Frames of Time: Ephemeral, Anamorphic, and Preserved Time Through The Composition of Light, Material, and Form

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Abstract

'Frames of Time' explores how architecture, like photography, can frame and capture our perception of time. Through the manipulation of light, material, and composition, architecture becomes not just a container of moments, but an active participant in how they unfold and are remembered.

Inspired by Ansel Adams' ability to preserve fleeting conditions within a lasting medium, this thesis seeks to extend his vision into a three-dimensional lived experience of time. Drawing from early explorations of visual perception--camera obscuras, anamorphism, reflective geometries, and apertures--this project investigates how architecture can frame moments of time. Three types of time considered in the design of the Gallery for Ansel Adams are ephemeral, anamorphic, and preserved time

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General Audience Abstract

Frames of Time is a design thesis that explores how architecture can shape the way we experience and remember time—much like photography. Inspired by the work of Ansel Adams, whose photographs capture fleeting natural moments in a lasting way, this project reimagines how buildings can do the same through light, materials, and spatial design.

The project takes the form of a gallery designed for Ansel Adams, inviting visitors to move through spaces that reflect different kinds of time: brief, shifting moments (ephemeral time), altered or distorted perspectives (anamorphic time), and timeless, preserved experiences (preserved time). Drawing from tools of early photography—like camera obscuras and reflective surfaces—the gallery becomes more than a place to view images; it becomes an immersive experience where the building itself frames changing light and perception, encouraging a deeper awareness of our place in time.

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Introduction to Ansel Adams + ‘Frames of Time’

Ansel Adams

In his iconic black-and-white photography of the American West, Ansel Adams renders time visible. Each image suspends a fleeting moment, otherwise impossible to hold, inviting viewers’ reflection on the dialogue between the ephemeral and eternal.

Time is anchored in the shift of light across a richly textured landscape...

in the low-hanging clouds drifting through a valley,..

and in the sharp silhouette edges of backlit mountains framed against a fading sky.

‘Frames of Time’
Gallery for Ansel Adams, Glacier National Park, MT.

‘Frames of Time’ explores how architecture, like photography, can frame and capture our perception of time. Through the manipulation of light, material, and composition, architecture becomes not just a container of moments, but an active participant in how they unfold and are remembered.

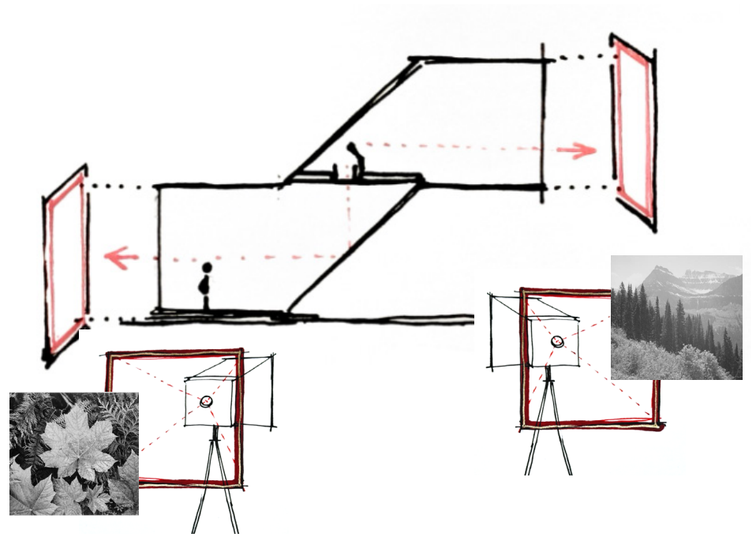
Inspired by Adams’ ability to preserve fleeting conditions within a lasting medium, this thesis seeks to extend his vision into a three-dimensional, lived experience of time. Drawing from early explorations of visual perception—camera obscuras, anamorphism, reflective geometries, and apertures—this project investigates how architecture can frame moments of time. Three types of time considered in the design of the Gallery for Ansel Adams are ephemeral, anamorphic, and preserved time.

Ephermeral Time

During visitors’ approach to the building, they experience total immersion in nature. With no boundary between self and context, change is experienced in every direction, and visitors perceive a rolling passage of time.

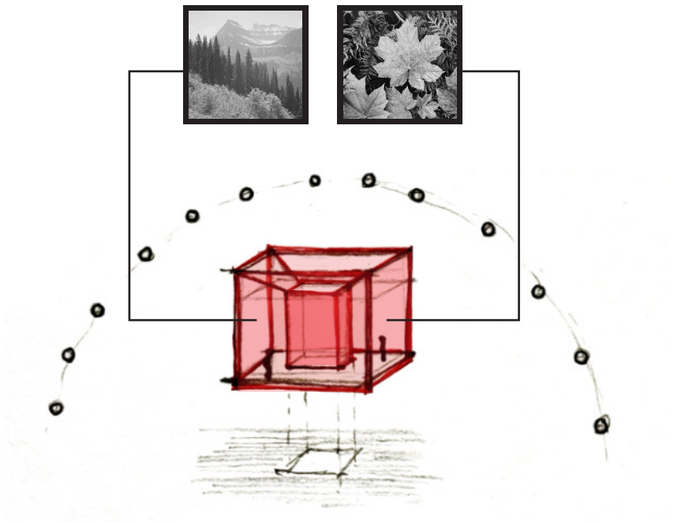
Anamorphic Time

As visitors engage with the architecture, it delivers revelation, alignment, and captured lived experiences. The architecture is as catalyst for wonder and presence. Upon entry, inhabitants circulate an outer ring of four periscope volumes. Within these geometries, there is a framed boundary between self and context. This mediation is similar to that of a large format camera or viewfinder where an observer experiences a live, framed image. Visitors feel revelation, wonder, and objectification of directed context. While experiencing revelation, inhabitants also experience a dilation of time.



