Learning Boundaries

A designer's take on building—and living—responsibly in Greater Yellowstone

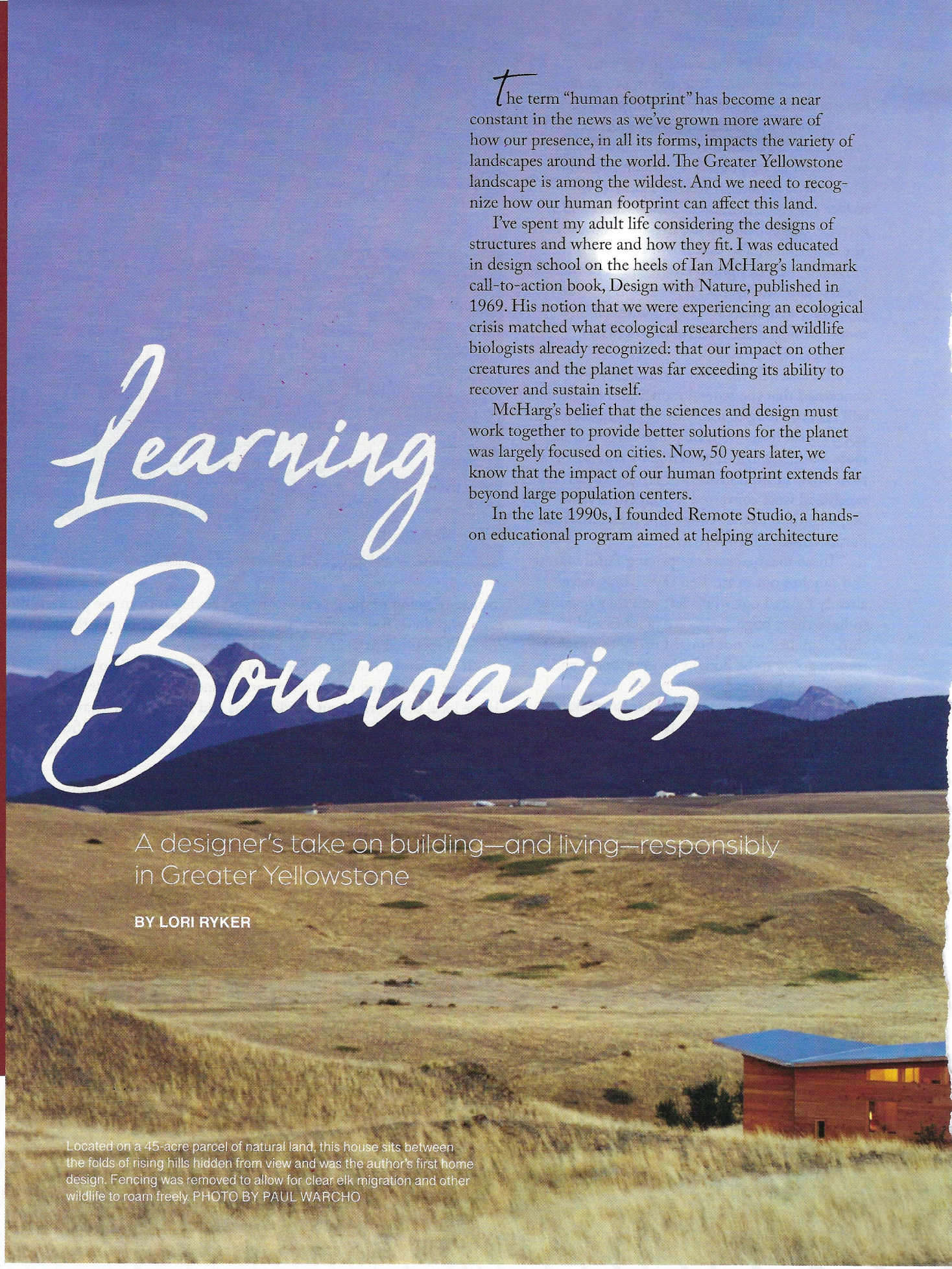
BY LORI RYKER

The term "human footprint" has become a near constant in the news as we've grown more aware of how our presence, in all its forms, impacts the variety of landscapes around the world. The Greater Yellowstone landscape is among the wildest. And we need to recognize how our human footprint can affect this land.

I've spent my adult life considering the designs of structures and where and how they fit. I was educated in design school on the heels of Ian McHarg's landmark call-to-action book, Design with Nature, published in 1969. His notion that we were experiencing an ecological crisis matched what ecological researchers and wildlife biologists already recognized: that our impact on other creatures and the planet was far exceeding its ability to recover and sustain itself.

