Taking Root
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This thesis seeks to investigate how architecture can utilize different techniques to introduce people to landscape, specifically those who have an uncomfortable relationship with nature due to inequalities in access to quality green space, a cultural distancing from nature due to historical acts of violence, or an increasingly urban and work-focused lifestyle. A proposed Visitor Center in Rock Creek Park, in Washington, DC, acts as a slow transition from park to city and back again, breaking the landscape into more digestible pieces before putting it back together as a whole. The building’s strategy for introduction can be broken up into two categories, what the building reveals to visitors, and what it tells visitors. The building reveals the surrounding landscape in a rhythmic way of spaces of rest and spaces of activity, utilizing entrances on different levels, screened views, and glass corners to frame the landscape and topography. It is also designed to reveal the power of the environment, the sun, the rain, and the snow, in weathering the materials and creating a dynamic appearance and exposing the ways in which water runs through the site. In addition to showing the park, the building also is responsible for educating visitors about the important cultural and natural history of the park. The architecture supports the education of visitors in a flexible and non-technological way, using a variety of surfaces to display information to be seen and touched, to encourage the slowing down of minds and bodies to facilitate the transition from the bustling city to the restorative nature of the park. The proposed building utilizes design concepts present in nature and integrates them into the architecture of the building, to create an introductory experience into the landscape that touches the senses and the mind, preparing the visitors to enjoy the park.
Secondly, the visitor center reveals the landscape through the adoption of techniques found in nature that facilitate a powerful introduction to a place, and formalizes them into the architecture of the building and experience of the visitors. The techniques to promote familiarity with the park include controlling the pace with a series of long, curving paths and embracing the rhythm of the topography with ramps and the seasons with a pattern of spaces for activity and rest, teasing with glimpses through the tree-like screen and through the glass gills, framing the view into the park. In addition, the building strives to amplify liminal space, a threshold between the old and new, architecture and nature, which exists in the glass corner gills. These corners jutting into the park, lit by a skylight, and fed fresh air by automated ventilation louveres, allows for apertures to have an intimate experience, in a way that really exists outside of the building, but in a way that provides the comfort of familiarity and not being quite all the way in nature either.

Finally, the building also is responsible for telling the visitors what they need to know by educating them on the important cultural and natural history of the park. The architecture supports the education of visitors in a flexible and non-technological way, using a variety of surfaces to display information to be seen and touched, to encourage slowing down of minds and bodies to facilitate the transition from the bustling city to the restorative nature of the park.

The proposed building utilizes its interaction with the physical environment, design concepts present in nature to reveal the landscape, and conveys information in a way and pace that is reflective of the way time moves in the park. All three strategies combine to create an introductory experience into the landscape that touches the sensate and the mind, preparing the visitors to enjoy and appreciate Rock Creek Park.
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WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE IN EXPERIENCING A LANDSCAPE?
PART I
The Background
For nearly all of human history, our homes were in nature and we inhabited the landscape. However there has been rapid change in urbanization patterns - as of 2017, it was estimated the 82% of the US population was urban. This increase in people living in cities has been accompanied by a cultural loss of connection to, and familiarity with nature. The average American spends 93% of their time inside. The average American child spends just half as much time as their parents did playing outside, and only 26% of them say they play outside every day. Richard Louv coined the term “nature deficient disorder” to describe the ailments of not experiencing the out of doors. The research that has been done to quantify what we are losing by being inside, and what we stand to gain by immersing ourselves in nature is startling. For children it promotes imagination, builds confidence, gets them active, increases curiosity, and reduces stress and fatigue and their chance of developing myopia. For adults, it boosts the immune system, reduces the risk of diabetes, inflammation, cardiovascular disease, premature death, preterm birth, stress and its associated hormone cortisol, and high blood pressure. One researcher found that a leisurely forest walk yielded a 12.4% decrease in cortisol, 7% decrease in sympathetic nervous system, 1.4 decrease in blood pressure, and 5.8% decrease in heart rate. Time in nature improved short-term memory, focus, creativity, generosity, and even empathy. This quantifies that experiencing nature is more than enjoyable: it is important for physical health and mental well-being. And for that reason it is critical that everyone have access to safe, quality green spaces. Studies have shown that in 10 major cities in the US, white residents with a higher income and higher education have the best access to quality green space. This is an environmental justice issue. In addition to access, minorities and low-income people are less likely to visit nature and be comfortable there because of a history of racism, segregation, and exclusion.
There were two important characters in this story, who were far ahead of their times in the relationship between human and nature and how that was manifested in bodies and minds.

