

## Drawing the Obvious, Seeing the Hidden: Learning with an empathic pencil

### A TEACHER'S HUNCH

Drawing is a way for the hand to help the mind comprehend what the eye sees but does not understand. Home is a concept that physically and ethologically presents itself through the experiences, additions, arrangements, repairs, furniture, memories, and photographs of a homeowner. The individual defines home – the architect designs the house. Teaching architecture students this concept is challenging when socio-cultural differences exist between student and client. When students see what is beautiful about other ways of living, only then are they able to design an appropriate house for a client.

Robert Lamb Hart, author of *A New Look at Humanism – in Architecture, Landscapes, and Urban Design*, writes that, humans judge buildings as they do other humans, based on physical character and appearance. Humans like to relate their own personal values to the new places they experience. This frame of reference helps the individual situate his or herself in society and better understand their surroundings.<sup>1</sup>

On that ground, humans will likely judge another person based on the style, condition, and size of the building in which they live. If a student misjudges a client's way of living, the most appropriate new house design cannot develop. Empathy, the ability for one to understand how someone else feels, is an important trait for an architecture student to learn. Placing one's self into another's position supports intuitive architectural solutions. Carefully and lovingly drawing a home builds empathy in students – utilizing their hands to open their minds.



**Figure 1.** Christenberry, William, "House and Blue Bar Bells, Newbern, Alabama, 1982." In *House and Home: Spirits of the South*, by Jock Reynolds. (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1994), pg. 60.

This hunch is the inspiration for an assignment to introduce empathy into an otherwise could-be patronizing and judgmental activity – designing and building homes for individuals living below the national poverty line. Documented by this paper is a classically contemporary drawing exercise third-year architecture students completed as a way to understand what “home” means to their client.



Figure 2. Photograph of Mrs. Zee’s trailer.

### DRAWING ON EMPATHY

In a 1994 exhibit entitled *House and Home: Spirits of the South*, Jock Reynolds curates work by three southern artists: Max Belcher, Beverley Buchanan, and William Christenberry. In the exhibition catalog, of the same name as the exhibit, Rebecca Walker writes of the work in the exhibit,

“... ways of living and transforming space become precious rite of tradition. From the specific laying out of a room to the adding of a porch or garden, from the placing of a favorite item --of the deceased on his grave to the daily sweeping of the front yard; when these patterns are recognized, repeated, and revered, so are the makers and keepers of those patterns.”<sup>2</sup>

The photographs, paintings, and sculptures of these artists celebrate a way of life instead of a structure by recording the evidence of the care and utility of simple buildings. An empathetic view of the people who lived in the buildings develops though a careful look. Walker goes on to describe what the photographs depict about the people who built and took care of them: the hand-crafted nature of crooked roofs, a sense of community through flowers in the yard, and adaptability by rooms on rooms of additions.<sup>3</sup> Each patch, painted detail, and adjustment shows a culture of inventiveness and self-reliance.

William Christenberry’s photography is both suggestive of life in Hale County, Alabama and architectural in nature (see figure 1). Christenberry’s family is from Hale County but he was raised in Tuscaloosa, a city north of Hale County and home to the University of Alabama. There, he studied painting, taught, and began his career

as an artist. The orthographic view points of the buildings he photographs speak of the life lived in the building; evidence of time and weathering highlight function and modification. Although worn, the buildings are proud of their usefulness. Understanding the life lived in the building creates a graceful picture of the occupant. Christenberry, himself, is not from this impoverished part of the county, nor did he grow up in a house like the ones he photographed, yet, through his hand as an artist, empathy develops in the viewer.

Does the artist gain empathy as they work, or must they first poses empathy in order to convey empathy? As with Christenberry, this paper suggests that the artist (an architecture student) needs no prior cultural or personal knowledge of someone’s life in his or her home to develop and convey empathy. It is possible – through careful study – to learn empathy.

The International Journal of Education & the Arts supports this assertion. Riddett-Moore describes how “aesthetic engagement can encourage empathy and caring” in art classrooms.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing there are different ways of life is an act of perception. With students, if the

