

ARCHITECTURE AND THE REMOTE STUDIO

Finished view of Wind Shelter
(Wayne Sellers)

AN OVERVIEW

Lori Ryker

The practice of architecture is woven into the fabric of our culture, constantly shaping the world in which we live. In recognizing this, we must also recognize that the way in which we educate architects will consequently affect the condition of the built and natural environment. In the Northern Rockies, one of the last regions in the United States to be fully developed and physically transformed, we stand at an impasse of choice. Will we continue to build our cities as they have been built before; will we exploit our resources here as they have been exploited elsewhere; will we forfeit our cultural heritage for the sake of commercial development; will we sacrifice the natural beauty of the mountains, plains, rivers, and lakes for our own perceived needs? Our choices reflect our values. They are not only evident in our day-to-day lives but are codified in our educational programs. Two questions must be considered and responded to not only here in the West, but everywhere. What qualities do we wish for our world? What knowledge do we find essential to impart upon the individuals who will be responsible for creating the world in which we will live? The Remote Studio is one possibility for addressing these questions.

The development of the Remote Studio grew out of my own educational experience. In the early 1990s, I completed a Master of Architecture degree at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. For most of us, the thesis project embodied the

A VIEW FROM WITHIN

Justin Smith

The appeal of the Remote Studio Course for many of the participating students, including me, was a summer spent outside in southwest Montana, as opposed to a semester in the design studios. We were committed to spending the time outdoors, learning about the region, and debating environmental philosophy, but Lori also developed a program that helped shape the way we look at architecture and its design process. I distinctly remember how the meetings throughout spring semester progressed. There was discussion about the organization of the program and worry about tuition and course credit. Eventually, those concerns were balanced by questions about how many hikes we would go on, and where we would go backpacking, making sure that we could spend sufficient time outside. Over seven weeks, the studio's activities took place in and around beautiful Paradise Valley, south of Livingston, Montana. The Remote Studio promised to provide us with wild experiences. For most of us, we feel as Aldo Leopold did, that "there are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot." The Remote Studio is a program developed by, and for, those who cannot.

In exchange for cleaning up ten years of dirt and repairing broken windows, Mr. O'Hair let us stay in the abandoned Richland Schoolhouse, situated on his ranch, about fifteen minutes south of Livingston. A week before the course began, we



L. First group overnight trip
up the West Boulder River
[Lori Ryker]

R. Students negotiating a
West Boulder River crossing
[Wayne Sellers]



LR > culmination of our thinking, a test of our potential, a quest for theorizing and practicing our beliefs. My work focused on the relationship of landscape and place to architecture. As the design work developed, a thesis advisor pointed out to me that there was a shared attribute to the sites I chose to work with: all were disturbed landscapes in one way or another. Recognizing the disturbed landscapes in which we live became the first of many lessons concerning the perception and understanding of nature and culture.

Years later I was driving through Wyoming, a vast place that requires close-up study for its full appreciation. Watching the grass roll out along the horizon as I moved through it, I wondered, what is it about the landscape that resonates within us, and why is it that schools of architecture spend so much time focused on the object of architecture as precedent and idea of creation rather than the natural world itself?

The Ph.D. program at Texas A&M University provided a later opportunity for me to explore this question further along with others. The upshot of my dissertation, the Remote Studio, is profiled here, while my practice with Ryker/Nave Design and RN Construction focus on the professional practice of these ideas. Practice is a humbling act, making reality of academic dreams, while teaching supports visionary interests. They are all bound together by a love of nature, landscape, and the

JS > spent a dirty weekend cleaning the schoolhouse, and before long we established it as a worthy place of residence to call home for the seven weeks of the program.

Initially, our focus was on seeing and being a part of the beautiful outdoors. This was especially easy given our direct view across Paradise Valley to the Absaroka Mountains. Our community room/studio/kitchen, where we spent most of our indoor time, had enormous picture windows facing directly east. At any point during the day, if we became even slightly confused as to what we were working on and why, it took only a glimpse outside to remind us. Each morning, breakfast was consumed as the sun crawled up from behind the Absorakas; days were spent beyond the walls of the schoolhouse; and, as the last hint of color disappeared from the sky over Paradise Valley, we devoured our home-cooked gourmet meals. Our first excursion into the wilderness was a daylong loop trip in the Absaroka Mountains that was strenuous but extremely worthwhile. The hike allowed us to expend some extra energy and gave us time for personal reflection. We were also able to glimpse the beautiful valley from above as well as some spectacular views of the Absaroka Mountains beyond.

Much of the first few weeks of the program were also spent extensively exploring the North Star Ranch, the site for the design and build



L. Patty Flores's vessel
project on the North Star
Ranch (Patty Flores)

R. Steve Harrop's vessel
project on the North Star
Ranch (Steve Harrop)



search for being of a particular place.

Aristotle claimed that wisdom arises from the experiences of adventure and leisure. Adventure provides first hand experiences contributing to who we become, whereas leisure provides time for contemplation and eventually wisdom gained through the assimilation of multiple experiences. The Remote Studio, which draws upon Aristotle's idea, is developed as a semester long immersion in the wild lands of Montana for students of architecture who are interested in exploring the relation of place to architecture, understanding better the holistic approach to an ecological architecture, and learning about their own creative intuition and its ties to direct experiences in the world.

The Program, begun in 1997 while teaching at Texas A&M, currently runs through Montana State University's School of Architecture and takes place off-campus in a live and learn environment within the Yellowstone eco-region, most recently an old school house. Ten students are enrolled in a full semester of coursework that includes design studio, advanced environmental theory, and individual problems of construction, all of which I teach. The courses are woven together with lessons in theory and first-hand experiences, providing an in-depth exploration of the surrounding environment and culture.

Readings and discussions of ecology, environmental philosophy, place, and phenomenology

JS > project. The first assignment was a series of "vessel" projects each of us was to construct. The vessels were to convey our ideas or beliefs about the region or the ranch, and, on a small scale, they let us interpret those ideas in connection with our own beliefs about the environment and our effect upon it. While the first vessels were portable, the final vessel we each constructed was built in place on the North Star Ranch as a reference to and of the permanence of the area and the temporary contact we shared with it. Understanding the intimate relationship between the natural landscape and the man-made landscape of our architecture was an important focus of the studio.

In addition to the hikes and vessel projects, we met with both the owner and the manager of the North Star Ranch to develop an understanding of their aspirations for the project. The proposed project was a wind shelter to serve a small valley pasture on the ranch, protecting horses from frequent storms in the winter and providing shade in the summer. Because we were limited to a six-week period for design and construction, we quickly started developing a proposal. Fortunately, the schoolhouse provided us with one of the best tools for design; wall to wall chalkboards in all three rooms. These chalkboards functioned exceptionally well as a backdrop for our design charrettes, and left traces of ten students'



LR > serve as the framework from which students begin to explore their design projects, while backcountry experiences bring them to a time of personal testing, contemplation, and comprehension. A series of "vessels" built from local materials allow for development and expression of an individual's creativity grown out of their experiences of a particular place. The group design/build project takes their lessons to a practical level, integrating theory, experience, and creativity into the making of architecture. Each design/build project is selected for its ability to serve a client, expand the general public's experience of architecture, and act as an intermediary experience from developed environments to wild and natural environments such as the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness.

For the design/build project, students take responsibility for communicating with a client, developing a proposal, negotiating its appropriateness, developing details, material palette, cost, and production. Discussions of responsibility and appropriateness to place, landscape, and resource remain constants during this period. Students learn how to work with one another, communicate ideas, and speak up for what they believe. Building is a test not only of physical endurance but also of performing as a group in order to make something that supports a developing ethic. The completion of the project brings the Remote Studio experience to its end. Whereas some may only recognize the value of the practical experience of construction and client relations, I see

JS > thoughts strewn across the walls, constantly reminding us of the project's evolution. The first proposal for the shelter slightly misinterpreted the goals of the client, and a second attempt was necessary. The final result not only solved the client's problem but also resulted in a much more graceful design solution. The functional "key" to the proposal was a gate incorporated into the scheme to allow a smaller portion of the pasture to be closed off. This provided separation between pastures while retaining the close proximity of new and old horses, a common concern in introducing new horses to the ranch. The vertical spacing of the wood clad wall opened the structure to a gentle flow of air, light, and views. The result of our proposal is a piece of architecture that would flow out of the valley, picking up the smooth rolling texture of the meadow, and providing a delicately balanced roof to shelter the horses.

With the client's approval, we started the hands-on phase: material selection, cost estimation, detail drawing, digging, cutting, drilling, and connecting the shelter to its pasture. In a maelstrom of events and chaos, the last three weeks of the program consisted mainly of building with a rapid learning curve for all of those not proficient in the art of construction or carpentry. The initial struggle was to refine a system for load transfer that was cost effective and appropriate to our design. We solved this necessity by incorporating steel into the wooden structure, which provided the stiffness to resist significant Montana wind forces. Shop drawings for the steel were quickly

LR > these lessons as a necessity for learning more about the self, gaining a sense of responsibility toward the world, landscape, and architecture, which in-turn provides young architects confidence to practice what they believe.

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Shadow patterns cast on
open gate showing roof and
wall details (Wayne Sellers)

JS > developed and given to the local welding shop for fabrication. Engaging with the local steel fabricator and lumber mill provided us with a great opportunity to work with custom materials and details. With only three short weeks for construction, our schedule was often dictated by what materials were readily available at the fabricator or mill. Sometimes, a wait for materials gave us the excuse for another outdoor adventure.

Living in a small schoolhouse and sweating out a project together allowed the eleven of us to develop a significant bond. We developed our own small community within the larger community of southwest Montana. As with any community, we had occasional disputes and miscommunications, but each provided us with new insight into how a community works. The course helped us recognize the interplay between ranching, the town, and the glorious environment that sustains the life of the area. The design of the project evolved as a response to that place as we became aware of it over the course of the summer. The lessons we learned from the hands-on experience, as well as from each other and our client, were more beneficial than those taught in the previous four years at school. From this experience we each developed a new interpretation of the design process, its role in architecture, and the factors critical to environmentally sensitive and responsible design.

Justin Smith received his *M.Arch.* in May 2004 from the School of Architecture at Montana State University.

Opp. L. Setting shelter posts on a rainy June day (Wayne Sellers)

Opp. R. Typical rigorous day of construction (Lori Ryker)

L. Setting rafters for wind shelter (Wayne Sellers)

R. View of construction progress from the approach road (Wayne Sellers)

Bottom. Finished view of Wind Shelter (Wayne Sellers)





REMOTE STUDIO STUDENTS, 2003

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Nick Fulton
Brian Gregoire
Steve Harrop
Andrea Kauffman
Joe Roodell
Wayne Sellers
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