

Remote Studio

In *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (Wiley, 2009) Juhani Pallasmaa calls for shaking the hegemonic foundations of an architectural education that values conceptual and theoretical knowledge over embodied experience. Focusing on the hand, he points to the imperative of direct modes of knowing evidenced in ongoing developments from the arts to cognitive science. Remote Studio is such an earthshaking opportunity, one of too few that holds the promise for expanding the relevancy and agency of architecture today. The pivot of Remote Studio is how it folds culture and wilderness together by taking students out into the landscape to better understand themselves and the complexities of the ecological systems that humanity is nested within.

June 1, 2010. Flying into Bozeman, Montana from the northwest I notice the expression of white Madison Limestone poking through fresh spring growth along the ridges of Horseshoe Hills. Peaks of the Gallatin Range remain snow covered. As the valley unfolds below, land flat enough is planted with alfalfa or hay; otherwise livestock graze the lowlands. On the ground Lori Ryker and her white German Shepherd Noel meet me at the curb. Lori is the founder and Executive Director of Artemis Institute, the non-profit organization that operates Remote Studio where she is full-time faculty. After a quick lunch we drive east to Livingston, pick up groceries, and turn south into Paradise Valley towards the base for Remote Studio on the bank of the Yellowstone River.

Remote Studio is an immersive educational program that seeks to focus student understanding on how we operate within the environment and empower students to seek greater responsibility for the world they will help shape. It is crucial for this review that I visit the studio in action and experience first hand what it produces. Remote Studio offers a full load of university credit over a long summer term (May–August) and a fall semester. Currently, it occupies a farmhouse and out

buildings as its base location 15 miles south of Livingston, Montana. Students live together in the house, Lori stays with them three (sometimes four) nights a week, and they use the outbuildings and barn as workshops and studio. Students navigate and synthesize experiences beyond those of standard architecture curricula by combining hands-on studio exercises and seminars with hiking and overnight backpacking trips culminating in a design/build project for a local client.

The Summer 2010 participants are all architecture students from outside Montana. Kristina Cowger from the University of Texas at San Antonio, Sara Delahoussaye and Robert Guidry (the sole graduate student) from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and Andrew Graham from Tulane University. Shortly after Lori and I arrive we check on the material studies.

Students are making fly ash concrete samples cast with various aggregates (Figures 1 and 2). After a short discussion and experimenting with brushed surface treatments, we tour the rest of the compound. The first outbuilding contains a compact wood shop. There is a barn used for exhibitions and storage, a studio made from a chicken coop along the river, and another riverside structure that is the library. The last humble building contains the metal shop. Over its history Remote Studio has occupied three other base locations in and around Livingston.

During 1993–1994, Lori taught at Auburn University as Samuel Mockbee and D.K. Ruth were starting Rural Studio—the groundbreaking design/build program that immerses university students within a powerful cultural context to live and work. While her book *Mockbee Coker: Thought and Process* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1995)

1. Reviewing material studies by the Yellowstone River, Remote Studio base, June 1, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)





2. Experimenting with surface treatments on the fly ash concrete samples in the wood shop. Remote Studio base, June 1, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)



3. *Vessel 1* by Robert Guidry. First vessels ranged from an apron of river stones extending from the yoke of three cottonwood trees by Sara Delahoussaye, to a groomed surface leading to an enclosure for light coming through the base of a tree by Andrew Graham, woven willow lines and bunches extending from another cottonwood by Robert Guidry, and a line of tall dead grass stems outlining the new growth of the season along the riverbank by Kristina Cowger. Livingston, Montana, June 2, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)

focuses on the private practice preceding the Rural Studio, Ryker's time with Mockbee and his milieu left an indelible mark.

Remote Studio began when Lori was asked to test her PhD research at Texas A&M University. The dissertation, "Second Nature: The Problem of

Making for Students of Architecture," became the studio foundation. In 1997 with a grant from the American Institute of Architects and support from her department chair Lori selected a group of A&M students to construct the *West Texas Bird Watching Station* in Ft. Davis, Texas.

In 1998, Lori began teaching at Montana State University (MSU) and in the summer of 2000 Remote Studio constructed the *B Bar Wind Shelter* southwest of Emigrant, Montana. The studio completed another wind shelter for horses in the summer of 2003. After receiving tenure in 2005, and authoring two books about off-the-grid architecture, Lori resigned from her position at MSU to dedicate herself fully to Artemis Institute and Remote Studio. Running the program as an overload to a full-time appointment had become untenable. Since Fall 2006 Remote Studio has completed six design/build projects in the region with two more in the works.

