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Chiaroscuro: Reconstructed Space

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Chiaroscuro: Reconstructed Space

Abstract

Our experience as occupants of a particular setting begins with the impulse to instantaneously scrutinize everything. This impulse is sustained through an often precisely choreographed threshold. As architect and artist, my goal is to assist the occupant in maintaining their initial ontological wakefulness through staging, often-temporary assemblies within a host space and thereby enhance its topographic fidelity.

Each inquiry is part of a process by which the humanity and sensual experience of a particular setting is revealed. The resultant staging yields what Joan Simon calls a socio-graph, a support system for the occupation of an environment. To this end, the act of making observations assists in cultivating place-based knowledge. It is an embodiment of an interdisciplinary agenda that embraces the artist as craftsman, choreographer and scribe in an effort to cultivate the cultural essence of lived space.

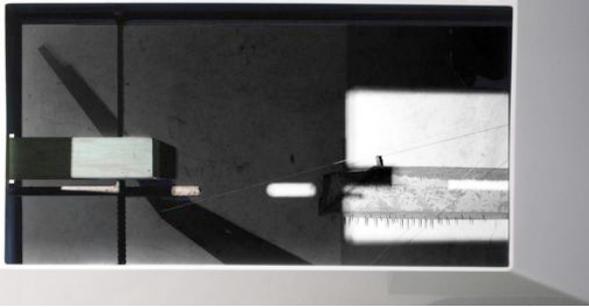
The space of Iowa has been reinvented in the nineteenth century as a reflection of the modern rationality of capital production. Communities in Iowa continuously adapt to changes in the agricultural production processes. Since its start in the nineteenth century, this production process was lead by family farmers – a form of farming in which labor is supplied primarily by family members. Family farming has become a consolidated social symbol that Iowans are attached to which is based on a form of independence through private farm property and its production process. This form of independence is also translated through social distance whereby farmsteads are equally spaced across the landscape leaving ample fields between farming families. This sense of spatial and symbolic independence has largely defined the quality of life in Iowa. However, this spatial and federally advocated form of independence was associated with economic dependence on market forces, food industries and federal policies. Given that family farms have been consistently mechanizing and increasing production, the demand for more farmland has also been increasing, which resulted in “successful” farmers purchasing production ground from other less successful farmers. This has made the family farmer’s space unstable as it is consistently under market competition pressure and trends of federal policies. This economic condition has produced spatial and communal instability because it has caused frequent reconfiguration in the living space. For instance, some farmers have rented their production grounds and continue to live on their farmsteads away from public services and employment opportunities that they have become increasingly dependent on. The impact of farming development has been even more apparent whereby vacant farm sites along the various roads are a common scene.

Black’s Seed Farm is one such dormant farm site in which a body of work is being developed as part of an ongoing effort to examine the past character and future shape of Iowa’s inherited landscape. Current studio projects focus on the act of making and curating a series of research assemblies within a dormant seed-drying facility using ethno-specific logic and perceptual practices as spatial conditioner. This work might best be understood as a site-adjusted set of objects or trace that indicates the presence of, and makes clearly recognizable, its context as referent rather than source or setting.

Disciplines

Architecture

Chiaroscuro: Reconstructed Space by Peter P. Goché



1.1 Aerial viewing monitor

Take 16 men, short and tall ones as they leave church on a Sunday morning and let each of them put one shoe after the other and the length thus obtained shall be a just and common measuring rod with which to survey the land.¹

Introduction

The content of this exploration was generated in response, and as an addition, to David Heymann's essay "Precise, Anonymous, Enigmatic" published in the 1990 winter issue of *Iowa Architect*. In that critically perceptive article, Heymann traces the evolution of the Midwestern landscape by examining farm buildings within rural Iowa. Central to the evolution that Heymann cites is the specific topography due to wind erosion. Heymann uses this dynamic to illustrate a perceived stability given the tectonic nature of farm building construction and associated spatial configurations. If the centerline of Heymann's thinking is that instability in land morphology (though difficult to optically register) has produced a tectonic perceptual stability, the conceit of this essay is that such stability no longer exists, and that a shift in the scales of economy has yielded an outwardly visible tectonic instability. Thus to Heymann's transformation is added the inverse consequence and thereby directly linking the visual evidence of an unstable (derelict) building set to the intellectual evidence of an unstable ground plane. This relationship of figure to ground is the basis for staging a series of intensely modulated spatial reconstructions within an antiquated seed-drying facility that, like Iowa's farm buildings and land-use practices, is intrinsically grounded in the spatial and cognitive confines of its surround.

