

Learning Montana, Evolving Place

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When we talk and write about architecture, we most often talk and write about the object, divorced from its nature, its place. Perhaps this way of talking produces a subsequent way of thinking and designing that fails to consider the depth and power, value and necessity of place. Failing to consider place, we not only fail to consider the qualities of the landscape and terrestrial environment, but we also fail to consider people, their social and cultural influences, and the living condition of what we make. How do we come to know place? How do we know when we know it? Is it because we live in a place our entire lives, or that we have learned to observe patterns and classifiable conditions? Do we know a place because we can measure the environment and its changes in weather, time, and season? At what point do we stop thinking about the place as an abstraction identified by its comparison to other places, and start knowing it through continuously *being* the place? Russell Chatham, one of Montana's resident artists who moved from California in the 1970s says that it took

him several years to know this place, several years before he could paint Montana. What Chatham means is that while he *could* paint the landscape of Montana's mountains, sky, or grassland, it would have been from the outside—discursively, from merely looking *at* but not from within—from the intuitive inspiration that comes from experiencing life. So rather than impatiently paint Montana, a place he did not know, Chatham waited.



The Yellowstone River as it flows through southwestern Montana's Paradise Valley. Photograph © Lori Ryker.

Knowledge of place does not come immediately, or without effort. Place seeps into us over time, becoming who we are. We must lie in its shadows and become a part of its day to day occurrences. Something strange occurs as you come to know a particular place. Its once identifiable qualities blur into continuous experience. No longer conscious of a particular place it becomes your life. You still sense its changes and continuities—its wholeness, but you are no longer startled by its unique characteristics. I believe it is this blurring experience that artists attend to. They are given the responsibility to make the world visible and tangible when it is all but blurry for the rest of us. For both long-time residents and visitors, a place comes present and distinct through an artist's writing, drawing, painting, building, singing, and sculpting.

What if we were to write about architecture, not as an object, but as part of a place, aware of its influences, its relations and conditions? Would we not share a greater sense of its place, its reality? I was most fortunate to share a friendship with Samuel "Sambo" Mockbee. Over the years we had many conversations about "architecture, sex and death," as he would call it. I also heard him speak publicly a number of times. While Sambo wouldn't speak directly to the idea of place, he spoke often of his life in the South and its particularities. Mostly, he lived his life and practiced architecture through the unique lens of the South and the impressions of that place upon him. Sambo had this magic about him, a sense of himself in the world, a clear feeling and sensibility about the place in which he worked that was the gift given a poet. His architecture was great not because of the forms, textures, and materials he assembled, but because of his mythology which came



A tumbledown barn in Paradise Valley. Photograph © Lori Ryker.

to inhabit his buildings. When he spoke about his work, it was not to explain the plan and sectional organization of particular buildings but to share the experience of beauty he recognized in the world. Even in the tragic setting of southern Alabama and Mississippi he found beauty shining through in the lives of the people he came to build for. Sambo would talk and write about the Mother Goddess, explaining her role in our cosmology. Such preoccupations are often seen as idiosyncrasies, odd conditions of our personality that others find difficult to comprehend. But it is these preoccupations that bring to life the world, while the brief idiosyncratic experiential overlaps we share with others are those truths that don't require words. Sambo confirmed my belief that our over-reliance on the activities of analysis and objectification of our artifacts is a waste and dishonor to life itself. The best we can

offer others of architecture is the story of why we design and build the way we do. This is the beginning of my story in Montana, a place and people I am learning day by day.



I sat on the unfinished deck of the house yesterday, balancing on the bare joists and listening to the quiet. Southwesterly wind whistled through the dry grasses across the horse pasture. The hot sun mixed with the browns and faded greens of late summer and I looked into Montana. I looked into the rotating spray of irrigation water, the halo of color created as light passed through water. Last year's remains of the Fridley Forest fire are visible high on the distant ridge. The summer air is calming, clear, and dry—not crisp and abrupt like winter. As I sat and thought about this house we were building in Paradise Valley, I thought about the valley floor . . . what will this place be like in another twenty years? In my mind I see a valley floor and river edge fully built upon with houses making a different kind of suburb from most



The complex of buildings Ryker/Navé Design designed for photographer Audrey Hall, Paradise Valley, Montana. Photograph © Audrey Hall.

