

## Design

After analyzing the site and applying the lessons learned from the case study, I felt ready to embark upon the design exploration. It proceeded over a period of several months, and went back and forth from clay model to paper to computer screen.

## Program

The program for Labor Heights Plaza consisted of three major elements: the Day Labor Site, the Neighborhood Plaza, and the Connection to Four Mile Run. There were several sub-elements that followed these three. A successful design would incorporate the three elements in an interrelated and complementary fashion.

### 1. Day Labor Site

- 3 zones (waiting, contact, hiring)
- Vehicular and Pedestrian Access
- Seating
- Bathrooms
- Parking for food truck
- Canopy/Shelter
- Unobstructed views

### 2. Neighborhood Plaza

- Market Space
- Multi-Purpose
- Promenade/Paseo
- Pedestrian Access
- Visual focus
- Human comfort (seating, shade, sun)

### 3. Connection to Four Mile Run

- Connect sidewalk with existing trail
- Significant visual connection

Here is a brief explanation of each of the sub-elements (not by order of importance). For the Day Labor Site, a key consideration was the design of the three zones which I had observed in the case study. They could overlap (as at the SEEC) or be separate (as at the HOWC), but they had to be addressed in order for the site to work as a day labor pavilion.

**Vehicular and pedestrian access** is a given for most public spaces, but a very careful balance would

have to be struck for the Day Labor Site. Its success depends upon the interaction of these two types of access, yet the intermingling of pedestrian and vehicular traffic often creates dangerous situations.

**Seating** is a basic element of any successful public space, and more so for any place designed for waiting. **Bathrooms** have increasingly been eliminated from public spaces in the U.S., but for the Day Labor Site, they are absolutely necessary.

A designated **parking space for the food truck** ensures that this vendor has a well-integrated place at the site. If the truck has to park off-site, it creates a reason for the laborers to walk into traffic.

The **canopy or shelter structure** is a means of achieving basic comfort and relief from the hot sun and rain. It also provides an indication of where the workers are meant to wait, a destination and center for the site.

The final sub-element is one of the most difficult to provide without conflict: **unobstructed views**. This was included after seeing how the laborers migrated outward from the SEEC site in order to get the best view, and from hearing that they valued a good view above many other factors. They need to be able to see, yet somehow be restricted from wandering off-site. Perhaps providing an elevated vantage point would prove useful.

The sub-elements under the Neighborhood Plaza are less complicated, yet no less important. The first element, **market space**, was decided upon after

speaking with neighborhood residents. More than one had mentioned using the parking lot for markets in the past, and expressed a desire to continue such events. The existence of a nearby community garden suggests that users might be interested in having a market where they could sell their produce. Markets have traditionally served to bring people together, and create a good focal point for a community. My site needed to provide the space and facilities for a market, without limiting other possibilities.

This brings us to the second element, **multi-purpose** capability. Public spaces are increasingly asked to serve vastly different users and activities, and these determine their physical form. My plaza needs to allow a range of activities without simply being a blank slate; it still needs to have an expressive character rooted in its time and place. So while the market is one definite use I want to encourage, it shouldn't discourage other types of behavior that often occur in public spaces: eating lunch, having conversations, handing out flyers, planned performances, and so on.

One such activity is the *paseo*, previously described in the section on the Latin American plaza. This activity is important enough that I included it as a specific sub-element for the Neighborhood Plaza, and its function suggests certain design cues. The inclusion of a place for the *paseo* to occur will hopefully help endear the plaza to its Hispanic users, as well as Anglo residents who have less familiarity with this custom.

The entire plaza needs to have plenty of **pedes-**

**trian access** in order to attract people. This shouldn't be a big problem, but the slope of the site and the high volume of traffic around it could be seen as obstacles. Fortunately, many people pass by the site on foot due to its location near bus stops, houses, and the AMCC.

A successful neighborhood plaza often has the ability to announce its location with some element of **visual focus**. This could be a piece of public art, a clocktower, a fountain, or some other landmark that enhances the public space and serves to signify it and the neighborhood. My plaza should have some memorable feature that can draw people to it and provide a means of representing the neighborhood to its residents, as well as visitors.

Finally, the site should have plenty of elements of **human comfort**: areas of sun and shade, seating, and zones of prospect and refuge. These are basic elements that every public space should have if they want to encourage use.

The third program element is the connection to Four Mile Run. This is the least-defined of the three, and only contains two sub-elements. Perhaps this is because plazas have not traditionally been connected to natural elements such as stream corridors; they are usually man-made. So there is a somewhat problematic relationship between my plaza design and the existing stream corridor: should it bring people to the stream, or merely suggest its presence? In other words, should the connection be physical, accessible

by everyone, or simply visual?

A connection should be expressed in the design, but in a way that respects the corridor's existing character. If possible to stay out of the 100-foot buffer zone of the Resource Protection Area of the Chesapeake Bay ordinance, then so much the better.

I decided that I could include two sub-elements, perhaps helping to guide my design for this troublesome element. First, there should be some **connection between the existing sidewalk** along Columbia Pike and the existing trail in the stream corridor. There is an extensive system of bike trails, but no good way to get to them from the AMCC parking lot. The grade is too steep, and currently the only means of getting to it



Fig. 4.1. Boulders block access to the only connection between the AMCC site and the existing trail along Four Mile Run.



Fig 4.2. Existing trail and stream corridor of Four Mile Run.

is by carefully picking your way down an eroded slope. (See Fig. 4.1) There should be some means of making this connection more useful to pedestrians and bikers.

Second, there should be a major **visual connection** between my plaza and the stream. To physically connect the plaza with the stream would require extensive grading. This would be prohibitively expensive and environmentally degrading, and would serve no real purpose. The stream corridor is already a lovely place; there is little justification to risk spoiling it further. (See Fig. 4.2) It should remain as a place of semi-natural repose in the midst of an urban setting. As such, a visual connection would be enough to remind people of the beauty and value of such a place, without significantly disturbing the existing stream habitat.

## Concept

The central dilemma I faced in the design was how to accommodate different uses and users in the same site. The main conflict was between work (the day labor center) and non-work (neighborhood plaza), but there also existed some reasons for not linking the stream corridor too closely with the day labor center. In a way, many of the program elements worked against each other.