One of these characters was John Muir. He left an unhappy home, and a nearly blinding factory accident, to find himself among the redwoods in California. That time spent in the wilderness healed him on a physical and emotional level. He came to see that humans and nature are connected within a larger system, and that there was a spirituality to nature. He took to preaching and writing his philosophies, and became one of the fiercest advocates for federally owned public land. At one point, he took President Theodore Roosevelt on a three-day camping trip, from which Roosevelt returned and included the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove to Yosemite National Park. Considered the father of the national parks, he is one of the most influential figures in the history of national parks and conservation in this country.

“AHEAD OF THEIR TIME
John Muir

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”

John Muir
The second important character is a man by the name of Frederick Law Olmsted.

Considered the Father of Landscape Architecture, Olmsted had a eclectic set of experiences prior to his career in landscape design. These previous experiences shaped his political and social values, which in turn gave him a greater understanding of the context in which he was constructing, and a desire to influence them.

He and his colleague won the competition to design Central Park, which he envisioned to be a park for all, especially those who could not afford to travel to the countryside. He believed passionately in the effects that nature could have on the bodies and minds of people, and felt that any person regardless of wealth or race should have that opportunity. In fact, when Central Park was completed, he visited doctors’ offices in New York City’s poor neighborhoods to tell them to send their patients to the park because they would feel better.

Olmsted came to Washington, DC to design the Capitol Grounds, and while he was there was a strong advocate for the preservation of Rock Creek Park before it was claimed by private interests. He continued to advocate for the park, with his sons taking the charge in completing a comprehensive report that divided the park into sections, with varying levels of development and intensity of use.

**AHEAD OF THEIR TIME**

Frederick Law Olmsted

“If we analyze the operations of scenes of beauty upon the mind, and consider the intimate relation of the mind upon the nervous system and the whole physical economy, the action and reaction which constantly occur between bodily and mental conditions, the reinvigoration which results from such scenes is readily comprehended . . . The enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it; tranquillizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system.”

-Frederick Law Olmsted
Rock Creek Park is a 1754 acre park in the Northwest Quadrant of Washington DC. The Park follows the canyon and the Rock Creek, which originates at a spring in Maryland, within the bounds of the District to where emptying into the Potomac River.

The park is known for its unique geologic features. The park contains the boundary line between the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain, and is marked by a dramatic rock feature. The rock of the park was quarried before it became a National Park for local building projects, and can still be seen at the National Zoo.

Rock Creek Park is home to two main types of habitats, wetlands and deciduous forests. Deciduous forests are forests filled with trees like oaks, hickories, tulip poplars, red maples and sycamores among others, who all lose their leaves every year in the fall. A diverse habitat in a dense urban area is home to amphibians, reptiles, 160 types of birds, 35 kinds of fish, and 30 mammals including raccoons, foxes, beavers, and coyotes.

In 1890 it was designated as the third National Park of the United State and was quite unlike its predecessors, Yellowstone and Yosemite. It has had its own unique history, and has been used a myriad of ways. Photos to the right show Theodore Roosevelt climbing Pulpit Rock, people sleeping in the cooler park during the hot summer months, children bathing in the river, and even a baseball game.
In staying true to the original concept of a park for the people, Charles Weller championed the idea of a camp for children and their mothers. He believed that time in nature could “save the lives of many sickly children and bring new inspiration both to neglected little ones and their overburdened mothers.” In 1904, he succeeded and at 16th Street and Military Road NW, within Rock Creek Park, the first camp was opened and fifty children and their mothers were welcomed. Later on, older children could come by themselves. It was noticed how well the children and babies’ health did in this fresh air environment, so a baby hospital was set up next door. In a segregated time period, the camp was only for white women and children, but in 1907 a camp for African Americans was set up in Prince George’s County.

