

# RURAL VOICES

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Dear Friends,

Every small town in rural America has something worth celebrating: their historic buildings, the natural environment that surrounds them, or the people whose stories make the town great. With the coronavirus pandemic and a pattern of economic divestment from small towns, it can feel more and more challenging for local organizations to invest in design. Yet we have seen that design not only has the potential to bring together residents in a new way and cultivate a sense of pride in a place, but it is achievable for small and rural communities too.

Design for the public interest takes on many forms, from Main Street redevelopment to landscape architecture to historic preservation. In all the rural towns HAC has worked with and featured in this issue of *Rural Voices*, there is also an element of engaging the community to create a shared vision for all town residents. Partnering with local artists to paint a mural or build a coalition for a local creative economy not only brings more beauty into public spaces, it can draw economic investment to the town. Ultimately, local citizens are tapping design to create a sense of place—that's what creative placemaking is all about.

Finally, design and creative placemaking are tools in the racial equity work HAC and our partners have taken on for 50 years. Lifting the rural voices of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other overlooked rural people leads to more authentic rural narrative. And that's good for all of us. We hope this issue of *Rural Voices* will spark conversations and ideas about what a sense of place in your town or community can look like—for all.

HAC's foray into rural design has only solidified our housing work, while broadening the horizons for us and for our partners. Moreover, HAC's founding documents cite the need for thoughtful design that engages the low-income rural people and communities that we've long served. Support from the National Endowment for the Arts makes it possible to carry out this charge.

Sincerely,

**Maria Luisa Mercado**  
Chair

**Laura Buxbaum**  
Vice Chair

**David Lipsetz**  
President and CEO

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# Boosting the Rural Creative Economy

Congressional Arts Caucus  
Chair weighs in on what works  
in her home state – and beyond.

*By Representative Chellie Pingree*

The arts can be transformative for rural communities. Coming from Maine – both the most rural state in the country and home to some of the country's preeminent artists and arts organizations – I see the power of the creative economy every day. Rural America has long faced challenges, many of which we've seen exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As rural communities look to recover and rebuild, I believe there are powerful opportunities provided by investment in the arts.

It's a common misconception that arts and culture are just for big cities – but with the right support, a vibrant creative economy can take root anywhere. Whether it's because of a loss of manufacturing jobs or volatile agricultural markets, so many rural areas could use the economic jumpstart. The arts stimulate tourism with performance venues, museums, and festivals, allow for a more well-rounded education for our kids, and strengthen quality of life to attract young people looking to put down roots.

Rockland, the mainland hub to the island community I call home, is a great example. Once a fish processing and manufacturing community, it has become an arts hub thanks to strategic planning, thoughtful investment, and a little luck. Anchored by a thriving collective of working artists and craftspeople, Rockland is now home to two world-class art museums and several commercial galleries, resulting in a transformed downtown. People come to Rockland just to do the arts walk and they spend more time and money in the







area because of it. Bed and breakfasts and James Beard Award-winning restaurants have thrived meeting the tourist demand.

Of course, there are natural advantages to Rockland's beautiful setting on the Maine coast, but towns and regions across Maine are using their own advantages to build creative economies that uniquely suit their needs. Over the past decade, Maine's arts economy has boomed. Arts and culture is the third most valuable sector of Maine's economy, accounting for more than \$1.5 billion in statewide production. The industry is directly responsible for more than 16,000 jobs, and indirectly supports thousands more in hospitality and retail.

I've been lucky enough to represent communities like Rockland in Congress since 2008. During my time in office, I've thought a lot about how to help cities and towns build strong creative economies of their own. In the House, I serve as the co-chair of the Congressional Arts Caucus, where I advocate for robust federal funding for agencies like National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). These agencies have far-reaching impacts, with direct grantmaking that supports organizations big and small and convinces other funders to take the leap. The NEA also supports the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design. CIRD, which is operated in partnership with the Housing Assistance Council, brings vital technical assistance to rural areas looking to plan their revitalization strategies.



It's not just the NEA and NEH that provide opportunities—government agencies like USDA Rural Development, the Small Business Administration, and the U.S. Department of Education also provide important support for the arts in rural economies, from incubating new businesses to preserving arts education in schools that may not otherwise be able to afford it.

It's no secret that our economy has been devastated due to the coronavirus pandemic—big cities and small towns alike, with the arts taking a big hit. To recover, rural places will need expertise and resources that aren't always as readily available as they might be in an urban area. I would urge these places to consider their creative economy, which will generate opportunities for workers and ensure that the arts can survive and thrive in our communities. The nation's arts organizations are not only great spaces for cultural enrichment—they are major employers, cornerstone institutions, and will provide social and economic returns well beyond the initial investment.

I'm going to make sure that Congress keeps doing its part. Though I was proud to help secure relief funding for arts organizations in initial relief legislation, it's clear that the need is greater than ever. Congress must allocate more funding to NEA and NEH in our next funding packages. But we must also look toward long-term opportunities to support the creative sector. In July, I joined Senator Brian Schatz of



Photo: Richard Haddad, Flickr Creative Commons, <https://flickr/p/IFZgrG>

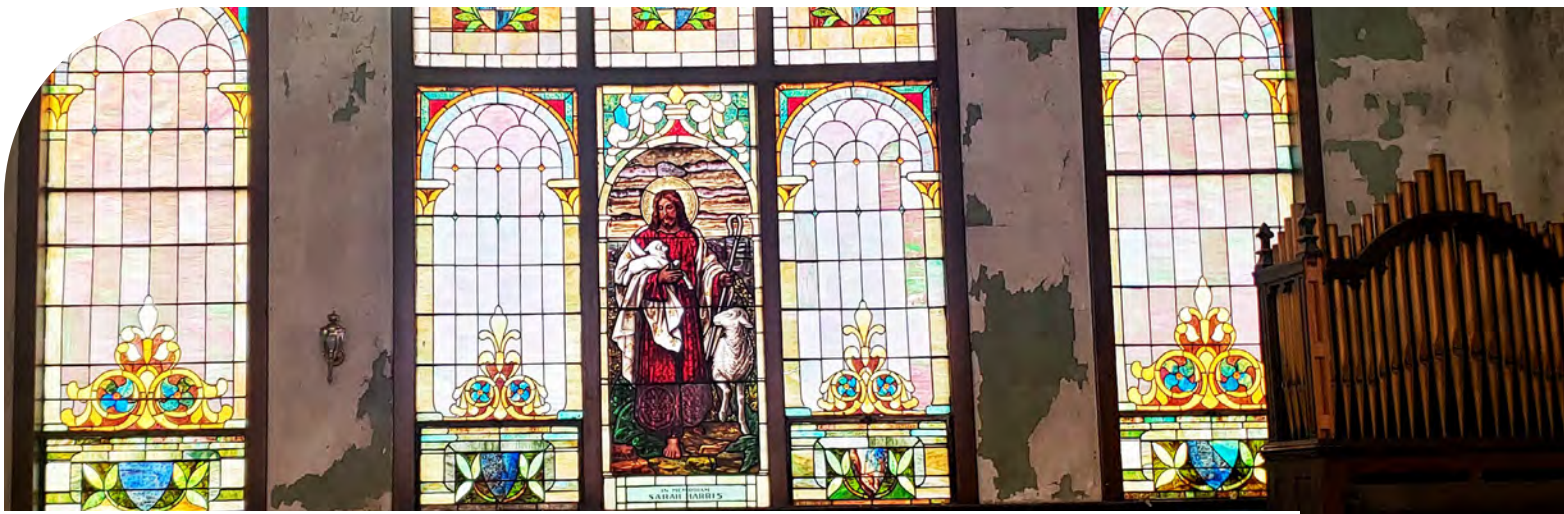
Hawaii in introducing the Promoting Local Arts and Creative Economy Workforce (PLACE) Act, legislation to invest in local economies across the country. This legislation would bolster today's cultural institutions and creative professionals while fostering new enterprises and a skilled workforce for years to come.