Preserved Time

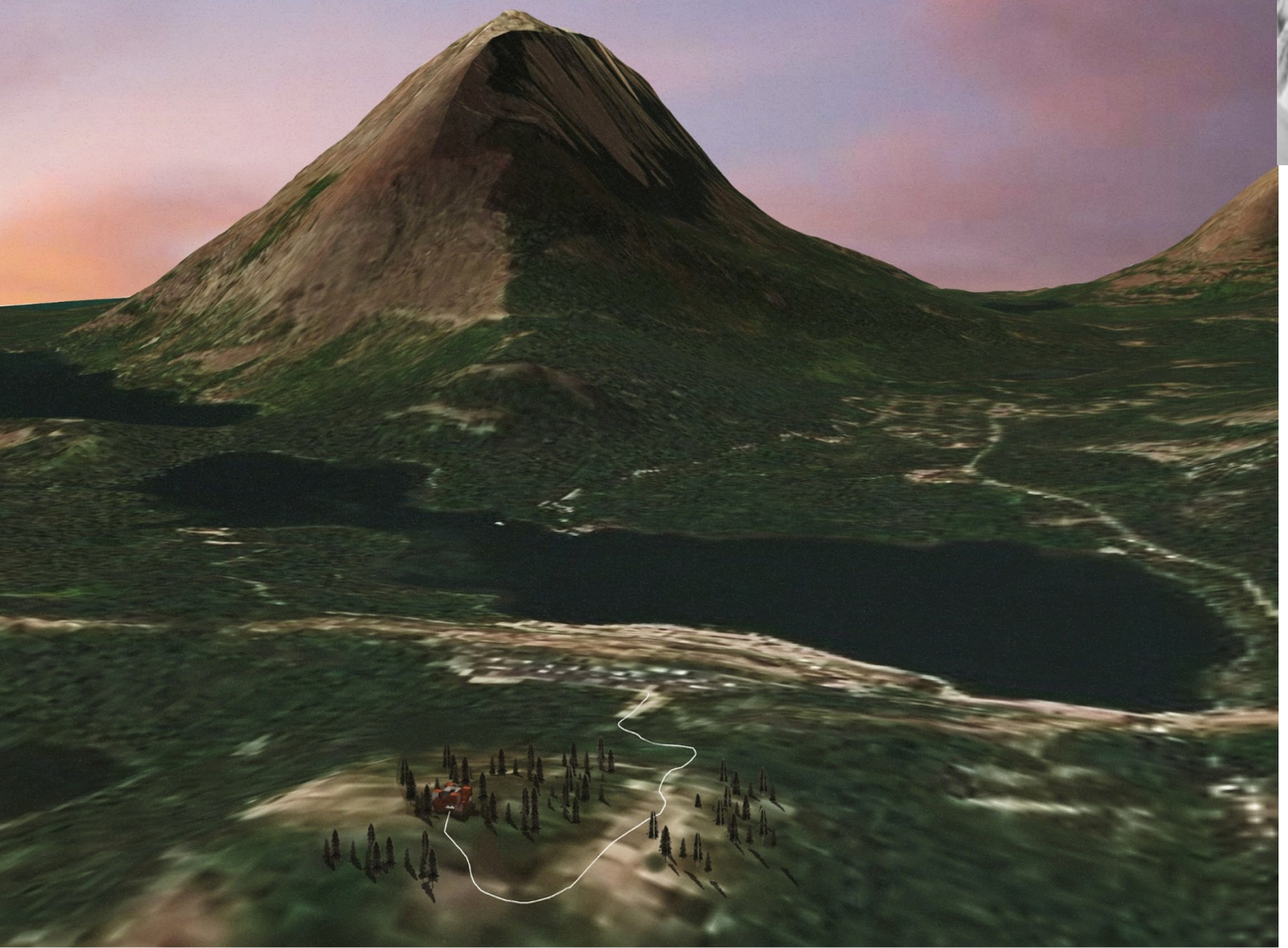
Within a central, enclosed volume, architecture acts as a time capsule—protecting stillness, memory, and past moments. After sequencing through the four perimeter periscope volumes and having a slowed experience of time via wonder, revelation, and objectification of context, visitors are drawn here, where Ansel Adams' work is on display. Within the space, there is a volumetric boundary between self and context. As an enclosed container, the room remains immune to contextual shifts, and inhabitants do not perceive the passage of time. The experience of preserved time is presented through the inward-directed architecture and Ansel Adam's careful photographic documentation of Glacier National Park's landscape from specific moments in time and specific vantage points.

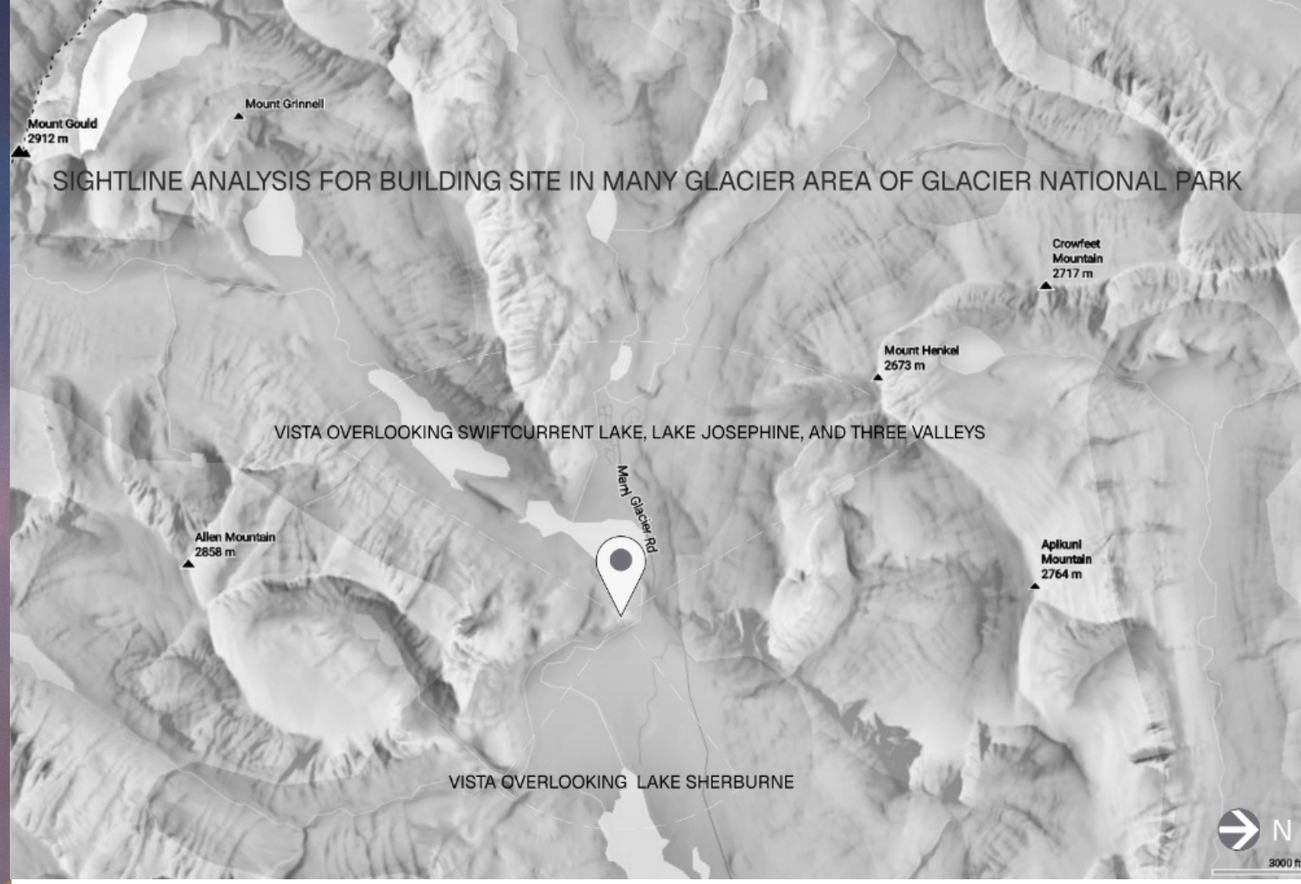


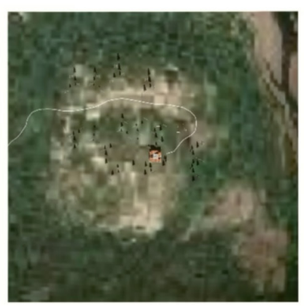
02 Glacier National Park - Site as Subject + Context