Iowa Landscape

The space of Iowa has been reinvented in the nineteenth century as a reflection of the modern rationality of capital production. Communities in Iowa continuously adapt to changes in the agricultural production processes. Since its start in the nineteenth century, this production process was led by family farmers – a form of farming in which labor is supplied primarily by family members. Family farming has become a consolidated social symbol that Iowans are attached to

which is based on a form of independence through private farm property and its production process. This form of independence is translated through social distance whereby farmsteads are equally spaced across the landscape leaving ample fields between farming families. This sense of spatial and symbolic independence has largely defined the quality of life in Iowa; however, this spatial and federally advocated form of independence was associated with economic dependence on market forces, food industries and federal policies. Given that family farms have been consistently mechanizing and increasing production, the demand for more farmland has increased, which resulted in 'successful' farmers purchasing production ground from other less successful farmers. This has made the family farmer's space unstable as it is consistently under market competition pressure and trends of federal policies. This economic condition has produced spatial and communal instability because it has caused frequent reconfiguration in the living space. For instance, some farmers have rented their production grounds and continue to live on their farmsteads away from public services and employment opportunities on which they have become increasingly dependent. The impact of farming development has been even more apparent, whereby vacant farm sites along the various roads are a common scene.²

Black's Seed Farm is one such dormant site in which a temporary body of work is being developed as part of an ongoing effort to examine the past character and future shape of Iowa's inherited landscape. In this manner, the facility serves as a field station focused on the study of spatial phenomena. In using the term here, I refer to a way of knowing that seeks to describe the essential qualities of human experience and the context in which that experience happens. The aim is to use these studies as the basis from which to discover underlying

commonalities that constitute the essence of experiential awareness specific to material space.

The field station is located at Black's Seed Farm (26156 530th Ave.) – 2 miles south of Ames, Iowa. Using experiential perceptions as spatial conditioners, current studio projects focus on the act of making and curating a series of research assemblies within a dormant seed-drying facility constructed in 1979. This work might best be understood as a peculiar deposit of site-adjusted spatial phenomena that indicates the presence of, and makes clearly recognizable, its context as referent rather than source or setting.

This exercise began by reconsidering the nature of a set of internal spaces formerly referred to jointly as the plenum. A single farmhand conducted the drying operation from within this set of spaces. The hopper doors throughout were used to regulate the distribution of warm air to the drying bins. The abandonment of this mechanical process and our consequent human association leaves the, often unknowledgeable, visitor at a loss with respect understanding its former utility due to the inherent austerity of its confines.

The subsequent reference (posited for purposes of this research effort) to these spaces, the entrance hall and the drawing room, conjure internal mental pictures of associated uses and social activities as a result of their new, albeit archaic, syntax. This implied description (loose intellectual linkage) coupled with the instability of the cultural context enables us to more fully enter the landscape as a place of imagination rather than that which might vanish if made finite.

Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall there is a second, narrower, room – a kind of drawing room – in which consciousness too, resides. But on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his function. (Freud 1917)

In the context of spatial assignment and cultural practices, Sigmund Freud explained his theory of the unconscious in the above excerpt. This notion is the conceptual basis for the reoccupation of a dormant configuration within Iowa's landscape, whereby a set of buildings and thereby spaces (rooms) have been left vacant for decades. Freud knew that he only had to name the rooms and his comparison between *real* space and the space of the mind would be made clear.³ Similarly, the goal of this effort is to examine, on the threshold between the two rooms and the broader agricultural context, the potential of a set of empty spaces whose original purpose is no longer served yet stand as social symbols of labor's leftover.



1.2 Dormant seed drying facility



1.3 Black's Seed Farm



1.4 Road leading to Black's Seed Farm



1.5 Aerial view of Iowa landscape (Photo by Marwan Ghandour)

Entrance Hall – Research Assembly One

The dimensional nature of Iowa’s agricultural landscape is not immediately discernable. This can be attributed to the absence of an outline of objects seen against the line at which the sky and earth appear to meet in the case of its physical dimension. In the case of its cultural dimension, this might likely be attributed to the intrinsic relationship (both symbolically and ethically) between the family farm unit and the expansive ground plane in which it operates. It is an extent, both physically and culturally, that becomes present and knowable (only) through the first-person dimension; an experiential unit of measure commonly referred to as time.

