

The Art of Removal: Studio South and the Politics of Engagement

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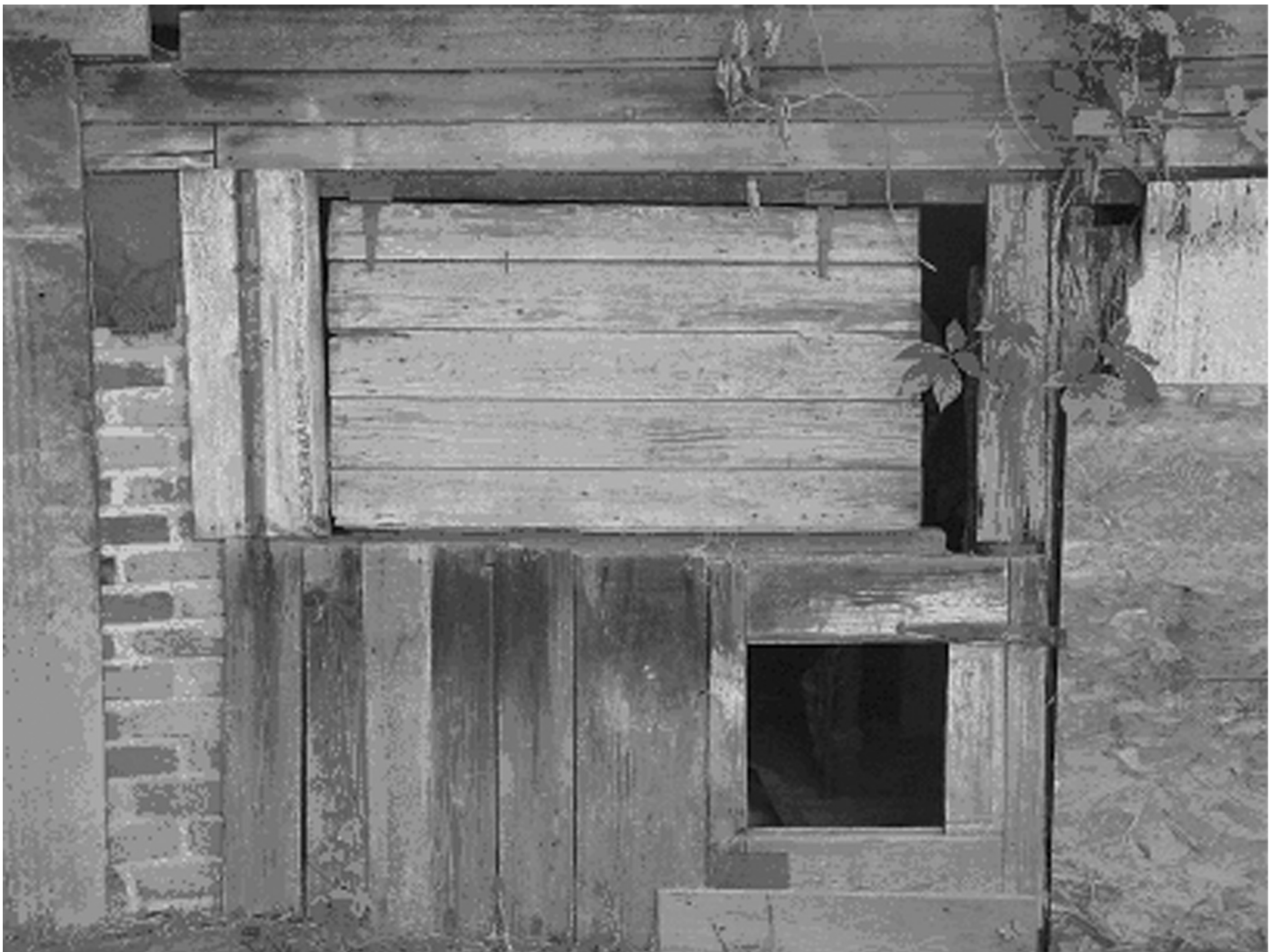


Fig. 1. Found assemblage on Keese Barn.

"The Nixon administration's chief attorney for civil rights said Tuesday that all South Carolina school districts must be fully integrated by next fall..."

