

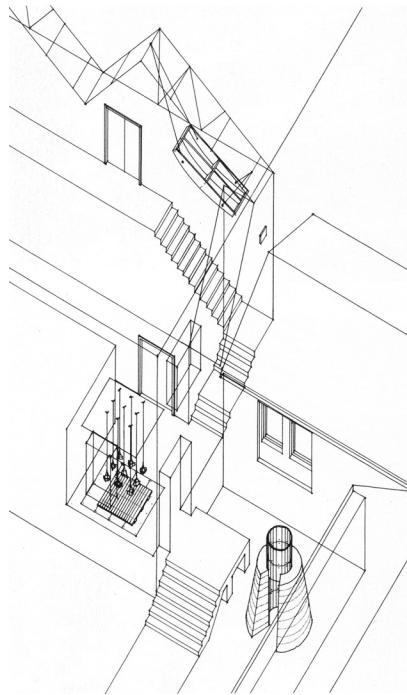
Fields

Robert M. Arens



field \ n

1a: an open land area free of woods and buildings **b:** an area of cleared, enclosed land used for cultivation or pasture **2a:** an area or division of an activity **b:** the sphere of practical operation outside a laboratory, office or factory **3:W**



The Fields Project was an inquiry into spatial transformation through the means of construction. Several spaces along the east entry sequence to Kansas State University's Seaton Hall were appropriated as the sites of simple but strong installations meant to activate the sequence and transform the perception of persons who move daily through the banal spatial configuration.

In relation to the preceding definition, Seaton's spaces were the field onto which the installations (three elements fundamental to architecture: wall, floor and roof) were projected. Through their appropriation, these spaces provided a sphere of practical operation (construction) outside of our everyday sphere, the design studio. The area or division of our activity was construction: we sought through the manipulation of several strong materials the knowledge that could lead to simple, appropriate forms. Rather than relying on rationalized construction methods and materials we chose the subtle lessons of hand-building which can only result from finding the perfect stone to fit a dry-laid wall, from cutting copper and cleaning its edge, from bending wood to a smooth curve.

Construction became a critical activity replete with physical and temporal dimensions far more dense and laden than in mechanized processes. For the duration of this project we chose to forsake what Dan Hoffman calls "the mesmerizing attractions of science and its claims of progress," opting instead to explore "the darkness of material."¹ Before engaging headlong in the now ubiquitous digital tools of our profession, we sought to understand what Henri Focillon understood when he wrote "The hand wrenches the sense of touch away from its merely receptive passivity and organizes it for experiment and action. It teaches man to conquer space, weight, density and quantity. Because it fashions a new world, it leaves its imprint everywhere upon it. It struggles with the very substance it metamorphoses and with the very form it transfigures."²

Through its forms and materials the installation responded to and transformed the fields which Seaton Hall provided. When taken together, the elements referenced the first and second entries of the definition: the vast fields of Kansas, or more accurately, their most important bounties, wheat and oil. With the project we attempted to lay bare the subtle aspects of construction, of Seaton Hall, and of Kansas. In doing so we hoped to reveal meanings that often remain cloaked in quotidian obscurity, those aspects of things that Ludwig Wittgenstein rightly observed are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.

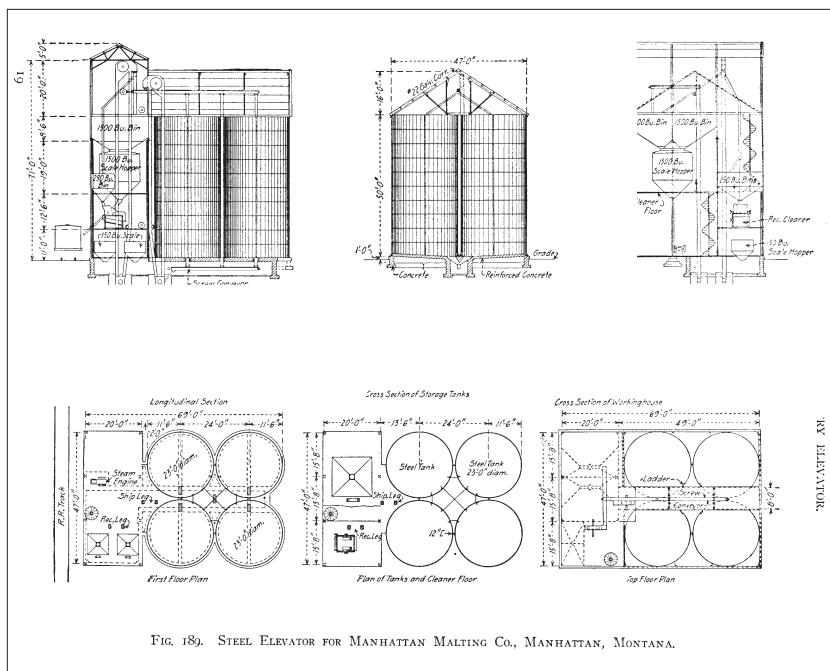


Diagram of Kansas grain elevator



Detail of wall element

The **wall element**, located on the ground level, was used to activate the area just outside Seaton Hall and begin the entry sequence. The wall was constructed as a battered cylinder of dry-laid limestone rubble roughly eight feet in diameter and seven feet in height. It was sited on the axis of the entry doors and in visual proximity to the floor element within the building. A narrow slot allowed viewers to stand inside and experience the copper sheath which was the cylinder's interior. The reference here was an obvious but powerful one: the silent grain silos that dot the horizon of the Kansas countryside.



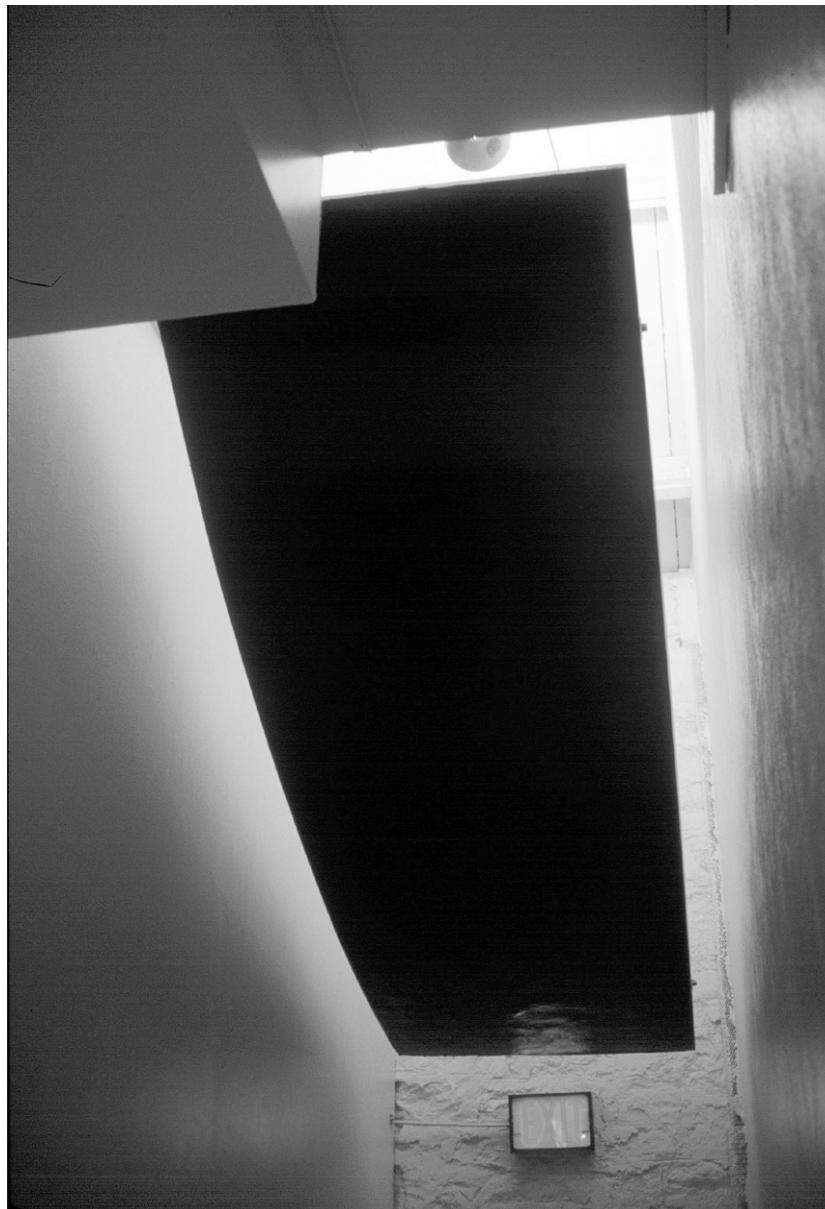
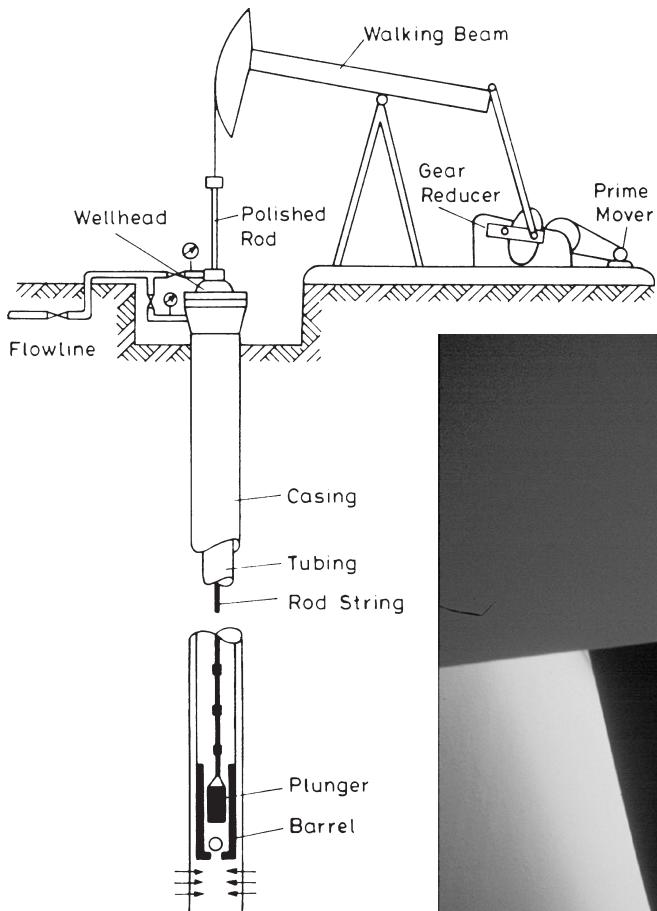