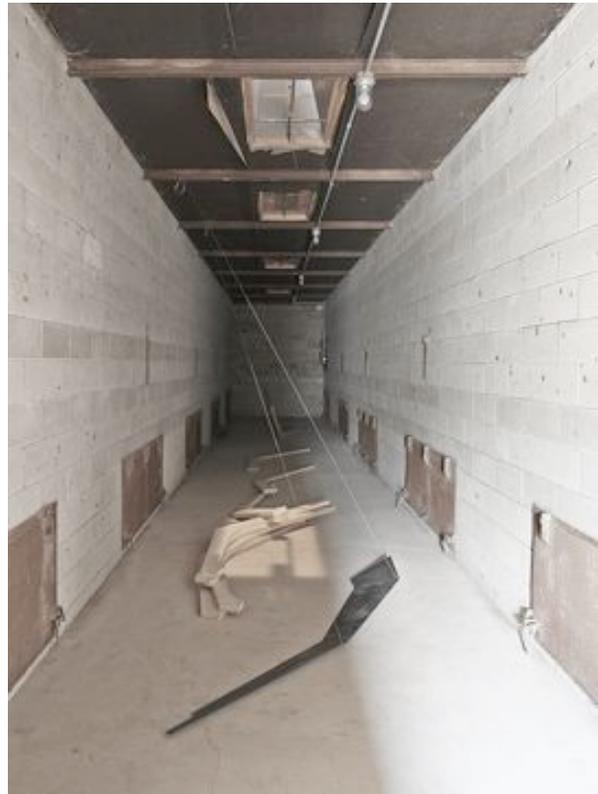
It is this logic with which the first research assembly has been developed. It is situated within the ground floor plenum space of the seed dryer, the actual dimensions of the entrance hall are 8 by 61 feet in plan. Its height is 10 feet. Access is provided through a small vestibule at the south end of the entrance hall. Upon entry, you are situated within an unlit tunnel constructed of cast in place concrete (floor and ceiling) and concrete masonry unit walls. With the door left ajar and ambient light emanating from an existing opening in the ceiling to the floor above, the viewer is confronted with a tilted steel plate and series of like wood elements placed on the floor. The arrangement and extent of this componentry is undeterminable given gradient light levels due to the hyper extended condition of the plenum geometry.

As the ocular effect (dilated pupils) of having moved almost instantaneously from daylight to dark slowly returns to normal, the remainder of the componentry, and ultimately the dimensional and material boundaries of the host space, become evident. This calibration to space is enhanced by the existing measure of steel ceiling beams that support the floor of the drawing room above and consequently, regulate the space of the entrance hall. In time, all incident planes and edges become visible. The viewer is drawn then, by curiosity, to navigate/negotiate the configuration of components and parameters of its host space.

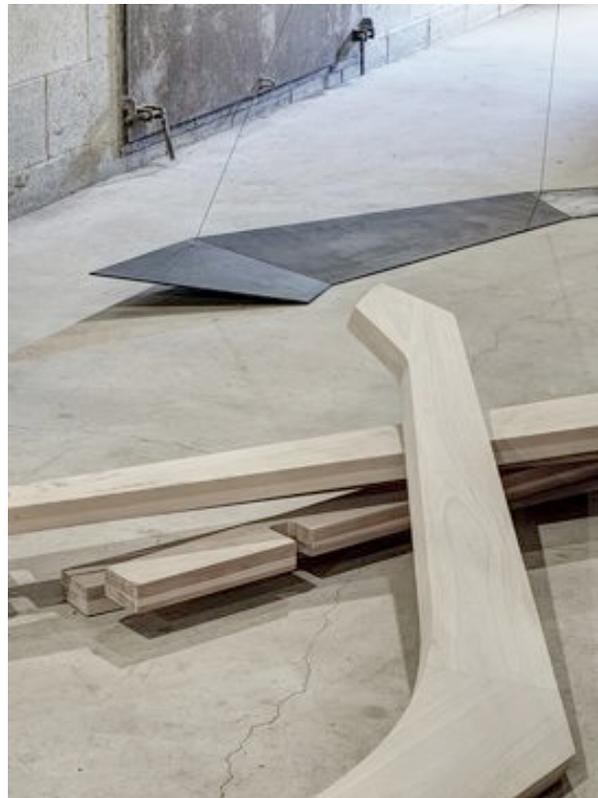
The bent steel component (control) is held at tilt from the ground plane via a set of stainless steel aircraft cables. The consequent spatial implication beyond contains a series of eight identical forms shaped from poplar wood. The intention of each part is unknown. It’s inherent precision apparent. The forms are piled and disarrayed along the space.

Entrance Hall – Research Assembly Two

For most of us, our comprehension of the inscribed landscape is the aggregate of various momentary engagements with rural America. Awareness is developed through finite experiences as a matter of passing through or attending a farm event. The rural configuration, thus, is the setting for an experience rather than the experience itself as practiced by the family farm unit as a matter of



1.6 Research assembly one (Photo by Cameron Campbell)



1.7 Research assembly one – detail (Photo by Cameron Campbell)

their existence. Thus, the contemporary experience, unlike the traditional, is not solitary, is not contemplative, and is less concerned with awareness of the environment.⁴ What eventually replaced the ethical perception of this landscape typology was the restricted vision of our global, rather than local, scale of exchange. However, there has recently been a conservationist revival as made most evident through community-supported agriculture whereby the farmer is directly linked to the consumer. It is changes such as these – fragmentary and pragmatic – that have informed, and been illuminated by, the production of the second research assembly.

This assembly employs a derelict metal conveyor lid placed on the floor with respect to the tilted steel bent. The conveyor lid, worn and distorted by weather, is host to a series of thorns that have been attached to its leading edge. The (ash grey) thorns are 3-10 cm long and have been harvested from the Honey Locust tree native to the Midwest, which is considered a weed and a pest that establishes itself in farm fields.

Incident light, emanating from the entrance door left ajar and a more intense halogen light source in the aerial observation station above, frames the resultant intercourse between each of the elements and their host space. Under this new configuration, the assembly – or, more broadly, the ambient configuration – is not what occupies the entrance hall, but what is completely enveloped by the consequent pool of light and surrounding shadows. In other words, the restricted view of the associated componentry yields what David Leatherbarrow refers to as a topographical inscription,⁵ a single cultural framework occupied by our collective imagination. In this way, the perceptual experience of the work forges a return to the solitary, contemplative experience; to a provocation of self-awareness with respect to what is known, consciously and subconsciously, regarding farm culture and the inherited landscape.

Drawing Room

Within the logic of landscapes is an indoctrinated manner of observation. Contemporary culture comprehends and navigates geographical realms via maps, which tend to set up an aerial relationship between reader and subject. Consequent to this intellectual configuration is the study of the atmosphere and outer space as viewed from earth. The upper story of the seed dryer operates as an instrument with which such readings can be performed – placing the viewer in the threshold between heaven and earth; consciousness and the subconscious; certainty and uncertainty.

Located in the second level of the plenum, the drawing room contains an aerial and ground-viewing station. The dimensions of the drawing room are 8 by 61 feet in plan. Its height is 8 feet. Entry is at the south end of the space via a ladder. The aerial viewing station was designed with



1.8 Research assembly two



1.9 Research assembly two – detail

respect to a series of 24 by 48 inch trap doors originally located to allow air exchange between the first and second levels of the plenum. Each opening is penetrated by a set of corresponding concrete reinforcement bars. The ground viewing station was assembled with respect to a large duct opening on the north end that leads to a separate turbo fan and heater building at grade.

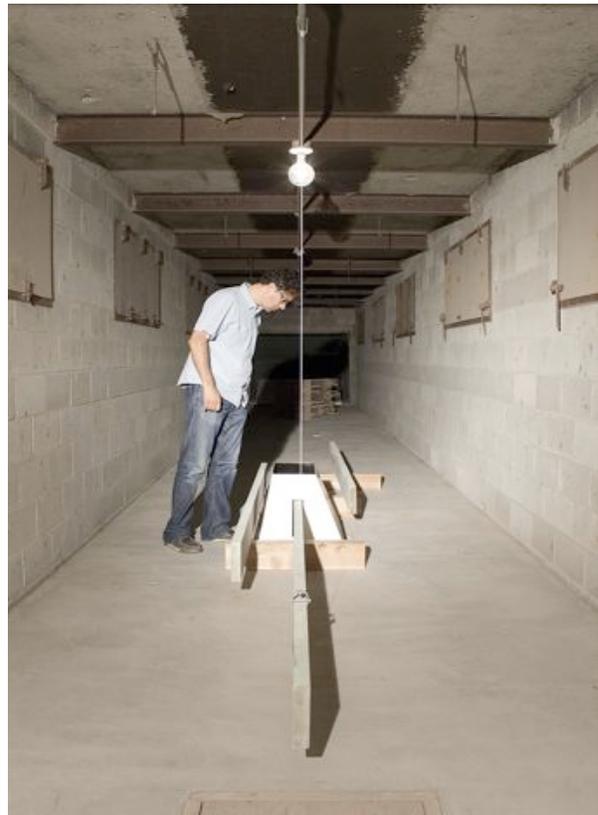
The aerial viewing station consists of an offset viewing monitor made of 10-gauge steel. The faces of which belong to the upper story are painted white. The faces of which belong to the lower story are unpainted. Consequent to the act of leaning over and viewing the serial landscapes below, through the monitor (Figure 1.1), is the convective air exchange loop that bathes the viewers face and makes observation a multi-sensory act. Bracketing the offset monitor is a set of cedar blocks and three painted timbers found on site. All systems are gravity placed. One of these members intersects the viewing plane of the monitor and is hung from the overhead assembly. The observation station is adjustable in the sense that it can be relocated to service viewing the work in the entrance hall below from any of the four trap door locations.

The ground viewing station is located at the far end of the drawing room just in front of the duct opening. This work consists of a *camera obscura* and a stacked wood viewing station. The *camera obscura* consists of a constructed picture plane and a 2mm diameter hole in the top of the existing duct. Light from the external (celestial) scene passes through the hole and strikes the picture plane inside, where it is reproduced, upside-down, but with color and perspective preserved. The picture plane consists of 16-gauge painted steel bents set on a wood strut and aircraft cable suspension system. The cables connect the negative space of the duct with the ceiling plane of the drawing room. Two vertical panel joints serve as measure by which the image of the sky is slowly understood to be in motion.

The viewing station consists of a stacked wood enclosure surrounding a Japanese garden stool. Each component is set apart from the other by a series of corresponding spacers (stickers) milled from plywood. The aggregate set of pieces is lined with a corresponding 10-gauge steel bent. This liner is rotated slightly, and thus, separated from its host arrangement.

Conclusion

The world is precisely that thing from which we form our perceptions, not as personal beliefs or imperatives, but in so far as we are all governed by a universal source of light and its consequent shadows. This optic disclosure, the layering of light and shadows, absolves us of our flesh and bone and allows the body to enter time, deep time, and thus rooted (as pointed out by Mircea Eliade) in our collective transcendent reality – the inscribed spatial history of a particular setting developed between human



1.10 Aerial viewing station



1.11 Aerial viewing station

beings and the environments they occupy.

Our experience as occupants of a particular setting begins with the impulse to instantaneously scrutinize everything. This impulse is sustained through an often precisely choreographed threshold. As architect and artist, my goal is to assist the occupant in maintaining his or her initial ontological wakefulness through staging often-temporary assemblies within a host space and thereby extend the passage sequence.⁶

Each inquiry is part of a process by which the cultural history and perceptual experience of a particular setting is revealed. The resultant staging yields, what Grant Wood depicts in his mural *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow* (painted in 1934), the foundation for subsequent forms of human civilization specific to labor and an intensely modulated means of production. The cumulative effort might indicate the potential use of this facility, and all of Iowa's derelict agricultural facilities, as laboratory inasmuch as it provides a dormant environment conducive to conducting a series of sustained observations.

To this end, the act of reconstructing forgotten space assists in cultivating place-based knowledge. It is a subconscious engagement whereby we become immersed in the world and do not succeed in distancing ourselves from it in order to achieve a consciousness of the world. It is an embodiment of chiaroscuro: a pictorial practice of arranging light (the conscious) and shadow (the subconscious) in the service of authenticating the cultural essence of lived space, and thereby, mine its capacity to summon the subconscious and reoccupy the inherited landscape as a dimension of life entwined with the present, a part of our ongoing perceptual experience.

About the Author

Peter P. Goché is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Architecture at Iowa State University. Goché holds a Masters degree in Architecture from Iowa State University. He taught in the Department of Art at Drake University before joining the faculty at the Iowa State University, where he coordinates and teaches design studios exploring ethno-specific design and the inherited landscape. For the last decade Goché has produced research assemblies specific to spatial phenomena. Goché has presented his design-work and scholarship at various institutions throughout North America and Europe.