I'm proud to represent a part of our country with such a rich, artistic legacy—a place that has redefined itself as our economy has shifted and changed. With support from the federal government, our rural towns have found renewed purpose as they encourage and promote arts and cultural institutions. When I pass through Rockland, I'm reminded of the importance of those federal dollars, which have transformed the very streets I travel. I know my community is one of thousands across the country that have seen massive growth and transformation from arts grants, and I'll continue doing everything I can to ensure that more communities have that opportunity.

*The nation's arts organizations are not only great spaces for cultural enrichment—they are major employers, cornerstone institutions, and will provide social and economic returns well beyond the initial investment.*

Chellie Pingree is the U.S. Representative for Maine's 1st congressional district.





# Arts, Placemaking, and Design Help Imagine a Bright Future

In an interview with Rural Voices, National Endowment for the Arts' Chair, Mary Anne Carter offers an overview of rural design's history and advice on how underserved communities can persevere through difficult times.

**The National Endowment for the Arts has invested in citizen-led rural design via CIRD for nearly three decades. And it expanded this investment in 2019 allowing CIRD to reach additional communities via a Learning Cohort. Why and how has rural citizen-led design stayed high on your agency's priority list across administrations and decades?**

Investing in rural citizen-led design has been a high priority for the Arts Endowment. In 1991, the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design was created to explicitly support rural communities to capitalize on unique local and regional assets

in order to guide civic and economic development. Since the program launched, it has hosted over 80 local public design workshops all across the country. The CIRD program has focused on providing design assistance to drive the vitality of rural America by using creative placemaking, arts, and culture as key drivers for economic development. The expanded investment in a learning cohort in 2019 has enabled the program to build a network of 23 rural communities to learn from each other. We know that local residents hold both the histories and visions for their communities. With support from their peers in rural America and designers, the hard work of revitalizing their town feels less daunting and they have an opportunity to bounce ideas off of each other and emulate best practices from other places.



## What is the economic impact when public or private entities invest in rural America's creative capacity?

The Arts Endowment has partnered with the Bureau of Economic Analysis since 2015 on annual reporting of the Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account, which examines the national and state-level economic impact of the arts and culture. Examining data from 2015 that was released in 2018, the satellite account noted that arts and cultural production contributed \$67.5 billion to the economies of states in which 30 percent or more of the population lives in rural areas. In addition, arts and cultural production in

So the impact is significant.

I also want to add that in 2019, the Arts Endowment and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies partnered with the National Governors Association to produce *Rural Prosperity through the Arts and Creative Sector: A Rural Action Guide for Governors and States*. This action guide provides data, stories, and strategies that governors and other municipal leaders can use to leverage the creative assets in their rural areas to enhance economic development plans. It has been a well-received publication.



Photo: Mt. Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society

The historic church in Athens was built by former enslaved and free-born black artisans.



Photo: Omar Hakeem

Storytelling underground efforts to restore the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Athens, Ohio.

**The National Endowment for the Arts invested \$75 million in CARES Act funds across the country, and you told NPR that the demand for such funding is “greater than the supply.” What suggestions do you have for rural arts and design organizations that are struggling to stay afloat?**

The situation we are facing as a result of the coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented, unpredictable, and devastating for all of the arts, including rural arts and design organizations. The Arts Endowment knew how much the arts community needed support so we worked as hard as we could and were able to designate all of the \$75 million in CARES Act funding in less than 14 weeks from the time the president signed the legislation.

But there is no one way for organizations to try to stay afloat. The agency has gathered and created a number of resources that can be accessed at <https://www.arts.gov/coronavirus> and should prove helpful.

**What can underserved rural and tribal communities teach the broader arts, placemaking and design communities?**

Artists are everywhere and have a profound impact on place. We've witnessed the ways in which artists and leaders in rural communities often wear multiple hats. They are public servants on town councils, run local chambers of commerce, own businesses on Main Streets, and host festivals that drive regional tourism. Rural and tribal communities have been working across silos and sectors to offer up nimble approaches to drive economic and community development. They can teach the broader arts, placemaking and design communities about ways to build trust and establish partnerships that can lead to longer term community change. Rural and tribal communities are rich in cultural heritage and have modeled ways to build their future economies on that asset, as coal-based and other industries have dried up. They offer innovative





Photo: Omar Hakeem

Local musicians in Thomas, West Virginia entertained participants at the CIRD cohort launch in 2019.

*They offer innovative approaches to building an economic future that looks quite different than the economic development of the past.*

approaches to building an economic future that looks quite different than the economic development of the past.

**On the personal level, what are some of your favorite examples of seeing your agency's investments at work in rural communities?**

I have two favorites. Cheyenne River Youth Project in Eagle Butte, South Dakota supports artist residencies and a Native youth arts fellowship program on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation. As

part of the Lakota Youth Arts and Culture Institute, these programs expand an innovative strategy to help build the connection between youth living on the reservation and Lakota culture by encouraging the practice of art.

Another example is the Appalachian Artisan Center of Kentucky in Knott County, which supports the Culture of Recovery, a program that integrates the arts into addiction recovery programs. Programming includes visual arts and performance workshops, as well as mentorships in blacksmithing, ceramics, and luthiery (the construction and repair of stringed instruments). Access to arts programming and skill-building enhances well-being and increases economic opportunities for participants.

