Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

MARGARET MEAD
In 1987, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts was given to the Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA) for the development of the Council’s Design Arts Program. In conjunction with ASCA, the Design Program informed over 1,200 Alabama designers, in a variety of design disciplines, that program development was underway. These individuals were asked to provide input and other information concerning their work. From this group, an advisory panel was formed.

The advisory panel determined that an advocacy group was necessary to educate the public about the importance of good design in Alabama. It was decided that a board of directors should be established and should be made up of both designers and non-designers, including community activists and business leaders. This is an important element in the organization’s goal to bridge communication between design professionals and the general public.

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The Rural Studio was founded in 1993 by architect-educators Paul Mockbee and D.K. Ruth. Puttng into practice their philosophy that everyone deserves access to good design, the Rural Studio brings architecture to rural West Alabama to give them a hands-on, educational experience, designing and building for underserved population. The Rural Studio, under the direction of Andrew Freear, has evolved toward more community-oriented projects. Across four neighboring Alabama counties, the focus of community, housing, and food, the multi-year, multi-phase projects—such as the recently completed Newborn Town Hall—continue the Rural Studio ethos of recycling, revising, and redesigning and using local materials. While the trials and tribulations that affordable, good design is important to all. In establishing Rural Studio, Mockbee was committed to the idea that architecture can achieve ethical imperatives to be meaningful. He believed that architects should become leaders in bringing about cultural, environmental, and social change, and called on them to place less emphasis on pleasing the rich and more on helping those who don’t have access to design services but need them. Mockbee wanted to supplant the predominantly theoretical ‘paper architecture’ that was taught in most schools with hands-on, practical teaching methods that included implementing design and working. For this initiative, the team posthumously received the Gold Medal, the greatest accolade in American architecture.

Twenty years and 150 projects later, Rural Studio continues to educate citizen architects through a mixture of hands-on learning and a healthy dose of social activism. The Studio’s rich existence in rural West Alabama is new rooted in building relationships and earning trust from their neighbors and friends in the community. Immersing themselves in West Alabama has afforded their students the opportunity to apply their skills as designers, while also learning about the nature, history, culture, economy, architecture and community in this unique educational landscape.

In 1998, the first YourTown/Alabama workshop was in the summer of 1998. YourTown/Alabama is an ad- aptation of a program created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1991 with the goal of applying assets-based community planning and economic development strategies to the revitalization and preservation of small towns and rural America.

The principles are simple: how can you leverage your historic/cultural assets, your natural assets and your economic assets to create a new community? It’s easy if you have the political will and the desire to preserve and protect what makes you special/distinctive and competitive? The target audience is citizen-leaders and elected officials and since Alabama became the first state with its own YourTown program, over 1000 citizen-leaders have participated in two and one half day hands-on workshop. Partners in the YourTown Program include: the Alabama Histori cal Commission and Alabama Main Street Corporation, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, DesignAlabama, CAVACO RCD, the University of Alabama’s Community Development and Auburn’s Urban Studio.

The Small Town Design Initiative (STDI) evolved from DesignAlabama’s Community Design Program and was founded in 1999. Following the success of the first planning based training workshops, STDI works with small towns and neighborhood development to create illustrated master plans that can position these communities for competitive advantages as they work toward revitalization and economic development.

The Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program uses a comprehensive, three-phase approach to assist rural participating communities in planning and preparing for a more vibrant future. Throughout each of these phases, ACE partners from the private sector, government agencies and universities work with each community to successfully achieve its goals. Currently 26 Alabama communities are participating in the ACE program.

In 2002, the Alabama Community of Excellence Program was created in 2001 as a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation organized for the purpose of utilizing the collective expertise of its partner organizations. ACE provides partnerships with a “one stop shopping list” of expertise and community development programs and tools needed to ensure long term success found through one organization. ACE’s comprehensive three-phase approach targets communities with populations ranging from 2,000 to 18,000. Communities are selected based on the level of commitment to the ACE program and the community’s capacity to support the ACE program.

The Alabama Regulatory History Commission (ARHC) brought the Main Street program to Alabama in 1992 and served as the state Main Street coordinating program, providing guidance, support, services and essential certification to existing Main Street towns. State budget cuts in 2003 and 2004 resulted in loss of staff and funding for Main Street at the state level and the program became dormant.

Main Street Alabama came back to life in 2009 and incorporated in 2010 to serve as state coordinator of the Main Street program. It follows a 30-year-old model for community revitalization that has seen great success nationwide.

A nonprofit organization, Main Street Alabama stresses public-private partnerships, broad community engagement, and initiatives that create jobs, spark new investment, attract visitors, and spur growth. Main Street builds on the authentic history, culture, and attributes of specific places, to bring sustainable change. In early 2009, the AHC contracted with the National Main Street Center to assess needs for and support for a revitalized statewide Main Street Coordinating program. The goal was to reestablish a stronger program that could match the investment and success of neighbors like State Street Street downtown. Main Street Alabama uses a proven model that has produced impressive revitalization results in many other states, the Main Street Four-Point Approach®. This method leverages local assets to revitalize their districts by leveraging local assets—from cultural or architectural heritage to local enterprises and community pride. The four points of the Main Street Alabama approach work together to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort.