

## Preserving the Cultural Landscapes of Ranching in the American West

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In the American West, alarm is sounding over our patterns of landscape modification, causing significant and necessary attention to the cultural landscapes of the region—especially when it comes to a settlement form of the American West—the traditional ranch.

As a cultural resource, the ranch represents an important aspect of the West's history and patterns of early settlement. Ranches evolve and develop as unique land-use systems that exhibit the history of families that make their living from the land. Traditional ranches convey efforts to build structures and shape the landscape for a specific use in areas that historically were often considered remote and uninhabitable. They exemplify how the natural and manmade have collided and grown together over generations, shaping a distinctive vernacular cultural landscape.

This paper concerns the sustainability of the western ranch and will demonstrate the positive impact graduate students can have on preserving rural communities through hands-on learning. First, an understanding of the ranch's cultural landscape is presented. Second, a description of the student involvement in the preservation of ranches is offered and one case study will describe a broader view of preservation, beyond the curatorial attention often given to particular structures. This, in turn, keeps the focus on the workings of the ranch, facilitating the continuation of the ranching culture that helps preserve and sustain the ranching heritage of the American West.



*Figure 1. Douglas County is one of the fastest growing regions in the nation. New housing development is shown next to agricultural lands that will soon be urbanized.*

### RANCHING AND ENVIRONMENT

Today, ranchers are pressured by escalating property taxes that result from surrounding subdivision or resort development, a lack of economic viability in the ranching industry, estate taxes that make it *cost* prohibitive for the next generation to sustain ranching and ownership of the land, and poor condition of the structures due to age and natural forces. For many ranchers, economics drive their decisions to sell their agricultural lands for financial gain that would not spring from their involvement in ranching.

The ranching cultural landscape is the product of a livestock rancher's day-to-day and long-term decision making. Sales of ranching property that takes ownership out of the hands of ranchers results in a physical change in the cultural landscape that has historically identified the region. This change of

ownership and land use affects not just the ranches but also the people, the culture, and the entirety of the landscape of which they are an intrinsic part. If the ranching cultural landscape is to be sustained in the American West, the rancher must play a major role in the preservation and conservation of not just the land but also the cultural landscape. It is essential to involve ranchers wholeheartedly in ownership and the decision-making process that impacts the land. Only if this process is conscientiously applied will the integrity and future of ranching, the ranching culture, and the ranching cultural landscape remain intact.

### ARCHITECTURE AND THE VERNACULAR CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

Today's traditional ranches function in much the same way as they have historically, embracing changes in technology and mechanization that come along to create a more efficient operation. Traditionally owned ranches are physically characterized by a large acreage of land on which there are a small number of structures. Ranches connect vast landscapes of private and public lands in the West. They provide the setting for the ranching culture (the people and their traditions), the land, and the built environment (buildings, structures, and objects—cattle guards, foot bridges, fence posts), all working together collectively for the purpose of raising livestock.

Characteristics of the cultural landscape of ranching include those that have been developed as (1) a practice for shaping the land to support ranching and (2) those that are material elements embedded in the landscape. *The Rural Landscape*, by John Fraser Hart, identifies three principal components of a complex landscape:<sup>1</sup>

- the landforms—features of the land surface that influence the pattern of vegetation and the ways in which people can use the land
- The vegetation—the plants that cover the surface, which are excellent indicators of the land's potential for human use
- The structures people have added, which generally reflect the functions that are necessary for daily living.<sup>2</sup>

The ranching culture itself shapes the distinct characteristics that define a ranching landscape. As noted below, these characteristics are reflected in the large scale of the landscape as well as within the micro scale of the ranching complex and buildings:

First, the physical modifications made to the land to support ranching are reflected in the *land-use practices* of the ranch. They are the major human influences that shape, imprint, and organize ranching landscapes. They are typically determined by cultural traditions, technology, economic viability, and the physical landforms and natural resources available on the land. For example, one type of dynamic physical element imprinted on the ranching landscape is the vegetation that is directly related to land use. This includes, but is not limited to, the seasonal movement of livestock to different grazing areas, the amount of grazing in each area, and the irrigation of the lands for the purpose of feeding livestock on both owned and leased lands. The temporal quality of a ranch's hay meadows will grow and shrink seasonally according to the amount consumed by livestock as well as the placement of hay bales gathered on the land for feeding the livestock during the winter months or drought periods.

