

TRAVEL



Caleb Munson, left, leads visitors into the Red Barn, a studio space of Auburn University's Rural Studio in Newbern, Ala.



The Rural Studio built a fire station in Newbern and helped secure a truck so residents could get a break on the cost of homeowners insurance.



Cardboard walls of a dorm at the Rural Studio headquarters highlight the school's emphasis on innovative, inexpensive and often reused materials.



The Boys and Girls Club of Greensboro, Ala., a Rural Studio project, gives young people a safe and inspiring place to hang out.

SHELTER FOR THE SOUL

An architectural outpost in one of the country's poorest regions, where modern buildings dot Alabama's bucolic landscape.

Story by KERRI WESTENBERG • Star Tribune | Photos by JILLIAN BANNER • Special to the Star Tribune

The higher I climbed, the more I felt the tower tremble. And my legs, too. Below me, Spanish moss hung limp on leafless trees. The swamp in winter looked ghostly. Then a nervous moan cut through the birdsong. Not an apparition, it was my own voice. "It's great up here," a friend called encouragingly. I willed myself to the top platform of the Perry Lakes Park Birding Tower, a 100-foot-tall, open-air stairway that grows narrower and steeper with each successive landing. It seemed almost

like a funhouse distortion, except the arrangement actually helps keep the tower upright. I peered over the railing to look down on cypresses and tupelos below my feet. Warblers flitted among branches. I could see far across western Alabama's rolling farmland to distant hills. The view was sweet, but I was on a special architecture tour and had come to see the tower itself. The relative skyscraper, made of parts from a defunct fire tower purchased for \$10, draws birders and day-trippers to the once-abandoned nature park.

Who would have thought that four architecture students could design and build — by themselves — the literal and figurative high point of this reborn park in Perry County, one of Alabama's poorest? Just such transformative feats have been occurring regularly in Alabama's agricultural Black Belt since 1993, when the Rural Studio, part of Auburn University's School of Architecture, launched in Hale County.

See **RURAL STUDIO** on G4 ►

See more Rural Studio projects at startribune.com/travel.



FRANCISCO GUIRADO MARTIN GoLearnTo has group trips that combine learning Spanish with dance, like tango lessons in Granada.

Will your next vacation set your heart racing?

In a growing trend, more vacation packages merge fitness and fun.

By DIANE DANIEL • Washington Post

If your resolution to get in shape still hasn't quite jelled, consider an active vacation where fitness is factored into your trip. The options are all over the map, and they're becoming ever more energetic.

"The move from more passive and pampering wellness experiences to far more active — even extreme — wellness and fitness offerings is one of the biggest trends this year," said Beth McGroarty, research director at the nonprofit Global Wellness Institute, a Miami-based research and educational resource for the wellness industry. Here are some ideas, from lower-key to turbocharged.

The language of movement

If you like the idea of exercising both mind and body, try double dipping. GoLearnTo wants to fill your dance card with group trips that combine learning Spanish with some moves. Options include Spanish and Argentine tango or salsa lessons in Buenos Aires; salsa or flamenco in Barcelona or on Costa de la Luz in Spain; and flamenco dance lessons, with Spanish, in Granada or Seville

in Spain. There's even a Latin dance option in the Dominican Republic's Puerto Plata. Prices range from \$330 to \$450 for a week. If you don't have rhythm but you can put one foot in front of the other, check out a small-group offering from Responsible Travel that combines daily Spanish classes with three to five hours of walking a day — thankfully not at the same time. The setting is a language school situated at the See **ACTIVE** on G5 ►

IN THE DEEP SOUTH, SHELTER FOR THE SOUL

◀ **RURAL STUDIO** from G1

Since then, the Rural Studio has gained international renown for making stunning, inventive buildings for residents and communities in one of the most impoverished pockets of America. Hale County was the focus of James Agee and Walker Evans' 1939 book, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." My drive through the region suggests that the paucity they documented hasn't lifted, even now.

Yet here and there, I saw signs of renewal and hope — most often in the form of architecture with a modernistic sensibility, asymmetrical shapes and cutting-edge materials.

Rural Studio has by now produced more than 170 homes and community spaces. Among them are the pieces that helped revitalize Perry Lakes Park: the birding tower, a bridge, a pavilion and a trio of the most highly designed restrooms I've ever seen (one has two cantilevered walls that stretch out over the forest with a tree growing tall between them). Anyone can take a self-guided tour (the Rural Studio offers a map), or sign up for one of the monthly tours guided by students.

One day in February, Caleb Munson, a fifth-year student from Bolingbrook, Ill., drove my friends and me on a day-long whirlwind circuit of Rural Studio sites in his SUV, just grubby enough to suggest that it regularly hauls construction supplies.

"It was the social piece, the interaction with the community, that made me want to come to the Rural Studio," Munson said. "We learn a lot by living where we work. We get to know the people, the history. We can't make buildings that matter unless we talk to the people we build them for."

Citizen architects

Visionary architect and Auburn University Prof. Samuel Mockbee started the Rural Studio with his colleague D.K. Ruth as a way to provide hands-on training. Teams of about five students spend time with the locals to understand their needs, seek funds and donations for the projects, and then design and build from foundation to roof.

