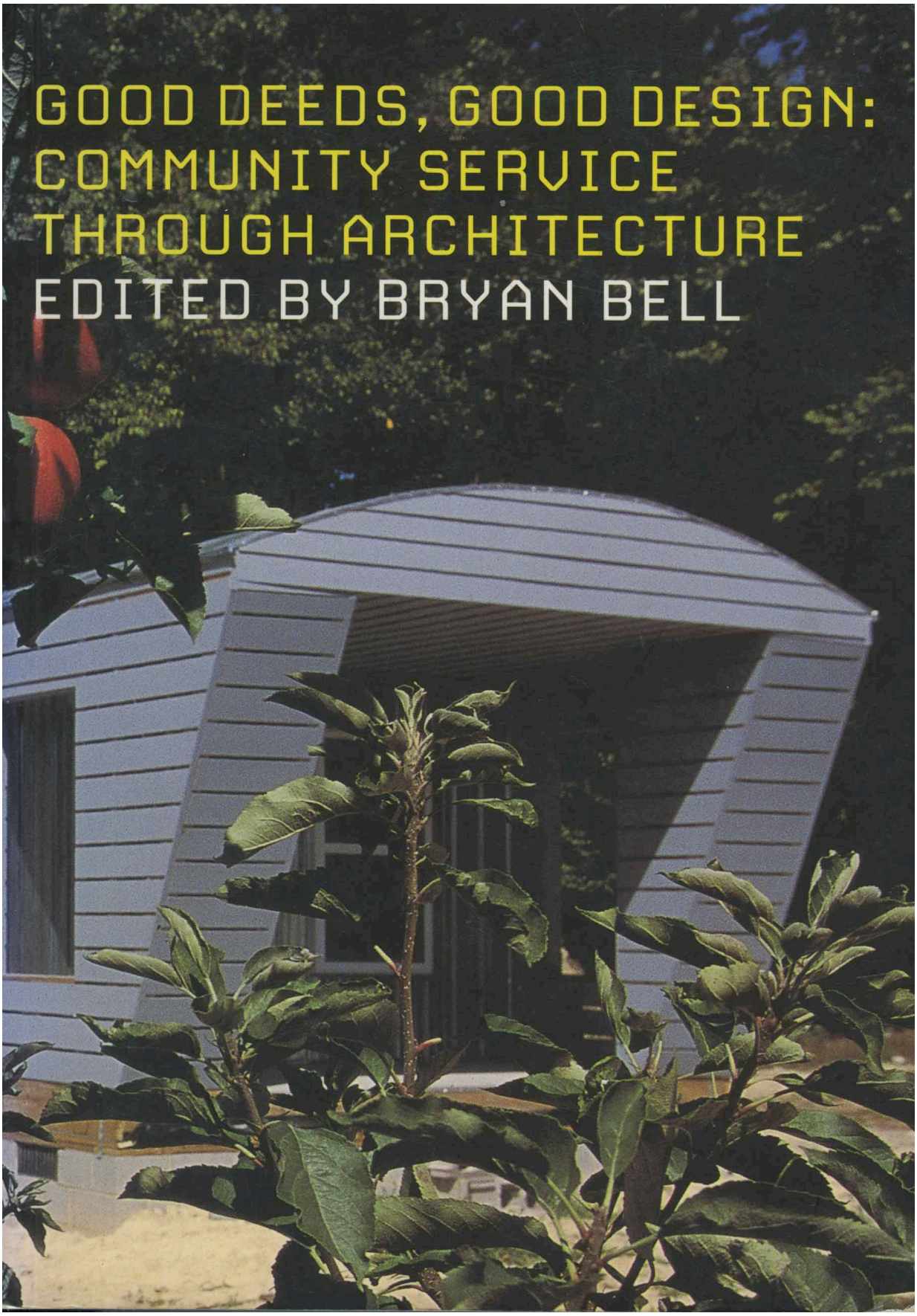
