

Montana Academy

October 6, 2011

Letter from Lost Prairie

What would a farmer do?

Those of you who have been on campus recently will have noticed the building taking place between the school house and the library where the old horse pasture fence used to begin. We have recently begun a new project – a building to house our therapists. As you know, our current therapist office space in the downstairs of the lodge is quite cramped, and two of our newest therapists are in the awkward position of having to share an office. Our team leaders are already three to an office and not all of the offices are big enough for groups. We have been imagining this new building for quite some months and met with our therapists in the early Spring to get their ideas and to ask Angela Hong, Nick's wife and an architect, to begin designing this project.

Earlier this summer I took a trip with my sister-in-law to visit Richard Fernau, a friend and Berkeley architect who was working on a project just outside of Clyde Park in the Shields Valley north of Livingston, MT. Richard has been working for several years, and in various phases, on creating a home for the Avis family, who own 250,000 acres of glorious Montana land with views of three mountain ranges – the Absorkee, the Crazies and the Bridger ski area outside of Bozeman. This family clearly had the means to build anywhere and in any style that they wished. In the end they worked with Richard to answer a simple question: What would a farmer do? The answer was that a farmer would take account of weather conditions, preserve the land and reduce the infrastructure, clustering the buildings close to the road and using whatever was available to remodel and make something new.

The result is a deceptively simple group of buildings just off a remote dirt road. Yet this project was written up in the *New York Times* in 2005. There is a cozy remodeled ranch house with stunning views set next to a trout stream and a medium-sized barn which has been turned into a handsome modern sports facility with sliding doors which can be opened to the outdoors for any variety of family occasions. A cluster of outbuildings for ranch equipment completes the compound. This small collection of buildings fits its landscape. It does not scream money or call undue attention to itself. It is accessible in winter and suits the needs of its inhabitants. It is a welcome addition to this remote ranching valley and has created friends and not made enemies with local people.

The Montana Academy campus, too, has grown organically. We bought Lost Horizon Ranch 15 years ago when the only existing buildings were the old ranch house and the barn, which is now our library. During our first summer in 1997 we housed girls in the ranch house where Phil's current classroom was then our kitchen and lounge space. We built a small 12-bed dorm for boys and remodeled the barn for use as a school house. When it was clear that the girls' and boys' dorms were too close in proximity we moved our girls to rented housing seven miles down the road on what was then a cattle ranch and

is now a wildlife refuge. We grew slowly and built accordingly. John Santa was our architect and Sean, his son, began to remodel old buildings as fast as we built new ones.

Perhaps some of you know that Sean had some trouble in his teenage years and became the inspiration for John and Carol's wish to establish a therapeutic boarding school which would address similar difficulties. Sean was in treatment for some years and eventually moved back to Kalispell, where he demonstrated a talent for woodworking and building. He helped our early students to make bunk beds for the dorms, tables for the dining hall, and chairs for the lounge area. He showed them how to take a large oak plank from the library barn and make it into a beautiful table for the conference room. Sean remodeled the ranch house, then the school house, and helped to build dorms for boys and girls. He has been an indispensable all-purpose builder and fixer on campus and built a home for his parents on Lake McGregor as well. This will be his first complete campus building.

I like to think that the Montana Academy campus buildings fit the criteria that Richard Fernau established for the Avis ranch: they are close to the road, accessible in the winter, clustered to make the most of the landscape with views of pasture, forest and mountains, and many of the buildings have been remodeled several times over already. In particular, I think that they do not show off. They fit their setting. And they also adhere to some important criteria set forth in a wonderful book called *A Pattern Language* by Christopher Alexander, another Berkeley architectural professor, and his colleagues from the Center for Environmental Studies. This book sets out a series of "patterns" – units of architectural designs to answer particular living problems and the ways in which humans have chosen to solve them in their homes and towns.

Take for instance the main entrance and the importance of immediately orienting people to their destination. Hence the large sign over the cattle guard as one approaches the campus down Lost Prairie Road. It is the cattle guard itself which defines the boundary between the public road and the private community. Indeed every student is familiar with the expression "crossing the cattle guard" which holds a central significance for those who voluntarily join the community and those who reject it. The lower campus is designed as a loose courtyard or what might be termed a "quad" for those who are familiar with the layout of Oxbridge colleges. This is a time honored solution to the problem of circulating between different realms and yet staying connected and it has the virtue of defining and protecting a central inner space which reinforces connection and makes it easy to observe students coming and going between buildings. Our buildings face inwards and are dominated by the lodge, which in turn faces the ranch house building and serves as the center of campus life. As such, it is the place where we gather to eat, socialize and hold ceremonial activities. The original ranch house faces both inwards across to the lodge and outwards to the road as it necessarily serves as our point of entry for visitors and business contacts. The school house and gym form a second adjoining "quad" where the new therapy building will face the gym and provide students access on their way to and from the school house and library. We deliberately wanted to emphasize the connection between the realms of therapy and education.

These two adjacent "quads" are open to each other and connected by a series of paths. All buildings are proximate and nothing is very far apart. Paths crisscross the open areas to link the buildings where traffic is heaviest. There is open space between the

buildings so that we are not entirely sheltered from the weather and must take account of it. The central focus of our open space is our small pond which provides a calm place for reflection and connects us to the source of life. We no longer send girls off campus for their protection, but the upper campus reflects the need for the girls' dorm to be a little separate from the boys and to be surrounded by staff housing, which creates its own sense of intimacy. Indeed the whole campus strives to exemplify the strong sense of closeness and community within which we hold our students. We are tucked away just off Lost Prairie Road, at the foot of Meadow Peak, with our back to the surrounding forests and yet open to the wetlands and grasslands of the valley. Our large arena stands facing the open pastures and our vegetable garden is adjacent to this source of manure and tools. We are rooted in our agricultural valley and connected to our physical environment. It provides me with great joy to work in such surroundings. I welcome you to explore the trails across the creek and through the woods and to join us in talking a community walk together across the cattle guard and down Lost Prairie road when you return this month.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon