

1500 Miles on a Bike



Ann Arbor MI > Toledo OH > Bowling Green OH > Findlay OH > Lima OH >
Bellefontaine OH > Columbus OH > Bear Cave State Park OH > Gallipolis OH >
Charleston WV > Madison WV > Logan WV > Justice WV > Tazewell VA > Jefferson
NC > Spruce Pine NC > Asheville NC > Clayton GA > Dahlonega GA > Aderville GA >
Cedarville AL > Pell City AL > Centerville AL > Greensboro AL > Tuscaloosa AL >
Birmingham AL

From June 18th to August 24th I peddled my bike across the country. I started in Ann Arbor, Michigan rode across the cornfields of Ohio through the narrow coalmining highways of West Virginia. I crossed through the mountains of Virginia and into the highlands North Carolina spending 5 days in Asheville where I meet up with my brother Elliot. Together we rode across Northern Georgia, briefly dipped into South Carolina, before traveling deep into a hot and dry Alabama. Finally we spent 4 days near Greensboro, Alabama visiting a number of rural studio projects located in Hale, County before flying home from Birmingham. Along the way I also studied books and visited buildings by Peter Eisenman, William McDonough, Albert Kahn, and the Design Corps/Architecture for Humanity among others. While larger issues of environmental degradation and social inequality helped inform my decision to ride a bike, my primary purpose was to gain a greater understanding of the way Americans live their lives. By traveling in this manner I hoped to open myself up to more personal interactions and more interesting conversations – learning about the places we call home and the buildings we build. I was particularly interested in the raw unedited traveling experienced that riding a bike offers hoping that through this experience I would gain a greater understanding of my own country. I absolutely had an amazing time and I'm still in the process of tweezing out lessons I've learned ranging from architecture and the environment to friendship and family. Though it seem a bit odd to write about the one period of time which I wasn't really riding my bike, I decided to focus primary on the four days I spend visiting the rural studio for sake of this essay. Thank you for this wonderful opportunity it is something I will never forget.

“There it is” I said in a matter of fact tone, applying additional pressure to the petals and feeling the wind pick up as I headed towards what I believed to be one the greatest works of modern architecture ever created. It was a somewhat dirty thing, standing just clear of a blue broke-down trailer.

My brother kept pace and we both skidded to a stop in the loose gravel near the folded metal entrance of Ora Lee’s Chapel– one the most widely praised structures to come out of Auburn’s design build program The Rural Studio and as I mentioned what was, and still is, one of my all time favorite buildings. My spirits were high as we entered the well-lit dry space. My eyes quickly began to follow the lines of the structure.



We had not only arrived at Mason’s chapel but we had arrived *here* the beginning to the end of what would be a roughly 1500 mile bike trip beginning in Ann Arbor and ending in Birmingham, AL. We had arrived in Greensboro the previous evening sneaking in a brief chat with someone from the Hale Empowerment Resource Organization (HERO) along with a tour of the HERO children’s center before calling it a day. We only had four days here and this was in my mind the real beginning of our Rural Studio

experience. I walked around the structure slowly taking it in.

Far from the vibrant, soaring pictures I had seen in numerous publications the building felt both humble and abandoned. A great deal of trash had been stuffed into boxes and stored near one wall. The laminated wooden pews had long ago been arranged in a circle, and several people had carved their names into the metal siding. The chapel’s most distinguishing feature, its sculptural glass face formed with old car windshields was mostly blocked from the outside by an old trailer. However, we were not alone in the structure. A group of black puppies along with their lactating mother had moved in, claiming the boxes full of newspaper as their home.



I sat down on one of the laminated wooden ‘pews’ drank some cheap wine, ate 2 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (an odd sort of communion) and pondered the new situation. Earlier in the day we had spent well over two hours looking for Yancy’s Chapel, or the tire chapel, with no luck. Now I had no idea what to expect from the rest of the rural studio buildings. This was the one place in America I was sure I could find energetic young architects not only dedicated to working within an economically struggling community but *excelling* at it. I had come here to witness the prosperity, ingenuity, and community spirit of the rural studio. Instead I found myself staring across the street at a totally dilapidated basketball court that the studio had erected so many years ago and wondering whether I should have gone to Brazil instead. At this point, however, I knew the lesson had changed. No longer was this about reveling in the success of the rural studio’s projects, it was about learning what makes low-cost community design work possible through the studio successes, failures and struggles. Looking back I can’t imagine a more appropriate lesson, I finally realized this was an increasingly active organization still evolving, still adapting, and finding its niche.