**ROCK CREEK PARK HISTORY**

**Camp Goodwill**
The first map shows the population density of the District. Central DC is the most dense, and the population distribution shows that most of the population is west and south of the park.

The following maps show that Rock Creek Park is not only a topographic divide in the city, but it also is an economic and racial divide.

The next map show the distribution of median income in the district. The highest median income is located to the west of the park, with the poorest neighborhoods to the east and south of the park.

The group of maps on the opposite page show the concentration of race within the district. Whites are strongly concentrated to the west of the park. African American, Hispanic, and other minorities are located in greatest concentration to the east of the park.

This demographic information is important to understanding DC and the potential visitors to the park. In addition to basic visitation, this research also exposes where are the people who have traditionally been excluded from quality green space are located, an important factor to consider in locating a new Visitor Center.

**PARK + PEOPLE**
*Washington, D.C. Demographics*
There is an existing Visitor Center in the Park. Marked on the map to the left, it is on the west side, towards the wealthier and whiter side of the park. Additionally, it favors private car as a transportation method, and is so embedded into the park, it is unlikely that those who are uncomfortable in the park would be willing to visit.

In thinking about equality of access, it was important to consider the public transportation routes available to the park. The map to the left shows that there is no convenient Metro stop that touches the core of the park. The map to the left shows the bus routes of the city. Visible here is 16th Street NW, an important North-South artery for the city, and one of the few places where a bus line touches the park.
Since the park was created, visitation has increased every year.

In considering where to put a Visitor Center, it was important to investigate where people already are in the park. The first diagram to the left shows the distribution of visitors in the park at established locations including the Visitor Center, tennis center, and golf course. To the right, the entire visitation of the park is shown, with those in green showing the non-location specific visitors including runners and cyclists. This clearly shows that there is no heart or central place in the park.

In addition to these maps, the data show that visits to the Visitor Center remains fairly constant throughout the year, which becomes important in the design process as it clearly needs to be a four-season building.

Rock Creek Park also serves as an important commuter route for the region, and there are millions of people who experience the park from their cars, but never interact with it more personally.
Here is a location in the park that became the area of focus for site selection. It is on 16th Street Northwest, a major North South artery, and is where the park actually meets the road.

This area overlaps with the Olmsted brothers’ “plateau recreation ground,” and is home to recreational fields, the tennis center, and the Carter Barron Amphitheater.
The selected site provided numerous opportunities for the building. Significantly, it also allows the visitors to experience the totality of the topography of the canyon, and reach the creek in a relatively short span of time. The location has direct access to public transportation via a bus stop and the entrance walk is through a busy and open fields, making it a comfortable and safe place. There is significant existing parking which prevents the need to tear down more of the forest and increase the impermeable surfaces, and it allows for a visitor to walk through the site. It can expand visitors’ experiences that are using this mostly recreational area. In addition, it has access to hiking trails, provides access to beach drive which is pedestrian and cyclist only on the weekends which is a great introductory experience to walking in the woods, and is close to certain significant points such as the boulder bridge.

The site also posed its fair share of challenges however. The topography is significant, and it is important that it be evident and experienced by the visitors. It needs a building of two faces and four arms, as it faces both the city and the park, and needs to bring people in from the city and release them to the park, and visa versa. It also marks the transition, not only from city to park, but from recreational park to wilder park.

**SITE SELECTION**

*Existing Conditions*
Site Selection

Site Photographs

- Park entrance from bus stop
- Trail through recreational fields
- Forest boundary
- Forest approach to building site, visible as top horizon on left side
- Looking up slope at building site
- Rock Creek at end of path
SITE SELECTION
Topographic Model
These questions spurred an investigation and reflection into the ways we experience nature, what impacts that experience in a positive way, and how those physical characteristics could be formally integrated into the architecture of the building.

The following are five concepts, based in a natural phenomenon or experience that were chosen as design principles to be carried through the project.

HOW DO WE EXPERIENCE NATURE?

