

## redBARN Installation : Representation vs. Sensation

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"Not to render the visible, but to render visible"-  
Paul Klee

### REDBARN: PROJECT

The project can be thought of as a charette where each student participates in every facet of the design / build experience. While not a building in the traditional sense of the word, many of the same concerns apply without the serious ramifications that one associates with the practice of architecture. With such burdens temporarily removed from consideration, students are freed to experiment and to explore; to respond to the materials and to engage the unexpected.

Since this kind of work unfolds rapidly (during the space of ten weeks or so), students were afforded the opportunity to see the immediate consequences of their designs and understand the ramifications of the drawn line. The old saying "it looked good on paper" became a mantra as students began to fabricate the work and confront unanticipated issues of building such as properties of materials, unforeseen conditions and issues of detail and scale. Also, because of the scale of the redBARN project, students immediately came to understand the spatial relations and haptic experience of their work. This is a unique and important opportunity since the embodied experience of space in architectural projects is often displaced by the ocular experience of the virtual tour.

### REDBARN : PROCESS

The barn was chosen as the site for the project because it was a familiar icon to most students growing up in the Midwest. Students were asked



to search for the beauty and the exceptional within the familiar, to see with fresh eyes and to celebrate the qualities of place unique to the barn. Conventional architectural criteria were removed from the mix; there were no square footage requirements, no adjacencies to be considered, no building codes. Instead, students were challenged to design an installation to articulate the haptic experience of space as well as to accentuate the qualities of "place" specific to the historic barn.

The project was a collaboration between two schools and was funded in part with a grant from the Indiana Arts Commission. . At the outset of the project the following goals were identified and helped to guide the investigation:

- To provide a datum to calibrate the space within the barn.

- To heighten one's appreciation of the

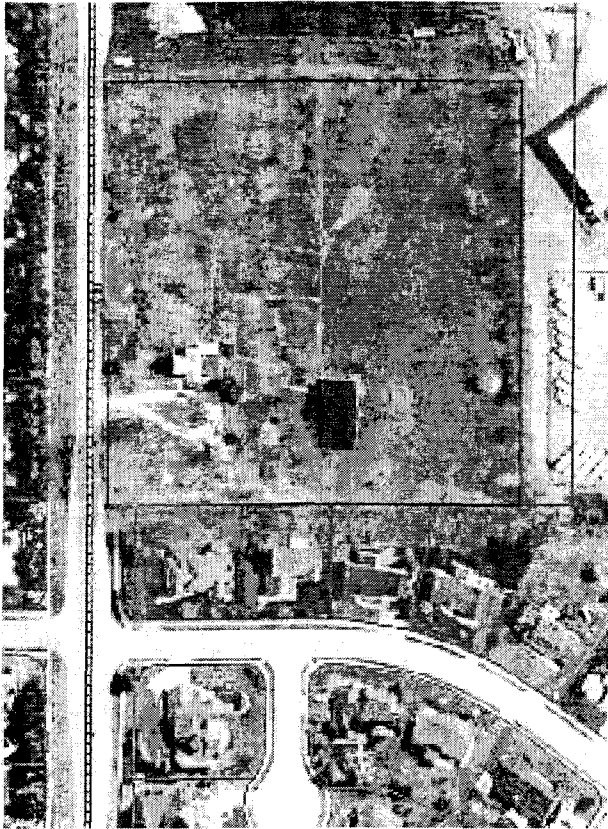


Image 02: aerial view of farm

space through contrast of material, scale and form.

-To increase awareness of the continued relevance and potential for revaluation of discarded materials (both the barn and its contents).

-To contribute to the student's and the communities awareness of this and other historic agrarian structures as objects of beauty and value.

At the outset of the project the two groups took different approaches to provide a catalyst for their designs. As a point of departure the Ball State students were asked to write a response essay based on their experience at the site. The essays were read aloud and discussed as a group. Although there was a wide range of response some clear themes emerged which served as cues for the design of the installation and are as follows:

-LIGHT: The poetic and ever changing quality of light filtering through the old boards of the south side of the barn was consistently addressed in the student's writing. "Contrast, glare, dust /ray, inspiration, harsh" were among the qualities identified.