One of the most powerful elements of design is the wall. It forcefully defines space and structures relationships between people and sites. The Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, and increasingly the walls of national boundaries have been symbols of domination and control. Points where the walls are perforated, or where they break down, are especially powerful as symbols of transformation and access. Much of the current debate over illegal immigration stems from feelings of ambiguity over the solidity of the legal wall formed by our border with Mexico, and the ease with which it can be crossed. The wall is a polyvalent symbol with obvious design implications.

Perhaps my design could be informed by the dynamic activity of a wall that is transformed from a solid mass to something different. A wall would certainly be useful in parts of the design since it could buffer noise from vehicles using the day labor pavilion. But it would be less desirable in other parts of the plaza. Perhaps this concept of the wall could guide the structuring of the site and help bring its disparate program elements

into some kind of peaceful co-existence.





Fig. 4.3. Illustrative Master Plan.

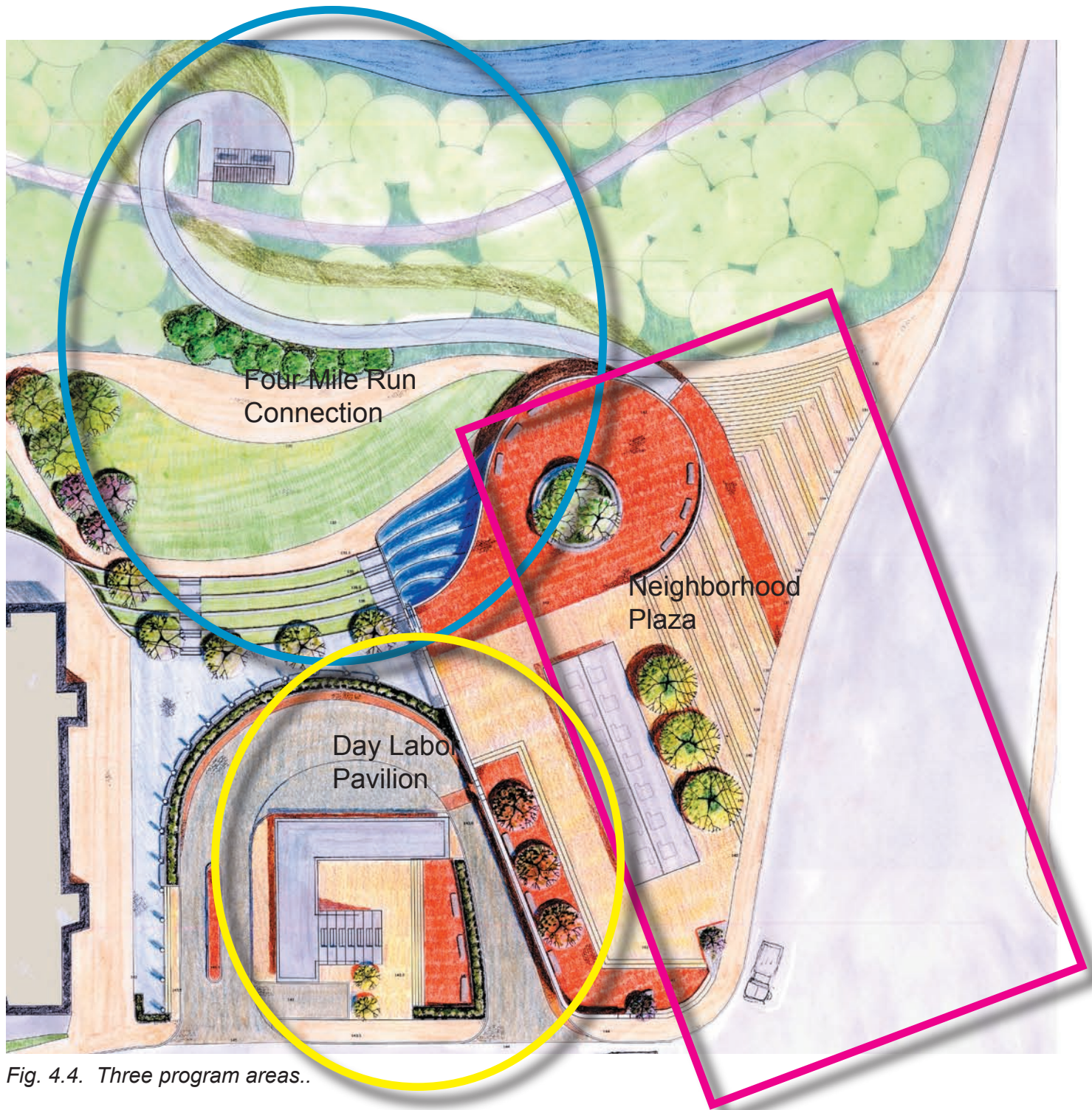


Fig. 4.4. Three program areas..

## Site Organization

The site can be viewed as having three parts based on the program list above. The Day Labor Pavilion is in the yellow circle, the Neighborhood Plaza in magenta, and the Four Mile Run Connection in blue.

The borders between these divisions are somewhat blurry, being more explicit in some sections depending on function and character. For example, the ten-foot high wall exists between the vehicular entrance to the day labor pavilion and the neighborhood plaza, but is perforated and breaks down between the stream connection and neighborhood plaza.