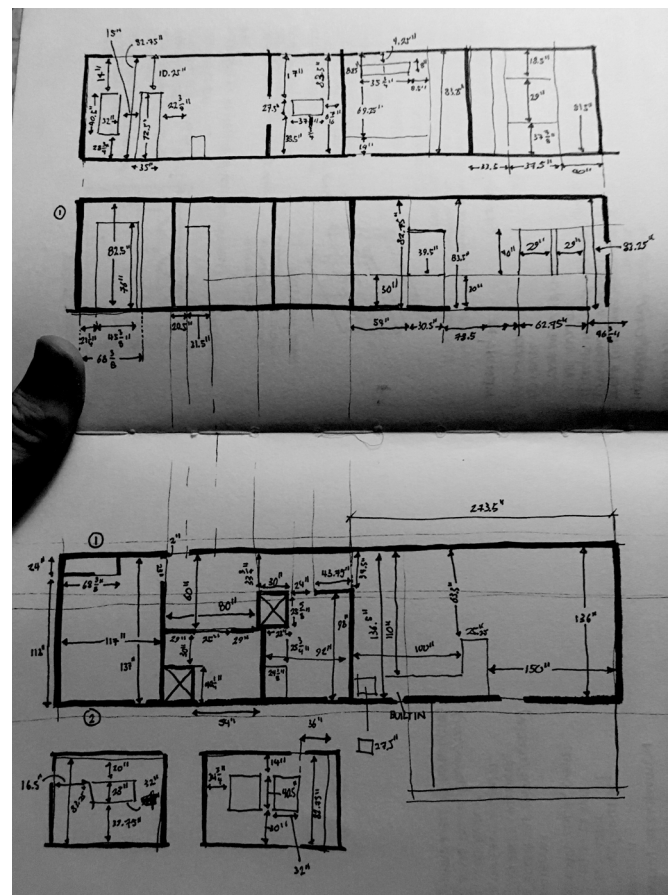


Figure 3. Student notes from carefully measuring and documenting Mrs. Zee’s existing trailer.

teacher approaches this perception with care and ethic, the students accept the alternative belief, becoming more tolerant and endeavoring to understand the other person. The author explains, "aesthetics as a practice in caring is about being attune to relationships. . . . In this lesson, an awareness of others' physical presence invites students to explore a new definition of relationship and ultimately to imagine new relationships and ways of life."<sup>5</sup>

Through the careful documentation of everyday objects, materials, shadows, patches, and arrangements, students are able to critically, yet respectfully study their client without judgment or bias. Through drawing, empathy develops in the student because they have considered a new way of living and associated it with their own. As a result, the viewer is able to learn as much and a more appropriate house design emerges for the client.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

Auburn University's Rural Studio is an undergraduate design-build program located in Hale County, Alabama. In one academic year, two groups of third-year architecture students build one house as part of an on-going research project about affordable rural housing. This continuation of their education from main campus supports the students' comprehension of materials, light wood-frame construction, and processes of construction management. It also offers a client-centric experience that allows students to participate in the fifteen-year 20K House Project Rural Studio endeavors to develop as a way to provide a model for rural affordable housing to the region.

In fifteen years, over twenty 20K House models of design have been built. Of these, three have surfaced as the most suitable one-bedroom options for further development as the Product Line Homes - Versions 8, 9, and 10. As the Studio continues to develop the 20K House Project, research continues at several levels. Each year fifth-year architecture students design and build a new model

that addresses a particular research topic such as aging in place, alternative storage solutions, or overall improved energy efficiency. The third-year students build an iteration of the Product Line Homes for a local community member. Their iteration incorporates solutions to problems they identify during an analysis of previously built homes with client feedback, and contribute to the body of knowledge Rural Studio is growing on durable, beautiful, and efficient construction details for affordable rural housing.

### PURPOSE AND LIMITS

The assignment described in this paper serves two purposes: to build empathy in students as a professional skill and as a way to customize a prototypical home for a real client. Empathy, the ability for one to understand another's feelings or situation, is an important skill for an architect, and interpreting a client's needs and translating them into useful built space is what an architect does. Building empathy in architecture students is difficult without an actual client. A strength of Rural Studio is that students come from a variety of places and backgrounds. Full immersion into the community is an important aspect of learning. However, students who attend the program are often unprepared to interact with a client and some are unfamiliar with the socio-economic backgrounds of their new client. Given this opportunity at Rural Studio, this assignment developed from need, rather than intention, meaning no pre-tests were given to students to try and understand their level of empathy before and after the project. The measurement of success was the outcome of the iteration of a Product Line Home. See figure 8, Mrs. Zee's completed home.

Simply put, it is this teacher's hunch that students learned to be more empathic. Although this weakens the assertion, it gives a starting point for future iterations of the assignment,

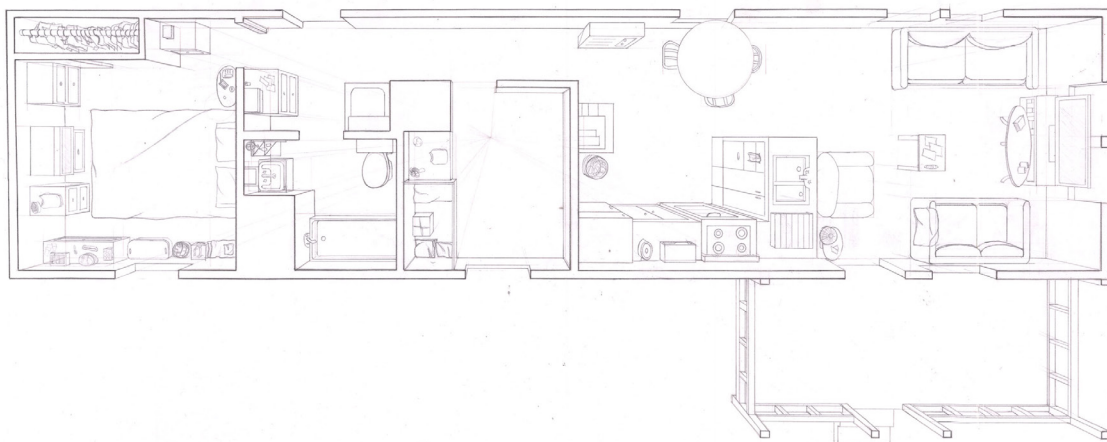
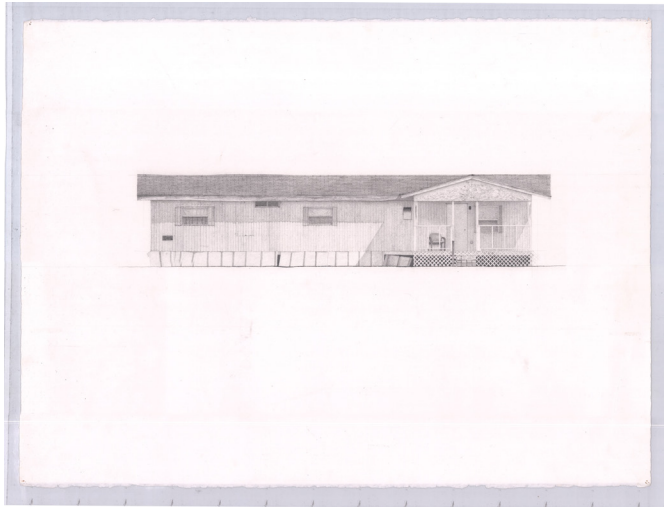


Figure 4. Hand drafted plan perspective of Mrs. Zee's trailer and her belongings. Student work by Henry Savoie.



**Figure 5.** West elevation of Mrs. Zee's Trailer. Hand drafted, pencil on arches. Work by

now under development for the fall of 2019. The measurement for success for this paper is an appropriately altered iteration of a Product Line Home for the client, since this was the intention of the initial project.

*MORE SIMILAR THAN DIFFERENT*

Before meeting the client, students engage in discussions about what they expect conditions to be like for their client and why a new house is necessary. Faculty ask them to withhold bias, judgment, and comparison to their own experience. The belongings of their client are valuable, even if they would not value them equally. The students' main objective is learning about how people live in houses, space requirements, and a new culture.

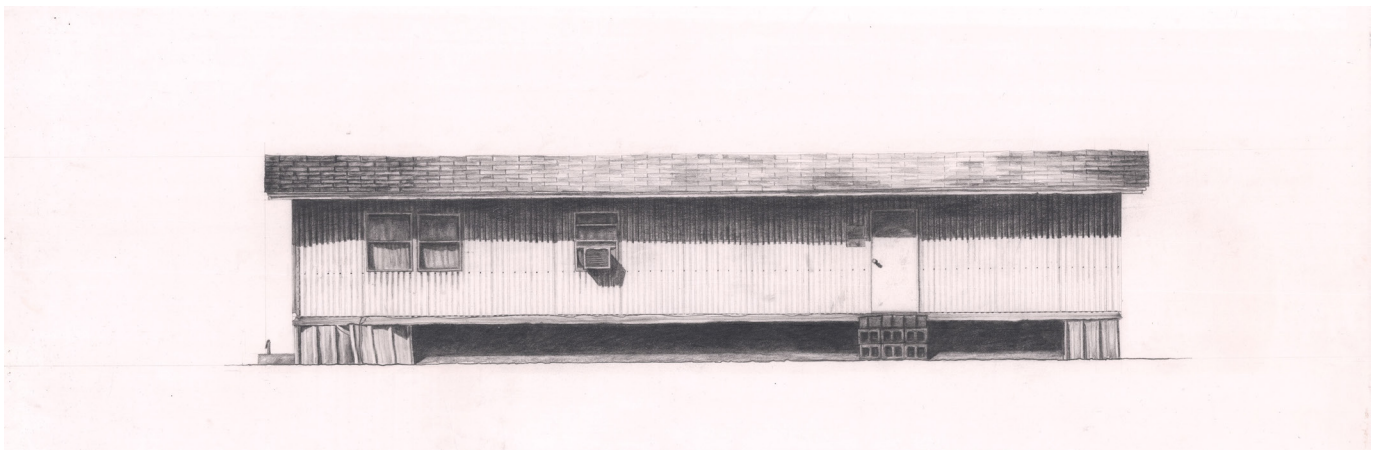
To further process the discussions students carefully measure and photograph their client's existing house during an introductory assignment. See figure 3. Students document each household item in the same manner. By studying the individual object and its usefulness, seemingly unimportant background objects become precious. Students have the opportunity to ask the client what is important and what will go into the new home. In this way, students learn about the space needs of kitchen appliances, hanging clothes, a vacuum cleaner, or special furniture – items their future clients will possess as well. The stuff of life becomes real. The opportunity to learn this from a real client is invaluable to a young architect.