**Has your agency learned lessons from the 2008 economic crisis or prior hard times that influence the response to the current challenges?**

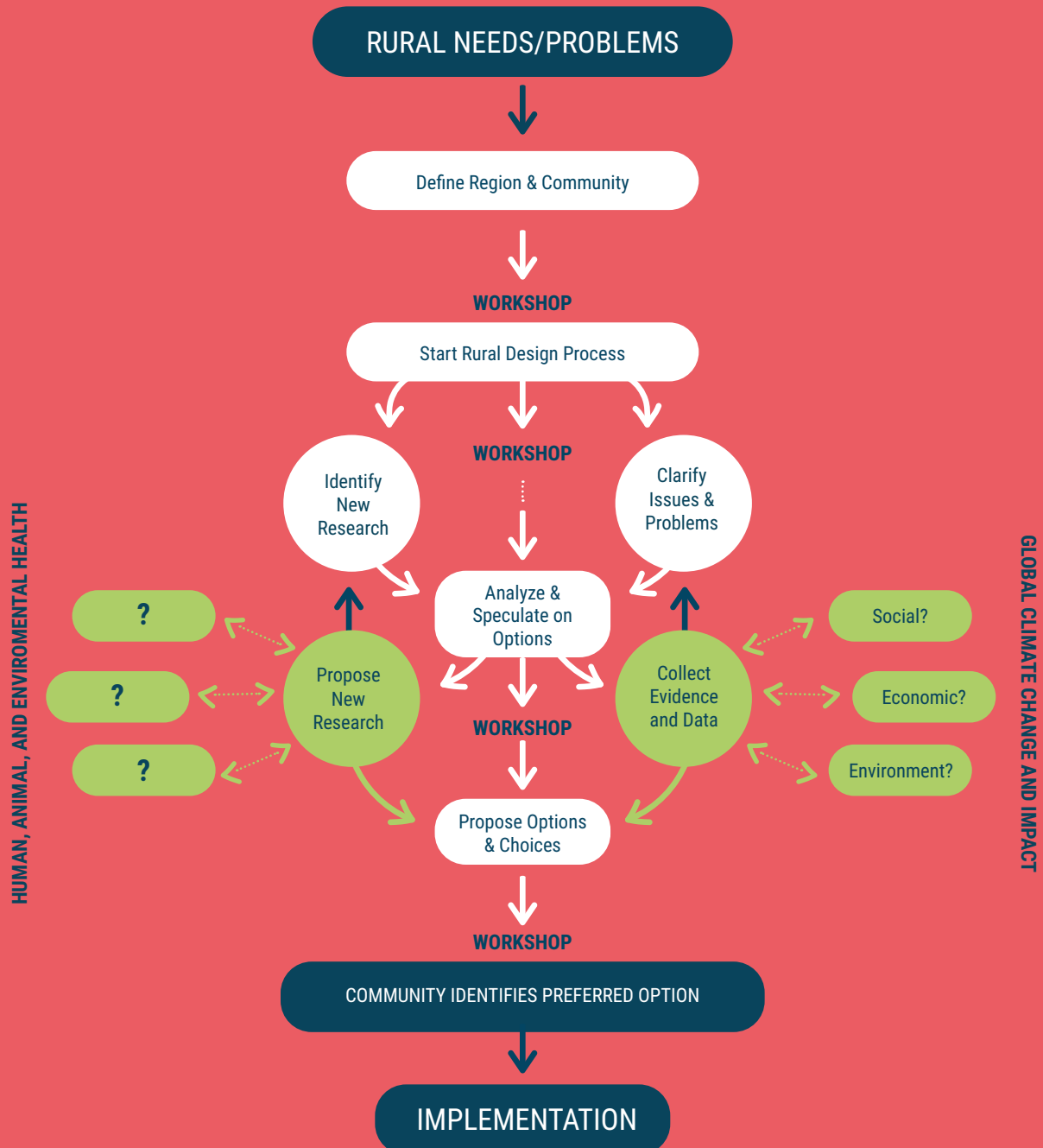
In response to the 2008 economic crisis, the Arts Endowment began a program to help communities recover by centering arts and culture as a viable strategy for growing the local economy. The Our Town creative placemaking grant program lives on today. Via Our Town, the Arts Endowment has invested in cross-sector partnerships between local or tribal governments and nonprofit arts and culture organizations to collaborate in strengthening their local community. We know that artists, cultural organizations, and culture bearers have a unique ability to be a galvanizing force locally: to connect communities, to envision new possibilities for place, and to inject new energy into a place. Now, more than ever, our country depends on the arts and cultural community to connect us during periods of social isolation, nurture our spirits, and imagine a future to enable economic recovery.

Mary Anne Carter is Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts.



# Rural Design Process

Rural design is a methodology to bring design thinking and the problem-solving process of design to rural regions to nurture human ingenuity, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation. Rural design expert, Dewey Thorbeck, explains that it promotes economic development, improves the environment, and enhances quality of life. This community-based design process empowers rural citizens.





# Citizens' Institute for Rural Design Cohort Communities 2019-2020

The National Endowment for the Arts' CIRI initiative is training rural leaders from 23 communities in rural design and creative placemaking, as well as offering support in navigating funding opportunities to make their communities better places to live, work, and play.



## Learn more about rural design:

[Citizens' Institute on Rural Design](#)

[Rural Prosperity Through the Arts & Creative Sector](#)

[Rural Design & Rural Futures](#)

[Rural Design: Establishing the Research Foundation for a New Design Discipline](#)

[Connecting Urban and Rural Futures Through Rural Design](#)



# Linking Rural Needs with America's Architects

New American Institute of Architects working group helps to elevate rural architecture.

By Stephen Sugg and Alejandra Hardin

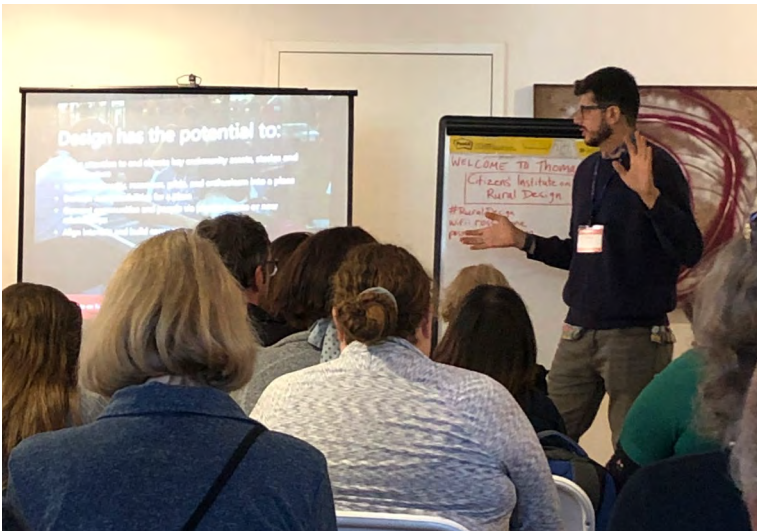
Kirk Narburgh is on a mission with a team of national architects who want the architecture profession to engage as effectively with rural America as it does with urban America. As CEO/Managing Partner at King + King Architects in Syracuse, New York and an established leader within state and national architecture circles with 29 years of teaching architecture at Syracuse University under his belt, Narburgh is well-positioned to carry out his mission. In a conversation with *Rural Voices*, he discussed the American Institute of Architects' just-launched rural "Incubator" working group that seeks a defined rural agenda within the profession, enhancing AIA's engagement with rural areas. Narburgh cited lagging rural recovery since the Great Recession, climate change, and housing, among factors undergirding the Incubator's launch. He also noted his affinity for rural issues—he grew up in upstate New York and has worked with rural schools and communities across his career—and the influence of his AIA peers including Omar Hakeem, who has been a great resource helping launch the Incubator.

Hakeem is CIRD's design partner and soon to be part of the AIA's Strategic Council; he will link Citizens' Institute on Rural Design to AIA's rural efforts going forward.