Second, a distinct *arrangement and spatial order* among the land, buildings, and structures—as well as the placement of objects for the ranching practice—is physically apparent on the landscape. This order reinforces land-use practices. The land is impressed with a systematized physical arrangement of pasture, hay meadows, and open range that is relative to the ranching headquarters buildings, structures, and corrals. This arrangement of elements establishes the cultural landscape, as the rancher—heeding the dominant landforms, natural environment, physical elements of the ranch, and daily ranching activities—adapts each individual piece of the cultural landscape.

Third, the buildings, structures, and objects that serve people and livestock are arranged in *response to the natural environment and land features* with consideration to solar orientation, wind patterns, and proximity to water resources. The circulation systems connect the land-use areas with the ranch complex and can identify relationships among

ranches in rural areas. Circulation systems that range in scale from railroads and highways to footpaths and trails are used for moving livestock through the ranch and region. In addition, waterways and irrigation ditches are critical circulation systems that determine land use and management.

Fourth, the *boundary demarcations* relating to livestock management are characterized by the property boundaries of the ranch, generally fences—walls, irrigation ditches, creeks and rivers, and natural landscape features. The marked boundaries of the property further identify the controlled management of the ranching landscape.

Finally, the ranch complex includes the *buildings, structures, and objects* that enable livestock management to flourish. Most often, there is a main house, often the original homestead added to over time; a bunkhouse for ranch hands; a barn; a blacksmith shop; garages and storage sheds; and small outbuildings such as a privy, meat house, icehouse, and a cabin in which a teacher might have resided. Typically, the structures are comprised of new, reused, recycled, and relocated materials—buildings that reflect the necessities of the ranching activities and uses. Physical features used for managing the livestock and land—including corrals, cattle guards, fences, hay stackers, and wells—are also evident.

The buildings, structures and objects on a ranch are clustered together on the landscape in response to functional necessity, cultural tradition, environmental factors, and the activities and preferences of the rancher. The landscape immediately surrounding the ranch complex is often augmented with the addition of large trees, which are used as windbreaks and for shading; such groves often define the edge of the ranch complex. Fencing also differs from that which defines and encloses the ranchland property in its entirety. While grounded in tradition, the ranching landscape is dynamic and continuously changing. Most traditional ranches exhibit the subtle visage of historic use, as apparent in collapsed and overgrown cellars and privy pits, fencepost stumps, wooden bridges crossing irrigation ditches, and refuse disposal areas. Each season reflects various ranch activities that are inherent in an annual cycle.

## RANCHING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The American Farmland Trust identified approximately five million acres of threatened prime ranchland in Colorado alone. The properties include the largest tracts of private land surrounding metro and resort development areas. The ranchlands are viewed as ideal to accommodate change and anticipated growth in the state. The change of ownership out of the hands of traditional ranchers and away from agricultural land use is the greatest issue threatening the long-term survival of ranching cultural landscapes.

As the ownership of ranchlands moves away from traditional ranches, the loss of agricultural lands has energized several types of preservation and conservation approaches. National and grassroots organizations have mobilized around the common benefit of preserving the landscape. Each approach has a different outcome, but all reshape the ranching cultural landscape.

The grassroots preservation programs endeavor to conserve the traditional ranch by developing approaches to keep the land in the hands of the rancher comes from a community of interested ranchers and locals whose goal is to protect rural areas while maintaining the viability of ranching. Preserving ownership in the hands of the traditional working rancher retains the ranching culture, land, and buildings, thereby sustaining the West's vernacular cultural landscapes.

