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Rebuilding the Dream

The School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture is changing the way the world is built, one project at a time.



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For decades, buying a house has been one of the great rituals of living the American dream. Nothing signifies upward mobility like a white picket fence and a new address. Yet in the U.S. this dream is increasingly out of reach for the average person. According to a recent Harvard study, home

prices have jumped a shocking 47 percent since early 2020 and 115 percent since 2010. Homelessness surged to record highs last year, and the U.S. needs an estimated 7 million more homes to house everyone that needs shelter.

So how do we design and build more resilient, affordable communities? Auburn's School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture (APLA) is teaching future generations of architects how to create communities that will stand the test of time—and changing economic conditions.

APLA comprises four programs within the College of Architecture, Design and Construction (CADC)—architecture, interior architecture, environmental design and landscape architecture. The curriculum equips graduates with more than just classroom knowledge. Before entering the workforce, students are primed with hands-on experience in rural and urban populations.



Blueprint for an Emerging Workforce

Dawn Finley, former professor of architecture and director of graduate studies in the School of Architecture at Rice University, was appointed as CADC's dean and McWhorter Endowed Chair in July of last year.

"The way you practice architecture, the way you practice landscape architecture, is vastly different than it was 50 years ago," said Finley. "[We're interested in teaching] students to understand that they're not only operating in the moment, but they're part of a continuum. They're part of a dynamic history that's influenced by technology and politics and environmental conditions. They are participating in that, and they have a voice in really becoming leaders and stewards of the built environment."

These skills can't be borrowed or bought—they must be earned. Hands-on opportunities allow for that.

Justin Miller '99, professor of architecture and head of APLA, believes an emphasis on engaging the world around them as architects, and as members of communities, is a vital aspect of APLA. Study abroad programs are one way to encourage this engagement.

"[We go to] Barcelona. We go to Denmark. We go to Japan. We go to Switzerland. Then you come back, and those experiences change the way you see your own context. There's a shift in perspective that occurs when one returns," Miller said.

Buying a plane ticket and readying one's passport aren't the only options for applied learning.



Urban Studio, a teaching and outreach program within Auburn architecture, is located in downtown Birmingham. Founded in 1991, the program admits third- and fifth-year students studying architecture and interior architecture. This opportunity allows for faculty to show, rather than tell, students about issues within urban communities and provide them with the chance to make an impact within a metropolitan area.

“Urban Studio has always been a way of allowing students to look at the city through a series of systems: looking at infrastructure, looking at historical precedents, looking at speaking with community members and really thinking about urban problems more broadly,” said Finley. “A lot of times, students are working with practitioners in the city. They’re working with nonprofit organizations in the city, and they’re working with city agencies.”

The Birmingham-based program found a new, permanent home this past year within the **historic Hood-McPherson Building**. This six-story, 44,000-square-foot building has a rich architectural heritage—a fitting location for students to learn about how to improve the urban landscape surrounding them.





Rural Studio, established in 1993, focuses more on building sustainable, resilient communities for underserved populations in West Alabama. The knowledge that students glean from these rural areas can be implemented into all kinds of future projects.

The studio's research concentrates on the long-term wellbeing of communities, enabling students to explore practices like home access and affordability, access to clean drinking water and the economic value of using local resources like timber.

“They’re actually working within the region and finding that there are critical issues that they are working on that are extractable and applicable to other parts of the world,” Finley said.

With more than 30 years of student participation, Urban Studio and Rural Studio have developed meaningful projects that impact people's lives.

“There are graduates of these programs who have built buildings,” said Miller. “[With] students that go to other architecture schools, it might be five to seven years after they graduate before they see their first project actually realized. That’s kind of remarkable in my mind.”

Doing Things by Hand

David Frazier '11 grew up a mere thirty minutes from Auburn and comes from a long line of Auburn graduates. At first, he was dead-set on studying architecture farther away from home. Now, Frazier can't imagine having gone anywhere else.

“Ultimately, the schools I was considering weren't even ranked as highly as Auburn's architecture program. I think it was both the legacy aspect and the strength of the College of Architecture, Design and Construction that ultimately made me decide to go to Auburn,” Frazier said.

Now the founder and principal of his own architectural and interior design firm in New York, Frazier is applying what he learned at Auburn to a number of high-profile projects.

Frazier was named the 2024 Southeast Designer of the Year by Atlanta Decorative Arts Center and Veranda magazine. His work has been featured in Architectural Digest, Elle Décor, Town & Country, The New York Times and many more publications. But if not for working at Auburn's Rural Studio, he might never have reached this point.

In his senior year, Frazier and three others helped build a new town hall for Newbern, Ala.

