

THE NEW WEST: RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH THE LAND, CULTURAL AND ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION AT THE URBAN INTERFACE

Clark Stevens



A: Sign west of Driggs, Idaho (author unknown) with Teton Range in background.
Photo by Clark Stevens.

Everywhere I go I study the scars on earth's face including rivers and lakes. I'm not playing God but assessing intent.

—Jim Harrison, from *After Ikkyu and Other Poems*⁰¹

Paying Attention to Place

You are here: between 40 and 49 degrees north latitude, average annual rainfall between 12 and 18 inches, average yearly temperature between 40 and 50 degrees Fahrenheit. These numerical representations of light, aridity and energy define at least a few indisputable facts of the region of the American West that has been the focus of much of our work in the last several years. Seeking precedents instructive to its ongoing settlement, we recently attempted to locate this numerical “here” in other places and other times. This global and historical research exercise, focused on a narrow band of latitude in both hemispheres and was a search for community forms that exhibit a reciprocal relationship with the Land – that is, where the technologies used for dwelling are sufficient to achieve the level of functional stability required for cultural development, but insufficient to achieve absolute dominion over the physical facts of the environment. Our comparative study of historic and more recent forms of rural community suggests that this parity of landscape and technology, the accommodation and integration rather than obstruction of natural forces, is critically important in the development of an engaged mode of dwelling in place. Such technologically limited (or conservative) communities, whether Plains American, Mongol, Metis or Mormon, tended toward spatial, often nomadic, solutions to the pragmatics of settlement, developing complex patterns of land use and occupation that fostered story, myth and the process of true inhabitation. While this process most generally progressed from necessity to culture, in some instances cultures selected for or against technologies that were determined by the community to be contrary to the stories they had found, the truth of their places.

Such research supports long observation that “authentic” inhabitation, “while not restricted to the local or regional, depends on the clarity and precision that comes from sustained attention to the particular.” The process finds *global* truth through *ground* truth. In his geo-biographical essay “A Native Hill”, Wendell Berry writes of his home place: “Whenever I have thought of the welfare of the earth, the problems of its health and preservation, the care of its life, I have had this place before me, the part representing the whole more vividly and accurately, making clearer and more pressing demands, than any *idea* of the whole.”⁰²

The condition of Land relationships inherent in such places as Berry’s Kentucky hill, what I would call *storied Land*, is becoming increasingly rare as modes of inhabitation and Land practice change in the rural West. It is, however, worth conserving. While I do not see the conservation of storied Land as a nostalgic pursuit, I will admit to sentiments regarding the concept and reality that find me capitalizing Land, as one might capitalize God.

The form of Berry’s native hill is in part a function of, and no more or less important than, his relationship with it. Our species is unique in the natural world in that ethical considerations are required to mediate our relationship with place. Other creatures live by the terms of their bodies and particular intelligences in patterns derived from long co-evolution with their places, but we have those restless opposable thumbs, those dreams and language, and so must remind ourselves to be fair with the Land. To construct such reciprocity is ultimately pragmatic, for without a Land Ethic we will first lose our places, and then ourselves. Our current estrangement from the “more than human” world finds us losing our companion species, our senses and our stories. Nevertheless, I remain optimistic that a meaningful balance between heart and hand, mind and Land can be achieved, and that the current generation of practitioners is uniquely positioned in history to effect the re-engagement of human community with that of the Land. The call to re-engagement, re-enchantment, re-inhabitation as the basis of appropriate place relations, whether voiced by Berry in “Back to the Land”, Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*, or by David Abram, identifies individual, bodily participation in the landscape through enlightened Land use rather than mere “protection” as the key to our future well-being. An “environmental ethic”, Abrams speculates, “will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.”⁰³ I can think of no better project, or one more suited to the skills and motivations of our profession.

The difference between a community that derives meaning from the conditions of the Land and one that merely exists in spite of those conditions is critical. In one instance life is rich, in the other merely possible. Informed by the mystery, alchemy and balancing drudgery of its facts and processes, a life lived *within* a place – as in *Landschaft*⁰⁴ – engenders cultural expansion. Its disengaged and rootless suburban contemporary tends to expand only spatially, denying true settlement, disabling ritual. Berry writes: “Apparently, it is in the nature of all human relationships to aspire to be permanent. To propose temporariness as a goal in such relationships is to bring them under the rule of aims and standards that prevent them from beginning. Neither marriage, nor kinship, nor friendship, nor neighborhood can exist with a life expectancy that is merely convenient.”⁰⁵ The structure of our ungrounded places is quite literally meaningless in comparison to their fully engaged counterpart. The widely variable forms associated with this psycho-spiritual disengagement are collectively described in popular terminology as sprawl. With financial and technological assistance provided by both the marketplace and subsidizing municipal and federal policies, sprawl has proven to be remarkably indifferent not only to the physical facts of the Land, but also to its mythological capacity. The condition yet lacks a clear definition or measure as either process or fact. Sprawl is not urban, not rural and certainly not wild, but is generally understood to exist between conditions that are spatially and culturally *legible*. The fuzziness of this middle landscape means that the vast majority of our land base is for most people literally ‘no place’.

Nevertheless, our dominant time- and place-scale is no longer agrarian, and our social structures embrace both pedestrian and electronic places. Contemporary landscape practices in the Netherlands are providing some provocative examples of how we might begin to ground this middle landscape. They celebrate this *terrain vague* as a landscape of freedom, even as they seek to shape it toward public good. Their approach seeks to activate social and formal potentials or propensities rather than define specific forms and limits. Given an established political and economic socialism, the new “American” landscape of market democracy is a landscape of opportunity, a challenging and far from hopeless condition. Recognizing that this landscape simply *is*, these practices are seeking ways to make it particular to their society and their time, rather than attempting to appropriate a synthetic, nostalgic substitute. This recognition of the Land as a malleable, if unpredictable cultural tableau suggests a paradigm for America’s exponentially larger, less dense, but formally similar middle ground. Such an enlightened pragmatism, if combined with a Land Ethic appropriate to its much greater undeveloped land mass and ecological potential, holds similar promise for the American landscape.⁰⁶

The edge, the “both/and”, the spatial periphery of communities in the ancestral cultures of the western world still evident in a few of the remaining non-industrial cultures, is the traditional realm of those responsible for maintaining the health of their human communities. David Abram’s studies⁰⁷ of traditional cultures found that the healer, shaman or sorcerer’s place in these cultures is at “the edge of the community, mediating between the human community and the larger community of beings upon which the village depends for its nourishment and sustenance”, navigating the realm between the human and more than human worlds as “the primary strategist and negotiators in dealings with the others.” Only “her continual engagement with the animate powers that dwell beyond the human community” enables the “traditional magician... to alleviate many individual illnesses that arise *within* that community.” We have for the most part, at least for a time, lost our sorcerers, and relinquished the power of the Other that we once engaged at our spatial and spiritual boundaries. Noting that the very structures and technologies of our civilized existence have promoted our obliviousness to nonhuman nature, Abram asks if we can ever hope to again understand (and to restructure) this relationship. We certainly cannot, he asserts, if we approach the problem “from within the midst of the very civilization it engendered. But perhaps we may make our stand along the edge of that civilization, like a magician...” Perhaps to heal the *urb* we should reengage that which it is not.

While our technologies certainly have the capacity to mask our essential relationships with the Land, our level of integration or engagement with a place, is determined by the *application* of technology, rather than by the technology itself. Good wines and good places, for example, are made with the same basic technology as bad wines and bad places. Just as the formal structure of the vineyard (its *terroir*) determines whether its vines will create complexity in the finished wine, a cultural landscape that accommodates and extracts the very particular character of its place will also produce a similar density of experience. The point of balance is tenuous, and communities that have sustained themselves over the long term without defeating their surroundings or being defeated by them have done so by formalizing a code of relationships within their culture and their landscapes that preserves both. In the arid and cold places similar to those that are

the focus of much of our current practice, they flower or they fail. Ultimately, there is very little *middle* ground.

The Real World?

Nostalgia is a predictable expression of loss for those who once lived “in” *Landschaft*, or at least retain a cellular memory of it, but now find themselves somehow existing outside of their own *landscape*. Eventually, nostalgia becomes the preferred tool of landscape control by those who have completely disengaged from and truly commodified the Land. An overlooked aspect of this commodification is that its practitioners can be found in the conservation community as surely as within the ranks of real estate speculators. To be effective as Land practitioners in rural places, we need to understand the characteristics of place-practices that promote disengagement, whatever the source, and perhaps even co-opt the language and position of those who remake our places daily. To do so, landscape practitioners will need to move much closer to the apex position in the Land use and development food chain.

In the northern tier of states where much of our work has been located in the last eight years, land use discussion typically centers on environmental issues. As part of the Greater Yellowstone and High Plains ecosystems, the communities of this region derive much of their identity from their personal and communal relationship with the Land. Most of them derive their income by extracting resources from it, exhorting distant interest groups to rally to protect it, or providing services to the extractors and exhorters. Another significant demographic (according to the Sonoran Institute the largest GDP contributor in the state of Montana, in fact)⁹⁸ simply spends what economists ironically call “unearned income” to enjoy the Land, drawing on fortunes and outcomes built elsewhere. Contrasts among these constituents are glaring, as are their opinions on approaches to managing change. Nevertheless, to declare one’s community to be an SUV or nuclear-free zone, or one’s windowless cabin a technology or federal tax and/or law-free zone, is to miss the point entirely.

One need not adopt the code of a Luddite or a Freeman to design community form that is appropriate to place. The protests and proclamations from both camps are predictable, but behind the tired and limited language are meaningful threads trailing from the factual fabric of the Land, suggesting new forms of landscapes that could indeed sustain community, individuality and ecological continuity. Perhaps it now falls to landscape practitioners to move these communities toward more fully integrated forms of dwelling by creating viable options for the private marketplace. To do so will require us to have faith that individuals (consumers *and* developers) will be able to recognize the difference between “better” and “worse” if “better” is provided as a choice. Critical and professional interest in process over product should not blind us to the reality that every day in this country someone is delivering dwelling as a product, and someone else is trying to choose a product in which to dwell.

The protectionist variety of environmentalism, effective since the 1970s, has certainly helped to prevent large-scale industrial degradations of air, water and soil, but is not well-suited to making propositions for what is currently referred to as “smart growth” or “wise use”. “No-growth” and “no-use” are more difficult propositions now that the ecological impacts no longer chiefly arise from large-scale point source polluters, but rather from individual families and landowners. Beyond the practical difficulties of opposing any and all land consumption, status quo environmentalist approaches can only serve to increase the generalized detachment from one’s home place (or *any* place) that constitutes the greatest threat to the cultural value of the Land.

