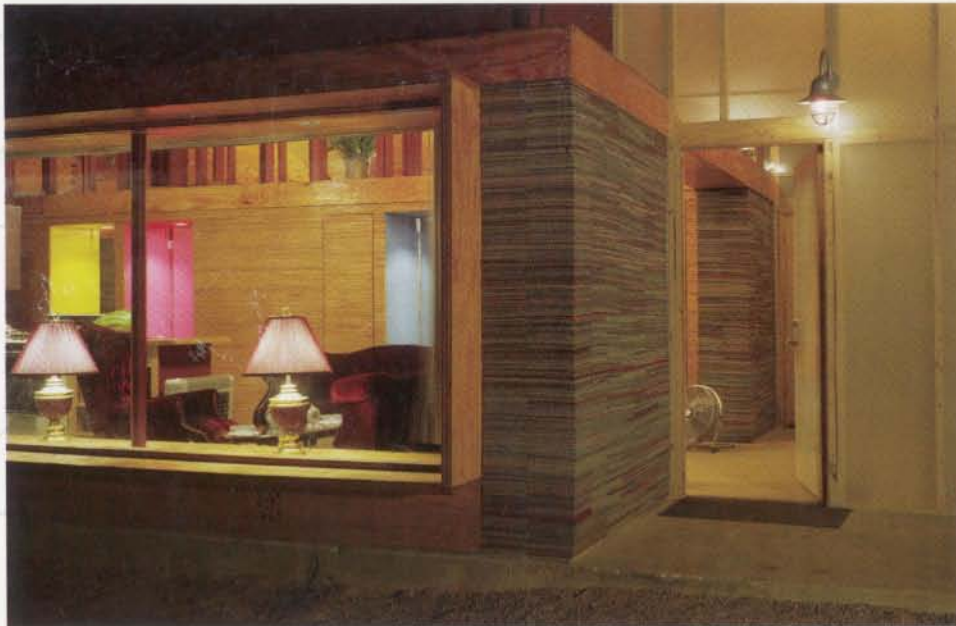




Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: *Community Architecture*





AN ARCHITECT'S UPBRINGING

I know the dirt on an old dairy farm named Yancey in Hale County, Alabama. That soil is different from most that you will find in the black belt. When the earth on Yancey is compact, it is as hard as bedrock. When that ground is pried loose, it is as fine as quartz dust. I know that dirt because Sambo let me build a chapel of it as a thesis project - with a friend called Dirtman and another named Tom. We constructed the Yancey Chapel with anything we could get our hands on - objects collected, salvaged, or dug. The materials cost almost nothing; we, the laborers and designers, were free.

The genesis of the chapel came over a Heineken with Sambo. We were teetering in rocking chairs on the porch of our home at dusk. We lived in an antebellum mansion with no air conditioning in the slow town of Greensboro, Alabama - a teacher and ten students completing a house built of hay bales, the first project of the Rural Studio. Sambo was the big man with a beard who sat at the end of our dinner table - he owned our attention. He triumphed in our discovering new building methods and utilizing old and discarded things. We were in the midst of his first victory - providing a warm dry place for a charming catfish fisherman and his family.

There Sambo and I sat - overlooking an unkempt lawn half the size of a football field. I was comfortable, inspired, and confident in his presence - as I was not always with my peers on that project. I told him that I would like to stay in Greensboro - build something start to finish as

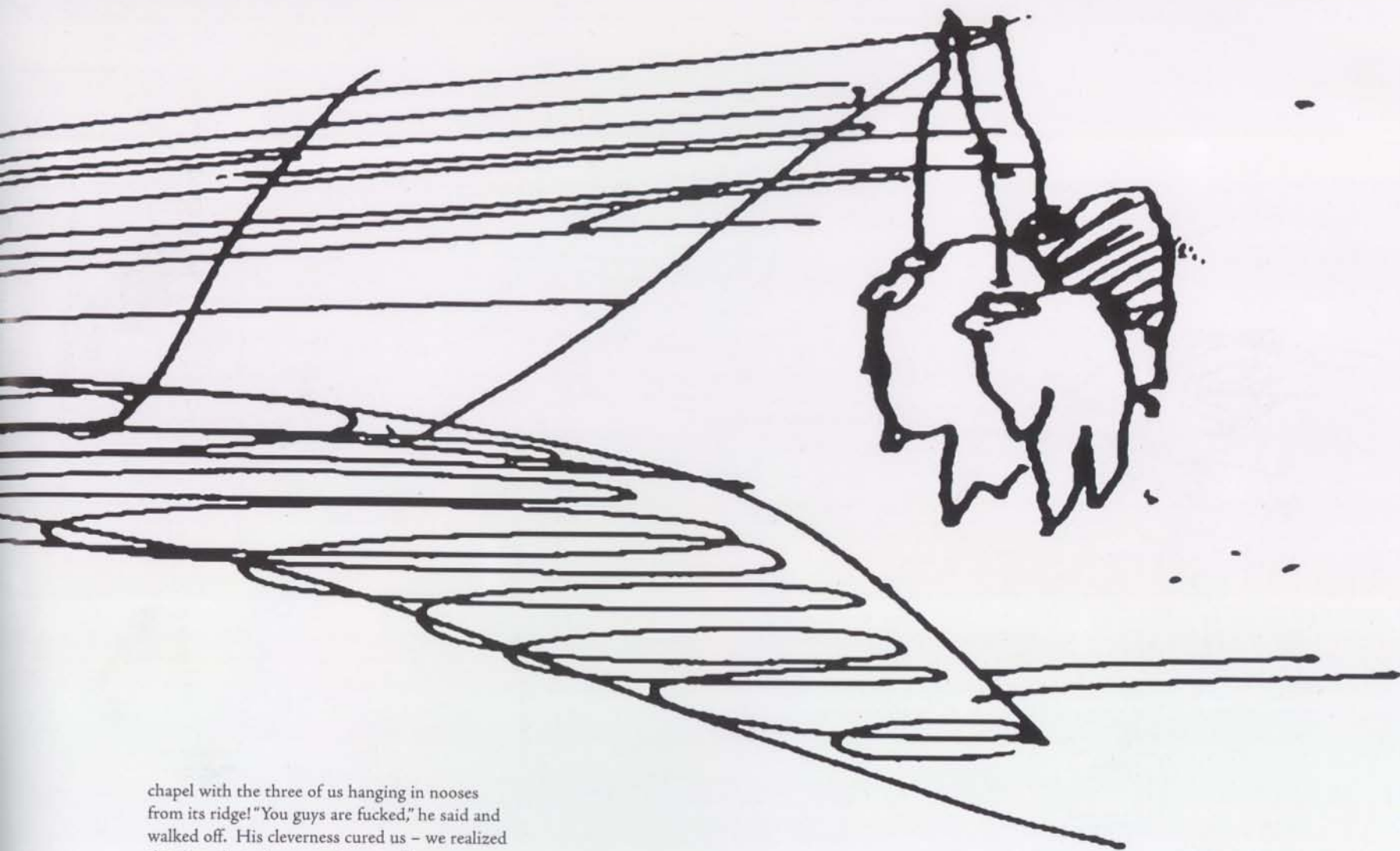
a thesis project. He did not hesitate in his response, "a chapel," he said - an inspiration for others, a sacred space. Sambo stood behind my idea, giving it form at that very moment; just as Professor DK Ruth stood behind his back at Auburn University - guarding the Rural Studio, making it happen for us. As our conversation progressed, Sambo was trying to think of the right backer for the chapel: someone with land in the community, who supported Auburn and the studio. He stopped rocking and said, "You should talk to Lemuel Morrison." And so I met with her shortly thereafter. Lemuel's eyes lit up wickedly as I proposed my plan to build a chapel on her land. She whispered to me that her property had a certain magic quality.