-TOUCH: The smooth rugged surface of the hand hewn wood timbers revealing blade marks over one hundred years old. The sick feeling of rotted wood. The rough, uniform texture of the milled lumber. The thick soft grit of dust everywhere.

-SMELL: *A thick layer of dust had accumulated on every surface of the loft. Walking disturbed the dust and raised a palpable odor; a smell of age that spoke to the passage of time. The smell of the horses, grain and old machinery permeated the barn.*

-AGE: Like the human body the skin(siding) and skeleton (framework), had sagged and settled over the years. Parts had been repaired; replaced and maintained (unmaintained) which spoke to an ongoing process over the life of the barn. Specific events such as the scars on the timbers and slogans etched in the siding provided clues to the past lives of the barn.

-VOLUME: There was a discontinuity between the low ceiling on the first level of the barn (at the point of entry) and the dramatically grander volume of the loft. Most students identified a strong sense of direction to the "flow" of the space, a front and back to the barn. The size of the framework relative to the volume enclosed suggested a utility; an economy of means.

-DANGER: There was a very real risk of falling through the old floorboards that heightened the student's awareness of their surroundings. The potential for injury made the students keenly aware of every step and rooted them in the moment.

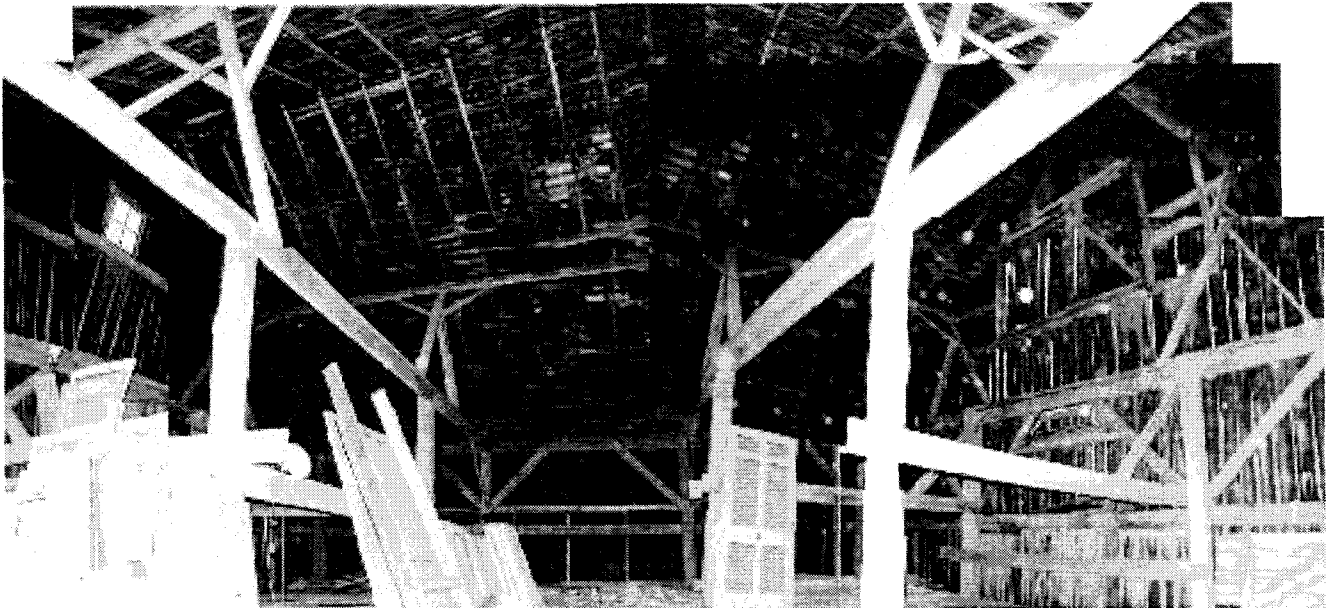


Image 03: *existing condition of loft*



Image 04: *wood chime*

-CONTEXT: Most students spoke about the barn feeling threatened by the surrounded by suburban sprawl; particularly the school bus yard to the south of the property. The horses were discussed in terms of a new life for the barn, a period of transition and health.

