

FIELD SUPPORT VEHICLE: model for embodied architecture pedagogy

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For over a decade the Land Arts Support Vehicle was hunch and dream. An exponential possibility for field-based pedagogy. The creation of an adaptable all-terrain backcountry truck outfitted with essential infrastructure of mobile kitchen and field lab to propel the ongoing research of Land Arts of the American West at Texas Tech University Huckabee College of Architecture. In 2020 the embodied potential became active with a significant donation enabling the purchase of an F-350 4x4 Chassis Cab. This launched an active design-build process that continues beyond initial fabrication through perpetual testing and iterative refinement emanating from sustained immersive field exposure into the collective commons of the American West.

Design-build process of the vehicle's custom service body allows it to carry essential gear and provisions. Pushing beyond paradigms of recreational vehicles, this project's ambition is aligned with scientific, and artistic, production vested in remote design-build field work. Think of a cross between inside-out food-truck and mobile construction workshop. Students and faculty worked collaboratively to design, fabricate, and evaluate the Support Vehicle to honor the ethos, aspirations, and complexities of the Land Arts program that is dedicated to expanding awareness of the intersection of human construction and the evolving nature of our planet.

Change is coming fast, though, on multiple fronts. Most of us begin the day now uncertain of exactly where we are. Once, we banked on knowing how to respond to all the important questions. Once, we assumed we'd be able to pass on to the next generation the skill of staying poised in worrying times. To survive what's headed our way—global climate disruption, a new pandemic, additional authoritarian governments—and to endure, we will have to stretch our imaginations. We will need to trust each other, because today, it's as if every safe place has melted into the sameness of water. We are searching for the boats we forgot to build.

Barry Lopez, *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World*¹

A building is not a machine, operating as an individual actor within its immediate and extended contexts to be well-oiled and forgotten about. A building is more like a plant: one part of an interconnected whole, tangled inside a larger ecosystem requiring cultivation and attention.

Neal Lucas Hitch and i/thee²

NEW METAPHOR

Architecture needs new operative metaphors and new networks of engagement. New sensibilities vested in the long temporality of geology, deep ethics of earth, and persistent poetics of particles.³

Land Arts Support Vehicle—truck—is not a metaphor. It is an agent. A call to action. Enabling ways of being. Ways of being with the world. Allowing and requiring connection with remote conditions, immersive experience, and transformative possibilities.

Land Arts of the American West⁴ at Texas Tech University is model for architectural education with expansive interconnections, material propositions, and care for cultural complexities. Linked by saturated, embodied pedagogy, directly in lands, histories, and conditions—works—being investigated. While benefiting from the technology of remote sensing and global communication infrastructure, this mode of operating seeks ground truth. From time on ground, in situ, processing bodily experience.

The truck is an agent of the program's action and an active demonstration of its ethos. The work-over-time nature of its design-build seeks geologic resolution. Crystals forming through accretion and erosion. It is not a fixed or predetermined form. It is a set of relationships held together through action, care, and community. Land Arts is momentum. For future possibilities emerging from the complexities of direct encounters and saturated immersion.

This story of that truck⁵, is one of collective momentum.



Figure 1. Support Vehicle during fabrication in Lubbock, Texas, June 2021. Photograph by author.

CONTEXT

Given the ongoing acceleration and plurality of crises impacting humanity—social, ecological, political, economic—human cultures need new models of adaptation, inclusion, and action, if we are to survive the unpredictable yet expected futures coming on fast.

Architects are increasingly focused on talking to themselves—even when faced with external subjects. For too long architecture has been more centered on internal debates and aspirations that further marginalize the agency of our discipline. This is exaggerated by regressive norms of practice where innovation and attention follow capital. We need to craft active regenerative models for futures of making, thinking, and teaching architecture to emerge from a discipline too long focused on exclusion.

Recent effects to address structural injustice within the built environment and the composition of our discipline are laudable. Yet care must be exercised to ensure these aims and actions do not remain superficial augmentations. If architects are to

demonstrate relevance and cultivate regenerative possibilities, we must look, and act, with wide impact. Across wide horizons. We need to look outside ourselves. We need to be outside.

