

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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# Timing and Triggering: Clues from Antiquity

Barton Phelps

**The-sis**, n. Gk., lowering of the voice; downbeat, the more important part of a poetic foot; the act of laying down.

*Landscapes are dynamic, and place is about time and activity. Function usually follows form—not the other way around; and time (in its historic, annual, and daily guises) performs a continual, not always harmonically constructive duet with presence.*

*Designers rarely encounter stable, unchanging landscapes in this country. Indeed, it appears such an idea is historically un-American: experimentation and commodification are more powerfully culture-driven ambitions than conservation and permanence.*

*Partly because its development came late and quickly, California is home to a distinct sequence of efforts to respond to this dynamism—to speed up or slow down the rate of change.*

*(Deciding where to come down in the professionally suspect, often moralistic terrain of time is a fundamental problem of architectural and planning activity. And what we are thinking as we go about this and what we report to clients are not necessarily the same thing.)*

*Let's call it timing.*

An experiment in timing is underway at Thacher School in the hot, dry foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains near Ojai.

Founded on a former cattle ranch by a Yale-educated newcomer in 1889, Thacher provided an early societal link between California and elite institutions of East Coast higher education. Nowadays, it's a diverse,

coed boarding school. Yet even if its curriculum is no longer based on the Classics, it still undertakes an update of Sherman Thacher's broadly inclusive educational initiative, combining academic achievement with objectives in self-reliance, teamwork, and environmental awareness.

The 240 high school-age students at Thacher live a rugged, outdoor life, shaped by the Ojai Valley and the daily ranch labor they perform. Their 400-acre campus (also home to 60 faculty and 140 horses) drops 200 feet in 1,200 feet from east to west, making for steep climbs and long, elevated views on the way to anywhere. Part grid, part contour-tracing ramble, its layout, and daily life itself, take focus at a shady central terrace called "The Pergola."

In 2001, the decision by the school's trustees to construct a new performing arts building and a student commons (the largest project in school history) on this central space raised a range of questions about space and time—as well as the designers' ability to get it right.

Bordering hallowed space unchanged for a half century, the Commons building would be the school's first to fully recognize coeducation in its design, and the Arts Building would give new importance to creative activity. The siting that we ultimately settled upon, however, intervened forcefully in a spatial composition evolved over five or six generations.

Our design aimed to show that architectural "progress" is not a *Zeitgeist* constant, and that the conscious choice of where to come down in architectural time is critically important to supporting social progress in every community.

We started by trying to be useful, helping other people to collect and organize their thoughts for a project whose name was soon shortened to AB/C.

## Building with Gerunds

*Engaging:* Two programs totaling 24,000 sq.ft. in an integrated composition anchored to the Pergola establish movement patterns that clarify campus orientation, provide new, precisely oriented view lines, and heighten awareness of the setting.