The Ball State students were then asked to graphically illustrate their writing with 8" x 8" tiles. The tiles engaged the imagination of the students and collectively represented the student's interpretation of "place" specific to the barn. Students were also asked to manipulate objects they had salvaged from the loft, directly engaging the material properties of the barn at the outset of the design process.

The Ohio State students began their design process by collecting and discussing images that represented the collective memory and shared experiences of the mid-western agrarian landscape as manifested in agricultural machinery, grain silos, and the metamorphosis of the landscape as reflected in cycles of growth and decay. In addition, many students began to conceptualize about the installation as a kind of machine with the alimentary track of the cow and the structural morphology of the horse acting as conceptual models; while others began to think about the installation as a taxonomy of the barn's entropy. Students broke-up into small

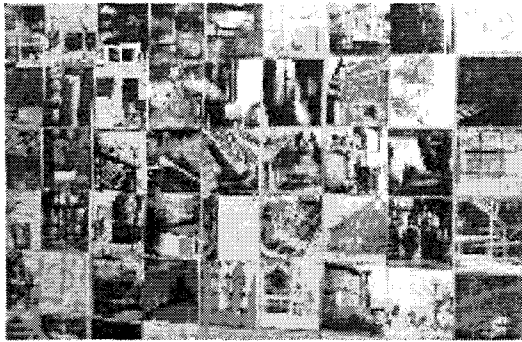


Image 05: student collage / tiles



Image 06: Professor Gray / Columbus workshop

groups and developed ideas through drawing, collage, and photomontage.

After an initial meeting at the site and an exchange of ideas the schools worked independently for a period of two weeks. Each group internally discussed and edited their ideas before meeting in Columbus for a full day charette. By the end of the day students had explored ideas and arrived at a consensus regarding the direction of the project. Areas of responsibility were assigned and an FTP website was set up to facilitate communication and provide a virtual forum for discussion of ideas and assemblies.

### REDBARN INSTALLATION

The installation consists of six discrete objects oriented on a north / south axis along the length of the barn. A new steel track which recalls the linear track of the old hay loft attaches delicately to the existing oak timbers of the barn, supporting and unifying each of the six objects. The installation is predominantly plain steel however components

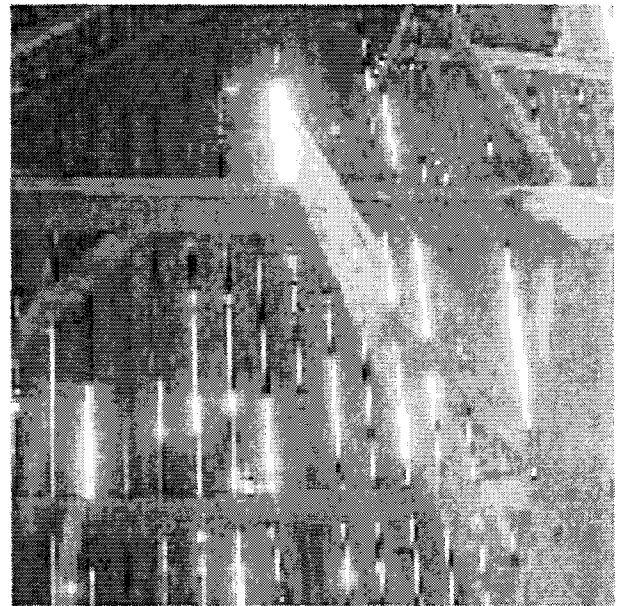
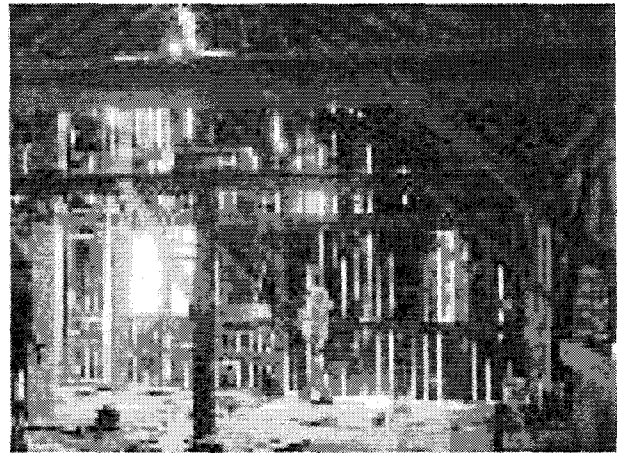


