Healing Through Movement
A Support Center for Bereaved Parents
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Guadalupe Tassara

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment to the Degree of

Master of Architecture
in Architecture

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Path, Edge, Threshold, Balance, Movement, Healing, Support Center, Bereaved Parents

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“A bridge of silver wings stretches from the dead ashes of an unforgiving nightmare to the jeweled vision of a life started anew”

Aberjhani, The River of Winged Dreams
Abstract

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My personal experience with the loss of my sons inspired me to consider how parents who lose children to cancer, accidents, or other terrible things are able to deal with the loss. Where did they go for support? How did they learn to cope with the loss for a lifetime? As I dealt with my loss, I went to therapy and opted for a prescription-free treatment. I dove deeper into yoga and meditation and I recognized that therapy was helping but was not enough. The only thing that truly made me feel better was by physically moving my body. I felt some satisfaction from recognizing this, yet I felt alone on my journey. Time passed and one afternoon during my weekly practice of yoga, I had a pivotal Matsyasana (fish pose) with the crown of my head submerged in the shoreline of St. Augustine Beach. It became clear to me that I needed to use my thesis to create a healing place to unify bereaved parents. I desired it, and knew that others around me did as well. That sunny afternoon the idea of a holistic support center was conceived.
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In May of 2009, I lost twins due to a preterm birth. A couple of years later, I was diagnosed with infertility and was devastated by the news. This coupled with other major life changing events made my original thoughts for my thesis completely irrelevant. Desperately searching for a new topic, I went away for a weekend to refresh my mind and came home with a new idea for my thesis. It never dawned on me, until I was deep in the process of my thesis, that I was confronting my biggest fears and deepest wounds. It’s no surprise that developing ideas for a building that could encourage healing through movement, healed me emotionally and physically in the process. The final result of my thesis was not just a building to prove an architectural idea, it was a miracle baby boy, Maximiliano.

My goal is to for you to experience my concepts, drawings, collages etcetera as I have, weaving in and out of places, thoughts, frustrations, never in a linear fashion. I encourage you to follow the dotted path of my journey through all five parts of the book; the introduction, conceptual ideas, site analysis, exploration of movement / building anatomy and the final drawings for the support center.

The hard copy of the book was designed to make you move out of your seat. While reading it, you will need some space to fully embrace the book. Ideally, all the parts can be hung on a wall in a straight line. On the contrary, if you are reading a digital copy, you will not get the same experience but I hope in both cases, when you are finished, you dedicate some time to moving your limbs, feeling your body, and pondering whatever thoughts are left in your mind.
Folding & Display Diagram

Part II
Part III - a
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Acknowledgements

The WAAC transformed me, it healed me, it was the place where I escaped from my realities and dove into the ideas in my head about what architecture could and should be for people. For this opportunity, I am eternally grateful. I want to express my deepest appreciation to the WAAC, specifically to my committee for having the grace, patience, and knowledge to help guide me on my path. Marcia, your openness and ability to always give me inspiration even when I was going in endless circles. Paul, your wealth of knowledge and sensitivity on the subject was something I always looked forward too. Susan, thank you for always pushing and demanding. At times, I asked myself; “why did I add this woman?” but I knew that without your challenging questions my thesis would have never resulted the way it did. Jaan, although we took a break from our conversations, in the end it was as if you had lived in my building and knew where the weakness was, solving them at a moment’s glance, you are truly amazing. Many thanks to all of you.

Thank you to my WAAC family and friends, Caro, Lola, Nico, Heba, Alanna, Allie, John, Mili, Navid, Ani, Azar for giving a place to sleep, shower, putting me back together, for sharing with me a plethora of ideas, for late night chats and inspirations, for sharing your precious time with me and keeping me centered in all the chaos. thank you!!! Antonio, there aren’t enough words to thank you. I hope that every morning, when you look in my eyes, you know just how grateful I am for having met you at the wacky WAAC.

Thank you to my family and friends outside the WAAC for supporting me and putting up with my Insane mood swings, crazy schedules, and constant need to be talking about this project.....Ma & Pa, Facundo, Andy, Kendra, Bridge, David, Ronly, Jen, Jackie, Oscar, John, Archer, Xan, Brandi, Torry, Pete, Alieca, Alli, and my Trader Joe’s family I could not have survived without your love and support. Muchisimas gracias!!! Namaste to my spiritual and yoga family for sharing with me invaluable asanas and showing me how to trust my body in the process.

To my boys, Justis & Mateo, thank you for teaching me the power of love. This chapter called “thesis” is a result of your short and powerful teachings. You both live forever in my heart.


