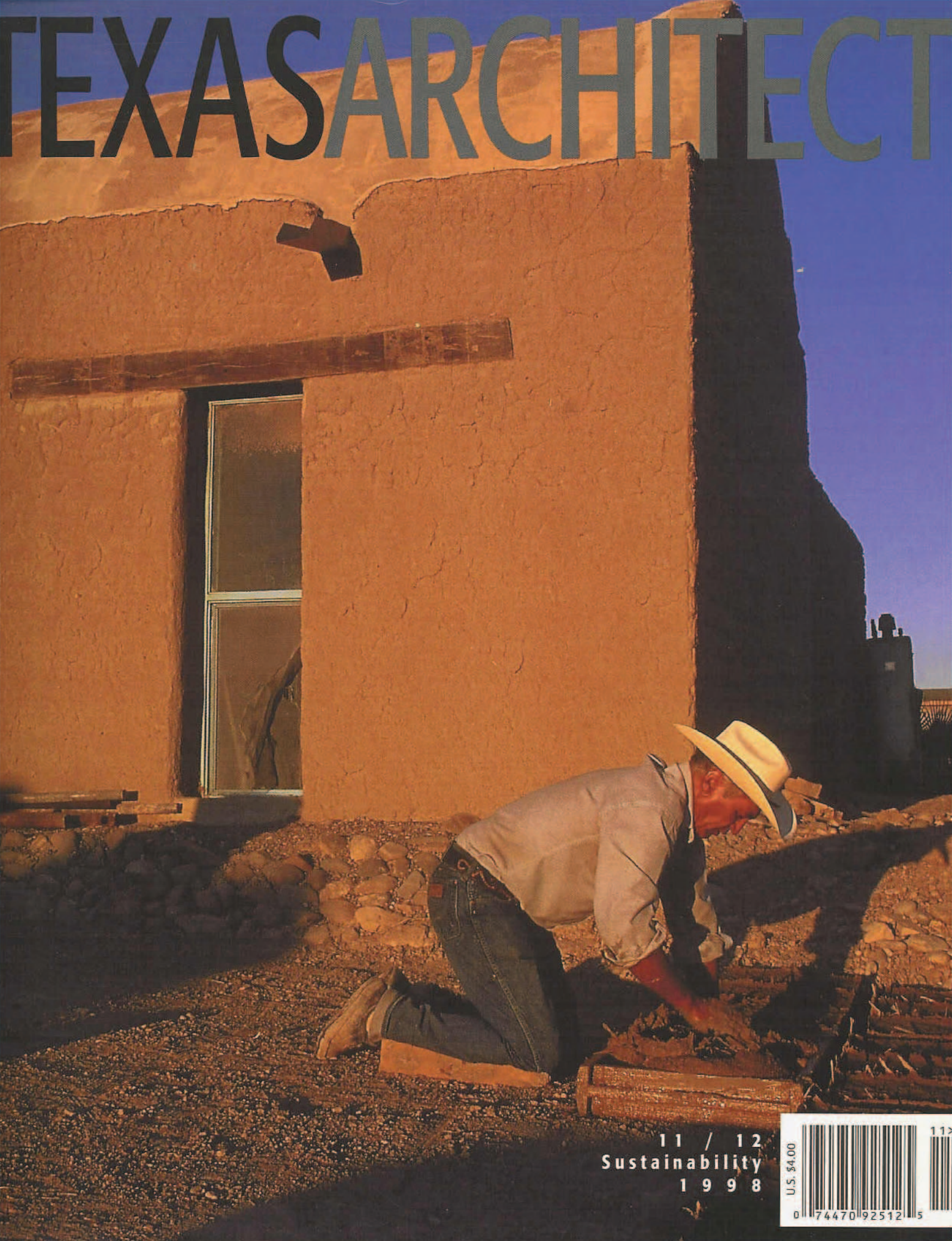


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Survey

Lifting the Mystique 42

EDUCATION A Texas A&M architecture studio spent five weeks in West Texas designing and building a quail-watching shelter for Davis Mountains State Park.

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Lifting the Mystique

EDUCATION According to myth, architecture students learn in a cloistered, self-referential environment—slaving away long hours in studio and seeing the outside world wistfully through a window or only briefly between classes. Typically, academic projects lack the reality of clients, construction, and team-based design. However, programs like Rice University's Building Workshop (*TA*, January/February 1998) and Auburn University's Rural Studio challenge that myth and take students out of the studio and into the world, introducing them to the particulars of site and materials and the reality of clients and economic constraints. In 1997, Lori Ryker, then an assistant lecturer in Texas A&M University's Department of Architecture, ran a Remote Studio with a similar goal: to remove the students from the academic environment and place them in the real world with a real project. In the summer, five Texas A&M architecture students joined Ryker for five weeks at Fort Davis in West Texas, near Marfa's Chinati Foundation. A grant from the American Architectural Foundation partially funded the studio.

Ryker searched for a project with "specific relevance to the community and its relation to the landscape in which it lives," a project that had not only clients and a budget, but also discussed man's relationship to his natural surroundings. The project, a quail-watching shelter, was designed for Davis Mountains State Park. Although similar projects are common in the traditional studio context, Ryker believes that the "particularity of the students' ideas and designs for a unique community such as Fort Davis were exponentially clearer" because of the immediacy of and the students' involvement with the site; a hands-on design/build project by its very nature requires that students learn to interact differently with one another and the process of architectural design.