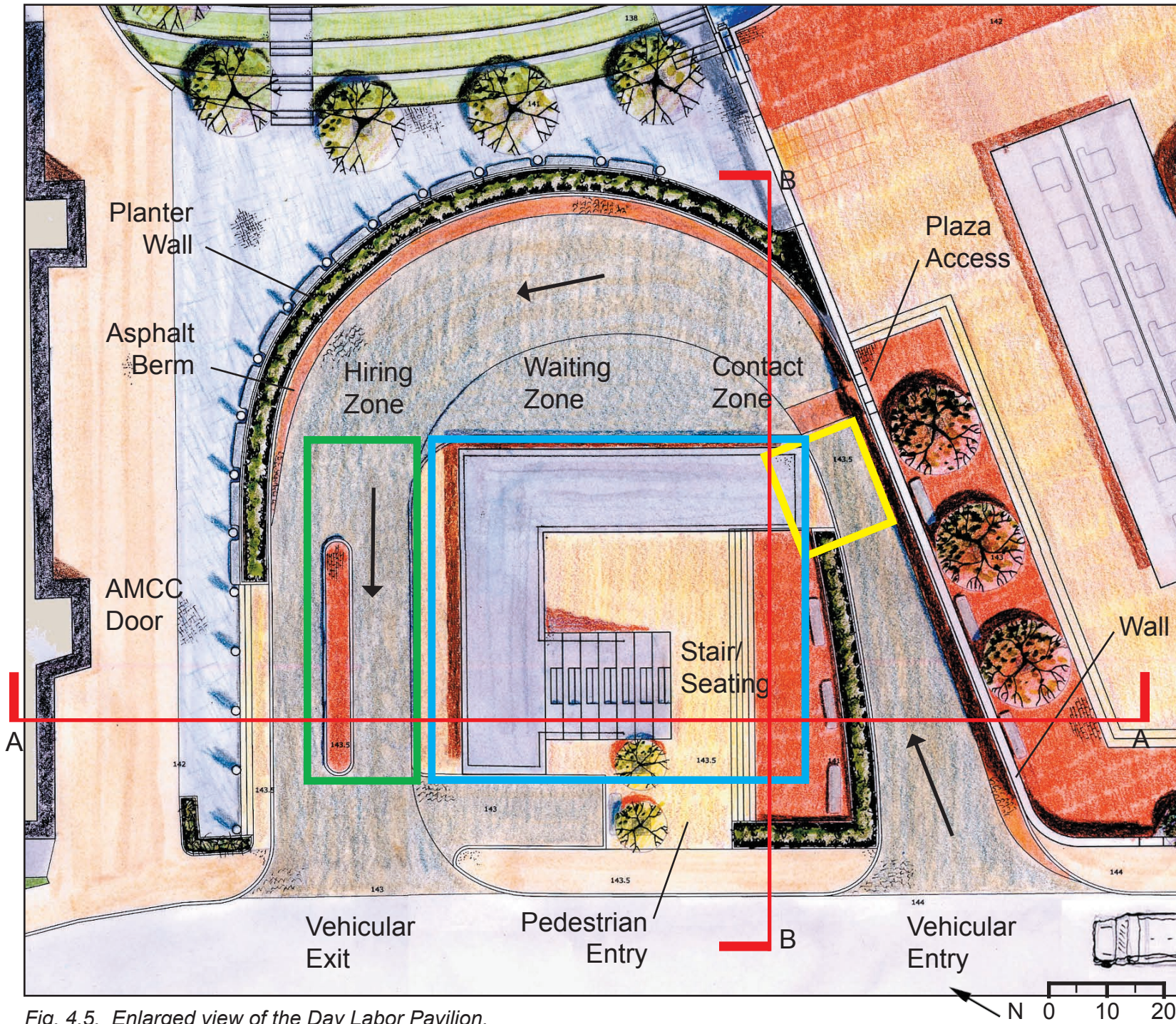


Fig. 4.5. Enlarged view of the Day Labor Pavilion.

## Day Labor Pavilion

This section of the design relies on a balance between pedestrian and vehicular interaction. Its design derives from the observations and findings from the case study. It has been designed to accommodate up to 100 laborers (based on personal space standards) and includes two public restrooms.

The most prominent feature is the pavilion shelter, in the shape of an “L” so as to link the three zones (Contact, Waiting, and Hiring) under one roof. The pavilion roof is designed to be used as an observation deck, reached by the large stair ramp, which doubles as bleacher-style seating. Contrasted with this high-lookout point is the “pit”, a low enclosure near the vehicular entry, where cooler afternoon temperatures prevail.

The three zones highlighted here guided the design. Vehicles approach the contact zone in yellow, where a narrow “choke point” impels them to slow and make first contact with the workers. This is where the employers convey their needs for the day: what kind of worker, for how long, for how much money, etc. The person at the contact zone (which could be an administrator or a day laborer) relates this information to the laborers in the waiting zone, which includes the observation deck, stair, and pit. Once it has been decided who will be hired, those laborers proceed to the hiring zone (in green), where the employer has arrived to stop and pick up the worker. The layout of the pavilion allows orderly negotiation of the day labor hiring process.