Physically constructing the building was one formidable challenge, while securing material donations for the project was another. Frazier says he still credits his problem-solving proficiency to these experiences—which he now channels into his eponymous firm.

“It was something that put me outside of my comfort zone and it challenged me in a way that I think would not have happened within the traditional classroom or the traditional studio environment. That’s where it was so invaluable to me,” Frazier said.

The completed project included 8-inch square heavy timber cypress for the building's interior finish, insulation and exterior finishes, as well as a roof structure with deep overhangs to help with ventilation. In 2013, the Newbern Town Hall won the 2013 Arch Daily Building of the Year Award.

“To be 21 and tasked with creating a community space that people will be able to use is amazing. They will vote there and they'll host functions there. To have that sort of impact in a community and for the Rural Studio is amazing. And for Auburn to give us that opportunity, at that age, to be able to create something and see it through the design and development phase and through construction? Even to this day, I can't believe that I had that opportunity,” said Frazier. “It was so empowering—like, if we can do this, you have that feeling that you could accomplish whatever you wanted or whatever you put your mind to.”

Designing a New Workforce

Out-of-state APLA students, such as environmental design major Claire Burke from St. Charles, Ill. and landscape architecture major Carson

Crooms from Vero Beach, Fla. migrated all the way to Auburn to join the school's programs.

Burke first fell in love with Auburn's campus and community. Then, while on a CADC tour, she learned of the APLA program and fell even harder.

"A lot of the studio spaces are all open, so you can watch people work. That's something that I really enjoyed and I cared about, so seeing that was amazing," said Burke. "I think seeing that community within the CADC itself, as well as within Auburn University as a whole, drew me toward it as an out-of-state student."

Now a senior, Burke feels prepared to take on life after graduation. Her environmental design classes are multidisciplinary, featuring graphic design lessons as well as architecture. The faculty focuses on providing students with a diverse assortment of skills, then having them apply them to real-life scenarios in the classroom.

"Every single class is an opportunity to gain experience, an opportunity to tailor it to what you're interested in. [That] is super important for going out into the field, that you have experience designing things that you're interested in."

Claire Burke

"One of my classes that I'm in right now—entrepreneurship studies with environmental design—we are working on a brand collaboration with Patagonia. It's super cool that we're making a pop-up. It's having that real

application, I think, that is what's helping all of us be prepared as well," Burke said.

Working with an array of design disciplines allows students to hone in on specific career paths they may want to pursue within their major.

Carson Crooms, who will be graduating this spring, also praises the way her landscape architecture courses' lesson plans are multifaceted, especially within her studio classes.

“My studio classes are fantastic because make us very well-rounded in the sense we do physical modeling, we do a lot of outside work, a lot of digital representat which are all things that are going to be applicable in the field.”

Carson Croom

According to Simon Yendle '90, assistant vice president of Planning, Design and Construction at Auburn, the balance of students to faculty within each of the programs creates great opportunities for connection.

“The faculty at the college really care about their students,” said Yendle. “[There is a] good ratio between the students and the faculty, and they really teach you how to think.”

Finley also attributes much of the school's success to students' opportunities to work closely with the faculty.

“Within APLA, you're not just a kind of faceless, nameless student. You are really a known quantity. You are an individual. And faculty work very

closely with you, start to understand you and build a kind of collaborative rapport with you in terms of your own interests and your strengths as a designer,” Finley said.

Looking Toward the Future

After a 20-year hiatus, the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture was reintroduced to the school in 2021—and remains the only one available in Alabama. This spring, the rapidly growing bachelor’s program will be introducing its first design-build program.

With National Architecture Week happening every April, the whole of Auburn University’s community can celebrate the research, scholarship and contributions derived from APLA students and faculty.

“I’m just really excited about the range and ambition of the research work that’s happening from faculty, and I’m hoping to find ways to sort of buttress that and allow students to work more on research along the way as well,” said Finley.

The countless alumni that contribute to the advancement of APLA, whether they return as faculty or become donors, are evidence of the gratitude of the graduates.

David Frazier and his wife, Holloway Payne ’14, created The Holloway Payne and David Frazier Study Abroad Endowed Scholarship to celebrate the relationships they cultivated while participating in APLA’s former study abroad program in Rome, Italy.

After Justin Miller completed his undergraduate studies in architecture and interior architecture, he received a Master of Architecture from Harvard University. Unable to stay away from Auburn, Miller reengaged with APLA 18 years ago and has remained here since.

“There’s this kind of connection there that I think is really rare nowadays,” said Frazier. “I graduated in 2011, and still, my very best friends are people that I was in the program with—I don’t know if that exists in a lot of other places. I think what makes [APLA] so special are the relationships that are formed within the educational environment.”

By Ella Walton

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