Image 09: Light through south wall

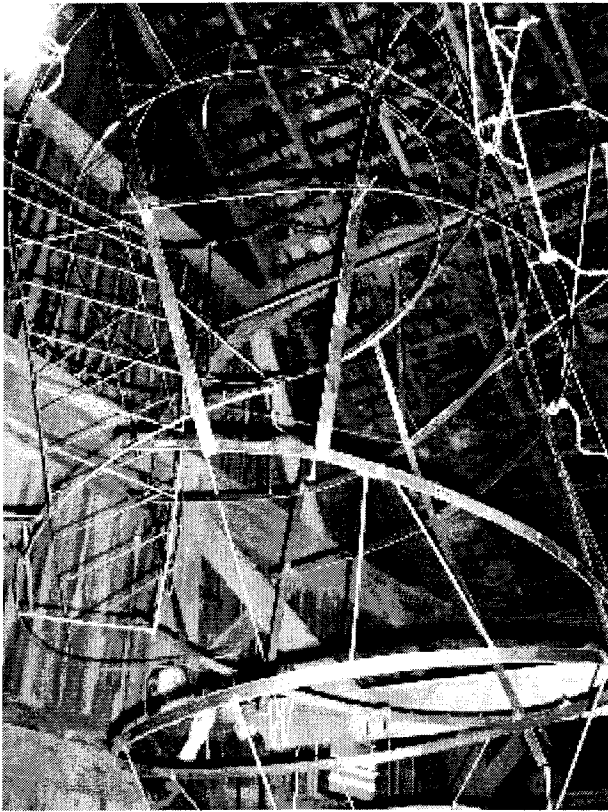


Image 12: detail of "larva"

include thirty hand blown glass vessels (teats); liquid latex lashed with animal sinew, hemp rope, wood slats as well as a variety of hardware, lighting, mechanical components and an electrical control box. Students came to know the materials through manipulation, hands and clothing covered with an ever-present film of black grease and dust. Each material had its own texture, smell and properties; its own voice in the design.

In one of the first physical acts the floor of the loft in the first bay was removed, revealing the full volume of the barn upon entry. With loud bangs and cries of "look out below" the demolition of this section was a dramatic event that energized the students. The loft was cleared; debris and material were removed in enormous heaps, everyone pitching in with the effort. Rotted floorboards were replaced. Fresh materials were installed. Altering the barn was empowering and students came to understand the place through their immediate experience: cold damp sweat on a winter day, the thick smell of dust and time, the ever changing quality of the light pouring through the weathered siding. The textures, smells, sounds and rhythms of the place