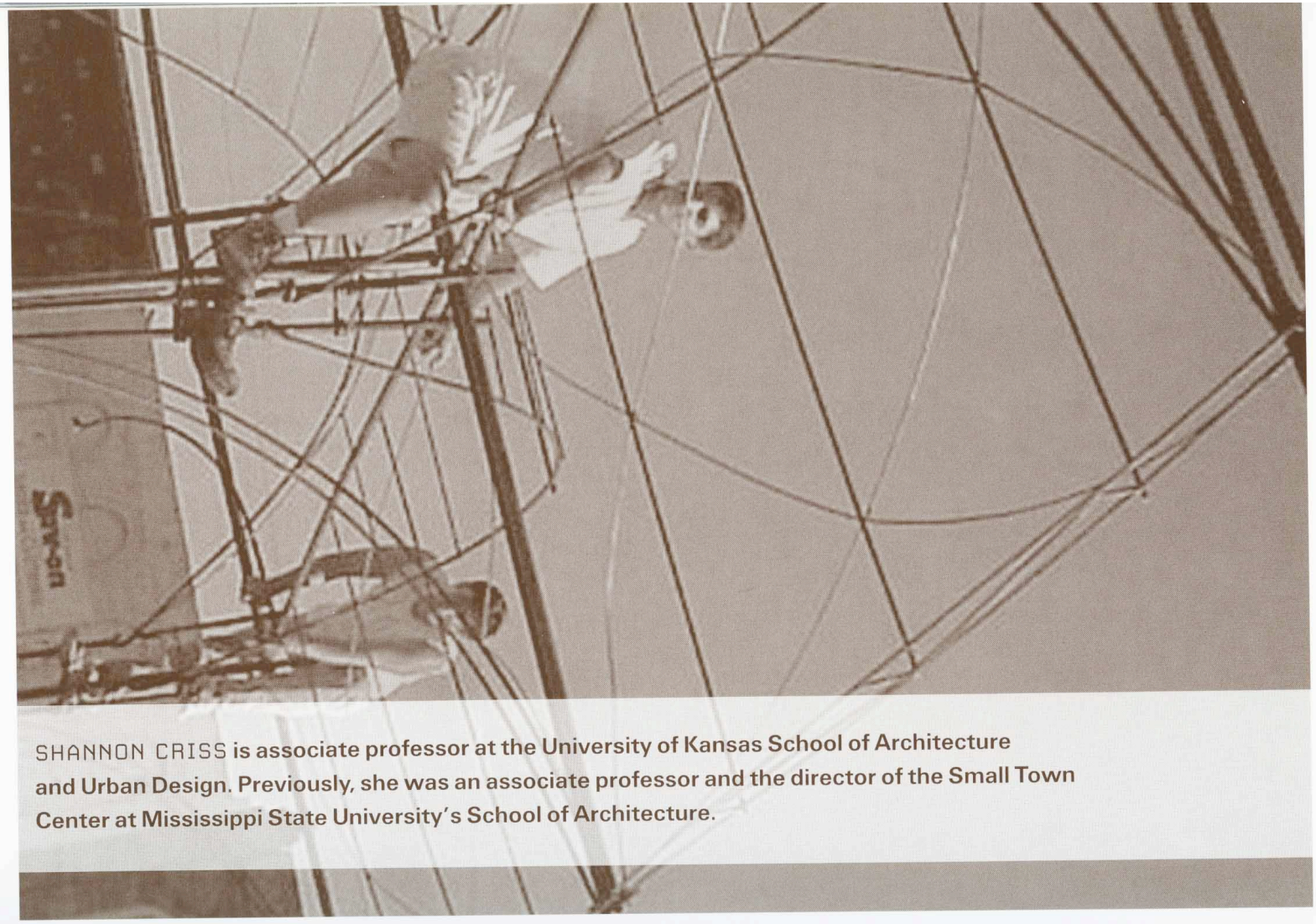