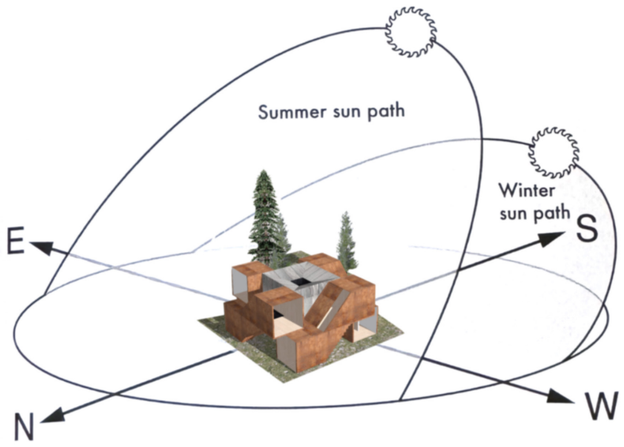
Set as an object within the dynamic and enduring landscape of Glacier National Park that Ansel Adams frequently celebrated, the gallery becomes a vessel: one that choreographs motion, elicits revelation through alignments, and preserves time through a protected gallery dedicated to the work of Ansel Adams.

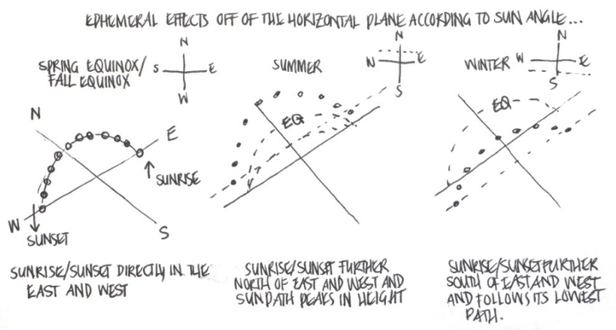
This is not merely a building for Ansel Adam's photography, but an architecture of time itself—an invitation to witness, remember, and revere lived experience in Glacier National Park through a shifting sequence of frames.



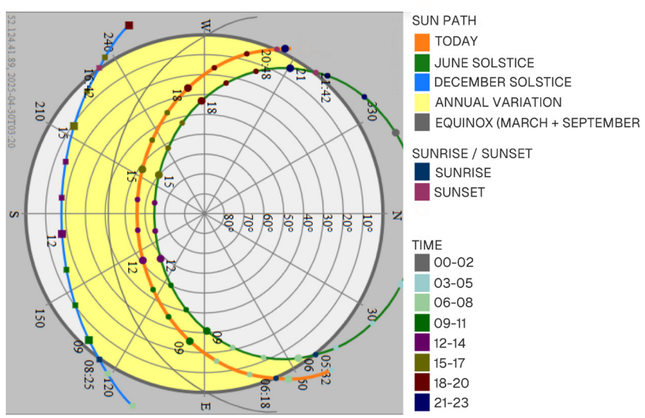


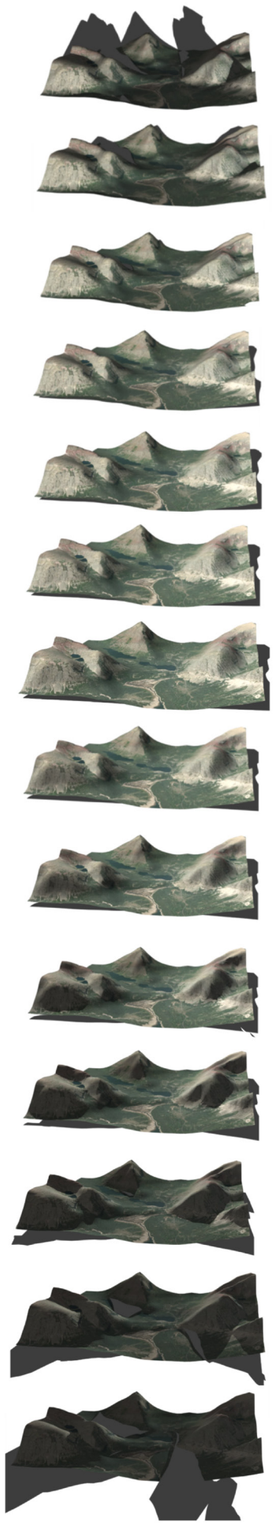






THE ANIMATED SEQUENCE TO THE RIGHT SHOWS THE DYNAMICS OF LIGHT OVER THE SITE IN AUGUST. THE DESIGN CONSIDERS SUMMER MONTHS AS A PRIORITY AS THIS IS PEAK HIKING SEASON IN THE PARK AND WHEN THE ARCHITECTURE WILL BE EXPERIENCED THE MOST.

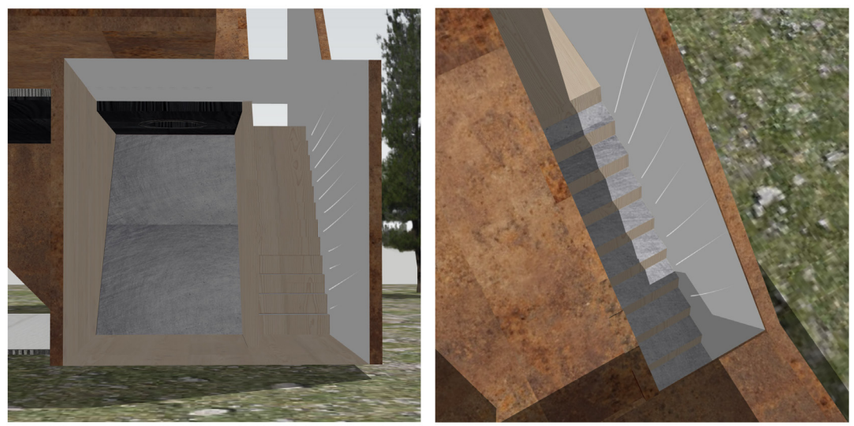




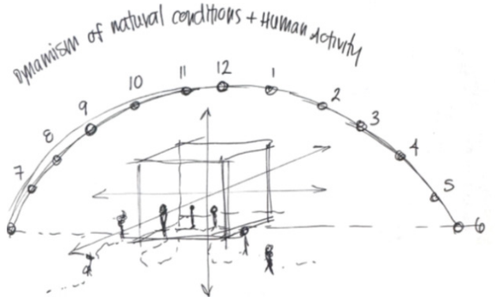
While the architecture appears to be a pinwheel of repeated forms, suggesting alike experiences within each of the four perimeter periscope volumes, interior experiences differ in response to the sun path activating the exposed, mountaintop site. In particular, transparent faces oriented to the East and West, are layered with reflective material on stair risers. These vertically oriented mirrors capture the vertical movement of the sun during sunrise and sunset, projecting rays of colored light onto a receiving white wall. In a different variation, transparent faces of the building oriented North and South, are layered with Douglas Fir stair risers. The stairs within these two periscope volumes have reflective treads, rather than reflective risers, designed to make present the lateral movement of the sun throughout the day. Linear skylights over the stairs with a mirrored tread condition allow light into the space that will be projected onto a receiving white wall in the stair shaft.