After our tour of the compound and as light rain falls, Lori gathers the students on the porch for a discussion of the design/build project. Until this point they were working on generative exercises independent of building program or application. The summer studio will create markers for a new park in the city of Livingston on recently donated land in the floodplain of the Yellowstone River. The budget is very limited (\$1,000), but students have access to a steady stream of crushed recycled glass and fly ash in addition to any materials they can find or secure through donations as the project evolves.

By late afternoon Pete Constanti and Jaric Pope arrive, both Remote Studio 2006 alumni. Pete gives the students a welding demonstration on the Hobart MIG in the metal shop. Everyone takes a turn making test beads. The students prepare a wonderful meal of red beans and rice—their Louisiana influence—salad and fresh-made pie. The table expands to include Tim Sanford, also a 2006 alum, and Audrey Hall, a member of the Artemis Institute Advisory Board. It is clear even in the



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4. *Reflection Point*, built Fall 2008 on an island within the Yellowstone River floodplain. The project includes a long wall parallel to the river made of steel tube and willow branches, a perpendicular plane of steel and fir slats with an aperture framing what moves towards you down river, a bench with back and overhead scrims, and a long steel screen ramp extending out to the river's edge. Last year a large cottonwood limb fell revealing the power of its force on the steel structure. We can imagine future events, of river and vegetation, will continue to deepen the patina of this architecture. Livingston, Montana, June 2, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)

5. *Reflection Point*, Livingston, Montana, June 2, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)

site-based projects that foster a dialogue beyond the utility of envelope or building program. They call for other forms of architectural communication.

The park site meets the alluvial Yellowstone River with a mix of braided gravel bars and channels. A large island fully vegetated with a stand of mature cottonwood trees is where Remote Studio constructed *Reflection Point* in the fall of 2008 (Figures 4, 5 and 6). To reach the project, we have to walk on a fallen log across a rising side channel of the river. The project is a liminal space of contemplation framing the occupant's understanding of site by connecting water, elevation, and light. Design and detailing convey the character of experience and the ruggedness required for withstanding—to an extent—the forces of seasonal flooding and shedding cottonwood limbs. The clarity of the project reveals an intelligence well-suited for design/build studios. It has impact and experiential presence without becoming distracted—as often happens in academic projects in which an overambitious scope curtails the realization of high-level work within the constraints of time or expertise.

Remote Studio seeks to connect patterns of action with the work of the architect. Regular hikes and backcountry excursions are not recreational or time away from the studio. On the contrary, they provide time for reflection and testing, time to assess and recalibrate priorities, and perhaps more importantly they provide a mechanism for the studio to learn to live and work together. After lunch, we set out for the South Fork of Pine Creek to hike up through an area of the forest that burned in 2006 (Figure 7). We begin under a mixed sky of clouds with hopes we stay dry. The first mile follows a Forest Service road not yet open for the season. Everything is still wet. In addition to the persistent rain of recent weeks, snow is melting from the peaks, swelling creeks and rivers. The ground is soft and active. The road ends at the trailhead where we find a cell phone in the gravel. It is unclear how long it has been here with water bubbling behind its



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second week of the term how close knit the studio community becomes and how tightly life and work are interwoven.

June 2, 2010. After early morning routines, which include clearing mousetraps filled during the night, everyone forages for breakfast and gets ready

to meet at the site. The first vessel is due (Figure 3). To initiate momentum and dialogue in the studio a series of three vessel projects provide an index of investigation for site, found materials, and individual exploration. The real goal of these provocative exercises is to allow for the creation of



6. Reflection Point, Livingston, Montana, June 2, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)



7. Hiking through burnt forest at the South Fork of Pine Creek, Gallatin National Forest, June 2, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)

screen—days or months—either way traces of culture are difficult to escape. The trail ascent is not too steep, but it is slow going for these students who are still learning to be in the wilderness and hail from low elevations. In time they will acclimate

to the altitude, but I suspect they will continue carrying pepper spray in the outer pockets of their packs given the prevalence of grizzly bears in the area. We take frequent breaks to let the group reassemble and marvel at the downed trees

crossing the trail amid the standing dead from the fire. We cross a low ridge and move onto an exposed slope covered with grasses and wild flowers instead of trees. A stiff cold wind meets our steps. Before too long and the next turn onto a more exposed face, the group decides it is time to return. The wind is picking up and the occasional raindrops seem to be arriving more frequently. Lori is also thinking about the wind and the chance it could bring down more of those burnt trees. We make it to the vehicles without incident—or so we think. Back at base everyone unwinds from the strenuous day and sheds their hiking boots and gear. Kristina notices that blood has soaked through one of her socks. Evidently, she got a blister and it burst without her knowing. Learning to experience the land and the feedback through our own bodies first hand is a vital component of this education.

