

# Metropolitan Home

Rose fellow Andy Brookes, an architect trained at New York's City College, was charged with coming up with sustainable strategies for this low-income apartment building in Harlem—from a GreenGrid planting system on the roof (courtesy of the Home Depot Foundation) to a community garden out back—as well as finding out about and interpreting the community's needs.



## Fellowship of the Roses

A FORWARD-LOOKING PARTNERSHIP TRAINS YOUNG ARCHITECTS IN THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE. **BY KARRIE JACOBS**

**W**hile the world is filling up with museums and luxury condos designed by architects so famous that all you need is a first name to recognize them—Frank, Zaha, Rem—there is an emerging movement of architects who are young and idealistic in the way that those guys from the Bauhaus, the inventors of modernism, were at the outset. What they want to do, these upstarts, is find ways to build great buildings, mostly housing, on very low budgets. The patron saint of this movement is surely

Samuel Mockbee, whose students at Rural Studio in Alabama began in the 1990s to build inspiringly beautiful “charity houses” out of found materials. In 1999, Enterprise Community Partners, a nonprofit that funds low-income housing to the tune of a billion dollars a year, and enlightened for-profit developer Jonathan Rose jointly established a fellowship specifically to teach young architects how to operate as effective public-spirited entrepreneurs in a challenging, cash-starved, red tape-clogged environment.





Jamie Blosser was part of the first class of Rose fellows, dispatched in 2000 to work with the Ohkay Owingeh Housing Authority on tribal land outside Santa Fe. Through assiduous networking, Blosser built support and

organized funding not for single-family houses but for a 40-unit development (above) that, like traditional pueblo architecture, was configured densely around a central courtyard.



Nathaniel Corum, who studied architecture at Stanford and the University of Texas at Austin, worked with



In Portland, Oregon, Ben Gates is working on a 16-story tower with floor plans designed by SERA Architects intended to allow low-income families to settle in the city's gentrifying Pearl district. Gates gathered the families around a giant floor map so they could highlight the features that made the neighborhood appealing or unappealing.



the Red Feather Development Group out of Bozeman, Montana, designing a system that would let members of the

Northern Cheyenne, Ojibwa and Hopi tribes build their own straw bale houses, like the one underway above.

Enterprise, which itself was founded in 1982 by a visionary, James Rouse (famous for developing the city of Columbia, Maryland, and Boston's Faneuil Hall), and his wife, Patty, dispatches its hand-picked Rose fellows around the country to spend three years with the community groups that know how to work the funding and political levers that get affordable housing built. "Our goal," says Rose, who has thus far donated \$6 million to the program named for his late father, "is to actually show that there is a profession, a significant profession, of being a community-based architect, and that profession is growing."

On a drizzly spring day, on the roof of a newly completed low-income apartment building in Harlem, I meet Rose fellow Andy

Brookes. Here in this remote block of West 153rd Street, just across the Harlem River from Yankee Stadium, we're standing on a roof cushioned with a lush array of foliage and flowers, cleverly contained in a Green-Grid, a planting system that is to the green roof as carpet tiles are to a rec-room floor. The building, aptly named David & Joyce Dinkins Gardens, for New York City's first African-American mayor and his wife, has this state-of-the-art eco-amenity not just because it will help insulate the building, but also because Enterprise's motto lately is Green Housing for Everybody. The building, six stories tall, with 83 apartments and ground-level classrooms for the Construction Trades Academy, also has an unusually striking facade,

distinguished by metal sunshades angled to keep the summer sun out and let the winter sun in.

Brookes, whose fellowship with the Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, the building's co-developer, ended in 2007, has returned from his native Anguilla for today's ribbon-cutting ceremony. A slim young man with a close-cropped beard and a brown corduroy jacket, Brookes leads me on a tour and proudly points out green features such as a boiler that's on the roof, a more efficient location than the traditional basement. He shows me the community garden out back. Brookes didn't design the building; a firm called Dattner Architects did that. Instead, he was the building's "facilitator." On one hand, he was there to advo-

cate green strategies—that’s one of the most significant things that Rose fellows do—but he was also charged with finding out about and interpreting the community’s needs. As we walk the building’s corridors, we are constantly interrupted by people who are almost as excited to see Brookes as they were to see Mayor Dinkins. The extent to which everyone knows him suggests that Brookes was a successful fellow, one who mastered the subtle art of “community architecture.”

Katie Swenson, the Rose Foundation’s program director since 2006, was herself a Rose fellow, and the story she tells is a typical one: “I always knew that I wanted to do community-based work, but at the same time I honestly didn’t have a strategic game plan.” After graduating with her master’s in architecture from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, she was invited to partner on a fellowship application by a local nonprofit, the Piedmont Housing Alliance, for which she’d done volunteer work.