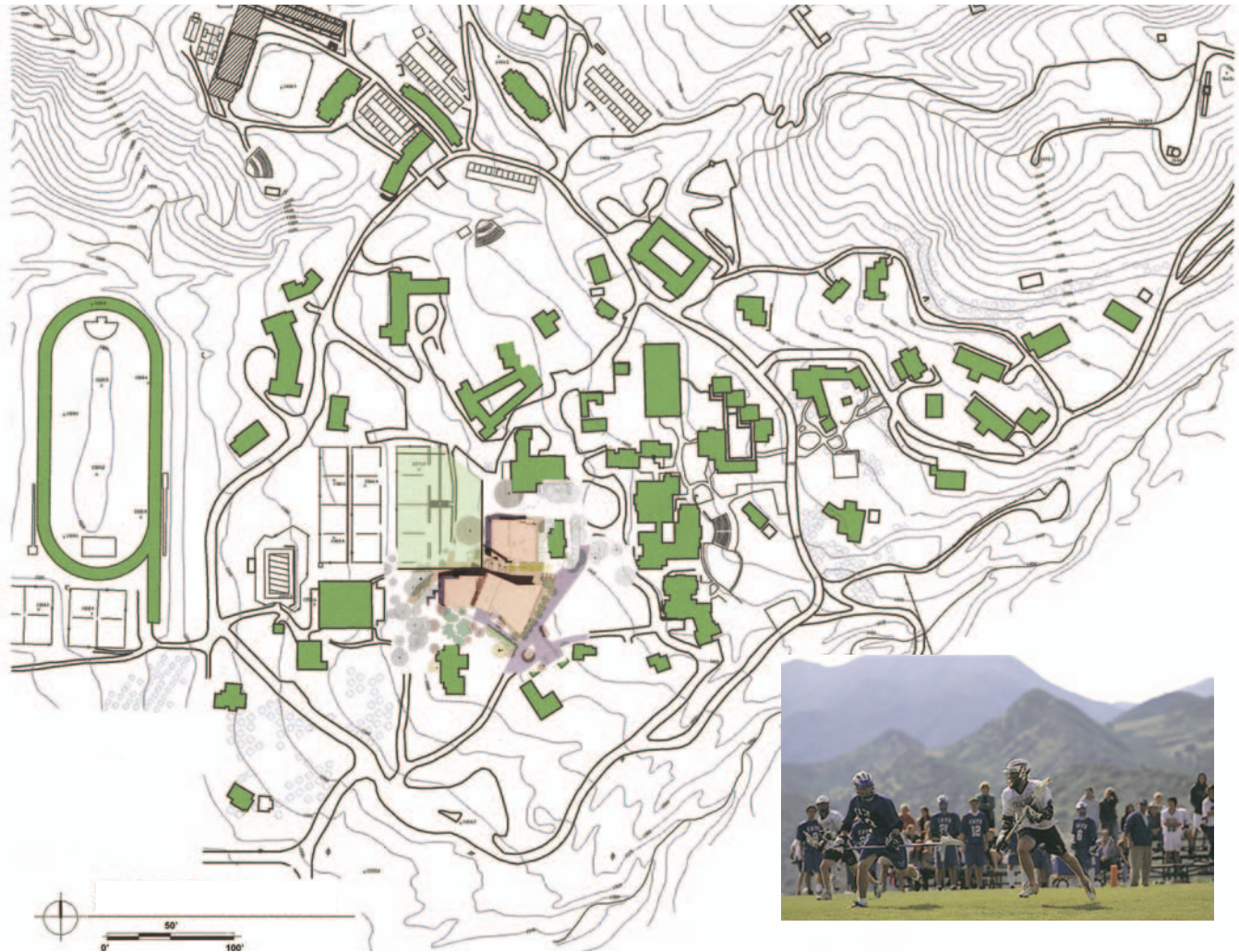
*Double-functioning:* Operations overlap to avoid redundancy and link activities. In addition to casual spaces for student, faculty, alumni and conference use, the Commons provides lobby/reception/rest room facilities for events in either building. Lower-level music practice rooms are close to the stage/rehearsal rooms across the court.

*Linking/Encountering:* Circulation is concentrated in a skylit central corridor linking Pergola and Arts Building, interpreted as a Parisian shopping arcade with a café and a school store display window. A *socio-petal* space, it banks on function, location, and daily visits to the mail room at its center to encourage social interaction. The space doubles as a gallery for the display of student work and traveling exhibitions. The tackboard "Toad" (school mascot) offers additional space for pin-up, Internet access, and vending machines.

*Testing Regionalism/Elevating Performance:* Orientation, daylight penetration, roof overhangs/sun shades, foundation/structural design, natural ventilation/limited HVAC systems, and material selection all reflect a balance between construction cost and life-cycle performance. In terms of texture, fieldstone, boulders (from the excavation), concrete, and metal siding predominate. Metal roofing replaces heavy tile, diminishing the seismic load its use created in earlier buildings.

**Opposite:** Campus plan of Thacher School showing site of Arts Building and Commons (AB/C). The school's setting is dominated by vistas to surrounding mountains (inset).

Images courtesy of Thacher School.