It is odd to recall that part of my wish to stay in Greensboro had been "wanting to do my own thing." That desire ultimately led to becoming one of a group of three - building by hand. I found great people to work with - diligent resourceful, people: Tom Tretheway, a man of action, Steve Durden a dreamer. Our team met for several days over Christmas break to shape our ideas and design the Yancey Chapel. We chose a site that overlooks a bluff, unusual to the landscape of Hale County. We presented our base design to the landowner; she seemed pleased. Sambo inquired of us via telephone afterwards. "Is the chapel cool?" "Yes," we answered. "Can you build it?" "No," we replied. "Good!" He reveled in watching students envision things they wanted to create, *then* figuring out how to build them.

Our team finally met the dirt. The three of us dug a rectangular hole in the ground and piled its emptied contents high around the edges. We collected tires from a nearby dump. We rammed the excavated earth into those tires. We pounded them into a running bond pattern around the dug-out sanctuary. Thus were born the retaining walls for our chapel. We covered them in chicken wire, then stucco. We began a roof of salvaged hundred-year-old heart pine beams. We added shingles cut from old barn tin. As we worked, we knew what we were willing to try. Sambo knew what would work. He would quietly, unassumingly let us know if we were headed for trouble. He would never give us answers. He moved us forward by wanting us to clear our own hurdles. He inspired us by imparting a sense that we were *doing*, that these creations springing from our hands would generate wonder.

One afternoon back at the house our team sat around the dining room table, paralyzed by indecision. Winter had become spring and we had tire walls and pine rafters, but no roof. We could not resolve the finished roof structure; we could not even agree upon its materials. Sambo dropped in upon our dilemma; he suggested he might give us some help. We begged him not to, but he picked up a piece of paper and started sketching with lightening speed. He was mumbling, "You're running out of time, you're running out of time..." We did not want him to give us the answer, but at the same time, we were intrigued - waiting for the master's illumination.

Finally he handed us the sketch our



chapel with the three of us hanging in nooses from its ridge! "You guys are fucked," he said and walked off. His cleverness cured us – we realized that in order to keep moving as architects we would have to be willing to be decisive. The next day we finalized the roof structure and agreed to cut shingles of salvage barn tin, rusted into colors that we could never find again.

It is only appropriate that Sambo sketched us tied to our building, as his world was built of people. No matter how well he knew someone he never lost the air of fascination with them. No sooner did he meet someone than he began to watch for their needs. Sambo wove his strengths through anyone that was willing to participate in his grand plan. It was wonderful to know him in a place where he knew his way through the fishponds and the woods, where he was excited by everything that was going on, as a mighty man flown in to save the day. So many deserving people have found themselves in new homes, so many students have found a realm in which to design and build. So many people have been made to feel bold. He taught me the thrill of a group assimilating each of its individual views, of building something with character.

When we finished our chapel Sambo said to us, "Well it's all downhill from here. You've done the best. You'll never be able to beat it." Although I enjoy my career of high residential architecture, my experience under Sambo in the Rural Studio will always be my architectural compass.

Sambo loved the South, he loved architecture, he loved the people of Hale County. With a lifetime's experience of crafting in the vernacular, he began an outreach that was an interpretation of his passions. We find Sambo in the pages of so many books, because he stepped so far beyond what had previously been written. As one enters the Yancey Chapel, one passes a concrete angel gesture. A lovely stream moves through it into the sanctuary. One may not recognize this angel upon first glance – he unobtrusively stands and looks out over the bluff, into the world.

Written by Alice Novak and Ruard Veltman