Endnotes

¹ Curtis M. Brown, *Boundary Control and Legal Principles*, Third Edition (John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1986).

² Marwan Ghandour and Peter Goché, *Guidelines for Spatial Regeneration in Iowa*, (2007 AIA Board of Knowledge Committee).



1.12 Ground viewing station



1.13 Camera obscura



1.14 Camera obscura

³ Georgina Downey, *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians and the Modernists*, (Bloomsbury Press, 2013), p. xiii.

⁴ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, (Yale University Press, 1984), p. 63.

⁵ David Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories: Studies in Landscape and Architecture*, (John Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 12.

⁶ Peter P. Goché, “Staging: Making a Scene,” in *Architecture as Performing Art*, edited by Marcia Feuerstein and Gray Read, (Ashgate Publishing Ltd., United Kingdom: 2013), p. 75.

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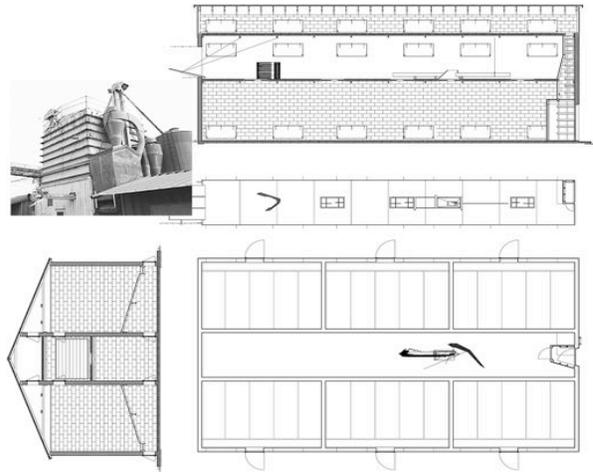
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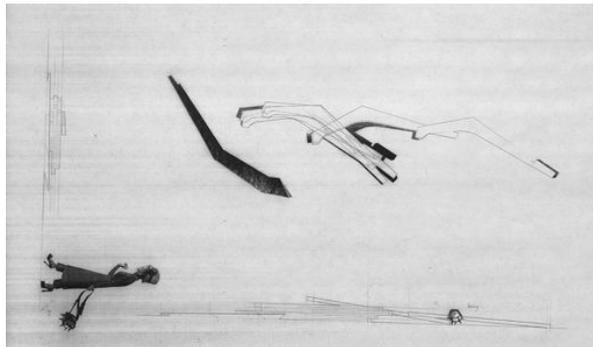
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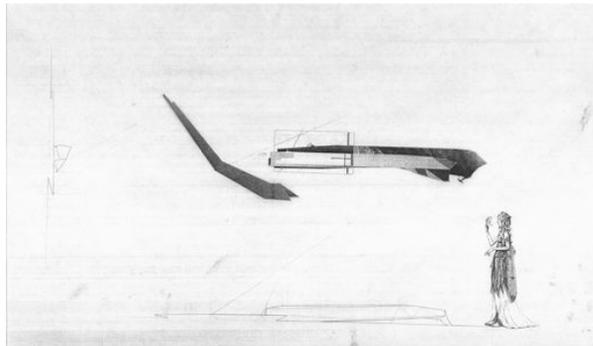
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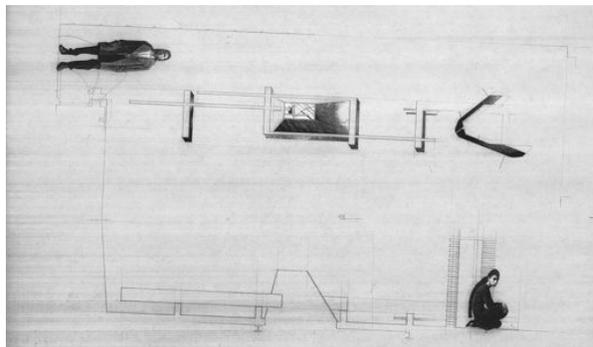
1.15 Digital drawing of seed drying facility



1.16 Manual drawing of research assembly one



1.17 Manual drawing of research assembly two



1.18 Manual drawing of aerial and ground viewing stations