## Rural Leaders Wear Many Hats and Often Lack Helpful Information

Narburgh said that local leaders' dearth of exposure to planning and architecture often hampers connection to architectural resources that may be readily available. "In most of these communities, you've got political figures and community leaders who





To Be Done's Omar Hakeem addresses a CIRD national cohort gathering in Thomas, WV.

are basically jacks of all trades. They're potentially running a farm or business, they're town supervisor, they might be the tax collector, and sometimes they're the code enforcement officer," he said. He explains further that when local leaders are stretched thin, it is tough to marshal resources toward effective planning processes, though he commended the connector role that CIRD and similar resources can play in bringing design and architecture resources to rural communities.

Cognizant of the limitations on local rural leaders—despite their dedication—Narburgh said a top priority for the Incubator working group is to remedy a lack of knowledge about the architecture-related resources and organizations already in place to serve rural areas. He was quick to add that the lack of knowledge extends to both the architecture community, including architecture schools, and to the local level. "I've been able to engage with a whole network of architects who do work in rural communities and are more than willing and able to volunteer their time to

help these communities with some of the upfront efforts, but they're just overlooked more often than not because those communities don't even know that they exist or even how to start that discussion." Narburgh mentioned particularly sustainable ideas that could help rural communities, such as windmills and solar panels, but noted that the design status quo would largely continue until local communities link to available resources.

"Our goal with this group is to tie all those together so we are not replicating each other's efforts and create a network that can be more supportive of one another," he said, adding that connection with CIRD is an important step. He also shared a survey that went to architecture schools across the country as a first step to recording and highlighting their ongoing rural-focused teaching.

### School Is In

As a designer of rural schools and versed in identifying key players for rural planning processes, Narburgh highlighted the rural education sector. "The school is the

community hub. More than likely the teachers live in these same communities and know many of the folks in that community. Student populations are much smaller than in urban settings, so you know all of your fellow students, and it really does, in many ways, become the glue that holds these communities together," he said, adding that schools often bring together people from expansive geographic areas to socialize and interact where they normally would not, a crucial element of community building in rural areas. He concurred with CIRD's assertion that rural schools are often among a community's largest landowner and employer, amplifying the need for the education sector's engagement toward community planning.

"The biggest challenge in rural planning is bringing together the right balance and perspectives of people who should be involved," Narburgh said, adding that school superintendents, educators, and students "need to be part of a successful process and that students bring great perspective to planning processes." In recognition of education's role—K-12 and beyond—Narburgh shared details of AIA's existing initiatives aimed at *inspiring and nurturing* the next generation of architects, especially

*Schools often bring together people from expansive geographic areas to socialize and interact where they normally would not, a crucial element of community building in rural areas.*



Kirk Narburgh has long championed rural needs in national architecture circles.



Pairing rural practitioners and design experts helps to link the rural development and design fields.

for students interested in the power of design thinking for their own schools and communities. Attuning architecture to rural needs will ensure that rural students—as well as their non-rural counterparts—benefit from the AIA’s work.

### Rural Nuance, Rural Resilience

Narburgh shared that “up front” time is critical in rural contexts—especially in comparison to urban, noting the perils of planning processes that rush through meaningful community engagement. “The best advice I give people is that when you practice in rural communities, you need to have patience. You need to become an educator. You need the right people in the discussions...eventually you get there,” he said, adding that many in rural communities are simply unfamiliar with planning processes, thus creating an increased need for passionate engagement and listening.

Finally, Narburgh reflected on a common characteristic of rural communities that drives his efforts. “One of the most amazing things about rural communities is they’re incredibly resilient. Rural communities make up the huge

majority of our geographic area in the United States. They, for the most part, have seen and endured almost everything—fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, poverty, inequalities, and more. But they’re able to withstand and persevere even without the most resilient infrastructure. In many cases it would seem like insurmountable odds given the fact that they lack many of the important assets to help combat some of these challenges. And yet they keep coming back, which is a testament to the resourcefulness of the people and their entire community.”

*Stephen Sugg is Special Projects Manager at HAC and Alejandra Hardin was a University of Chicago Institute of Politics Intern at HAC.*



In 2017, HAC teamed up with Woodlands Development Group and bcWorkshop to showcase creative placemaking best practices in West Virginia.





All Photos Courtesy of CRYP

# Cheyenne River Youth Project Carries on Creative Placemaking

In an interview with Rural Voices, Julie Garreau of Cheyenne River Youth Project explains how the tribal nonprofit continues to serve its youth through the arts despite challenges caused by the pandemic.

**The Cheyenne River Youth Project (CRYP, also called Wakpá Wašté Théča Okhólakičhiye in the Lakota language) was first known simply as “The Main” when it opened its doors in a former bar on Eagle Butte’s Main Street in 1988. Tell us how your organization has grown since then.**

We have significantly grown over the years, but it was a gradual evolution from that one-room, volunteer-run center for younger children in 1988 to our five-acre campus for ages 4-18 today, 32 years later. We moved “The Main” to a brand-new building, its current home, in 1999. We added the Winyan Toka Win (Leading Lady) Garden and our seasonal farmers market in 2000, and we opened the doors to our Cokata Wiconi (Center of Life) teen center in 2006. In the last decade, we added our Keya Cafe and Gift Shop and teen internship programs. We have also developed the public

Waniyetu Wowapi (Winter Count) Art Park, art internships, a new Lakota Art Fellowship program, the award-winning RedCan invitational graffiti jam, and a variety of workshops for youth and the public.

How did that come together? When I think about CRYP, I think it comes down to three things. First, consistent leadership. We have kept our roots in our organizational values and our traditional Lakota values, and stayed true to our mission, which means our organizational DNA has stayed the same. We are by Cheyenne River, for Cheyenne River. Second, we are good stewards. We take care of the resources we are given and use them creatively. We stay flexible and adaptive, because





circumstances are always changing. And third, we listen to our kids and our community, respond to their needs, and let the path unfold. It is quite simple really. We are just doing what we do.

**For the last several years, CRYP has hosted the RedCan invitational graffiti jam in Eagle Butte, South Dakota. What is a graffiti jam, and why host one in Indian Country?**

Graffiti jams were designed to introduce mainstream audiences to graffiti as an art form. They bring together people who exemplify the contemporary graffiti art movement, and how it has evolved since its inception a half-century ago. When we introduced RedCan in 2015, we hoped not only to showcase a global movement and its relevance, but also to build a bridge between graffiti culture and Lakota culture. We knew that the graffiti world resonated with our kids, so we wanted them to have an event where that world would come to them. Over the years, it has become so much more. RedCan gives our young people opportunities to explore their identities in a positive and healthy way, discover their own voices, and share their truths and life experiences. It allows our Lakota artists to collaborate with our visiting artists. And it lifts up our entire community because our people get to see their

stories, their language, and their culture in such a bold, beautiful way. RedCan belongs to them.

**RedCan is nationally lauded as an example of how to do creative placemaking. What does that term mean to you, and how did you first get involved?**

I was not familiar with the term “creative placemaking” until we applied for a grant with ArtPlace America. I came to learn that it is not just about art and art spaces — it means so much more than that. It is endless what can be a creative space, and now I absolutely love the term. Every day, we are creative placemaking at CRYP.