Careful documentation of the existing house becomes carefully crafted orthographic elevations and section perspectives drawn in pencil. See figures 4, 5, 6, and 7. Students then meticulously render each elevation, selecting objects associated with the home and client to include, like her prized pick-up, wind chimes, and porch chairs. Students bring rendering skills to Rural Studio they learn from core courses on main campus.

**CLASSICALLY CONTEMPORARY**

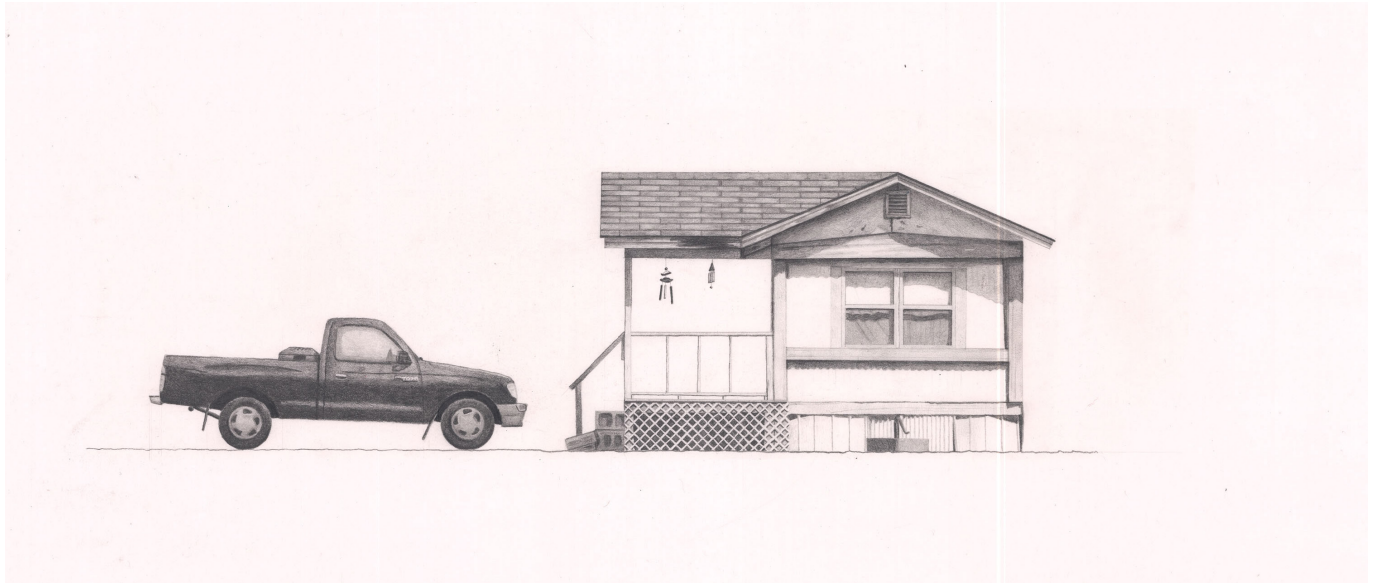
Mrs. Zee (as she'll be called) lived in her trailer for 42 years. Although well taken care of, her trailer appeared to be old and substandard. As part of a design-build studio students built Mrs. Zee a new house in the months that followed the drawing assignment. Understanding her former home was crucial to honoring her way of living and to providing her with the most suitable new house design.

Drawing the obvious to see the hidden, students used classic methods of representation to study and understand contemporary socio-political issues surrounding poverty and affordable housing. They measured and photographed Mrs. Zee's trailer to draft orthographic elevations. Textures and shadows, classically rendered



**Figure 6.** East elevation of Mrs. Zee's Trailer. Hand drafted, pencil on arches. Student work by Will Hall.





**Figure 7.** South elevation of Mrs. Zee's Trailer. Hand drafted, pencil on arches. Work by Reagan Eiland

in pencil, depict material, passage of time, the resourcefulness of the client, and the important of everyday objects. A page of Arches hot-press watercolor paper provided a precious surface to study proportion of the trailer and practice composition on the page. When drawn in this light, students are able to recognize and relate their own personal values to Mrs. Zee's way of life.

In this example, the classic modes of architectural education combine with contemporary issues facing our neighbors, and (ideally) result in empathetic designers ready for the varied socio-cultural circumstances they will face after graduation. Separating the classic and the contemporary is not always necessary; using the tools of both skill sets reinforce thoughtful, skilled, and prepared architects. Through meticulous documentation of the obvious, students learned hidden things about Mrs. Zee. They were able to anticipate her needs in a new house and design modifications for her lifestyle. Students recognized similarities to their own routines and forged bonds with their new client through empathy.

The drawings they produce become part of their presentation to reviewers and a way to discuss Mrs. Zee lifestyle with people who have not met her. Students recognize their own lives in how Mrs. Zee lives, and the gap between student and client closes. As a gift to Mrs. Zee the students compiled the drawings of her former home into a framed composition. At the grand opening of her new house, they gave her this gift. The beautiful renderings of her old house now hang in a special place in her new home.

#### **WHAT DRAWING TEACHES**

What can a drawing of a building teach someone about a person? When carefully studying arrangements and patterns, a routine

becomes apparent. In the north elevation of Mrs. Zee's trailer home, chairs on the porch confirm that she uses her porch daily to talk to her sister and watch the neighborhood. The proximity of her pick-up truck to the front stairs depicts someone with troubled knees – a fact about Mrs. Zee. In the section perspective of Mrs. Zee's trailer home, a small folding table by her recliner indicates that she takes most of her meals in the living room, and a curio cabinet in the corner confirms space needed for her elephant collection. Numerous chests of drawers indicate a need for storage in her new house. A washer – but no dryer – shows that Mrs. Zee drove to a laundry mat each week to dry her clothes on laundry day.

These drawings document a story of a life that an interview glosses over. Connecting routines, likes, and habits of the client helps the architecture student choreograph appropriate spaces in design work. The empathetic analysis resulted in specific architectural solutions for Mrs. Zee that are evident in the final house construction.

#### **MRS. ZEE'S NEW HOUSE**

Although Mrs. Zee's new house is designed to accommodate many lifestyles as part of Rural Studio's 20K House Project, slight modifications to this version were a result of what the students learned about Mrs. Zee through this analysis. A front porch was non-negotiable for the new house, and a ramp makes it easier for Mrs. Zee to get into her house now. Lower by approximately sixteen inches; an alternative raised slab foundation reduced the ramp length by sixteen feet. She parks her pick-up directly in front of the ramp. Two closets – a first for houses like this at Rural Studio – organize her hanging clothes and cleaning supplies. Wall space for additional chest of drawers was

necessary – one of which is a television stand in the bedroom – as the interior section perspective indicates. Space for a new dryer in the bathroom saves Mrs. Zee a trip to the laundry mat each week.

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### CONCLUSION

Although the student renders the house to near photographic perfection, the choice of objects highlighted in each drawing tells a story a picture cannot. Compared to the actual photograph of her trailer (see fig. 2), the drawings convey a sense of humanity with which the viewer associates to his or her own experience. Everyone has a memory of sitting on a front porch with a family member. Everyone can identify with needing more storage. Everyone understands the burden of maintaining a property. When the drawing is precious to the student, the subject of the drawing becomes precious in turn. Mrs. Zee is beloved by the students and she adores them. Through drawing the obvious, new relationships were strengthened by seeing the hidden.

3 *ibid.*

4 Riddett-Moore, K. (2009). Encouraging empathy through aesthetic engagement: An art lesson in living compositions. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 10(Portrayal 2). Retrieved [Oct. 1, 2018] from <http://www.ijea.org/v10p2/>.

5 *ibid.*



Figure 8. Mrs. Zee's new home. Photograph by Timothy Hursley.

### REFERENCES

1 Hart, Robert Lamb, and Albrecht Pichler. 2016. A new look at humanism. In *architecture, landscapes, and urban design*. Oro Editions.

2 Walker, Rebecca, "The Initiate's Journey," in *House and Home: Spirits of the South*, by Jock Reynolds, (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1994), pg 15.