But Mockbee was driven by another motive: to instill a moral code in the profession and develop what he termed citizen architects, those who merge their work with public service. Mockbee, who received a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant in 2000 and died in 2002, believed that all people, regardless of income, deserve to enjoy good design.

"Everybody wants the same thing, rich or poor, not only a warm, dry room, but a shelter for the soul," he once said.

The Rural Studio homes certainly are soulful — and they usually replace decrepit shacks that lack running water, or rusting trailer homes.

It's long been surmised that Mockbee located his architectural experiment in the region

not only because of its residents' need for better housing, but also because building codes are lax. His students' creativity, unencumbered by regulations, could drive their designs.

In one home, 72,000 stacked carpet tiles form walls. A smokehouse was built with pieces of concrete from the Hale County Highway Department, with salvaged road signs as its roof. A community center, the Glass Chapel, welcomes

the sun through a series of car windshields, tiled and fastened together into a soaring wall. Rural Studio projects — which rely more on ingenuity than funds — often make use of donated or recycled materials.

Rolling through Hale County

Angular buildings, the architecture of a modern mindset, stood out amid dilapidated homes and sagging barns when my friends and I passed

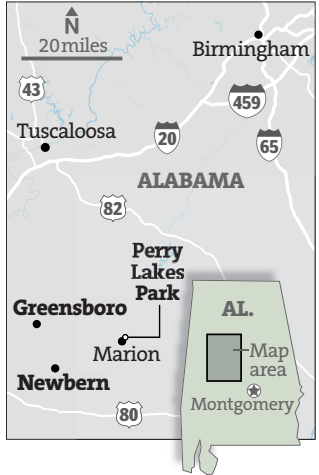
through Newbern, pop. 186, earlier that day on our way to our 8 a.m. tour.

The tour began at Morrisette House, a farmhouse that is the Rural Studio headquarters. Students in Birkenstocks and work boots walked across the lawn to the house for breakfast while we examined a row of pods, small fanciful dorms. Sporting sheet metal, one looked like a miniature Frank Gehry, the architect of the University of Minnesota's shining Weisman Art Museum. Another had walls of wax-infused cardboard, in an effort to keep the material from landfills (the wax makes it difficult to recycle).

We convened under a tall covered workspace where students make prototypes; the space itself was a student project. Then we piled into Munson's SUV, turned up a red-dirt road and spied three "20K" houses — each can be made with about \$10,000 worth of materials, with the rest of the \$20,000 to cover labor. The project is intended to provide affordable homes and construction jobs for locals.

The Rural Studio in recent years has shifted its focus from homes for the region's neediest individuals to community buildings that can impact the lives of more people, Munson said. That change in philosophy became apparent back in Newbern, with those contemporary buildings we had ogled on our morning drive.

We saw the minimalist Town Hall next to the sleek Newbern Fire Department space, the town's first new



IF YOU GO

For a self-guided tour, stop by Morrisette House, Rural Studio's main office in Newbern, Ala., for a map of its projects. It is open 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri. Guided tours are offered once a month. To arrange one, e-mail Natalie Butts-Ball at buttsnr@auburn.edu or call 1-334-624-4419. Out of respect for their clients, tours do not include stops at private homes. For more information, including suggestions on where to stay, go to ruralstudio.org and click on "Get involved."

public building in 110 years; it became a priority when residents faced rising insurance costs because their homes were so far from a fire station. At the Newbern Library, in the redesigned space of a former bank, an extra-deep window well lined with carpet and pillows invites readers to lounge.

Compared to the Rural Studio buildings, the Newbern

Mercantile, under a slumping and rusted awning, feels lost in time. The only store in town sells Moon Pies and pork cracklins from half-empty shelves. I bought a copy of the weekly "Greensboro Watchman" as the woman behind the counter — also, apparently, a reporter — asked for the spelling of our names. Our visit could be noted in the next edition.

At our lunch stop, a cafe in downtown Greensboro called the Stable, a curvy metal mesh awning meant to soften the Southern sun was the first clue that the storefront had been a Rural Studio remake, too.

In the afternoon, Munson brought us to a playground formed with 55-gallon galvanized drums, an animal shelter with an expansive arched roof and a ball field concession stand that looks like a flying saucer. The Lions Park Scout Hut nodded to the outdoors with walls made of thinnings, small trees felled to keep a forest healthy.

Later, we stopped at the Boys and Girls Club in Greensboro, another singular beauty. There, winter coats collected during a recent drive waited to be claimed by children. The jackets, representing their own communal kindness, reminded me of Mockbee.

"Help those who aren't likely to help you in return," he had challenged his students. "And do so even when nobody is watching."

That's an inspiring idea, but I'm glad I watched for a day.

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Clockwise from top left: The Newbern Library, created by the Rural Studio in Newbern, Ala., occupies an old bank building; a deep window well there makes a nice reading nook. The side walls of the Lions Park Scout Hut in Greensboro, Ala., are built with thinnings, small trees downed to ensure forest health. In sleepy downtown Newbern, architecture students take classes and design projects in the Red Barn. A tour stops at a 20K house, one of several made by Rural Studio students to be built with \$10,000 worth of materials and \$10,000 for construction workers. The hope is that the houses will provide shelter for needy families and help boost the economy in Alabama's impoverished Black Belt. A student work space inside the Red Barn.

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