Common Language:

Vernacular elements define Saskatchewan rural architecture.

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Reality's never been of much use out here.
- Retired Wyoming rancher
Preface:

Growing up as I did – *weekday city kid, and weekend farm kid* – I let myself believe that I knew what it meant to be urban and what it meant to be rural; I knew that difference. I have absolutely no memory of sameness between the two places; everything was different – even the sound of quiet was different.

Then, I saw a house that did not belong. It looked like a city home – treeless, naked, and cold on the ranch lands of Alberta. *I guess Albertans have a different idea about farmhouses than us Saskatchewanians.* But, then it started to bother me that these houses were what people aspired to have in the country. *Back in Abernethy, people want the 100-year-old farmhouse on the farm, not a city house.*

I rarely left Calgary, so I did not let this deported anxiety interfere with my thoughts too much. Until a day out to Okotoks, followed by a lecture from Canadian architect, Brian MacKay-Lyons. *Those homes do not fit.*

*What would happen if a futuristic excavation uncovered those houses – they would be mistaken for suburban houses?*

*There is supposed to be a difference.*
A Theory

Architecture is anthropological, and to achieve its anthropological essence, architects must look to the vernacular set of a place as influence.

As inhabitants of the world of 2000, people cannot escape the homogenous temporary reality set by rapid communications and rapid transportation. The workplace has grown to encompass the world, including the home, via telephone lines, cable networks, and satellite transmissions; all subjectively shrinking the world and comparatively compressing time and space. Architects must acknowledge the existence of this new reality in addition to evident concrete realities. Designing with forms and materials, architects hope to present new modes of thinking about human existence, yet architecture’s immediate victims of this worldly implosion have been authentic senses of place and time.

The place where one lives is no longer limited to the particular city, town, or region that surrounds them; rather all places now stand in a homogenous sameness to all other places in the world. A coffee shop once found only in a West Coast city now sits as a form of comfort in the mountains, and on the Prairies. Houses once found only in urban suburbs now reside in the rural countryside... all brewing the same coffee from that same coffee shop. Notions of place have been removed from the circumstance of history and locale. Authentic place is uniformly transposed into idealised commodities – commodities that begin in the city and extend themselves into the countryside, sitting as deported aliens on the landscape – a homogenous solution: strip to strip, home to home.
- a concoction of place that is clueless to the persona of the region. Place is packaged as a consumable image specifically attractive to the world-body of consumers. Additionally, the notion of time has become ambiguous through the rapid availability of product and information. At one time, the requirement of waiting on a product via mail order led to anticipation and appreciation. Now, all products are found in monotonous outlet stores. Thus, people have become indifferent to time through the immediate availability of consumer society. People detach themselves from time. The present is protected from the inevitability of the future by an abstract veil of time that detaches it from the now, while at the same time, historical events are of little regard, since these are safely past. All things in society, all consumable things – including time and place – have become homogenous products without context. Things that bounce between the once thought concrete substances of time and place are available to be recycled at any given moment, for any given locale. The only concrete remnants of difference between the world-body of places are language and religion (and fragments of culture). And, these hopes of difference are taut to break.

Is this what architecture has become? A commodity for anytime and anyplace – a packaged product to be built, rebuilt, and recycled in a vacuum of time and place? The authenticity of place has been diluted by the media image of the consumer place. Romanticised imagery erodes tangible variations – the cultural and the physical – to nameless barren territories.
It was the goal of early 20th century architects to create a style that could be built anywhere. The International Style is responsible for some of the most austerely beautiful creations of twentieth century art, and once it became apparent to patrons and builders alike that the principles of the style could be used for cheap construction, these principles were welcomed commercially. What began in the 1920’s as a revolutionary ideal for new architecture became in the 1960’s and 1970’s the cliché of mass-produced building, which makes every unprotected city on the planet look much like every other one.

The reaction of architects of the early 21st century must be one that attempts to recapture that which was lost with these homogenous buildings: the vernacular differences of a place’s buildings. It is no longer appropriate to reproduce a style that was from another time and place; rather, architects are at a time that calls for a reaction against the mass-produced. Society is obsessed by commodity, and architects have the power to lead consumers in the direction of difference – something appropriate in one part of the world is not necessarily appropriate for another. Just as, architecture of the urban is not architecture of the rural.

It is the theory of this thesis project that architecture is anthropological, and to achieve its anthropological essence, architects must look to the vernacular set of a place as influence. It is not the belief that architects must be anthropologists. Rather, that architects and their buildings generate an anthropological history – just as the skyscrapers of today will be the pyramids and the Acropolis of tomorrow, and just as common pots, tools, and arrow heads create an anthropological history of the Canadian Prairies. This theory does not intend to generate an anthropological investigation of the Prairie site chosen for this project, instead it will generate a study of the vernacular elements available to an architect building on this site. It will be a study of human history and behaviour that lead to the creation of a vernacular set
of this place. A great number of present-day architects and builders seek to deny the anthropological essence of a place’s architecture with an architecture of the mass-produced – a recycled architecture. However, it is the belief of this project that architects must take influence from the vernacular elements of a place to ensure a building maintains its place in anthropological history.

This thesis project has five objectives that will address the theory set forth; as an organisational method this document will be formatted in the progress of achieving these five objectives.

The first objective is to define two terms, anthropological and vernacular, and to understand the relevance of both to the architecture of a place. It is not the objective to create a vernacular architecture nor an anthropological architecture; rather, the significance of one (vernacular) ensures the survival of the other (anthropological). It is the second objective to examine three architects who look to the vernacular set of a place to influence their design. The third objective of this thesis project is to select a specific place and examine its vernacular set and ultimately apply that set to the design of a building for that place – objective four. The fifth, and final objective, is to re-evaluate the process as a whole to determine the validity of the theory set forth – is the vernacular set of a place the best tool in generating an architecture that maintains the anthropological essence of a place?
Objective 1

Anthropological

Vernacular

Academic
Architecture is anthropological, vernacular the guide.

Anthropology, defined most simply, is the study of humans, the study of humanity, especially in terms of the physical, the cultural, distribution, customs, and social relationships. The examination of human dwellings lends itself to human investigation. However, an evident problem is consuming the anthropology of buildings: homogeneity. In some future anthropological study of a suburban home from the 1990’s in conjunction with a rural home of the same time, the investigator would assume the human occupants were of the same association. Yet, to live in the country is not to live in the city, so why has architecture of the rural followed the path of the urban? Such a question lends itself to a project of its own, one that investigates the reason for and history behind such homogeneity. However, the intentions of this project begin where such a project might end: this project presents a theory that will respond to this problem and suggest a possible solution that will give rural design a direction of its own. For, in future anthropological studies of dwellings there must be a recognisable difference between the rural and the urban. To achieve this difference, the theory presented here looks to the ever-present vernacular elements of a place as influence.

Vernacular, by definition, refers to the language or dialogue commonly spoken by the people of a particular place. Vernacular, as defined within the parameters of this project, refers to those common elements – specifically, common objects, common building types, and common environmental factors —shared by the people of a particular place. These vernacular elements (also referred to as the vernacular set) are made common by the history and behaviours of a place’s people. The vernacular set differs from the anthropological set by a
fine line, and an argument of semantics may arise, however, this minute difference is vitally important to the understanding of the theory presented here. The vernacular set of a place is those common elements that are part of the working order of everyday use; whereas, the anthropological set implies a historical everyday use. An example on the Canadian Prairies of this difference is a thrashing machine compared to a combine; the first is of the anthropological set while the second is of the vernacular set. An example of transition between the two is the grain elevator. These great buildings lie on the cusp between the two; at present they are of the vernacular set, yet as more and more are abandoned for the new concrete grain terminals, they too will join thrashers in the anthropological set.

Thus, as this theory is looking to prove that an architect must look to the vernacular set to ensure a building’s place in anthropological history, architects must look to the working everyday elements that will someday be the present’s history. It is not the argument that architects look to the anthropological set, for they are history and this theory does not promote the resurrection of the past, rather it looks to create a past from the present for future studies.

Contemporary architects are beginning to react to the limited view that the vernacular is not influential on architecture; their rebuttal is that, “there is a shed in the heart of every cathedral, a cathedral has the potential of every shed” (MacKay-Lyons, p. 5). These architects do not summon the ghost of architecture past into the architecture of the present; rather, contemporary architects look to these spirits as teachers of tradition and precedents of culture. It is these architects that use vernacular elements, most commonly buildings, to generate a style of their own, one that uses the vernacular tradition to instigate present-day architecture. Vernacular is something of the people, something that is common to the collective group; therefore, contemporary architects do not admit to being builders of the vernacular, for this is
an impossibility as the vernacular set has already been created. Rather, these architects are making design choices based on the vernacular set; thus, a *style* from the vernacular. Vernacular tradition, to those that admit to its influence, has been precedent to late twentieth century architectural styles whose perspective lies in *building on tradition*. The vernacular way of building is one of practicality, that is, building as a happening of product, of availability, of need, of learned trades, and of necessity.

The true essence of the vernacular tradition is not only defined by a specific style or form, material or construction practice. Rather, it is moreso defined by the wind of a place, the sun of a place, the rain, the earth, the function, the plenty or restraint, the technology, the availability, the haste or patience, and ultimately the people. Vernacular tradition does not copy the roofline of a neighbour as a practice of aesthetics, instead, to copy particular modes is the practice of quality – that is, if something works there is no need to reinvent it.

Although it is a unique person who can design and construct a building today, many people have ideas about the nature of spaces that they would like to inhabit. As a function of vernacular buildings these desires, the *normal* preference of the common people, are measured as vital as the act of building itself. “The vernacular builder, usually a local [tradesperson], creates not so much what [they] personally think is best but what [they] know or sense [their] customers will want. Thus the consumers of vernacular architecture are also important form givers, a circumstance that provides vernacular architecture with a strong popular or social identity. As the creation of local people, vernacular architecture presents less the wants of any single person than what is communally sanctioned” (Upton & Vlach, p. XVii).
Although the preaching of the early 20th century architects pronounced the absolute necessity of common sense – form following function, negating unnecessary frills and ornamentation – it was the prairie homesteaders that half a century earlier simply built in a common sensical manner to survive. The common sense building that generated the country-scapes of early Canada was a common sense of materials, of climate, of needs, and of technology. To reproduce the schemes of European mother countries was impossible by way of Canadian prairie offerings. Thus, a new language emerged. This language, through trial and ultimate success, became the common language, the vernacular language of Canadian Prairie Architecture.
Vernacular buildings versus Academic architecture

It is acceptable to present the notion of using vernacular elements as influence to create architecture because all architecture takes influence from something. However, part of the vernacular set is vernacular buildings, and to use non-architectural buildings as influence to architectural buildings stabs at the innate arrogance of the architectural profession. Architectural precedents are always well-documented, highly regarded, stylistically favourable buildings propped atop the architectural podium. These buildings, referred to as academic architecture, are those buildings used for the study of architecture. The other buildings that make up the occupied world, if not categorised as architecture (agreeable or not), must be non-architecture. And, as per academic texts, these are documented as vernacular buildings.