After eating lunch in the chapel we rode around Mason’s bend. Several housing projects were clearly visible from the road and we took our time walking around the area. We saw Christine’s house, the Hay Bale House, Lucy House, Willie Bell House, and my favorite the butterfly house. Despite my brother’s prodding I refused to knock on any doors. I am not sure exactly why this was. I think more than anything else I was afraid that whoever I talked to wouldn’t be happy with their rural studio house. Though not totally discouraged, I began to worry. Can a house made of carpet manufacturing scraps really be safe? Is that metal *supposed* to be bent like that? Is that house really big enough for 4 people? At this point I was afraid to know the answer to these questions, so instead we went home. We ate pizza and I looked through shiny pictures of where we would go tomorrow.



I knew the rural studio *was* positively affecting the community. Every morning, and many evening during our stay we would eat the best southern country food you can imagine at local diner called Flava’s talking with anyone who shared our interests. The luxury of a home cooked meal was equally matched by the luxury of conversation. While we did meet a few people who seemed totally unaffected by both HERO and the rural studio; the majority of people had only good things to say, asking if we had met Patti or John or Dave and telling us about new projects happening in the area. It seemed the studio was fostering a sense of hope and empowerment though maybe not through the channels we had experienced. I still wanted to see a few of the Studio’s classic projects but was beginning to get the sense that it was really the on-going process and continual long term commitment that was making the studio relevant at a local level.

The next day we rode north about 17 miles to Akron. Northern and central Alabama were, at this time, experiencing one of the worst droughts on record. The papers said that no one who was alive could remember a time of such little rain and many farmers were expecting to lose 50-70% of their crops. We felt the heat as we rode through a mix of forest and agricultural land. As we came into town we passed through rows of defunct housing before reaching the one block of commercial development in-town. In one corner a gas station; in the other, across from the police and fire stations, the rural studio's Boy's and Girl's club. As we made our approach all looked well – until we crossed the street and saw the whole picture. Windows had been smashed, entrances were boarded up, and signs stating 'Caution: Keep Out' had been hung in several places around the building. After ignoring the signs, peeking in the windows, and surveying the building we headed to the gas station for answers.

Surprisingly enough the clerk, who had been working there for the past several years, not only had no idea what had happened to the building but didn't seem to care what had happened. Another customer told us the building had been occupied by a print-maker and had just been boarded up in the last month. A print-maker? We hung our heads and began looping back south toward Sawyerville. We asked at least three people who had lived in Sawyerville their whole lives for directions to the tire chapel only to be met with blank stares. They even claimed *no such thing exists!* Eventually we got excellent directions but we're warned that it was located on private property and the residents were out of town.



Cautiously we managed to find the place at the end of a long dirt road. Though the corners of the pews were covered in cob-webs and we doubt it had been used more than a few times, if at all, in the last few years Yancy's Chapel was exceptional. If the place had been reduced to an architectural relic, it was a relic worth seeing. We spent an enjoyable 45 minutes walking around and admiring the structure, light, view, and promenade. On the ride back, however, it was hard not to run through the list. Mason's Bend – trashed,

Akron Boy's and Girls Club – boarded up, Yancy's Chapel – privately owned and mostly abandoned. Exactly what kind of success was this?



On the way home we caught a lucky break. Just along the highway we spotted something. It looked like the collision of a storage building and a future systems project. It had to be the rural studio. We pulled up to the anomaly and introduced ourselves. Sure enough there stood four recent grad students and a supervising construction manager working for the rural studio. I talked to them about my trip; they told me about their project, an animal shelter, and then we moved on

to other conversation (music, construction, Greensboro). The new project was a radical departure from the rural studio I had seen. I thought about commenting on the state of past projects but *this* rural studio seemed so far gone from what I had just seen. From formal vocabulary and the materials, right down to the choice of program, most everything was different. And of course this was a different rural studio. All of the people involved in this project had come to the studio after Samuel Mockbee. Eager to share the students invited me to come in and look around. Compared to past projects, this one was both larger and more complicated. Sections of the building were even to be air conditioned. Ten minutes later I left the site feeling a new sense of wonder. The students were reinventing the studio for a new generation based on specific needs and more refined construction methods.