towns. I see the mountainous public land rising above the hills that are held by absentee landowners who fancy themselves as ranchers. Despite the bitter taste of their daily absence in our community, I appreciate their holding onto land that would otherwise be divided into smaller and smaller parcels for the next wave of development creeping up the hills to the edge of wilderness. But I also see a place filled with the immense beauty of deep forests and glaciers, blue and bright skies. The beauty found in this place's immensity

always reminds me of our own smallness. I feel Suce Creek trail as it drops down into the creek bottom and then returns to an open pasture edge and the valley beyond. Suce Creek will always feel a part of me. From here we made our first hikes as newcomers to Montana. We cut down our first Christmas tree, tried out new snowshoes, picked iris in the spring, and learned the local wildflowers in summer. From here I learned that, no matter how close, the trail could not be reached by car in the winter after the wind blew snow drifts across the road.

I close my eyes again and try to see the valley as I have heard it was ten years ago, quiet, with just a few ranches holding all of the tens of thousands of acres.



Light filters deep into the interior of Audrey Hall's home.

Photograph © Audrey Hall.

There was a night sky that was black except for the stars above. While it is not difficult to imagine, it is hard to feel. And it is the feelings we have for places that bind us to them. Today the valley is full of twinkling lights up the side of the hills and mountain slopes that mix with the stars in the sky. The lights and stars create my feeling of this place. Ground and air are blurred. Gravity is erased. I am floating in the cosmos.

The night sky is transfixing here. It is one of our cultural obsessions, skiing on the night of a full moon, staying up into the early morning to watch meteor showers, discussing the “strange red light in the western sky” with the local ranchers. One of the most transforming experiences I have had as an adult came a few years ago on a winter night. The night sky was hazed with red, like it was on fire. As I drove home in the dark, I realized I was seeing the Northern Lights. Thirty minutes later, parked on top of a grassy hill we looked to the North as the sky shot colors of emerald green, red, and white up from the horizon, making the dome of the night sky perceptible. At one point red slid across the sky arcing toward the rising moon. That night was one of the few times as an adult that I screamed from some primal center, while watching with awe a sight that no scientific explanation could diminish for me. We should be searching for more moments such as these. We should be creating them for each other.

The valley is bright today, white sunlight, bound by the sinewy Gallatin Mountains and the sharp-peaked Absarokas. The Absaroka, or *Absarokee* as named by the indigenous Crow tribe, hold within them part of the Beartooth Wilderness, one of the largest remaining federally protected wilderness areas south of Alaska. Within these mountains are the grizzly bear and North

American gray wolf. Their unassuming lives and predator nature are the source of many heated discussions in bars and community rooms. Most ranchers would prefer them confined to Yellowstone National Park, while I find their roaming through the surrounding mountains a reminder that I am mortal, and definitely part of the food chain. Montana is raw in that way; it exposes your humility or arrogance, but seldom allows you to remain complacent.

Legend has it that this valley came by its name in the 1950s from a developer who was looking for a catchy name, Paradise Valley. Just as *Big Sky* seems a name that you can feel through your imagination, so does Paradise Valley. It appeals to our frontier mentality. Paradise is disappearing these days, the developer's name serving its purpose. From ranch hands to cult church, movie star to general working folk, the valley is being populated by humanity. While local developmental studies complain that the valley's beauty is disappearing into houses and roads, we must remember that the wildness of the valley disappeared long ago, under the plow and hoof of domesticated livestock, and our vision of independence and settlement. Its tameness is studded with farms, ranches, and their structures. Since the 1860s the valley has been a domesticated landscape.

As Paradise Valley disappears, suburbia appears. While we mostly envision suburbia as those paved streets ending in cul-de-sacs, with a selection of five repeating house styles, the patterns here are different. Despite its form, suburbia is a quality of living, a state of mind. Suburbia is a choice we make to not live in the realm of urbanism. As James Howard Kunstler says, America has decided that neither the city nor the wilderness makes an appropriate place to live. We choose to not live in a densely populated environment



The kitchen/dining area in the Hall home. Photograph © Audrey Hall.