**A Prime Transformation**

As at other venerable schools, the campus landscape at Thatcher is valued equally for functional and symbolic successes. And, as is true of other examples of this best recognized and most revered form of American building culture, great effort has gone into maintaining its encoded spatial system.

But up here, absent gates, quads or towers, campus spaces and narrative myth developed anomalously. And partly because of the vertical topography and the land's former use for grazing, and partly because of an ethos

of modesty that prefers conventional building to more emphatic representational modes, the campus ideal seems ironically delicate in this craggy mountain context.

As architect/alumnus Ross Anderson, FAIA, has written, the Thatcher landscape is “easy to screw up.” School supporters are painfully aware of this, and architects working at Thatcher find the meaning of “daring” to be more closely related to Zen archery than the “shock and awe” of the international architecture scene.

Our approach wraps vernacular

building forms and materials around a technically complex program. The exterior of the Arts Building looks to the angular unity and sculptural potential of California barns to mask the high stage loft and provide a sense of contextual fit.

The 450-seat auditorium has mid-range acoustics for music, speech, drama, dance and cinema. And its cross-aisle and lighting lend intimacy to the lower 300 seats for daily assemblies. But the interiors are plain.

Overhead, exposed structural elements and industrial features do play





off the memory of an older campus building, the long-gone “Rough House,” which offered a cunning combination of ordinary gymnasium and scary high-wire equipment devised to induce terrified exhaustion in adolescent males. In our design, some fairly daunting ladders, catwalks, and lighting positions were as close as school lawyers would let us come

**Above:** Plan of Commons and Arts Building at ground level. Courtesy of Barton Phelps & Associates.

**Opposite:** Arts courtyard looking west. © Benny Chan/Fotoworks.

to this precedent. However, garage doors at the rear do open for ventilation and allow for additional performance seating on horseback. The leather-colored concrete likens the floor to a collective saddle.

Controlled institutional landscapes sometimes allow designers to look beyond assigned functional programs to create unasked-for interactions with surrounding outdoor spaces, and so enhance the campus experience. At Thacher the opportunity was intensely contextual. For example, it could be argued that few buildings constructed there since the

1950s recognized the powerful presence of their mountain setting.

Similarities between this semi-arid terrain and that of ancient Greece immediately reminded us of the care with which designers of sacred sites once drew palpable linkages between topographic features and architecture. From this viewpoint, the Thacher lacrosse field hovers above the valley in an ennobling way that echoes the soaring stadium at Delphi.

The old Greek model triggers awareness of our place in the natural world.<sup>1</sup> This school values the idea. It still works.

**Phe-nom-e-non**, n. Gk., to appear, to show, to know things by means of the senses rather than by means of rational thought.

*It's thrilling to work just above the base of a western mountain range — low enough that the wild terrain has already been tamed by loggers and ranchers (so you're off that book), but high enough to still be knocked silly by topographic abstractions expanding above and below you.*

*Part way up, the earth's broken shell dispenses hard facts more clearly and rapidly than a designer can possibly take in. Phenomenal interests sabotage rational problem-solving, and distant crustal events lay claim to your clients' carefully chosen site in a way that does not suffer value engineering or "gift opportunities."*

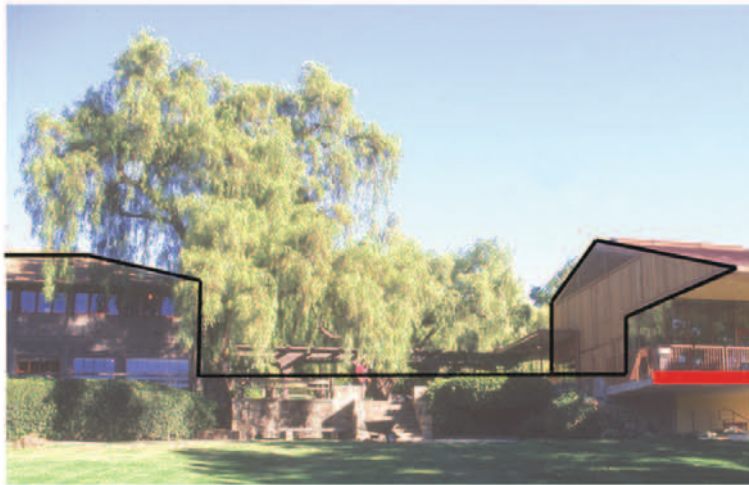
*The architect finds salvation in a forgotten soft science: sites like these are testing ranges for built interactions with the natural world. And if design alone cannot originate a shared idea of place, it somehow can alert people to certain dimensions of space that make it meaningful and, most importantly, memorable.*

*Let's call it triggering.*

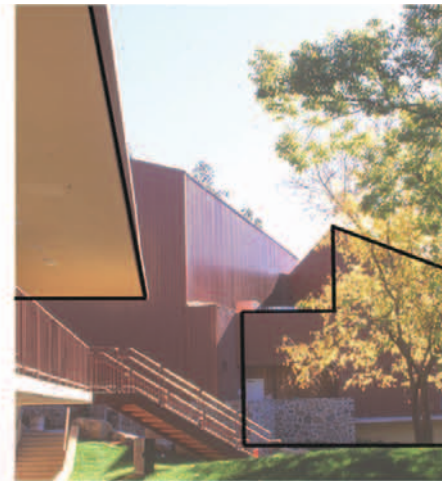








5. FRAMING THE PERGOLA



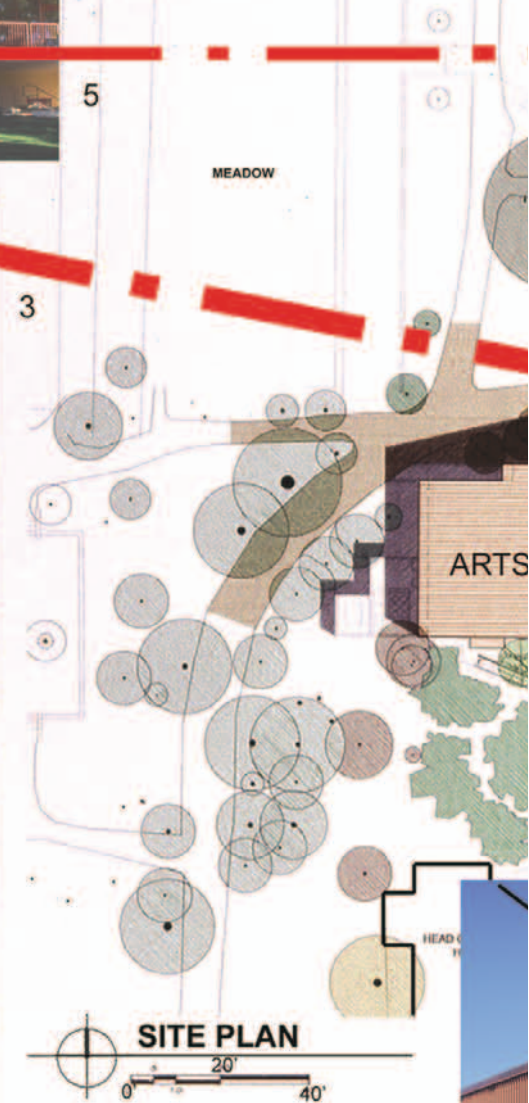
4. NEW CORNER AT MEADOW



3. VIEW OF OLD UPPER SCHOOL

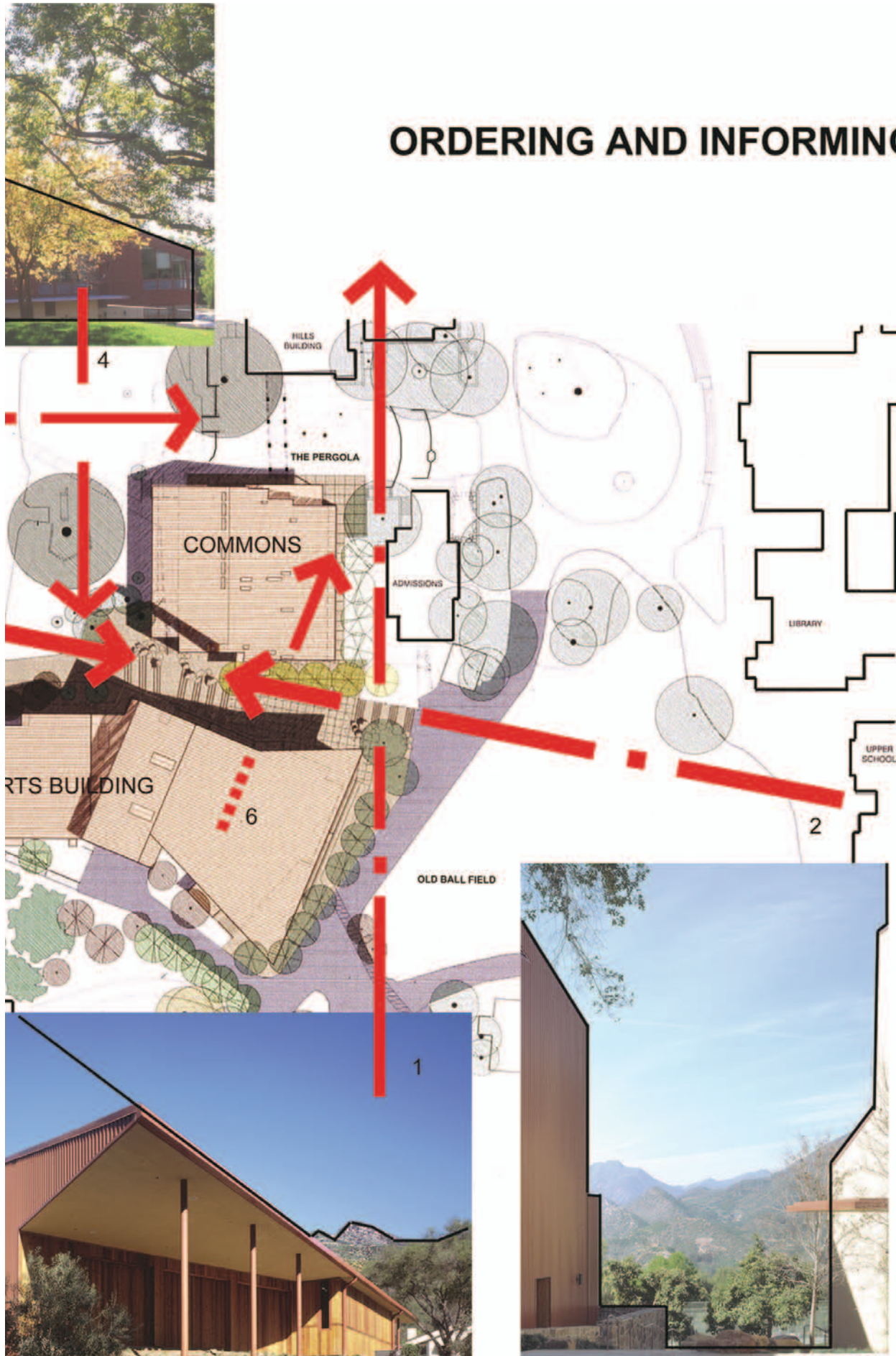


6. TWIN PEAKS FROM AUDITORIUM



Credits: Photos 1, 2, 3, and 6, © Benny Chan/  
Fotoworks. Photos 4 and 5, courtesy of Barton  
Phelps & Associates.

