

# KENTUCKY

## Alumni

SPRING 2012

College of Design & Alumni Redefine River Towns

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# Giving new meaning to 'up the river'

UK College of Design & alumni  
redefine Ohio River towns By Beverly Bell

Scan the four men's resumes and you'll think you've got it all figured out in a matter of seconds. You spot the connection under the heading, "Education." The four — Mark Bethel, Tim Skinner, Drura Parrish and Martin Summers — are all trained as architects: wired to mesh form and function, equal parts of the creative and the analytical while imagining a more perfect environment. You pat yourself on the back for finding the common thread so quickly.

Turns out you're only half right. What each resume can never reveal is the much more powerful tie that binds them to one another. Powerful and yet subtle, this is a tie born of memory and the common experience of growing up in Henderson. While their lives unfolded in different and unexpected ways, they all came back together with one shared goal — to write the next volume in the story of their hometown. With the help of the University of Kentucky College of Design and its students, they spearheaded an effort that now includes local government officials, business

leaders and citizens in conjuring up a new future for Henderson. Along the way, their work has become a building block in a much larger and grander project, one that could very well redefine Ohio River towns for decades.

It's called the River Cities Project, a 10-year partnership between the UK College of Design, its graduate students and several cities along the Ohio River. The objective is ambitious: to look at dated or underutilized facilities along the riverfront of these cities and using design, conceive of innovative ways to redevelop and reuse them. The hope is that by bringing the sites back to life, they'll stimulate jobs and opportunities, re-energize stagnant pockets of commerce and produce tax-generating revenues that will ultimately enhance the community overall.

The project started with Henderson. Mark Bethel is an international real estate developer who has worked around the world. Receiving his bachelor's in architecture from UK in 1975, Bethel had returned

to Henderson for a brief period after his father, Jim Bethel, passed away. Jim Bethel was also an architect, so while Mark completed a few of his father's unfinished projects, he reconnected with Tim Skinner, a 1980 architect alumnus, as well as a former president of the UK Alumni Association and Henderson resident. Skinner ran his own firm and he knew Bethel from when they had both worked for the elder Bethel early in their careers.

Perhaps he still heard his father speaking to him six months before the elder Bethel's death, telling Mark it was time to start giving back. Or maybe it was being in Henderson again, remembering what he had loved about growing up there and realizing that something was being inexorably lost as jobs vanished and the younger generation abandoned the city at an alarming rate. Whatever the reason, Bethel told Skinner he wanted to give money to the university with the ultimate goal of helping Henderson. Neither knew exactly what shape this would take, but Skinner agreed to join him.

Bethel and Skinner soon met with another friend, Drura Parrish, also a Henderson native trained as an architect, and member of the UK College of Design faculty. The three devised a plan: funnel the contributions from Skinner and Bethel into the design school where UK architecture students would look at two sites in Henderson — an old granary and the decommissioned Henderson Municipal Power and Light Plant (HMPL #1) — and come up with proposals on how both could be redeveloped.