Light surrounds the fireplace, Hall home. Photograph © Audrey Hall.

to gain some “ground” between us and our neighbor. Suburbia also permits a certain amount of visual and physical independence. Suburbia has similar characteristics to the disappearing agricultural and ranch land in the American West, without the necessary function for the space of fields, pastures, and livestock. Suburbia, like agriculture, is domesticated wildness. It is the in-between: not belonging to the wild or urban, holding many of our perceived qualities of the wild, being tamed by the structures of civility, freedom within prescribed limits. Such similarity is highly visible in the surrounding landscape of Livingston, where I live. The formal disposition of these suburbs is influenced and developed from the agricultural condition that remains on the other side of the fence. People move here, to Livingston, to Paradise Valley, because they are in love with the idea of Montana. They want to bring to life their imagination.

The lots that form the suburbs of Paradise Valley are not typical divisions of an acre, but plots of multiple acres found down dirt roads, along creek bottoms, or across grasslands or turned pastures. Similar to agricultural land divisions, these plots are still carved along the Jeffersonian grid, rather than following the natural condition of the landscape. They are surrounded by pristine wilderness, mountains, and wildlife. To retain their rural quality of life, people would rather drive the twenty miles to town, than support a quick mart along the highway—at least so far. Paradise Valley is evolving into a suburban development of large parcels of individuality. It is a suburbia that dots the landscape with houses, and small barns, or steroid “cabins” with horse pasture. While I look with disdain at the anesthetizing suburbs of sprawl outside of Western towns such as Las Vegas and Phoenix, I do not have the

same clearly drawn opinions of Paradise Valley. As the population grows and expands as it has across the continent, is it not nostalgic to say “it is time to preserve. . . .”? This sprawl, the expansion across the West, is the American way. Yet I believe our vision of a world that is something *other* is American, too.



Our client came to us over a year ago with a vision for her home. Hers was not a vision of a house, but of outbuildings. She wanted a home that was determined in its landscape and casual in its disposition. A photographer with a keen sense of the Montana landscape, she had already recognized the vanishing farm and rangeland and the fast arrival of the brick veneer ranch style homes or the log or EIFS sided “larger than life” houses we all see across America’s West. Our client’s land is a small piece of a grassland meadow in Paradise Valley surrounded by a community landholding that, by covenants, is not developable. She recognized that her buildings could support the vernacular language of Montana; that they could add to the continuity of the valley context.

Montana possesses many of the original structures that were built by the settlers. And in many cases they are still in use. Corn crib and grain sheds stand out as lone sentinels in pastures and grain fields. They are easily identified by their frame structure exposed to the outside and smooth horizontal board siding on the inside. They are lifted off the ground, floating in an attempt to keep out the local vermin. They are beautiful containers that hold light between their walls. Their pitches are steep, as are most



At night, looking up from the Hall living room to the bedroom loft space with corn-crib walls. Photograph © Audrey Hall.



A house by Ryker/Nave Design on Deep Creek, with the Absarokas in the background. Photograph © Audrey Hall.

outbuildings around here, to keep the snow from piling up too high. Galvanized metal covers the roofs of most farm buildings, becoming a collage of worn gray and rust as the snow sits on it year after year. Smaller structures served as feeding sheds for sheep, foaling sheds for horses, shoeing stations and weighing facilities. The barns come from many cultures, Norwegian, Dutch,

Swiss, and German. In the valley the German heritage is prevalent with the straightforward simplicity of gable-ended volumes that are added on to as money is available. Most original structures are of square log construction changing to vertical boards at the second floor. The houses are simple frame structures or settler log cabins that most often sit across from or adjacent to the barn, never being further away than necessary to provide protection in the harsh Montana weather. There is an inherent relationship between the use and need and the perceived value of what was being housed or provided for in all outbuilding types communicated through construction methods and quality of materials. Today these structures are used as found or reinterpreted for the changing functions of land use.

Exploring the hierarchy of outbuildings in size, construction method, and details, the project comes together, not as mimicry, but as a new conception of what building in Montana can be. Side-stepping the popular nostalgia of the West, my partner and I considered the necessity and drive of the utilitarian structure, imagining how this ethic could produce a simple set of structures

to live within. We also considered the needs of our client who is single and enjoys hosting large social gatherings, challenging many of the assumptions of room enclosures and relationships. We drew and expanded upon both formal and material characteristics of outbuildings. Techniques that belong to Montana, to the language of our national agricultural heritage, to a particular scale of building, and its narrative of detailing were considered and reinterpreted. But the results are nothing as cerebral as can now be explained. The ideas came about more through discussion of the fabric that surrounds us, an evolving vision of how we understand place from a distance and how place is something else close up. Ability to change and evolve is key to the continued value of cultural artifacts. Multiple interpretations of our creations overlaid upon original intent are what make our experiences in life rich and engaged. Discovering or creating new uses for artifacts that have not outlived their material usefulness is one of the great tangible qualities of Western heritage. Ranchers and farmers reuse a grain bin a number of times, changing its function in small ways over many years, they reuse side walls or old doors as bridges and skids, they hold onto old hinges and leather harnesses and change them into strapping and tie downs. Architecture can provide a similar character of transformation. Doors can be useful as walls and windows can close to become walls, changing the quality and use of a space. The project is both marked by the history of barns, post and beam construction, variations on typical agricultural wall construction and cladding, tempered by the matter-of-fact-ness of living off of limited means brought into a contemporary telling of living in the West. It is not only a part of the past but a critical response to living in these times of resource depletion, recognizing



The kitchen of the Deep Creek residence. Photograph © Audrey Hall.



*The public rooms of the Deep Creek house, with pool in the foreground.
Photograph © Audrey Hall.*

that the frontier is closed, that where we live requires our care and consideration.

Before I came to Montana I imagined its place, its mountains and rivers, its summers and winters. But I had not considered what it would be like to build in Montana. It costs more to build here than most places in the West. The remoteness costs, or at least the idea of remoteness costs. Less people means less buying power. Concerns toward sustainability must be tenacious. While the rest of the country is becoming familiar with the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) system, in Montana we struggle to have the building industry as a whole understand the concept of sustainability. For this reason, changing the way buildings are built in Montana requires research, perseverance, and imagination. Just as no “certified” lumber is commercially available in Texas, Montana lags in such a program. Yet small mills are still a common business practice here. Despite the lagging public support for forestry conservation and smart practices for timber harvesting, some family-owned businesses choose to follow an ethic that recognizes the limitation of environmental resources and the need for healthy and sustaining practices in this place. We have forged long-term relationships with one of these mills. They are relied on to provide wood that is select-cut, knowing the lumber source for each milling job and its method of harvesting.

Last September the frame went up, resembling post-and-beam barns of a hundred years ago. The trees for the timber work had been harvested by hand, and brought out of the forest by draft horse, not more than five miles away. From the second floor of the house we can see Pine Creek where the timbers came from. It remains rich with wildlife, a continuous habitat from private



The house Lori Ryker and Brett Nave designed for themselves near Livingston, seen from the south. Photograph © Audrey Hall.



Ryker and Nave's own home, nestled into the landscape (as seen from the north). Photograph © Audrey Hall.

land to federally protected wilderness. Last weekend we sided the interior framing of the master bedroom with rough sawn wood from the same mill, a reconfiguration of the construction method surrounding hay barns and grain storage buildings. We could see

covered ground, wind would pick them up, and they would seem to float over the ground for us to catch them. We build in Montana year round, but if you get off schedule, the winter months are exhilarating to work through. After the truck left, we looked from

the light from the windows beyond graze along the top edges of the boards as we spaced them apart, like the morning light as it moves above the horizon of the Beartooth Mountains. The room will be a lantern of light, inside and out, perched above the ground floor.

By last winter the studio and main house was dried in, and we installed insulation. Unavailable locally, the eco-fiber was trucked in from Phoenix. As I drove out the valley that early winter morning, I watched the outside temperature drop from about 1 degree to negative 14. We hurried to unload the semi, large bundles being thrown out of the trailer's open doors bounced across the snow



The sculptural fireplace in Ryker and Nave's living room.

Photograph © Audrey Hall.

the house to the studio, knowing that the sooner we filled the walls and roofs of one building we could turn the heat on. All day we unrolled and stuffed, and cut and pulled the insulation. I remember steam coming off of my partner's back, like the Madison River in winter. That memory makes the Montana winter tangible. I can feel its coldness, the steam, the frost, flying geese, and squeak of dry snow underfoot.

As I sit at the edge of the deck today, grout dries on my fingers. It is time to return to crawling around on hands and knees, finishing the tile work in the showers. One shower is built from flat river rocks I collected from the Yellowstone River. Several weeks of walking the dogs along the river's bank resulted in a shower floor, while its walls are built from the galvanized roof of a nearby demolished barn. A handrail is built from the driftwood left at a culvert after the Yellowstone receded this spring. Balancing on floating logs, I collected the wood for its strength, color, and shape. Some cottonwood, some lodgepole pine, red dogwood cleaned by beavers, other curly willow roots. Collecting materials from the surrounding landscape extends the place into the buildings, knitting together a continuous experience and memories, constructing a context of feelings similar to the words of a poem.