## PRESERVATION PROGRAM

The complexity of ranch *preservation* issues and the role of the university in service to the community warranted a collaboration model that would achieve the desired outcome of historic preservation and education. The university and local preservation organizations have collaborated to develop a pilot program to preserve the character of rural areas through the built environment. The program focuses on helping interested property owners preserve their agricultural properties.

The goal is to apply this pilot program statewide to various counties in need of conducting existing condition surveys and historic preservation, land conservation, to oversee the preservation of ranch properties

and to initiate a research study of the vernacular architecture and cultural landscapes of the region.

The success of this program is largely dependent on the partnerships developed in the county and the resources available at the university. Within the county this program is offered to ranchers and property owners. Within the university this program is offered to graduate students in the architecture, landscape architecture and planning programs and is currently developed through independent studies, seminars and studio courses.

### THE PARTNERS

The program developed in collaboration with the county, is incentive based and allows the property owners to select the area of participation that best suits their needs. The program offers ranch surveys and inventories, National Register nomination assistance, historic structure assessments, photographs, one-on-one technical assistance, grant facilitation, tax and other incentives, and preservation easement facilitation.

Within the College of Architecture and Planning the purpose of the program is to:

- Educate, train and inform graduate students in architecture, planning and landscape architecture about the process and importance of properly preserving and documenting the cultural resources in the state.
- Develop an *educational* outreach program in collaboration with ranching communities to help identify and preserve historically significant buildings and cultural landscapes.
- Educate students on preservation issues, to develop hands-on applications of preservation methods and to disseminate the outcomes for public awareness and benefit.
- Collaborate with rural communities to identify, record, evaluate, document and ultimately designate significant ranch properties in order to incorporate historical values in planning.

Connecting to communities as well as educating and training students in historic

preservation techniques that will ultimately allow for the designation of as many significant properties as possible is the primary goal of the pilot program. In addition, it is key to develop an understanding of the importance of historic preservation in academia as well as in the student's future professional practice. For many rural areas it is a difficult and costly process to obtain the information needed to determine the viability of preserving their ranch lands. Connection between the university and the community is a key component to the program's success.

Such success brings a better understanding of the preservation planning process among students and rural communities, and produces more efficient and thorough surveys and documentation elucidating historic significance and integrity. In addition, a database of the surveyed sites is being developed, the communities will have the completed Architectural Inventory Forms and Management Forms, and selected organizations in the county will use the data as a basis to nominate the properties for historic designation. The ranchers can use the information to develop further preservation efforts such as tax incentives, easements, zoning and land use control, and funds that aid in the conservation of historic areas.

### PRESERVATION PROCESS

The following outlines the on-going process of developing the program:

#### 1) Identify the Community and Stakeholders

One of the key components to the success of the program as well as access to the resources is community support for the project. The preservation efforts for this program are developed as incentive based for the ranching community. The more the ranching community and county are involved in the pilot preservation program, the more likely the program is to succeed. By getting students involved with the community the survey effort itself becomes a powerful stimulus to public involvement. The process of developing the surveys and gathering the data contributes to public support by helping the public understand what is important about the communities past. The data's contribution to their future provides information for wise use

of a community's resources and the basis for making sound judgments in community planning.

## **2) Develop Historic Context**

A historic context is developed that will provide background information about the patterns of history and development that shape a particular geographic area in the state. The historic context links a rural property with important historic trends or themes, such as homesteading, grazing and livestock development. It informs us of how people built with the land and environment and ultimately teaches students about the various forces that inform the built environment. By using the historic context to link to development of the existing ranch structures, the rural landscape can be viewed as a unified whole.