GOOD DEEDS, GOOD DESIGN:
COMMUNITY SERVICE
THROUGH ARCHITECTURE
EDITED BY BRYAN BELL


SMALL TOWN CENTER
SHANNON CRISS
Public space making—even with a great economy of means such as this small park project—can go a long way in reinforcing communities, as well as forming relationships between designers and community members.



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Okolona, Mississippi, is a town of three thousand located in northeast Mississippi. Once a prosperous railroad town and trading center, it in recent years has become a bedroom community for people working in nearby Tupelo. The public image of the town has declined over the past few years, as buildings suffer neglect through disinvestment, and as the town's limited resources are spent on "essentials" like schools and police, not on maintaining the public realm. Like other small Mississippi towns, Okolona was once a (legally) racially segregated town, with whites living on one side of town and African-Americans on the other. This community continually works to find opportunities to bridge the gap that still exists between the races, and recognizes the need to revitalize its economic base and invest in its public space.

A PARK FOR OKOLONA

In 1997, a small group of concerned citizens—both black and white—met to discuss the idea of building a small park in downtown Okolona, in a location that neither race would "own." They envisioned the park as a common ground that would provide the community with a collaborative project on which to focus its energies in a highly public manner during planning and construction. It could be a place for public events, such as church performances, school events, a farmers market, and election rallies. They also desired a space with shade for the occasional passerby or a lunch break.

This 140-by-50-foot site at Main and a major cross street linked diverse neighborhoods and served as a neutral site for the community. My students in the design-build program at Mississippi State University joined with local community members to provide the ground for a shared, tangible result. The project embraced the thoughts and suggestions of many people. The greater the number of people involved, with their viewpoints helping to shape the project, the greater the possibility that the physical place would hold significance and foster future use for those in the community. By establishing principles internal to the place and the people, a better fit is possible.

The students began by immersing themselves in the neighborhoods, using sketches and photography to record and become familiar with this place. This forced the students to transform their own feelings of being outsiders into something that could assist the design of the park. They were not aware of the subtle racial boundaries in the community and were motivated to walk around and take photos of those things that seemed curious to them. They found creative ways in which people transformed commonplace objects into yard art, fences, and signs, which ultimately helped them discover new potential for commonplace materials such as re-bar, parking bumpers, and abandoned farming tools. The students' initial research into the community was not always easy or pleasant. Several were questioned as to why they were there, why they were taking photos. During discussions back at school, many students revealed that they were not certain we should be there, that many felt uncomfortable with our "intrusion" into the town. Class morale was beginning to suffer.

At that point Patsy Gregory, the director of the Okolona Area Chamber of Commerce and the primary figure in getting this park off the ground, organized a diverse group of citizens—young and old, black and white, newcomers and long-term residents—to meet with us to share their feelings about Okolona. We gathered one evening in the town hall, and the residents took turns telling their stories. Some recounted their several-generation family histories in the town; others why they so desperately wanted to get Okolona out of its "funk"; others the bright future they imagined for the town. At times it got emotional, and the

evening ended with a very noticeable change in the students' attitudes. It was easy to see that some people in Okolona did appreciate our presence, were optimistic about our efforts, and were going to be supportive during the construction. It was a critical moment.

Immersing ourselves into the community had another effect—we gained an appreciation for local creative design that inspired our own work. Many Okolonians make do with limited resources and must rely upon modest means to express themselves in their surroundings. They collect and stockpile things with the sense that they may someday come in handy. Things are contingent, as there is not a definite plan; everything has potential.

FROM RESEARCH TO DESIGN

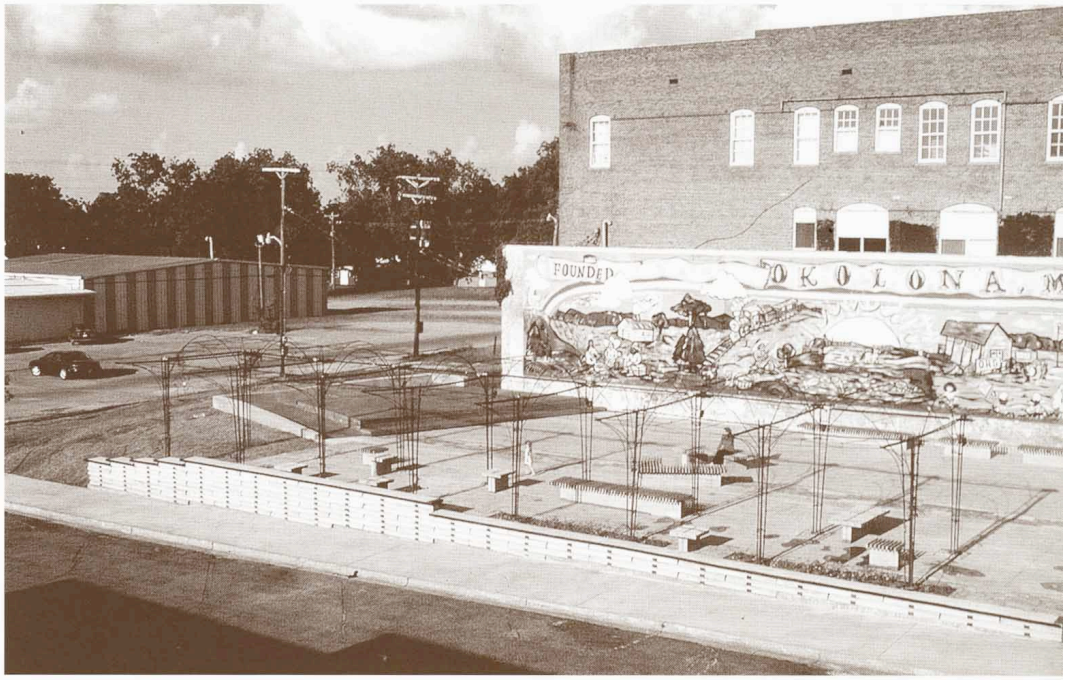
Following this, the students started designing schemes for their vision of the park. Decision making during the design process was governed by the idea of consensus building. Collaborative efforts did not come easy, as the typical architectural education emphasizes original thought and individual creative acts. Getting all thirty-two students to share and develop ideas was only possible through a series of discussions. Many of these discussions were tested in community gatherings, challenged by real, practical concerns. Playing out ideas within the presence of those that lived in Okolona helped the students focus and avoid making fantastic, unachievable suggestions. The students built a highly crafted, large model of the park proposal and displayed it in a downtown storefront. Making the ideas public helped the general community understand what we were about to undertake and forced the students to be clear with their intentions.