*Our people get to see their stories, their language, and their culture in such a bold, beautiful way.*

**How has COVID-19 impacted your community and the youth you serve?**

The coronavirus pandemic immediately created concern about the future. I told my staff not to worry, and I connected with all of our partners to see how we could do this. They told us that they wouldn’t let us fail, which was wonderful because even I needed to be reassured. It’s been stressful, but we are adapting, just like CRYP always has. Flexibility is critical for us, as a grassroots, community-based, nonprofit organization. It’s why we’re still here, serving our second generation of children. I think the kids are wearing thin. Their safe spaces aren’t available. They do not fully understand that, yet they also worry about hurting their loved ones if they inadvertently bring the virus home. It is







incredibly hard on them, so they are also feeling anxious and worn out. That is why we work so hard to engage with them, whether it is through delivering a healthy, well-balanced meal, keeping them active in the garden, or providing arts classes with a teacher instructing over Zoom.

**In addition to the impacts on the community, COVID-19 is affecting a lot of organizations, and it has created a lot of uncertainty. What are some obstacles CRYP is facing right now?**

Our biggest challenges this year involve growing funds and resources, and continuing to guide and support our organization during unprecedented times. We can adapt, but we have to find the means to do so. For example, we transformed our full-size gymnasium at Cokata Wiconi

into a learning center, so the kids could still come to us for some programming. We had the space for social distancing, but then we needed to source the supplies we needed for our new hygiene protocols. We needed to supply more masks, install a new internet line for remote learning, and secure Chromebooks so all the kids would have devices. We have really had to up our game, and we have had to do it without the volunteer program, which is suspended during the public health crisis. Another challenge for us is that we signed up for youth work, and we really miss our kids.

**So many organizations around the country have had to rapidly shift their plans for serving their communities. How have you adapted RedCan this year?**

When the pandemic exploded this spring, we assumed we would not be able to host such a dynamic, live art experience. But, as CRYP always does, we found a way. The answer was to put together a team of experts to figure out the back-end engineering, invite the artists to contribute their creativity in new ways, and take the event online. So RedCan came back for its sixth year, and it was bigger than ever. Our artists created their large-scale RedCan murals in eight cities across America, and we unveiled them live on Facebook, YouTube, and our website. Also, for each day of RedCan 2020, we hosted a live “RedCan Classroom” in the afternoon so we could teach kids on site and showcase the arts instruction for viewers around the world. We hosted a live talking circle each evening, connecting with our RedCan artists on themes of “Changing the Narrative,” “Remember Your Medicines,” and “Powered by





Our Ancestors.” We were inspired by the energy and creativity that came out of this year’s event, and I would not be surprised if some elements from this year continue next year and beyond. Once again, we have learned that great challenges also mean great opportunities.

**CRYP has evolved a lot over the years based on what the community needs. What do you think the Cheyenne River reservation needs right now, and what are your goals for serving youth in this unprecedented time?**

I have been thinking about the future a lot, and about our need as a community to create a resiliency plan. We have been thrown into this chaos, and we have had to react to it – but, ideally, our response should be resilience/recovery, not reactive/adaptive. We need to think about tribal sovereignty in all its aspects, and consider: How do we survive on our own? What are our infrastructure needs? What about food and water? Impoverished communities do not have partners for that. We have to find a way to still be available for our youth, whether that means distance learning or outdoor classrooms. Some aspects of programming cannot adapt that quickly, but we have to be innovative, because our goal is to serve kids.



**What advice would you offer other organizations working with youth and arts right now—tribal or otherwise? What lessons have you learned from this shutdown?**

Look at the challenges you are facing and figure out how you can adapt to the circumstances and still pursue your mission. Forge ahead, find the resources you need, be good stewards of those resources, be willing to grow and change in unexpected ways, and always be creative.

*Julie Garreau is a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and Executive Director of the Cheyenne River Youth Project.*





Photo: Timothy Hursley

# Rural Studio and the Front Porch Initiative: What Good Design Can Afford

A college architectural program in the South describes their innovative approach to making housing affordable to local residents.

By Rusty Smith and Michelle Sidler

“Everyone, both rich and poor, deserves the benefit of good design.”

Located in the heart of West Alabama’s Black Belt region, the city of Newbern is home to Rural Studio, a design and build architectural program in Auburn University’s College of Architecture, Design and Construction. For over 25 years, Auburn students have designed and built structures—including community buildings, parks, courtyards, and homes—for the residents in and around Hale County.

## What Situated Design Can Afford

Like many rural communities in the South, the Black Belt is comprised of several persistent poverty counties, USDA-designated areas with high percentages of low-wealth residents. The mission of Rural Studio is to serve this often invisible and underserved population with projects that enhance the economic and social way

of life in West Alabama. The Newbern Firehouse is a crystalized example of what good design can afford, and it symbolizes the work and mission of Rural Studio. It also has an illuminating design, quite literally: when lit up at night, it resembles a lantern laying on its side. The structure is also a testament to the ingenuity of Rural Studio students, who raised \$100,000 in material donations, including two-inch-thick wood that had seasoned for years in the storage barn of Newbern’s former mayor. This wood, and the students’ resilient design and construction, allow the firehouse to withstand 110-mile-per-hour winds, making it both durable and aesthetically pleasing, a key component of Rural Studio design.



In 2003, the Newbern Volunteer Fire Department (VFD) approached Rural Studio because they had received a grant to buy a fire truck, but they needed a long, tall building to house it. This seemingly mundane request understates the challenges of rural living that necessitated the Newbern VFD in the first place. Previously, the closest fire department was 15 minutes away, endangering Newbern residents and raising insurance premiums. In an area where many residents live on a fixed income, mitigating the costs of insurance can make the difference in affording a home.

Newbern does not have fire hydrants, so the truck has to carry its own water. The firehouse plans accommodate a building that keeps the water from freezing in winter without incurring a heating bill the town simply could not pay. The students harnessed passive solar power and added cedar slats to the south translucent wall that admit light from the lower winter sun and heat the concrete floor during the day, which in turn radiates heat back to warm the truck at night. This

thoughtful design affords the town a vital resource with little overhead. As the first new public building in Newbern in 110 years, the firehouse benefited the town when it became a focal point for engagement and voting as well as a place to hold town hall meetings before Rural Studio students eventually created a town hall for such gatherings.

The Newbern Firehouse epitomizes Rural Studio's design philosophy, that it should be sustainable, vernacular, locally resourced, and beneficent. Andrew Freear, Director of Rural Studio, maintains that the work of the program and its students "have been responses to necessity, a result of staying in one place, reacting to the place as architects and teachers should, critically reflecting on our work, and nurturing community relationships."

*Older, neglected homes present another burden to residents because they are often poorly insulated, leading to high utility costs.*

### What Reflective Design Can Afford

Rural communities, are experiencing a silent housing crisis. Although a higher percentage of rural residents are homeowners than their urban counterparts, those homes are valued lower, and are often older and in need of repair. Older, neglected homes present another burden to residents because they are often poorly insulated, leading to high utility costs. Residents have been known to live in only one or two rooms of a larger home to save money on heating and cooling. Adverse weather conditions common in the South—flooding, high winds, and humidity—render these homes vulnerable. Many low-wealth residents are unable to afford new homes, particularly when banks are reluctant to approve mortgages under \$100,000. Additionally, civic rural infrastructure tends to be old, inadequate, or even non-existent. The challenge of financing new homes under these conditions further disincentivizes potential lenders.