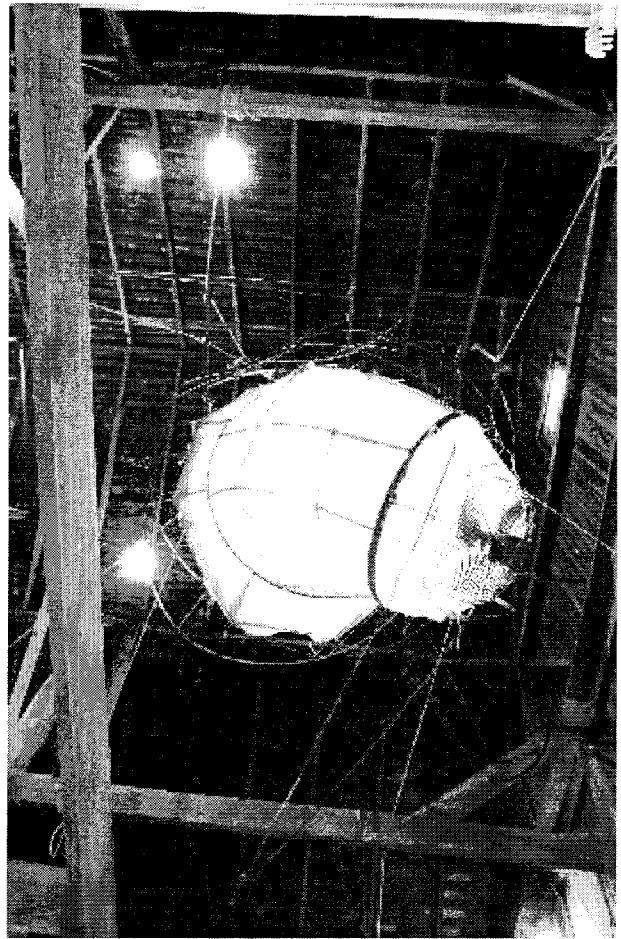


Image 13: "larva" suspended above entry

The steel boxes are mounted on brackets and sway when stimulated by the "milking" of a pair of glass vessels (teats) suspended below at the entry to the barn. The sensuous and tactile experience of milking the teats causes the boxes in the loft to gently sway. When set in motion the glass vessels swing precariously close to the steel boxes and to one another, potentially shattering and spilling their contents. The tension between the disparate materials and the real danger of breaking the objects reinforces a feeling of being at risk

The vessels in the first box are filled with horse grain and speak to the present use of the barn. The next box is filled with vessels of dust and wood shavings collected from the floor of the loft. The final two boxes are filled with corn meal and motor oil. The relative emptiness of the boxes reflects the utility and volume of the loft, simultaneously revealing and calibrating the space.

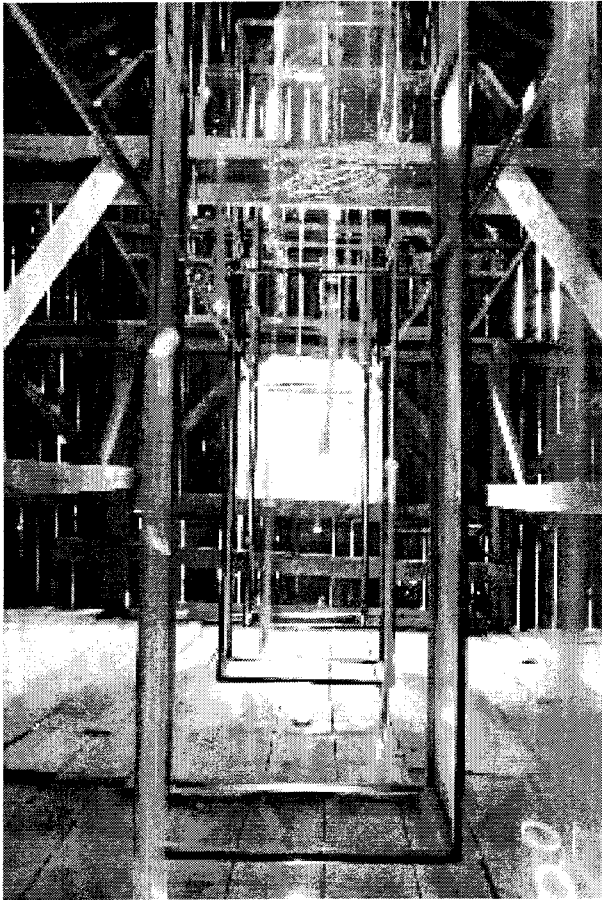


Image 14: view through boxes



Image 16: "milking" vessels

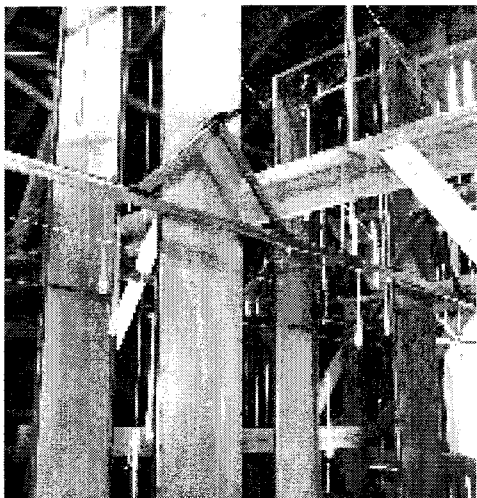


Image 15: detail : boxes

The final object, dramatically suspended seventeen feet beyond the last point of connection to the barn, is a "wood chime". The wood chime is the only part