Environmentalism has come of age by saying “no”. This has generally been a successful approach, and its practitioners are loath to try new methods now that the issues have become more complex. The most extreme property rights advocates, on the other hand, want to deny any human relationship with the Land, to avoid any implication of responsibility to the greater good. The most worrisome aspect of this debate is not that one or the other side will prevail, but the belief system and life experience that colors it: the general inability of the vast majority of contemporary, urban and suburban humankind to see themselves as part of the natural realm. The removal of appropriately scaled human communities from proximity to “natural landscapes” would only serve to increase our dominant culture’s general detachment from the natural world. Yet this removal is often all that is proposed when environmentalists approach planning issues. To be detached,

uninformed and self-righteous is as dangerous a condition as greed. Both extremes would do well to reexamine Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic:

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.⁰⁹

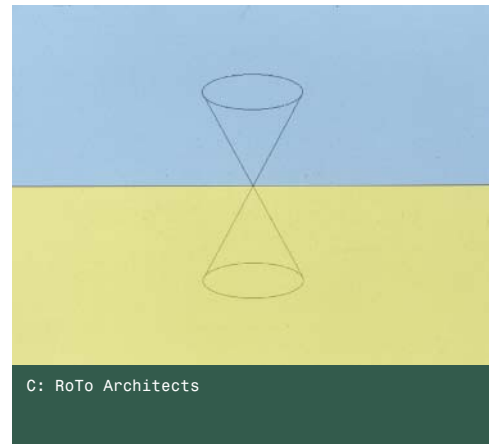


B: RoTo Architects

Leopold's assertion requires our presence in the land – an enlightened presence, yes, but a presence nonetheless. If nobody is there to love a place, it will not necessarily be better for the absence. Much of the West is in fact a “brittle environment” altered by removal of its original ungulates and introduction of invasive vegetation to the point that even where “left alone” it will continue to degrade. The necessity of stewardship and husbandry of the landscape is a pragmatic issue certainly, but more critically an issue of the spirit. A (primarily urban) generation that has come of age being told that it has no critical and productive place in the natural world other than as a passive but unwanted admirer can only love that world as an object. In such a disengaged relationship, authentic intimacy cannot exist. Passive admirers, while capable of fantasy, cannot create stories that can be shared with the object of their affections. Without the shared (and much less idealistic) history of a complete relationship, such admirers eventually lose interest in their object of infatuation.¹⁰

Most land users and conservationists in fact share some interests and enemies, suggesting as Wendell Berry does in his essay “Back to the Land” “the possibility of a defined community of interest” and a “shared stewardship of all the diversity of good things that are needed for the health and abundance of the world.” Acknowledging the history of conflict between conservationists and land users, he nevertheless asserts the necessity of their cooperation: “Conservationists can't conserve everything that needs conserving without joining the effort to use well the agricultural lands, the forests, and the waters that we must use. To enlarge the areas protected from use without at the same time enlarging the areas of good use is a mistake.”

True conservationists are capable of simultaneous self-respect and place-respect. Theresa Richards-Bulla, an educator and conservationist friend who studies the Gray Whale, camping on the shore of its Baja calving grounds each spring, has over the years noticed a subtle but critical restructuring of her relationship with this place. She recently said to me, “I always knew that I missed the place. It was not until this year that I realized that the place missed me too.”



C: RoTo Architects



D: Photo by Peter Kerze.

To be missed by the Land is a worthy goal. The first step to this state is to recognize that, again in Berry's words, "we are *not* the authors of ourselves. That we are not is a religious perception, but it also a biological and a social one. Each of us has had many authors, and each of us in engaged, for better or worse, in that same authorship. We could say that the human race is a great co-authorship in which we are collaborating with God and nature in the making of ourselves and one another."¹¹ In his closing remarks for the University of Texas-sponsored Landscape Urbanism symposium that prompted this essay, Professor Michael Benedikt noted that the simple act of "paying attention" to a place "gives it value". The care taken to know a place somehow comes to reside in that place thereafter, where it can more easily be appropriated by others—provided that they too are paying attention. Even a drawing, carefully conceived, might change the experience of a place if it contains what is true.

B

The Lines of the World: Sinte Gleska University

"Whenever your hand remains warm you can actually feel the lines of the world with it."

He paused as if to give me time to ask about the lines. But before I had a chance to, he started explaining that there were an infinite number of lines that joined us to things.

He said that the exercise of 'not-doing' that he had just described would help anyone to feel a line that came out from the moving hand, a line that one could place or cast wherever one wanted to.

Don Juan said that this was only an exercise, because the lines formed by the hand were not durable enough to be of real value in a practical situation.

"A man uses other parts of his body to produce durable lines,' he said... He can also make them with his eyes."

"Are they real lines?"

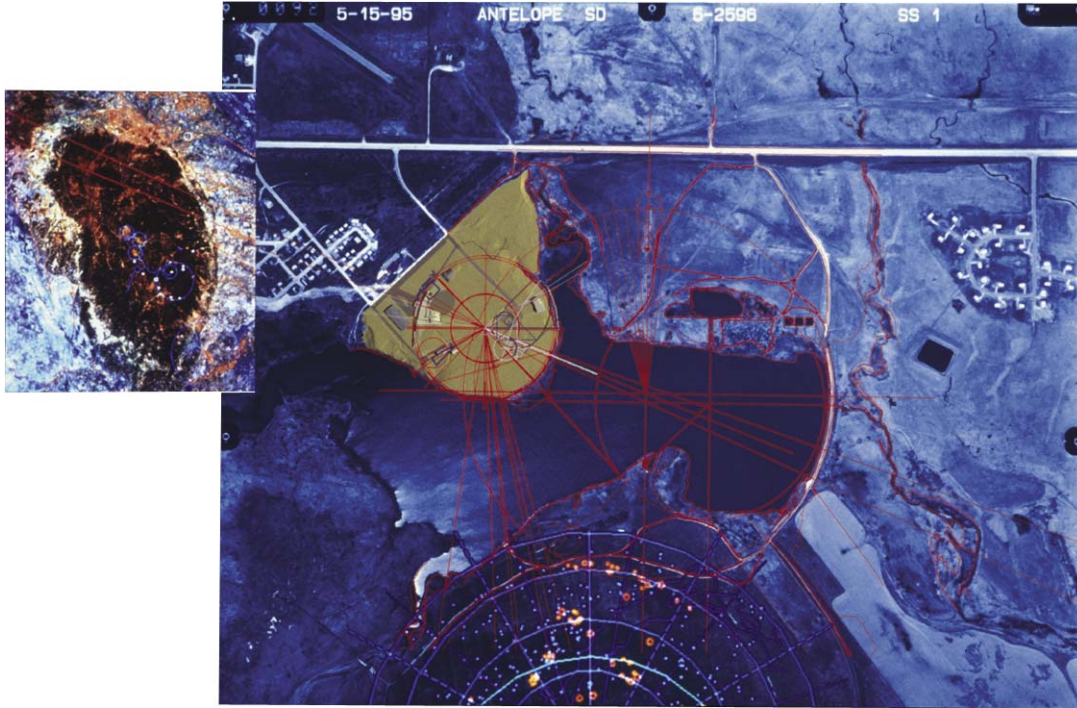
"Surely."

"Can you see them and touch them?"

"Let's say that you can feel them... and one feels the world through its lines"

—Carlos Castaneda, from *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan*¹²

In 1994, RoTo was asked to create a strategic plan for Sinte Gleska University, the first and oldest accredited tribal university in the United States. Our work for the Sicangu Lakota was intended to not only provide a structure to house the Lakota curriculum, but also to recover the sources of that curriculum from the Land and embody them in the new campus.



E: RoTo Architects

In Lakota cosmology, or Star Knowledge, physical, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of reality are woven together at all sizes and scales. The Lakota paths of movement and their places of rest on the earth, as well as instruction in human relationships such as kinship, are reflected in the night sky and its rhythmic diurnal and seasonal cycle. Their stories embody formal concepts that we came to describe as *mirroring*, *scaling* and *nesting*, each of which incorporates principles of order and systems of relationships among every thing in the universe.