For our final full day we decided to visit Newbern, the heart of the rural studio. We arrived in town uncharacteristically early, around 8:00 am and parked our bikes near the corner gas station/food mart. We spent the entire afternoon poking around studio projects some over a decade old and some still being built. We saw the student 'pods' and the communal 'supershed', a volunteer firefighter's station (which was locked) and a number of public



parks. One of the most intriguing spaces was the studio itself. From the outside the building looked as if it was held together purely by rusty scrap metal and goodwill; leading me to hope that they would, in the near future, find time to rebuild their own quarters. Despite the fact that nobody was there at the time the place still felt alive. Layer after layer of drawings hung on the wall with an army of half-finished models standing to one side. You could tell several teams of people had been in and out in the last couple of weeks. Later when we came across the studio's administrative headquarters we would learn that there were in fact four different teams working through the summer; one on the

animal shelter, two on a public park (Lion's Park), and another on a new Boy's and Girl's club (which although we hadn't realized it at the time was the building going up just down the road from the original boarded up club). Even during this period of relative relaxation the studio was working to finish their typical four to five projects a year.



At the headquarters, my brother and I were also able to ask a few questions. Though answers were not always satisfactory, an honest attempt was made. Apparently the old Boy's and Girl's club had failed to receive funding due to the fact that it was located on private land, while Yancy's chapel had originally been put forth for a communal living situation which later fell apart. As we talked about the various projects, I became particularly interested in the 20.0 houses, a series of houses built with off-the-shelf products

arranged to suit the local climate, which rather than gifted could be purchased for around \$20,000. Seeing pictures I realized that we had actually ridden by one of these structures hardly taken notice of its humble design.

After visiting what we believed would be our final destination Sambo's memorial (subrosa) we made our way back to the gas station to get a drink and pick up our bikes. The owner of the gas station just happened to also be a volunteer fire fighter and we talked about the adjacent station. After praising the students for their hard work (many having put off job offers or even relationships to finish the project) he handed us the keys and invited us to look around for ourselves. In some ways I think this was my favorite project. The 30 or so foot high roof is supported by a series of vertical truss assemblies and provides for a single open space. The materials, arranged in elegant pairings, drew from past projects while also leaving room for innovation. Clear acrylics lit the space with diffused light while horizontal planks of unfinished wood provided additional shading. A simple folded sheet of metal provided a beautifully minimal staircase, and local woods provided warmth and visual interest in the overhead loft. This was a building which was comfortable in its own skin. A simple, abstract shed which did not strive to be overly impressive or hide itself in the background. Ultimately I believe the new projects represent a genuine evolution in the rural studio's approach. I think, given the attention and praise that past projects have received; it would have been easy for the studio to fall in the trap of trying to repeat its same poster-child successes. However, the new students and directors have done an incredible job of challenging everything from the materials they use to the philosophy they promote. The studio has retained all of the noble aspirations that initially made it so attractive while continuing to take steps which make those ideas more locally relevant and socially sustainable. That isn't to say there haven't been mistakes along the way. Arguably tens of thousands of dollars have been spent on buildings which have failed to function more than ten or even five years. Seeing the new

Akron Boy's and Girl's club going up right next to the old boarded up club you can't help but to scratch your head and ask why. However, these lessons have helped shape the studio and after spending a few days in Hale County I was amazed at the extent to which this single program has left its mark.

I did find it curious that many of the same buildings that enjoyed so much press (the MoMa purchased a model of Yancy's chapel for \$30,000 approximately the same cost as the building) have also been some of the first to fall into disrepair. I don't know exactly why this is. Issues of private ownership and funding, vague programmatic requirements and insufficient upkeep have all contributed to the decline of any one building; but it feels like there is



something more basic which has left these buildings in their current condition. Perhaps it is because these structures were designed too much from a top-down perspective, or perhaps it is because none of the residents felt compelled to keep up the properties.

I find it interesting that given all my research and interest in the program, I've never come across any literature that chose to criticize the program. I can understand this given that it is one of only a few architectural organizations out there working for financially impoverished people, and nobody wants to help threaten the organization's value or funding. While I understand this line of reasoning, I feel that it also begins to place the rural studio on a pretty high pedestal. I think that it is easy to believe that the rural studio is an anomaly born through the genius single handed genius of Samuel Mockbee - untouchable and unrepeatable. However, after this trip I feel that the most incredible aspects of the rural studio is that it exists at all. This is an organization that has adapted and grown under the wings of many passionate people. But there is no reason why similar efforts can't thrive elsewhere. In fact it is only now after this trip that I am beginning to fully appreciate and recognize the efforts of the Detroit Design Center and other community based projects.

As my brother and I flew home, from the seat of our plane we could spot some of the major landmarks and cities we had passed along the way. In the end this trip, and especially my experience with the rural studio, has left me feeling both emboldened and in a certain way also more cautious. I still can't imagine a more intriguing country to explore and I know it's only a matter of time before I get back on my bike to broaden my perspective and see more of our nation and its architecture.