Image Credits

image 14, page 7 - photograph, Tim Bermingham

image 16, page 7 - photograph, Tim Bermingham


image 31, page 17 - google maps underlay, https://www.google.com/maps/place/Jones+Point+Park/@38.7959635,-77.0351242,15z/


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Path

As my exploration began, it became clear that I needed to define a set of tactics to follow and a set of concepts to define and organize my building throughout the process. I started by asking “can the path’s material influence your train of thought?” I quickly realized I can. Through the study of traditional Japanese Gardens, it became apparent that there are different material combinations with all types of shapes, sizes and textures (image 2). I learned how to better understand the user’s journey on a path and how the journey is affected by the material. For example, you must consider your next step if you are walking on a cable stone surface (image 4). Conversely, the thought is necessary while walking on an uneven natural trail (image 5).

It was therefore important to consider the physical material of the path but equally important to consider the spiritual ideas of a path. I reflected on how the material could relate to the spiritual ideas of path in regards to the human journey. Sometimes our chosen path and our destined path do not coincide and it is difficult to get back on track. Therefore, it was important that the paths, walkways, trails, etc. have different widths and materials to allow variable levels of refined physical focus (images 6 & 7). Beyond the physical path and on a larger scale, the ability to connect to a larger system of trails for extended walks or vigorous exercise was also important.

Balance & Movement

Upon my first visit to the site of Jones Point Park located in Alexandria, Virginia, the space under the Woodrow Wilson Bridge spoke to me. Although it is now mostly a parking lot, it left an emotional threshold that I equated it to a result of the echo from the cars above sounding like ocean waves, the view of the Potomac in the distance, and even possibly the people moving around the cars above sounding like ocean waves. Upon my second visit, I was greeted by the Potomac River’s muddy and marshy blurred edge that is constantly changing. Thus this edge would somehow produce a euphoric and peaceful feeling. I equated it to a result of the echo from the rain above sounding like ocean waves, the view of the Potomac in the distance, and even possibly the people moving around the trail. For whatever reason, this simple parking lot transforms to a serene place between two worlds. This became the threshold and gateway into my building (image 9). I considered that it was important to not be welcomed bylawned parents when taking their first step towards life as a childless parent. The bridge became a representation of the emotional threshold these parents must conquer in order to sustain. This notion about crossing over an enormous emotional threshold became an idea that was manifested into a physical form. I envisioned a path leading to a decision of where one needs to physically pick up their feet up to cross over and enter the space (images 8 & 11).

I studied different edge conditions varying in height and proximity to the river (image 10). The site itself has a few different edge conditions: land to water, from city to park, residential to river, and for my work most interesting to me was the Potomac River’s muddy and marshy blurred edge that is constantly changing. Thus this edge would have to be studied vertically and horizontally, as my exploration began, it became clear that I needed to define a set of tactics to follow and a set of concepts to define and organize my building throughout the process. I started by asking “can the path’s material influence your train of thought?” I quickly realized I can. Through the study of traditional Japanese Gardens, it became apparent that there are different material combinations with all types of shapes, sizes and textures (image 2). I learned how to better understand the user’s journey on a path and how the journey is affected by the material. For example, you must consider your next step if you are walking on a cable stone surface (image 4). Conversely, the thought is necessary while walking on an uneven natural trail (image 5).

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II. Woodrow Wilson Bridge

A. Laid down on the Potomac River from Theodore Roosevelt Island to Maryland

B. The new building location was anchored to the site (image 19, page 17)

C. The Mount Vernon trail runs under the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, facing east towards Maryland (image 26)

D. Jones Point Park in Old Town Alexandria was selected as the site (image 21)

E. The site analysis searched for new locations for building (image 32)

F. Study of site section illustrating the idea of a bathing pool on site (image 33)

G. Floor plan of new building placement along historic edge (image 34)

III. Site Analysis

A. Site analysis documented the site and started collaging my conceptual ideas

B. The Mt. Vernon Trail is 2 miles long and extends the Mount Vernon estate. It connects to the Custis, Potomac, Heritage, Rock Creek, and Four Mile Run trails which extend along the Potomac River from Theodore Roosevelt Island to the southernmost tip of the land (image 31)

C. The park happens to lay within an area that has a 1% flood chance (image 35)

D. The new building location supported my conceptual ideas on the trail within the site (image 36)

E. The new building location captures my conceptual ideas of being on the bank of the park. The historic maps revealed that the land had drastically changed over the years. The use of concrete as the main supporting system was influenced by the historic use of concrete in the area. Although my building was now strongly anchored to the site, there was still the issue of water on the site and how this would affect the foundation of the building (image 36)