Threshing with Jointed flails

The **floor element**, located in the first-level vestibule, occupied the space and clarified the circulation paths through the area. A mat of copper overlaid with a doweled oak pallet marked the crossing of the axis of the entry doors with that of a window in the vestibule. Above the new floor hung shards of limestone rubble suspended from an exposed area of the floor structure above. The reference in this component of the installation, although obscure to some, was to threshing floors used in the harvesting of wheat, with the copper mat symbolizing the wheat and the levitating limestone shards the chaff.



Diagram of sucker-rod pump



The **roof element**, a curved, tar-covered plane, was suspended over the interior stair adjacent to the first-level vestibule containing the floor element. The black arc hovered above those entering the stair from below and adjusted the tall space to reflect the steep transition between the first and second floors. Most apparent to students approaching the stair from the second level corridor, the tar surface of the roof element was a reference to the petroleum products of western Kansas and its curved form was derived from sucker-rod pumps which rhythmically draw oil from strata below the fields.

Fields explored architecture's power to transform space, but also the role of materials and construction in that transformation. Methods and materials were considered not only in their traditional time-honored sense but also for their potential to hold new meanings achieved through alternate uses. The installation was built with the assistance of the following students: Chad Clark, Jim DeLapp, Kelly Edinger, Ryan Hartje, Garth Hite, Patrick Leeds, Larry Madore, Brad Massey, Michael Mecseri, Jonathan Rae, Mike Rush, Susan Seltzer, Kenny Sheehan, Darren Stross, Rich Weber and Julie Wienberg. The project was supported by generous contributions from Bayer Stone, Inc., Kansas Lumber Homestore and the Zahner Metal Company.

Notes

1. Dan Hoffman, *"The Third Shadow," Architecture Studio* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), p. 11.
2. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 184. Originally published as *La vie des formes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1934).