The differences between vernacular buildings and academic architecture were not as important in the past as they are today. Both modes of thinking about construction, in the past, were very much alike, because the vernacular mode was the construction source of the academic mode. In the architectural landscape of towns and villages, vernacular lodgings alongside palaces and churches whose styles were international in origin harmonised with their surroundings in a real, physical sense. Both materials and building techniques were similar; thus both immediate and profound aesthetic results were harmonious and complementary. In well-preserved villages dating from the Middle Ages, this is easy to see. The buildings designed by early academic architects and constructed by the craftsmen of the time though they often incorporated foreign styles took on local features and became a stylistic synthesis of particular concepts of space, structure, form, and function. After the Renaissance, the gap between architecture as a professional career and vernacular buildings
has grown larger in spite of a few instances of harmonious coexistence and mutual enrichments emanating from both sides.

In a broad and secure cultural environment, there can be academic buildings, complete in themselves, which are nonetheless inextricably linked to vernacular buildings, with each highlighting the other against a background of their mutual genesis. These buildings stand in the same relationship to their vernacular source as the vernacular buildings stand to their environment; that is, they stand in a delicate state of persuasive tension that conceptualises, stresses, and ultimately reinvents the balance between architecture and environment, between civilisation and nature. Vernacular building is integrated within a particular environment because the latter is and functions as a counterpoint to the work of the artisan, validating vernacular buildings as a whole.

Today, this fragile balance that had been maintained for centuries has become a disjunction by the spread of cross-cultural modes of architecture. The traditions of a place – sociological, psychological, craft – are replaced with international trends and tastes; thus, buildings stand in moments of placeless displacement – ready to be built anywhere for anyone. The result is a stage of academic architecture, which is no longer aesthetically confronted either by the earlier vernacular buildings or by its place. Standardisation and universality leads to contemporary attitudes that ignore or deny the vernacular/environment relationship and substitute a new aesthetic that ultimately ignores its place. New buildings in the academic mode are not involved in a dialogue with the architectural past of a place, whether vernacular or historical. When modern criteria come to dominate, the vernacular mode is either abandoned or ruled out as illegitimate. What appears to be relevant instead is the false diversity of neovernacular models – that is, models that attempt to repeat the vernacular as
moments of plagiarism, rather than applying vernacular traditions to the specifics of time and place.

As a consequence, the natural aesthetic quality of vernacular buildings has been displaced, substituted for by an ugly architectural rationalism or neovernacular kitsch. Our rural dwellings have lost that irreplaceable anthropological quality that is common to vernacular homes, and all in the name of a supposedly functional notion of comfort. Along with the degradation of the concept of a dwelling goes the serious degradation of the quality of life of contemporary human beings. It is clear, though difficult to measure, that the anthropological/aesthetic integration of a wood house on a ranch harmonising as it does with its various outbuildings and the environment is infinitely superior to a suburban house deported to that same country acre. Even the most heroic attempts to fuse the current trends with the vernacular by way of cottage-style ornamentation or pseudo-ranch construction have in a short time revealed themselves as no more than the creation of ornamented relics.

North American neovernacular styles, including the suburban pseudo country home, show how adding superficial popular features cannot achieve the aesthetics of the vernacular mode without turning everything into an architectural potpourri (Image right: McKenzie Towne, Calgary, Alberta). It can be argued that urban inventions like Calgary’s McKenzie Towne do look to the vernacular construction patterns of historical Calgary homes, yet something is missing in the town’s equation. It is not the same to walk in this new neighbourhood as it is to walk in the older established neighbourhoods of Ramsey and Inglewood, the places from which the new neighbourhood was copied. The anthropological essence is missing; something is missing in the application. Perhaps it is the repetition of the same model over and over within one city block; perhaps it is the wide sweeping road-ways that divide the upper and
lower neighbourhoods; perhaps it is the great distances one must walk to shops and public centres; or perhaps it is the overpowering presence of the massive multi-family housing units that seem to gate the entrance of the subdivision. An explanation as to why the McKenzie Townes of North America fail to capture the anthropological quality of the older inner city neighbourhoods is difficult to pinpoint. However, it must be recognised that the answer lies within the place where it is built rather than in the places that define another portion of the city’s history, that is, the answer for McKenzie Towne is not in Ramsay.
Objective 2

Vernacular precedents used for inspiration.

Brian MacKay-Lyons

Lake/Flato

Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd.
Canadian architect, Brian MacKay-Lyons confronts Pevsner’s much repeated logic that a bicycle shed is only a building; MacKay-Lyons suggests that such a finite definition leaves much unexplained. “[W]e know that symphonies have been inspired by folk dances; that literature has been derived from folk tales; that the great cuisines of the world have been born out of hardship; that the roots of Chicago jazz are in the Mississippi Delta blues; and that the culture produced in basements and garrets fills the great concert halls and art galleries. Yet, Pevsner’s view remains the dominant tradition within our discipline” (MacKay-Lyons, p. 15).

MacKay-Lyons takes inspiration from the ‘zero’ aesthetic of the vernacular buildings scattered throughout his native Canadian region. He defines zero aesthetic as pragmatic rather than as ideological. That is, to build out of necessity with concentrated efforts in maintaining affordability, in adapting for climate, and in utilising local trades and materials. MacKay-Lyons generates an aesthetic from these ‘folk-tech’ construction practices:

[they are, for the most part, within the vernacular material culture of the place that they sit... To the extent that there is an ideological basis for this type of work, it is the conviction that architecture must be accessible. Henry Ford contributed to the democratisation of technology by making an automobile that anyone could afford. I believe that the democratisation of architecture is necessary to ensure its social relevance and the ultimate survival of the profession. Like the anthropologist who studies ordinary pots and pans, if one believes that culture derives from the everyday rather than the unique, then as a designer one is drawn to everyday things as a way of understanding the relationship between architecture and culture.

MacKay-Lyons, p. 15

MacKay-Lyons embraces the vernacular tradition as an irrefutable component of architectural history. Architects explore the developmental process of that history, a process in which
patterns arise and are refined from earlier standards. The images MacKay-Lyons creates are reminiscent of gable-roof boathouses and express visible nautical symbolism. His rural designs are built to occupy the open land like boats on the vast seas. Homes, though fully anchored to the earth with basements and lower levels, appear to float on the land by use of pile-raised decks and outdoor walkways. Curved structural members, both indoors and out, recall the hull of a boat. Oversized fireplaces and chimneys that protrude from the exterior sidewall or that rise vertically from the main space are suggestive of masts and steamships. (See Image Right, courtesy MacKay-Lyons, p. 51).

Other MacKay-Lyons rural designs are built to articulate the language of regional barns and outbuildings. These homes are expressed with single, clear shapes; like their vernacular inspiration, MacKay-Lyons uses single gable-roofed rectangular volumes. The design carries this massive volume to the interior with a typical centre space that rises from floor to ceiling. The horizontal and vertical structural members assert the same vocabulary; the long timber members are typical of the region's barns and outbuildings. Exposed plywood in combination with the timbers state the economies and availability of such product in the architect's eastern region.

In a lecture given at the University of Calgary during the Spring of 1999, MacKay-Lyons spoke of a construction practice for his homes that makes use of local tradesmen that utilise generations-old building practices. Carried forward through the generations of tradesmen, the historical Nova Scotia post-and-beam timber construction is carried forward into the architecture of the present. MacKay-Lyons argues that economics, availability, and tradition dictate his choice of this practice over the more-commercialised practice of stick-frame construction. The architect also told of another Nova Scotia tradition that directs his
architecture: progressive designs as determined by economics. Regions throughout Nova Scotia rely on the fisheries market, both directly and indirectly, and many of MacKay-Lyons’ clients have the desire and intent, yet not the financing to realise their architectural wants. Therefore, in recognition of this reality, and in keeping with his desire to make architecture accessible, MacKay-Lyons will design with the intent of future buildings, additions, and extensions to be constructed as financing allows. The completed home may take a number of fiscal years to realise, but each stage is complete in and of itself.

Lake/Flato – Texas, United States

The American architects, David Lake and Ted Flato, closely examine the cultural context of their Texas native homeland as a design tool. They do not consider themselves fashion followers – “their buildings are not “dressed” to respond to the latest architectural fads and they are not particularly concerned with what the taste-makers are doing” (Lake/Flato, p. 6). Rather, they concern themselves with the light, the space, the commonplace materials and the tough climate of the Southwest. It is their belief that as the country expanded to the west:

[common-sense construction and innovative problem solving left a legacy of well-loved buildings. With the formalised arrival of architectural schools in the East, the carpenter, craftsman architect was superseded by the professionals who, under the influence of the Beaux-Arts, were purveyors of style but educated to the harmonies of proportion, detail and elegant materials. What the Beaux Arts did to the visual expression of construction technology, the Modern Movement did to the efficacy of site-specific architectural solutions. Frank Lloyd Wright stood in the middle of the country decrying both and espousing the landscape and its natural materials. All the while, farmers, ranchers and folks on the frontier built away, solving problems with materials at hand, letting comfort and common sense be their guides, without the benefit of professional assistance.]

Lake/Flato, p. 6.
Lake/Flato, like their Canadian contemporary MacKay-Lyons, utilise a design vocabulary that advances an architectural style that incorporates both modern technology and the soul of a region’s enduring vernacular buildings. The history of these constructed places innately presents a starting point for the design process. The enduring result is architecture that “settles with its site aware of the climate, and a character of building that responds to the surroundings, with discriminating forms and clear functions. Design proceeds with far-sighted ideals in mind, to merge soil, trees, sun, and breezes with local traditions, craftsmen, and materials. With study and response – tapping a wellspring of forms and materials, archaic and modern – the natural qualities of the site and building coalesce” (Lake/Flato, p. 10).

Lake/Flato use heavy stone base walls and sand-coloured stucco as reference to the ever-present adobe structures of Southern Texas. To press this thick-walled adobe experience further, the architects create cavities, hallways, and usable space inside the walls. In plan, many of their designs take inspiration from the hacienda tradition of rolling, widespread buildings tied together with porches and covered pathways, both of which become liveable spaces. At times, Lake/Flato emphasise the idea of exterior rooms by incorporating outdoor areas into wide colonnades. Typical of the hacienda, these outdoor rooms act as a transitional threshold that erases the line between the indoors and out. In keeping with both traditions, Lake/Flato buildings are positioned low to the ground with expansive roof structures; windows sit deep within the wall cavity; and the architects extensively use louvers and covered outdoor spaces. All are traditional adobe and hacienda practices of sun protection.