## **3) Identify the Survey Team**

Each survey team consists of 2-3 graduate students from the programs who are selected and trained in the survey and inventory process. Hands-on training is conducted to include a site visit to review the survey methodology and inventory process and an explanation of criteria used in evaluating the ranch. The survey process and a discussion of the historic property types representative of each historic context also cover a general description of the county area. Additional training includes the process for defining the location of different historic property types, research on how and where to find and identify information on properties surveyed including illustrations, maps and photographs of the area.

## **4) Identify Properties for Survey**

In addition to developing the preservation model and educating students in the field, the university uses the data gathered for applied research and the development of a database for future public benefit.

The county leaders play a crucial role in coordinating the efforts between the ranchers and university. The team is scheduled to conduct the field inventory of the properties whereby they define the architectural and historical significance of each property in

addition to identifying and gathering data on a community's historic resources through research and conducting oral histories.

During the survey process students focus on the architectural and landscape qualities of the properties involved, the description of each building in terms of the building style, its type of construction and its defining architectural features. The complex is considered as a whole by understanding the construction and organization of the building in relationship to the other structures and the land. They identify any modification that took place and evidence of patterns and activities that occurred on the site. Understanding modifications of the floor plan and additions to the structures reveals how residents at different times organized their spaces in response to changes in social conditions, economic status, population size and so on. The site reveals facts of their daily lives, values, interest and beliefs.

Although a large part of the history of each ranch is represented in the landscape and features contained within (e.g. structures, ditches, cattle guards, fencing), a key component is in the memories of its people, their thoughts, expressions and way of life. When possible, the student surveys team resided with each ranching family to gather their history.

## **5) Documentation – HABS / HAER**

Upon completion of the survey process, properties that reflect historic and architectural significance of the ranching heritage are selected for further documentation. Following the process established in 1933 by the National Park Service Historic American Building Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), this model of documentation aims to facilitate the preservation of important structures and landscapes not physically but on paper through precise measured drawings, photographs and written records.

Students produce documentation based on detailed guidelines for site description, photographs and measured drawings. The detailed drawings build from an initial global positioning system (GPS) site survey, the field studies and notes, site analysis and historical research developed in the survey and

inventory. The drawings produced aim to be of the highest caliber. Students work with documentary technology including hand-drawn ink on mylar, drawings produced on the computer, digital camera and scanned images.

### CASE STUDY

The following case study demonstrates the integration of the ranching culture—the buildings, structures, and objects on the landscape, as well as the land—that are critical to the preservation and conservation of traditional ranching landscapes.

#### The Redmond Ranch

Settlement in northwestern, Colorado, occurred in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The topography characterized by mountainous regions, as well as fertile mountain valleys, strongly influenced the type of settlement in the region beginning in the late 1800s. While long used by cattle operations for summer pasturing, ranching and substantial permanent settlement did not begin until circa 1905-1910, in anticipation of the railroad.<sup>3</sup>

The Redmond Ranch was first settled in the 1890s and purchased by the Redmond family in 1916. The ranching landscape includes approximately 387 acres of land with 13 buildings and structures situated between two ridges in south Routt County. The Redmond Ranch conveys a sense of its significance and past and represents the early ranching heritage of the region, as well as the evolution of a working ranch over time. This is apparent in the continued land use as well as the variety of construction styles found at the ranch complex, as the family's needs have changed over the years.<sup>4</sup>

### EVOLUTION

The Redmond Ranch represents a great success in the influence of a grassroots-preservation approach to sustaining the ranching landscape. In response to economic changes in ranching, as well as many private buyers purchasing ranches for development purposes with little interest in the activity of ranching, grassroots programs are springing into existence in Routt County and throughout Colorado, focusing on preserving the traditional

