

HALE COUNTY
AND RURAL
POVERTY

ASPEN
DESIGN SUMMIT

ASPEN MEADOWS, COLORADO | NOVEMBER 11 TO 14, 2009
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INITIATIVE

Hale County is one of the poorest regions in the U.S. Much of its impoverished population suffers from substandard housing, education, health care, and job opportunities. Recently it has become the focus of attention of a growing number of design and other organizations committed to providing expertise to help improve the lives of local citizens.

Hale County is envisioned as a center for implementing design projects to help alleviate rural poverty. A National Design Center for Rural Poverty Programs — a prototypical or conceptual name only — would act as a laboratory for designers, academics, NGOs, and community groups to experience, research and collaborate on issues related to rural poverty, including health, education, housing and infrastructure, among other topics.

A National Design Center is likely to include live/work spaces, classrooms, and perhaps an exhibition area and community/tourist center that would provide a physical place to accommodate designers and others so they can come to Hale. It would bring together designers and community groups to see how design expertise can benefit the region through social programs and economic development, from small businesses to tourism. It is further anticipated that the Center could be a place for design work and research into rural poverty issues in other parts of the county.

The initiative would build on the presence of groups already in Hale, such as HERO (Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization), Rural Studio, Urban Studio, Project M, Horseshoe Farm and Teach for America. The goal is to devise a concept and business model for a research center or laboratory, which would act as a catalyst for developing resources and programs to foster social

change, ways to document initiatives and learning, as well as expansive and innovative ways to draw the larger national design community to this resource center to foster economic development in the region. It is anticipated that program definition and development for initial projects will be a part of the initiative.

BACKGROUND

Hale County is located in west-central Alabama, in what is known as the Black Belt, named for its rich dark soil. Farming was the prevailing occupation until the middle of the 20th century; cotton was the main crop until the 1930s. Unlike many neighboring counties, Hale did not take part in the industrialization boom of the mid-20th-century, remaining largely rural and agricultural, accounting for its high rates of poverty today.

Poverty is endemic among a majority of its 18,000 residents, mostly the 60 percent black population. A legacy of segregation and institutionalized racism has made political, economic and social progress difficult.

In Hale County, 22.2 percent of families (and 26.9 percent of individuals) live below the poverty line; 34 percent of children 18 years or younger live in poverty. Some 53 percent of households are female-led, almost double the national average (not surprisingly, 64 percent of grandparents are caregivers compared to 42 percent nationally.) Per capita income in Hale is \$12,661 compared to \$18,000 statewide and \$38,000 nationally.

Housing

Sub-standard housing occurs in Hale at a rate of 2.5 times the national average. About 25 percent of the population lack direct access to the municipal drinking water supply, and are forced to get their water from wells or tote cans from gas stations or public facilities (many residents could have access

but can't afford set up fees or water bills). Between 2 percent and 3 percent of residents lack complete plumbing or kitchen facilities; 9.4 percent have no phone service, compared to 2.4 percent nationwide.

Health

The county has a poor health-care delivery system, especially for the black population (typical for most black communities in the state). The black infant mortality rate in Hale is 25.9 percent compared to the national average of 14 percent for blacks and 5.8 percent for whites. Not surprisingly, 36.2 percent of black mothers lack adequate prenatal care. There are 2.0 primary care physicians per 10,000 inhabitants in Hale compared to 7.0 nationwide. In 2003, Hale was designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area by the federal office of Health Professions.

In 2007, the CDC reported that three states — Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee — all had obesity rates equal to or greater than 30 percent. In 2008, Alabama clocked in at 30.1 percent.

Education

According to the Literacy Council of West Alabama, the state's overall functionally illiteracy rate is 25 percent; in other words, one out of four people function at the lowest literacy level in Alabama. In Hale, the functional illiteracy rate is 41 percent, one of the highest in the state.

Not surprisingly, 43 percent of adults with low literacy skills live in poverty. 40 percent of children entering 4th grade are unable to read at grade level. This also impacts job skills: 75 percent of Alabama small business owners report that many job applicants do not have basic reading, writing and math skills.

Hale County schools received a "C" grade in 2000 by the State Board of Education; the

high school drop out rate is around 22 percent.

Impressions

The county seat, Greensboro, is a city of vivid contrasts. It boasts a historical neighborhood with antebellum mansions and examples of Greek Revival architecture; a stately Main Street with 70% of its buildings unoccupied (including a few burnt-out shells); a dramatic block-to-block residential shift between racial groups; two somewhat racially-segregated grocery stores; a legally-integrated high school with no white students (white students go *en masse* to a nearby private school); the Safe House Museum, once used to shelter Martin Luther King Jr. from the Ku Klux Klan during a 1960's meeting; a former Opera House, the focus of a recent \$200,000 restoration fundraiser; numerous Auburn University Rural Studio architectural projects; and the headquarters of HERO.

CASE STUDY: HERO

After attending the Rural Studio as an Outreach Fellow in 2003, Pam Dorr decided to stay on and started working with HERO, a nonprofit founded in 1994 and involved mainly in providing social services to families in a county that suffers from high infant mortality and child abuse rates. Today, she is its Executive Director.

Dorr changed the direction of HERO to focus on offering housing resources. With an annual operating budget of around \$1.2 million, HERO today provides housing and community resources to help people become homeowners; offers payment assistance grants to afford homes; counsels on home repair, home rental, home-buyer education, and home building. Community resources include so a low income energy assistance payment program, thrift store, food pantry and an educational and job training program called Youthbuild, aimed

at helping young people ages 16-24 complete their GED and at the same time help build homes for families.