Architecture needs new metaphors. Beyond machines for living. Beyond trophies of capital. Beyond captives of functionalist utility, or unhinged excess.

ARCHITECTURE NEEDS TO EVOLVE FROM THE PARTICULARS OF PRIMARY CONDITIONS, EMBODIED GROUNDS, TANGIBLE ACTIONS.

PEDAGOGY

Enter Land Arts of the American West⁶ in the Huckabee College of Architecture at Texas Tech University. A transdisciplinary field program that consistently, and for nearly two decades, has attracted participant students of architecture, art, history, literature, and beyond, to examine the intersection of human construction and the evolving nature of the planet. The program hinges on direct immersion in the field with saturated encounters of sites, weather, people (internal and external to



Figure 2. Support Vehicle during fabrication in Lubbock, Texas, June 2021. Photograph by author.

academic pursuits). Land Arts activates and builds connections between wide ranges of disciplines, relations, structures. It takes inclusion and experiential inquiry as prime opportunities.

The “semester abroad in our own backyard” travels roughly 6,000 miles overland while camping for nearly two months each Autumn to experience major land art monuments—*Double Negative*⁷, *Spiral Jetty*⁸, *Sun Tunnels*⁹, *The Lightning Field*¹⁰—while also visiting sites to expand understanding of what land art might be, such as pre-contact archeology, military-industrial infrastructure, and sites of contemporary wilderness and waste. Throughout the travels, and on-campus, participant students make work in response to their experience, which is exhibited at the Museum of Texas Tech University to conclude each field season.

The program was borne out of art and design and has re-centered within, and from, architecture for the last 13 years. During this time, it has survived with the support of outside patrons and the curiosity and inquiry of participant students

and guests. It now includes a graduate certificate program to facilitate international participants and a more academic credential. While still structurally provisional it has an established momentum and international visibility.

Student participants have come from across North America, Australia, Belgium, Chile, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom to study at Texas Tech during or after their work at the universities of Pennsylvania, Texas at Austin, Iowa, South Florida, California at Berkeley and Riverside, Carnegie Mellon, New York University, Goldsmith’s in London, Cranbrook, Rhode Island School of Design, Whitman College, Bard College, and Yale University.

The program invites the wisdom of field guests—writers, artists, and interpreters—to join specific portions of the journey to help negotiate and probe the multivalent meaning of the places visited and to open models of operation. Past field guests have included Center for Land Use Interpretation¹¹ director Matthew Coolidge, Utah Museum of Fine Arts¹² director Gretchen



Figure 3. Support Vehicle in use at Cabinetlandia, New Mexico, October 2021. Photograph by author..

Dietrich, Remote Studio and Artemis Institute¹³ director Lori Ryker, Adobe Alliance¹⁴ founder Simone Swan; artists Deborah Stratman¹⁵, Postcommodity¹⁶, Joan Jonas¹⁷, Zoe Leonard¹⁸, and Dionne Lee¹⁹; art historians Ann Reynolds²⁰, Kevin Chua²¹, and Monty Paret²²; architects Urs Peter Flueckiger²³, David Gregor²⁴, Jack Sanders²⁵, and Nichole Wiedemann²⁶; and writers Curtis Bauer²⁷, Charles Bowden²⁸, Ingrid Schaffner²⁹, Lucy Lippard³⁰, and Barry Lopez³¹.

This expansive network of people, and places, are central to Land Arts operating as embodied example. As a work that makes other works. A program fusing teaching and research to advance and test new methods of operation. Combining diverse and expansive disciplinary, and anti-disciplinary, potentials within an active and living context. Participants are drawn into dialog through works made and perceived, and responses to works. While often writers write, painters paint, and architects enact buildings. More often, hats constantly change. Being tried out. Testing through direct investment in the grounds constructed and embodied in collective and individual action. The field is a charged stage. Ways of teaching are evaluated by the impact on participant student's future work. By the futures they help shape, build, create. Land Arts

is outward facing. Connecting beyond immediate frames of reference. "You cannot count the miles unless you feel them."³²

After years of commercially renting vans and lightly outfitting them for field work, a generous donation in 2020 allowed Land Arts to enter new operational spheres and for it to develop a model architecture project manifesting its ethos and literally supporting its possibilities and opportunities.

SUPPORT VEHICLE

Enter the Land Arts Support Vehicle. A dedicated backcountry vehicle that provides the physical infrastructure of food/water, shelter/support, regenerative power and sound/video projection, emergency equipment and resources. It is a literal pedagogic armature to support field-based living and learning. Requiring community, connection, attention, and inclusion. Truck as literal and phenomenal vehicle. An agent allowing and requiring new ways of moving through and existing within terrestrial worlds.

The prospect of a dedicated vehicle designed to respond to the conditions of the field was a dream of the program for a long time. A need reinforced with every tire failure or episode being



Figure 4. Support Vehicle in use at Goblin Valley, Utah, September 2021. Photograph by author..

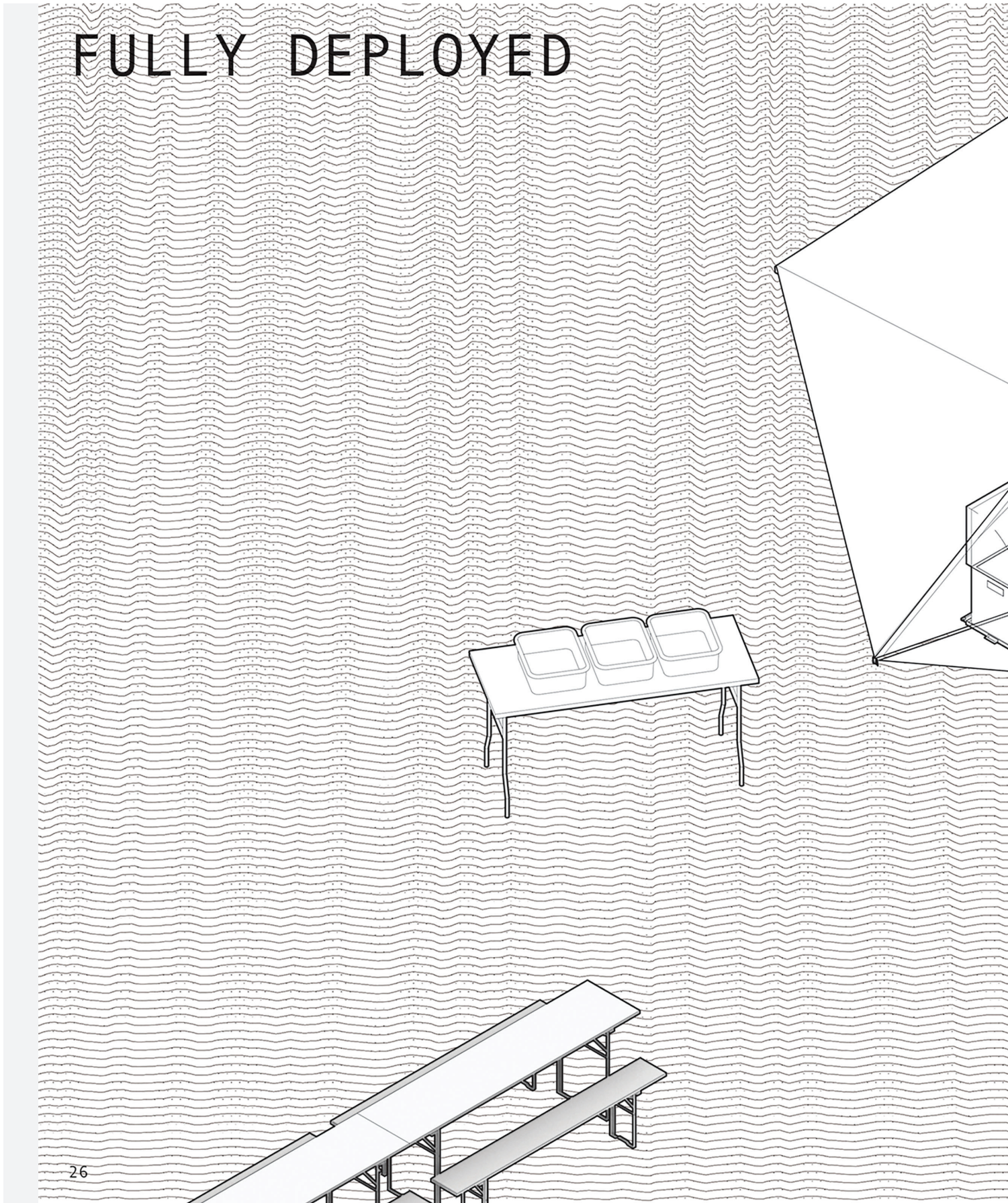
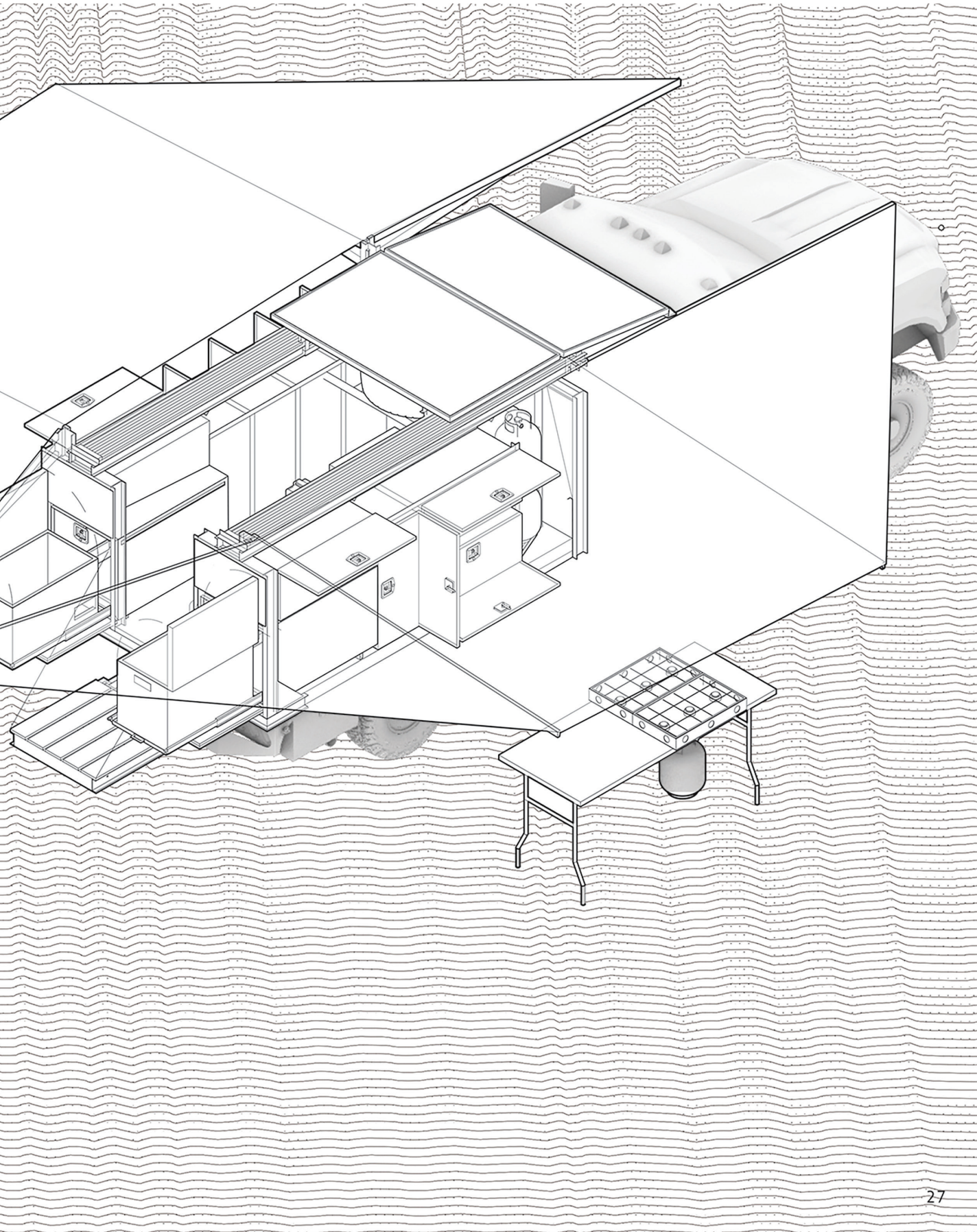


Figure 5. Support Vehicle deployed diagram, Spring 2022.



stuck in mud while negotiating washed out backcountry roads. The move from dream to possibility emerged during conversations with an anonymous supporter with first-hand knowledge of our challenges.

The quick decision to make the donation was followed by a lengthy approval process negotiating university policy for adding a vehicle to the fleet. Once approved and the donation deposited, the specified vehicle order was made for a 2021 Ford Super Duty F-350 XLT, Single Rear Wheeled, Four Wheel Drive, Chassis Crew Cab, with a 179" wheelbase. Given global pandemic impacts on the supply chain an order from 2020 stretched into 2021 with the bare vehicle arriving just before the new year.

During Spring 2021 a seminar course was taught with nine undergraduate and one graduate architecture students. The charge was to "begin the design-build process of the custom service body" for the Support Vehicle. "Pushing beyond paradigms of recreational vehicles, this project's ambition is aligned with scientific, and artistic, production vested in remote design-build field work. Think of a cross between inside-out food-truck and mobile construction workshop. Students and faculty will work collaboratively to design, full-scale model, and test fabrication of the support vehicle to honor the ethos, aspirations, and complexities of the Land Arts program that is dedicated to expanding awareness of the intersection of human construction and the evolving nature of our planet."³³ Given necessary requirements of working remotely to maintain pandemic safety, the course remained focused on the collective design of the custom field body with student teams taking on specific areas of project design—water storage, solar power generation, refrigeration, structure, food and gear storage, assembly, and deployment. The design process was very horizontal with students taking responsibility for systems or components and teaming up as needed. Everything was shared collectively with drawing and models coming together consistently throughout the term. Physical testing did not occur until the summer build phase of the project began.

June 2021 a small independent study course with two undergraduate and one graduate architecture students³⁴ conducted the primary truck build during the month of June. Instead of building a custom aluminum frame and deck to support the service body the college acquired a commercially available steel flat truck bed with under-bed toolboxes also in steel. Everything above the bed was fabricated in aluminum. The late arrival of the steel bed and the availability of essential components required ongoing design updates for dimensioning and approach throughout fabrication. The digital design model was regularly updated and consulted as components were fabricated with the first alteration the shift from a flat bottom 100-gallon water tank to a 125-gallon horizontal leg tank. The increased capacity and functionality were tradeoffs for less efficient component assembly. Repurposed aluminum dry boxes

provided base storage for food and equipment. Handles were removed, latches replaced, and where needed hydraulic lid lifts installed. Spacing of the boxes became a decision of operational flexibility and integration with other storage needs.

The base design approach was to line the sides of the truck bed with storage boxes facing out to use the center for gear that could load in for transit. It is an approach very similar to conventional service trucks, however the geometry was sized by the storage needs. Instead of hauling tools and construction materials this support vehicle needed to be a working kitchen and field station. Sliding out of the back on each side are custom boxes that hold new refrigeration. The move from heavy duty coolers with ice, and associated food spoilage, to AC/DC refrigerators meant a significant reduction in weight and an increased efficiency in cold food storage. The refrigerators slide out to the back and are accessed from a folding tailgate platform that doubles as a step up into the bed. The tailgate platform is set to be 36 inches below the top of the refrigerators.

Above each side of storage boxes are enclosures that hold aluminum pipes used to assemble a free-standing shade and rain shelter. The front of the enclosures is joined with trusses to hold hard mounted photovoltaic panels covering the water tank and extending over part of the truck cab. Between the water tank and rear panel is a spare tire.

The onboard solar power system provides enough energy for the kitchen as well as all other electrical needs: charging computers, cameras, phones, hand tools, running digital projector, area lighting, task lighting, and sound. The system is set up to collect energy from two 300-watt photovoltaic panels that are stored in two large 12-volt absorbent glass mat batteries that can hold 400 amp-hours of energy. It distributes that power to ground fault current interrupter alternating current outlets inside the cab and at the rear of the vehicle, and to the direct current power ports and loads concentrated in a rear mounted control panel. The 30-amp charge controller, 1000-watt pure sine wave inverter, and necessary fusing, breakers and line protections are collected in a custom-built aluminum box mounted in the center storage area just beyond the battery box.

The center volume of the truck bed is used to load in mobile gear such as dining, kitchen, and wash up tables, shelter assembly parts, trash receptacle, tarps, and other miscellaneous equipment. Two propane tanks are stored in mounts that stack vertically at the front of the passenger side of the bed. The truck powered air compressor is mounted under the hood and connected to an outlet in the truck bed on the driver's side. The water tank is plumbed to standard hose bibbs at the rear on each side. Filling the tank is completed by connecting a hose to a supply spigot and back pressuring the truck outlet.



Figure 6. Support Vehicle in use at Trick Tank, Arizona, September 2022. Photograph by author..

The big push of first assembly was completed in June with minor modifications for food storage dividers occurring just before the vehicle's first field season in September 2021. From the onset the goal of the design-build process was to view the project as an active work in progress rather than a fixed form to be attained. Having built and operated the field infrastructure over nearly twenty years the need for the system to be pliable and evolve over time, with breaks and repairs, was expected. The intent in 2021 was to begin operations with the base equipment³⁵ and allow the design-build to evolve and continue in time.

POSSIBILITY

Support Vehicle is embodiment of architecture pedagogy and possibility. Infused by the operating practices of the Land Arts program. It is also inspired by projects such as Terminal Exploration Platform³⁶ / Great Salt Lake Exploration Platform, Dymaxion Car³⁷, Embarcación Amereida³⁸, Makoko Floating School³⁹, Teatro del Mondo⁴⁰, SIMPARCH⁴¹, field-based design-build programs such as Rural Studio⁴², Remote Studio⁴³, Gulf Coast Design Lab⁴⁴, Design Make Studio⁴⁵, Studio 804⁴⁶, Ghost Architectural Laboratory⁴⁷, DesignBuildBLUFF⁴⁸, and field

programs such as Rural Environment Field School⁴⁹, Epicenter⁵⁰, High Desert Test Sites⁵⁰, and residency programs such as Center for Land Use Interpretation, Tablelands Center for Bioregional Art⁵², Oakes Creek Residency⁵³, Skowhegan⁵⁴, Headlands Center for the Arts⁵⁵, Playa Summer Lake Residency⁵⁶, Montello Foundation Residency⁵⁷, Fogo Island Arts Residency⁵⁸, Desert Fellowship at the Blue Sky Center⁵⁹, and Chinati Foundation Artist Residency⁶⁰.

September 2021⁶¹ was the inaugural field season for the Support Vehicle. As anticipated, expected, and unexpected events unfolded. On the first day a storage box containing reserve provisions became locked and inaccessible from contents shifting within. Rivets were drilled out to liberate the contents and the latch remounted. Sequence of loading in and out of the truck were refined with each site move. Core to the Land Arts ethos and pedagogy is the crew taking responsibility for the operation, performance, and protection of the collective gear, each other, and the lands we inhabit. Field testing the design and build of the Land Arts Support Vehicle is part of its existence.

Among the items yet built during the first season was a custom sliding box for the cook stove that would have hard mounted the stove to the vehicle. Given the dynamic terrain encountered during the Land Arts itinerary it quickly became clear that the vehicle was often not on level terrain and that a table set stove would offer more opportunity for safe operation and level adjustments. Once the new stove was operational it became clear that keeping the stove portable was a spatial, logistical, and safety detail.

Pivoting awnings that slide out from each side of the truck to provide shade and rain shelter also have yet to be built and remain clear improvements on the horizon. With dedicated truck mounted awnings will come more specific hard mounted lightning. It will remain necessary for a free-standing shelter to cover dining tables and group gatherings during inclement weather and this system also remains on the list for reexamination and design development.

A Spring 2022⁶² seminar conducted a major collective as-built three-dimensional model and drawing project that advanced vision for continued evolution, adaptations, and additions. Time reflecting on composition and construction, and field performance, is generative. Providing time for reflection as well as action is central to the ethos of the Land Arts program. Returning to the field in Fall 2022⁶³ provided another test phase with continuing minor field augmentations and deepening perspective on evolutions ahead.

Land Arts Support Vehicle strives to manifest a pedagogy of embodied action.

Mobile design-build architecture beginning from the reality of dynamic context and variable site conditions. Not fixed or static benchmarks. Situations of deep potential, migratory force, and possible futures. They are at once remote, rugged, and challenging while also serving as universal common challenges to architecture's relation to site and to modes of situating design and construction. Relevant architecture of present and future must emanate from agile, reflexive, embodied grounds.

This truck is a physical manifestation, an example, resource and agent. Land Arts Support Vehicle is opportunity supporting access to the commons of the American West.

ENDNOTES

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9. Sun Tunnels is an artwork created near Lucin, Utah by Nancy Holt between 1973 and 1976. It is currently owned by Dia Art Foundation, additional information at <https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/nancy-holt-sun-tunnels>.
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34. Summer 2021 ARCH 4000, College of Architecture, Texas Tech University taught by Chris Taylor with Adrian Reyna, Zach Harman, and Truett Payton as student fabricators.
35. Truck Specifications. The truck with an accompanying people hauler (15 passenger van with 10 people) can support a base of 10-15 people in very remote field conditions over time. It can expand to accommodate increased guest and events. The basic set up includes: 600 watts of photovoltaic solar panel collection, 400 amp-hours of AGM battery storage, 1000 watt pure sine wave inverter, Alternating and direct current power supplies, Light (task, area, lanterns), 125 gallon potable water tank plumbed to fixed faucets, two 5 gallon propane tank storage mounts, propane cook stove, two AC/DC refrigerators powered from the solar, food storage, recovery gear (tow ropes and chain, compressor, hi-lift jack), tables for dining, dishwashing and kitchen, communications technology, Starlink internet, computers, projectors, sound, cameras, GPS, FM transmitter, Fire suppression, Shovels, digging tools, ax, mattock, saw, hand tools, and cleaning supplies & trash can. Seats 5 people. Four wheel drive 1 ton chassis cab.
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57. Additional information about Montello Foundation Residency at <https://www.montellofoundation.org/>.
58. Additional information about Fogo Island Arts Residence program at <https://www.fogoislandarts.ca>.
59. Additional information about the Desert Fellowship at the Blue Sky Center at <https://www.blueskycenter.org/desert-fellowship>.
60. Additional information about Chinati Foundation Artist in Residence program at <https://chinati.org/programs/artists-in-residence/>.
61. Land Arts 2021 field season information including full syllabi, itinerary, and field guest listing can be found at <https://landarts.org/2021/09/03/2021-field-season/>. Participant students were Maria Amador, Jef Biesinger, Wills Brewer, Talia Brown, Christoffer Eide, Meghan Giles, Joshua Haunschild, Penelope Leggett, and Amber Noyola.
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