The mass of Lake/Flato buildings recalls the functional farm buildings of Southern Texas. Common is the use of shed-like structures to house individual guesthouses; like shed-roofed stables; they link to the main house by covered walkways. The main house, often covered
with a hipped-roof and standing pavilion-like, is distinct from the shed-roofed guest wings and function wings. Additionally, Lake/Flato repeat the cupolas in many designs to provide light to deep spaces.

In a state that is rapidly turning from a rural population to a heavily urban population, Lake/Flato ensure their rural designs take precedence from the rural vernacular set. They do not attempt to integrate the popular urban trends that typically follow an urban population surge into their rural sites. This would be an open disregard for the powerful Texan rural tradition.

**Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd. – Northern/Western Canadian**

Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd. of Edmonton Alberta, with offices in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, generates architecture for the people of a place by working directly with those people in design workshops. Community members, boards, interest groups, and representative committees are effectively part of the process to ensure that prospective designs appropriately address the context of their place. Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd. look to the symbolism important to each cultural group; that is, the parti is a metaphorical gesture of a particular aspect of the clients’ vernacular set, something common to the context.

Typical with many of their First Nations designs, Manasc Isaac evokes imagery powerful to the culture. Schools take forms from the Eagle – a Cree symbol of independence, power, vision, and pride (Image right, bottom) ([www.miarch.com](http://www.miarch.com), p. Saddle Lake Jr/Sr High School).

The palette of Canadian First Nations cultures is based on the primary colours in union with earth hues — artworks, beadwork, head-dresses, costumes, and symbols — all brightly assert meaning for the people. Manasc Isaac designs boldly use these hues to denote functions, and to express the tradition of colour.

All the First Nations symbols evident in the Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd. designs, though of historical origin, remain part of the *working order* of the cultural context. Thus, the architects’ use of this vernacular set to create contemporary architecture is suggestive of the culture’s longevity of tradition.
Objective 3

Place

Where

Vernacular Set

History – Settlement
  – The Permanent House – Building Practices

Behaviours of Living – Formula for Dwelling

Shapes

Environment
The place one chooses to build is defined by its setting, its topography, its distinctiveness, and its neighbours; yet what if its neighbours are not next door, rather they are a mile down the road? Do these acquaintances influence one another? It would be rare to view both places in the same frame except on the chance occasion that one is approaching both from a particular direction and the distance allows one’s perspective to capture both as thumb-sized images in the vista of the windshield. That is, if a road exists in such a particular direction. Hence, is it necessary to consider such neighbours in the rationale of design? They do not create a streetscape, they stand within the freedom of open space, and have become 21st century icons of individual solitude. What is created is a countryscape; each place autonomous yet plainly distinct if one does not fit in. To fit is to be part of the greater whole – not necessarily through twinning aesthetics, but through appropriate aesthetics. A recognisable non-example can be found throughout the Canadian prairies: definitively urban houses plunked in the middle of a country field.

These buildings stick out in their awkward urban gesture; a gesture that is repeated to infinity. This awkwardness appears to be a disregard for the context of place; the design was chosen before the site. This carelessness is equally inappropriate in both academic architecture and vernacular buildings. Both modes of construction are navigated by the choice to fit in or to diverge with a given context; nevertheless, both recognise the inherent notion of fixed place. Perhaps, subtlety is the greatest statement of all: to fit in with respect, yet to diverge with discreteness. It is easy to make a statement with boisterous distinctions; yet to speak the
language with a foreign melody is seductive – it inspires one to listen and revel at the newcomer’s endeavours. Architecture secures the language of a place, and while newcomers are welcomed, it is the mother tongue that maintains the context of that place.

The challenge of context is diluted with the existence of architectural magazine imagery; buildings are perceived as isolated, self-contained objects. They appear as sculptures in the same way that automobiles appear devoid of contextual information. The argument can be made that a Ferrari is both sculpture and automobile, nevertheless it retains both whether it be encompassed by the urban or freed by the landscape. Buildings, however, are always part of a single context, situate a building in different surroundings and its character changes.

Commonly mistaken are Wright’s Prairie Houses; photographed as buildings on the prairie, yet in fact they exist in suburban American cities. (Images right: Robie House, Chicago Illinois, F.L Wright, 1909. Courtesy of www.swcp.com) As a first time visitor, one is surprised to discover this great prairie home bordered by concrete sidewalks. One is impelled to believe that the city grew around the house. Wright’s intention of style and context was distorted as an act of publicity; the portrayal of Wright’s America to Europe was of a vast and bountiful region. This aim could not have been successful had the photographer included the neighbouring university buildings. The genius of Wright’s homes is that they are successful whether the perception is rural or urban. However, this success is not the norm.

To fit in, builders must learn the local language, if not, they will be architectural tourists – to be in a place temporarily for the purpose of pleasure does not address the innate longevity of architecture. The welcomed tourist is one that attempts to learn the language and culture of the place they visit. Architectural languages are regional differences born of historical differences. Pioneers and homesteaders of the western frontier brought with them roof shapes, window
sizes, colours, decorations, and proportions. What was not brought was the materials and environment. It was these two components that confronted the pioneers and thus converted the forms brought from the east to regional styles of the west.

The western architectural language may have roots into Europe and eastern North America, yet the discourse has flourished into a true prairie style. Photographed in its propriety, a grand homestead of 19th century Canadian aristocracy records a portion of prairie history portrayed as extravagance and plenty, while ignoring the little architectural marvels that nourished the frontier. The effect of such little marvels on a prairie landscape is quite different. Both the grand and the small share similar architectural features - rain hoods, gable roofs, and wood-frame construction - yet the latter reflects a silent harshness. It is these historical and vernacular gestures that offer inspiration to create a true rural architectural style.
**Where in the world?**

Situated within the richest farmland in the world, the language of Saskatchewan rural buildings is one that pays homage to the products offered of the earth; the synthetic material language appropriate to the urban presents a deported anxiety when found in the country. “A building that ignores its context is crazy, because it lacks a crucial ingredient – meaning” (Rybczynski, p. 93). The meaning of the country is not the same as the meaning of the city, yet this most apparent observation is most commonly overlooked. As city dwellers, people of the 21st century have forgotten that rural living is not a privileged escape, rather the population exists on the sustenance of rural dwellers – it is perhaps the foremost functional requirement of society. Some in architecture’s profession would dismiss the need for an architect’s presence in these ultimately functional buildings. However, contrary to their hopes, some architects build in the country and their response to country neighbours is consciously more important than one would expect – rural neighbours narrate a history that is the context of a place. To ignore such history is to ignore meaning.

Building at home, one often takes their surroundings for granted, and efforts must be made to understand an all too-familiar language. There are two types of buildings on the Saskatchewan landscape – farmhouses and outbuildings. Both have steep sloping roofs that shelter the geometry beneath. The barns are honest structures – less monumental than those of the Pennsylvania Dutch – with insignificant openings in their seasoned wooden walls. The houses, repetitive of each other, are constructed of wood, stone, or brick and are identified by verandas and porches. They are scarcely handsome, but the strong, clear shapes, protruding from the earth are solace from the barren silence of the prairie landscape. They have a
Canadian restraint that merits the practical and is suspect of the pretentious. They offer no frills, and squander no gestures. They are reserved in their call to return home.

It is not possible for a small building to eclipse its setting; yet neither should a small building compensate for this hierarchy with arrogant architecture— it will only seem self-important. The informal, agricultural surroundings of the Prairies exclude the building of an extravagant or fanciful structure. Agricultural buildings dwell in comfortable solitude not ostentatiously but plainly.

The site chosen for this design project has a municipal address of SW 28, Township 20, Range 10, west to the second, which is a farmstead located four kilometres east of Abernethy, Saskatchewan, (present population = town 232 RM 497), (formerly known as Pheasant Hills) and 100 kilometres northeast of Regina on route to Yorkton. The farmstead is a five-acre portion of the farm’s total ¼’s of a section. Situated on the west edge beyond the shelter-belt is a 30-by-60 foot dugout; moving east inside the shelter is the 2 ½ storey 28-by-28 foot brick farmhouse, constructed in 1903, covered by a hipped roof, veranda to the east, and lawn to the south. Constructed in 1905, the great 30-by-50 foot gambrel roofed barn sits to the east facing the house. The northern-most edge is lined with five bins
The 28-by-76 foot garden lies on the southernmost boundary, inside the shelter. The farmstead has been vacant for 15 years and appears to be weary; the house is slowly being stripped of her wears and the grass and trees are claiming ownership (See Site Plan 1, p. 34).

The location of new construction as per this design project is outside the bounds of the shelterbelt directly south of the dugout and south west of the garden. The existing lane will be extended to the new yard (See Site Plan 2, p. 35). This design intentionally does not invade the bounds of the existing homestead. A tradition of the region is to let stand existing buildings, as they are the voice of history.

This farmstead was chosen as a design site as opposed to choosing a vacant piece of land – that is, a blank slate – for three primary reasons: 1) the history of this place is known to the project designer, 2) the human behaviours of the region suggest a building practice of creating new farmsteads on or near the site of an existing farmstead, and 3) the existing farmstead offers a vernacular set to influence the new design. To premise the forthcoming design, the following 5-tier-investigation process was used to determine the validity of the vernacular set of this place. Important to this set, was the exploration of settlement, building the permanent house, behaviours of dwelling, common shapes, and the environmental forces that dictate the previous four.
Site Plan 1
Site Plan 2
History of SW 28 – 20 – 10, West to the Second

Settlement

Charles Shaver, the first settler on SW 28-20-10, like many Eastern Canadians of the late 19th century was enticed by the federal government’s incentives to settle on the western Canadian Prairies. “The Prairies captivated eastern Canadians and Americans pursuing more and better land – or simply a new life, Europeans who were seeking new possibilities, and cultural minorities who were enduring persecution in their home countries” (Kalman, p.500). Shaver, with wife Anne, decided to take their acquired wealth from Toronto and head to the West in 1882. Unlike many early settlers, the Shavers set out for the West together; many wives remained in the East until husbands could build the initial farmstead – usually requiring the first year. The Shavers packed to the limits of the train’s allowances, then sold, gave away, or stored their remaining belongings before leaving Toronto. After arriving by train in Indian Head, Saskatchewan, the Shavers hired oxen and cart to take them the remaining 35 miles north across the Qu’Appelle Valley to the Pheasant Hills region. The two-day trip was arduous and was their first taste of desolation. A two-night stay with the Stueck’s – a former Easterner turned Pheasant Hills homesteader – allowed the Shavers to catch their breath, but they were abruptly confronted by the reality of having to build a farm out of nothing.