F. I envisioned my building to contain, such as subterranean pools and saunas and concrete retaining walls with elevated entry. Nonetheless, I had a hard time letting go of some spaces I had included in the drawing (image 35, below)

G. The historic maps revealed that the land had drastically changed over the years. By connecting to the historic edge, the outline of underground creeks, and outer edge of the marshland I was able to locate my building (image 35)

H. The new building location supports my conceptual ideas on the trail within the site, there was still the issue of water on the site and how this would affect the foundation of the building (image 36)

I. I envisioned my building to contain such as subterranean pools and saunas and concrete retaining walls with elevated entry. Nonetheless, I had a hard time letting go of some spaces I had included in the drawing (image 35, below)

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K. I had a hard time letting go of some spaces I had included in the drawing (image 35, below)

L. I had a hard time letting go of some spaces I had included in the drawing (image 35, below)

M. I had a hard time letting go of some spaces I had included in the drawing (image 35, below)
Part III - b

Site Analysis

And I wished for so long... Cannot stay.
All the precious moments... Cannot stay.
It's not like wings have fallen... Cannot stay.
But still something's missing... Cannot say.
Holding hands of daughters and sons,
And their faiths are falling down.
I have wished for so long...
How I wish for you today.
Will I walk the long road? Cannot stay...
There's no need to say goodbye...
All the friends and family.
All the memories going round.
I have wished for so long.
How I wish for you today.
And the wind keeps rollin',
And the sky keeps turning gray.
And the sun is set...
The sun will rise another day.
I have wished for so long...
How I wish for you today.
I have wished for so long...
How I wish for you today.
Will I walk the long road?
We all walk the long road..

Long Road,
Eddie Vedder

You picked up your heart
And made straight for the hills
And that day I've not forgot
All the while I've loved you still
And I won't stop
'Til my heart from my chest drops
And you leave me no choice
But to wait for the water to rise
In streets of stone you stood
Like a light in darker times
And we all did what we could
But our failure closed our eyes
And I won't stop
'Til my heart from my chest drops
And you leave me no choice
But to wait for the water
To wait for the water to rise
And I won't stop
'Til my heart from my chest drops
And you leave me no choice
To wait for the water
To wait for the water
To wait for the water
I won't stop
'Til my heart from my chest drops
And you leave me no choice
But to wait for the water
To wait for the water
To wait for the water
To wait for the water
To wait for the water
To wait for the water

Wait for the Water, Ballroom Thieves

Time it took us
To where the water was
That's what the water gave me
And time goes quicker
Between the two of us
Oh, my love, don't forsake me
Take what the water gave me
Lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow
Pockets full of stones
Lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow
And oh, poor Atlas
The world's a beast of a burden
You've been holding on a long time
And all this longing
And the ships are left to rust
That's what the water gave us
So lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow
Pockets full of stones
Lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow

'Cause they took your loved ones
But returned them in exchange for you
But would you have it any other way?
Would you have it any other way?
You could have it any other way
'Cause she's a cruel mistress
And the bargain must be made
But oh, my love, don't forget me
When I let the water take me
So, lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow
Pockets full of stones
Lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow
Lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow
Pockets full of stones
Lay me down
Let the only sound
Be the overflow
or "pods" connected by a single raised path to ensure that it around it. The building became a series of smaller structures that comes and goes with the tides, I realized that my building was on the ground plane running between the pods, closer to allow the user to engage more with their body awareness. It was important to me to define the structure or "bones" of the building early on so I played with many different shapes to stabilize in balancing positions (image 51 below). I needed to poses to the framework of the building that things started me some trouble and it wasn’t until I associated yoga poses with the human body in yoga poses. I needed to bring that into consideration when designing the building to ensure that the architecture supported the practice of yoga. The main building system would become a refined series of structural systems. a. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and cable railing at open path between pods. b. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and beam inside pods. c. tapered glue laminate overhangs. There will be a few secondary stepping stone paths created to allow the user to move from one pod to the next and to create a space to safely practice. The entry garden is an important aspect of the building as it is the first thing that visitors encounter. There are a total of six pods containing; an entry space, a therapy room, ten private dwelling units, a dining space, a therapy room, and a dining space. There is a small reception space and a studio for the director. The entry space is the first pod a visitor encounters from the northern end closest to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and the parking lot. The exit would be on the southern views of the river. It was thought that one would go from the entry space up (images 58-61 page 39 & image 63 page 42). There are a total of six pods containing; an entry space, a therapy room, ten private dwelling units, a dining space, a therapy room, and a dining space. There is a small reception space and a studio for the director. The entry space is the first pod a visitor encounters from the northern end closest to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and the parking lot. The exit would be on the southern views of the river. It was thought that one would go from the entry space up (images 58-61 page 39 & image 63 page 42). The main building system would become a refined series of structural systems. a. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and beam inside pods. b. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and cable railing at open path between pods. c. tapered glue laminate overhangs. There will be a few secondary stepping stone paths created to allow the user to move from one pod to the next and to create a space to safely practice. The entry garden is an important aspect of the building as it is the first thing that visitors encounter. There are a total of six pods containing; an entry space, a therapy room, ten private dwelling units, a dining space, a therapy room, and a dining space. There is a small reception space and a studio for the director. The entry space is the first pod a visitor encounters from the northern end closest to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and the parking lot. The exit would be on the southern views of the river. It was thought that one would go from the entry space up (images 58-61 page 39 & image 63 page 42). The main building system would become a refined series of structural systems. a. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and beam inside pods. b. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and cable railing at open path between pods. c. tapered glue laminate overhangs. There will be a few secondary stepping stone paths created to allow the user to move from one pod to the next and to create a space to safely practice. The entry garden is an important aspect of the building as it is the first thing that visitors encounter. There are a total of six pods containing; an entry space, a therapy room, ten private dwelling units, a dining space, a therapy room, and a dining space. There is a small reception space and a studio for the director. The entry space is the first pod a visitor encounters from the northern end closest to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and the parking lot. The exit would be on the southern views of the river. It was thought that one would go from the entry space up (images 58-61 page 39 & image 63 page 42). The main building system would become a refined series of structural systems. a. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and beam inside pods. b. round concrete columns, glue laminated post and cable railing at open path between pods. c. tapered glue laminate overhangs.
that hang from the beams overhead (image 65 & 66 below)