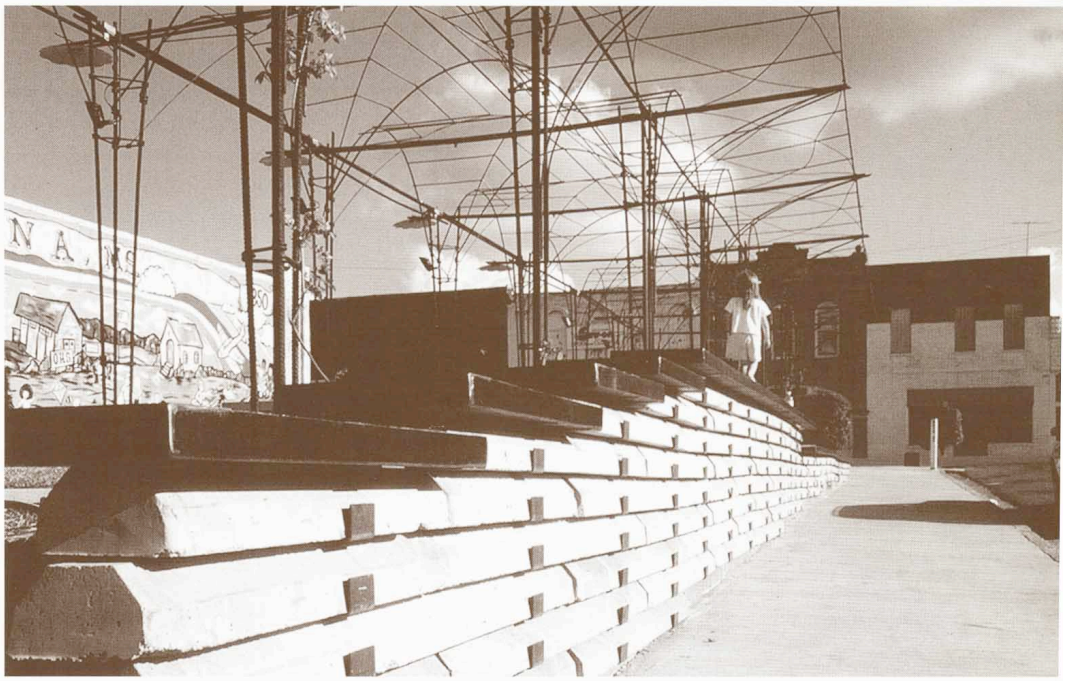
A student assists community children with a paving project.

All students in the class proposed individual schemes for the park at the beginning of the design phase. From these, we identified large principles that were embedded in numerous schemes: shading, sitting, performance, edge-making, vegetation, etc. When we reached consensus on a set of principles, the class divided itself up into teams to develop specific solutions to address these principles. In this way the students designed the specific elements for the park: a wisteria arbor, a stage, benches, a retaining wall, and paving to address a rift between two existing concrete slabs.