WHAT ABOUT IT PHYSICALLY HELPS US TO SEE, UNDERSTAND, OR EVEN LOVE A PLACE?
“Slowness means cleaving perfectly to time, so closely that the seconds fall one by one, drop by drop like the steady dripping of a tap on stone. This stretching of time deepens space. It is one of the secrets of walking: a slow approach to landscapes that gradually renders them familiar. Like the regular encounters that deepen friendship.”

-Frédéric Gros, A Philosophy of Walking
"There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds; in the ebb and flow of the tides; responding to sun and moon as they have done for millions of years; in the repose of the folded bud in winter, ready within its sheath for spring. There is something infinitely healing in these repeated refrains of nature, the assurance that night after night, dawn comes, and spring after winter."

-Rachel Carson, The Edge of the Sea.
Why do we set out on a hike? Why do we go, when we know not what we will see? What keeps us going, trudging along? Might it be the glimpses along the way? The split second where a sliver of grand view is visible, when a fraction of a mountain, a valley, a river, slips through the wall of trees? If so, why do we keep going from there, turning our backs on that sliver? Might it be a faith? To see clearly what lies before, we must relinquish the sliver and embrace the path unknown.
“Most of the time I am sunk in thought, but at some point on each walk there comes a moment when I look up and notice, with a kind of first-time astonishment, the amazing complex delicacy of the woods, the casual ease with which elemental things come together to form a composition that is—whatever the season, wherever I put my besotted gaze—perfect.”

- Bill Bryson, A Walk in the Woods.
“There was no sudden, striking, and emotional transition. Like the warming of a room, or coming of daylight. When you first notice them they have already been going on for some time.”

-C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed
THE VISITOR CENTER
Site Plan
In approaching the building, visitors will first see the kiosk from the road-marking the forest entrance. Then visitors will follow a raised forest boardwalk to the building, the structure will help moderate the topography change, and ease visitors into the forest on a very constructed path. After moving through the building, visitors continue down the slope, on a less constructed path, reach a place for picnics and fire pits where the creek will be visible much of the year. Finally, the visitors will navigate the last bit of the path and steps that leads down to Rock Creek.

THE VISITOR CENTER
Site Plan
THE VISITOR CENTER
Final Model
The building is carved into the topography, with each floor meeting the grade at some point. The shape originated from the idea of multiple and distinct paths, allowing for a visitor to choose an unknown adventure as they move through the building for the first time.

Along the north side, a set of stairs and ramps navigate the terrain change, with an intimate exhibit space at mid-level. On the south side, a series of ramps connect glass corners or “gills”.

On the lower level, there is a cafe and kitchen with support spaces for catering staff, mechanical rooms, and exhibit storage. A lobby alongside the glass wall reintroduces the large view to visitors to the park, and welcomes in those who have been out in the park.

THE VISITOR CENTER
Lower Floor
The upper floor hosts an informational desk, a large flexible overlook to host exhibits, a hearth that divides that large space into smaller spaces. Visible here is all four of the glass corner gills, and the mid-level exhibit space on the north side of the building.
The top floor hosts the administrative space for the National Park Service. Entering at grade from the new pull-through and parking, gives the building an easier, more direct, and more private entrance for employees and service deliveries. The floor hosts traditional office spaces such as desk space, conference room, kitchen, bathrooms with showers for commuters, and more unique features such as a hearth gathering space and a large roof terrace. The large green roof shown here can also be accessed from the third floor for maintenance.

THE VISITOR CENTER

Top Floor
THE VISITOR CENTER
Elevations
THE VISITOR CENTER
Elevations
THE VISITOR CENTER
Sections
THE VISITORS CENTER

Sections
THE VISITOR CENTER

Sections
Materially, the building reflects the park. Rock Creek Park is known for its unique and impressive geology, and is specifically known for its granite Kensington Tonalite. A granite stone plinth where the stone is carved out of the earth, will leave a fossil of the building long after it is gone. A stone fireplace jutting out of the earth mirrors the geology of the park. In a monumental city, where stone marks something of importance, it is fitting to use that language for this Visitor Center. The stone then meets the wood; the fireplace supports the exposed cross laminated timber structure, arranged radially, so it acts a steady reference to guide visitors to the park, and back to the hearth.