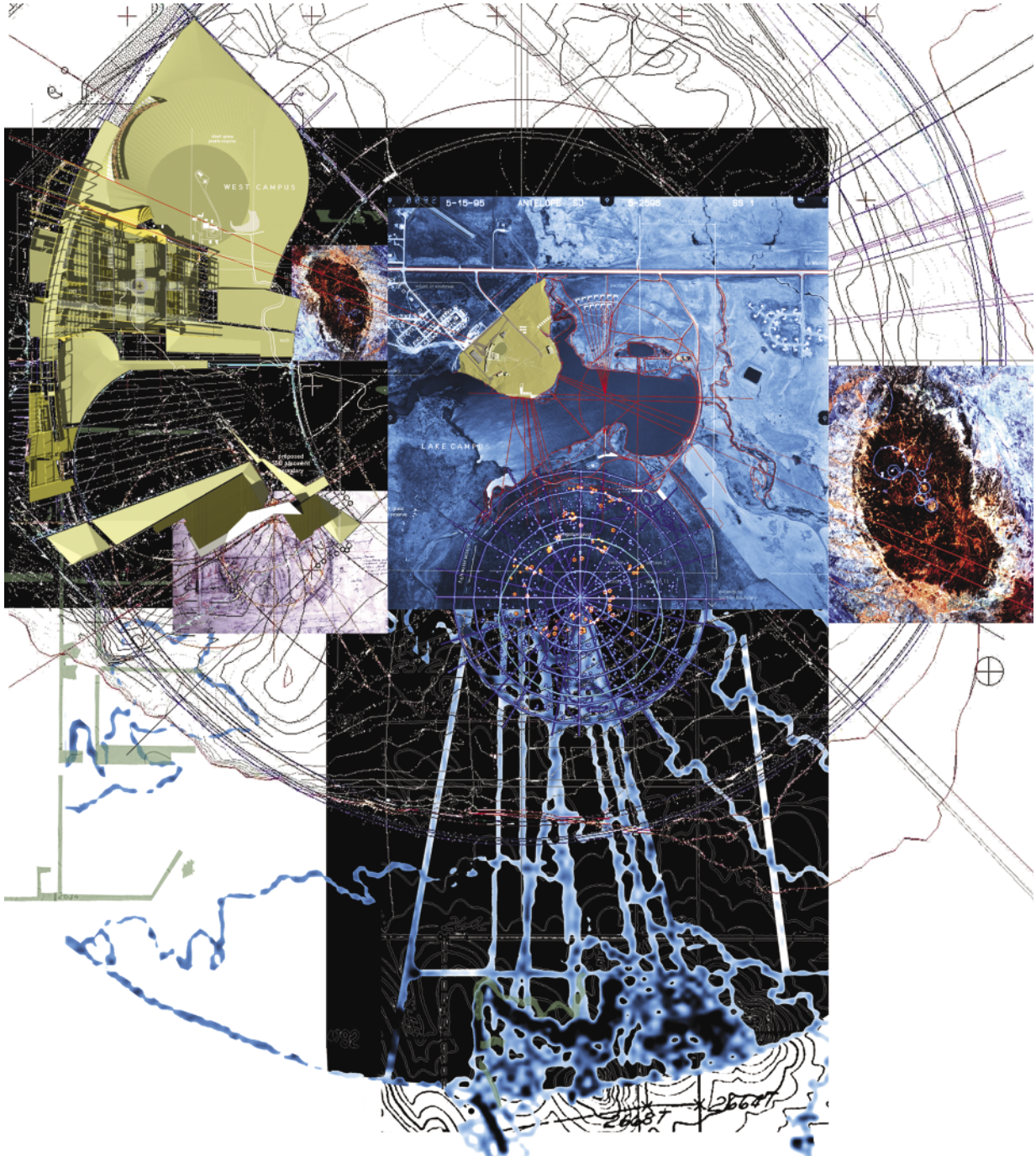
The cosmological structure that connects the earth and sky in this continuum is called *Kapemni*, which translates to “the twisting motion of the wind”. In this hourglass form of interlocking, inverted and counter-rotating cones, the disc of the earth forms the base opposite the stars. Earth and sky are mirrored so that every geographic location has a cosmographic twin. The point of intersection of these two conic volumes is understood to be the horizon, where earth and sky merge and the instructions for life on earth can be read.

The obsession with the circle among contemporary Lakota, which seemed to us initially a vast oversimplification of their cultural practice, is actually the most complete and pragmatic distillation of this complex, hierarchical system. The Circle is in effect the ‘plan view’ of the universe.

Early in our discussions they said, “Build us circles, not squares.” As we became more comfortable with one another, we reminded them that the land and their systems of sacred geometry contained many forms, and that the stories they had told us contained a spatial ordering system of relevant complexity. Their knowledge suggested a more considered approach to a permanent alteration of their landscape than picturesque reproductions of traditional shelters could accomplish.

Nevertheless, we began to see circles in the land.

The peninsula that was ultimately selected to be the home of the first phase of the new campus projected into a reservoir used for aquifer recharge and managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.



F: Clark Stevens, RoTo Architects

Having been told that a proposed dam improvement project would raise the elevation of the lake by almost four feet, we traced the new shoreline contour that would result. Given the simple and consistent instruction previously provided, I perhaps should not have been too surprised to see one arm of the peninsula submerged to reveal a new shoreline that was three-quarters of a perfect circle.

E



G: Construction shot of Technology Building at the Winter Solstice sunset, Sinte Gleska University, Mission, South Dakota, 1994

This peninsula had once been the home of the original missionary boarding school on the reservation. Little evidence of that original campus remained. Only a few old foundations and depressions in the site were left to identify where buildings had long ago been entombed in their own basements. For reasons unknown, the school grounds had been organized at 45 degrees from the cardinal directions and the dominant grid. A single remaining sidewalk of the original quadrangle ran toward the lake along the line that divided north from west, ending on the crown of the peninsula at the precise center of the circle to be formed by the post-flood shoreline. It was not difficult to imagine the spirits of Lakota children

walking from their ghost dormitory to their ghost classroom, apparition and sidewalk disintegrating together at the point where the Cartesian, Jeffersonian, western world of the orthogonal merged with the indigenous cosmos of the circle.

The sidewalk was preserved in its original condition within the new plan for the campus, so as not to disrupt this promenade. Once the child spirits and the lake had collaborated to establish a center and a circumference, the horizon could be reactivated as the zone of teaching and learning. We then extended the form and physical characteristics of the site, its connections to oral history, seasonal events, significant positions of sun, star or constellation, in both the horizontal field and the silhouette of the campus constructions at the horizon. The definition and hierarchy of the three-dimensional campus landscape, as well as the building form which was viewed as its logical continuation, was based upon the degree of "connection" or "correspondence" among various mappings, scalings and nestings of the spatial and temporal landscape according to principles of Lakota order.¹³

The geographical and spiritual center of the historic Lakota homeland is the Black Hills, known to Lakota as "The Heart of Everything that is". Given that physical re-occupation of the Hills by the Lakota was impossible, we looked for other formal relationships that could bring the "Heart" to the center of the campus, and found a yet another extraordinary formal "coincidence". From the center of the Campus Circle on any given day between the vernal equinox and summer solstice, one's shadow at the moment of sunset would travel toward the Black Hills, to the traditional place of a Spring Journey ceremony appropriate to *that very day*. Even allowing for a few days variation in the timing of the sequential ceremonies, this remarkable relationship could only exist in locations within a few square miles of the Campus site. As night fell, a shadow cast from the center would merge with its companion star site in alignment on the horizon. We determined that the shadows of the built landscape should do so as well, and massed the buildings and local topography to acknowledge these times and places.

The Lakota consider their purpose in this journey to be that of timekeepers, quite literally winding the earth each year so that earth and sky will remain connected and cycling, rotating in mirrored directions. Their movements integrate the cosmos in a four-dimensional structure, so that there is simply no escape from meaning anywhere on the Land or in the Sky. Once that is understood, the significance of any element or characteristic of the Land is imbued with intention, and can be read almost as a series of instructions. Once we knew what to look for, there seemed to be no end to the layers of instruction provided.



H: Photo by Peter Kerze

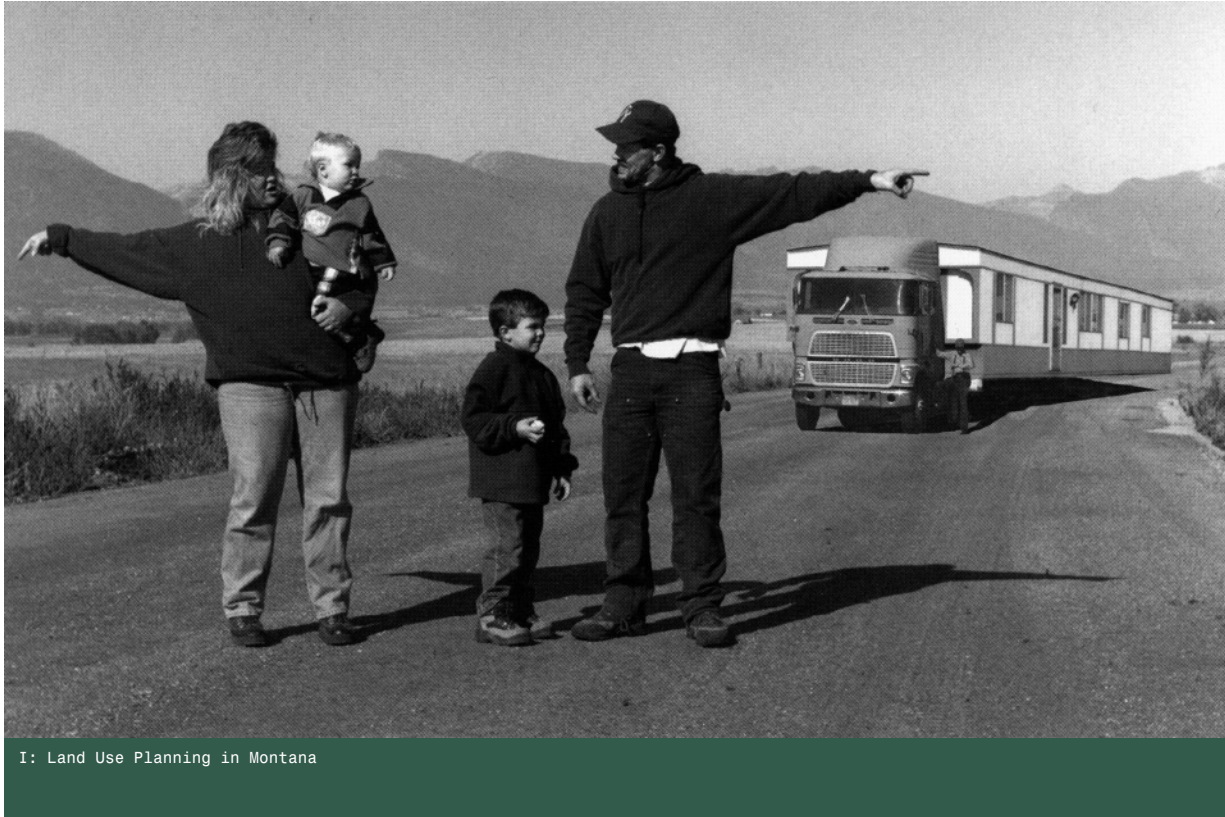
Postscript and Precursor

It is common knowledge that reservations are generally poor. The Rosebud Reservation is located in what is statistically the second poorest county in the US; its immediate neighbor to the west, home of the Pine Ridge Reservation, is the poorest. The destruction of an entire way of life certainly provides a sufficient explanation for psychic and economic depression, but does not in and of itself suggest a solution. One cannot undo the clock. Nor does this historical account explain the significant and enigmatic differences between Native rural poverty and its urban counterpart that were apparent to me from my first encounter with the reservation. Edward Abbey, in *The Journey Home*,¹⁴ suggested that perhaps the Native American simply recognizes that which other Americans have traveled too far historically and technologically to see:

“...they [Native Americans] are poor people. They live in shacks, drive secondhand Oldsmobiles and eat too much Wonder Bread. The reasons for this deplorable situation are many, varied and complicated, as any sociologist can explain to you, but basically it comes down to the fact, observed all over the world, that the descendants of hunters and warriors do not make good clerk typists or computer tapers.”