place to watch the sun set on the river from oversized swings

open views to the west. The viewing platform is an ideal

faces the park on the east and a viewing platform that has

fireplace and lounge area to encourage its visitors to socialize


Part IV.b

Exploration of Movement

Building Academy

The bathrooms are meant to be an open feeling with

access in the shower. Some lie in direct view to the

travels of the body, and how our body

perform on it. It can lead and support us to surpass difficult

intentions for my thesis. I learned that a simple path has

engages it, has the ability to connect or disconnect us from

emotionally. The material of the path, and how our body

times and push us to be healthier both physically and

completely fulfilled with my understanding that architecture

itself deeply into the land to stand up straight and support the

rooted on the site, that it became part of the site. It buried

also be pushed to an unimaginable edge and be able to

outside world and maybe to a fellow visitor practicing next

encourage the user to connect to the scenery outside and

marks in the shower. The dark and light studios are

separate yoga studios, a dark and a light yoga studio,

to them. While the studios lay on either side of the path,

times and push us to be healthier both physically and


9. viewing deck & laundry folding/drying rack.

1. laundry room  2. typical private toilet & shower  3. solarium (later to be a sun deck)  4. soaking tub - enlarged floor plan of bathing pod.

3. soaking tub with a sunning deck on the eastern side (image 70-

bathing pod study of co-ed bathrooms. The pod contains within it all activities related to cleaning including

necessary storage for the guest’s belongings is built into the

bed. This again was intentional to encourage guest interact

of the bed. There is no seating in the room other than the


image 64, page 43

image 65, page 44

image 67 - section through early study of dwelling pod, illustrating sleeping spaces and cross ventilation. The red zones in the center illustrate the public path on the ground level and private path on the top.

4. queen bed  5. front porch  6. private path  7. observation platform  8. therapy pod - enlarged floor plan of dwelling pods & therapy space.

Small and quaint with only a queen sized bed, hung from a bathing pod in between them. My goal was to encourage

broken into two clusters of five dwelling pods with the

Past the therapy room, are the dwelling pods which are
can also be used as a common living room or reading space or for group therapy. When the therapy room is not in use, it

Just beyond the dining space is a single therapy room


image 72

image 70 - section through early study of bathing pod, illustrating the height and the necessary storage for the guest's belongings is built into the bed. This again was intentional to encourage guest interaction of the bed. There is no seating in the room other than the


Part IV.b

Exploration of Movement

Building Academy

45

49

77

4

5

2
Part V - a

A Support Center for Bereaved Parents

1. viewing deck     2.  registration    3. director's office  4.  waiting area  5.  Private path

8. Private Path


5.


Section ii
not to scale

Section gg
not to scale

Section ee
not to scale

Section ii
not to scale
Looking Southeast at entry ramp
Looking Northwest from public dock
Looking South from public path at Entry pod
Looking north at Yoga pod

Ground Floor Plan
East Elevation
First Floor Plan