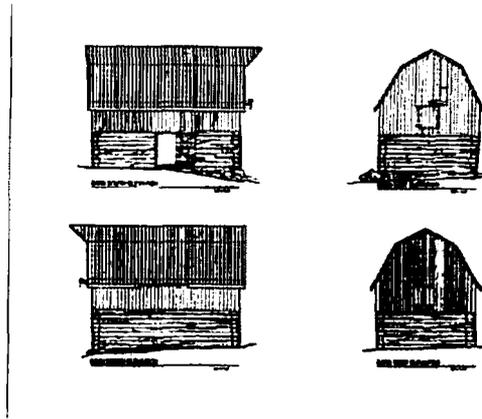


Figure 2. HABS drawings developed of the Redmond Ranch by graduate students in the architecture program.

ranch. This approach takes into consideration the importance of the people working the land, the evolving ranching culture, the structures and buildings at the heart of the operation, and the entire cultural landscape as integral parts of a worthy whole. The movement is inspired by an appreciation for this network of ranches that knits together the landscape, buildings, and ranching culture that signify the region.

The Redmonds typify the ranching community and stakeholders in the region. They have proved that rancher involvement in land ownership increases the likelihood of cultural landscape sustainability. In 2000, the Redmonds participated in a cultural resource survey that identified the integrity and architectural inventory of their ranch. HABS/HALS<sup>5</sup> drawings of the ranch complex and barn, constructed in 1890, were developed to document the vernacular cultural landscape. Both the survey and drawings were then used to obtain local historic designation for the ranch. From that local designation, a recommendation for nomination to the Colorado State Register of Historic Properties was submitted in 2004 and was enthusiastically accepted. Currently the Redmonds are applying for a conservation easement on their property through the local land trust.

Designation of the Redmond ranch complex at the state level will allow for tax benefits and the ability to apply for grants from the State Historic Fund.<sup>6</sup> These funds will be used to stabilize and rehabilitate many of the structures on the ranch complex for

continuing use to support the ranching activities. The application of a conservation easement lightens the financial burden many ranchers experience in a climate where land prices for development soar. It will continue to sustain the ranching landscape and will permanently refigure the financial factors that can be considered for the land in the future. The easement will secure the ranchland for agricultural use by future generations without changing ownership, while sustaining the ranchlands as part of the collective whole in the region.

Each process a rancher commits to contribute to sustaining the ranching cultural landscape for continued use while maintaining the physical attributes of the ranch. Several ranchers are pursuing the various levels of preservation and conservation methods made available in Routt County, each of which will contribute to the integrity of the ranching landscape in the region.

The means to maintaining the vernacular landscape is to present opportunities for preserving ownership and keeping the decisions that govern activities on the land in the hands of traditional ranchers. As ranching landscapes are altered, ranches change ownership, and the ranching culture evolves—and, in many cases, disappears—these changes will redefine prime land parcels and the cultural landscapes of the American West.

In a collaborative effort with a local county, my students, the community, the ranchers, and the historic preservation specialist, between 2000-2004, twelve ranches have received local designation, two have received state designation, eight ranches have been documented using HABS standards and approximately eighty ranches have been surveyed. The documents developed allow ranchers to pursue conservation easements, historic structural assessments and tax incentives. This is a testament to the success of the grassroots method of preservation.



*Figure 3. The Redmond Ranch complex consists of buildings in a variety of construction styles; some borrowed from the original homestead, many others built over the last 100 years to meet growing needs. The original homestead of the Boors is in ruins at the bottom of the hill in the pasture now used for cattle grazing.*

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Hart, John Fraser. 1998. *The Rural Landscape* Baltimore and London .The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Schaffer, Laureen Lafferty, *Agricultural Context* researched and compiled and serves to summarize, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize the agricultural trends in the county from earliest agricultural record until the postwar era.
- <sup>4</sup> State Historical Fund project for the City of Steamboat [SHF project no. 5RT-1401 Architectural Inventory Form.
- <sup>5</sup> Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record:  
[http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/145\\_habs.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/145_habs.html)
- <sup>66</sup> Colorado Historical Society  
<http://www.coloradohistory-oahp.org/programareas/shf/shfindex.htm>