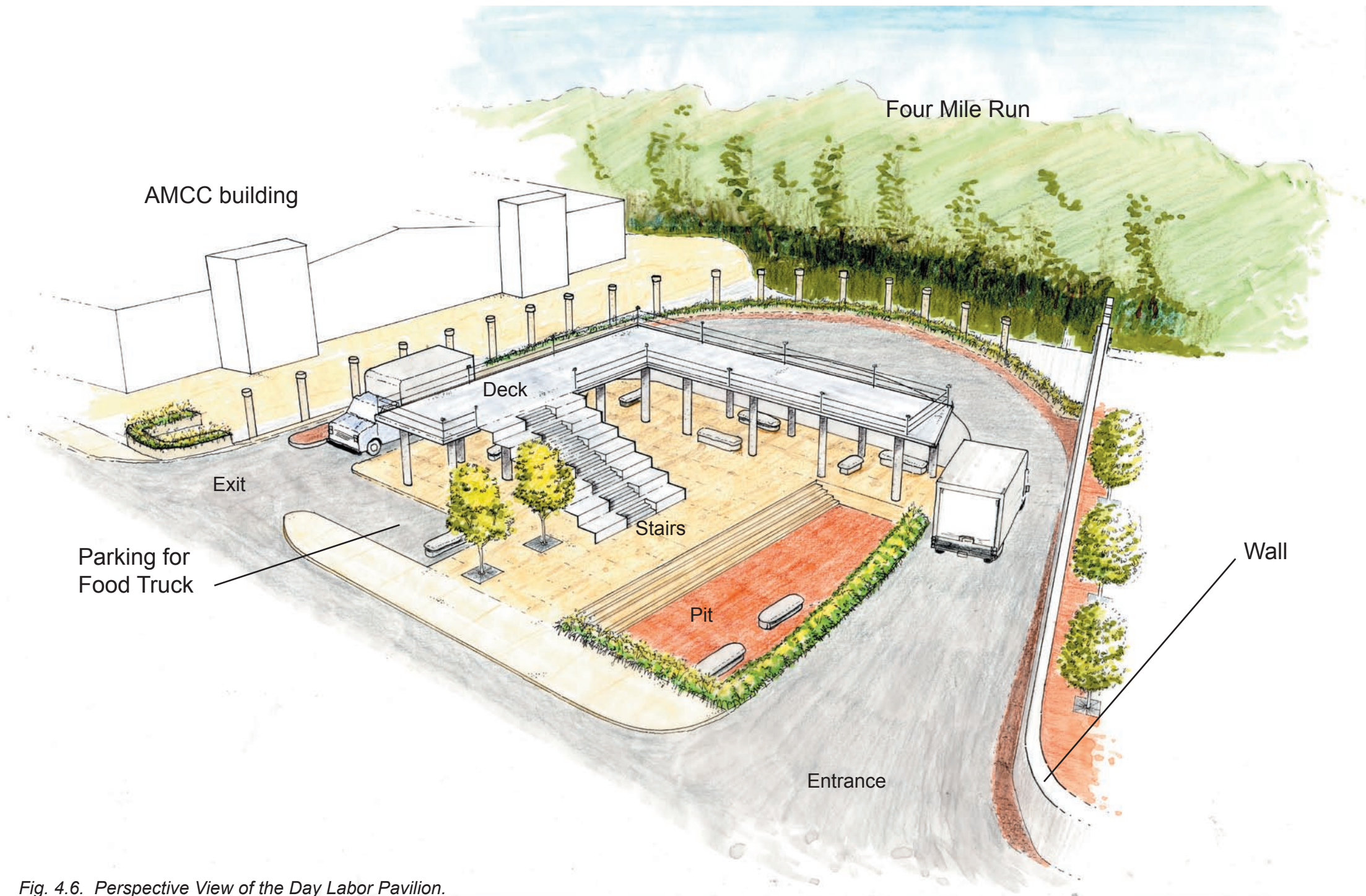
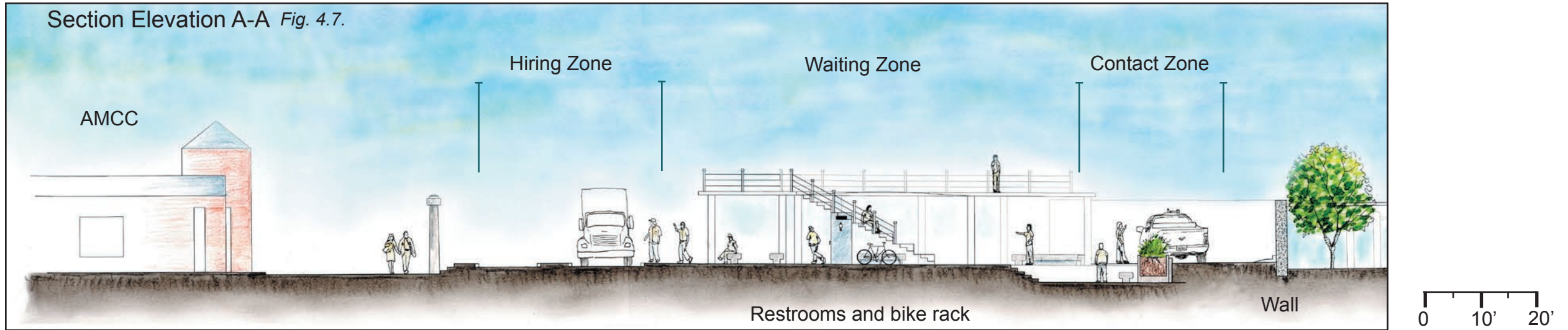


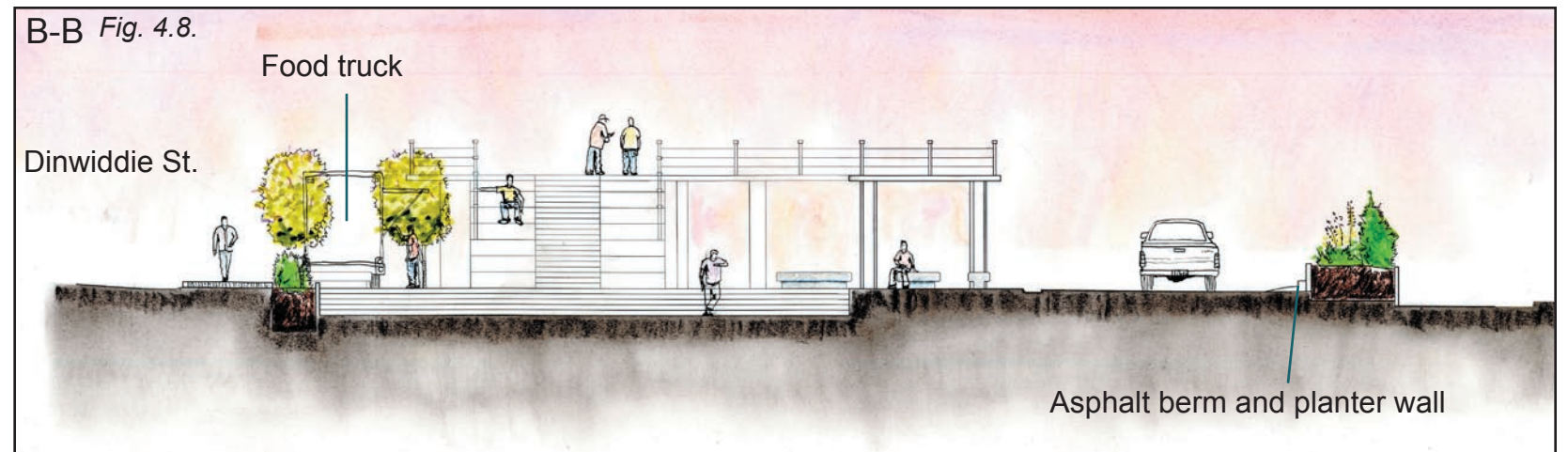
Fig. 4.6. Perspective View of the Day Labor Pavilion.





These two section-elevation drawings help show how the day labor pavilion works. The first two drawings in particular show how important elevation changes are to the pavilion. From the highest point, laborers have a great view and can see employers approaching. From the lowest point (the pit), they can see, but not approach the vehicles.

The contact zone was designed so that at most four laborers could stand at the same level and speak with approaching vehicles. The zone occurs at a kind of “choke point” for vehicular traffic. At the vehicular entry, the width of the asphalt is 23 feet. This generous width is to allow for large turning radii of bigger vehicles, such as moving vans. The width quickly narrows down to 8’-6” at the contact zone, which is still wider than the largest truck that would use the site. This narrowing is a means of forcing drivers to slow and stop at the contact zone, where a waiting laborer (or site



administrator) will speak with the driver to assess their needs for laborers.

