

No Such Thing as Bad Publicity? Why Clickbait's Bad for Affordable Housing

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Kira Gould



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Last month, FastCoExist and Inhabitat ran stories about Auburn University's Rural Studio's 20K Project. Inhabitat's was titled: "[Students design affordable, beautiful homes that target mass productions at just \\$20,000 each.](#)" FastCoExist's was: "[This house costs just \\$20,000, but it's nicer than yours.](#)" The subhead took it even further: "The Rural Studio's 20K House is so cheap and has such innovative design that it's changing the entire housing system—from mortgages to zoning laws." The 20K house is a worthwhile student project coming out of the great program run by Andrew Freear and founded by Samuel Mockbee. It's great to see coverage of Rural Studio's efforts, but to hear these headlines (and, less hyperbolically, the stories that followed), the 20K Project is revolutionizing affordable housing for the mass market right now. However, the authors, who may not be responsible for the titles, fail to point out some of the key differences between student work and building in the real world—and in so doing do a disservice to everyday practice.

After reading these stories, I reached out to two prominent designers in the design-build world to get their opinions. First, architectural designer Jordan Pollard, who is currently running his own company, [DRIFT Design Build](#), after working for four years at Make It Right in New Orleans (before that he worked on Make It Right projects with John Williams Architects and William McDonough + Partners, where—full disclosure—we both worked). I asked Pollard for his opinion after an exchange on Facebook, and he lamented the effects of articles such as these.

Kira Gould: What's wrong with the way these pieces are painting the 20K Project?

Jordan Pollard: As someone who has been dealing with affordable housing for several years, I am disappointed by articles like this. They are misleading and nowhere near

represent reality. I love Fast Company, and am bummed they did this. But they are not the only ones.

The Inhabitat story noted, at least, that it cost some \$135,000 to make the two houses and the deck connecting them, which makes a little bit more sense. But I am sure that even those costs do not accurately represent the donations of time and materials that projects like this often get.

KG: What are the realities of affordable housing, from your perspective, that are being left out of the picture here?

JP: There is the cost of land, for starters. Many student projects have that donated to them. And when media outlets report cost of materials as being some \$13,000, I want to know what was donated in terms of materials, too. Were permit fees waived? There are many times when you need a licensed architect or engineer for certain permits, and that's not likely in these totals. It is completely fine to get around having to do that stuff, but it's not truthful to report the results without the real numbers as a part of the story. These kinds of things get shared around and people walk into our office and insist that they've heard that houses can be built for these impossibly low numbers. If I were trying to make a house for \$20,000 that would be impossible.

At Make It Right, both in our work in the Lower 9th Ward and elsewhere, we tried to document all the donations so that that our numbers were accurate. When you say "We are building for this amount" you really have to look at why and how that was possible, including everything from property costs to permits, and all the donations along the way.

KG: The headlines seem particularly egregious. We know that these are designed to be startling, and to "earn" follows, likes, and shares, but is web-based journalism just so invested in clicks that it is effectively going too far?

JP: Sensationalizing in journalism is hurting the people who are trying to actually design and build affordable housing. Yes, part of the problem is how journalism has to sell these days. It is all about clicks. It is all too frequent that the article does not relate to the headline. And for all that, those publications may not be getting what they really want, anyway. There was recently an NPR piece [on All Tech Considered: ["How Do You Measure Passion? Figuring the Value of Social Media Followers"](#)] about how the number of followers is meaningless. You have to look at the "substance" of the followers. They are creating new algorithms to "qualify" the people as substantive.

Plus, it's 2016. We live in the land of data and numbers. There is no reason to be deceptive about this stuff. The more people understand and the more transparency we have, the better off we all are—the designers, the builders, the finance and real estate people, and the would-be homeowners.



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After speaking with Pollard, I also reached out to Rusty Smith, associate director of Rural Studio and associate professor at the Auburn School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture. We discussed whether those numbers—even the \$135,000 number that was referenced in the Inhabitat article—are accurate and, more broadly, how student projects can be applied in the real world.

Kira Gould: Your 20K House project has gotten a slew of recent coverage, including new stories from FastCoExist and Inhabitat, both of which seem to be touting this as something that is ready, or nearly so, for the mass market. How accurate are these reports? Where is the project now?

Rusty Smith: We appreciate the press, of course, but those headlines are unquestionably clickbait.

We are a student program, and we are trying to create something that can have use and value in the real world. This was a first test.

Our collaboration with developer Serenbe was our first “field test.” We have a very long view of this whole effort, and this is a student project with a possible long-term, real-world application. Serenbe was a great first partner for us, because they recognized that there was no way that it would be \$20,000 or anything close, but they were committed to doing it. We are meeting with them in a couple of weeks for a full accounting. That \$135,000 figure, which is probably pretty accurate, includes so many things. The full accounting will include lessons for us about what costs we can know. We believe that there is great opacity in small home procurement: we can daylight a lot of the “knowable” numbers.

