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A House at the Meeting of Two Landscapes

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I am not accustomed to working on houses whose square footage is in the range of one-half acre. But working with a residential program at that scale has enabled me to think about good dwelling and good outgoings in an entirely different manner.

The house I am discussing sits on five hundred acres of farmland in central Missouri, in a county where there are only about 10,000 people. You don't need a permit to build there. There is no review process at all. But there is also no natural gas for heating; electricity has to be brought a long way; and water supply, sanitation and fire suppression are up to you. So you are on your own in trying to figure out an appropriate approach to a building of this size, one that can accommodate hundreds of people for events. Despite the logistical problems and the occasionally bad weather, my clients find the middle of Missouri to be one of the great places in the world. I did not know what to expect, but my first exploration of the site convinced me they were right.

As our clients became more aware of the character and subtleties of the landscape, they found new and deeper value in the property. Now they are looking for ways to share the richness that they experience in this place with a larger community. The project becomes significant because it carefully changes an intact agricultural landscape in order to make something that goes beyond a vacation house to become a communal retreat and, eventually, a kind of institution.

Two Landscapes

The word “ozark” comes from the French explorers' term, *aux arcs*. By “arcs” they meant the great bends of rivers that have carved through the Missouri hills. One of those rivers is the Osage, a north-flowing tributary of the Missouri that marks the northern edge of what geologists call the Ozark Uplift and was the first river that Lewis and Clark explored after leaving St. Louis. The Osage is enclosed by high limestone bluffs and forests of very old trees that have managed to live in the thin soil above the rock, so the drama of the river is kept from you until you get to the edge of a bluff and look down onto it. The river and two of its arcs are the theme of the house.

The surrounding countryside is rolling and pastoral. It has been an agricultural landscape for about a hundred and fifty years. Although this is still a working farm, cattle are no longer grazed there, which has made an enormous difference in its appearance. The remaining agricultural buildings and the cultivation patterns—soft pastures of alfalfa planted over clover and curving patterns of corn and milo—are juxtaposed with old woodlots. Their carefully

composed forms continue to define the place and its aesthetics strongly, so one becomes sensitive to the magnitude of change a project like this is imparting on the landscape. As we worked on the site and designed and built the house, the grading, clearing and planting all became simpler and less diagrammatic. Retaining walls were removed and replaced by natural banks. Window types and the axes of certain spaces were changed to better capture distant views or merge more closely with the outside.

Situating on the Land

I was very interested in orchestrating the ways that people could come to understand this place as they arrive and proceed to the house. We wanted to slow down the eye so that one takes in the changes in the landscape one is passing through.

The new entry road articulates an introductory sequence. The entrance to the property is framed by two great oak trees where a farmer intuitively put the pasture gate a long time ago. The road points along the axis of a deep meadow, then veers off and meanders across the meadow before it dives into the darkness of the woods, where it narrows to snake around trees and rides high. Just before arriving at the house, one gets a quick glimpse of the planted bottomland and river. Finally, the road swerves into the three-sided central court, which pushes out over the river below.

Duality and Difference

The house is oriented north–south and projects as far out on a bluff as we could safely build it. In one direction, there is a dynamic, sculptural view of a riverbend and the bluffs stacking up, one after another, beyond. In the other direction the view is of a flatter, less dramatic, but equally evocative riparian landscape. That contrast stimulated questions about how this house could react to different landscape qualities, especially the surprise of its proximity to the river: How close could we place the house to the edge of the bluff? How should views of the river be framed? Which parts of the house should have the advantage of those views? And how might the dwelling spaces be shaped by the views they afford?

These questions were resolved partly in the plan, which is more about function following form than the other way around. There is a complexity of initiative here; the design emphasizes dualities of various kinds: communal and private, large and small, above and below, closed and open, opaque and transparent, conventional form and exceptional form.

But it occurs to me now that the house may also be



Sinquefield House, Osage County, Missouri.

Top: Osage River, view from bluff.

Bottom: Living room cantilevered over the forest floor.

Photographs courtesy Barton Phelps Associates.

about different scales of “incomings and outgoings.” At the largest scale, the main portal works as an axial framing device to connect the entry court with the landscape across the river. The portal delivers you to the central court, where a series of doorways allow movement back and forth between the most private parts of the house and the most public ones—a kind of cloister open on one side to the river. Narrow passages to the outside slice between the bedroom suites to offer the option of slipping unseen into the woods where a network of trails begins.

The plan is also about what could be called “inpullings”—differently calibrated visual-spatial relationships between indoor and outdoor spaces. Some of the views, like that from the trapezoidal living room, give the sense of the background in an old master painting: a framed, axial view of a composed, distant landscape. Other views are intimate, arranged for particular times of day—sunset from the bay window in the living room, for example.

The variety of these indoor-outdoor relationships is palpable: the curving dining room volume (which can also serve as a conference room) presses against the forest and its angled window frames align with tilting tree trunks. The billiard room has a more indeterminate relationship with the forest. Here light enters only at the corners; axis and merging are replaced by views of the house itself. On the house’s cantilevered west wing, the apartments hover over the forest floor, allowing it to slip beneath them, and the outside rooms and porches seem to hang out into the woods. The cantilever allows us to ground a big building without dominating the surrounding terrain.

Initiating Community

Within the courtyard, the singularity of the house is countered by breaking the big arcade into three sections that slip past each other at their corners, implying an element of urbanism (I confess to having Rossellino’s Piazza Pio at Pienza in mind).

The spatial vortex where all of the special rooms come together is the main hall and its canopied door, but the most important event is the portal. It is based on the dogtrot log cabin, to my eye one of the most powerful inventions of the American landscape, not simply as a handsome form, but also conceptually, the dominant void establishing an axis through space to infinity—in this case, the other side of the river.

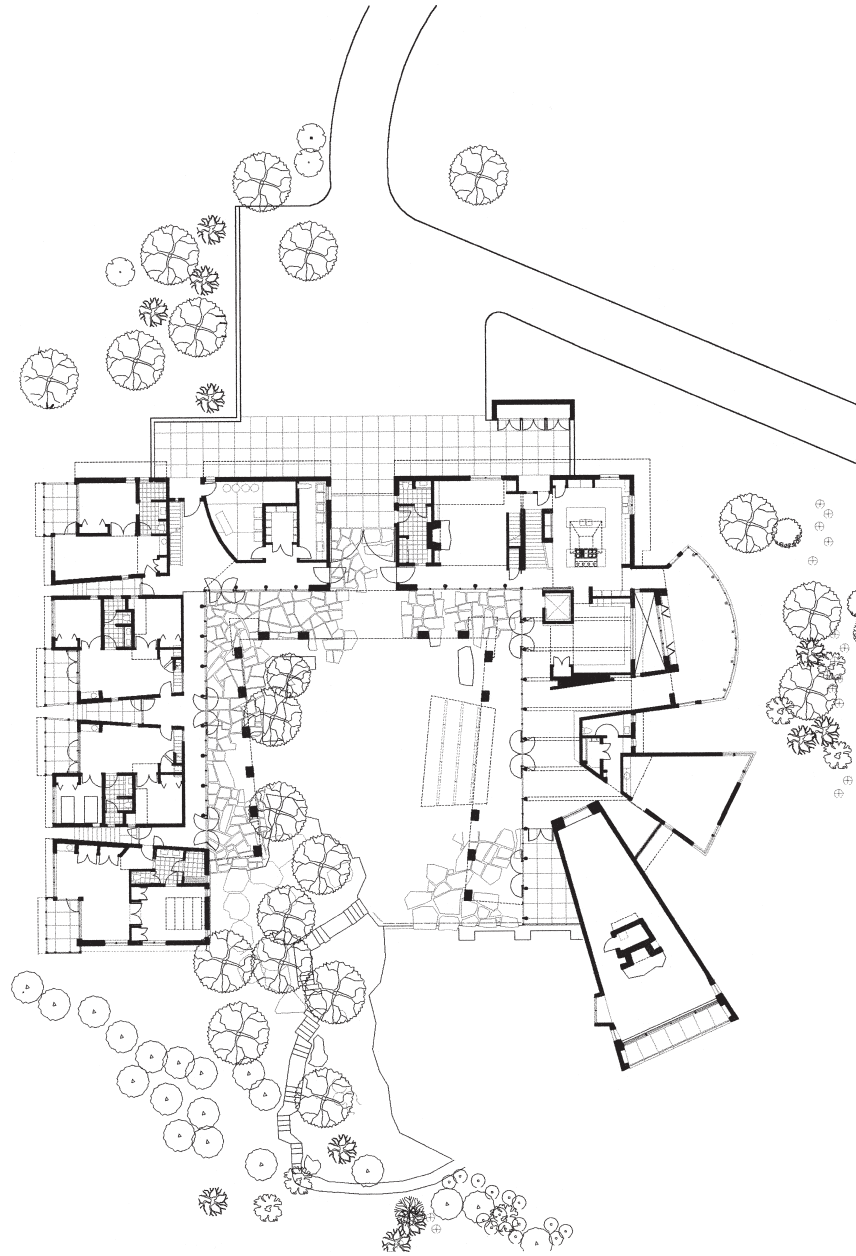
Outgoings

Wandering around the property, one encounters a variety of natural wonders, such as the largest pecan trees in Missouri, rocks split by ancient, bonsai-like cedars growing out of them and springs lined with bright, white limestone that runs for hundreds of yards through deep ravines. One starts to realize how many wonderful secret places there must be in the agricultural landscape of America. The next step will be to chart a series of trails that extend from the house out into the property, providing not only good outgoings but also places where one can dwell in the landscape.

The house is the beginning. It can accommodate overnight groups of thirty for conferences and retreats, and larger events in its courtyard. The porte-cochere is designed as an acoustical enclosure should the St. Louis Symphony come someday.

A master plan is in the works to confirm how the property can accommodate a campground program for an orphanage in St. Louis, serve as a natural preserve with interpretive trails and botanical study programs for the Missouri Botanic Garden and the University of Missouri, and host a range of public events and charities.

What I find remarkable about the effort our clients have put into making this house is that it is not located anywhere that resembles a resort or a wilderness area. It is not on a lake or the ocean, not in the mountains, not even in a dramatic setting that is especially unique for retreats. It is simply a place that my clients find to be deeply restorative. The house invokes the memory of an agrarian landscape and a lifestyle that may well be vanishing. Emphasis and fitting in are equally important parts of that.



Sinquefield House. Site plan. Courtesy Barton Phelps Associates.