— Excerpted from newspaper scrap found on site, Circa 1968

Design/build studios are not particularly unique in architectural educational today. We know them for their ability to give students a full-scale experience in design and construction. The programs offer different benefits from a focus on community service, sculptural form making, or materials experimentation, to simply true to life hands-on projects. In contrast, Studio South offers a design/build model with strong underpinnings in theoretical investigations. The Studio began with a lecture series entitled Southern Seminar, with the intention of exploring ideas of territory, culture, language, and architecture within the geographical condition known as South. From that base, the Studio developed with a mandate to engage the territory through full-scale interventions in communities that would reflect the questions and discussions of the seminar. Studio South's first project, The Keese Barn, conducts this research through a system of removal or disassembly.

FOUNDATION — SOUTHERN SEMINAR

In 2001, the faculty established a graduate level bi-monthly symposium titled Southern Seminar. The aim of this seminar was to create a common voice for the Graduate Program of the School of Architecture. The primary aim of the seminar was to direct students and faculty's attention to our immediate territory, and solicit a clear strategy with which to intervene in this territory.

Mission Statement for Southern Seminar:

Architecture establishes boundaries, limits, territories. In order to create a territory, we must be able to define those things that bind us. In the South, we have the opportunity to build on strong cultural underpinnings. It is not about nostalgia for some lost time or past glory. It is about seeing where we are. In order for our school to carve out a territory within an increasingly generic world, it is imperative to establish a territory within which to intervene, occupy and transgress. Language and poetics form the basis for an investigation and research of the territory of the South. It is our aim to foster in our students the importance of territory and the significance of discourse. As the sole school of architecture in South Carolina], it is our role to lead

discussions of this type and to send students into practice who understand and embrace their role within this discipline. The Southern Seminar will provide a platform for discourse in the complex and difficult pursuit of establishing a territory.

The notions of territorial engagement developed in the seminar allow us to envision a program that steps outside the classroom and engages the community and the profession under interdisciplinary topics.

Studio South brings architectural practice to the academic environment by engaging hands-on projects in small Southern towns and communities. It operates as an architecture office, performing the many complex tasks involved in practice, from permitting, documenting, managing, and designing to the less typical responsibilities of demolition and construction. In addition, Studio South is charged with academic interests of research and critical inquiry related to the topic of the South. All of this is layered with a further cause of public service. We engage projects that would otherwise not be feasible in practice, as the clients cannot afford professional services.

Because Studio South undertakes projects that affect the community directly, it must work closely with the people to understand them and their needs. In this way, we work towards effectively improving the existing conditions of the community. Studio South collaborates with community and practitioners to fulfill the goals of the academy and the profession.

Engaging an actual project requires a different set of design parameters than typically addressed in education. We have budgets and deadlines that have to be met as well as giving the community what they need and being able to communicate to them why we are designing the particular project the way we are. It is necessary to work with the community throughout the process to design appropriately and as a team. Yet interventions are guided by research and topics of the South. In this sense, the Studio comes to projects with a specific pedagogical frame and understands that pragmatic issues form only part of the goal.

PROJECT 2002: THE KEESE BARN

The first venture of Studio South is the disassembly of a historic but condemned structure, the Keese Barn, in a small African American community. The second part of the project is to design and construct a new structure for the site. The community sits at the edge of the established town of Pendleton, legally circumscribed by

the town borders, yet clearly outside of the Town's identity as a Pre-Civil War historic center. We have chosen to engage a community not traditionally served by the design profession for a project that has historic and socio-political meaning.

PROJECT TEAM

Client: The Pendleton Foundation for Black History and Culture, and the African American Community within the Town of Pendleton

Studio South: 2 Faculty, 15 first year graduate students, and 7 thesis graduate students

Consultants/Collaborators: Architects, Engineers, Construction Professionals, Faculty, and a Horticulturalist

Organizational Structure: Fluid Hierarchy—students rotate leadership responsibilities on a daily and/or task basis. All students take a lead on the construction site on a daily rotating schedule. All students take the lead on major tasks through each phase of the project.

CLIENT DESCRIPTION

The project that we have undertaken this year engages the students directly with the clients and collaborators through a hands-on building experience. By appropriating a professional office model, we set the structure and the process for the project; however, the discoveries made along the way through the academic model offer something quite different from typical office practice.

The community that Studio South serves is primarily comprised of family members of former slaves from area plantations. Recognition of this fact illuminates some of the mindset of the community. They have lived through and have familial memories of: Reconstruction, segregation and integration through the Civil Rights movement. Demographically the community is one of the poorest in the state. Events begun during the time of slavery have created a cycle of poverty and all its associated ills including, a meager infrastructure for community life. Nevertheless, the members of the community have actively endeavored to keep certain elements of community alive through a community center and the preservation of certain historic structures and sites such as the Keese Barn.