EAST / WEST STAIR CONDITION - ENGAGING LATERAL MOVEMENT OF THE SUN

NORTH / SOUTH STAIR CONDITION - ENGAGING VERTICAL MOVEMENT OF THE SUN (SUNRISE + SUNSET)

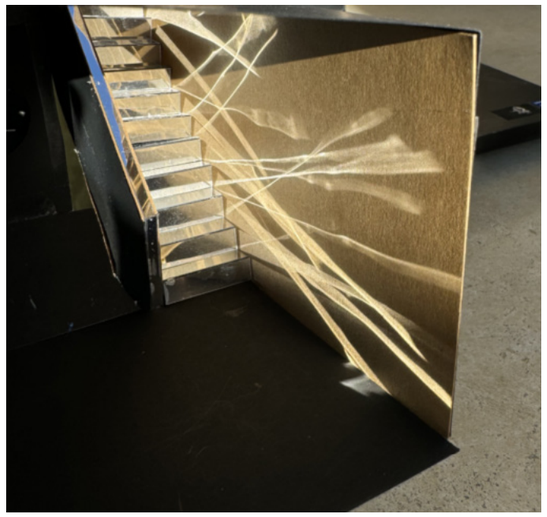


EAST + WEST FACADE CONDITION



"The edges, contours and surfaces of the structures that define urban spaces are revealed in dynamic perception and light. The experience of urban space generated by the slight rotation of individual planar walls is separable from the parabola of sunlight grazing its boundaries. The movement of sunlight exerts relational forces on spatial definition, engaging ~~shadow~~ the body of a stationary building."