of the installation that is visible from the exterior of the barn, extending through the existing loft door to the south. The chime is composed of a grid of 2 x 2 sticks which are allowed to pivot individually and as a group, swaying in the breeze they emit a low-pitched chime. The wood chime announces changes in the breeze or an approaching thunderstorm, acknowledging the historical importance of the weather to the rhythms of the barn. The uniform spacing of the sticks filters the sunlight and reflects the regularity of the bus yard to the south of the property.

The redBARN installation becomes the sum total of these intentions, but to leave the description there would somehow miss the point. Each object ultimately contains the imprint of the place as well as the imprint of each individual who worked on it. This has as much to do with the finished work as the intentions that led there. To use the "lung" (at the base of the larva) as an example: the density and pattern of the stitching, the taughtness and



Image 17: wood chime

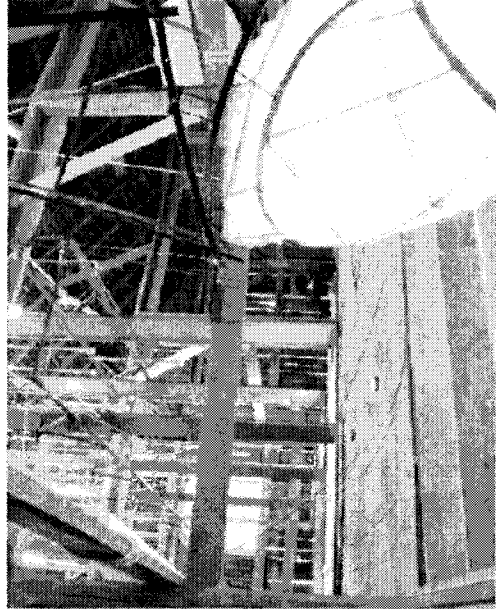


Image 18: "larva" foreground, looking toward boxes / wood chime

of all those involved. Freeing the project from any relationship to "program" allows students to follow and to learn from the materials: rusted handprints translating through the sealer on a steel box; the sensuous individuality of each glass vessel set in stark contrast to the cold taught box of steel. The material qualities define the work, qualities that are only fully engaged and explored through the physical act of making.

The project was fabricated and installed in roughly the period of one month, and those four weeks in particular were a whirlwind of activity undertaken in concert with the myriad of competing commitments and obligations on the part of faculty and students alike. The project was offered as an elective at each school and as such competed with other classes, including design studio, for the attention of the students. Time spent on the project was productive and intense but regrettably did not allow for adequate discussion and reflection as the project was taking shape. The process seems much more clear writing this paper in retrospect than was the case at the time.