From here, word travels back to the laborers in the waiting zone, the largest area of the day labor pavilion. The waiting zone features three levels of elevation: the ground level, basically even with the road and sidewalk, the pit, which is 2’-6” below ground level, and

the 10’-6” tall roof deck and stair.

The pit was designed for several reasons. First, it is a means of providing comfort, since it’s lower than the surrounding ground and shielded from the southern sun. Second, the stairs and level change create a distinct spatial separation from the ground level. The pit could be used for informal classes or speeches, or

just as another space for certain cliques to congregate. Third, it acts as a way to limit the rushing behavior by allowing visual contact only. The idea is to make it difficult for day laborers to rush since they would have to climb up and over the planter wall. (See Fig. 4.9) I felt that this measure was more effective than installing a fence or simply a screen of plantings, since visits to the SEEC site showed how most of the shrubs had been trampled from foot traffic.

The roof deck was included as a way to grant day laborers the long views they valued. I was essentially taking away these views by locating the pavilion halfway back in the site, away from the “100% corner” of S. Dinwiddie Street. This corner would be the natural place to congregate for day labor, but I hoped that by providing the amenity of a better view, day laborers would be more inclined to stay in the waiting zone.

Once they saw an employer they recognized, and/or received a request from someone in the contact zone, they would walk back down to ground level and proceed to the hiring zone. This zone was fairly straightforward, but it was important to make it as safe and functional as possible. I wanted to make it a fairly long straight line, so that vehicles could stack up three deep if necessary, and workers could line up along the long frontage. This was something they told me had been the standard practice before the days of the SEEC, and was perceived to be beneficial. So the hiring zone is 56 feet long, and is split into two roadways by a five-foot wide raised curb. This curb island gives

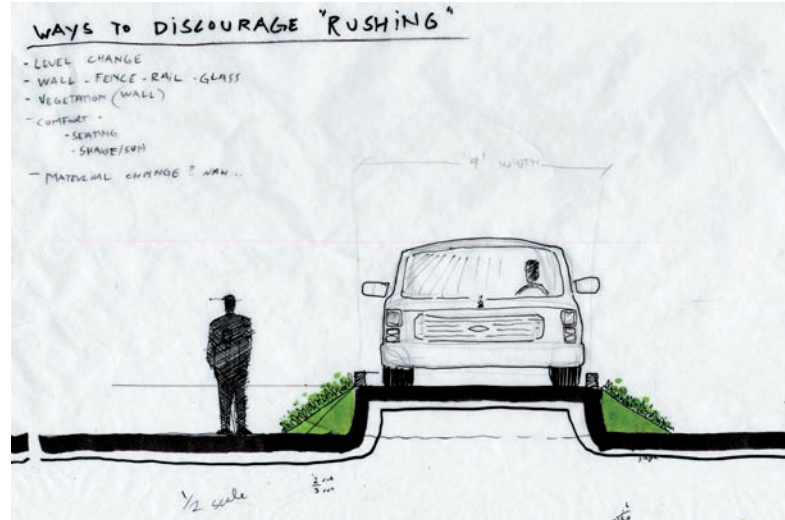


Fig. 4.9. Sketch exploration of method to discourage rushing behavior.

workers a safe place to stand while boarding vehicles from both sides, and is a means for vehicles to pass around the hiring zone if they decide not to hire day laborers.

Also included in the waiting zone are two bathrooms and a bike rack, tucked under the ramp stair to the roof deck. Thirteen permanent concrete benches are under cover for rainy days, leaving plenty of open space for removable seating if necessary. Two small ornamental trees mark the pedestrian entrance off of S. Dinwiddie Street, and one large parking spot is set aside for the food truck. Thus, the day labor pavilion provides the basic set of amenities necessary for the space’s unique demands, as well as being general enough to serve other users when day laborers are not there. Thought was also given to what happens to the day labor pavilion if and when this phenomenon ends.

The pavilion could easily function as an outdoor classroom or market structure, retaining its unique features as remnants of a place designed to meet specific social needs.