A canvas tent acted as home until the Shavers were able to build their first dwelling. “Other temporary [prairie] shelters included a lean-to made of saplings lashed together and placed...
The few weeks that I had sojourned in the country had by no means
prepossessed me in its favour. The homesickness was sore upon me,
and all my solitary hours were spent in tears. My whole soul yielded
itself up to a strong and overpowering grief. One simple word dwelt
forever in my heart, and swelled it to bursting – "Home!" I repeated
it waking a thousand times a day, and my last prayer before I sank to
sleep was still "Home! Oh, that I could return, if only to die at
home!" And nightly I did return; my feet again trod the daisied
meadows of England; the song of her birds was in my ears; I wept
with delight to find myself once more wandering beneath the
fragrant shade of her green hedgerows; and I awoke to weep in
earnest when I found it but a dream.

Moodie, pp. 67-8

The walls were built like laying bricks. The sods were cut about two
feet long, were thirteen inches wide and four inches thick laid with
grass side down. We had one rough-made door about six feet high
and 2-feet-6-inches wide which was difficult to fit into the sod walls.
The roof was a lean-to type; there were three windows 2 feet by 2
feet with four lights in each. Being set in two-foot wide walls not
much light could come in, of course no storm windows. Many cold
days in winter an inch or more frost would gather on the inside of the
windows.

Inside, it was 12 feet wide and 22 feet long. Ten feet was
curtained off for a bedroom, and the other 12 by 12 feet were used as
a kitchen and a living room. Later a porch was added which came in
very handy. Poles with hay and sods on top were used for the roof
over the bedroom; we used boards with tarpaper on top over the
kitchen. The lumber for roof, door, and windows cost about 20
dollars. One good fortune by having boards over the living room was
the reasonable freedom from insects and dirt falling from the
ceiling...

Robertson, cited in Kalman, p. 502

As the Shavers had money available from Toronto, in the spring of 1884 they purchased
materials at the Indian Head sawmill and lumberyard to construct a shed, or shanty. For the
next two 8-month seasons this rectangular one-room structure, 16 by 20 feet sufficed all daily
activities: meals, rest, and social. Their shack was framed with 2-by-4 studs, sheathed with
horizontal wood shiplap siding, and sheltered with a moderately sloped shed roof. Unlike
other new settlers who clad their first dwellings with scrap lumber, tarpaper, or anything that
could be found at bargain prices or if possible, free, the Shavers bought new materials. One
door and two windows penetrated the tiny envelope; thus the interior was quite dark. A small
wood-burning stove was used for cooking and heat. "[This kind of] lodging was comparable
to the log shanties of Upper Canada, yet they were frame versions rather than constructed of
logs, and most likely were introduced to the Prairies by people from that region. This kind of
shelter was popular among people who lived on their land only during the summer and had
jobs elsewhere during the winter because they were poorly insulated" (Kalman, p. 501). The
Shavers resided on the land for eight months of the year, returning to Toronto for the four
winter months. Yet, the spring and autumn prairie nights were cold, therefore, they required
the innovative insulation techniques used by other homesteaders. Sods were often banked up
against wood shacks to provide insulation. Other settlers that resided on the Prairies for the
duration of the year elected to build the warmer soddie. "The most common grassland
substance was the turf that was cultivated by ploughing; thus sod houses were an appropriate
and popular solution. The post-railway prairie sod house (or soddie) was a fairly solid

over a dug-out hole in the ground; or a ‘Prairie Schooner’, an arch of saplings constructed
over a wagon – if a settler had one – and protected with the canvas wagon cover” (Kalman, p. 501). These transient lodgings were necessary until the first house, usually a semi-permanent
dwelling, could be built.
dwelling built fully above grade. A well-built sod house had walls two sods thick” (Kalman, p. 501-2).

After two seasons in their wooden shack, the Shavers built add-on rooms in the spring of 1886 and 1888. It was this final three-room wooden home that sufficed until the family could succeed in completing their second home – their permanent brick home – in the spring/summer of 1903. The wooden home became the hired man’s house once the Shavers moved to the big house.

*The Building of the Permanent House*

The second house to be built by Shaver completed in 1903, which still stands on the farmstead, was typical of the region. Many settlers in Pheasant Hills, although of European decent, began their Canadian lives in Ontario. Thus, these settlers brought with them ideas commonly found in the eastern province. As the architectural specifics of the Shaver second home are not documented, a similar farmstead home of the region that can be used as a model is that of W.R. Motherwell.

Also of Ontario, Motherwell like Shaver left the East with the intent of turning his agricultural education into a profitable business on the Saskatchewan Prairies. A graduate of the Ontario Agricultural College, William Richard Motherwell was the fourth son of a Lanark County farmer in Perth, Ontario. Like many men his age, he was lured west by the prospect of free land. He staked his claim in the Pheasant Hills district south-west of present-day Abernethy, Saskatchewan, in 1882 and changed the practice of farming forever. “Motherwell was an

*Only 60% of the applicants for prairie homesteads succeeded in obtaining a patent to their quarter section.*

(Kalman, p. 504)
agricultural visionary. He developed systems of crop rotation, and he broke the railway grain monopoly, paving the way for the farmers’ co-operatives in the Prairie Provinces. His homestead is preserved in the period of its peak, pre-WWI, giving us insight into the man and his life’s work” (Dance on the Bridge, p. 27).

In 1897, after a bumper wheat crop and the end of the recession, he built his family’s second home: a permanent residence constructed of large stones that clearly displayed their wealth and position in society (Image 1, Top Right, c. 1907, photo courtesy, Kalman, p. 508). The house incorporated a 2½ storey principal block with a hipped roof, central door, and a formal centre-hall plan while projecting at the rear was a 1½-storey kitchen-wing with a separate entrance (Image 2, Middle Right, photo courtesy, Kalman, p. 508). This portion supported an Ontario-type central gable, and embraced a long side veranda. This back area originally held a summer kitchen and servants’ quarters. This sequence of a main block and back wing was common in eastern Ontario, and the design is suggestive of the Italianate style that was popular when Motherwell left Perth. “The principal façade has a two-tiered central gabled porch and a pair of projecting pedimented windows, both of which have handsome fretsawn details. ... The windows have Italianate segmented heads, and the round-arched dormers [with] fan-like mullions (there are no dormers on the side, which suggests that the attic storey was used only for storage). Cast-iron cresting outlines a rectangular space at the peak. The attractive ornamentation clearly made this house stand apart from most prairie houses of the day” (Kalman, p. 507).

Shaver’s home (Image 3, Bottom Right, photo courtesy, Grant Barnsley, Regina) mimicked Motherwell’s lead, though at a less grand scale, its centre-hall plan flanked on one side with formal sitting and dining rooms, and on the other, private
sleeping quarters for the Shavers. As they had no children, the Shaver's servants occupied the entire second level with private stair leading from the kitchen. Typically, this level would have been occupied by children, and nanny/nursemaids. The hipped-roof covers the third level; the storage attic is windowless except for the crown that is glazed to serve as a lookout. Servants could climb the movable ladder to watch for Shaver's return, and Shaver could watch the land and sky.

Shaver, like Motherwell, used his house to validate his position within the community; the house was wood-framed (common in Prairie homes) and was faced with a brick veneer (common to Pheasant Hills, yet not the wood-clad norm of other original Saskatchewan farmstead homes). Documentation of the brick's origin is unfound; however, as local brickwork manufacturing companies were started in Estevan, Claybank, and Wolsley Saskatchewan at the turn of the century, it can be assumed that they were brought from one of these locations. One fact is certain, the bricks were of Saskatchewan soil as is evident from their yellow colour; the red bricks of other homesteads in the area are not native to Saskatchewan. All building materials that were not native to or could not be produced in Southern Saskatchewan were brought to the region via rail. "Milled lumber and manufactured building supplies were obtained from retail outlets, of which there were many by 1901. The rail- system allowed easy transport of supplies, yet the lumber industry commanded distribution and prices. Aggressive and competitive marketing strategies introduced mail-order lumber sales to the Prairies in 1909, which slowly reduced the cost of building supplies" (Kalman, p. 504).

Motherwell's home predates the availability of milled lumber; therefore, he chose to construct his house of large grey, black, and brown fieldstones that he had collected from his and his

"I took a vow to myself that if I ever got in a position to do it, I would try to reverse the idea that farming is a subservient occupation."

Motherwell cited in, 
*Dance on the Bridge*, p. 45
neighbours' fields and from the Pheasant Creek coulee. The number of years required to generate such a collection of stones suggests he had his mind set on a stone house for a long time. “(Stone, the most popular building material for substantial houses in Perth, is also common in this part of Saskatchewan.) Motherwell later remarked that he knew the history of each stone that went into the walls. Care was taken in placing each one, calculating the effect of its colours and size” (Kalman, p. 507). Both men participated in the construction of their homes, and as documentation of architect participation is unfound, stories suggest that both Shaver and Motherwell played a great part in the design of their homes. However, many settlers still could not afford, nor had the carpentry skills, to design and construct their own wood-frame houses. Therefore, many compromised ideological wants for practical needs and accepted the necessity of mass-produced, standardised farm buildings. Pre-built and prefabricated buildings, including mail-order houses and published plans, offered rural residents secure and cost-effective frame dwellings.

Sectional prefabs, which supplied the homesteader with standard wall panels that could be assembled without special skills had been produced in the UK and Canada for several decades – in 1883 the NWMP headquarters in Regina was partially constructed of section buildings. Companies from Quebec, the James Riley & Company, and of Ontario, Logan &
Doherty, produced these pre-fabricated buildings. The rail system was instrumental in the success of such industry. However, it was not until the early 20th century that these improved products were actively marketed on the Prairies. “The British Columbia Mills, Timber and Trading Company of Vancouver, which manufactured a large line of well-constructed prefabs between 1904 and 1910, was the first company to target the demand of prairie housing. The wall panels were layered of wood and tarpaper – separated by internal air spaces as means for insulation – offered rigid and draft-free walls. All sections were numbered for easy assembly. A one-room cabin, pre-painted and with a galvanised iron chimney could be purchased for $100, this was an alternative to a hand-built initial house. Eight hundred dollars could provide a four-bedroom, two-storey house” (Kalman, p 504).

The early homesteads of the Pheasant Hills region pre-dated the availability of pre-fabricated housing; however, builders did make use of the early standardised building supplies. The list of grand homes like Motherwell’s of 1897 and Shaver’s of 1903 is long: construction on the Dixon home began in 1896, the Foster home of 1898, the Stueck home of 1903, and the Stilborn’s and the Teece’s also of 1903. From the documentation of family histories, all of these permanent homes share common threads: the owners were settlers from Ontario and all utilised the carpentry skills of Norman Ferguson, a builder originally from Ontario, and Conrad Krug, a furniture builder also originally from the east. Krug, who worked winters in the Indian Head Lumber Mill and building supply store, was aware of the pre-fabricated construction materials. Thus, all the houses, except Motherwell’s, were frame structures (becoming a prairie trademark) with brick or stone veneers (typical of Ontario designs).

