

# wilderness training

in the field, students unearth the link between design and the environment.

by lori ryker, ph.d.

The Northern Rocky Mountains meet the plains in the middle of Montana, where I live and work. It is an inspiring place, where the Absaroka, Beartooth, and Crazy Mountain ranges form around the Yellowstone and Shield rivers. It is one of the few areas in the United States where the wildlife is truly wild. It is also a place that is undergoing development unmatched since the frontier expanded.

As picture-perfect megalog cabins replace undeveloped landscapes, rivers are drained, and wildlife is pushed out of its home, I ask myself, as a teacher and practitioner of architecture: Am I attentive to and critical of this vastly changing environment? How can we reconcile our perceived needs while gaining a clearer understanding of our place in this world?

## natural order

In the shadow of the Absaroka/Beartooth Wilderness, I teach a program at Montana State University called the Remote Studio. It focuses on helping architecture students come to a clearer understanding of their responsibility to the world around them—the



Courtesy Lori Ryker

Montana State University's Remote Studio program involves students in every aspect of designing and building a small-scale structure. The 2001 group harvested and milled their own lumber on site.

world in which they will someday practice. The key to the program's structure is the students' firsthand experience of the world, referred to by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger as "dwelling."

Heidegger, writing in the 1950s at the height of the housing shortage in Germany, stated that simply building more houses does not attend to the primal condition of the human being. He believed that housing should not only provide shelter, but also make people aware of their connection to the rest of the world through the poet-

ic expression of architecture. Dwelling, he wrote, was the mortal condition of being on Earth, through which we "cherish and protect" the planet and ourselves. Our attentiveness to this condition helps us understand that we are part of a larger whole.

The architect's gift is that of making places that situate us, that give grounding and meaningful context to our experience, thoughts, and actions. We have all been to places that help us recognize nature's continuity and beauty. Le Corbusier conveyed water's restorative qualities when

designing the tiled recliner in the bathroom of Villa Savoye. The entry sequence in Mockbee/Coker's Barton residence reveals a considered sense of living that is intricately tied to the shift from day to night. The residences of Glenn Murcutt even articulate the presence of rain throughout the changing seasons.

## disappearing act

Despite such contributions, I am concerned that these experiences are dwindling from the artifacts we make, and that their disappearance affects our understanding of

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