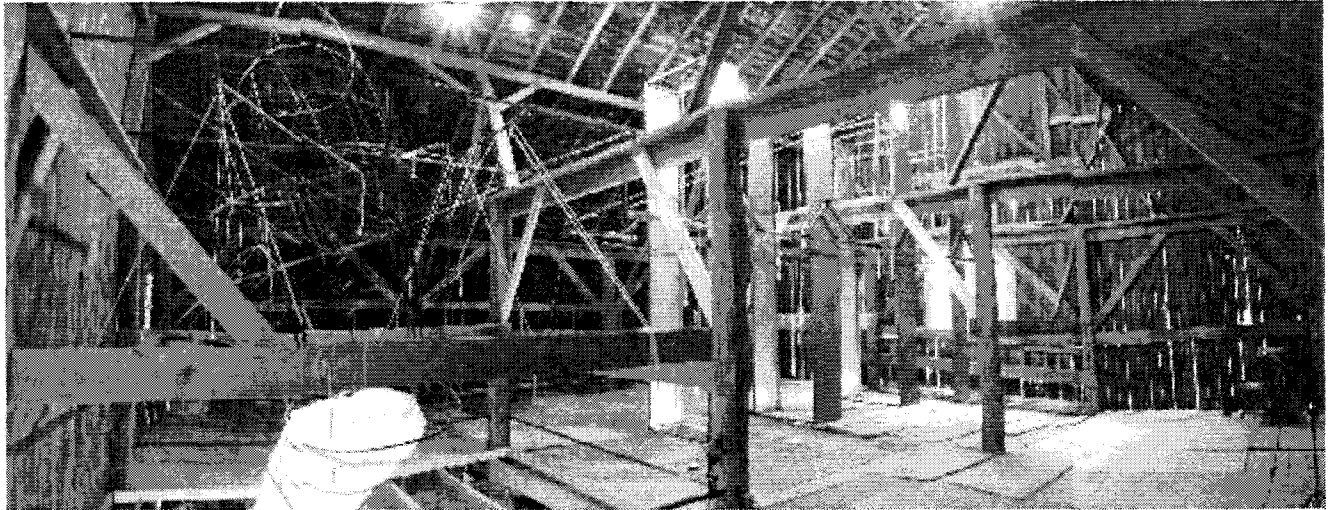
Despite this the project gained a momentum of its own, there was a shared sense that we were doing something significant and that we were learning together. The fact that the project was fabricated and installed in such a short time speaks to the level of commitment by all involved. The redBARN was as much a learning experience for the faculty involved as for the students and will be remembered more vividly for the energy, the people and the process than for the finished work.

### REDBARN : CONCLUSION

If the enthusiasm and commitment of the students is a credible gauge, the redBARN project was a success. This does not answer the broader question, however, of how this project fits in to a students design education. What lessons did the students learn and why are they relevant? Although we proposed the project with certain goals in mind , we would hope that students would all have individual answers to these questions and that these answers might evolve over time. As is often the case the unanticipated results are often the most powerful.

That said, there is a clear benefit to an architecture student drilling a hole in a piece of steel, welding, sourcing components, designing and fabricating

overlap of each panel, the irregularities in the latex revealing the trowel strokes when it was poured from the can, the sediment and dust embodied in the material. The physical act of making defines the very quality of the work and leaves the imprint



joints under load. Even an introduction to these skills better equips a student to represent their intentions on paper or on a computer screen and helps to foster an appreciation of craft.

There is a clear benefit to providing students with a unique opportunity to respond to a 'real' site as opposed to a 'representation' of site that ultimately reduces all experience of 'place' to that of the diagram, the site plan, and/or the site section.

There is a clear benefit to providing a forum where students realize that architecture is not a solitary endeavor limited only to the studio drafting table, but instead a social discourse that depends upon and is strengthened through dialogue and collaboration.

More importantly, however, and more to the point, redBARN gave voice to the more elusive and less tangible aspects of environmental design, embracing an intuitive process that asked students to look for and to see the "qualities" of place and in turn to interpret those qualities in built form. All too easily it seems, students and faculty alike can get caught up in discussion of square footages, adjacencies and building codes; in problem solving. This is particularly true in practice where issues of budget, schedule and personal politics are brought into the mix, most often drowning out any discussion of the more subtle criteria we seek to promote.

While not disputing the importance of problem solving and good quantitative skills, the redBARN project attempts to give equal weight within a curriculum to the more evocative qualities that speak to the spirit of a place and can vary dramatically based on the interpretation of the individual. It is our belief that great works of architecture are rooted in direct experience of place and this is the understanding we aspire to instill in the students. The sort of analysis employed in redBARN is highly individual, speaks to the poetics of a building or place and is much more difficult to discuss for faculty and students alike. This process requires one to embrace the unexpected; to learn from the site, to learn from the materials and to be open to clues as they present themselves along the way. It is not a substitute for what might be considered a more conventional analytical approach to problem solving but an integral partner in that process that we have attempted to lend a strong voice.

#### FOOTNOTES

1 Daniel W. Smith, "Translators introduction. Deleuze on Bacon: Three Conceptual Trajectories in the Logic of Sensation" (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2003) pp.xxiii

2 Robert Irwin; *Being and Circumstance*, San Francisco, The Lapis Press; 1985 pp. 27