Remote Studio establishes muscle memory for the practice of architecture that is as much about picking up a pencil to make a line or a matte knife to make a model as it is about picking up a hammer to set grade stakes or pull nails from reclaimed lumber. This memory becomes infused in the body by walking a site far beyond the limits of property lines to situate an understanding of context within regional forces of hydrology, historical land use, and locally available materials (among many others). Graduates of Remote Studio carry this cache of memory with them out into the world and well into the future.

Long days produce abundant appetites. So a dinner of slow-cooked pork chops, carrots and potatoes, with rice, corn, and fresh made peanut butter cookies quickly vanishes and the kitchen is cleaned (Figure 8). The day isn't over, however; everyone gathers for the evening seminar. It begins with the vessel sequence—number two is due the following Monday—and moves into a discussion of readings from *Overlay* by Lucy Lippard and *The Passion of the Western Mind* by Richard Tarnas. The



8. Around the table for dinner with Lori Ryker, Kristina Cowger, Robert Guidry (center), Sara Delahoussaye, and Andrew Graham. Remote Studio base south of Livingston, Montana, June 2, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)



9. *B Bar Wind Shelter*, built Summer 2000 on the sustainably operated B Bar Ranch where the lumber was harvested and milled. The straightforward detailing allows repair over time as elements and horses inflict wear. Southwest of Emigrant, Montana June 3, 2010. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)

students take a very active role in the dialogue as Lori leads them through key points of connection. Even with tired eyes everyone holds it together as the value of blending “school work” with “life” is

demonstrated by the persistence of embodied learning.

June 3, 2010. In the morning the students head for the site to begin their next vessels and

visit city hall to retrieve a site survey. Lori and I head south on highway 89 to visit the *B Bar Wind Shelter*, a graceful curved and tilted wooden wall breaking wind for horses (Figure 9). After lunch of burgers with characters at the Old Time Saloon in Emigrant, we travel north to find the *US Forest Service Pine Creek Pavilion* built by Remote Studio Fall 2006 (Figure 10). A clear pattern has emerged of projects focused by intent and tectonics. The reductive elements of a primary horizontal or vertical plane, minimal amenities, and a gathering space—for people or horses—are intimately bound within limits of pedagogy, temporal, financial and ecological resources, and community.

The motivation of Remote Studio to develop linkages between culture and wilderness is profoundly more operative and important to the identity of the program than the fact that projects are developed through a design/build process. Lori believes architecture can connect rather than isolate people with natural environments, contrary to many of the technological developments since industrialization. This is not a call of the Luddite. It is a prescient and persistent devotion to using our resources and our intellect more wisely from a broader ecological point of view.

June 4, 2010. Shortly after the students leave for another day of working on site, Lori and I drive to Bozeman so I can catch my flight out. Before leaving Remote Studio, I note the kitchen white board shows the mouse kill count for the semester standing at fourteen—everything is just beginning.

While Remote Studio continues to offer university credit through MSU, Lori is developing ties with other institutions that see the value of immersive educational experiences. University of Texas at San Antonio and Texas A&M, among others, are particularly interested. A new model of collaboration should emerge from the appeal of Remote Studio, one more akin to multi-institutional sponsorship of scientific research centers. I imagine



10. U.S. Forest Service Pine Creek Pavilion, built Fall 2006 within CCC campground. The studio responded to historic CCC context in scale, impact, and material. Gallatin National Forest, June 3, 2006. (Photo by Chris Taylor.)

Remote Studio growing as a field school attracting students from all over who want to rekindle embodied wisdom in architecture.

What is so heartening about the first-person experience embedded in the history of Remote Studio lies beyond the precise and elegant clarity

Lori has brought to the work. More significant is the institutional vision, aspiration, and commitment that has driven her to create and grow the program. It is far too easy to imagine all the reasons why such an effort would seem impossible—funding formulas, liability, university administrators not being able to imagine how to get from here to there. The lack of leadership and inability to prioritize values within architectural education is a loss for the discipline as a whole. Those who step forward are making the future and honoring Mockbee's legacy to "proceed and be bold." In an era when ecological demands pile up around us, it is vital that there are those who commit the time, energy, and personal sacrifice to reveal how we experience the complexities of the environment and provide the next generation with tools and resources they can use.

As I fly east across the Rockies I am buoyed by lyrics in "Oh No" (*Gypsy Punks: Underdog World Strike*, 2005) from Gogol Bordello. "It doesn't have to be so/It is possible any time anywhere/Even without any dough/Oh yeah, woah no/It doesn't have to be so/The forces of the creative mind/Unstop-op-op-able." This is certainly the case for Remote Studio in Montana, and hopefully inspiration for schools of architecture far and wide.