- Steven Holl, Parallax

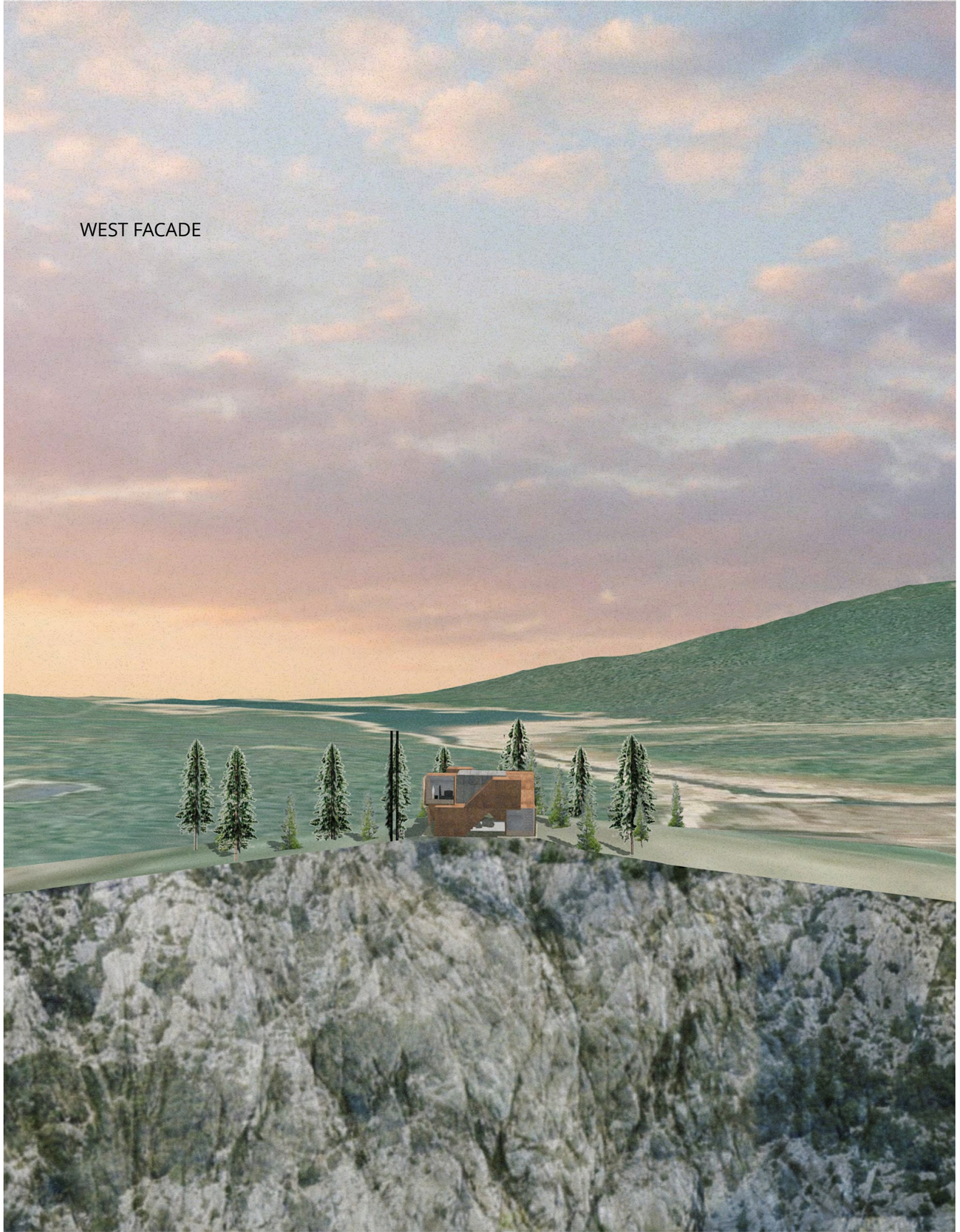


03 Elevations

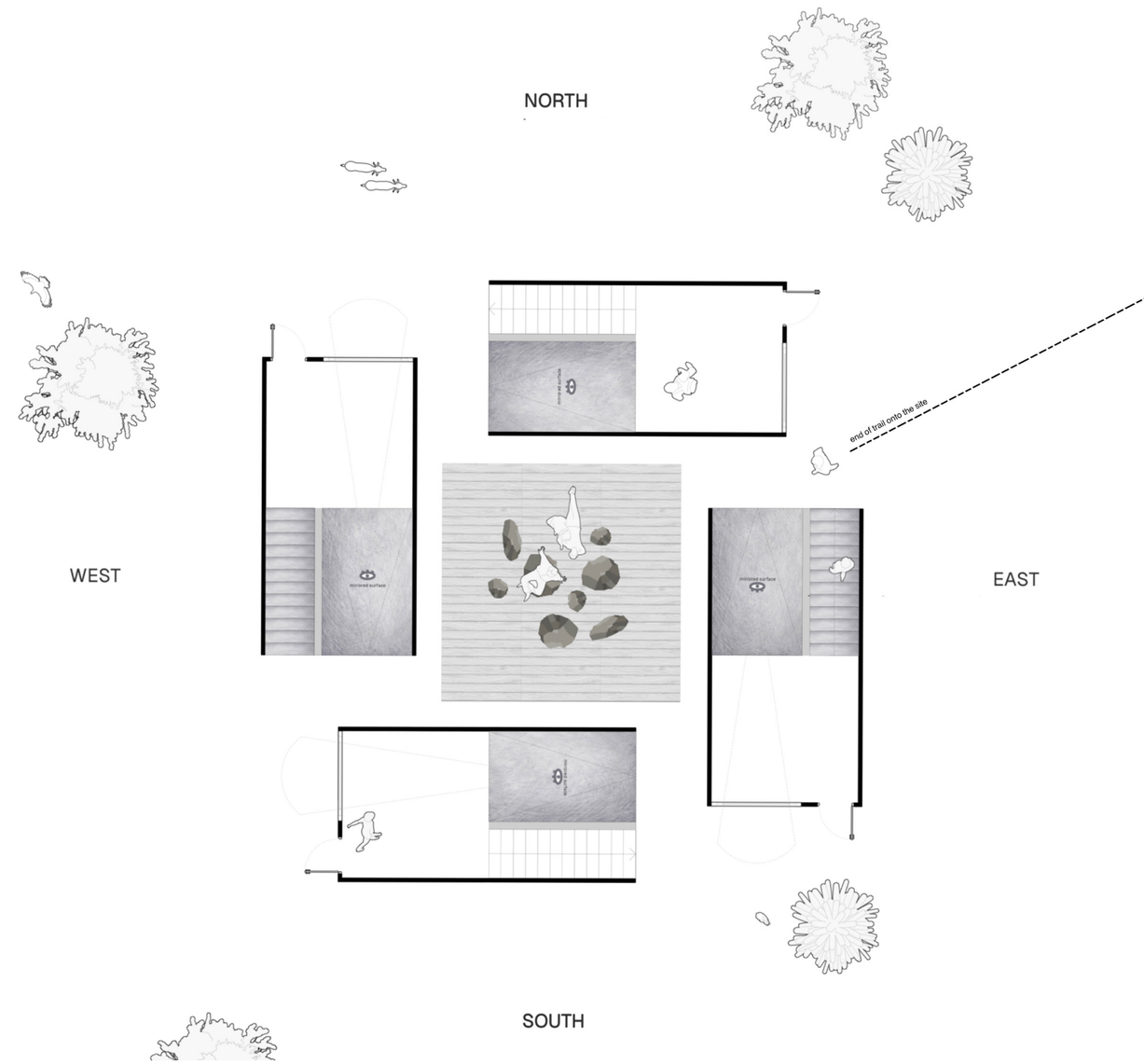
NORTH FACADE

EAST FACADE

SOUTH FACADE

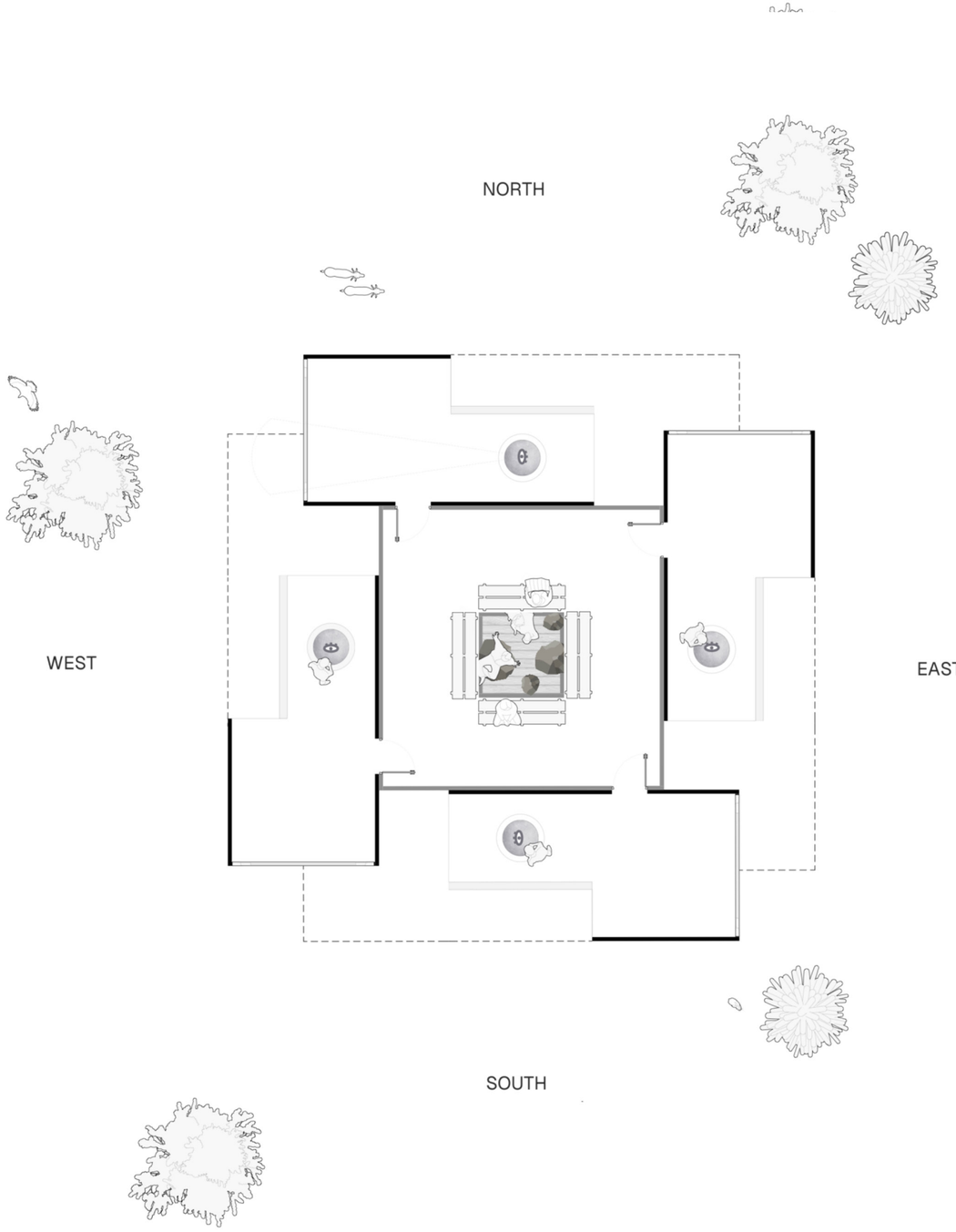