The turn-of-the-century residents of Pheasant Hills were proud of their survival and success on the Prairies; therefore, the permanent homes of these first settlers were symbols of wealth.
All had servant quarters, all had brick or stone veneers, all had ornate detailing on windows, verandas, or pediments, all stood three storeys above the earth, and most importantly were designed specifically for the owner. All adopted the familiar centre-hall plan (common in wealthy Ontario homes at the time) to the independent needs of each farm operation.

Other great homes constructed in the Abernethy region appeared after the availability of prefabricated houses, yet they too were designed by owner/contractor. The Bates stone house of 1910 was a design created by local masons, Sam and Wally Berhns; the 1910 Burton home was built under contract of Walter and Charlie Middleton, who also constructed the Foster home in that same year; the Sheppard’s house of 1915; and the red-brick Barnsley home of 1918. These houses, like their predecessors, had independent designs. The Bates’ home boasted a central spiral staircase in the grand entry hall. The Foster home separated the served and servant areas completely. From ground to roof, the only connection between the two areas was closed-door hallways on all levels. Stories say that these doors seemed to swing only one way, and that old Mrs. Foster never saw the inside of her own kitchen. The 14-room Barnsley house was designed around the business of farming; great rooms were designated and formulated around the operation – office, gentleman’s smoking/waiting room, and another great meeting room (today’s version of a boardroom). Old Willy was not an entertainer; the man was all business. Mr. Barnsley had no servant quarters in the main house. The hired man was put in the farm’s first house – the five-room 1890’s wood house; this allowed the hired man’s family to live with him – this was advantageous to Mr. Barnsley as the entire family worked for the farm.

The only evidence of a pre-fabricated house in the Pheasant Hills area was that of Enoch Dixon. Present-day old-timers agree that it was an Aladdin House, yet a date is not known,
before the 20's is the assumption. “The T. Eaton Company of Toronto first included houses and building materials in its 1910 catalogue. The next year’s catalogue offered five houses and a barn, ranging from a ‘shack’ ($165), and a ‘cottage’ for the homesteader, to a nine-room house ($1,025); three years later the line was expanded to require a separate 80-page catalogue of houses and barns. Eaton’s faced competition from a number of other suppliers of prefabricated houses, mostly American – including Sears Roebuck of Chicago and the Aladdin House, manufactured by the North American Construction Company of Bay City, Michigan (which opened a branch in Toronto)” (Kalman, pp. 504-5).

The overwhelming increase in availability of mail-order homes by the Sears Roebuck and T. Eaton companies, and Kalman’s text, suggest that pre-fabricated homes were the norm on the Prairies; however, the early homes within and around the Pheasant Hills district do not support this claim. The simplicity of choosing to buy an advertised plan as guarantee of a proven design and construction system did not seem to appeal to the consumers of this region. Nevertheless, standardisation is evident in the detailing, massing, and generalised plan of these homes. Popular in the district were pediment, crown, bracket, and window ornamentation similar to the organic designs of Louis Sullivan – who validated such details within academic architecture in his book, Ornament in Architecture (1892). However, such details were later mass-produced and popularised by retail outlets, and advertised in such journals as The Nor’ West Farmer and The Farmer’s Advocate. Another common feature to these homes was the massing: four walls with minor punctuated windows. The intent of these rectangular and square buildings was to maximise interior space with minimum wall surface to ensure minimum heating requirements. The plans of the early Pheasant Hills homes were some derivative of the centre-hall plan. All maintain a significant back entrance with clean up and boot areas; the kitchens occupy the greatest percentage of space on the main level, yet are
hidden from the formal areas. The builders of these houses followed the precedent of designs familiar to them from Ontario, which inevitably originated in Europe, yet individualised them to suit the Prairie lifestyle.

The history of housing construction on SW 28-20-10 ends with the house of 1903. As with other district homes, the turn-of-the-century permanent house – through renovations, adaptations, and additions – remained the primary dwelling throughout the entire 20th century. Celebrating centennials around the region, all have been passed down through generations and remain occupied – minus two. New housing construction in the area has been scattered since these first permanent homes. A phase of smaller, wood-clad, less expensive homes were built as new farmsteads between the wars; then another crop of smaller homes emerged on these and on the old original farmsteads during the grain boom of the 1960’s and 1970’s as supplementary housing for children and grandchildren. These latter two construction phases are undoubtedly born of the pre-fabricated availability of product. Yet, the goal of their residents is clear; all wait their turn to live in the turn-of-the-century permanent house. The family names in the Abernethy district date back to the first settlers; this place has an innate sense of community and the longevity of its old homes is metaphorical of the behaviours of its residents.
Readers! It is not my intention to trouble you with the sequel of our history. I have given you a faithful picture of a life in the backwoods of Canada, and I leave you to draw from it your own conclusions. To the poor, industrious working man it presents many advantages; to the poor gentleman, none! The former works hard, puts up with coarse, scanty fare, and submits, with a good grace, to hardships that would kill a domesticated animal at home. Thus he becomes independent, inasmuch as the land that he has cleared finds him in the common necessaries of life; but it seldom, if ever, in remote situations, accomplishes more than this. The gentleman can neither work so hard, live so coarsely, nor endure so many privations as his poorer but more fortunate neighbour. Unaccustomed to manual labour, his services in the field are not of a nature to secure for him a profitable return. The task is new to him, he knows not how to perform it well, and, conscious of his deficiency, he expends his little means in hiring labour, which his bush-farm can never repay. Difficulties increase, debts grow upon him, he struggles in vain to extricate himself, and finally sees his family sink into hopeless ruin.

If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property, and shipwrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in the wilderness in vain.

Moodie, pp. 236-7
Behaviours of Living, Formula For Dwelling

The history of the Abernethy (Pheasant Hills) district, specifically SW 28-20-10, retells a story of longevity and settlement; and this history is indicative of human behaviours specific to that place. Like the longstanding traditions of MacKay-Lyons’ Eastern clients and Manasc Isaac’s First nations clients, the people of Abernethy, Saskatchewan (and surely other communities in Canada) are generating their own tradition: the longevity of dwelling.

The settlers that came to and ultimately survived and stayed on the Prairies were people willing to sustain hardship, poverty, and loneliness in order to make this place their home. Therefore, in the fashion of Darwin, a sort of natural selection occurred – only those strong-willed, defiant, unyielding individuals remained – all others bid the Prairies adieu. And, whether one believes in the theory of nature or opts for nurture, the descendants of these first undefeated settlers also exhibit an unwillingness to concede. The 21st century generation argues that the harsh weather, the hard-taxed, struggling economics moulds the survivalist Saskatchewan psyche. True. Yet, had this generation not been bread and nurtured by headstrong parents and grandparents, their ultimate survival in this tough Prairie province would have ended in a one-way ticket to Alberta.

Something that must be addressed before questions arise is the issue of heritage. Canadians are a hyphenated-people, German-Canadians, British-Canadians, Chinese-Canadians, and more. Even generations down the line, the mother-heritage is recognised. This recognition of heritage played a great roll in the settlement patterns of the first Prairie dwellers. Evident from the family names of the first to arrive and settle in Pheasant Hills, this place is consumed by
British-Canadians who appeared to have wealth and education prior to arriving. And, although some hired men and women that worked for these families came from British descent, many more were of Eastern-European countries – the Ukraine, Russia, Poland, and Germany. Escaping to Canada from the persecution of their home countries, these new Canadians settled in Prairie districts occupied by fellow countrymen. Many hired settlers of Abernethy farmsteads came from Goodeve, Saskatchewan (Ukrainian, Russian) and Lemberg, Saskatchewan (Polish, German). And, on occasion the British settlers, like Charles Shaver whom had no descendants, would will their property to a favourite hired man. Harry Woznesensky, a man whose family escaped from Russia with very little while he was only a twinkle in his mother’s eye, was one of those fortunate hired men whom in 1940 was granted the opportunity to become the proprietor of SW28-20-10.

Rare was the luck of Mr. Woz. Most original farmsteads in the area are still owed by the descendants of the first settlers, or have been passed along through the generations via marriage. Uncommon is it to see one sold. Comparable to the First Nations’ tradition of carrying forward the use of such ancient structures as the sweat lodge and the Eastern tradition of carrying forward the post and beam timber construction of homes, the Abernethy tradition is one that pedestals, nurtures, and hands-down the original permanent house. The similarity between these three very different ideologies is that all could have been laid to rest as part of the people’s history – shelved within the anthropological set. However, the people of these places maintain their tradition as part of the working order of their place. Thus, each remains within the vernacular set.

This pattern continues with the new generations of Abernethy dwellers, who still go back to the farm to occupy the original permanent house. These new descendants are not unlike their
ancestors: equal numbers of men and women are graduating with degrees in agriculture (Motherwell would be proud), education, nursing, medicine, commerce, and many other professions – all with the intent of returning to the farm. Perhaps it is the education and business sense of this region’s farmers that keeps them diversified and afloat during Canada’s farm crisis.

So, how do they dwell, what makes it different to dwell in these farmhouses as compared to the urban-like homes that find their way to the country? Pragmatics. These farm homes lack excessiveness. Spaces are designed around the necessities of the farm operation. The designers of farmhouses have always recognised the importance of offering space where needed. To move through one of these homes, one is aware of the pragmatic nature of all spaces. A common formula has been followed through the century. First, in plan the entry condition is the anchor to the rest of the house, roughly one quarter of the main floor is consumed by entry, which includes boot, coat, wash, toilet, and storage areas. Another one quarter to one third space is dedicated to the kitchen and the remaining space is designed around gathering areas – usually family rooms, offices, and music rooms. The days of formal dining and sitting rooms are gone; therefore the new occupants of these homes have converted the once formal spaces into usable spaces. The second level is assigned as the private sleeping and toilet areas, with additional room(s) for overnight guests. The common third level, the attic space, holds storage and artefacts from the home’s lifetime.

Second, the formula requires a presence. Without the objections of code, the farmhouse could be built as a sprawling bungalow consuming as much square footage as required. Yet, the builders of these homes created 2 ½ to three-storey homes. The presence of these homes on the landscape was not by accident. Rather, the height was a beacon while at the same time
offering views to the land; additionally, the prominence was a symbol of perseverance and success.