The structures serve as a reminder of a time when the community was vibrant and lively. Despite segregation laws, members of the community created businesses, built schools and libraries, attended church and gathered together to celebrate special events. The property was owned by Mr. Ben Keese but still operated as a community place as host to many of these functions. These are the memories of the site shared by the families who are our clients.

Over the decades since Mr. Keese passed away and the Pendleton Foundation for Black History and Culture took over the property, different groups made many efforts to save the structure, now known as the Keese Barn, or the Hundreds. Unfortunately, no effort succeeded in raising the funds necessary to save the Barn and the Town scheduled its immediate demolition. The Barn and site no longer functioned as the center of the community, except in memory.

SITE AND STRUCTURE

Mr. Ben Keese went to Philadelphia as a young man and learned the possibilities of entrepreneurship. He returned to his hometown and began a small business known as the Keese Store out of a one-story structure that he rented. Over time his business grew and Mr. Keese began to operate a café and rent apartment space in the structure. As the business grew, so did the building with Mr. Keese and his associates adding on with makeshift materials to the makeshift structure. In a major addition to his business and the structure, Mr. Keese built a second story and a third story attic on the existing one story structure. In this he housed an extremely profitable antique business (with antiques he returned to Philadelphia to purchase), attracting customers from the white and African American community. He effectively created one of the only racially integrated experiences for all members of community.

The Keese Store also served the African American community in other ways. The café is purported to be the only restaurant in town that would serve a hot, sit-down meal to people of color. Mr. Keese loaned money to individuals and families throughout the community who would have been unable to receive credit from any bank or business in town. He hired young people to work for him in the store and taught them the ways of a successful businessperson. In that capacity he served as a role model of an extremely successful African American man in a time that most people would have found that impossible. Finally, the site of the Keese Store itself became a focal point for the community, a place where local African Americans could gather freely, outside of

church, to celebrate community events and strengthen their ties to one another.

A THEORY OF DISASSEMBLY

A normative method for clearing the Keese Barn site would be to demolish the structure at the base with explosives and allowing the weight of the upper portion to break down the rest. If the goal were to salvage some materials, the normative method would be to begin at the top of the structure and strip all sheathing and structure floor by floor, down the building. However, our goals of engaging the community, learning about the history of the building, and studying spatial relationships lead us to the idea of disassembly.

Disassembly means to take something apart rather than destroying it through demolition. Our disassembly theory relates to many of the tenants of Modern art and architecture, revealing spatial relationships through depth and light. We have drawn on the work of Gordon Matta-Clark in his anarchitecture projects of the 1970's. In an interview with Liza Bear from *Avalanche*, December 1974, Matta-Clark and Bear have this exchange:

“LB: A cut is a simple thing if you see it in graphic terms only. What struck me about the Humphrey Street piece was how much information the cut seemed to reveal. GM-C: Yes, a cut is very analytical. It's the probe! The essential probe. The scaffold of sharp-eyed inspectors. Initially I also wanted to go beyond visual things. Of course, there are visual consequences to cutting, certainly to removal, but it was kind of the thin edge of what was being seen that interested me as much, if not more than, the views that were being created. LB: What do you mean exactly? GM-C: Well, for example the layering, the strata, the different thing that are being severed. Revealing how a uniform surface is established. The simplest way to create complexity was one of the formal concerns here, without having to make or build anything.”

Studying this work allowed us to begin to see more opportunities within the project.

We proposed that by selectively making cuts through the building, we could study and reveal space, politics, and construction. The resultant process is akin to a reverse collage, taking away in order to create new spatial compositions. We adopted strategies of cutting, stripping, and removal as negative spatial operations. However, in order to work safely within the structure,

the disassembly process also requires an assembly of reinforcing. This generates greater complexity in the project as the new structure informs the disassembly and creates new spaces.

This process also allows us to engage the history and social structure that gives shape to buildings. It places the process of building within the political and cultural arena. For the erasure of the objects of a culture (in this case the African American community) becomes a critical activity. The Studio must have as a guiding directive, an awareness of the political implications of act of removal. Therefore our operations become poetic as well as physical.

PHASE 1: STRATEGY AND DOCUMENTATION

Throughout the project, students were exposed to the complexities of the discipline and practice of architecture. Our responses to the issues were informed by responsibilities of our profession, the advice of our practicing collaborators, and the community surrounding the site. In operating as an office, Studio South followed the traditional steps of a project. Through defining the project, we realized we had not one, but two distinct yet intertwined projects for the site. The first project was to disassemble the existing structure while salvaging as much material as possible. The second project was to work with the community to design a new structure for the site that would meet their current and future needs. We quickly realized that the two projects could inform each other and that the new design would be most successful if we could allow it to evolve out of the disassembling of the older structure.

To implement this project, faculty first met with The Pendleton Foundation for Black History and Culture, owners of the Keese Barn site. We presented to the Foundation a disassembly strategy that would allow students and faculty to:

- Study and record a significant historic structure in the Upstate.
- Examine how issues of the South have been manifested in our community.
- Engage the community through real issues.
- Develop a design build program for the School of Architecture, rooted in the notion of territory. After our presentation the Foundation unanimously approved the project and provided financial support

for it. During the summer we also met with the Town of Pendleton, and with the University's legal council, to address the diverse issues involved with the project, such as safety, coordination, etc.

As the members of Studio South assembled, work began on gathering as much information about the site and client as possible. Students spent the first part of the fall semester studying the structure and gathering its history, as well as addressing a multiplicity of issues, such as safety, budget, permits, disposal, site security, procurement of material and equipment, etc. The Studio performed:

- Building and Site Documentation
 - Measured drawings
 - Photography and video
 - Land survey
- Historic Documentation and Research
 - Local History
 - Interviews
- Legal Issues Research
 - Permits and Zoning Regulations
 - Safety / OSHA
 - Materials Disposal / DHEC

During this process the building was thoroughly documented and photographed. The Studio consolidated all of this information in a series of log entries that will become part of the Foundation's archive. Part of this preliminary stage involved working with the community to gain trust and build relationships. Therefore, we planned an event called "The Ice Cream Social."

The Social served many purposes. Most importantly it allowed Studio members and community members to meet. The Studio deployed temporary structures on the site so that people could become familiar with the idea of a new occupation. The temporary structure gave students an opportunity to experiment with design and materials. And finally, the event gave the Studio an opportunity to gather more site/historical information through recorded interviews with people who remembered the active life of the site.

Once preliminary information had been gathered, the Studio began the early stages of planning for the disassembly of the structure. Our first concern was reinforcing the structure so that we could safely disassemble at a protracted pace. At this point, we brought in a building pathology expert to advise on the project. His interaction allowed us to become more realistic and specific about our methods. We also had to develop a realistic budget strategy. After we made several more attempts to design stabilization and reinforcing, we consulted with a design/build firm to determine the final solution. During this time we continued to gather historic/legal/site information, as well as beginning to procure the materials and equipment necessary to complete the project.

The Studio continued to focus on and develop the following aspects of the project:

- Social Interaction
 - Race Relations
 - Class Relations
- Community Issues
- Research
- Structure
- Budget
- Interviewing process and certification (IRB)
- Project Planning, Organization and Implementation
- Demolition
- Client Relations

PHASE 2: BRACING AND SHORING

After much planning and organization we were ready to initiate disassembly of the structure. Local businesses donated tools, equipment, and an 18-foot trailer for storage. Initial shoring of the building commenced and was completed in a week. The basic strategy was to build three stud walls within the existing structure that would be stacked to form three continuous lines of force through the building. Cross bracing completed the structural stability of the new intervention and disassembly started.

During this phase students worked with the community on design proposals, having several informal meetings. A Community Design Workshop was held to ask the community to express their ideas and opinions about the future of the site. The workshop brought out many different concerns from the people, all of which were documented and considered by the studio. In order to evaluate and consolidate all the ideas gathered from the workshop, Studio South held a twenty-four hour charrette. This effort resulted in a final design proposal in the Design Development phase that would be further developed during construction.

A final presentation for the community was held. During this meeting Studio South presented a Master Plan for the area: Town Square, Keese Barn, Community Center and Silver Spring's Church. This plan synthesized all the ideas presented in the Community Design Workshop; it envisioned a greater interaction between these historic sites in an attempt to present a cohesive structure in which the Keese Barn is a central element. Students also presented the building history of the Keese Barn. Throughout the process of disassembly we discovered elements and traces of the original structures on this site. This history, along with the ideas brought forth by the community, was incorporated in the final proposal for the Keese site. The final proposal called for a community living room. This space, marked by a hearth, becomes the center for community gathering. It recalls the original use of the site, where the community would congregate around a fire.

PHASE 3: CUTTING AND REVEALING

The work schedule developed early in the semester assured a rigorous and safe disassembly process. Student's chose a daily job-captain (who was in charge of opening and closing the site) divided themselves into groups, rotating chores, from stud building, removal and clean up to photographic and video recording. While the disassembly followed certain rules and guidelines to assure safe working conditions, our disassembly plan deviated from a standard demolition process. Normally such a process would begin at the top of a structure and work it's way down the building, removing sheathing and then structure. However, in order to learn the most about the building and the construction techniques used in it's making, we strategically selected areas of the building to begin work.

We made an initial intervention in the building to remove dropped ceilings in one section. This revealed the fact that the building had been a one-story structure in its first rendition. Fueled by this discovery, we

moved to another area of the building to take a 12 inch slice through all sheathing, flooring and roofing to begin to reveal a live section of the building. Each subsequent area of removal was guided by the discoveries made in the previous intervention. An additional revelation came through the students' impulse to light the structure at night for passer's by to view and also enliven the site. The strategic material removal that we had been doing by day became a dramatic event at night when lit from within.

OVERLAY: RESEARCH

Southern Seminar helped address theoretical issues, territorial practices, and other concerns related to the South and to "south" as a general concept. It also helped Thesis students focus and develop their research agenda. Thesis students were required to use the Keese Barn and its site "the Hundreds," as their thesis topic.

Seven of the students involved in the project are in the process of completing their final year of professional architectural studies, culminating in an individual thesis project. Their individual studies inform and are informed by, the Keese Barn site. The thesis projects fold into one another and into the general group project through the intervention on the site. Thesis research forms the critical base for the new project to be constructed on the site. Topics addressed by the thesis students are as follows:

The first thesis project concentrates on the issue of land tenure and property as it relates to race. It addresses legal issues affecting architecture and the production of space. These issues are linked to segregation laws and practices. It recognizes legal acts as significant players of spatial production in the South.

The second thesis project studies issues of programming in emblematic community buildings. The Keese Barn is compared with Farmers Hall, the seat of power and meeting place for slaveholders. Both structures offer a clear spatial distribution and programmatic arrangement reflecting the societies they served.

The third thesis project deals with ideas of improvisation. The Keese Barn is an example of African American building techniques in the South. Like many structures of its time, it was largely built with scrap materials. This building method prompted the student to engage the notion of improvisation as a way to understand local techniques of construction.



Fig. 2. Thesis research: segregation around the site.



Fig. 3. Thesis research: building comparison.

The fourth thesis project engages the notion of architectural and literary narratives. It understands the site of the Keese Barn, the Hundreds, as a place that contains many stories. Supported on oral histories captured through interviews with the community the study suggests a juncture between architectural narratives, manifested through spaces, materials and construction techniques, and literary passages of seminal Southern texts.

The fifth thesis project studies the notion of craft in contrast to industrial techniques and methods. It attempts to understand craft as a building block of community and the relation of craft to the community and practitioner it creates.

The sixth thesis project engages environmental sustainability as manifested in provincial vernacular constructions. The study concentrates on regional typologies such as the "Growth House," the "Dog Trot," and the "I



Fig. 4. Thesis research: improvisation.



Fig. 5. Thesis research: narrative and architecture.



Fig. 6. Thesis research: craft.

House" to understand how past technologies can influence contemporary building practices.



Fig. 7. Thesis research: vernacular influences.

The seventh thesis project explores memory in architecture. It studies how society creates an image of itself by investing buildings with social significance. The study explores the role of architecture in the creation of the collective image of the South. It envisions architecture as an engine that promotes a greater understanding and recollection of the past.



Fig. 8. Thesis research: memory.

CONCLUSION

Studio South offers a pedagogical framework for exploring the overlaps between community, practice, and the academy. By addressing theoretical issues of territory and the South, it brings greater depth to a design/build process and mandates the engagement of community. The process of disassembly, as theory, practice, and strategy, allows us to operate on an existing structure to reveal hidden relationships, form new spaces, and activate a static site. It allows us to slowly investigate a historic site and learn about the politics and community that created it as well as the architectural implications of such a project.