

Art Farm | Red Barn Gallery

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Figure 1. aerial view of the one-mile square "Jeffersonian" grid that organizes much of the American Midwest and West (photo shows central Nebraska).

Drawing lines on the land

"To pass the time on flights between Omaha, Nebraska and San Francisco, I often gaze out over the vast gridded flatness that stretches beneath me to the horizon. The landscape that attracts my gaze is not only flat (a topological analysis of Kansas proved that the state is in fact flatter than a pancake¹), its apparent flatness is enhanced and its actual topographic uniqueness is mitigated by the highly-visible overlay of a now familiar organizing grid." The so-called Jefferson Grid originated with Thomas Jefferson's conception of an agrarian democratic landscape, one in which every parcel of land was equivalent and to which every citizen of the young nation had equal access. After the Revolutionary War, the Land Ordinance Act of 1785 established the

Public Land Survey System and the process of surveying the new territories to the west of the colonies began. Jefferson famously brought these new territories into existence for white settlers by drawing lines on a map. From my vantage point 30,000 feet above its plane, the grid projects itself as the triumph of rationality over the tractable surface of the Great Plains. As manifest, however, the grid is far from the perfect order that Jefferson and his collaborators imagined. The purity of the abstract grid quickly succumbed to politics and the uncertainties of circumstance, the primitive surveying techniques of the day, and the inevitable vagaries of capital. Nevertheless, although their original meaning and origin is now an artifact of history, these lines and the creation of the map are still the dominant organizing force across much of the

American landscape. The grids of the National Land Survey cover over 63% of the United States and the Public Land Survey System continues to be the method by which federal lands are quantified. In this view, the map is not a representation of existing conditions in the land as it is the creation *ex nihilo* of the conditions of landscape – the map organizes the world for future inhabitation. By focusing on the line on the map (more importantly, on the surface of the earth), the practice of architecture transgresses disciplinary boundaries to occupy a territory “belonging” to landscape.²

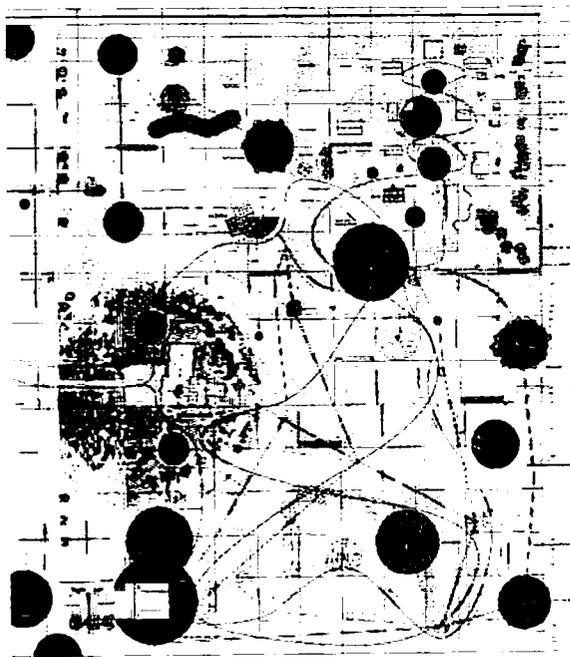


Figure 2. detail of the Art Farm site plan with its 66-foot grid, circular “tree” nodes, and the Red Barn Gallery in the southwest quadrant.

Our interest in the facts of the grid are more than academic. In 2003 our office, in partnership with a student-staffed design lab, began a working relationship with Art Farm.³ Art Farm is a non-profit art residency program situated on a forty acre working farm in Marquette, Nebraska, 140 miles west of Omaha. In operation for over ten years, the site currently includes a large, informal sculpture “Art Pasture,” and approximately fifteen separate standing and salvaged buildings. Our primary task was to create an organizational infrastructure that can both accommodate and structure the development of Art Farm over the next ten years. While we may be fortunate to design and construct

several of the new buildings and modifications to those that exist, the very nature of Art Farm suggests that much of the work that follows will be the product of the improvisations of multiple participants.

As with all systems of order, the form of the grid outlives its practical origin. At Art Farm, we wish to give these units new meaning by accentuating their innate specificity through the introduction of a miniaturized facsimile of the local grid deployed as an organizing system for Art Farm’s migratory structures. When these lines are first staked out on the actual site, they will not immediately be physicalized. Like the original National Land Survey, the lines are only a virtual infrastructure of boundaries, awaiting inhabitation. Over time, our new grid of mini-sections will accumulate physical structures (in built or planted form), slowly becoming more visible as they gradually manifest themselves in the landscape. Buildings within the gridded Great Plains landscape have always been commodities with impermanent locations – nomadic structures built for a flexible economy and a mobile population.

We categorize individual buildings at Art Farm as either “domestics”, structures fixed in place, and “migrants”, structures that are free to roam within the bounds of a 66’ x 66’ “mini-section”. Artists may relocate migrant private studios as they wish to arrange a personal workspace (see the northeast quadrant of the site plan). As such, the Campus will take on a seasonal state of flux, subverting the dominance of permanent location upon which architecture frequently relies for its meaning.



Figure 3. the “domestic” territory of the Red Barn Gallery fixed by a supple “carpet” of concrete.

The first building project we are engaging within this re-organized landscape is the **Red Barn Gallery**, a salvaged structure repurposed for a new, post-agricultural landscape.

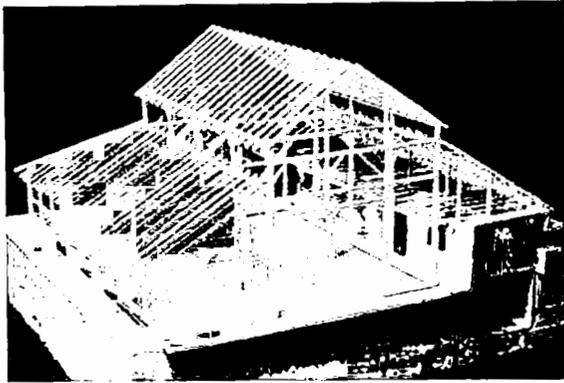


Figure 4. concrete carpet and existing timber frame, model photo by Larry Gawel.

The **Red Barn Gallery** will be the entry point for the public and the interpretive center of the multiple ecologies of Art Farm. Currently Art Farm has no dedicated public space, nor is the site structured for the public visits except during special events. As part of a major master planning effort in which most of Art Farm's acreage is to be modified and re-appropriated, the Red Barn Gallery project is of special significance as it will become the primary public "node" of the entire institution.

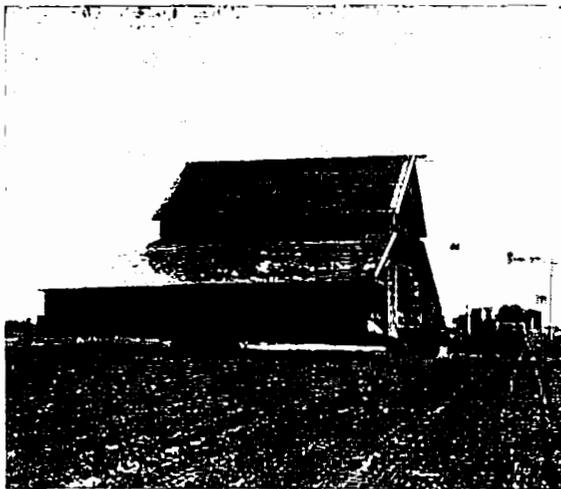


Figure 5. moving the barn to Art Farm, July 2005.

In order to accommodate all of these needs, the simple structure of the barn must be amended significantly. While our goal is to preserve the silhouette of the barn, this is not a restoration project. In keeping with a philosophy based in an understanding of the vernacular as a process of flexible accommodation and not as a "style", the proposal freely mixes modern design with the

historical structure of the barn. This montage of new and old construction is becoming the signature aesthetic of Art Farm.



Figure 6. montage from southwest.

Now that the barn has been moved, the work of renovation and re-appropriation begins. As with all projects at Art Farm, construction will be the result of the collaborative efforts of the architects, Art Farm resident artists, and the Art Farm owners/staff. Outside professionals and tradesman may be involved from time to time, but in the can-do spirit of the Great Plains, much of the work will be accomplished by highly skilled novices.