We are all descendants of hunters and warriors, but the Lakota people have both the blessing and the curse of being closer to that way of life and the poignancy of its loss. The family esteemed elder Edna Little Elk, for example, was completely self-sufficient with no acknowledged relationship with the federal currency or government programs until the early 1960s. As soon as that contact was made, the Lakota were likely categorized as “poor”. The story suggests that the economic model our culture chooses to define poverty is limited at best, and that the relationship of material poverty to spiritual impoverishment is not nearly so clear. With all that is lacking in the present day reservation, and while acknowledging the pathos of their most recent history, it is yet difficult for me to view the Lakota people as collectively “unfortunate”. Many, perhaps most of them can still see some part of the thousands of years of their culture embedded within their Land. *To feel that you are authentically a part of this World is to be very fortunate indeed.* There is immeasurable value in this state of being, and its erosion is not confined to this country’s reservations. The simple yet vital connection to Place, albeit subconscious for most Lakota, I suspect will make them effective guardians of their Land for as long as they continue to believe that it is where they belong. Grandma Little Elk, when asked if she was worried about the “loss” of the Lakota language, was almost amused. She apparently did not understand how we could think that a language that was always in the Land could be “lost”. She went on to explain that when the people could again hear that language, they would again speak, and perhaps should not try to do so if the Land was silent to them.

The Lakota consciousness, combined with the general disinterest of investment capital in reservation lands (casinos notwithstanding), means that to a great extent their prospects for Land-health are more promising than for those of the remaining rural West. Other places are far more rapidly losing the stories, the language, that binds a community to the Land. Throughout the rural American West, contrasting histories, economies and value systems are altering patterns of



I: Land Use Planning in Montana

inhabitation at a rapidly accelerating pace. These places contain indigenous wisdom too, if one defines indigenous not in terms of race, but in terms of knowledge, practice and consciousness.

The Next West and Mining for Meaning

It is in the west that as a nation we shall ultimately work out our highest destiny.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Even an amateur historian of the American West can see that, since the disintegration of its original communities, the region has never felt in control of its own destiny. Assailed at various times from all sides by wilderness, “savages”, winter ice and summer dust, as well as the once and future “revenoors”, its residents defended themselves by developing a cult of rugged individualism. As the truth (there was once some truth) of successive autobiographies dwindled over the generations, it was replaced with a quantity of myth sufficient to keep the story intact, if not exactly fresh.

This story continues to have remarkable market appeal. Since the early 1980s, the greater Yellowstone region has been a global real estate hot spot. This myth-motivated boom has hastened the fragmentation of the cultural and ecological fabric of the West, supported by the boosters that have always preceded migration to the region. An only slightly less subtle choice for Montana’s license plate motto, “The Last Best Place”, would have been “You’d Better Get Some While You Still Can.”

As is generally the case with successful marketing campaigns, the truth is not as glossy as the brochures. Tom McGuane, not quite old-timer but far from a newcomer, whose vocational split illustrates the ‘working in’ versus ‘working out’ challenge of ranching life, described the cultural condition:

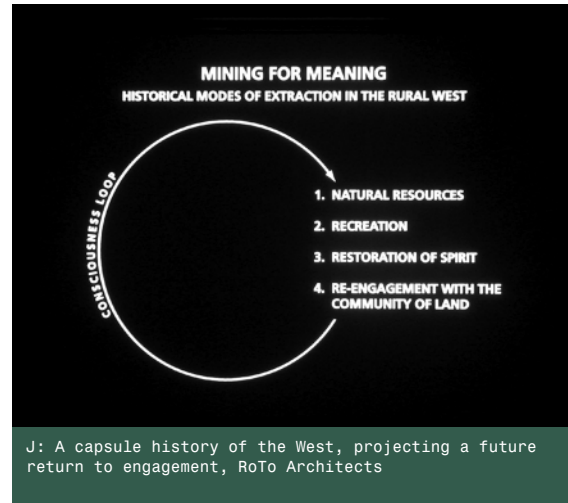
My chores of late had consisted of writing screenplays so that the bank didn't take the ranch. These days the primary skill in ranching is making the payment; it comes before irrigation, feeding out and calving. Some rancher friends find this so discouraging they get up and roll a number or have a slash of tanglefoot before they even think of the glories of the West. This is the New Rugged.¹⁵

In the New Rugged, where fewer and fewer can afford to work the land, the dominant mode of land use has begun to shift from extraction of natural to cultural resources. A new kind of Rurbia is being created, where the land is now mined for its meaning.

But some signs point to a shift beginning in the consciousness of the most recent migrants. Until the last decade, the moves seemed to be an escape *from* rather than *to* a place, resulting in displacement of the formerly more fully-engaged community (repeating the original displacement of the indigenous) by a culturally – often physically – absentee population. The point-source despoliation of historically dominant extractive industry (mining, oil and gas, logging and agribusiness) is being replaced by a field-based despoliation: a continued disengagement from a direct relationship with and knowledge of Land that may prove to be as destructive to place and community. Ironically, the newest migrants have often rejected the disengaged mode of dwelling that dominates their former urban and suburban conditions, and seek a more integrated relationship with community and the Land that extends beyond that of the workplace or social club. However, unable to leave their spatial and social mores behind, pandered to by marketers and speculators, and insisting on building the myth rather than accommodating the reality of the West, their migration hastens the advent of the very conditions they hoped to escape. Once arrived, the newcomers lack the patience required to integrate, but not the judgmental assessments of the locals. The locals lack the patience to teach, but not the defensiveness for their failings. Without humility or the guidance of teachers, misunderstandings, subdivisions and alienation follow the refugees to their new landscapes as surely as their own shadows.

A landscape that has merely been *acquired* rather than constructed through layers of manipulations over time does not produce indigenous knowledge and story. Such “storied” Land disappears from community consciousness as rural places suburbanize. Clearly, the West of extractive technology (including agribusiness) has been ecologically damaging. But continued regression into the picturesque understanding of place fostered by America's rapidly urbanizing population threatens to remove us from the remaining sources of indigenous knowledge that exist in rural communities. Although in speaking as a turn-of-the-century railroad magnate his motives may have been dubious, John T. Hill spoke true when he said, “Land without population is wilderness, but population without land is a mob.”¹⁶ A century of population growth later perhaps not all of urban/suburban America exhibits the characteristics of a mob, but nevertheless I can think of no more important design issue to address than the re-engagement of Americans with their land.

There is reason for hope if the West can engage homing instincts rather than escapism. The last decade or so has seen a maturation of the urban and suburban refugees. In coming to rural landscapes, many are now consciously selecting for, rather than against, community. This may ultimately lead them back to a more enlightened mode of “extraction” – more properly an exchange – with the Land. This transformation will require better choices and more authentic forms and modes of dwelling than currently available in the conventional market landscapes of the West. To provide such choices, the truly wise component of the local “conventional wisdom” should be celebrated, but mere convention masquerading as such should be challenged and discarded.



LANDCRAFT (I)

In order to promote cultural re-engagement with the Land in rural places, it seemed important to define a new type of professional service, one not bounded by the conventional understanding and pre-conceptions of the role of an architect. The RoTo portfolio, largely urban, could initially play a supporting role at best in convincing rural landowners and organizations to commission conservation-based work. While still attempting to determine what I really meant by the term – through teaching as a form of research at Montana State University and later at the University of Texas – I founded a “Land stewardship” consulting business in Montana.

New West Land Company (NWLC) is a conservation-consulting firm that works with private owners, communities and Land Trusts to plan for the cultural, ecological and economic sustainability of the lands that they steward. Unlike the original land companies of the West that were structured for speculation and despoliation, we are chartered to make human community good company for Land. Our primary purpose is to determine how *not* to build on Land that has ecological and cultural value as open space, while acknowledging the need to not simply accommodate the growth of human communities in these regions, but to integrate them with local cultures and opportunities for functional ecosystems.

Our initial efforts have introduced rural landowners, Land Trusts and environmentalists to the notion that both cultural and natural conservation can be measured in spatial terms, and should be designed, as opposed to merely managed or mandated. This has required a continual shape-shifting from architect to naturalist, humanist, developer or druid, the dominant form on any given day determined by circumstance and the audience. Most people who live life in contact with the Land recognize that healthy landscapes have varied but distinctive spatial characteristics, and that a pattern of solids, voids, volumes, concavities, convexities and edges, as well as a particular

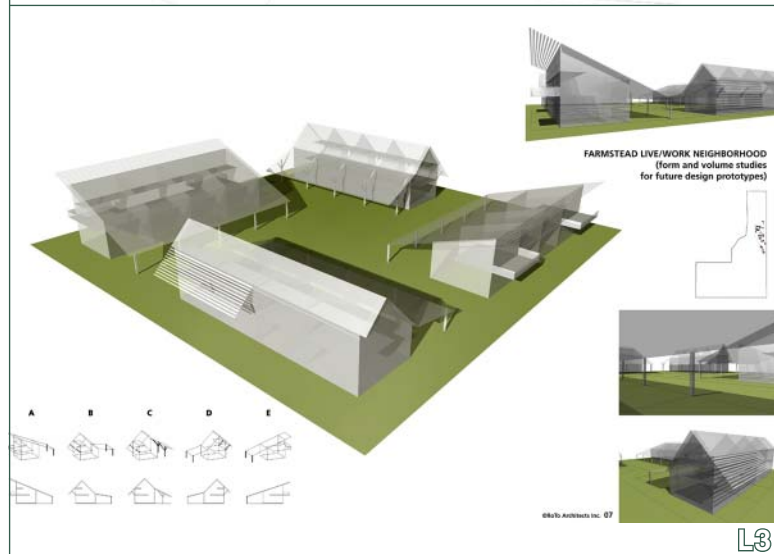
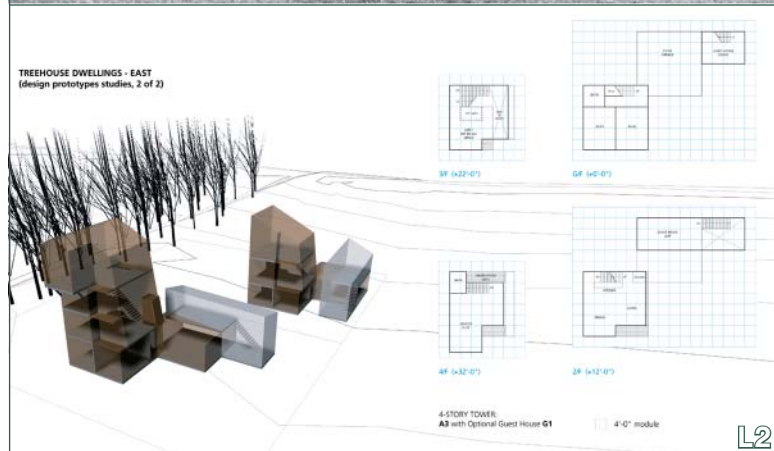


kind of “storied” cultural overlay, signal that health. These conditions are best read and extrapolated by those trained to make, and test, socio-spatial propositions and represent them three-dimensionally. Wendell Berry calls this process “solving for pattern”, noting that when the correct pattern of Land practice is engaged, the ironic first principle of ecosystems – that “diversity builds capacity” – can be accessed.¹⁷