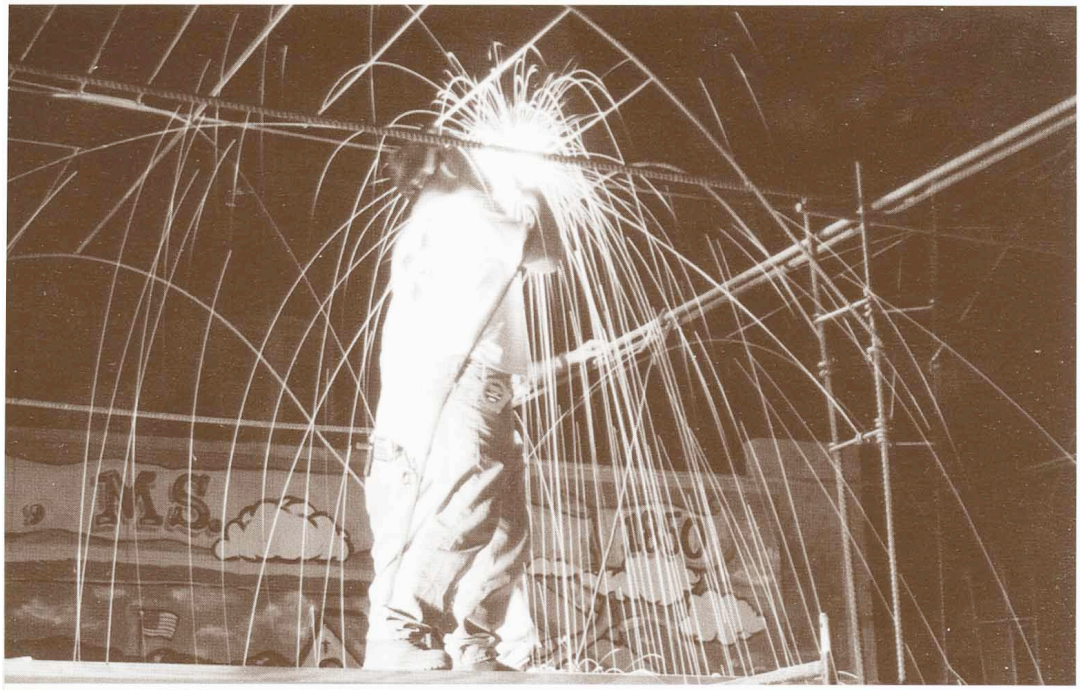
We were inspired by the way the community used found objects and materials in new, improvised ways, and designed the arbor out of half-inch reinforcing bar that wrapped the steel members and were assembled to make columns and vaults. The arbor is seventy-by-ten feet, strengthened by interlocking pieces and anchored to footings. We installed uplighting on the columns and in the ground for evening use. The wisteria combats the extreme summer heat and provides shade. In a town such as Okolona where the tax base is relatively low, maintaining a park is not the highest priority. In designing the park we had to consider how the materials and assemblies would age.

Working with common materials and a low-skilled labor force is the way many of our Mississippi buildings get built. And in our case, our own low skills put us to the test. We built a one-hundred-foot retaining wall to contain the edge of the slab and conform to the changing slope of the site out of stacked concrete parking bumpers and anchored by steel angles. Instead of relying on skilled brick- or stonemasons, we used this common, affordable material (nineteen dollars per bumper) that became more elegant through repetition and its subtle shadows.



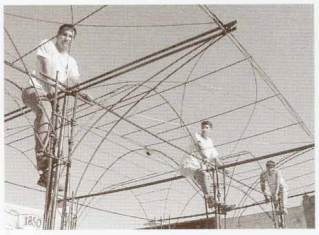


TOP: Overview of park in Okolona, Mississippi, including a wisteria arbor, a stage, benches, a retaining wall, and paving. ABOVE: The retaining wall is made of concrete parking bumpers and angled steel.



TOP: A student welds steel in place at the wisteria arbor. ABOVE: Wisteria is beginning to grow on the arbor.

Understanding the needs and desires of various citizens and how to incorporate those ideas came at different moments in the design process. As we began to transform the site with demolition and to pour footings, people in general would stop and question what we were doing. A local carpenter took an interest in our work, participated in its construction, and, in effect, taught the students some skills of his trade. One woman who lived down the alleyway adjacent to the park was highly skeptical at first of our work. She did not think it was possible to develop what we planned to build. However, as she became familiar with some of the students and spent time watching what they were doing day by day, she saw how committed they were to the project. As a result, she organized a weekly meal in her home, involving many neighbors in the cooking. Through these social gatherings, the word spread and more people took interest and stopped at the site. Practically every day that we were on site, someone would stop and drop off a cooler of Cokes or a platter of cookies. With such connection to the community, the students were offered opinions, suggestions, and skills that strengthened the park proposal. Following group approval of the basic elements, the teams began building mockups for a town meeting at midterm to receive community feedback and approval. We learned to represent our ideas there in ways that were direct and easy to understand; clear communication helped us establish relationships and secure the involvement of local people. We realized their involvement was critical to the future life and the usefulness of the park.



John Bondurant, Barry Lann, and Kyle Kish work on the arbor.

As the project progressed, students took on different leadership roles and responsibilities: one developed project management methods, while another negotiated with suppliers. Project needs directed the students' energy and focus. Students found their specific role in the project according to their interest and aptitude.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The method of critiquing the students' designs was based on internal principles of the place, such as use, durability, and time, rather than strictly on form and appearance. Designing *and* building, back and forth, provide the potential for a more sincere product and innovation. This process provided space for experimentation and improvisation, and in these, architecture may rediscover craft and the potential of materials. It brings a degree of outside reality that allows our work to be more relevant to broader, more public concerns.[1]

The very act of making something in this way places a higher regard on the act itself. Learning to improvise and respond to the conditions and material at hand provides an important lesson. By slowing down and seeing the potential of a place and its people, we remake ourselves to fit the circumstances at hand; we approach our work in a different manner, and this can be enormously instructive.[2]

[1] Some of the thoughts included in this paper, are informed by "Working Space: Notes on Design Studio Work in the Public Realm," a paper that David Perkes, associate professor at Mississippi State University, and I developed and delivered at the National Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture in Cleveland, Ohio, in the spring of 1998.

[2] The project is not developed by our internal motivations, but instead by collaborating with others—designers and community participants—we are forced to find shared, basic motivations for design. In this way we search for those characteristics and connections that are outside our past experiences and find form and purpose that are foreign to us. In effect, we remake ourselves. It is difficult to enact this attitude and way of working in the architectural academic setting.

Our authority over our work is challenged. Working with others exposes our personal thoughts and challenges us to make structures that can be inhabited by others. As Michael Benedict has written, "The very act of making, working to both gain an appreciation of the technical and poetic qualities of the things made, helps us to make a powerful case that architecture matters."[3] The work's authority is no longer that of the individual, but relies on broader concerns that are internal to the problem, such as the flexibility of form to allow for a diversity of uses, the durability of materials and assembly to endure the rain, heat, and wind, the impromptu use of the stage and potential other uses, the budget of $24,000 for materials for the 6,500-square-foot site, and the ability to share an idea among thirty-two students and a community. So often, the practice of architecture instead errs in its single-minded approach.

A new confidence emerges from the context of uncertainties as designers rely upon their own beliefs and values, reconfirming them in the act of building. I believe that such is the critical value of working in public ways. This park was conceived as being able to both shape and hold imaginative qualities. In this project we realized that a looser fit between the original intent and the final product was truer and more sincere to the needs of the site and the community.[4]

Through this kind of work, we have come to understand how critical it is to involve the community in the life of our projects; it is not possible for a design to be cared for and maintained without a community taking possession of it. This looser fit between architect, builder, and user suspends the design process to involve others in it early on, which provides the grounding for many to be involved and able to pursue long-term community making. The practice of designing and building allow others to be involved in tangible ways and establishes the place for long-term community making. Through the process of making this park, the community found an opportunity to reestablish their relationships to one another, to see the ugliness and invalidity of racist viewpoints and the opportunity to invent a new shared, public life. Involving many in the making of the park provided a powerful case that architecture does indeed matter.

Design studio class at opening day.

[3] Michael Benedikt, "Less for Less Yet: On Architecture's Value(s) in the Marketplace," *Designer/Builder* (October 1999): 21–26.

[4] The term "loose fit" helped to communicate the need for flexibility in designing that would allow for more options and a broader concern for form. By defining a working space in which others could participate, the project was truly shaped by multiple and conflicting viewpoints. A loose fit optimized the built forms by generosity, inclusiveness, flexibility, and the search for enduring and intangible qualities. "Loose fit" is a term that Professor Chris Risher of Mississippi State University often uses, although he would undoubtedly have a more eloquent definition of it.