BUILDING + THE ENVIRONMENT
Materials
On the exterior, it was important that nature be able to orchestrate the facades of the building, so materials were chosen for their ability to visibly weather, age, and reflect the sun, rain, snow, and ice of their distinct location. Kebony, a sustainably harvested siding clads the structure and will weather from brown to grey. Covering that is Virginia Creeper, a vine native to the park that changes colors in the fall, allowing the building facade to change with the seasons and the trees around it. The north side of the building hosts a prefabricated screen in front of a curtain wall that allows for glimpses into the forest. The screen is made of Kebony and Corten, a steel that weathers to a rust color. The roof edge is copper, which starts out bright but will tarnish to a green.
Washington, DC has a four season climate and a deciduous forest has a particularly spectacular range of seasons. Here, the south facade with the Virginia Creeper is depicted, changing colors through the seasons and allowing the building to change alongside its habitat.

**BUILDING + THE ENVIRONMENT**

**Seasonality**
The building is sensitive to its environment and seeks to reduce harm. While the screen provides a lovely experience from the inside, it also protects birds from misreading a glass wall. On the large glass façade, Orni-lux is specified, which is a glass that has a pattern in it visible only to birds.

Automated ventilation louvers on the south side allow for the building to breathe in the lovely DC shoulder seasons, and allow for the feel and smell of fresh air to enter the building, particularly strongly in the glass corners. This works well with DC prevailing spring, summer, and fall breeze from the south.

While being in a forest protects from the most significant solar considerations, the building is designed to maximize northern light with the glass wall and the roof terrace facing north, with reduced glazing to the south.

The large sloping, and easily accessible roof is a semi-intensive green roof. This provides habitat, improves the energy consumption of the building, improves air quality, and provides sound insulation to reduce the presence of city/road noise. Suggested plantings from the DC Department of Energy and the Environment include hardy sedums, but it is also critically important to include some native pollinator plants to support the insect and biodiversity of the area.

**BUILDING + THE ENVIRONMENT**

Environmental Interactions
Rock Creek has had a muddy history with storm water runoff. In an urban area, runoff contains chemicals, trash, and sewage, in addition to the exponential increase in runoff volume. Green roofs can retain up to 60% of the rain that hits it. What is not absorbed here will travel down the slope of the roof, and drain along the edge near the upper entrance, completing that gill with a wall of water. A raised boardwalk preserves two important drainage swales, and permeable pavement across the site reduces runoff. This becomes an important spot in the project where a visitor can visibly watch water interact with the building, traverse the site and join the creek, providing a real learning opportunity for visitors.
EXPERIENTIAL

adjective

involving or based on experience and observation.

The second way in which the building impacts the experience of a visitor is through what the building shows a visitor. Utilizing the design concepts mentioned previously, the building strategically creates moments to bring a visitor closer to the landscape that surrounds them.
"Slowness means cleaving perfectly to time, so closely that the seconds fell one by one, drop by drop like the steady dripping of a tap on stone. This stretching of time deepens space. It is one of the secrets of walking: a slow approach to landscapes that gradually render them familiar. Like the regular encounters that deepen friendships."

-Frédéric Gros, A Philosophy of Walking

The building is based on two unique paths, drawn out to slow the visitor down, but not excessive to the point of being discouraging. Upon entrance, it is clear that the path is not direct nor a straight shot to the exit, in fact the exit isn’t even visible, which encourages people to slow down and explore what they can see without the distraction of an exit.

BUILDING + VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Control the Pace
“There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, in the ebb and flow of the tides, responding to sun and moon as they have done for millions of years; in the repose of the folded bud in winter, ready within its sheath for spring. There is something infinitely healing in these repeated refrains of nature, the assurance that night after night, dawn comes, and spring after winter.”

-Rachel Carson, The Edge of the Sea.