Montana, and possibly most of the West, are described through their waterways and landscape. To know a street is not as important as knowing the land and the place names we have given them. In this way we tie our cultural history to the place. Architecture can participate in this knowledge, keeping us mindful of where we are. From the kitchen and bedroom windows Deep Creek and Pine Creek to the west can be seen. Up Deep Creek is Russell Chatham's old studio. He still owns the land and home,

but I have never seen him there. In the 1970s he, Tom McGuane, and Jim Harrison would get together as most friends do—to bar-b-que and carry on. In the 1980s Rick Bass, who lives up in the Yaak, came down to visit Chatham and Harrison here. I know this because I ski through Chatham's land in the winter, and the old truck that Bass vividly describes in one of his books still lies in a heap along the drive at the edge of Chatham's property.

Pine Creek boasts a small store and cabins that hold summer bluegrass concerts on their small lawn. The nights are cool next to the creek and in the shade of the great fir trees. People bring blankets and chairs and beef and buffalo burgers are served, along with the local beer. It is a time to enjoy each other's company and appreciate the green grass, bugs, and summer smells that for so long are buried under winter snow.

Further south, down the valley is Emigrant Peak, the tallest peak around here. Emigrant is a marker of place and distance, while moving down the valley, or up in the mountains. In the



Light and shadow in the bedroom of Ryker and Nave's home. Photograph © Audrey Hall.

living room the fireplace is counterpoint and foreground to Emigrant Peak. Emigrant was the home to a small Native American tribe the settlers called the Sheep Eaters. Gold was discovered at Emigrant in the 1800s and there was no more room for the Sheep Eaters. They are lost to this place now, wiped out by greed. Not one descendant left. Out the double-glass doors to the west flows the Yellowstone River. Though infamous, it is a continuous part of our landscape and life here. From drought

to flood, experienced through fly-fishing, floating, and drinking its waters, it is a touchstone for the health and heart of the valley. Tall cottonwoods edge its banks, along with red dogwood and other species of willow. Rainbow and cut-throat trout find home in its waters. In the spring large flocks of white pelicans fly over the river, landing on its water to rest and feed. They look like visible music in the air, their white feathers shining in a bright blue sky. Not far from the house is an osprey's nest. All summer long we watched the parents raise their young, hunting in both grass and river. The

house is almost finished now, and the natural grasses are coming back. Surrounding the house, the distant landscape is merging with the immediate, history is meeting the present. Next spring the grass will fill in completely, and these buildings will sit on the land as part of the cultural vernacular, an evolving continuum of what it means to live in this particular place.

All of these experiences add up to how I know this place. It is the feelings I have for the night sky, the mountains in white snow and green grass, aspens in full fall glow, the deer that watched me as I watched her. It is the grass that dries to yellow, and the ranchers that try to hold onto their family's land. It is the newcomers who are loud, arrogant, and brazen. It is my friends and summer on the lawn listening to bluegrass, or summer in the mountains looking down on all of the fire works on the Fourth of July. It is the people at the Coffee Crossing who make the best Chai I have ever had. It is color and words of Russell Chatham, Tim Cahill, and Tom McGuane who give voice to this place, as it was twenty years ago and as it is today. It is seeing the twinkling

lights down the valley, and the glow of the sun setting beyond the mountains' edge. It is the smell of heavy smoke in the air when the forests are on fire and the smell of pine when it rains. It is knowing that when I walk into the wilderness I am smaller and weaker than the grizzly, moose, and cougar that roam within. It is my client and friend who is both daring and concerned, who knows this place and makes the most beautiful and spellbinding photographs.

Our work is a marker of activism and engagement in the community. It is both an answer and an ongoing question of how and why we live where we do. The result is an architecture that can serve as context to the place that passes in front of windows and walls that enter through open doors and become the place that the next person knows as part of Paradise Valley. It is all of these things and many more that add up to this place, that I remember when I make architecture. It is these experiences, people, and places that I honor through form and material, myths and anticipated rituals I am not quite ready to reveal.