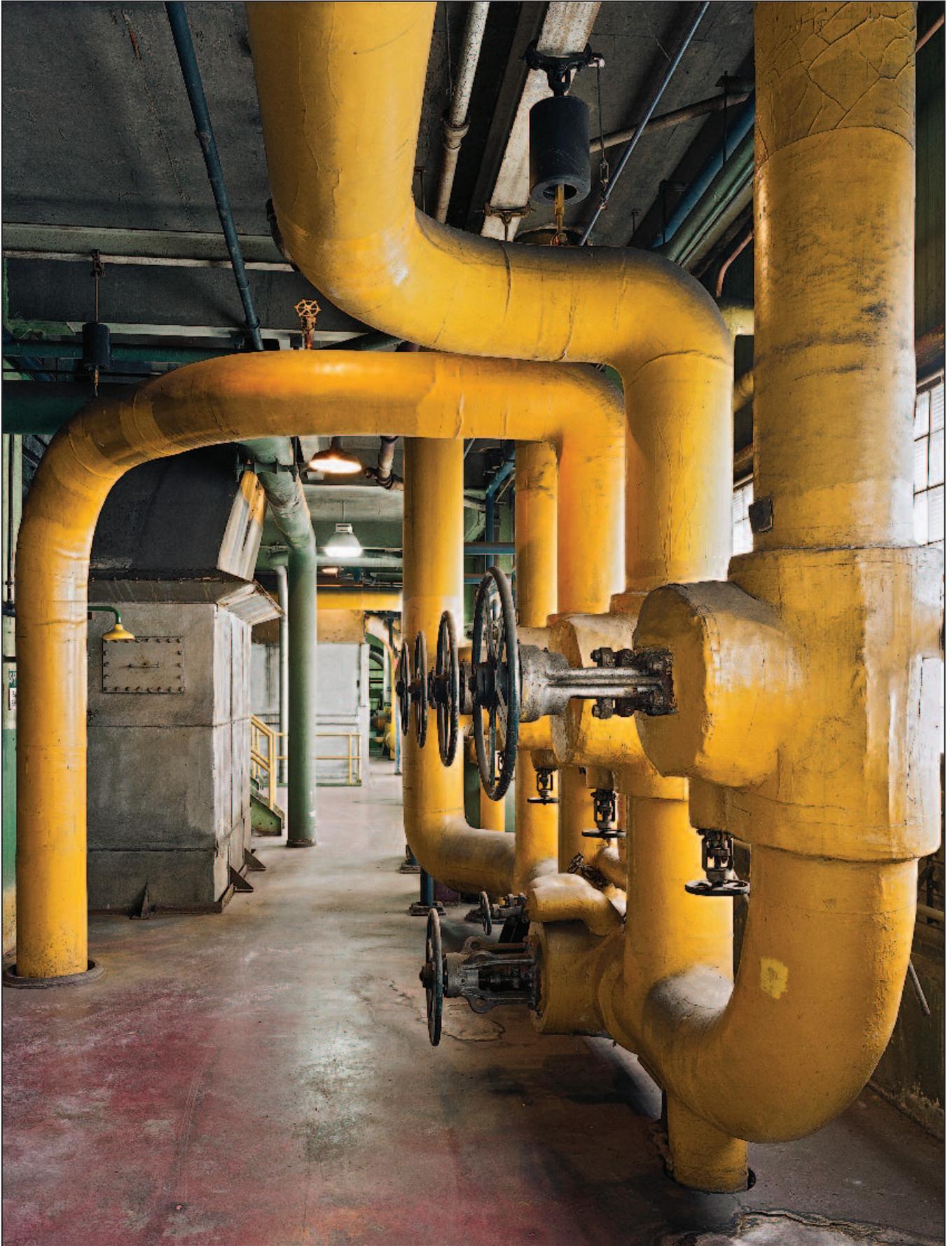
Bethel was eager to get the students involved. "There's nothing more fun than putting some fresh eyes on something without restraint ... That really throws a



Mark Bethel



Henderson resident Tim Skinner '80 DES, left, Dean Michael Speaks of the UK College of Design, center, and Martin Summers '96 DES, Sutherland Visiting Professor of Landscape Design at UK, right, are involved with the 10-year riverfront redevelopment effort called the River Cities Project.



*Photo: Frank Doering*

A view of the inside of HMPL #1, the 65,000-square-foot retired coal fired power plant in downtown Henderson, as it awaits a possible new life.



**To address the problems of economic decline and job loss in river towns, the UK College of Design is partnering with local municipalities and private, citizen-led development groups and nontraditional developers to revitalize industrial sites like HMPL #1 in Henderson.**

curve into beautiful young minds and gives them a wide range of things to think about. I told them to suspend disbelief,” he says.

The first year of the project would also include students from the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), another cutting-edge design school in the country. Parrish had a strong relationship with SCI-Arc after receiving his post-professional master’s from the school and teaching there before coming to UK.

Flesh was put to bones and the Henderson Project was underway. Three years later, a fellow Henderson native and 1996 UK College of Design alum, Martin Summers, joined in when he was named the Sutherland Visiting Professor of Landscape Design at the university.

In design school, the academic/real world experience that Parrish initiated and Summers carried on is called a studio. But the Henderson experience pushed the concept to its furthest extremes, so much so that designers thousands of miles away from the Commonwealth of Kentucky sat up and took notice.

#### A rose by any other name...

Everyone has heard of art studios and movie studios, photography studios and recording studios. There are even studio apartments, which are typically living spaces the size of a closet in a dense urban area.

In the design world, however, studio has nothing to do with a small, cramped room.

In fact, the opposite is true. It means something big, wide open and full of possibilities. The only boundaries are those imposed by one’s own mind. Simply, a studio in this scenario is a semester-long class in which students tackle a specific design problem and come up with solutions. Studios are considered a centerpiece in design education, says Michael Speaks, dean of the UK College of Design, because they bridge what the students learn in the classroom with a real design challenge.

From the first moment he arrived at the university in 2008 as dean, Speaks knew the Henderson Project held tremendous potential. “What’s happening in Henderson is also happening in Owensboro, in Paducah and in a lot of the cities along the Ohio River,” he says. Because of the disappearance of good jobs and the disappearance of youth who need those jobs, “...you have kids who go to school someplace else and they don’t come back.”

After two studios, many public meetings and wide discussion, the immediate focus shifted primarily to proposed plans for HMPL #1. Instead of tearing down the behemoth 65,000-square-foot industrial facility, Henderson leaders listened to the students who suggested converting it into a multi-use building. The options were as expansive as the building itself: a convention center, a community meeting space, museum, small hotel, or a corporate headquarters. Building on the two miles of green space that already existed on the riverfront and considering its prime location with dramatic spaces and beautiful views of the river, the former power plant held a myriad of possibilities.

