn't have a social component to our work, because we had to build more student housing on our little campus in Bluff. I thought Uganda would be a great way to incorporate the social aspect that year. I think we'll continue to do that, because it's so remarkable to watch the students fall in love with the people they're helping.

**Badanes:** All these programs are rooted in a place. I've been to India, Cuba, Mexico, Vermont, doing this kind of stuff: You do a project and you raise expectations and then you disappear. So we stopped doing it. I think this idea of thinking globally and acting locally is at the heart of what we do. You don't see any of these programs going to New Orleans.

**Dan Rockhill:** This year we left home and went to Greensburg, Kansas (see story, page 134). It could have been Uganda. The town had been wiped out by a tornado.



Instead of taking on one of its usual city-based clients, in 2006 The Design Workshop, a program of Parsons The New School of Design, built a park pavilion in the 650-person town of Margaretville, New York (left and far left). Last year, DesignBuildBLUFF also went far afield, doing work in Uganda (below and bottom). Studio 804 deployed prefabrication to erect its so-called Sustainable Prototype in Greensburg, Kansas (bottom right).



**AR:** *The Greensburg project is a prefabricated, 1,600-square-foot office and gallery, not to mention the first LEED Platinum building in the state of Kansas. Dan, why did you decide to wrap up-to-the-minute prefab construction into Studio 804? Was there longstanding student demand for it?*

**Badanes:** It has to do with the Kansas winter!

**Rockhill:** We still froze our tails off in the warehouse, but it really was for that reason Steve mentions: We took down a building no more than 15 minutes away from the school, and we recycled it into prefab modules that we eventually brought to Greensburg. It wasn't philosophical. These kids have never had their hands in concrete, nor driven a nail. They need to have some of that under their belt before taking it to the next level.

**Hopfner:** There is a push for prefabrication and digital fabrication in general at our school. So prior to a Yale Building Project design, we look at what is possible with our time frame and support. Given that I have 60 laborers, it's harder to justify the lead times of prefabrication for the entire thing. And yet we do try to identify components that might be made on a CNC mill, whether it's a stair or a cabinet piece or a cladding system. So there's exposure to it. I don't see this technology as a danger, but as just another tool with its own opportunities and limitations.

**AR:** *Tom, the Over-the-Rhine Design/Build Studio has a political component. What's the origin of that?*

**Thomas Dutton:** Design-build is just one of many things we do. We also do agitprops—artistic installations that are devised with community leadership to make people aware of what happened at a particular site. They're like learning devices to raise questions about history and urban space. We also do straight-up advocacy planning. It's all determined by the community at that particular time.

**AR:** *What other task besides design-build consumes most of your time?*

**Rockhill:** For us it's really fund-raising. We're not supported by the university. As a not-for-profit corporation, the burden is on us to raise whatever funds we can from year to year. That consumes a lot of time, at least for students, who think of the studio as all nails and two-by-fours.

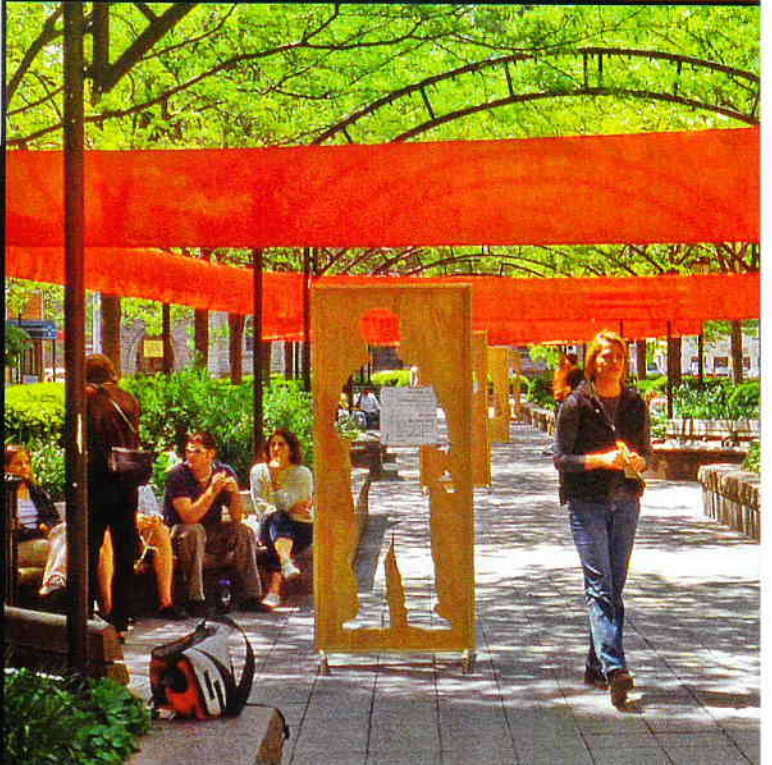
**Freeear:** Our students traditionally have raised phenomenal material donations, but because of gas prices and the economic squeeze in the past year, it's become very difficult. We are contemplating completely different approaches to projects for the next couple years simply because of that: The tax write-offs and material donations are not going to be there.

**AR:** *What preparatory advice would you give all those professors who are considering starting their own design-build studios, especially in an economic downturn?*

**Badanes:** They always think they should start with something on campus, and that's often a bad idea. My advice is to start with something small, out in the community. The biggest problem is that faculty and students start new programs thinking they can do large projects faster and cheaper than is realistically possible.