Freear observed these barriers to homeownership, so in 2004, he challenged students to build low cost, beautiful, well designed, and high performing homes in west Alabama. Sponsored in part by Regions Bank, the challenge resulted in more than 20 homes for local residents and over 15 years of research and design. Dubbed 20K Homes, each structure was a research project in which students incorporated lessons learned from earlier work to enhance the subsequent home's resilience and efficiency. 20K Dave's Home, for example, was a shotgun-style, one-bedroom house constructed in 2009. The student team studied the floorplan and typology of earlier iterations and then optimized various aspects of the space to create more room and privacy. They also reimagined the construction process to shorten the build time, making the home more easily replicable. This reflective process—studying and enhancing previous students' work—allowed later student teams to more easily construct new iterations, while accommodating residents' needs, improving air circulation, maximizing affordable insulation,



and revising various foundation techniques. Later student teams integrated even more precise standards for energy efficiency to further lower residents' utility and insurance costs. The result of this ongoing, 15-year research project is a catalog of elegant, wealth-building, efficient, and easily replicated 20K Homes.

### What Energy Efficient Design Can Afford

As well constructed, deeded property, 20K Homes provide a basis for rural residents to build wealth, while at the same time offering them resilient, energy-efficient shelter. Recognizing that this work could be applied more broadly, Rural Studio founded the Front Porch Initiative in 2018. The Front Porch Initiative is a collaboration between Rural Studio, community-based nonprofit rural housing organizations, and external government and industry groups. In research partnership with Fannie Mae, USDA, Wells Fargo, and Auburn University, its goal is to transform rural housing and improve the economic, social, and physical well-being of rural communities.

The Front Porch Initiative is working with Field Test Partners—housing organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Affordable Housing Resources, and Mountain T.O.P.—to provide construction plans and technical support for a growing suite of Product Line Homes, which are iterations of 20K Homes that can be adapted to each

partner's local conditions. In 2019, a combination of these partnerships came together to build two high-performance homes in Opelika, Alabama, based on the 20K Buster's Home product plans. These homes are built to beyond-typical building codes, delivering a highly resilient structure to withstand severe weather. In an effort to further maximize energy efficiency in the Product Line Homes, Auburn University faculty and the Front Porch Initiative are studying and comparing the homes' energy consumption and resilience.

Maximizing the performance of Product Line Homes is a key component of the Front Porch Initiative's plan to promote rural homeownership throughout the South. The Front Porch Initiative is working with its Field Test Partners and its external partners to encourage a re-thinking of home procurement processes that are flexible enough to acknowledge and accommodate what low-cost, high performing Product Line Homes can afford in rural markets. Energy efficiency translates into monthly cost savings for homeowners, money that homeowners can fold back into the mortgage. In short, the energy efficient components offset the added costs of their construction, allowing rural homeowners to reap the benefits of energy efficient, resilient, and well-built homes for no additional monthly cost.



Photo: Matt Hall

### What Healthy Design Can Afford

Efficient, resilient, and well-designed homes afford homeowners the financial benefits of high performing, deeded, and titled property, yet the neglect of rural communities extends beyond systemic financial challenges. Rural communities are also burdened with disproportionately poor health outcomes. Residents tend to be older and in poorer health than those in urban areas because they suffer from the comorbidities of poverty: poor diet, high blood pressure, and obesity. Medical facilities are increasingly sparse as well. The Front Porch Initiative is embarking on a new phase of its research and outreach that explores the health benefits Product Line Homes can afford. They are partnering with the Healthy Building Network to equip their existing building envelope designs with materials that produce fewer toxins, which are harmful for both building constructors and residents.

At Rural Studio, architectural design continues to challenge the mainstream understandings of affordability, leverages the strengths inherent to rural living, and maximizes the return on home investment—while accommodating the needs of underserved rural communities.

*Rusty Smith is Associate Director of Rural Studio and Michelle Sidler is an Associate Professor at Auburn University.*



Photo: Sahar Coston-Hardy

Black-owned Graham's Ribs in Springfield, Missouri, open from 1932 to 1996, was an establishment listed in the *Negro Motorist Green Book*

# Hard Times

The rural design community and CIRD look ahead by looking back.

By Stephen Sugg and Alejandra Hardin

Jennifer Reut, the architectural historian behind the Mapping the Green Book project, is bullish on the potential of rural design—inclusive citizen-led rural design—to be a positive, unifying force as rural America becomes more diverse in an increasingly urbanized world. Reut knows the importance of architectural history, even when painful, as a grounding force when communities design for the future. For Reut, who edits *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, “all places lived in constitute design.” She is keen on studying vernacular architecture, which encompasses ordinary buildings and landscapes crafted without the aid of trained architects. Reut emphasizes that non-architects designed the “near-entirety” of the landmarks in her ongoing study of the *Negro Motorist Green Book* and other travel guides. The study takes her to the remaining gas stations, beauty parlors, restaurants, hotels, and other establishments that served Black American travelers during the Jim Crow era, when their mere presence at non-vetted places could lead to mortal danger. Lessons from history inform Reut’s advice to a rural design community seeking welcoming spaces where all rural Americans can thrive. Hint: it starts with listening.

CIRD’s conversations with Reut and other experts combine with a glimpse into rural architectural and design history in search of lessons to guide CIRD going forward. Rural Design is a 23-year-old approach that makes connections between urban and rural futures, according to Dewey Thorbeck, whose work undergirds the discipline. Urban-centric outlooks permeate design scholarship and discourse. As noted elsewhere in this issue of *Rural Voices*, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) is poised to soon elevate rural within the organization as attention to rural people and places is required for meeting challenges at the intersection of food security, climate, and inequality. Also pressing, HAC continues to emphasize the pandemic’s disproportionate economic impact on a rural America still lagging from the 2008–2009 Great Recession.



## Historic preservation

The Great Depression offers a focal point for learning from past economic downturns with an eye on design. Non-white people bore the greatest burden of the Depression's hard times, with the "last hired, first fired" mantra applying to the Black community—rural and urban. The federal response to the Depression included the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration investments in buildings and spaces with lasting impact, with a small slice of the federal arts and culture investment reaching the Black artistic community. The rural rustic aesthetic emerged from the WPA's influence, with plentiful examples remaining. Another example of federal investment in design with last impact is the Hall of Waters in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, a former health resort that incorporated Art Deco and Depression-era designs, as well as Mayan Water God motifs. It is included on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2020 "11 Most Endangered Historic Places" list and is in need of major repairs and upgrades for its current uses. Local leaders behind efforts to preserve the Hall of Waters are part of CIRD's 2019–2020 Learning Cohort. The Public Works Administration's \$1 million investment in the building represents the agency's most ambitious investment in Missouri. Those seeking to preserve the Hall hope for a tourist draw and downtown anchor rekindling the Hall's role as a driver of the town's economy, in addition to a source of civic pride.

## Design that serves residents

Farmworkers have long faced low-wage labor in physically demanding and dangerous conditions in the fields and beyond. Recent reports of both COVID-19 and wildfires affecting farmworkers add yet another example. CIRD's Alejandra Hardin spoke to Paul Chavez, President of the Cesar Chavez Foundation and youngest son of Cesar and Helen Chavez, seeking a historical frame for current events. "Unfortunately, while the pandemic is new, the hardships faced by farmworkers aren't new," Chavez said, adding that packed vans heading to fields and cramped housing conditions contribute to COVID-19's rapid spread among farmworkers. Ameliorating these conditions has driven his life's work, carrying on a family tradition.

Chavez said that while structures thwarting farmworkers' participation in civic life and preventing access to services such as health care and education

are ever-present, organizing and a holistic approach to meeting farmworker needs drive the foundation's work. One design-rooted example from Chavez: a retirement home for farmworkers built with communal dining, thus allowing Filipino farmworkers to enjoy traditional food in a familiar setting. Chavez also emphasized seeking the humanity of those enduring poverty, noting the powerful "hopes and dreams" of the less fortunate, even against long odds.

## Inclusive public spaces

Jennifer Reut, like Paul Chavez, placed responses to COVID-19 in a historical context when asked for lessons going forward. She said that public spaces are more important as health conditions lead to increased outdoor gatherings, including in the rural American west where she lives part time. She has observed that affluent white people gather freely in parks and trails, for example, while people of color and/or immigrants are often "also there, but not as visible." And thus, left out. She added that the *Green Book* was a tool for those "wanting to avoid humiliation." Making the design of these spaces inclusive would lead to public spaces truly for all—with the accompanying public health benefits. And that inclusive rural design can bring about truly accessible public spaces. Communities heeding Reut's advice would be tapping history's lessons for a better tomorrow.

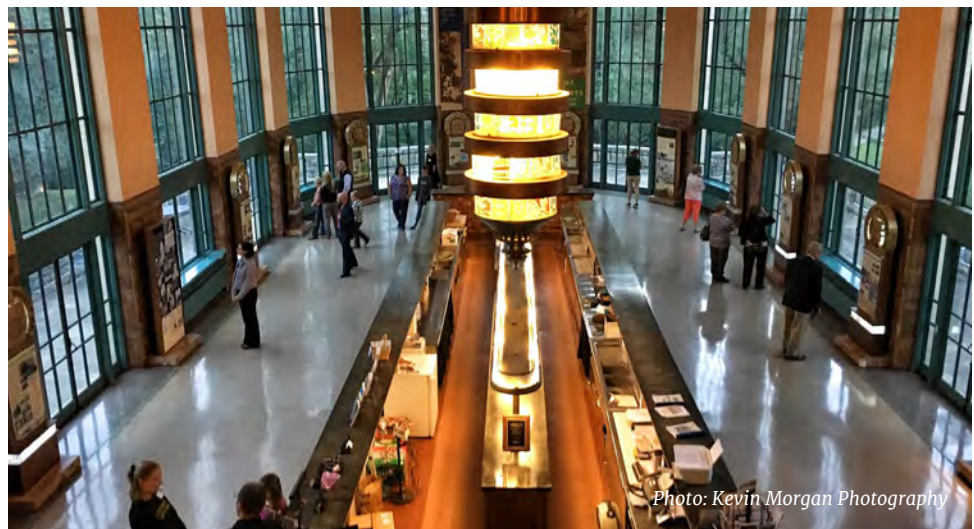


Photo: Kevin Morgan Photography

*The Hall of Waters in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, is an Art Deco style building from 1935.*

## Takeaways from Reut

Jennifer Reut's conversation with CIRD offers some thoughts for practitioners to keep in mind. Rural America is not monolithic. "Every [rural] place is different." Thus, it is difficult for design-focused publications to report on trends applicable to the rural architecture and design discipline. A shortage of reporters in rural America makes it difficult to access information organically, even if it is noteworthy to the broader design world.

It is also important to understand how the legacy of racism continues to hurt the Black community, so that practitioners can take action for a brighter future. Black history is often erased "purposefully." "There is much research on white towns and places," she said, lamenting "the dearth of research on Black people, Black farms, and places." Reut's Mapping the Green Book work, beginning with a fellowship with the National Museum of African American History and Culture, underscores the Black community's resilience while facing a system designed to suppress dreams of wealth and opportunity. "So, they [Black communities] made business districts, schools, gathering places, and more...with an aim to allow the next generation to go to college." Reut added that the Great Depression ensured that the Black community would be the "poorest of the poor without exception" as federal relief programs, with few exceptions, weren't accessible to Black Americans—by design. "Every school built, every Black business



*Threatt's Filling Station near Route 66 in Luther, Oklahoma served Black travelers' fuel and food needs during Jim Crow.*

district is a form of resistance and resilience from the Black community," she said, while noting a few remaining examples that her project has mapped. And though historians usually say 1968 marked Jim Crow's unofficial end, Reut readily pointed out examples of redlining—government forced segregation of neighborhoods—occurring well after that year.

History's lessons, from architecturally significant structures that emerged from the New Deal to the nearly-vanished establishments that once populated the *Green Book for Black Motorists*, provide grounding for rural design as a discipline. CIRD looks to heed such lessons while continuing to elevate best practices emerging from rural citizen-led design. Rural resiliency remains a unifying force, past, present, and future.



*In 1966, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, a vocal supporter of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, participated in hearings held in California by a U.S. Senate subcommittee on Migratory Labor.*

*Rural resiliency remains a unifying force, past, present, and future.*

*Stephen Sugg is Special Projects Manager at HAC and Alejandra Hardin was a University of Chicago Institute of Politics Intern at HAC.*



# In Memoriam: Matt Herron

The opening of Matt Herron's obituary in the August 11, 2020 *New York Times* captured his contributions to history and his zest for life:

*Matt Herron, a photojournalist who vividly memorialized the most portentous and promising moments from the front lines of the 1960s civil rights movement in the Deep South, died on Aug. 7 when a glider he was piloting crashed in Northern California. He was 89.*