Besides getting students out of the closed-door studio, "the focus of the Remote Studio was to study and experience firsthand the rela-



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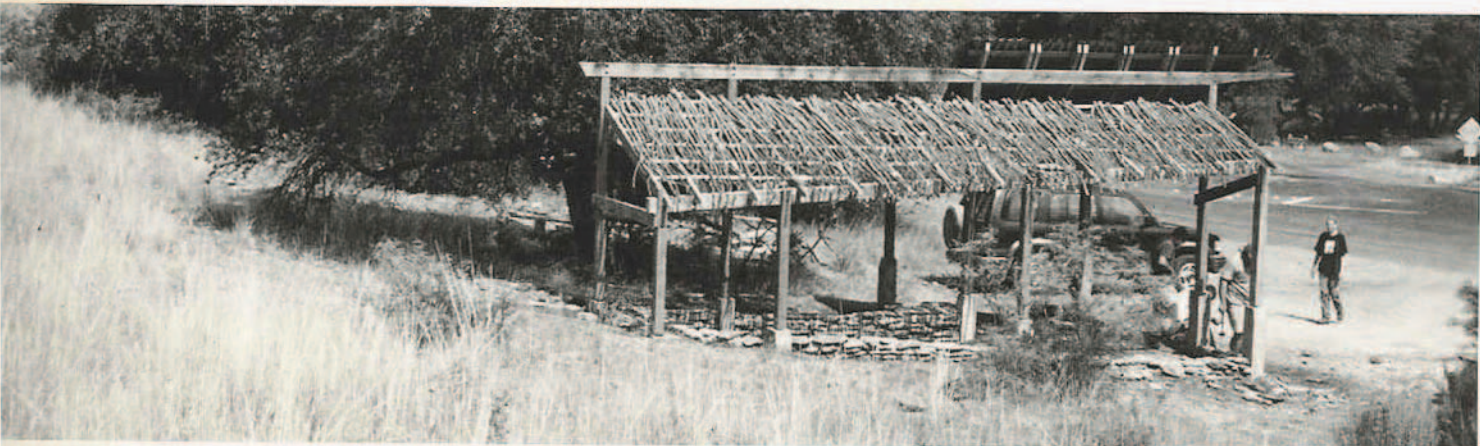
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1 The shelter is built into the hillside with areas of differing floor levels. construction, which used student labor, required only circular saws, drills, wrenches, and

2 Most of the screwdrivers.

tionships that exist between small towns and their natural landscapes," says Ryker. This was achieved through a process that introduced the students to client relationships, team-based design, and hands-on construction, demystifying the process of design realization and creating a concrete legacy of the Remote Studio for the Texas A&M students and the community of Fort Davis. The built shelter goes beyond a mere studio project in its material presence and existence outside of drawings and the imagination.

Choosing from three projects already in



5

3 The ocotillo roof changes pitch as it approaches the hillside.

4 The students harvested local stone for the retaining walls.

5 A metal roof shades the picnic area at the entrance to the shelter.

the park's budget, park manager David Schofhausen asked that the students design a shelter for watching the montezuma quail, a species located only in the Fort Davis area. The studio drew materials from vernacular construction, including harvested native stone, concrete, rough cedar, recycled galvanized metal, and ocotillo, a desert shrub of the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico characterized by thorny branches and used traditionally as fencing and thatch. An ocotillo roof covers the quail-watching area, which looks back toward the hill, while a metal roof protects the picnic area. The shelter, built into the hillside, provides a level surface and allows easy accessibility.

The five-week studio began with a camp-trip to nearby New Mexico and a hiking excursion into Big Bend National Park. The

studio filled the following two weeks with walks, observations, discussions, and small individual charrettes in which the students created objects in response to the landscape. "Much of the discussion of our relationship with the natural environment emerged in discussions about the small projects," says Keith Randolph, a member of the studio.

Design also moved forward on the quail-watching shelter, and the students learned how the design process involves give-and-take between architect and client, design and budget. Randolph notes, "I feel I benefited the most from the opportunity to work with a client and the experience of designing and building something in a group—all things I had not done in previous studios." The students had to specify and quantify all of the necessary materials so that the park could

procure them. Construction took two and a half weeks, and the students provided all of the labor.

On its face, Texas A&M's Remote Studio may lack the explicit social agenda of Rice's Building Workshop or Auburn's Rural Studio. However, notes Ryker, "lessons from small communities and their surrounding environment are rich with experiences due to their cohesiveness and strong sense of identity." Fort Davis is an example of one such small community whose livelihood and identity is intimately tied to its environment. Ryker says, "These small communities—borders of communing and natural—and the undeveloped landscape form a rich ground from which students and the profession can understand what builds community, gain lessons for land use, and foresee the necessity of these considerations in the realm of urban and suburban environments." As at Rice and Auburn, students gained valuable lessons on design realization and the complexities of the world outside of studio.

Jonathan Hagood

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