**Rockhill:** I find that people tend to overthink the complexity of the issues in front of them. They tend to meet with everybody on campus and get everybody involved, and that's a surefire way to draw something out for eternity. I tell them to just do it.

**AR:** *Adam, Andrew, and Dan, you've all inherited your programs. How have you dealt with that legacy, or shaped these studios in your image?*



Working with the Yale Building Project, in 2004 Adam Hopfner began exploring prefabrication and digital technology with a stair system made entirely of CNC-routed sheets of Baltic birch plywood (left). In addition to doing traditional building and rehabilitation projects in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, such as a laundromat and meeting room (middle right), Thomas Dutton's design-build studio will stage "agitprop" art installations that commemorate events such as the demolition of the SRO Milner Hotel (right).

Steve Badanes recommends that design-build studios take on small public spaces, such as the Garden Gathering Place his University of Washington students completed for Danny Woo Community Gardens in 2007 (left). For the second year of the Yale Building Project's collaboration with Common Ground, students constructed a house for a disabled female veteran and her family, which also includes a one-bedroom rental unit (right).



**Hopfner:** This is my second year directing the Yale Building Project. I take the stance very strongly that I do not have authorship. I think there's a danger in that, and I'm certainly not teaching to get my aesthetic agenda across.

I have tried to make housing issues a little more current, and to that end we've been working with an organization called Common Ground, a nonprofit to end homelessness, since last year. We found that veterans make up 28 percent of all homeless, and that people are coming home from these conflicts with huge emotional disorders. We've identified female veterans as the group in need of housing. We did a lot of research into the psychology and brought these social issues to the fore to see how that would affect the design position. The second thing I've tried to do is make more explicit the process as opposed to the product—the constraints of site, zoning, budget, time, and environment that really come to bear on a project.

**Lewis:** One thing that I think is really critical is, even though it's design-build by students, the design absolutely has to be of the highest mark of excellence. The students have more time than an architecture firm can give to this project, so the results should exceed what professionals should be able to do. Instead of just learning how to work materials, this is an opportunity you won't have when you go out into the profession. It's something I've inherited, and I think it's critical to maintain that position, especially with the client.

**Freear:** From my point of view, when Mockbee dropped dead, it was simply a case of keeping up. It never has been a deliberate "I've got to establish my own style." I hope what I have tried to do is protect the luxury of time. The Rural Studio has a huge luxury of time over a lot of these other programs. Fifth-year students, for example, are here technically for nine months, though

they stay upwards of a year afterward to finish their projects on their own time and dollar. I get a lot of grief from the university for allowing that to happen. But it's about raising the standards, the craft, the level of detail and the quality—it's about being more rigorous. I don't really apologize for any of it. There are few places where you do something because you want to do it and you want to do it right. I'm trying to be fiercely protective of that opportunity, and to have students understand how long it takes and how difficult it is to do something well.

**AR:** *What long-term effects have your design-build programs wrought on their communities?*

**Louis:** What I've found, especially with the Rosie Joe House, is that it afforded her the opportunity to go back to weaving rugs, which now command as much as \$10,000. Previously, she had to give up the loom to be a receptionist at Motel 6 or waitress somewhere else.

**Badanes:** It's the students who really feel the long-term effects. Our goal is to deflect them from finishing architecture school and taking their portfolio to an office and getting a job. We're trying to create a different kind of architect. Our most successful people have become nonprofit housing developers, developers of community gardens, and a lot of them have gone into design-build, which from my experience is a bit more satisfying than the office alternative, especially as things become more automated. We teach building and practical things, but the real lessons are perseverance and self-motivation, teamwork, and community service. It's a big agenda. I think that's where we can make a real difference.

**Dutton:** That's one of the things I've learned from Steve Badanes. We're not just trying to help a community, but we're



Thanks to the Rural Studio's long-term engagement with the surrounding community, design-build participants' works are getting bigger and affecting more people. Andrew Freear says the 40-acre Lion's Park (left), Hale County Animal Shelter project (below), and Hale County Hospital courtyard renovation (bottom) are emblematic of that sea change.

trying to deconstruct students' privilege. We're trying to get them to be better citizens, better community advocates, and to understand the complexity of urban areas. We'd like to institutionalize ourselves even more into that community—develop job-training programs, get high school industrial-education kids involved with us—so that the center is not only a site of student and faculty learning but community learning, as well.

**Freear:** The Rural Studio began 16 years in one place and is becoming a neighbor there. I'm starting to see the fruits of that. The local politicians and community groups are coming to us now, and they're actually bringing grants and dollars to the table themselves. It's great to see they have the imagination and also the courage to be involved with us. I think that's reflected in the scale of recent projects, like a 40-acre public park, an animal shelter, and a hospital, which may serve more people than all the other projects put together.

From the students' point of view, I hope they leave here feeling empowered. I know when I left school, I had no idea who to ask or what to do in an office. Everything was a complete mystery to me. At least these students know how an engineer and architect engage in a dialogue, and where to look for things and whom to talk to.

**Hopfner:** One other thing that I'm beginning to push is addressing issues of the profession: Architects have really divorced themselves from the building process. In such a litigious society, they don't build; just design. By exposing students to all of the forces that come to bear on the making of a building, whether environmental, technical, or political, they can begin to harness them to become more effective as architects. I hope they have the courage to feel good about their decisions. ■

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