McHarg's belief that the sciences and design must work together to provide better solutions for the planet was largely focused on cities. Now, 50 years later, we know that the impact of our human footprint extends far beyond large population centers.

In the late 1990s, I founded Remote Studio, a hands-on educational program aimed at helping architecture



Located on a 45-acre parcel of natural land, this house sits between the folds of rising hills hidden from view and was the author's first home design. Fencing was removed to allow for clear elk migration and other wildlife to roam freely. PHOTO BY PAUL WARCHO

students understand their responsibility for how they interrelate with the natural world. They learned the profound reciprocal influence that nature can have on their creative process if they come to intimately know it.

Over the span of almost 20 years, Remote Studio curriculum combined backcountry immersion and discussions about philosophy and ecology with a community design-and-build project located at the interface between "built" and "natural" landscape.

I relocated to the Northern Rockies in 1998 to ground Remote Studio in the Greater Yellowstone region with the belief that immersing students in the most wild and intact ecosystem in the Lower 48 would enrich their understanding of the importance of a nearly whole and wild part of nature. These experiences were also meant to provide the means for reflection on what can be lost when we don't pay attention to our impact on wild places and their nonhuman inhabitants.

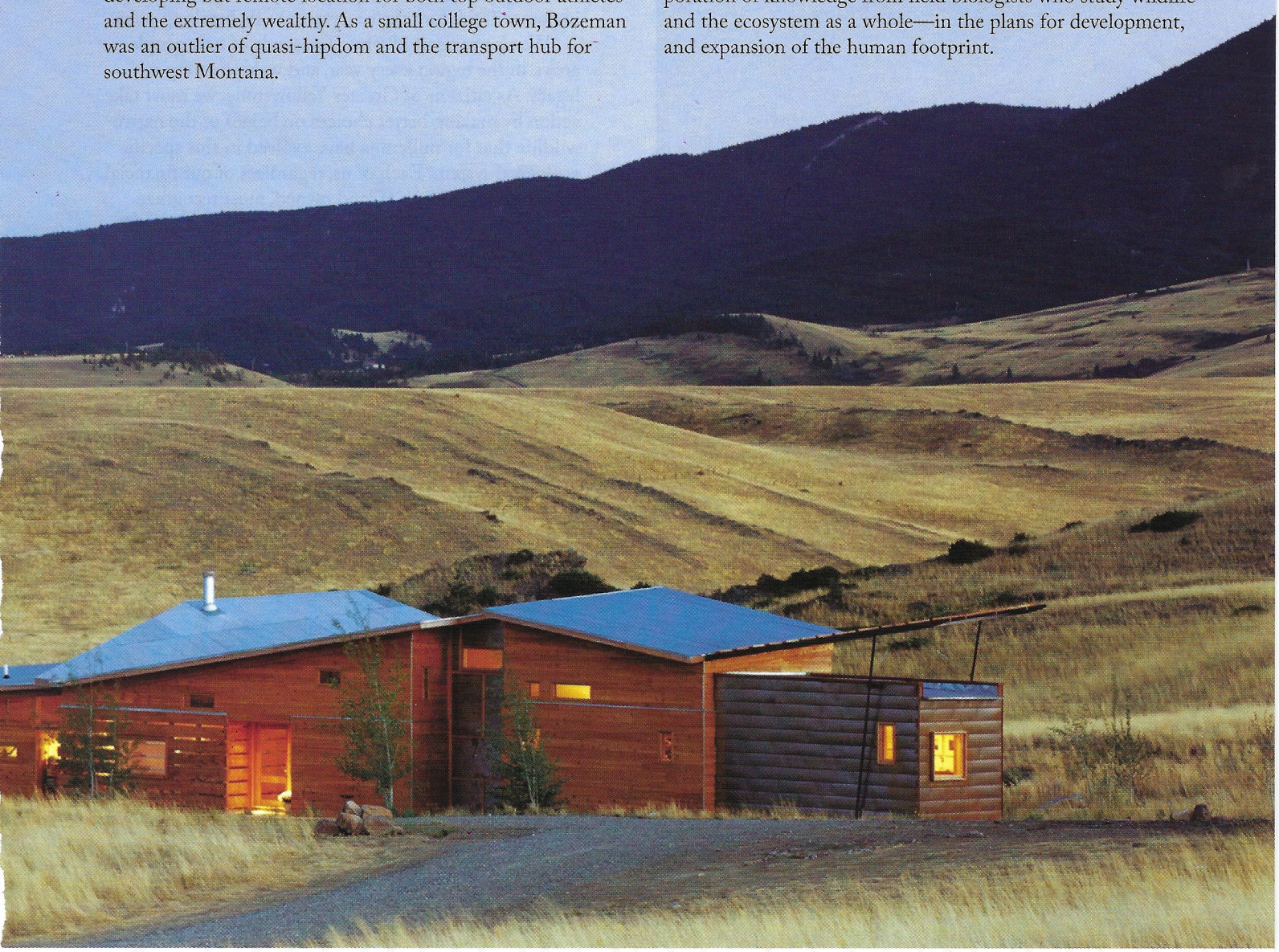
When I arrived in Montana, the Yellowstone region still felt largely undeveloped, a mixture of rural and wild sensibilities. Big Sky was a small resort and Jackson, Wyoming, was a developing but remote location for both top outdoor athletes and the extremely wealthy. As a small college town, Bozeman was an outlier of quasi-hipdom and the transport hub for southwest Montana.