Unlike the public policy-based and purchase-oriented conservation organizations that work in the region, NWLCo develops strategies for privately initiated projects, linking multiple sources to work toward a culturally, ecologically and financially sustainable result. We are working to co-opt the conventional language of development for our own less conventional purposes, using place-appropriate forms to fund conservation outcomes. Although we do not consider conservation and development to be mutually exclusive, we place development in the category of a tool, rather than as an end in itself, so that we are able to walk away from any strategy that does not result in leaving the Land better than we found it. Aldo Leopold again provides a key definition:

When land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land; when both end up better by reason of their partnership, we have conservation. When one or the other grows poorer, we do not.¹⁸

Our willingness to consider conservation and development as something other than an either/or proposition is critical to our work within the currently neglected middle landscape of the West. This “messy middle” is a vast territory between the zone of municipal jurisdiction and planning and the postcard-ready landscapes that are the



L1: Treehouse dwellings – East, Design Prototypes Studies, 1 of 2, RoTo Architects
 L2: Treehouse dwellings – East, Design Prototypes Studies, 2 of 2, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects
 L3: Farmstead Live/Work Neighborhood, Form and Volume Studies for Future Design Prototypes, RoTo Architects

focus of efforts for The Nature Conservancy, Montana Land Reliance and other large Land Trusts. This zone includes the majority of the rural private lands, much of the critical riparian habitats in the West, and most of its highest quality agricultural base. In fact all of NWLCo's projects to date have been located in one of the ten most threatened agricultural counties in the United States, according to the American Farmland Trust's 2002 nationwide study.¹⁹ Gallatin County, the location of our Wisdom Community Preserve project, was identified in that study as the most threatened agricultural county in America.²⁰

The dawning recognition of the placelessness that is overtaking this country has led to some recent progress in sustainable design practice and developer product. Americans, however, seem to have a tendency to take a good and original set of principles intended to inform a *process* and turn them into a *product* to be used indiscriminately. Many rural planning discussions have appropriated New Urbanist language, often without regard for the specific physical, cultural and economic carrying capacity of a place. Eight units per acre is a very different thing in Bozeman, Montana than the eastern megalopolis. The humid East has had a century or more of practice with the environmental, social and civic impacts of density. In a mile-high and arid alluvial valley where six square miles has in some microclimates been considered the minimum holding for the comfort of a family since the 1920s, density must necessarily take unique forms.²¹

Thomas Jefferson was never able to see for himself the starkly different character of the Land and cultures beyond the Missouri. It is understandable that he did not see past the plow and buggy, or recognize that west of the 100th meridian 160 acres sometimes wasn't enough to feed a mule in a dry year, let alone a vital American family. In our own time we must recognize the crucial differences between a European village that grew slowly out of its time, place and technology, and a forced, single-phase replication of its most superficial attributes. If we are to create a moral and sustainable landscape as Jefferson intended with his Land Ordinance, we will need to reactivate our deepest sensory skills to find principles of order within our own time and in our own places.

Precedents, of course, are useful in this effort to re-inhabit our rural landscapes. At the outset of this essay, I mentioned our global research exercise in search of sustained and meaningful settlement precedents, historic or current, for regions of similar climatic conditions. In that exercise we were somewhat surprised to learn that certain parts of the Spanish state of Castille y Leon have latitudes, average rainfall and temperature identical to that of parts of Montana and Wyoming. Investigating further, we learned that during the long Norman/Moorish conflict, these same lands remained open as a front in the wars and were subsequently proclaimed open range by the victorious Norman kings. This royal management ordinance made illegal the fencing of livestock from agricultural plots, precluding the development of self-sustaining villages. So we found no permanent settlement precedent to study there, other than the few Cathedral towns originally built for and sustained by periodic religious pilgrimages. On second thought, outposts sustained by periodic pilgrimage, inspired by a search for meaning, might very well describe today's American West.

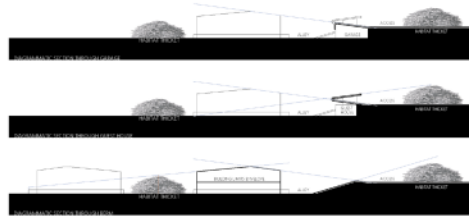
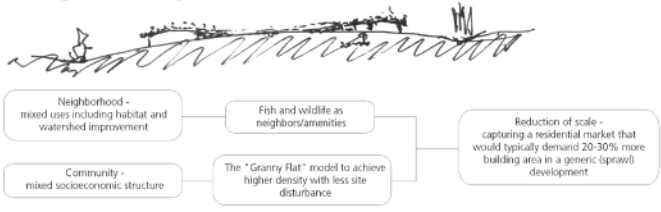
LANDCRAFT (II) – CASE STUDIES

The West for me has always been a place of heightened materiality, about "stuff," all of it drawn by a very large hand with a very clear intent and a message for those who listen carefully. It crackles with a kind of hyper-reality and all manner of voices murmuring in dust, trees, rivers and sky. The work that follows assumes that access to the systems of meaning and mythology – the basis of community – is available through the physical facts of the form of the landscape. Drawing the actual structure of a place with specificity that extreme yields clues to the logical scale, density and position of the architecture that supports both community and stewardship of the Land.

Miller-Schaaf Community Preserve

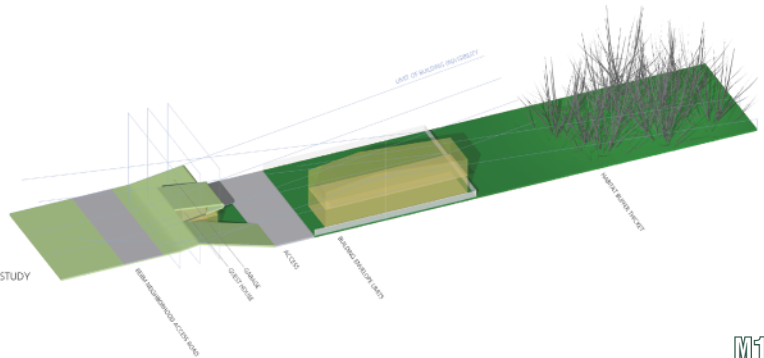
The smallest of the case studies presented here, the Miller-Schaaf property, consists of 135 acres remaining from larger agricultural holdings increasingly subdivided by the city of Bozeman expansion. Although the property is located within a mile of the center of the Montana State University campus and less than two miles from the center of Main Street and downtown Bozeman,

berm dwellings limits study

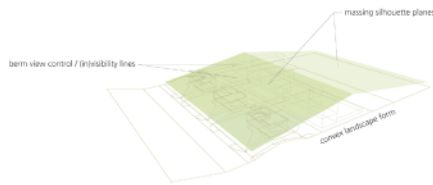
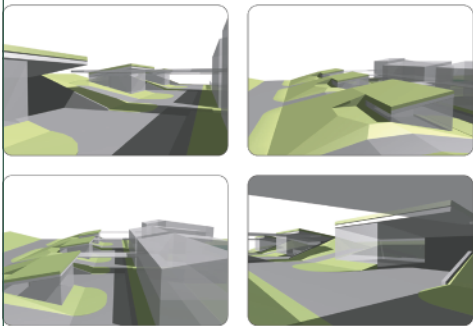


Between the two branches of the Sunrise Farm spring creek is the **Berm Dwelling Neighborhood**. To create a neighborhood for up to sixty families that is nearly invisible from the adjacent grasslands, we have hidden the vehicular access, garages, and small (600-800 s.f.) "carriage houses" within and behind a sheltering berm that slightly accentuates the natural roll of the land. From without, the neighborhood will appear to be a collection of small structures reminiscent of hay sheds, but which are actually the loft portion of the carriage houses. The slope of the berm, as well as the reintroduced wetland habitat thickets, will hide the massing of the slightly larger (1,400-2,000 s.f.) primary houses beyond. The dwellings will be constructed within the building limits shown in these diagrams, creating a courtyard space defined by four houses and a habitat buffer.

UNIT PROTOTYPE - VOLUME LIMITS STUDY



M1



BERM DWELLINGS NEIGHBORHOOD
Within Grassland/Wetland Preserve
(volume studies)

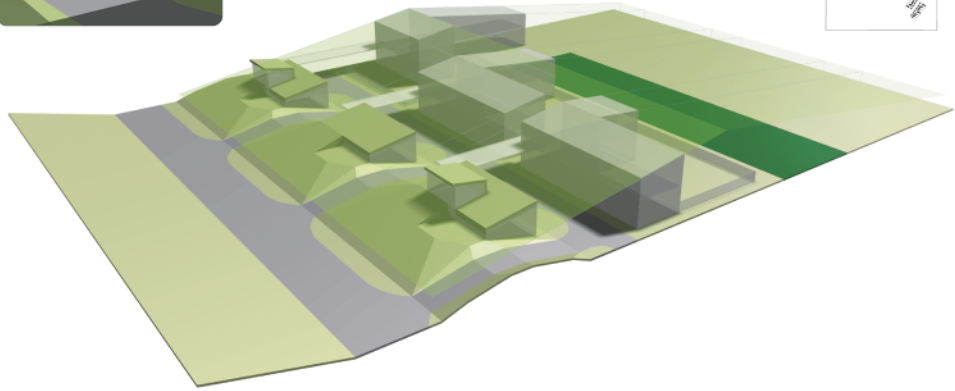


VOLUME STUDIES

Individual homes would be designed to complement the materials and forms of the surrounding natural/agricultural landscape, and would be defined by the volume limits shown.

DWELLING TYPES

- Single Family: 1,600 - 2,000 sf
- with Guest House: 800 sf
- Common Garden: 6,400 sf min.



SITE SECTION



M2

it still contains two branches of a healthy spring creek and a dormant (or “prior converted”) wetland zone. It is adjoined on its northern edge by a new commercial/office development indicative of Bozeman’s rapid growth. Aerial photographs of the site from the late 1930s to the present show that owners have for some time resisted the conventional approach to the management of agricultural lands that has steadily degraded the environmental quality and diversity of the neighboring parcels.

The sibling owners, Don Miller and Jane Schaaf, are somewhat prototypical heirs to agricultural and ranch land in southwestern Montana. Their land is their legacy. Having no heirs of their own, they initially considered selling the property in order to draw an income from the proceeds, and leave the rest in trust for charitable purposes. However, they were concerned that at sale the land would fall victim to standard local development practice. They chose to forego the income of a quick sale and speculate the creation of a limited mixed-use and mixed-income neighborhood that would preserve the ecological and aesthetic qualities of their family land.

The social program, in Don’s words, was to be an “ungated community” of mixed generations, uses and socioeconomic conditions, the opposite of the mono-cultural, starter-mansion subdivisions that are the norm for local development practice. We developed site-specific dwellings and structures whose density and massing are an extension of the character of their place and the forms of the natural landscape, so as to minimize disturbance of the land cover and wildlife and remain largely hidden from areas adjacent to and within the site. We also enhanced and reclaimed the existing natural components of the land, such as the currently drained wetland and spring creek system. Our plan identified management strategies for habitat conservation, sustainable grazing and conservation easement investment incentives.

In order to achieve a balance of human activity with habitat suitable for sensitive wildlife species, we applied research on habitat continuity, patch size and other conservation thresholds, and the impact characteristics of various forms, types and intensities of human uses. With the assistance of a team of resource ecologists, these factors have been incorporated into the three-dimensional design of the landscape and community, and have necessarily limited the number and configuration of development units appropriate to the Land. To increase unit density without adding site coverage, and to initiate social interaction even within individual parcels, each lot is designed for a minimum of two dwelling units: a primary residence and a “granny-flat”. This provides for the social cycling of each dwelling parcel, and also allows entry-level buyers access to parcels that will provide a source of income from renting either the primary or secondary dwelling within a college-based rental market with continuously high demand.

Despite high-density and low-coverage lot types, the high priority given to ecological function places limits on the income that can be produced within this type of conservation development. We sought multiple funding sources for the public benefit to be created by this plan in order to maintain the appropriate proportion of developed and open space, while still showing a rate of return sufficient to secure investment. The Natural Resource Conservation Service of the USDA identified funding sources through the Farm Bill to assist in the restoration of critical riparian and upland habitat at the heart of the Preserve.

The design proposes a “teaching landscape”: an urban educational wetland with critical impact far beyond its size. In reverse of a typical development project (but a defining characteristic of “conservation development”) the landscape work will be completed first to add value to the sale of individual parcels and dwellings. The restoration is the first step in a project that meets economic return expectations, respects and complements the existing physical and mythological resources of the land, and seeks to re-engage community with the land.

Corner Table

Larry and Ankie McEvoy and their family have been the major force in land conservation in the greater Billings, Montana area for nearly a decade. Their investment and restoration effort has to date secured over 2500 acres of habitat, and their vision and energy stands to preserve four times that amount with conservation development as a tool. Besides increasing the diversity of the range, the calving grounds of the regional elk herd and the aquifer recharge capacity of an entire sub-watershed they have also created higher development potential on adjacent agricultural parcels due to their stewardship. Although they have ensured a core wildlife habitat in perpetuity, they have also increased the likelihood that others will seek to develop along



N: Billings, Montana, photo by Lane Coulston; www.montanaconservation.com

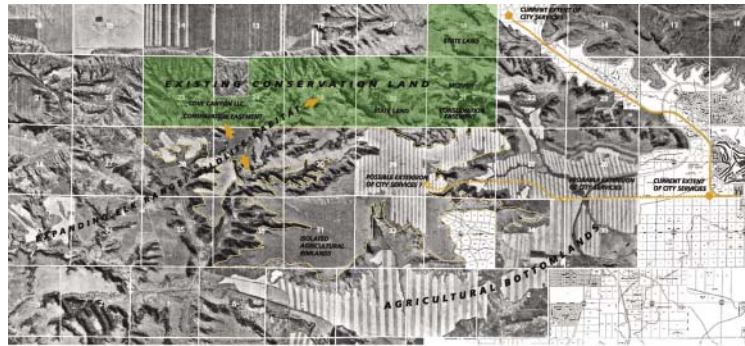
its boundary. Our work provided them with a strategic conservation development plan that will provide income to purchase and preserve additional critical buffer lands.

The efforts of the McEvoy's over the last decade have resulted in the expansion of the elk calving grounds onto their holdings. The herd's range is expanding to the east, while Billings is growing to the west. Easily developed bottomland, now being explored by elk and land speculators alike, is all that stands between.

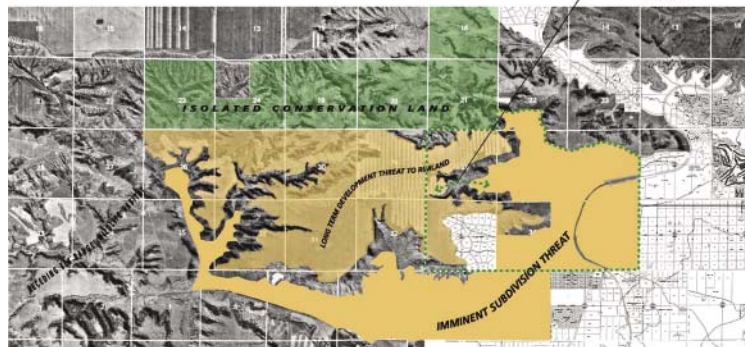
The advancing development to the east has already begun to inflate the price for the wheat lands, and impacted the visual quality of these lands so that they are not a good prospect for a typical conservation buyer. Our solution was to become that buyer and create funding for the purchase through a dense, mixed-use and habitat-sensitive community on about 200 acres of land previously degraded by inappropriate agricultural practice, while restoring and integrating buffering habitat in ecologically sensitive areas. The form of the plan accommodates connectivity of the restored wetland and habitat zones, while introducing site-specific neighborhood forms. The income from the development of the conservation-based town will fund the purchase of 2,200 acres of critical buffer habitat for the elk herd.

The 10:1 ratio of protected land to development footprint is laudable, but through strategic development and conservation easement design the project would preserve much more habitat than the purchased acreage alone. We had earlier attempted to negotiate a market value purchase of an additional two square miles of land critical for habitat buffer. The owner was insufficiently impressed with the conservation aspects of our proposal to sell for a price close to market value, and was holding out for the much greater price that would come with the advancing development of Billings. We nearly abandoned the project at that point, realizing that our conservation land plan would only increase the value of his land and the likelihood of its future development.

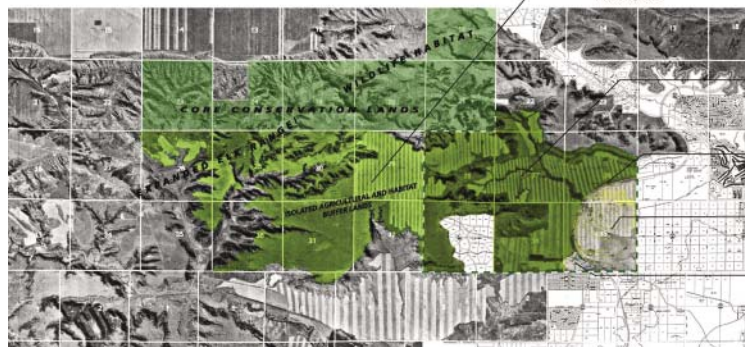
However, after a title search, we discovered that the property we sought for additional agricultural buffer had no recorded access, the county having abandoned a section line access as part of an adjacent filing. By purchasing both sides of that section line and consolidating it as a single property protected by federal conservation easement, access would forever be limited to the existing agricultural uses. As the existing agricultural access came from two points, the federal easement would force any future development access to the other existing "easement of use" under a Burlington Northern Rail trestle. Should any owner of the land apply for development subdivision in the future, BNRL would require them to construct a grade-separated crossing. Given the conditions of the site, this would require a million-dollar investment to get to the far eastern edge of the property. Given the growth rate of Billings, development of those critical lands would therefore not be economically feasible for at least a decade, if ever. The strategic location of the buffer land purchase and proposed 200 acres of development would severely limit future access to, and services for, most of the remaining 8,640 acres of private land in the elk range. Our plan would therefore effectively create a privately funded urban growth ring in the sprawling northwest quadrant of Billings, defined by the cottonwood-lined, gracefully arcing grade of the Burlington Northern Rail Line.



01



02



03

01: Existing Parcelization/Subdivision map, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects
 02: Probable Sprawl Scenario, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects
 03: Conservation Development Proposal, total contiguous conservation area = 9800 acres, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects

Residents in the 200-acre Rimrock town site of Corner Table will, with their purchase, be investing in the protection of almost 10,000 acres of prime elk and upland bird habitat. The ratio of habitat preserved to land developed, at 50:1, illustrates the extraordinary potential of strategic conservation development.

