

## An Interview from the 1999 Annual Awards Issue.

In 1999, Mississippi State University's Small Town Center program won *Architecture's* annual scholarship award. This article is taken from the April 1999 *Architecture* Annual Awards issue. The interview was conducted by Philip Arcidi.

The revenues from entries to the P/A and annual research awards enable *Architecture* to add an academic scholarship to the awards it gives to practitioners. This year, the winner of the magazine's third scholarship, which premiates an ongoing curricular program in architecture, is the School of Architecture at Mississippi State University.

Over the past 20 years, hundreds of Mississippi State students have participated in the school's Small Town Center. It positions undergraduates as architectural consultants and designers for rural, often disadvantaged communities in a state with only one large city. Shannon Criss, associate professor and director of the Small Town Center, spoke with *Architecture* about the insights she and her students found in their ventures throughout Mississippi.

**ARCHITECTURE:** *What is a small town?*

**SHANNON CRISS:** Small towns here in Mississippi are places where there's an identity, a history, a group of people that know each other. Mississippi is made of small towns. We've got the city of Jackson, which has a population of 200,000 or so, and a couple of communities in the range of 30,000 to 60,000, but most of the state is made up of small towns, with 30,000 or fewer residents.

Most of these towns and communities started at the turn of the century, some in the 1880s; some are a little younger. They responded to a geographic condition, such as a river, on which they found their livelihood. Others started as points on the railroad. Public spaces and the ways in which individual properties were developed had a different nature than we find today. Buildings shared party walls and lined streets. At the turn of the century there was a vision about the future; towns laid out grids. There was a larger plan, a larger order. Since World War II, we have residential enclaves and separation from a shared public space. I haven't found any new small towns, that is, any established within the last 40 years. Every town that I've worked with has roots from the turn of the century.



*What can architects who aren't working with small towns learn from your work?*

Originally I understood architectural practice as something within defined property lines, built for a distinct client. I was thinking in terms of a specific response; I saw it as a reactive profession. Architecture can be more proactive, a catalyst to looking at a larger network of conditions through the vehicle of a small town.

*How did the Small Town Center come into being?*

It grew from the efforts of James Barker, who developed the program in 1979. We're up in the northeast part of the state, in a very rural setting. It seemed natural that the school address small-town and rural needs. In the early days the professors worked with small towns out of commitment, with the help of a few National Endowment for the Arts grants, rather than from any funded position. They emulated the Rural and Urban Design Action Teams (RUDAT) of the American Institute of Architects (AIA); designers would spend several days charetting in a town, and then produce reports that communities could build upon.

*The Small Town Center is under the aegis of the School of Architecture?*

Yes. It presently runs on the grants and contracts that we write. The school is very supportive and has given us space and equipment. There are three active faculty members involved. We probably have about 20 students involved either through grants or contracts. Some of them are taking independent studies; we are engaging the entire third-year class in studios where one of the professors and I are working with 32 students. I probably have 20 percent of the fourth year class involved. In total, we have an impact on 60 or 70 students this year.

*What do the students produce for the Small Town Center's clients?*

We're architectural consultants: We've produced written reports for several towns that describe their architectural qualities and outline strategies to restore or develop buildings and neighborhoods at risk. Our 1997 report for Booneville, a town of 8,000, suggested that its community college, hospital, and factories are as fundamental as the courthouse and prewar commercial core to the town's identity. We suggested that the town use landscaping, lighting, and signage to create arrival points for cars entering town; we highlighted the attributes of some established neighborhoods, and suggested tax incentives to help residents sustain and restore the traditional features of their houses. We tabulated parking requirements and proposed better trash collection strategies for downtown merchants. Our report suggested the town consider a new industrial park; it even proposed ways to rehabilitate an abandoned Wal-Mart.