The third, and final constant in the equation of the Abernethy farmhouse, is the occupant’s unwillingness to rank the house above all other buildings on the farmstead. Each building, including the home, stands as its own entity. One does not overshadow another, as all are equally part of the farm equation. Thus, each structure stands independent and different from the other, yet together they create the farmstead as a whole.
Shape to define SW28-20-10

A place is made recognisable by objects or shapes common to that place, the everyday common things that are the vernacular set. The Yukon Visitor Reception Centre addresses this vernacular in its curved structural system (Image top right, courtesy Architecture Canada, p. 59). Sturgess Architecture and FSC Manasc Architects were engaged by the Yukon Ministry of Tourism to design a building that would capture the spirit of the Yukon and herald its site on the Alaska Highway. “Touring the region, we perceived a consistency of structural form generated by an attitude to construction that was special to this place, a recurring image of a delicate, distinctive structural framework prevalent in the kayak frame, a fish skeleton, or an airplane wing. These images pervade the vernacular of the North – a spare yet elegant design used to solve a technical problem with the simplest means” (Architecture Canada 1997, p. 56).

While re-visiting the Prairies around Abernethy, and into SW 28-20-10, the most vivid image is that of objects standing alone in a field. At times a few stand together, nevertheless, repeated over and over is the gesture of being alone on the land. During the spring, a single tractor pulls a cultivator or seeder. In August, the bailer grinds away. The dust of September and October encompasses the combine as it pushes through the swath. Intermittent and cyclical. Gable-roofed, clapboard or steel-clad grain bins; round, and towering grain silos; shed-roofed cattle shelters, and the most powerful of all, the dying prairie cathedral, the grain elevator. All protrude as geometries from the landscape – headstrong to the summer sun while crouching from the winter winds. Whether great or small, the imagery remains; objects that work for and hold the gifts of the Earth protrude from her place with spartan predictability.
Brian MacKay-Lyons worked with a similar inspiration for his LeGallais House in Bedford, Nova Scotia (Image Top Right, courtesy, MacKay-Lyons, p. 42). An admixture of old farmhouses, former cottages, new suburban homes, and a commercial strip surrounded his site; all consumed into the Metropolitan area of Halifax. The shape for his design came from the voice of the vernacular agricultural buildings that held a strong presence in the community. “The straightforward English barn form is built to setback lines and pulled forward from its neighbours to create the impression of an old outbuilding... As with several of the other houses, the denser servant spaces or ‘machines’ protect the interior ‘rooms’ both from the road and at the side yards by the addition of ‘blinder’ saddlebags. The parti, which recalls the English barn, consists of a 35'-0” high central living area – the ‘threshing floor’, that is flanked on either sides by ‘stables’ containing kitchen and garage, and corresponding ‘hay lofts’ above for second and third storey bedrooms” (MacKay-Lyons, p 43).

To generate a parti for a Saskatchewan Prairie home, the strength of the solitary objects and outbuildings was impossible to ignore. Their form is completely and utterly devoted to function, and speaks volumes to Prairie life. The loudest of all was the great grain elevators; every space in these great buildings is designed to serve a function, no ‘excess’ories. Additionally, the grain elevator was the ultimate gesture of the Abernethy vernacular set. To use the shape of the 19th century and early 20th century first permanent homes that were built around Abernethy is somewhat looking to designs of other places. These homes were designed from precedents of the East; they were not built purely for the
Saskatchewan Prairies. And, although these homes offer a formula for the behaviour of dwelling, it was the grain elevators that were designed and built for one function: to service the Prairie farmers and their product; these buildings are the true expression of a prairie vernacular form.

The central geometry, the main house topped with the cupola sustains all the operational necessities and is the hub of activity within the elevator. Adjoining this is another mammoth cube, the annex. This addition is a curious building, it massively stands as an overflow support building, it houses up to 16, 2-3000 bushel bins with no working members (minus its intake and outflow augers), and can remain virtually empty until it is called upon for storage. Leaning into the main house sidewall, opposite the rail lines, is the driveway. Its function is clear. The fourth crucial member to this grouping is the office; often gabled into a vacant sidewalk of the main house, it lacks scale in the shadow of the other gigantic shapes.

Unlike the four-walled existing houses of the Abernethy region, the shape of the elevator is one of four buildings grouped together. Each individual works to create a functioning whole. Like the formula of dwelling within the first permanent house, all spaces are utilised without exception: both the grain elevators and those first homes are pragmatic operations.
Environment

_SW 28-20-10 west to the second: she, the land_

Here was the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky – Saskatchewan prairie.

Mitchell, p. 3

Absolute vastness, exalted emptiness. The only obstruction to one’s view is the curve of the Earth.

Homesteads in the Abernethy region of south-west Saskatchewan dot the land, yet their great setbacks from public roads offer minute illusions of human existence. To use the topography as a guide to design broaches nothingness. Unlike Brian MacKay-Lyons’ House on the Nova Scotia Coast #12 (Image Bottom Right), that contrasts the public roadside with the private seaside; no such contrast exists on the Saskatchewan openness. The Prairie farmsteads sit half a mile off the highway, and a seaside is non-existent. Vital definitions on this prairie are man-made; grid roads define the mile, while shelterbelts geometrically render a notion of property. Yet, the presence of these is a constant within the Prairie equation, and thus somewhat unfelt. It is the freedom from crowding, the feeling of nothingness that is majestic. To be in a place and turn 360 in blaring silence is overpowering to one’s senses. Perhaps, that is specifically why this design project stands on the edge of such treed protection.

A comparable moment of vastness is the site of the _Yukon Visitor Reception Centre_, Sturgess Architecture and FSC Manasc Architects, in Whitehorse, Yukon. Viewed from great
The site lies parallel to the Alaska Highway. Its place is one of a series of horizontal bands; the architects established the concept of a long narrow structure that mediated between the parallel lines of the mountain range and the highway, and defined a point of rest. The building hugs the ground in presentation of its copper-clad roof to forthcoming visitors (Architecture Canada 1997, p.56).

The desire of the architects to bow this centre to the earth beneath the dark line of the mountains is appropriate in the presence of Inuit traditions of the Sacred. However, notwithstanding the powers of the Earth, there are moments befitting to rise from and stand above the land. In most instances spirituality in some form defines protrusion: the gothic cathedrals, the pyramids. SW28-20-10 is an awesomely flat part of the world, and a designer has two options, to profess and restate the powerful Prairie in a horizontal architecture, or harmonise with the land through vertical contrast. The Prairie grain elevators do not bow, rather they stand, not as gestures of the spiritual, but as requirements of the pragmatic. They are the lighthouses that beacon to distant ships giving direction to the dizzying openness. Their height is the anchor to tie one’s line. At times of success, their giant presence is symbolic of plenty; yet at times of crisis their deteriorating expression and evaporating population is metaphorical of the rural human occupation.

The Prairies were born as the purveyors of life, and the people of the Prairies take that life to the world. Grain farmers of this region walk the land, they know the land, and care for her, but the land is not one of unconditional offering – giving to farmers food, sustenance, and favours. Rather, it is a relationship of equality – give and take – without one the other does not exist. And, although it is a union of harmony, like man and woman, the relationship is one of contrast.
Sage, the sky

The Prairie sky is roof enough to house entire rainbows, grand enough to reach beyond the furthest edge, and high enough to encircle the sun, moon, and stars. It is nourishment for the prairie psyche; and perspective for the Prairie soul: a glimpse of its limitlessness returns one to the bounds of human capacity.

Perhaps the sky is too huge to confront; one does not question its dominion over its people. However, Prairie Canadians look to the sky not for the divine inspiration of poets, rather, the sky is their prophet. The sky instructs and forewarns; farmers predict the future – not just future days, but months – by the dictates of the sky. The clouds, the colours, the shapes, the birds, the sun, and the moon – all profess the fate of the Prairie farmer.

Such a prolific entity heeds itself a significant position in the realm of design. The sky is to its people a prophet.
Hush, the wind

The wind on the Prairies is different. It is not revered as a spiritual leader, nor is it cherished as the provider of life; rather, it has an accepted presence. Urban dwellers condemn the wind, it gusts down the walled streets, whipping hair out of place and around corners swirling the trash from the day before into fiery-like dances, until the dance halts in the folds of a woman’s skirt. In the openness of the country, the wind is less of an annoyance; it is expected. It hammocks itself under one’s knees on warm spring days, it blows away the heat of summer, it dries the harvest crops, and reminds one to stay indoors during the winter months.

Early homesteaders’ responded to the wind with shelter. Houses back themselves into the prevailing westerlies; shelter-belts catch the wind-thrown snow from blocking lanes; and animal outbuildings sit downwind from the aromatic human domain. Farmers shelter the land from this gusty entity by a process called strip farming, which is the practice of growing crops in strips that alternate with strips of summerfallow. The benefits from this process are less soil erosion and increased soil moisture from snow catch. SW28-20-10, like most areas of Saskatchewan, has prevailing winds from the west. Therefore the best direction for strips to reduce the erosion potential is north and south – perpendicular to the wind.

The significance of wind to rural design is equally important to the significance of the land and sky. Unlike urban residential design, rural designs calculate the wind for the positioning of all buildings; it offers bearing to roof slopes and generates the possibility of a perpendicular. Brian MacKay-Lyons makes evident his recognition of the wind in his Leahey
House on the Nova Scotia north shore (see Images Right). “The standing seam galvalume roof is slung over portions of the frame to provide an archetypal, lean-to shelter” (MacKay-Lyons, p. 47). Positioned parallel to the seashore, the north façade stares out over the water, while its back hunches itself to the prevailing south winds. The Leahey House, like the Saskatchewan Prairie houses, stand in protective contrast to the wind. Although, the MacKay-Lyons house is more metaphorical, the builders of Prairie houses manifest a defence to wind more subtly: veranda to the south or east, as well as the lawn and outbuildings. The building of barns and cattle sheds has a different motivation to the wind. They are positioned parallel to the breezes which allows cooling through open front and rear doors, additionally, early barn-builders were apprehensive of perpendicular winds tearing off shingles, thus the flat-faced gambrel-roofed barns are faced headstrong into the wind.
And then there's the sun, the rain, the snow, and the clay

Saskatchewan is hot and cold; both equally opposite from the zero, for as cold as it gets in the winter it gets equally hot, but to the positive, in the summer. With an average mean temperature of 2 degrees Celsius, the number of warm sunny days equals those that are cold and overcast. Contrary to the opinion of other Canadians, Saskatchewan has the greatest number of sun-filled days in all of Canada. With these extremes of hot and cold one can expect to find great variations in the path of the sun. Lying at 50° 45' N and 103° 30' W, SW28-20-10 has a sun path that ranges from 16° from the horizon on December 21st to 59° on July 21st. The high, shadow-less summer contrasts the low, stretched shadows of the winter; both instances inform the design as to window placement, shades, and louvers.