The rhythm of active and rest, slope and level, is evident in the materials and the arranging of spaces. Wood denotes moments of pause, on the overlook, benches, and the flooring in the gills, cafe, and mid-level exhibit. Stone marks areas of activity or learning. Ramps, stairs, decks, exhibits, and the fire are all constructed of stone.

Walk down the boardwalk, pause at the bench. Enter to the hearth and exhibits, travel down the ramps and stairs. Pause in the gills. Pause at the exhibit. Travel down further, rest at the cafe, then travel out of the building down the slope. Rest at the picnic spot and overlook, walk down the rest of the way. Rest on the shores of the creek.

BUILDING + VISITOR EXPERIENCE
Embrace a Rhythm
Why do we set out on a hike? Why do we go, when we know not what we will see? What keeps us going, trudging along? Might it be the glimpses along the way? The split second where a sliver of grand view is visible, when a fraction of a mountain, a valley, a river slips through the wall of trees? If so, why do we keep going from there, turning our backs on that sliver? Might it be a faith? To see clearly what lies before, we must relinquish the sliver and embrace the path unknown.

The pre-fabricated screen breaks up the mass of trees into smaller bite sized pieces, focusing a view on just a small portion of the landscape. Focusing on one part lends a greater familiarity with the whole, and the combination of screen and open frames these vignettes. On the ramp side, the curving wall allows for just a sliver of the glass corner to be visible, pulling the visitor further in, which in turn rewards them with more of the view.

BUILDING + VISITOR EXPERIENCE
Tease with Glimpses
“Most of the time I am sunk in thought, but at some point on each walk there comes a moment when I look up and notice, with a kind of first-time astonishment, the amazing complex delicacy of the woods, the casual ease with which elemental things come together to form a composition that is—whatever the season, wherever I put my besotted gaze—perfect.”

“There was no sudden, striking, and emotional transition. Like the warming of a room, or coming of daylight. When you first notice them they have already been going on for some time.”

-C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed

This threshold between the old and new, architecture and nature, exist in these glass corner gills. The corner jutting into the park, lit by a skylight, and fed with the scent and feel of fresh air from the ventilation louvers allows for a person to have a more intimate experience, in a way that really exists outside of the building, but in a way that provides the comfort of familiarity and not being quite all the way in nature either.

BUILDING + VISITOR EXPERIENCE
Amplify Liminal Space
Lastly, it is important to consider not just what information you want to tell people, but how you want to tell it. In the era of screens and technology, it’s a race to get flashier to attract and keep our attention. But when it comes to transitioning people into, and then back out of, the park, it is important to consider the slowing that must occur on not just a physical but mental level in order to see and appreciate the park and the pace which it abides by. The first thing you reach when you enter into the building is the information desk—prioritizing a human connection between ranger and visitor.
The exhibition space is designed to be flexible (one of the main complaints of the existing Visitors’ Center which has not been updated since it was built). The hearth splits the large space into two smaller spaces which can be used for group gatherings, lectures, fitness classes, and even a screening (with a screen hung from the timbers which provide innumerable opportunities for displays). A reader rail provides a great place for information that can be seen and touched. A stone step underneath it allows for kids to get better access to the rail, and creates a kid-scale space for interactive information.
The large stone walls are ideal for banners, which can be printed on fabric and hung, and are easily changeable. An exhibit area on the north side provides a more intimate space for a smaller collection, maybe even some of the pottery that has been discovered in the native American burial sites within the park.
In conclusion, there are multiple ways in which architecture, and the built environment can impact a visitor's experience. The building proposed here utilizes three different main strategies. First, it is visually responsive and shaped by the environment, making nature the dominant force. Secondly, it utilizes specific design strategies adapted from nature to facilitate an intentional introduction to the landscape. Lastly, it uses its strategic implementation of the programmatic elements to ease the visitors into a psychologically slower pace to prepare them for their experience in the park. The building achieves a relationship with the surrounding that is evident through sight, smell, texture, and noise.

As we become a more urban species, architecture will, and must, play a continually greater role in bridging the gap. We are a species that is more and more comfortable in urban spaces and in buildings, and not so comfortable in nature. Deliberate architecture has the power to bring us home, to the places we do not necessarily know, but where we most certainly belong.