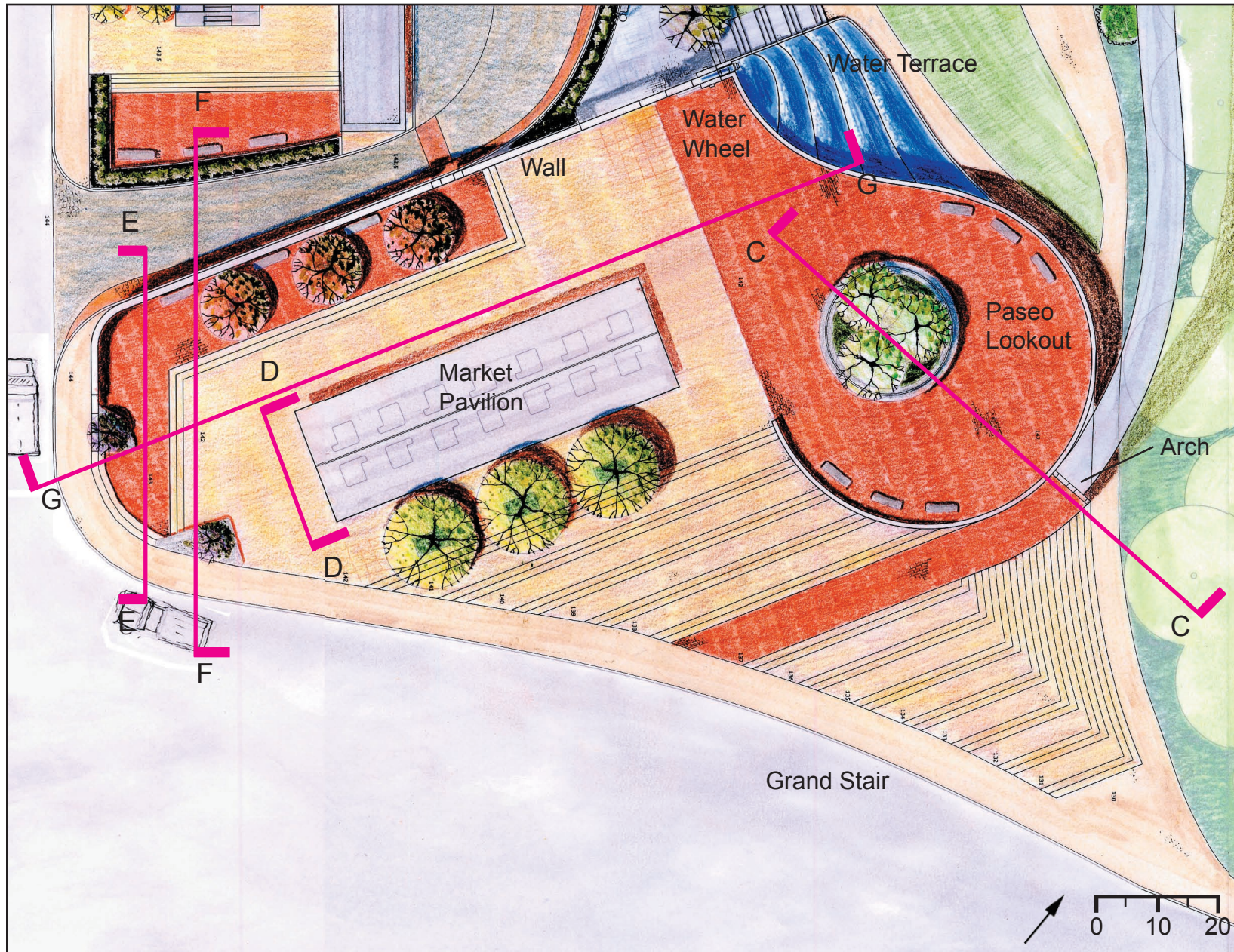


Fig. 4.10. Enlarged view of the Neighborhood Plaza.

## Neighborhood Plaza

This program element is the most visible to pedestrians and passing cars. It has to satisfy some complex requirements, including providing market space and introducing and signifying the neighborhood and setting.

The most significant structure in the neighborhood plaza is the Market Pavilion. (See elevation D-D.) Every effort was made to create a structure that would serve market users, while allowing for passive uses such as eating lunch and sitting with friends during non-market times. The structure itself is a polycarbonate roof canted at a 15 degree angle. (Runoff is collected in a central gutter linking the two halves.) Underneath the structure is a set of 14 poured-concrete tables. Each is roughly square shaped and 32 inches tall, with a lower indentation at one corner meant as a low bench on which vendors may sit.

The Grand Stair that leads pedestrians into the plaza is a very prominent feature, visible by pedestrians and passing cars. These were difficult to design, and I worked with many variations in layout, spacing, and riser/tread dimension to arrive at the final design. (See section-elevations H-H, I-I) I chose a very shallow riser of four inches, with the correspondingly long tread length of 18 inches. This was done to ease the transition, allowing for people of all stages of life to use the somewhat imposing stairway. I also wanted to create a condition where the stair could be used as seating and market spillover space. The inspiration for this idea

was the traditional market in Chichicastenango, Guatemala, where a long-running market occurs on the front stairs of the town church (Webb, 1990). The landing halfway up the stair leads through the arch and out to the stream corridor (described below).

The Paseo Lookout takes the shape of a circle and guides circulation around the large planter. Ample seating is provided on the planter and along the lookout wall. The view from up here is dramatic, looking down thirty feet into the stream corridor. The intention is to provide a natural circuit for people walking through the plaza. Walking from the market pavilion, users are rewarded with the lookout view, which is hidden by the circular planter.

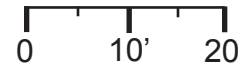
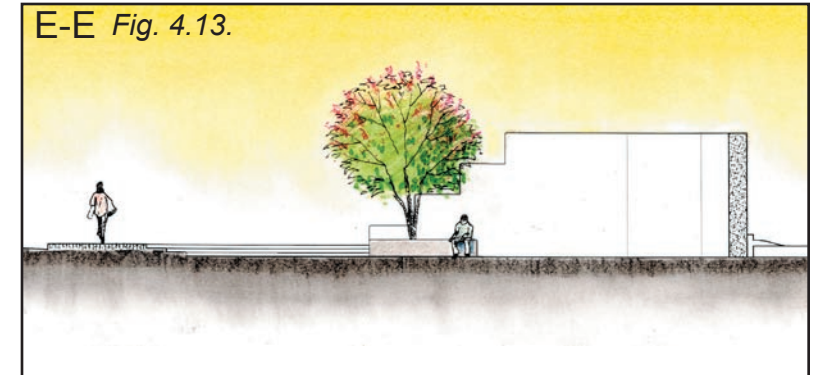
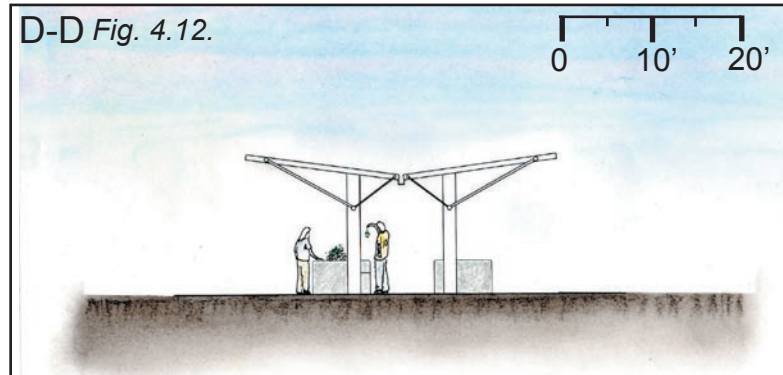
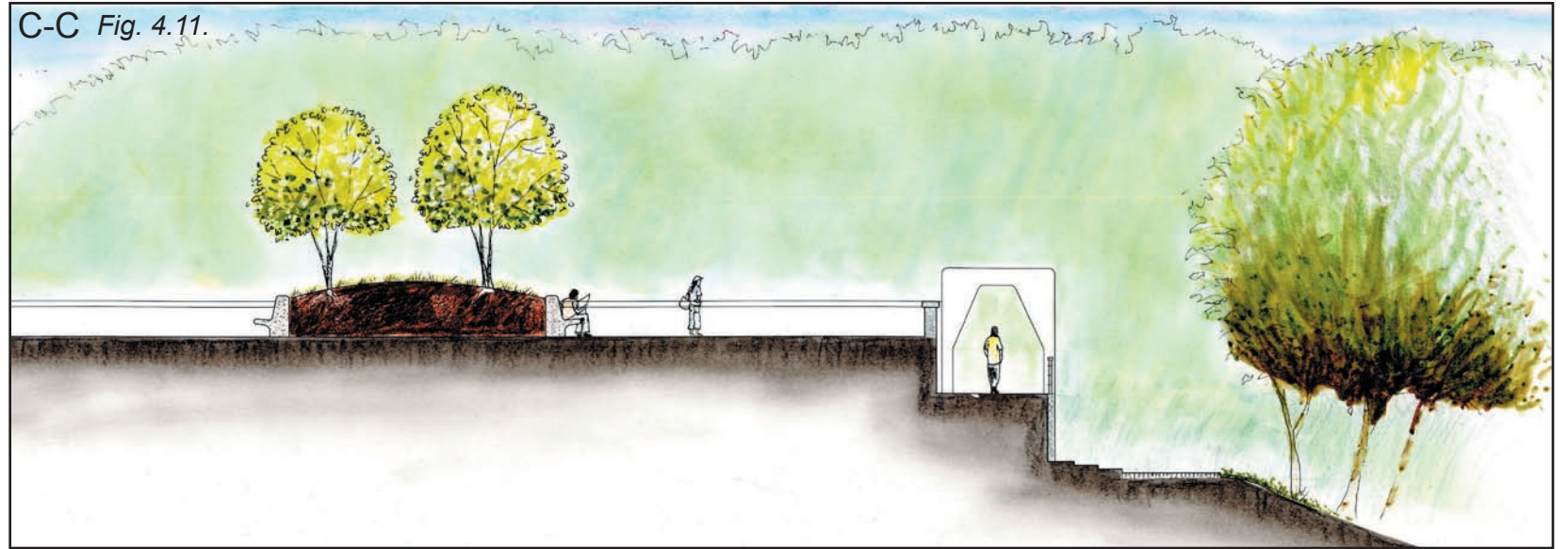