“The big thing in architecture right now is sustainable design and there’s nothing more sustainable than taking an old 1950s coal fired polluting power plant and retrofitting it to some sustainable, reusable building,” says Skinner.

Speaks suggested expanding the project beyond Henderson, thereby creating the River Cities Project. Design studios are up and running in other Kentucky towns including Louisville, Paducah, Covington, Newport, Bellevue and Dayton.

Now, the River Cities Project has captured the attention of designers from around the world. The project was selected from hundreds of submissions and is one

of only two from the United States to participate in the fifth International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR), which runs April through August 2012 in the Netherlands. The IABR (See below.) represents the best of the best, attracting architects, designers and academicians to discuss critical issues facing design while reviewing exhibits of progressive ideas.

### Fresh eyes and no limits

When Parrish ran that first studio, there was no talk about building anything. Instead he laid out the problem to his students as straightforward as he could. "I told the kids, 'Look, here's Henderson. It's not doing so well. What do you guys think you should do about it?'"

This was the foundation of Henderson and all the river project studios: students with no agenda and no preconceived ideas bring an unencumbered perspective to a community facing a serious challenge. "What really changes the discussion in this project is that the students who are in school developing these design projects are doing research in the local communities," says Summers, who ran studios in 2010. "They're trying to meet with people and talk with people who live this life every day. It's not an abstract thing."

For Megan Doyle, currently a graduate student in the program, the experience was unparalleled. "Henderson was the first

time that you actually had to think about the realistic existing condition. You had to present it to not only your professors, but also the key players in the town."

The other unique part for the students was working so closely with design school alumni. "We were all invested in this project," says Jordan Hines, who received his master's in the spring of 2011 and is currently at the Gensler Architecture Firm in Houston, Texas. "Even though we had had different professors...a relationship was built. That had never happened before."

### 'The most beautiful river on earth'

To the French, the Ohio River was La Belle Riviere while the Indians called it Oyo, or the great river. Thomas Jefferson once said it was, "the most beautiful river on earth." The history of America unfolds along its nearly 1,000 mile-long banks like pages turning in a book. Dozens of towns just like Henderson can credit the Ohio for their birth and early growth.

The River Cities Project represents a critical next step in that evolution. And even though redevelopment along the Ohio will continue for years, the project has already impacted the dialogue as all these towns map out their futures. In Henderson, for example, the River Cities Renaissance (RCR) was established. Headed by Butch Branson, a leading proponent of the Henderson

Project, RCR was created to promote public/private partnerships and move the project from research and speculation into development. In Northern Kentucky, the design students are currently collaborating with Vision 2015, a regional long-term planning effort that includes 15 counties.

For its part, HMPL #1 has several major hurdles to overcome. Negotiations between the power company, which controls the plant and the city which owns the land, are currently underway. After that, remediation to address concerns such as asbestos will take another one to two years. The remaining equipment will then be removed and sold. When this is completed, final plans for the conversion can be adopted and financing secured.

Until then, the plant remains quiet, the last employee having left more than two years ago. Still, Bethel can see the facility for what it was. "It was never just a building to me. It was a living machine, a labyrinth of hissing pipes, lit gauges and humming generators," he says.

It was life, and it fed life into this community. If he and the Henderson leaders have their way, it will be that again — stretched out next to the Ohio as it has been for more than 50 years, but transformed and transfigured, proving that the river isn't the only thing that keeps on rolling. ■

## UK College of Design and International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2012

When Henk Ovink visited his friend and colleague Dean Michael Speaks two years ago and witnessed the riverfront redevelopment work the college was doing in Henderson, the vice director general and director of national spatial planning for the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment offered one piece of advice: enter the competition for the fifth International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam 2012 (IABR).

The IABR is considered one of the most prestigious architectural exhibitions in the world and this year is expected to draw 80,000-100,000 visitors from April through August. What had captured Ovink's attention was how the college was tackling the project — a bottom-up approach that included students, citizens, community leaders, elected officials and business people.

"He thought that this was kind of a unique way of city development and city planning because in Holland, for example, it all would have been top down," Speaks explains. Ovink, who also serves as co-curator of IABR, thought the project was a natural fit for the theme of the five-month long event, building sustainable cities.

Speaks followed up on his friend's suggestion, submitted an application and learned in mid-2011 that the college had been selected as one of 29 design projects overall. It's also one of only two from the United States and was chosen from among 430 submissions.

The actual exhibit, "Kentucky River Cities: Louisville, Paducah, Henderson," will include much of the studio work, models, presentation drawings and proposals from the college's larger River Cities Project, a 10-year riverfront redevelopment effort between the university and numerous cities along the Ohio River. The exhibit's main focus will be the redevelopment efforts of the Henderson Municipal Power and Light Plant (HMPL #1), which has been closed for more than two years and occupies a prime location along the city's riverfront.

"It's a real interesting opportunity," says graduate student Megan Doyle of the biennale selection. "We are going to be presenting Kentucky and its River Cities Project to the world."