# ORDERING AND INFORMING



1. TWIN PEAKS SIGHTLINE ON ENTRY WALK

2. ARTS COURT: LONG VALLEY VIEW





The site plan manipulates the AB/C buildings as an integrated composition anchored directly to the Pergola and axially to the old Upper School. The design establishes movement patterns that aid orientation and heighten awareness of the

**Above:** Commons entry from the Pergola. © Benny Chan/Fotoworks.

**Opposite:** Arts Building Entry, north elevation. © Benny Chan/Fotoworks; Wooden Barn, Cambria, California (below). Courtesy of Barton Phelps & Associates. Section through the Arts Building (unfolded). Courtesy of Barton Phelps & Associates. The historic Rough House. Image courtesy of Thatcher School.

larger context, and it enlivens landscape through playful application of regional vernacular form.

The Commons squares off with the north/south grid at the center of the campus. Its main (north) entry receives the old wooden pergola that connects to the dining hall. Meanwhile, the plan of the adjacent Arts Building swings off the grid to border a fabled triangular ball field, and then cranks back to shape a strong corner for the meadow to the west.

Most importantly, the composition frames a major space that was not mentioned in the school's program: a stepped courtyard

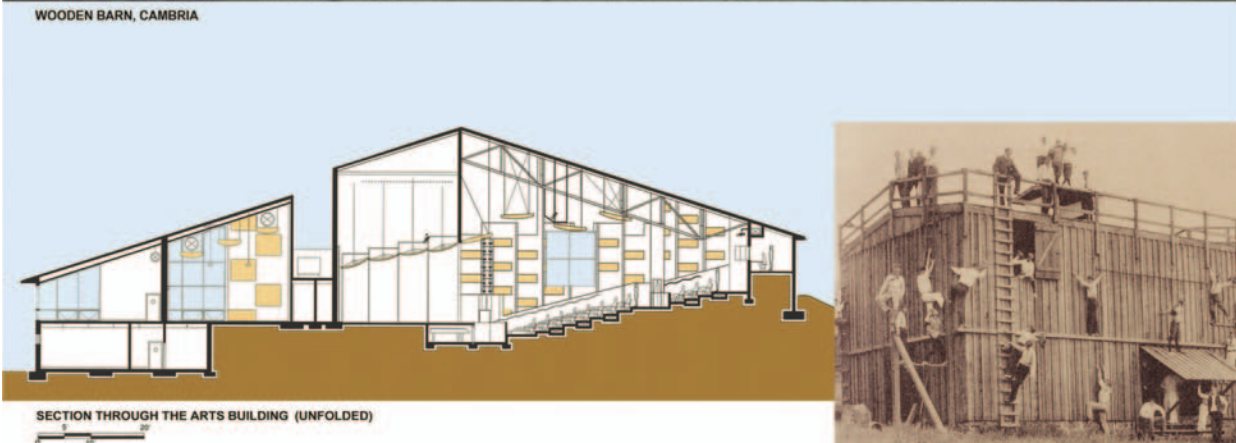
between the two buildings that serves as a lobby for assembly/event crowds, an informal student gathering place, a theater for outdoor events, and a passage for daily movement. Its axis opens a powerful new view corridor that links distant peaks with the oldest building on campus.

Building alignments and window placements also connect major spaces with distant peaks and ranges. The cantilevered deck and window wall of the Commons provide a sweeping overlook of the Ojai Valley. The roofline of the Arts Building leads the eye of arriving theater-goers up to Twin Peaks. And music and





WOODEN BARN, CAMBRIA



dance rehearsal rooms engage mountains to the north, while the big auditorium window frames Twin Peaks during each daily assembly.

### **The California Problem**

One intention of the AB/C was to demonstrate how much positive, perceivable landscape change two relatively small buildings could produce if they were designed not only inside-out and outside-in, but also (in the Greek sense) outside-out.

Thacher School presented the perfect laboratory for this effort. And, judging from users' responses, our design has succeeded at least partway in triggering thoughts about the relationship between human activity and remaining natural (or naturalistic) places.

We like to see this heartily conceived and supported project as a small contribution to a larger effort, begun before Thacher was founded, to imagine ways of forming landscapes worthy of California's Edenic promise.

#### **Note**

1. See Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).



**Above:** Gallery looking toward Arts Court. © Benny Chan/Fotoworks.

**Opposite:** Auditorium. © Benny Chan/Fotoworks.