In Mississippi architects do not have any particularly strong stature. This means that our school of architecture is a significant player in the profession; we've become a statewide resource. People come to us

because they know that their downtowns are economically fading but still have cultural significance; they know that new commercial development shows little, if any, planning intelligence. All sorts of people approach us: economic development groups, mayors, chambers of commerce, and individual property owners. We've developed a reputation as a place for advice that's not beholden to commercial interests. Some think we offer free services, like an agricultural extension service at a land grant college. In fact, we do charge fees; each community we work for contributes something. We often look for funding to supplement what a town provides, so we can cover costs of transportation and the production of documents. We work on projects that impact the public realm, and have educational merit for our undergraduates; we refer most individual property owners and specifically architectural commissions to local AIA offices.

*How do you deal with the time frame of a semester when you try to realize a proposal?*

Ultimately I and other faculty have to make a long-term commitment to a place. It's very important that the community understands that we are there to address ongoing issues. We are often a bridge between a town's initial interest and implementation by practicing architects. They read about us in the paper and visit advisory council groups. They're becoming more and more aware of us. At first they offer pro bono services or participate loosely, but I can imagine that ultimately these projects become contracts for them.

About one-fifth of our small town projects—one each year—include a built project. This semester, in the town of Okolona, we have a \$20,000 grant that will enable 32 third-year students to build a simple structure on a 50-by-100-foot site virtually surrounded by warehouses. Community leaders and high school students talked with us about what they'd like to see there; we're working with laborers from prison to cut concrete slabs left on the site; we will build footings for a retaining wall and construct a stage and an overhead steel structure. We hope the site will be a catalyst for more public events in the area, a place for gospel choirs, farmers' markets, and crafts fairs, a place where people can sit, a space that belongs to everyone in town.

*Are the architecture students at Mississippi State predominantly white, as at architecture schools everywhere?*

Yes. Suburban.

*They often work with poor black communities, for people that few architects would have as clients. How does this affect the students?*

I can answer that by talking about the work students have under way in Jonestown, a town of 1,500 African-Americans in the Delta. Our students couldn't understand why people would stay in a town with 40 percent unemployment, deteriorated housing, and a chemical odor in the air

at harvest time when farmers defoliate cotton. Mothers work in the casinos a couple of hours away; they're away from their kids from six in the morning until seven at night. Why not move? People in Jonestown told us about the generations of their families that had lived there, and their dreams of leaving something for their children. We learned that a community is sustained by how the people relate to their town.

In Mississippi, we live in a place where an intense climate and dense vegetation seem to conspire against the very survival of any physical artifacts. But we saw how poor people were committed to their community. They showed us that architecture is not a ground zero proposition; it starts with the pride people have for their hometowns, their perseverance. These people gave architecture lessons to us, the ostensible experts in this discipline. We learned from people who didn't realize that they're creating architecture.

*Do Mississippi's small towns have any lessons to offer the New Urbanism movement?*

We took students down to Seaside, Florida. The town has a nice set of guidelines; they're very succinct and offer good lessons. But Seaside is a community born on a blank site; a beautiful site, but one that is separate from ways in which we've been working. I can't think of any projects in Mississippi that have taken the New Urbanism approach.

My concern with the small towns of Mississippi is that a lot of them are forgetting their roots. I don't want to be nostalgic but I think there are ways to redevelop and increase density close to the core rather than continually expand. I think one of the largest challenges we have is to help communities understand how to reinvest. We have to learn to reconstruct shopping strips from the 1950s and 1960s or take buildings down and reinvest with new projects. To build within the context is extremely important.

*What do small towns need?*

These communities love discovering that what they might take for granted has value. They may not think that their community offers a lot or has specific qualities or an identity. Most people aren't aware of their particular environment in the way that architects are. When students, faculty, and practicing architects engage a community it increases the community's appreciation and awareness of its own place.

I often find that communities are tired of just another study. Those often just live on the back shelf. But if you engage the community in a real, tangible way—maybe a park bench, a specific proposal for a site that they know—and help them implement that, then we have a meaningful engagement. Small towns need those kinds of footholds.