A DESIGN FOR LIVING

Architect Samuel Mockbee and his students take the scrap materials of everyday life and spin them into gold—attractive, environmentally sensitive homes for the poor. But beyond just designing houses, they're building a concept of community.

NO ONE WAS MORE SURPRISED THAN ARCHITECT SAMUEL Mockbee when he received a call from The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation last year, awarding him one of what are popularly known as "genius" grants—$300,000 with no strings attached—for his pioneering work using scrap materials to build functional, attractive, and environmentally sensitive housing for the poor in Alabama. As the foundation noted at the time, Mockbee "has erased the boundary between experimental design and social consciousness." "I'm no genius, as my school transcripts show," Mockbee says with a laugh, "but I was smart enough to take the money." Mockbee's efforts have indeed earned him the label of "genius" from a wide range of observers. The Mississippi native, a professor at Auburn University's College of Architecture, Design, and Construction, spends most of his time at his Rural Studio, 160 miles away from campus. In this impoverished agricultural area, Mockbee and his students design and construct homes and buildings using found materials such as used tires, old street signs, and concrete fragments. The results are so striking that they have won acclaim from architectural magazines and organizations; they are also leading the way toward more innovative approaches to better housing for the rural poor. Mockbee began his career as an architect in 1977, but after growing tired of the business end of his profession he accepted the offer of a professorship from Auburn in 1991. The following year, the confidence of the experiences caused a light bulb to go on in his head, and the Rural Studio was born in 1993. A winning example of the work that Mockbee and his students do is the 700-square-foot Bryant House, built in 1993 in tiny Mason's Bend, Alabama, for a 70-year-old fisherman and his wheelchair-bound wife and their three grandchildren. The family had been living in a shanty without indoor plumbing. Mockbee and the students used bales of hay to insulate the walls (making the house cool under the Southern sun), scavenged translucent acrylic sheets for a steeply pitched see-through roof, and got concrete and wood from an exploded silo to build a smokehouse. Colored
bottles were set in the walls to draw in light, and the roof was capped with discarded highway signs. The result was a house with a total cost of less than $17,000 and a remarkable design.

Mockbee has been a visiting professor at universities including Harvard, Yale, the University of Virginia, and the University of California, Berkeley. He is only the third architect to win a "genius" grant in the past 20 years (288 grants have been awarded during that period), and last year he became the only individual represented twice in the Cooper Hewitt Museum/Smithsonian Institution's first National Design Triennial exhibit, "Design Culture Now."

She had parole out these houses to the destitute but still had families she wanted to help. One family had seven kids living in a shack. I designed a house and, with donated labor from the office and friends and with lumber from a house that was being torn down, we built it for $7,000. That showed me that you could do something like this without all the expenses and resources you think you need. Since then, I've always been amazed at who steps forward to assist financially, physically, or with advice—often not the ones you'd expect.

Q: You work with students living together in the Rural Studio facility. What gave you that idea, and how does this differ from learning architecture the traditional way?
A: Because of legal issues and the increase in class sizes over the past 20 years, students have lost some of the benefits of a close relationship with their teachers. I realized this in 1990 when I taught a two-week course for Clemson University at its graduate program in Genoa, Italy, where I lived with a dozen students in a villa. It was an emotional high to constantly feed off each others' ideas and to experience that camaraderie.

I also wanted students to do more than just live with the designs in their heads. I wanted them to get out and do construction so they could feel the weight of the sheet rock, I wanted to give them the opportunity to unleash their imaginations on something that was real. Architecture that only exists on paper isn't as much fun as actually seeing it built. Fortunately, my department head in 1992, D.K. Ruth, agreed that the hands-on approach was a better way. So we lined up a grant to start the Rural Studio out of an old house that was part of a nursing home. We've changed location since, and the students have done a lot of the building and renovation of our current quarters.

Q: You've said that most of your students come from white, affluent backgrounds, while you're working in an impoverished African American area. Does that inhibit understanding of your clients' needs?
A: Students tend to arrive with abstract ideas about poor folks, but once the poor become real to them, the students work hard to win their respect. The students are from decent families and want to improve these people's lives.

Q: It's easy to understand that the poor really need better buildings, but explain why you believe they also need beautiful ones.
A: What we're constructing are not only houses for bodies, but shelters for souls, buildings that will uplift individuals and the community. We're trying to do serious architecture that meets the highest standards and satisfies the needs for creature comforts and spirituality in the same way great art of any kind does—literature, music, dance, sculpture, painting. I'm proud that my students are pushing the profession and have been getting positive feedback at such a young age.

Q: How do you determine what constitutes beauty in your designs?
A: You know, there's no ugly color; it's just a matter of arranging the appropriate composition. I find great beauty in the pattern of corrugated metal that is rusted and normally would be thrown away. Artists need to pay attention to their intuition about what's beautiful and inspiring.

Q: Why have you criticized modern architecture as being disconnected from morality and reality?