Lake/Flato’s South Burke Ranch of Zavala County Texas uses the natural growth cycle of foliage to address the cyclical changes of the sun. Typical of Lake/Flato houses, this home has many outdoor rooms that are covered with grapevines. “In a treeless setting, these arbors create a garden atmosphere that protects the house from the severe summer climate. In winter, the vines lose their leaves and allow the sun’s rays to penetrate the house, which provides warmth in cold weather” (Lake/Flato, p. 22).

On the south elevation, overhangs must shelter openings to reduce excessive heat gains during the hot summer months, yet these same shelters must not prevent the direct light of the low winter sun. One way to deal with the extreme variances of sun can be deep set windows in the
thick wall cavity, like the adobe window openings of Lake/Flato *Santa Fe House I*. As the
Saskatchewan sun is glaringly white in the winter and overwhelmingly bright in the summer,
wall openings must offset workspaces and reading areas to ensure comfortable natural light;
north-side openings would accomplish comfortable read/work light.

The annual rain in Saskatchewan is a welcomed visitor, and protection from it is rather
excessive. Snow is Canada, and protection from Saskatchewan’s is futile. However, snow
adds an additional consideration to the design – loads. Snow loads will be the greatest live
load that a Saskatchewan Prairie home will have to endure. Therefore, structural
considerations must be made to compensate. With the snow comes freezing and thawing.
Thus, all water, septic, and plumbing must be insulated or buried below the frost line. Spring
run-off will go to the lowest point, therefore, the house and all outbuildings must be situated
higher than the lowest elevation on the site. The site should be watched through one spring
prior to building to verify natural run-off lanes.

Saskatchewan soil contains high levels of clay, especially in the region of this design.
However, the clay varies quickly as one move across the land. To the north of the site, below
the top soil is a yellow clay loam, to the west the clay turns to a deep grey containing heavy
aggregates. The benefit of this soil composition is its great capacity to yield quality crops; the
downside to clay lies in the construction process. A ground made up of clay is one that settles
over a long period of time, unlike sand, or dirt, or gravel that will eventually settle and rest,
clay never really finishes settling, as moisture variations keep it moving. To construct on this
ground, one must respect the inevitability that typical concrete foundation walls are
unsuccessful; as the clay beneath one corner of the foundation moves at one rate in one
direction, another corner may be pulling in the exact opposite. Thus, foundations crack under
stress; this stress is transferred to the structural system of the building. Interior walls display this movement with additional cracks and openings become skewed. Cracked foundations allow water to permeate that will freeze and expand to further enhance the foundation failure.

The answer is a construction that bypasses the clay. A typical, yet more costly, practice is the use of grade-beams as foundations. The piers of this system rest on the bedrock below the layers of clay. Another, less expensive solution is pole construction. This practice is popular in the Abernethy district for barns and outbuildings.

Like the grade-beam system, piers are poured down to a level of stability. Poles are then vertically anchored to the piers with anchor bolts and additional brackets. Poles are available in many sizes, ranging up to 60 feet or more. The benefit of this additional length is that it provides the architect with the option of tall, seamless interior spaces, something unavailable with platform framing. Poles can be spaced 4 to 16 feet apart depending on their size and the wind/snow loads the building must carry. Normally, the poles will rise from the concrete piers to the roofline. Once the poles are raised – either by hand or tractor – horizontal girts are nailed every two feet to carry siding; bottom girts that may be in contact with the ground must be pressure treated; and double girts must carry the rafters. Wall bracing is absolutely necessary in pole buildings. Braces run from the upper girt to the poles and are often reinforced with plywood gussets. These braces are the only things to provide lateral support to the walls. Floors in a pole building can be placed at any level by...
using wall girts to support the joists. Joist headers are attached to both the ends of the joists and poles (Burch, pp. 62, 108-112).

To address the soil conditions, for reasons of cost, and due to its apparent success in the Abernethy region, pole construction will be used for all buildings in this design.
OBJECTIVE 4

The Design
The Design

To design a rural house, specifically on the Prairies, there is an eternal client – the people of the region – and there is a site – the Prairie. Such an overwhelming responsibility to accept. And, as is known, every place has a history that dictates the voice of its people; so too, the land has a voice of its own.

For the design of this theoretical prairie house a faceless, nameless group of people was expressly choosing. The parameters were narrowed when this generically chosen group was defined as an Abernethy grain farming family of four. These people circumscribe programmatic boundaries, and follow the behaviours of living/formula for dwelling that was defined in Objective 3.

The design for this project must be recognised as a response to the theoretical examination of the vernacular elements of the Pheasant Hills region of southern Saskatchewan. The project design will include a permanent house created from those elements with the specific intent of satisfying the dwelling requirements of Abernethy farmers. The design does not involve the renovation or restoration of the original Shaver brick home on the site, which is a tradition in the area. Rather, a new second permanent house was designed to ensure that all aspects of the theoretical portion of this project could be addressed without the dictates of a preconceived space. The design discussion that follows will be in reference to this new house. Please recognise that barns, cattle sheds, bins, quonsets, garden buildings, other outbuildings, septic systems, water supply, dugout conditions, ground water, run-off, erosion, solar energy, soil conditions, and the grain producer’s fiscal economy were examined. However, as the scope of
this project was one of design, these areas are utilised to their minimum, not as an intentional disregard, rather as a necessity of succinctness.

To clearly understand the architectural motivation and the intended use of the project design, a discussion must follow a pragmatic order. Programme, placement within the existing site, movement and function, and form and materials will direct one through the project as means of understanding the resultant building.

**Programme**

A farmhouse begins with the kitchen and mudroom. These two spaces differentiate this house from other non-rural homes. The kitchen will consume a minimum of 25% of the main level with much storage, counter space, and separate prep and wash areas. The pantry will be a walk-in with a minimum of 40 square feet. Cold storage will require an additional 40 square feet. The mudroom, a space so integral in a farmhouse, will also occupy a large portion of the main level, and will be accessible from all entry conditions. This space will have toilet, industrial sink, coat and boot areas, and storage for mittens, hats, and snowsuits. Another important space for 21st century farmhouses is the office space that will have a computer station, filing area, desk space, and telephone/fax centre. This space must be private, yet easily accessible for individuals arriving for business. The house will not have a formal sitting room; rather it will have a family gathering space. Focus within the main living area will be directed to the hearth. This space will hold a great 10-person dining table that will act as the eating
area for both formal and informal meals. It will join the family gathering space to the kitchen space, and will be the focal centre of the entire main house.

The programme has been divided into four specific areas, the main house, the annex, the driveway, and the office. The following programme list includes all necessary requirements of the farmhouse.

The Farmhouse Programme
Note: the given square footages are the minimum requirement for the design programme.

The Main House
- Kitchen – 250 sq.ft.
- Family room, that includes entertainment area – 250 sq.ft.
- Parent’s suite, with sleeping quarters, walk-in’s, ensuite bathroom (contained in annex), lookout, and reading area – 700 sq.ft.
- Children’s attic, with sleeping bunks, walk-in’s, ensuite (contained in annex), lookout, and computer station – 575 sq.ft.

The Annex
- Mud room, with toilet, industrial sink, plenty of room for coats, boots, mittens, and hats – 195 sq.ft.
- Pantry and cold storage – 120 sq.ft.
- Furnace room, with water heater, water softener, freezer, and water/septic controls/pumps – 40 sq.ft.
- Storage, no less than 200 square feet
- Laundry room, with adjoining sewing area – 100 sq.ft.
The Driveway – 220 sq.ft.
- Garage, insulated, and entry to mud room

The Office – 75 sq.ft.
- Computer station
- Filing area
- Desk workspace
- Telephone/fax centre
Placement within the Existing Site (See Site Plan 2, page 35)

The new house will be situated adjacent to the existing farmstead outside the bounds of the mature shelterbelt. It does not invade the existing space; it is important that the new occupied area has been created without an intentional disregard for the history of the once thriving existing farmstead. However, the specific south-west location was chosen for four reasons.

First, it sits directly south of the existing dugout; thus new corrals can be built adjacent to this water source. The existing corrals and barn drew water from the eastern slough, which has proven empty over consecutive dry years. Therefore, the new farmstead will have an independent and reliable barnyard water source.

Second, the location of the new home will be south-west of the existing garden. The hard work of previous occupants that ensured a weed-free, cultivated, nutrient-rich, and protected garden space must not go unnoticed. This space has daylong sun and is close enough to make use of the dugout water supply.

Third, this space offers an openness that ensures 180° sunlight and endless views to each of the four horizons. The only limited view is to the north-east where the existing farmstead stands. Therefore, the design guarantees that trees planted for future shelter will be placed in unobtrusive positions. Additionally, the possibility for solar collectors exists.

Four, the natural slope of the topography is from direct west to the Pheasant Hills coulee directly east. Therefore the layout of the new farm buildings protects against barnyard runoff.
from entering the bounds of the house. Additionally, the potential of ground water runoff from the old farm’s septic, well, and barnyard systems is non-existent.
Movement and Function

As one approaches the farmyard north from Highway 22, they will enter via the existing gravel lane. However, just as this lane curves and the original house comes into view, the lane will fork and offer entry to the new farmhouse (See East Elevation, page 71). It must be noted that the proposed new lane trees will not attempt to conceal the house, rather they will create fissures that only reveal a fragmented image of the new house. It will be the direct view from the westward lane that offers the whole of the house. As one drives toward the house the main entry is visible; as well, the annex entry is partially visible to the accustomed visitor. For the house’s occupants, entry to the garage ends the lane, while parking for visitor’s cars lies in front of the main entry.

For guests, the front entrance opens into the tall narrow central volume; the tall inner foyer reinforces this volume (See Section D-D, page 73). This foyer rises to the ceiling height of three-storeys – 30 feet, and shows the narrow 8-by-78-foot distance of the entire central mass. Additionally, the overwhelming size of this space is strengthened by the use of platform-like second and third level floor plates. Like the 30-foot height of the foyer, a tall void is created between the northern wall of the central volume and the upper level floor plates; the plates stop eight inches short of touching the north wall (See Section B-B, page 72). This central volume is important to the design in that it acts as the line that ties all the functioning areas of the house together. It is the spine that movement must flow through to get from one area to another, from one level to another. Thus, its importance is fortified by expressing its sheer size both internally and externally.
East Elevation

east 1/8" = 1' - 0''
Whether one enters through the main door or comes through the annex entry, their first encounter will be the mudroom (See Entry Level Plan, page 75). This functional space was intentionally placed adjacent to all entries for two primary reasons. One, a great percentage of times that people enter a farmhouse, they have dirty boots, bulky winter-ware, dusty work-clothes, or an armful of anything. Therefore, they need space to place things, hang clothes, remove and store boots, and wash up. Two, the functional intentions of this space set the tone of the entire house. All who arrive are informed that to live in this space – a house on the farm – is about pragmatics.

