

The Cultural Landscape of Ranching Documentation, Preservation and Interpretation

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Introduction

Nowhere in the country is the critical relationship to the natural landscape and environment as apparent as in the West—a region where recent population demands have caused instant urbanization and mass land consumption. This rapid growth and sprawl, with its ensuing development, is eliminating one of the most precious Colorado historic resources and my great interest—the cultural landscape of ranching. These early settlements of the 19th century that continue to operate even today are dynamic “working landscapes” that are continuously being modified— combining the traditions of the rancher, the natural landforms and environment, and the buildings and structures required for the purpose of raising livestock. They represent a link to our western heritage and are significant as biodiverse environments, open space, and wildlife hubs that are a unique component of the region’s identity.

The traditional rancher—those who understand the environment and have the closest remaining ties to the land—and the ranch’s cultural landscape can make important contributions that may well impact our choices regarding the future development of the western region. In a recent report, the American Farmland Trust identified approximately 5 million acres of threatened prime rangeland in Colorado alone. This land will undergo a transition to new development at an average rate of 140,000 acres per year to support a projected population boom of over 2 million people in the next two decades. The ranches include the largest tracts of private land surrounding urban and resort

areas and are viewed as ideal to accommodate population growth by providing landmass, easy access and low-cost property.

The projects developed through my research and teaching seek to answer the following questions: 1) How might we rethink preservation as a process of sustaining the dynamic ranchlands which still embrace the culture and traditions, the land and the buildings as an integrated whole? 2) What can we learn from the ranch as a “working landscape” and how can we apply that knowledge in the 21st century? 3) What can we learn from the evolution of our ranchlands in response to population growth and how can we mitigate negative impact? 4) What can we learn from the ranch structures to assist us in designing appropriate architecture for the western region? 5) How might we document the cultural landscapes of ranching in the American West? 6) What can we learn from the vernacular—the historical, ordinary cultural landscape of ranching—to better understand our patterns of settlement in the American West?

In my teaching I develop projects for my students that focus on the documentation and future design of historic ranch sites. In my research and creative work I interpret the documentation of the ranches, which has been developed by the students, to understand the patterns of development and potential preservation of the sites. These activities benefit and serve the communities by assisting in the potential preservation, land conservation and documentation of the ranch sites.

Documentation

As part of my research, over 300 ranch sites have been identified for documentation through my teaching. They each have common characteristics. The properties are working livestock ranches—running cattle or sheep—and were established at the turn of the 20th century. The ranches have 160 acres or more based on the 1862 Homestead Act that encouraged settlement in the area. The sites also clearly integrate the ranching culture, landscape, buildings, and structures that support ranching activities.

Preservation

I work with communities involved in the preservation of agricultural properties to develop a comprehensive plan to document and survey all ranches interested in participating in the process. After the initial survey and documentation take place, individual properties can be assessed for preservation needs, and the information is passed on to the owners. The counties use that documentation as a tool to aid in the preservation of the ranch, designating many sites as historic places at the local, state, and national level. Architecture inventory forms that are developed during the process are submitted to the Historical Society as public documentation. Ranching communities use that documentation for further preservation and conservation of their properties. The public document awards them access to technical and professional assistance in order to preserve and restore their buildings. There is also the potential for tax and other incentives with no strings attached. I've developed a database of information on these vernacular settlements that will allow for interpretation of the ranch's cultural landscapes.

In a collaborative effort between 2000 and 2004—in one county alone with local organizations, my students, the community, the ranchers, and the historic preservation specialist—twelve ranches received local designation, two received state designation, eight ranches were documented using HABS standards, and approximately eighty ranches were surveyed. This permanent record is a crucial part of the State's history and will become available for public use and benefit. 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 and the role of the university in that process. The work, part of a larger process, will contribute in a meaningful way to the preservation of ranches in the West.

Interpretation

The aforementioned documentation combines my own original work with that of my graduate students. The interpretation of the ranch is valuable in that it provides an understanding of the development of the built environment and cultural landscapes of early Colorado settlements. This investigation will enable us to better understand the ranch's value and its change and continuity over time in this region. The research, in turn, will teach others and further my own understanding of how to design within the context of historic vernacular landscapes and ultimately to develop appropriate architectural solutions to problems in this region and beyond.

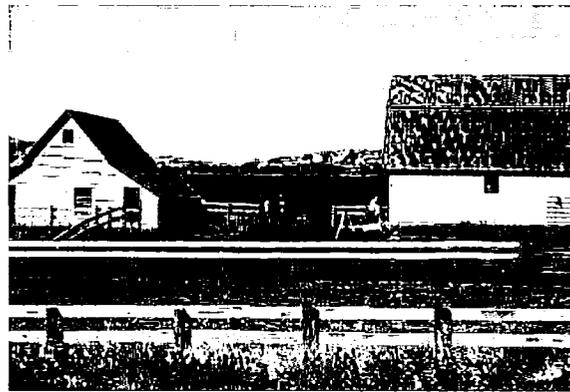


Figure 1. Graduate students in the College of Architecture and Planning at The University of Colorado at Denver document the Pavilion Ranch.