Today, these descriptors are history and the area is experiencing rapid development at a pace that's difficult for any city planner or county commissioner to respond to. Despite warnings in the mid-2000s that the region would become the next trampled and overdeveloped landscape following the pattern of Boulder, Colorado, or Boise, Idaho, regional leaders seemed to largely ignore what was coming.

Now, our towns and counties are scrambling to respond. Some are more development friendly; others are searching for processes that educate the population while hoping to quell the potential that all remaining land will have a house on each 5-acre lot.

During these times, no town in Gallatin County had formal input or support from professional staff ecologists skilled in conservation biology, even though the region is unique to all others in the U.S., with wild inhabitants that represent a full spectrum of creatures that have been here since before Lewis and Clark's expedition.

The region is feeling the pains of missing advisement and influence from having no staff ecologists to support the incorporation of knowledge from field biologists who study wildlife and the ecosystem as a whole—in the plans for development, and expansion of the human footprint.



As part of Remote Studio, Lori Ryker assigned students to design and build a series of vessels as an exercise for students to spend time in a place, contemplating, exploring and learning to build with their hands.This vessel involved aspen trees and horse grass. PHOTO BY PATRICIA FLORES

Pine Creek Pavilion, a Remote Studio project, was designed and built by Ryker's students in 2006 at Pine Creek trailhead in Paradise Valley using nearby natural resources. Its roof was developed to water the aspen trees and its shape honors the nearby Absaroka Range. PHOTO BY AUDREY HALL

While teaching Remote Studio, I also began a private practice designing custom homes, primarily in the Northern Rockies, focused on concepts of sustainable construction methods and energy systems. What I learned early on was that, in this place, it's not enough to just focus on building conditions and energy efficiency. We must also consider where the house is placed as well as the human impact and movement on land that came into private ownership.

Some of my earliest lessons came from the B-Bar Ranch, located in Tom Miner Basin, a drainage not far from Yellowstone National Park that remains a key corridor for grizzlies, elk and wolves. From their ecologically based ranch practices, the B-Bar selected areas for development and respected the wildlife. My eyes were opened to how decisions, for better or worse, can affect the ecological system we live in.

After years of striving to understand this landscape, I now see that if we don't view ourselves as part of the whole, responsible for keeping this place whole, our impact will fracture the ecosystem to its breaking point.

We also can't sit idly by. Thousands of new people arrive in the region every year, and we're creating a legacy. As citizens of Greater Yellowstone, we must take action by making better choices on behalf of the native wildlife that for millennia have evolved in this specific ecological system. Each of us, regardless of our financial net worth or amount of land owned, must recognize that we are responsible for the future of this place.

Lori Ryker has called Montana home since 1998. She has a design practice in Livingston, Montana, and is the founder of the nonprofit Artemis Institute, which focuses on the relationship between nature and culture.

Call to Action:

When I work with clients, I share the message of conservation with them in hopes of helping them become better stewards. Here are some of the principles:

- The ecosystem is not solely your playground, but home to wildlife. And it's their last wild place left.
- Unless you're an expert in this region or an ecologist, find someone to advise you on the responsibilities that come with living in this place before you buy land here.
- Work with a designer or architect committed to designing for the total place, including land, water, fish, bird and all animals.
- Learn how, where and when wildlife move across the land, where they come from and where they are going. Consider which location on the land is the least beneficial to wildlife and the ecosystem, or which area is the most environmentally compromised. Build away from these historic animal travel ways and sensitive spots.
- Understand that wildlife does not recognize human insinuated boundaries, including fences that can be dangerous to them.
- Choose the land you purchase wisely and understand your role, no matter how many acres you can afford. If you can't be a steward for the place, don't buy the land.
- A smaller house footprint is critical, and when located thoughtfully, it will minimize overall impact. Always consider building less, because no matter what we perceive is necessary to fulfill our desires, wildlife need this place more. We are, after all, moving into their neighborhood. If you want them to stay, become a gracious guest.