Continuing down the spine, one finds the main house – the necessary living spaces. The kitchen with views to the hearth and family gathering space are placed in order of utility. Each ready for use, there is no impression of formality. The kitchen is closely adjacent to the annex that holds the pantry. The stairs down to the lower level, which houses the cold storage and additional storage, are off the kitchen prep area (See Storage Level Plan, page 76). The hearth is the focal point of the main house in that this space is the heart of the house. It is the place where the family gathers as a whole to eat and talk. Like the foyer, this space rises through the levels of the house and ends at the 30-foot ceiling. The hearth can be looked down upon from all upper levels.

The remaining areas of the house are designated private – the office, the parent’s suite, and the children’s attic. This privacy is established not by closed doors, rather the office is hidden around a corner and the stairs to the upper levels begin away from the public space. That is, they are not positioned in an inviting manner to all; instead, they imply a private place.
the meaning of the country is not function. as city dwellers, people o:
the same as the meani
the 21st century have
The upper areas are not simply sleeping places; rather, they are private living spaces (See Parent's Suite Plan, page 78, and Children's Attic Plan, page 79). Each has an ensuite; the parent's suite has laundry and sewing areas. (All are enclosed within the annex building – a building designated to all support systems auxiliary to the main house.) The sleeping areas are in the east; as the sun rises and the day begins, so too the day of the farmer. The living areas – sitting space, computer space – are in the west; as the sun sets and the day closes, so too the workday of the people of this place.
meaning of the city, to move through, we have forgotten that rural living is
igh a farmhouse is a movement of not a privileged escape, rather the
Form and Materials

The design began in plan. It was extremely important to ensure all programmatic requirements were fulfilled. However, once the organisation of spaces was resolved, the most difficult design decision was the outer form. It was a process that began before the theoretic examination of the vernacular set was finished. Therefore, the massing of the building was an uncertain cycle of what was thought to be appropriate for a farmhouse. It became repetitive drawings of house after house, but nothing that addressed the vernacular of the place.

Eventually, the design was put on hold until a concrete aesthetic of the vernacular elements could be established. It was important that the form followed the function of the farm (however, cliché that may sound). But, ultimately it was the right path to take.

The interior spaces followed the lead of the established turn-of-the-century farmhouses, as that formula was the accepted norm of the Abernethy people. Yet, the form could not succeed in following the form of these established houses for two reasons. One, those houses were taken from Eastern Canadian and European precedents because the Prairies did not have an established set at that time. But, now the Prairies have their own language. Two, the design needed to be symbolic of the Prairies as a whole and having based the interior spaces on the programme set forth by the old houses, it seemed appropriate to choose another inspirational force to generate a form.

Ultimately, the form articulated the dialect of the Prairie grain elevator (See S Perspective, page 81, NE Perspective, page 82, and SW Perspective, page 83). Not only for reasons of metaphorical symbolism, but as call to honour the disappearing pragmatic buildings.

55 More elevators Closing

The Leader Post
Regina, Saskatchewan
November 17, 2000
Cover Story Headline
S Perspective
NE Perspective
The house has five distinct volumes, the central spine, the main house, the annex, the garage, and the office. In mass, like in plan, their arrangement is determined by their use, especially, in order as determined by the movement through the house. Each volume is defined not only by its shape and size, but also by its material.

The central spine functions as the link between all other spaces. It acts as the anchor to which all other spaces are attached. To differentiate this space from the others it was important to suggest horizontal as well as vertical movement. Thus, its form takes on a long and tall, yet narrow shape and is the only portion of the house to have a basement level. Again, this move helps to reinforce the anchoring essence of this volume. To present a form that holds all others together, it was important to apply a material quality that was suggestive of rooted strength. Therefore, it was faced with concrete-coloured flat-trowelled stucco – to appear like concrete, yet not present the problems of having to build and insulate an entire volume made of concrete.

The main house contains all liveable spaces: kitchen, hearth, family gathering space, sleeping areas, and private sitting and computer places. It is the life space. As such, its significance gives it a placement within the grouping that stands out; it becomes the front of the house. Important to this volume is the contrast between the punched deep-set windows of the working areas of this space as opposed to the tall glazed wall of the hearth (See South Elevation, page 85). Although the hearth is part of the main house, it was necessary to reinforce the significance of the interior on the exterior. Therefore, the choice to use glazing as a differentiating material gives the hearth a second role. It becomes the sun’s timepiece. As the sun moves across the horizon, so too its rays through the narrow glazing – an entity
South Elevation
within the house. The main house is clad with wooden shiplap boards; this recalls the first homes of Abernethy settlers and its horizontal lines imply the notion of home.

The annex is the gable-roofed, wood-clad building that rests against the back sidewall of the central spine. This volume holds all the functional necessities of the house: mudroom, bathrooms, furnace room, laundry, sewing room, and pantry. This building ensure the continued operation of the house. Its form came from the gable-roofed outbuildings throughout the region; without these buildings, the farm operation could not function. It is clad in the same shiplap board as the main house to show that the two spaces work together. The annex is lowered four feet into the ground to reduce its mass in the overall grouping. Additionally, to enter the annex one must walk down an earthen ramp, thus giving it a back door-feel even though it shares the same east elevation as the main front door.

The two remaining volumes are the garage and the office. Each has one occupation; their industrial nature is evident by their corrugated steel surface and the garage’s shed-roof cover. The mass of each is size enough to house the function within and both stand as auxiliary volumes to the ordered grouping.

The greatest gesture of all is the sloped western roof (See West Elevation, page 87 and NW Perspective, page 88). The structure is steel-clad to half; then the wooden super-structure alone extends itself to the peak. From northern and southern views, its shape summons imagery of grain augers, while from the west and east its monumental wooden structural peak is reminiscent of the building of huge barns and quonsets in the area. This roof explicitly gave orientation to the entire house. It works perpendicular to the wind. It does not turn the house’s back to the wind; rather it is a shoulder that shelters from the unalterable western force.
West Elevation
NW Perspective
Objective 5

*Where we stand.*
Where We Stand

In this discussion of vernacular elements as influence to architecture, it is inappropriate to equate vernacular with reproduction of the old; rather, the appropriate connection is about place. Not place as defined by country or province, but place as defined by the ground where your feet stand. In North America we are in a time of simulation and entertainment and it can be said that a return to the vernacular mode of building as inspiration for design ignores these emerging technologies and styles. Yet, vernacular traditions do not ignore technology; early builders – those now classified as vernacular form-givers – were technology makers in their first attempts to build on the Prairie. Contemporary builders and architects who choose the vernacular mode are not attempting to reconstruct these earlier technologies; instead, they use present and emerging technologies that are appropriate for their place – the place where they stand. Another misconception is that vernacular is historical, thus, somehow more meaningful. However, vernacular has meaning not only from its historical context, but – whatever the form, whenever the time – vernacular recognises the common people’s experience.

It can be said that recent architecture is becoming a new form of art, one that has become a technique, subject to uncontrollable economic, technological, and social pressures. The result is an underlying fear that architecture, as a world body, will follow one path into a forest of monotony. One part of the world will be denoted from another simply by the airport greeting signs. Such overt disregard for regional differences – specifically differences of place – only
further stimulates human homogeneity. The vagueness of the term, *culture* is already prevalent, simulation and commodification push this ambiguity even further.

It is hoped that the more creative and sensitive architects in the context of some future crisis will look to those aspects of the vernacular set that are compatible with academic architecture in their search for a solution. For this to happen there is at least a possibility that, in the middle future, such modes could again become attractive, even stimulating. Proposing the vernacular as an inspirational source may sound strange in an environment where people are so rapidly substituting the modern in place of the vernacular. However, that makes such a proposition all the more pertinent – especially, when the argument can be made that vernacular buildings (as we perceive them) were at one time contemporary. Although vernacular buildings find their way into *community historical society journals* rather than architectural journals, at one time these buildings were *not history*; they were new and in some ways innovative. Perhaps the seduction is that vernacular buildings can be found back to the evolution of the built form, and such forms will be found in humanity’s future. The goal is modest; to provide some theorising that will lead to intellectual debate and may sow seeds to germinate the building of better dwellings. The architectural creativity of our century, faced as it is with urgent challenges, should not abandon a thousand years of vernacular tradition. “Vernacular architecture is the product of an ever-changing process, incorporating older and newer elements, and both traditional and transitional values” (Turan, p. 121).

It is the attempt of this thesis project to recapture the authentic senses of time and place that has been lost in late-20th century rural architecture. And, to stand back and re-evaluate the theory set forth – is the vernacular set the best way to establish authentic place and time? – The answer is unequivocally, yes. For the vernacular set is the only constant in a given rural
architecture. It would be impossible to concoct an architecture that is clueless to the persona of a place if this common constant is understood. The vernacular set establishes a context. And, if that context is known, in whole or in part, architecture has less chance of becoming a commodity for anytime and anyplace. It is written, "has less chance" because inevitably there are those builders or architects who specifically choose not to acknowledge the vernacular set. However, it is not the intent of this project to suggest that all architecture or buildings that refuse to understand the vernacular of a place are wrong. Rather, it is the intent to present a way of thinking about context. And, building architecture for a given context assures those buildings a place in anthropological history.

It is my belief that having been forced to move back to the Prairies for reasons other than my own, I have been guided to pursue my passion of the Prairie vernacular. This particular Master's Degree Project is only a starting point for what I anticipate to be a life-long process.
Bibliography


www.taliesinpreservation.org

www.miarch.com
Those who came here not so very long ago and did not go insane, did not starve to death, did not run away, but stayed to make their homes, to find livelihoods, however misguided, that is, our ancestors, are those whom we revere. We feel we cannot fail the intrepid folk whose bones lie buried in our small-town cemeteries and the corners of plowed fields, but whose spirits walk the land in the form of stories we continue to tell in awe and pity – the hardships those newcomers endured to make a place for themselves and future generations here. We know we could never have done it ourselves, although a tiny part of us would like to have had the chance to try.

So: we are tough; we are not always nice, but we’ll help you when your car breaks down, or you’re lost and have had nothing to eat for hours; we’ll pull you out of the ditch you wouldn’t be stuck in if you’d known what the Prairies are like; we’ll even organise a search party and risk our lives to find you in a blizzard. We may not say much, we don’t even expect you to see the soaring, brilliant beauty in which we live, but if you look closely you can read the effects of space and distance in our eyes, and you can feel how silence has settled into our bones and our blood, and you can sense the quiet reverence we share for living here in such beauty. You’ll come to marvel at the enduring strength that living on the Prairies has taught us.

Butula, cited in O’Brien, pp. x-xi