04 Plans



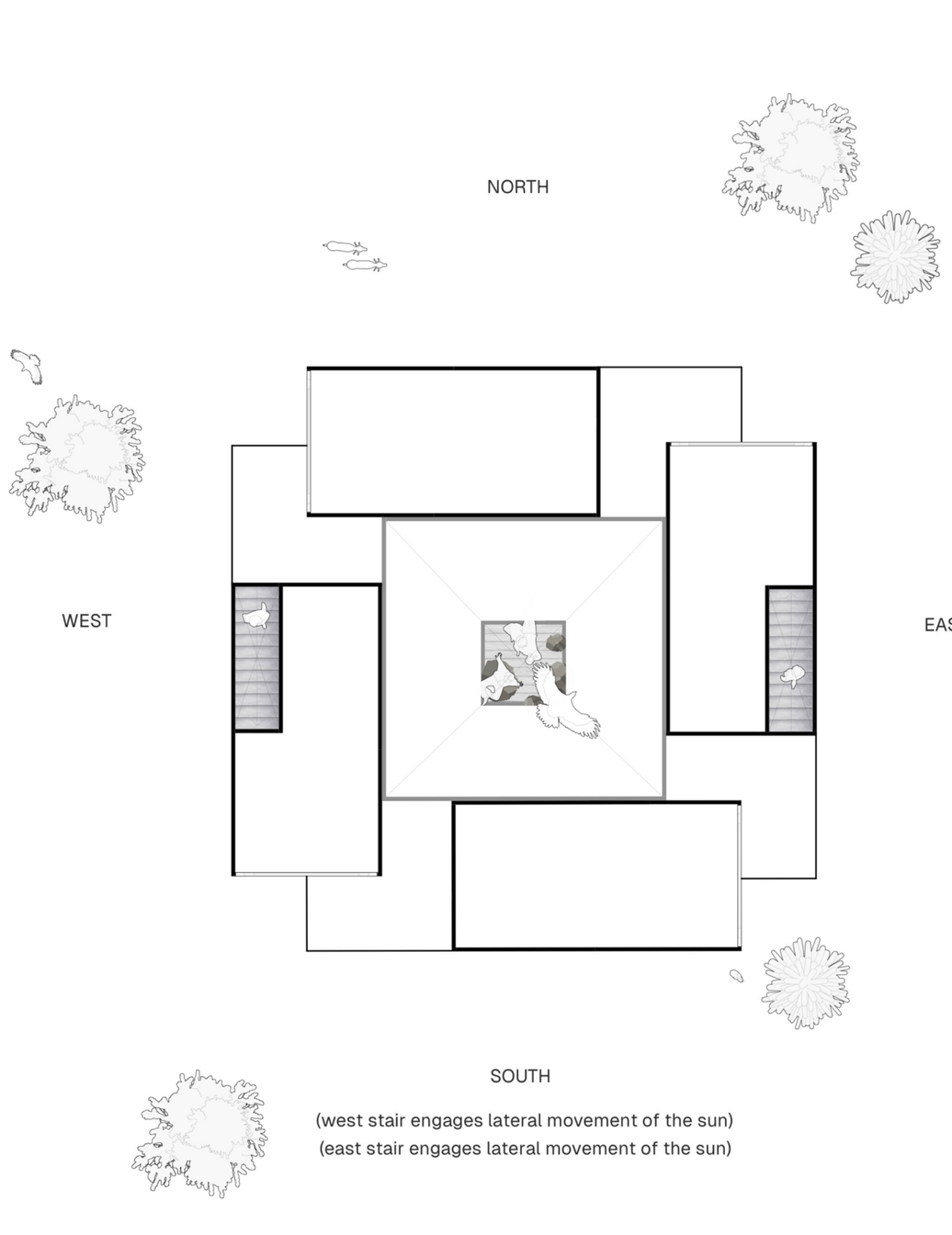
1/4” = 1’

GROUND - SITE PLAN



1/4” = 1’

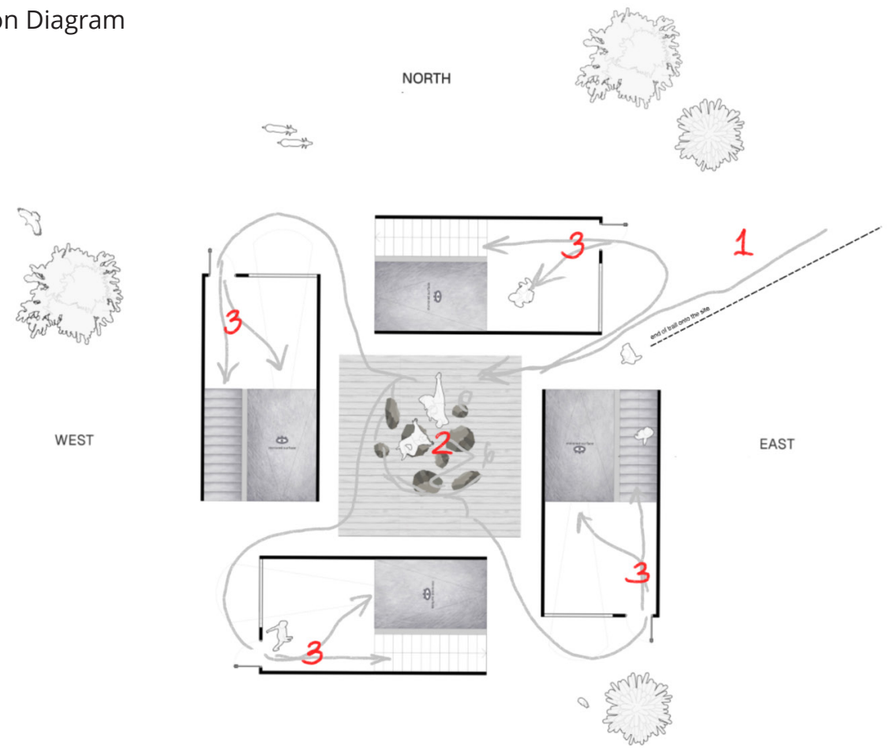
LEVEL 2



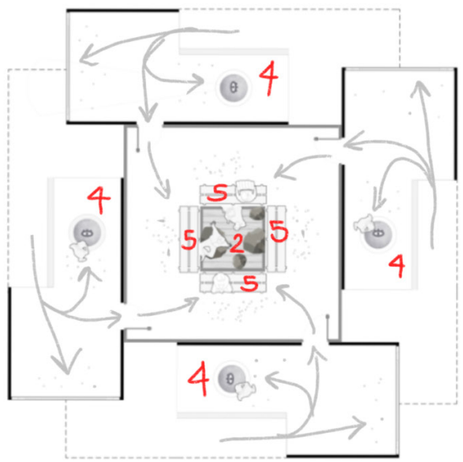
1/4” = 1’