Fig. 4.14.

G-G Fig. 4.15.

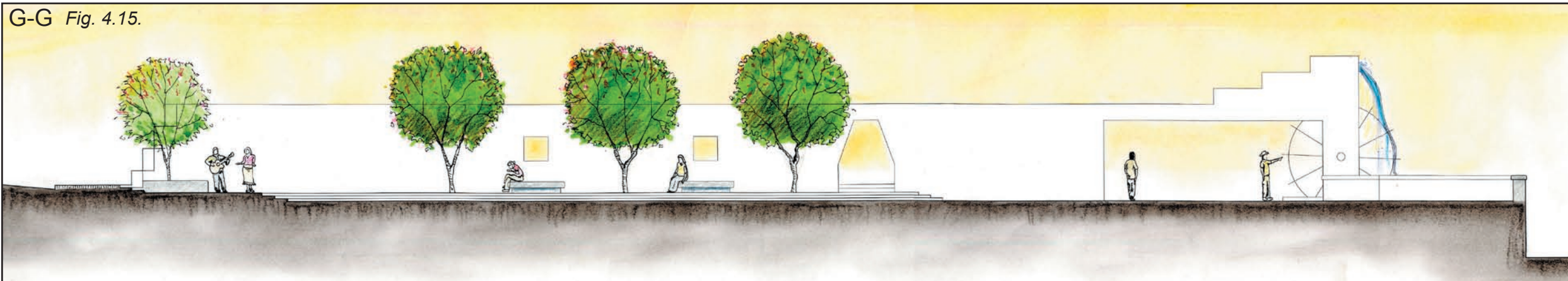
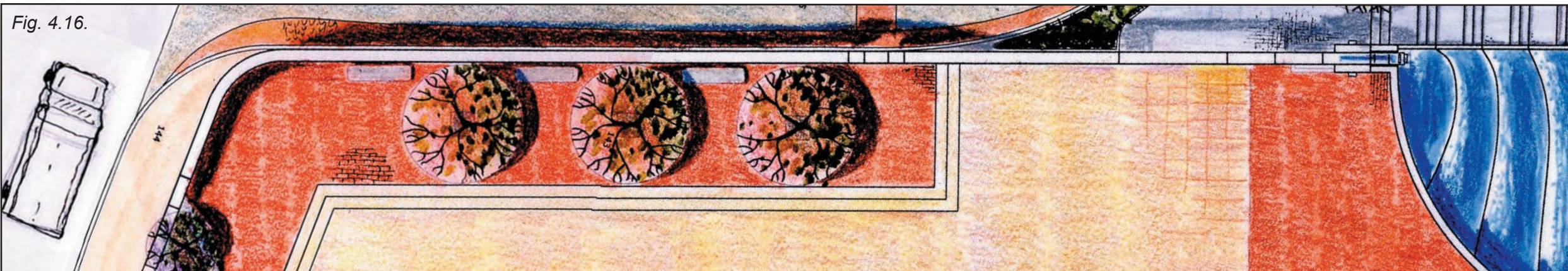


Fig. 4.16.



The Wall is central to the design, and represents the most direct application of the concept of transformation. The Wall starts by stepping up from a small tree planter/bench, is perforated by two windows and an archway at the Day Labor choke point, then a large opening which leads to the Community Center, and finally culminates in a tall water wheel fountain. (See section-elevation G-G.) The wall provides a backdrop for informal performances and separates the most conflicting aspects of the site from each other (vehicles and pedestrians) while allowing for linkages between

the neighborhood plaza and Four Mile Run connection. The water wheel occurs at the functional heart of the site, where the three areas meet and intermingle. It directly references the historical element of the Arlington Mill wheel, and acts as a symbol of transformation. (See Fig. 4.17)

The wall's stark white color recalls the stucco and plaster found in many Latin American cities, and will be used as a canvas for murals. This practice, a long-standing facet of *barriology*, builds affiliation and identification among public space users.