P2

Q;R



P: Corner Table, photos by Lane Coulston; www.montanaconservativo.com

Cottonwood Ranches

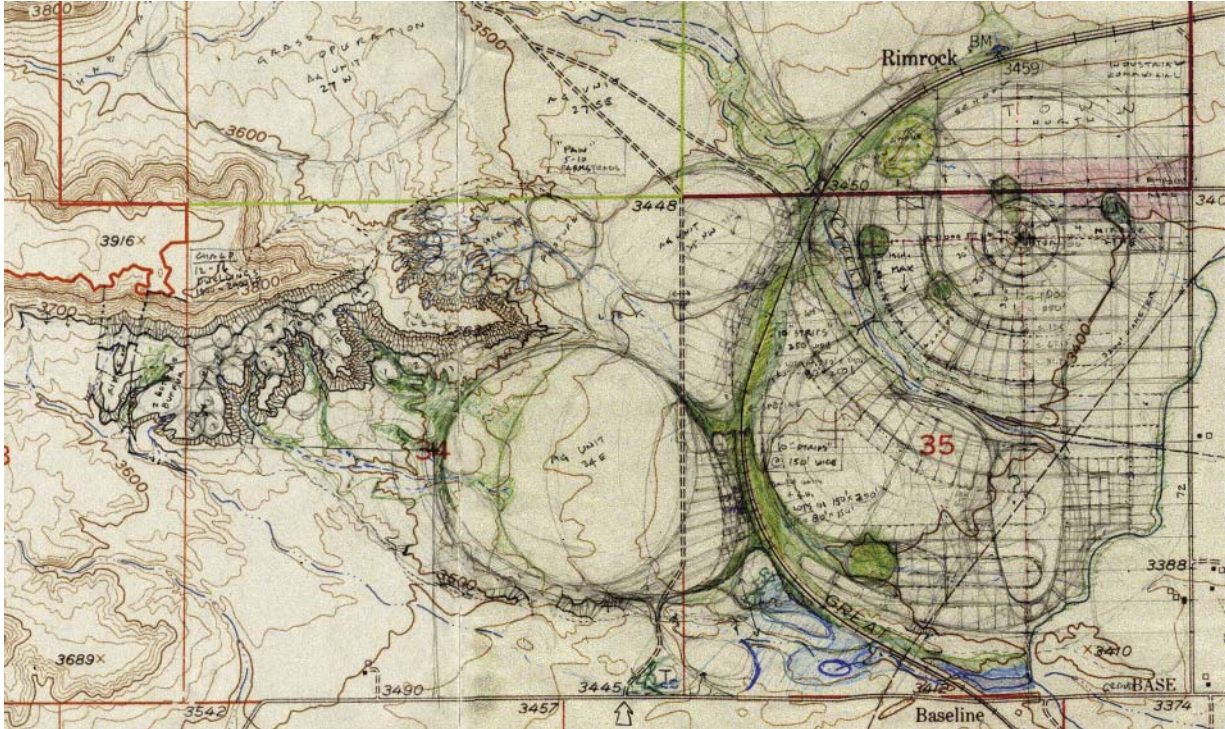
Cottonwood Ranches is a single holding consisting of nearly 100 square miles of contiguous deeded and leased (BLM and USFS) lands in the Green River Valley of Wyoming, south of Jackson. The ranch is unique not only for its size, but for the fact that it is undivided by major roads along its entire length and includes elevations ranging from 7,096 feet at the Ranch entry to 10,450 feet at Lander Peak. The ranch was assembled over a fifty-year period, from a series of originally distinct homesteads along 27 miles of the South Cottonwood creek drainage.

We faced not only the challenge of making the ranch financially sustainable but also of returning a significant portion of the investment of one of the key members of Cottonwood Ranches LLC, who wished to recoup some of his investment. This presents a significant financial challenge to the LLC, which bought out another partner less than two years previously. Our client, the youngest LLC member, asked us to design a culturally and ecologically sustainable alternative to the standard ownership subdivision and management fragmentation proposed by the retiring member. To add to the challenge, the surface value of the ranch was threatened by oil and gas development proposed by the owners of the subsurface rights. The best defense was determined to be a management plan that established an ongoing financial strategy for the ranch, linking its value to specific features and places within the landscape.

We posed this question: “How does one become a part of a whole without cutting the whole into parts?” During the ranch’s “prime”, a colorful and significantly larger collection of families had managed, worked, written about and painted its landscape. This period of activity gave the Land many of its names and most of the stories that are still told, and left it with a number of historic locations now known as “places”. The goal of our design has been to reinvigorate the landscape with a new and fully engaged human presence in and around these places, restoring not only the quality of the land but the character and complexity of its community. An additional benefit of this site-specific strategy was to show that the recreational value of these locations was dependent upon the protection of the ecological and aesthetic health of the Land. A three-dimensional digital model of the ranch was prepared to map the viewsheds and show that drilling and road construction could be limited to less critical areas, providing an important tool for positive negotiations with the holder of the mineral rights.

Rather than subdivide the habitat and working ranch operation, the design restores the existing structures and integrates new dwellings, composed in concert with the historic areas of activity but without disrupting the natural, agricultural or visual fabric of the landscape. The design proposes not so much ‘development’ as ‘repopulation’.

The entire ecosystem of the watershed and grasslands will remain intact, as will the surface management of the entire 83,000 acre ranch by the Cottonwood Ranches LLC. This will become a



Q: Corner Table, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects

community-owned ranch operation over a period of years as the new owners learn the land. To prevent ecological fragmentation, as well as the socially damaging sensibilities of a “gated community” approach, our plan proposes to “unbundle” various use rights that are typically purchased in totality in conventional subdivisions. Clustered near the sites of historic settlement, each new owner will have build, surface and fence rights on a homestead site of between 1/2 and 3 acres within a 50 to 600 acre deeded holding, or “homeshare”. However, agricultural use rights of all but the homestead site will be retained by the ranch management entity, on which recreational rights also will be held by multiple owners. In addition to their own deeded acreage and homestead sites, buyers will own recreational rights to fish, ride, hike and hunt a minimum of 5,000 acres

up to 11,000 acres of the other non-homestead deeded lands, depending on the purchase price of their particular homestead, as well as to the entirety of the leased lands. Due to this collective ownership of recreational and agricultural rights, and the composition of new construction within the original homesteader settlements, the Cottonwood Ranches will bear no physical evidence of subdivision other than that derived from the natural, ecological and holistic agricultural functions of the Land. This approach, generically known as “shared amenity development”, is necessary not only to comply with minimum parcel sizes of local agricultural zoning (that make “cluster” development difficult), but also to acknowledge conventional investor and market preference for larger deeded acreages – even when the design provides

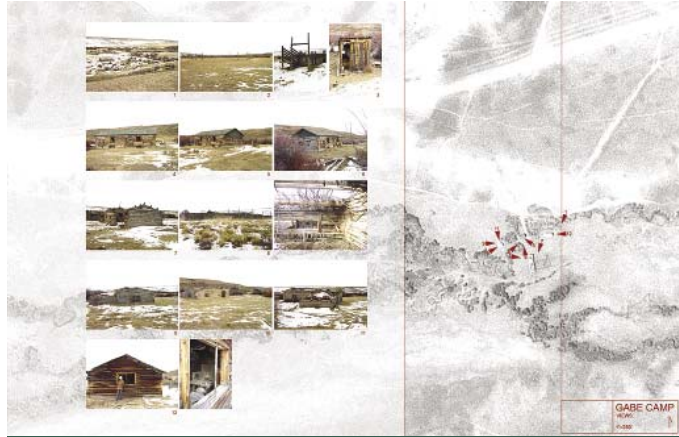


R: Corner Table, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects

for far more recreational access, and far less private management cost to the buyer.

Regardless of the “paper plat” of ranchettes, in actual practice the ranch will operate as a series of concentrated mixed-use inhabitation nodes with a continuous range and habitat management zone, and ensure the lasting financial, ecological and cultural integrity of Cottonwood Ranches. Released from its obligation to exclude and divide, a ‘subdivision’ can become a ‘collective ownership diagram’ that is free to express its symbolic content. Imbued with a community structure based upon a Land Ethic, the legalistic “plat” is replaced by an expression of an integrated social and natural system expressed in an idealized geometry – a ranch “mandala”.

Unlike the few other shared-amenity ranches that exist in the west, the Cottonwood strategy proposes to educate the newcomers to the land over time, eventually turning over the management of the entire landscape to a community ownership structure. Purchasers of a deeded interest would be assured of the long-term health of the pastures, creeks, upland and forest habitats (and of the value of their recreational rights) by a “Constitution of the Land” written by the founding partners. The administrative management entity would have a board of overseers that initially would include only the seven members of this “Founders” group, the two original ranch owners, and the long-time ranch manager family. Over time the board would be expanded to include all owning families. After the minimum number of years of occupancy required to become vested (and to initiate the process of re-inhabitation), owners would join the “electoral college” of the ranch, with votes equal to the number of acres in their deeded holdings. Ownership of multiple homeshares by a single individual would be limited to a maximum



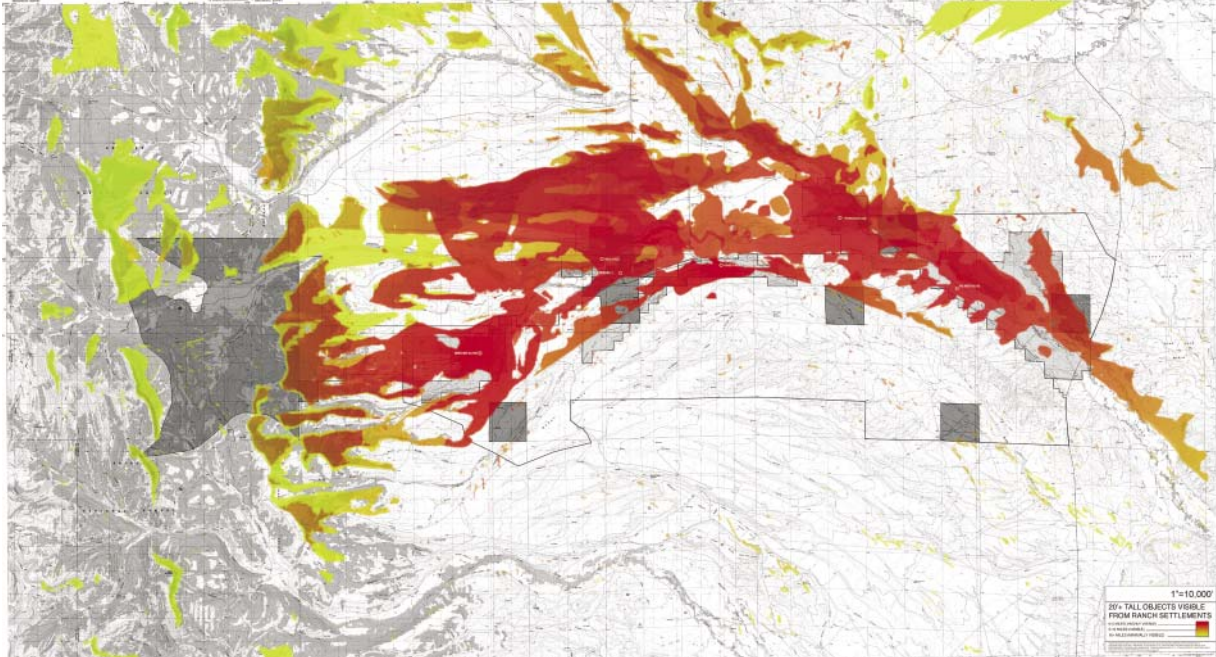
S: Rather than subdivide the habitat and working ranch operation, the design restores the existing structures and integrates new dwellings. Cottonwood Ranches, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects



T: Oil and gas development on BLM land leased by Cottonwood Ranches.



U: Cottonwood Ranches, Green River Valley, Wyoming



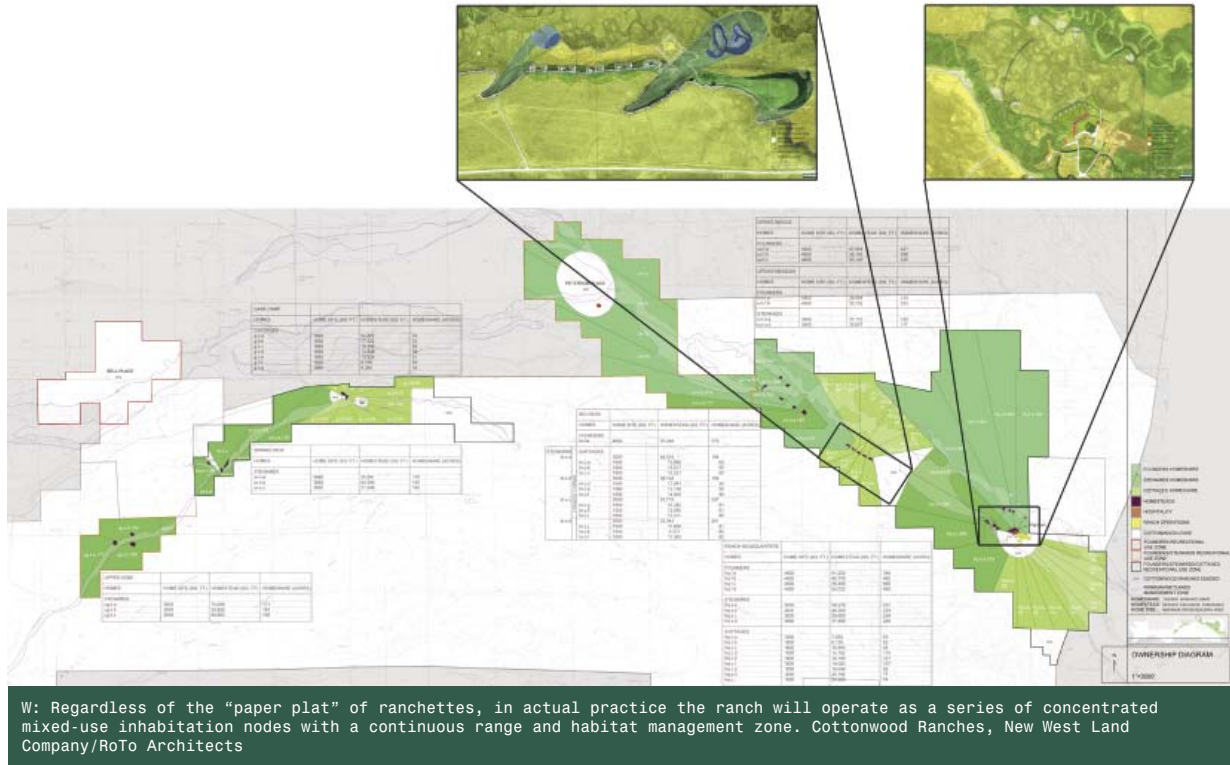
V: Cottonwood Ranches, New West Land Company/RoTo Architects

percentage of the deeded acreage of the Ranch. The proportion of small and large interests is designed to balance collective power in the management of the ranch, encouraging all to become truly engaged members of this “community of the Land.”

Building on the concepts of historic “camps” throughout North America, Cottonwood will merge the authentic daily operations of the working ranch with recreational and hospitality uses. Unlike conventional “guest ranches”, the hospitality components of the project will be marketed and managed by outsourcing a limited number of guest-weeks to a resort in nearby Jackson in combination with “Rolodex-based” marketing through the collective owners for the balance of the guest-weeks. This approach is intended to create a social mix that avoids conventional hierarchies, focusing instead on the quality of the overall experience, especially at the collective dining table, the true heart of any Camp. Just as we will manage the Land for biological diversity, we will also design for the social diversity to enrich the camp experience. Working families of the ranch, owners of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and short-term camp guests will interact daily, without the sterility of a conventional “gated community” development approach.

The sense of community will be created organically around the adaptive reuse of historic structures rather than the strangely grandiose “lodge” typical of contemporary recreational development. Individual dwellings will also be massed as groups of smaller structures in traditional farm-and-ranch-stead compositions, and grouped in existing zones of historic human occupation and alteration in order to minimize ecological impact, maximize unimpeded open space and engender a sense of community. In order to keep the structures to a scale appropriate to the concept, our plan provides for volumetric limitations appropriate to each place. While these building concepts and envelopes will preclude the sprouting of “starter mansions” on ridgelines and ensure a composition and materiality that integrates landscape and building form, they will stop short of dictating a historicist design language that might romanticize or trivialize the integrity of vernacular structures of the historic West.

Ranch lands held in common will be managed holistically, with irrigation profiles designed to restore the abundant diverse grasslands, expand the quantity and diversity of wildlife and enhance the extraordinary fishery that contains four species of trout. This management approach will partner private investment with public programs such as the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program, providing funding for solar electric fencing and long term protection of the riparian corridors.



Beautyway: A Conclusion

My favorite passages that link culture, story and Land come from Barry Lopez’s essay “Landscape and Narrative” in *Crossing Open Ground*. Although Lopez talks here about the inherent qualities of story, a place designed in a language derived from the inherent structure of the landscape has a similar “power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call ‘the land’”. Echoing David Abram and Wendell Berry, he notes that “an indigenous philosophy – metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and logic – may also be derived from a people’s *continuous attentiveness* to the obvious (scientific) and ineffable (artistic) orders of the local landscape.” These observations suggest that a sincere effort to understand the “is” of a place – to observe and question every aspect of its nature from both a scientific and cultural perspective and to map it onto the land – will eventually reveal the structure, even *intentions* of the Land.

Lakota oral tradition holds that the role of humans is to be conscious of the natural order and to see to its maintenance. This function falls to humankind not because we are distinct from the natural order, but because we are within it and equipped to measure the health of our place with our own senses. While the Lakota cosmology provides “rules” for the care of this order, its true measure is left to our human senses and sensibilities. Of primary importance is our ability to experience the beauty that is evidence of that order and those intentions:

Among the various sung ceremonies of this people – Enemyway, Coyoteway, Red Antway, Uglyway – is one called Beautyway. In the Navajo view, the elements of one’s interior life – one’s psychological makeup and moral bearing – are subject to a persistent principle of disarray. Beautyway is, in part, a spiritual invocation of the order of the exterior universe, that irreducible, holy complexity that manifests itself as all things changing through time (a Navajo definition of beauty...) The purpose of this invocation is to recreate within the individual who is the subject of the Beautyway ceremony that same order, to make the individual again a reflection of the myriad enduring relationships of the landscape.



An appropriate design process, or perhaps a design ritual, can function in a similar way. According to the Navajo concept, our failures in the stewardship of our places result from inevitable human tendencies. The loss of sense of place is an inevitable result of the loss of rituals not yet replaced in contemporary form. The good news is that we have not entirely lost our ability to measure the current societal imbalance. We still know ugly when we see it, even if our training in relativism makes us reluctant to identify and define its opposite.

Lopez is not afraid to speak of Beauty in absolute terms. While we may lack the shared definition of the Navajo regarding this concept, the experience is indeed shared and ultimately discernible in the Land, is a good measure of its health and our own, and suggests a purpose to the experience. Perhaps our underlying innate sense of beauty is our best measure of sustainability: not simply a fortunate and pleasant fringe benefit of our physiology, but our most advanced survival skill, and the only one that operates beyond our life span for the benefit of our offspring's offspring. The "senses" we recognize as such evolved to provide us with the tools we needed to survive to sexual maturity,

but our "sensibilities" might just have a sustaining function for our species as well. While beauty, by whatever definition, may not predict cultural and ecological health, I cannot think of a landscape that is by any objective measure ecologically and culturally healthy that is not also beautiful. The cultivation and preservation of spatial harmony – of balance, proportion, order, of composition, pattern and texture – might then be our best way to ensure that we are sustainable as a species. When we act to sustain or promote beauty in a place, we may also be acting to sustain its health, and ultimately our own. This conclusion will likely be seen as anthropocentric, and perhaps it is necessarily so. Ultimately, after all, we take measure of our places with the tools that we have "on hand" and in our heart, and define for ourselves with our own body of cells and experiences the relationships we wish to conserve.

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NOTES

01. Jim Harrison, *After Ikkyu and Other Poems* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996).
02. Norman Wirzba, ed., *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2002) 5.
03. David Abram, *The Spell of the Senuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 69.
04. For further discussion about *Landschaft*, see James Corner's article “Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes” in James Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscapes: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, c1999).
05. Wirzba, 136.
06. For further discussion about contemporary landscape practices in the Netherlands, see Alex Wall's “Programming the Urban Surface” and Bart Lootsma's “Synthetic Regionalization: The Dutch Landscape Toward a Second Modernity” in James Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscapes: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, c1999).
07. See “The Ecology of Magic”, Abrams, 3-29.
08. Statistic from a presentation by Ray Rasker of the Sonoran Institute at the Institute's Land Use Science Symposium in Yellowstone National Park, 2001. The Sonoran Institute works with rural communities and small towns to plan for socially and economically sustainable transformations.
09. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 21.
10. For further discussion, see Allan Savory's *Holistic Resource Management* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1988).
11. Wirzba, 137.
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14. Edward Abbey, *The Journey Home: Some Words in Defense of the American West* (New York: Dutton, c1977).
15. Tom McGuane
16. Jonathan Raban, *Bad Land: An American Romance* (New York: Pantheon Books, c1996).
17. For further information about “solving for pattern”, see Berry's essay “Solving for Pattern” in Wirzba, 267.
18. Curt Meine and Richard L. Knight, eds., *The Essential Aldo Leopold: Quotations and Commentaries* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) 164.
19. *Farming on the Edge: Sprawling Development Threatens America's Best Farmland*. American Farmland Trust. 2003 <http://www.farmland.org/farmingontheedge/>.
20. *Strategic Ranchlands in the Rocky Mountain West*. American Farmland Trust, Rocky Mountain Regional Office. 2003 http://www.farmland.org/rocky_mountain/Montana.htm.
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