ROOF

Circulation Diagram



1/4" = 1'
GROUND - SITE PLAN

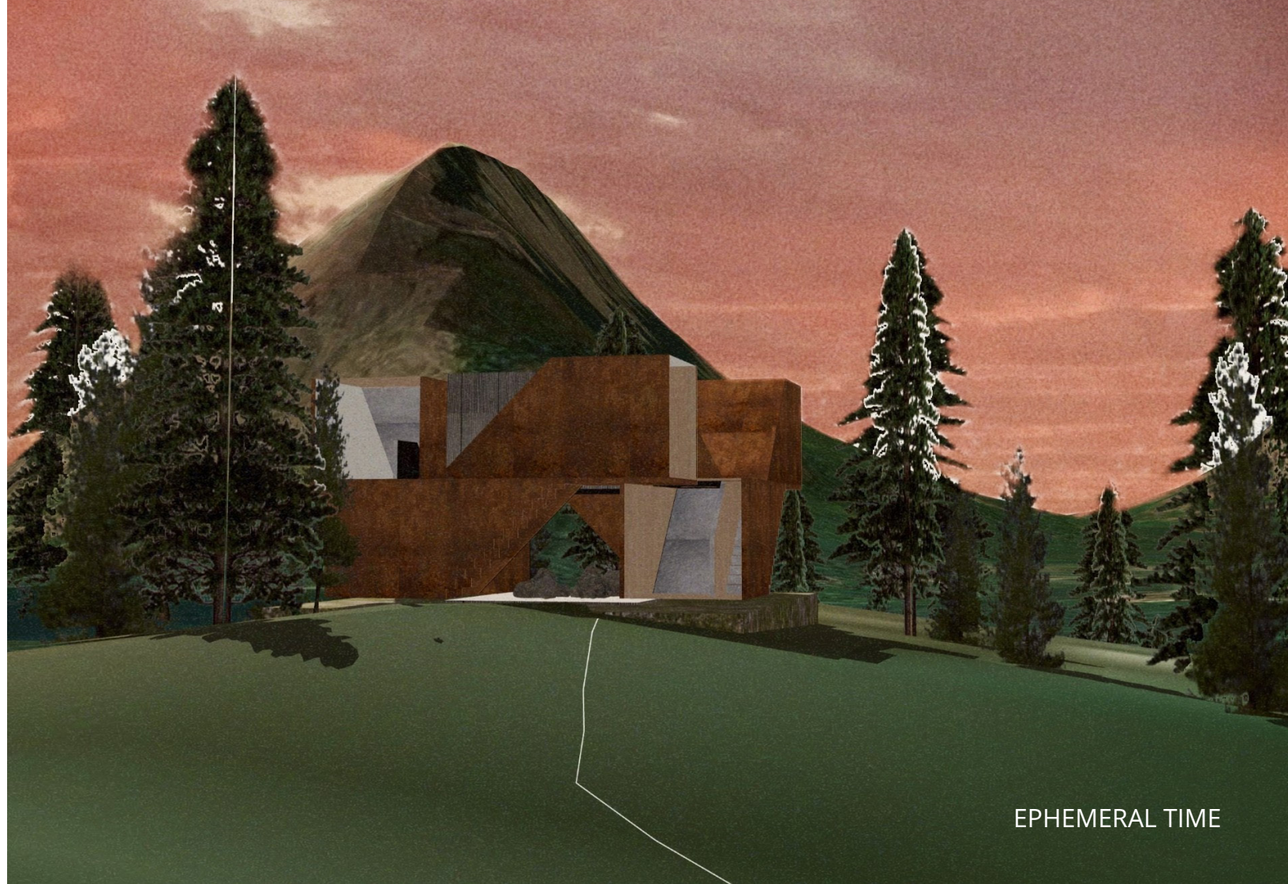


1/4" = 1'
LEVEL 2

05 The Visitors' Journey: Moving Through Frames

The architecture choreographs the journey: from immersion in the dynamic landscape, to moments of alignment and revelation, to stillness within the preserved gallery space.

1 (Corresponds with Circulation Diagram)



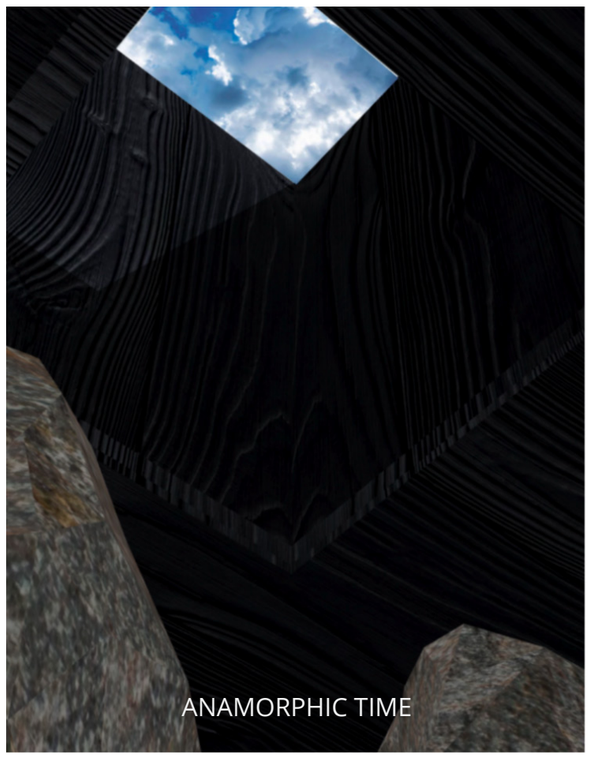
2 (Corresponds with Circulation Diagram)

3 (Corresponds with Circulation Diagram)