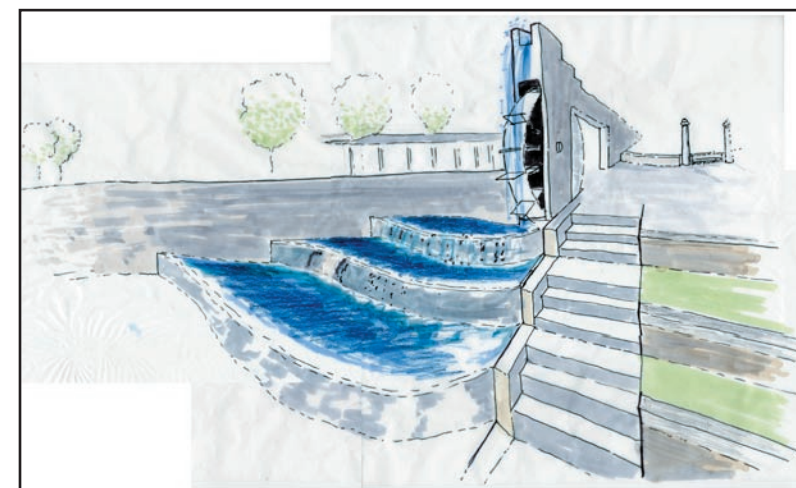


Fig. 4.17. Sketch of water wheel and water terrace.



## Four-Mile Run Connection

The final program element is the linkage between Labor Heights Plaza and the existing Four-Mile Run Corridor. There are two major features: the skywalk and the amphitheater.

The skywalk is an elevated steel walkway that can be accessed from either the Grand Stair or a staircase directly under the skywalk observation deck which connects it to the existing Four Mile Run trails. The skywalk is a dramatic way to visually connect the plaza with the stream corridor, as it maintains a grade level with the sidewalk access as the ground drops away below it. This puts the observation deck at 30 feet above the ground, affording a breathtaking view of the stream and bridge (See Elevation H-H and Fig. 4.19).

The amphitheater takes its curvilinear geometry from the stream meanders. Plantings are somewhat less formal, and a large lawn remains open and available for flexible recreation. The pathway from the sidewalk widens to 20 feet, allowing plenty of room for performance groups to put on a concert or play. Plenty of seating is provided by a terraced grass stair, which steps down the wall in six-foot-wide landings. (See Elevation I-I).

The most dynamic element in the amphitheater is the water terrace, which catches the water spilling from the water wheel described in the previous section. Water gathers and spills down a series of five pools, which get larger in area as they descend to ground level. This feature would provide a pleasant source of



Fig. 4.18. Plan of Four-Mile-Run Connection.

white noise, and a great place for kids and adults to dip their feet in the water and cool off. (See Elevation I-I.)

The design also includes a new trail connection between the new parking lot and the existing trail. The trail was located in this spot due to the steep elevation of the stream corridor; this was the most feasible location that would require the least amount of disturbance to the forest.

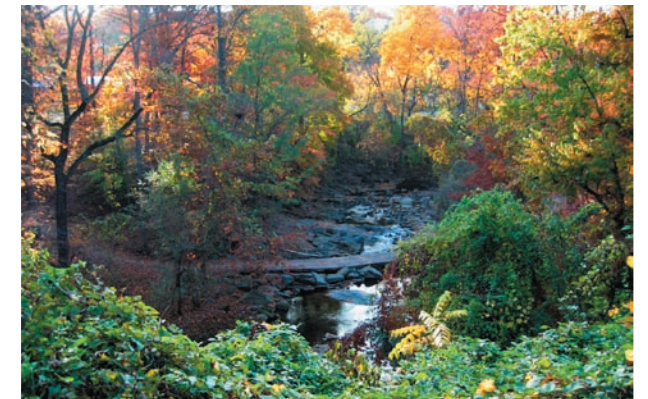
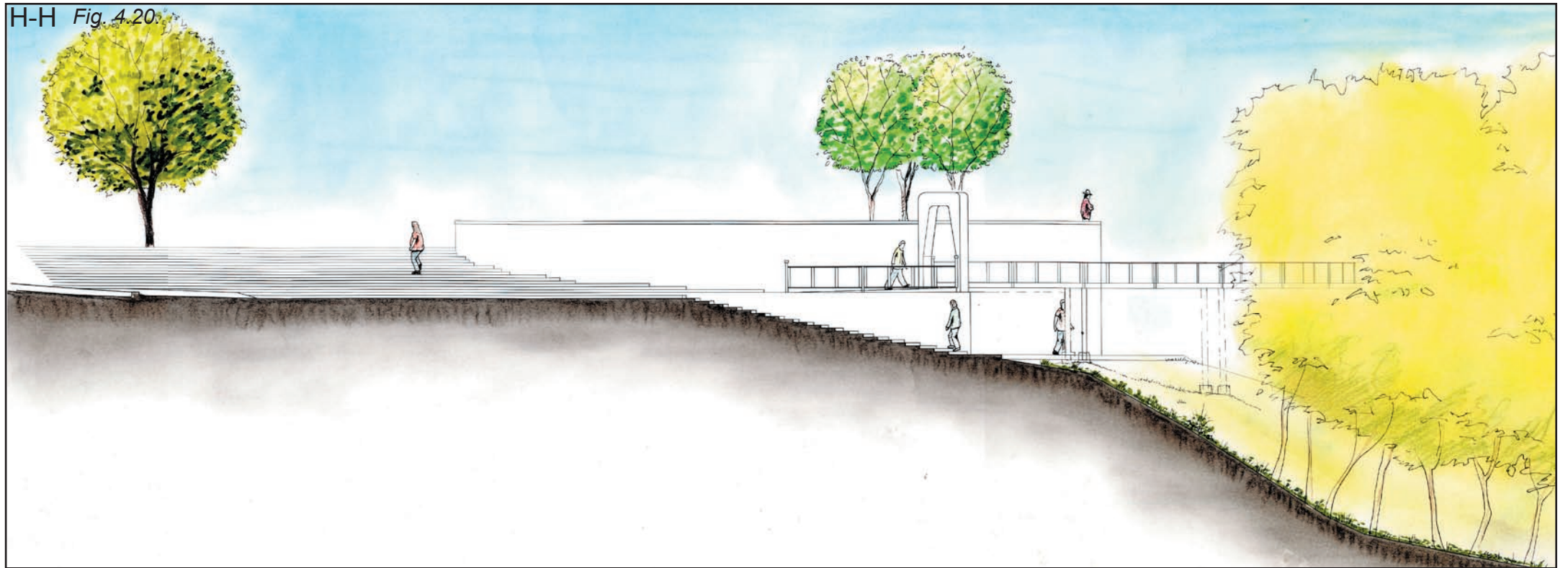


Fig. 4.19 - Photo giving an idea of view from the skywalk.

H-H Fig. 4.20.



0 10' 20'

I-I Fig. 4.21.