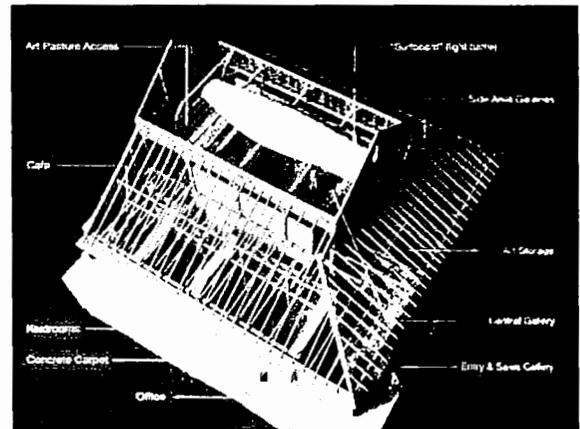
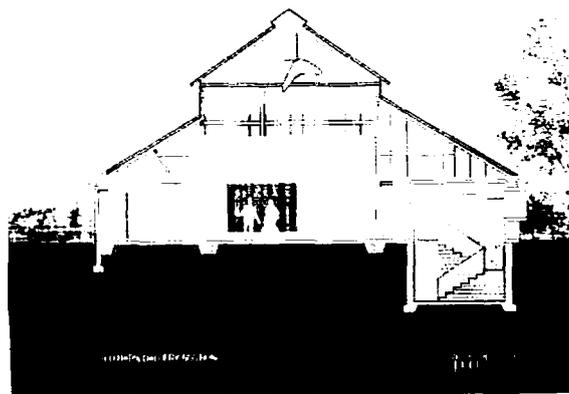
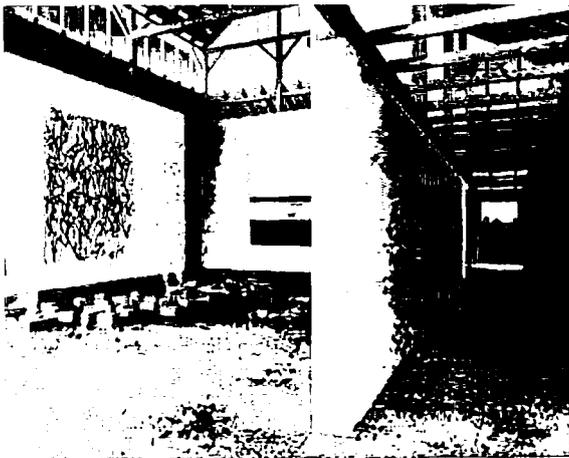


Figure 7. overview of interior, model photo by Larry Gawel.

The primary functional spaces of the Red Barn Gallery are as follows: Gallery Space (for everything from temporary installations to sales of small art works), Public Facilities

(restrooms, etc.), Administrative Office, Café, Storm Cellar, Art Storage.



Figures 8, 9, 10. interior montage of central gallery, looking east; section looking west; interior montage looking west.

"The ongoing work on this and other projects follows a belief that large-scale architectural projects with indeterminate futures such as Art Farm benefit more from a tactical approach to design that coaxes specificity from the generic and contingent identities bound up in circumstance. In this case, the most dominant "circumstances" are those derived from the Survey and it's mobile (architectural) inhabitants. A tactical, bottom-up approach to given circumstances is thus more successful than one based on the inflexible strategies of the "master plan". Art Farm takes the pragmatism of the Midwest farmer and turns it on its head to create a vibrant new landscape for art from the post-agricultural plains."⁴

References

¹ Mark Fonstad, William Pugatch, and Brandon Vogt, "Kansas is Flatter Than a Pancake," *Annals of Improbable Research*. Available at <<http://www.improbable.com/airchives/paper/air/volume9/v9i3/kansas.html>>. Accessed on 10 September, 2005.

² Jeffrey L. Day, "Drawing Lines on the Land", *REVIEW a + up* 2006, forthcoming, 2006.

³ Min|Day is an architectural practice based in Omaha, Nebraska, and San Francisco, California (www.minday.com). *FACT* (Fabrication And Construction Team) is an academic/professional collaborative design lab established but Jeffrey L. Day at the University of Nebraska that offers students a forum for exploration aimed at expanding the understanding of the complex relationships between thinking (conceiving, designing, theorizing) and making. A frequent collaborator with Min|Day, *FACT* engages design intensive projects and creative clients in collaborations that bridge the gap between design and construction. Portions of this project have benefited from funding through the UCARE program of the Pepsi Foundation.

⁴ Jeffrey L. Day, "Two FACTS Concerning Landscape in Architecture," *306090 #07, Landscape Within Architecture*, ed. David L. Hays (New York, 306090, Inc.), 99.