We have a very long view of this. In terms of “giving it away” to companies or individuals in the real world, we are learning that the “it” is not a set of construction documents. People don’t just need to know what to build, but how to build it and why it needs to be built that way. That’s much more like a complex instruction set.

KG: Surely the 20K Project as executed by students is vastly different than it is by others.

RS: 20K House exists within a five county service area. The places where we work, there are no zoning boards. If you want to build a house, you can. Serenbe is rural, but it’s in Fulton County, the same county that Atlanta is in—that means a whole different set of zoning and permit issues.

All of the networks in which home procurement exist [codes, mortgages, zoning and other regulatory frameworks] are stacked against small-home ownership. Not because they are bad people or have bad intent. Every roadblock makes sense in isolation, but in the aggregate, it’s the classic wicked problem. We recognize the complexity of that and because we are an institution, we see that with a long view. But this is a nuanced story to tell. So the stories that are being told are pieces of the story.

KG: Now that the first field test has been completed, by Serenbe, what else is different?

RS: We build one of these houses in three weeks ourselves. Serenbe took about five or six months. That changes the cost model of the house, too.

KG: Is your material budget really \$14,000 on the student-built houses? That seems very tight. Are there donations in addition to that?

RS: We have a shopping list of materials that is \$12,000 to \$14,000—we are teaching our students to work to that material budget.



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KG: Who is the actual market for this project, if there is one?

RS: The real market for the house is not the for-profit sector. The market is going to be housing advocacy groups. We are talking with potential partners now that will have capacity to do it. They will be our next field test partners. We also think the DIY-er will be interested.

All of this depends on getting the “it” refined. It will probably end up being more like a detailed instruction manual, with lots of elements about how to deal with zoning, mortgages, codes, and more. For homeowners, that would include how to work with contractors and craftspeople.

KG: What about making the house site specific? You work in five counties in Alabama and Serenbe built it in Fulton County, Georgia. Similar climate, but the site had to be vastly different than your usual sites.

RS: We are place-based, no question. We work and build here. If we eventually export this program to places beyond our general climate, there’s more work to be done. We worked with Serenbe on some things that would need to be adapted. But it was a similar enough climate that it was not like adapting it for Minnesota.

KG: Do you and others at the Rural Studio and Auburn University’s School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture regret the 20K Project name? More importantly, is it a real constraint? Is the name itself, effectively, clickbait?

RS: Not really. That has always been a real number. It’s not a provocation. Year after year, that is constraining and driving the student project. We have not changed it for inflation or other factors. From the student learning and research perspective, I’m happy that we’ve

stuck with that number: it is a constraint that makes it real for the students.

To be honest, we don't seek media attention. We are not trying to attract students to our program or anything like that. The budget constraint is the key point to the student learning we're after here. We do have long-term hopes for the 20K House's application in the real world, but they are not immediate, even if some media outlets are attracted to that part of the story to the point that they are inspired to exaggeration.

KG: Why does that number make sense in your context?

RS: Rural poverty is not the same as urban poverty, which people are more familiar with. Homelessness is not usually the issue in rural poverty. Most of the homeless here have land and water; they are living in an old trailer home or something similar. We assume that utility costs are not in the equation because where we work, they usually already exist. Yet, I get frustrated when people suggest that we shouldn't be doing what we're doing because we can't figure out land or utilities. We are teaching architecture. These are student projects and as a state institution, not a penny of state funds can go the physical projects. We are a really efficient nonprofit and we depend on donations.

KG: What other partners are you working with to get at some of the layers of the "wickedness" of the issue?

RS: Regions Bank [a subsidiary of one of the country's largest providers of consumer and commercial banking services, serving customers in the South and Midwest] has been a great partner in this regard. They have never published a thing about us, they are not making money from working with us, but they understand the mission and it is aligned with their culture, so they are figuring out how to write these mortgages properly for these houses.

We are an institution. We are patient. We want to do this right: The goal is to get a very affordable house that is dignified and noble that anyone would want, and make it procurable as effectively and efficiently as possible. The thousands of inquiries we are getting are heartbreaking—and motivating. The need is out there. What we're working on is not ready for mass market just yet. Our next steps are with other partners who will be early field tests, such as housing advocacy groups.

One thing that's important to be clear about is that 20K is actually very different from most of the other work we do at Rural Studio. It is actually intended to be different from, and in effect a critique of typical design-build student work and service learning education. Those projects depend on free labor and donated materials, so they inherently "hide the numbers." With 20K, we want to make the accounting more real, to try to show that affordable housing can be done without relying on charity. But it's not ready for prime time, as Serenbe helped us to show. The fact is that housing is not affordable, but people deserve it anyway. We are pushing toward a third way. Our institutional partners—banks, permitting agencies, code groups, and others—really do want to help solve this problem. But we have a big vision and a long view: We want to solve these issues holistically, and that means working with all sorts of group who can make providing dignified housing part of a solution that factors in food systems, health issues, and more. As an institution, if we take it one piece at a time, we can leverage our influence across many sectors. Ultimately, that's what it will take.