A HERO design challenge to build a home for \$20,000 came about after Dorr learned that many local residents could only qualify for a \$20,000 loan because they live on a minimal income, usually about \$637 a month, the amount of their social security or SSI. Rural Studio took up the challenge, budgeting \$10,000 for materials and \$10,000 for labor. Eight of these homes, designed and built by Rural Studio students have so far been completed.

Other Projects in Hale County:

AMERICORPS/VISTA

Over the past year HERO has worked with 6 VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) fellows and has applied to double that number next year. This will allow HERO to expand its community services to 5 new low-income counties. HERO will offer housing counseling services; home buyer education, credit counseling and down payment assistance grants to families interested in changing their housing situation.

www.americorps.gov

www.americorps.gov/about/programs/vista.asp

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

Habitat came to Alabama in 2006 after Hurricane Katrina and now works in 5 Black Belt counties to create new housing options. Over 350 volunteers serve each year to build homes; 22 have been built to date. A partnership with Auburn University's DESIGNhabitat has led to progressive Habitat designs which have received numerous design awards.

www.habitat.org

PROJECT HORSEHOE FARM

Project Horseshoe Farm is a non-profit service, leadership development and educational initiative located in Hale County, which began full operation in 2009. It was started by Dr. John Dorsey, a psychiatrist at Hale County Hospital. Initially the focus of service will be on housing programs for adults, including the elderly, with mental disabilities, and on mentorship, academic and enrichment programs for children.

A housing program focuses on improving quality of life of residents by pairing stable housing with the companionship of Horseshoe Farm Fellows and community volunteers. For children, the program will be looking improve an after-school tutoring, mentoring, and activities program initiated in partnership with Greensboro West Elementary School in 2007. The program currently serves approximately thirty 4th-6th grade students and is staffed by students from University of Alabama's School of Social Work and from the University's Honors and Blount Colleges, as well as from Auburn University's Rural Studio.

www.projecthsf.org

PROJECT M

John Bielenberg's Project M started in Hale in 2007 with the buy-a-meter program to help residents gain access to the municipal water supply. The second step was to establish a Project M Lab in Hale, a permanent home in a former schoolhouse where students can stay while working on projects in collaboration with HERO. A recent project is PieLab, which serves many functions: local pie shop, café, art gallery, small business incubator, community gathering place. It is a model for a small community-based business, and as it is located in a reused storefront on Main Street, Pie Lab is a good example of sustainable design.

www.projectmlab.com

www.pielab.org

RURAL STUDIO

Auburn University's ambitious program allows students from the school and other interested people to design and build innovative and often sophisticated houses in underdeveloped rural areas like Hale County — mostly for desperately poor, typically black clients. The Rural Studio seeks solutions to the needs of the community within the community's own context, not from outside it. Its participants build homes as well as community spaces, with an esthetic that is modern but also blends in with traditional structures.

The Rural Studio became the vehicle through which its founder Samuel Mockbee was able to realize his personal aspiration that architecture could offer an opportunity to raise the spirits of the rural poor through the creation of homes and community facilities, which aspired to the same set of architectural ideals and virtues as those buildings which have substantial budgets and prosperous clientele.

More importantly, Mockbee's social ethic is imbued in the students by instilling in them a sense of professionalism, volunteerism, individual responsibility, and a commitment to community service. Andrew Freear, director of the Rural Studio since the death of Samuel Mockbee, has extended this program in dynamic and new ways.

Rural Studio projects in Hale and neighboring counties exemplify the sheer power of architecture when applied in this poverty-stricken region. These include many public buildings, designed and built by teams of four students: among these are the Boys and Girls Club in Akron, Alabama and the Antioch Baptist Church in nearby Perry County.

www.cadc.auburn.edu/soa/rural-studio

TEACH FOR AMERICA

Teach for America will come to the Alabama Black Belt — Hale, Sumter and Perry counties — in 2010. This two-year program will involve 30 teachers in the first year and 60 in the second. The goal is to create educational equity in low-income areas so that location does not determine educational level and outcomes. The program is aimed at leveling the educational playing field. There are currently no charter schools in Alabama; legislation is being put forward to change that, and Hale might be the first to have one.

TFA corps members are recruited from top schools and corporations, and 20 percent end up moving to the site location permanently. Many serve as school principals or are engaged in community development, while 63 percent stay in the educational field.

www.teachforamerica.org

URBAN STUDIO

Auburn University's Urban Studio, founded in 1991, is an outreach program of AU's College of Architecture, Design and Construction that gives fourth-year and thesis students the opportunity to pursue design in an urban setting and engage in community projects. It is a laboratory to study urban design in Birmingham as well as in small towns in Alabama to help them recognize their potential and establish a vision for the future.

In addition to its work with the City of Birmingham, the Urban Studio has partnered with more than 40 small towns and communities across the state to help them recognize their potential and establish a vision for the future. The Small Town Design Initiative, started in 1998, assists civic leaders and citizens in small towns in preserving those things that made their towns special while preparing for revitalization, growth and improved quality of life. Since that time, the Studio has worked with these communities to develop

long-range visions and strategic plans for revitalization. Many of these communities are in Hale and surrounding counties.

www.designalabama.org

www.yourtownalabama.org/smalltown.htm

RESOURCES

Hale Empowerment and
Revitalization Organization

www.herohousing.org

Alabama Department of Public Health

www.adph.org

CDC-Hale County Snapshot

www.bt.cdc.gov/snaps/data/01/01065.htm

Encyclopedia of Alabama

www.encyclopediaofalabama.org

*Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an
Architecture of Decency*

Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, Timothy
Hursley ISBN 9781568982922

*Proceed and Be Bold: Rural Studio After
Samuel Mockbee*

Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, Timothy
Hursley ISBN 9781568985008

Design Observer: Report from

Hale County, Alabama

[http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/
entry.html?entry=8877](http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=8877)