Swenson explains the role of the Rose fellow by telling me about Jamie Blosser, dispatched in 2000 to work with the Ohkay Owingeh Housing Authority on tribal land outside Santa Fe. When Blosser arrived, the tribe was squandering its land on single-family homes. Through assiduous networking, Blosser built support and organized funding for a 40-unit development that, like traditional pueblo architecture, was configured densely around a central courtyard. “There was an architect of record and a tax-credit housing project, but what she did as a fellow was take those two items and turn it into

an incredibly beautiful project,” Swenson tells me. Blosser’s role, like that of Brookes in Harlem, was much broader than that of a typical architect. “It’s the role of listening and learning and teaching the community,” Swenson adds.

What’s striking about the bottom-up approach to affordable housing promoted by the fellowship is that, unlike the old-style monolithic public housing projects that were built in spite of the desires of the existing community, the affordable housing that the Rose fellows work on is always a reflection of the community for which it’s built. In fact, one recent fellow, Nathaniel Corum, worked with the Red Feather Development Group out of Bozeman, Montana, designing a system that would let members of the Northern Cheyenne, Ojibwa and Hopi tribes build their own houses. Corum was asked to come up with a way of systematizing the construction of straw bale houses. “We were able to really boil down a way of building that was very efficient when the building was done, but also something that volunteer crews could build well,” he explains. Red Feather’s method is to teach a volunteer crew to build a house over the course of a month on a budget of about \$55,000. Straw bale is the material of choice because it’s readily available, insulates well and is relatively easy to master.

Meanwhile, in Portland, Oregon, Rose fellow Ben Gates seems to be adding layers of complexity to his project. He’s working with an organization called Central City Concern on a sleek, 16-story tower, designed by SERA Architects, with floor plans intended to allow low-income families to settle



Victoria Ballard Bell worked pro bono on the Marion, Alabama, Job Training Center, designing on nights and weekends while writing grants

to support it. In 2003, she landed a Rose fellowship to develop it. The building, an angular assemblage of industrial materials and the only modern building for miles around, was completed in May 2007. She’s currently developing a day-care center.

in the city’s increasingly fashionable Pearl district. Gates organized a series of meetings with the community. At one, he gathered families around a giant floor map that was made up of aerial photos, and the parents and children—especially the children—marked it up, highlighting the features that made the neighborhood appealing or unappealing. Based on this meeting and others, it was determined that the building needed to have its own day-care facility and a community center.

The most determined Rose fellow, however, might just be Victoria Ballard Bell. Back in 1997, when Bell was an architecture grad student at the University of Virginia, Samuel Mockbee himself came to visit and conducted a design studio with her class for a job-training and day-care facility in Marion, Alabama, not far from where he’d established the

Rural Studio. The former mayor of Marion, Ed Daniel, even participated in the studio. The project died when Mockbee did, in late 2001, and Bell stepped in.

“I took it on because nobody claimed the project,” she recalls. She worked on it pro bono, designing on nights and weekends while writing grants to support it. In 2003, she landed a Rose fellowship to develop the Marion Job Training Center under the auspices of Design Corps, a Raleigh, North Carolina-based community building organization that, as it happens, was founded by Victoria’s husband, Bryan Bell (a bit awkward, but the committee that reviewed the proposal was convinced that the

need in Marion was real). Despite the fact that her fellowship ended just as the building began construction in 2006, Bell took the job to completion. The Marion Job Training Center, an angular assemblage of industrial materials—and the only modern building for miles around—was completed in May 2007. Bell and the local nonprofits couldn’t find funding for a day-care center, though, so the building is only half of what Bell originally envisioned. Since her fellowship ended, she has started her own architecture practice in Raleigh, but she continues to attack Marion’s problems.

So next time you’re contemplating your pantheon of architectural

gods, imagine for a moment what Frank, Zaha or Rem might do with a client who, like the town of Marion, wanted a symbol of change but, unlike, say, the Guggenheim Museum, didn’t have a budget. Imagine your favorite starchitect going out and digging, as Victoria Ballard Bell did, until she found the money. Hard to picture? Well, maybe the Rose fellows—26 of them so far—with their community-spirited approach to the practice, represent a new kind of architectural hero. You might even want to make room in your pantheon for Andy, Katie, Jamie, Nathaniel, Ben and Victoria. ☛

*For further information on this program, go to [RoseFellowship.org](http://RoseFellowship.org).*