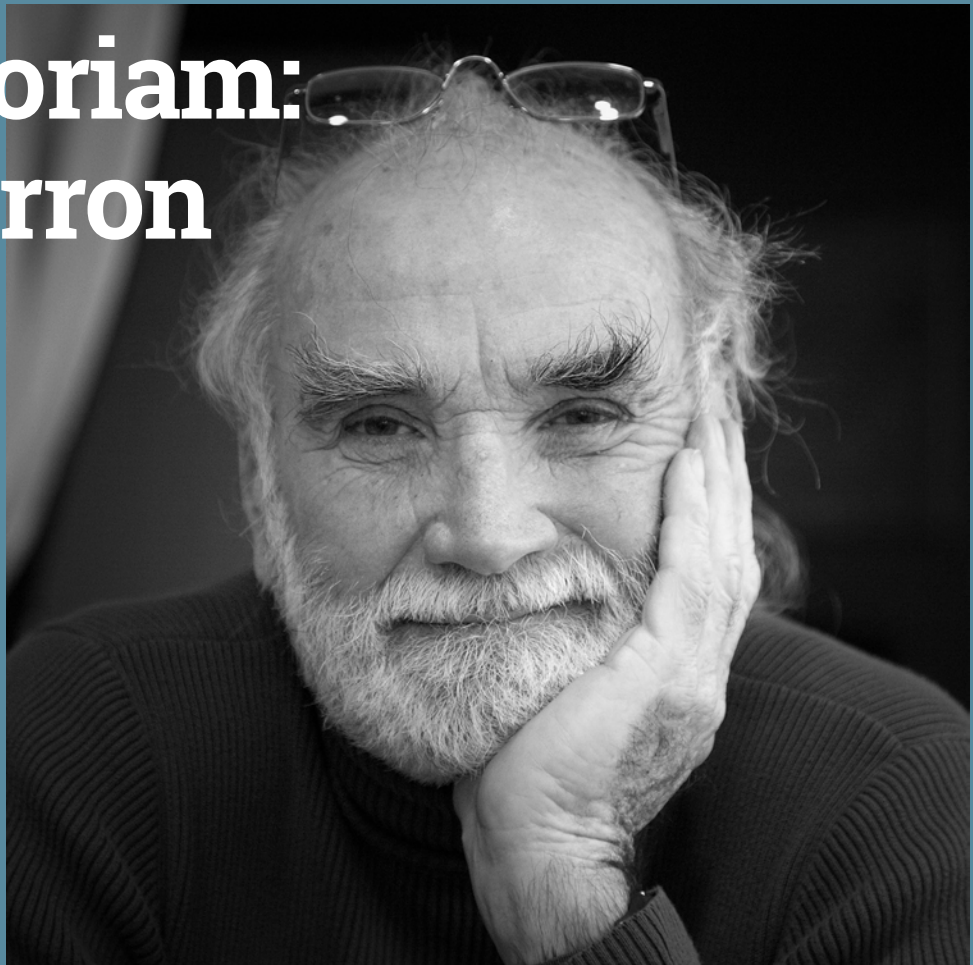


Photo: Jeannine Herron

At HAC, we mourn Matt's death. HAC is carrying out a National Endowment for the Arts award to celebrate and build on the work of George Ballis, a photographer and activist known for capturing the dignity of ordinary people – especially farmworkers and those building self-help homes – and also for his iconic photos of Cesar Chavez. Herron and Ballis, both

taught by Dorothea Lange, risked their lives documenting the civil rights movement in the Deep South, chronicled in Herron's book *Mississippi Eyes*.

A noted and active photographer and writer up to his death, Herron was Ballis's friend and the custodian of his photographic legacy. Herron was generous in lending his expertise and memories to HAC toward the upcoming Ballis-

inspired exhibition and accompanying narrative. Matt was set to coach the photographers selected for the project and to curate the exhibition alongside To Be Done's Omar Hakeem.

Several photographers with deep ties to Matt Herron are contributing their talents to the exhibition, set for late 2020.



LET'S BUILD  
SOMETHING  
TOGETHER



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## VIRTUAL RURAL HOUSING SYMPOSIUM: RECOVERY THROUGH RESILIENCE

Watch live on [HAC's Youtube channel](#) on December 3rd at 11am EST for a day filled with engaging speakers, invaluable rural practitioner perspectives, and a vast array of information on rural realities, as well as opportunities to interact and reconnect with peers.

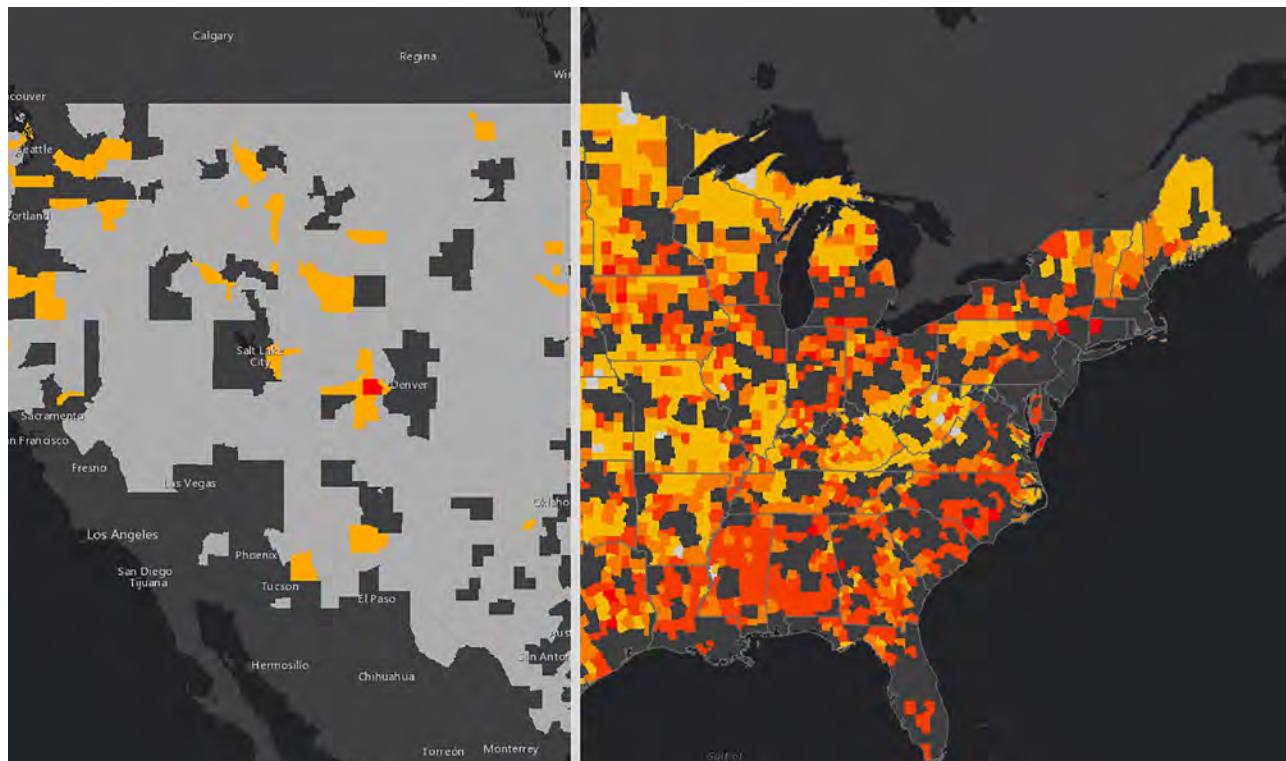
## HAC RECEIVES \$794,500 CDFI FUND GRANT

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) has been awarded a \$794,500 grant from the Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) Fund to develop and preserve affordable housing throughout the rural United States.

"HAC is thrilled to partner with the CDFI Fund to improve housing conditions for the people who need it most in rural America," said David Lipsetz, President & CEO of the Housing Assistance Council. "Rural communities are brimming with potential. This investment in HAC helps unlock it."

## TRACKING COVID-19 IN RURAL AREAS

As the coronavirus pandemic spreads across the country rural areas have not been spared from its impact. In the wake of a disaster the lack of information can often be an obstacle to recovery. HAC has been tracking and publishing [information](#) about the virus as it relates to rural areas, and mapping the spread of COVID-19 in rural counties.





## Housing Assistance Council

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