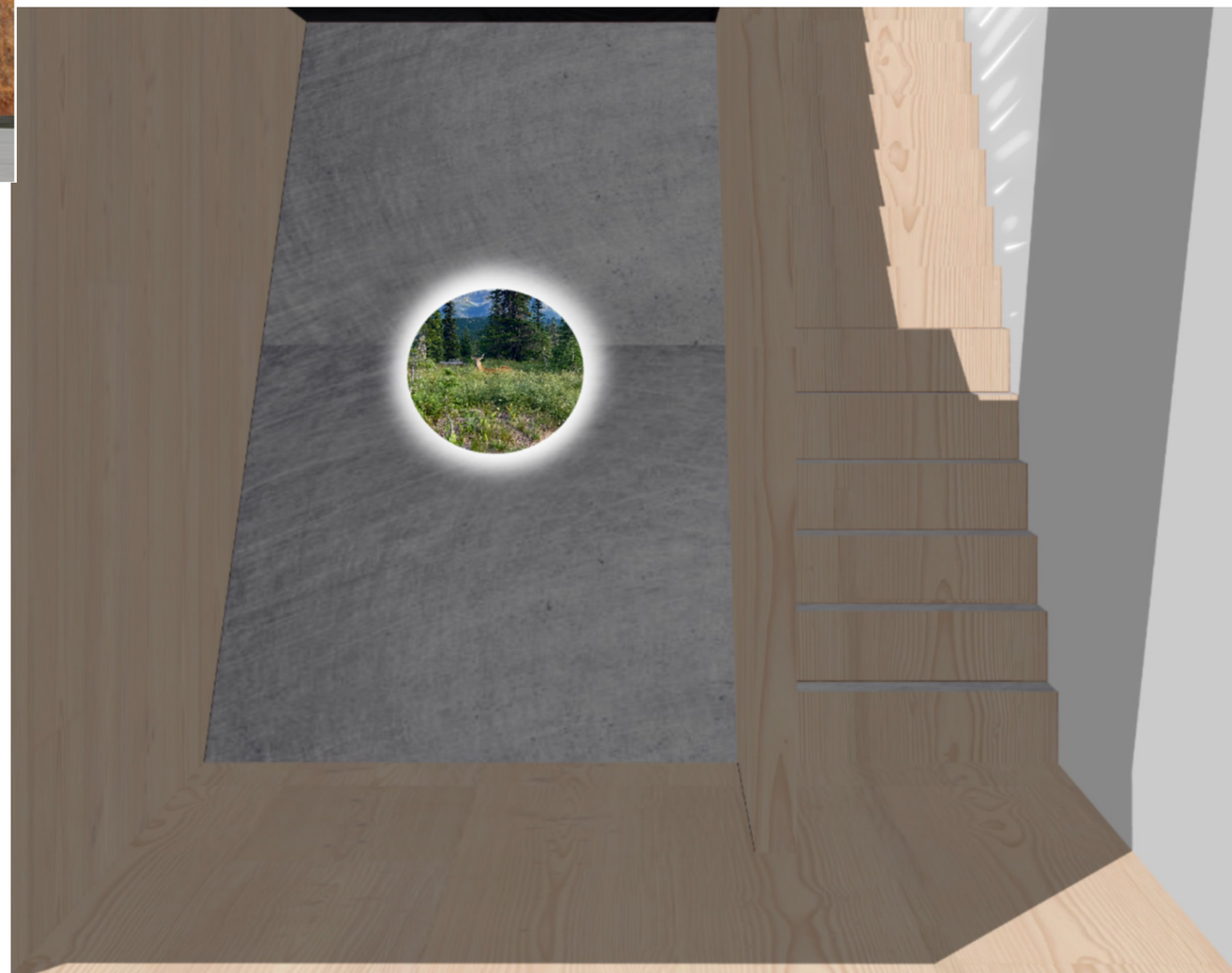
ANAMORPHIC TIME

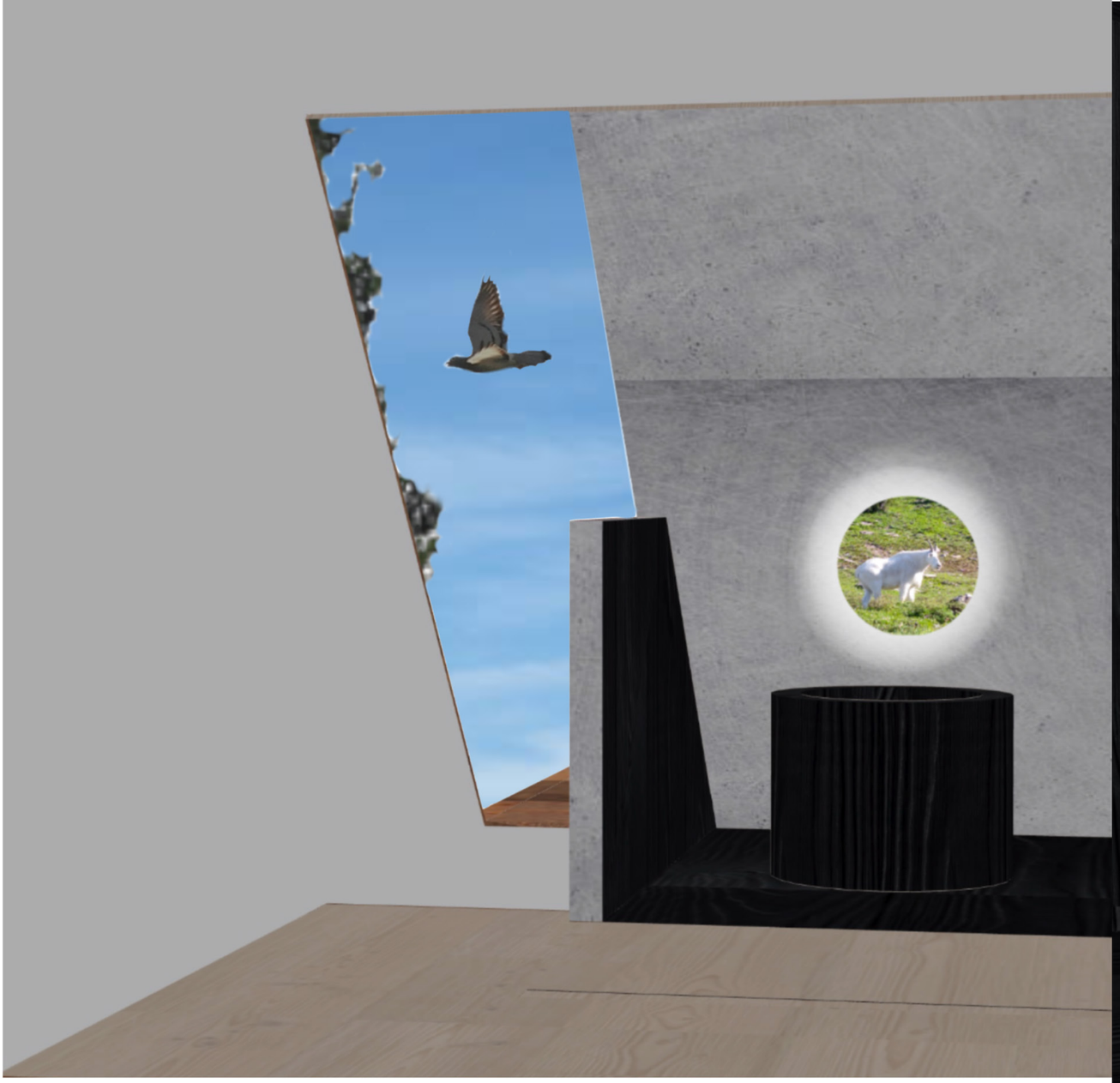
Evening Condition

Daytime Condition



ANAMORPHIC TIME





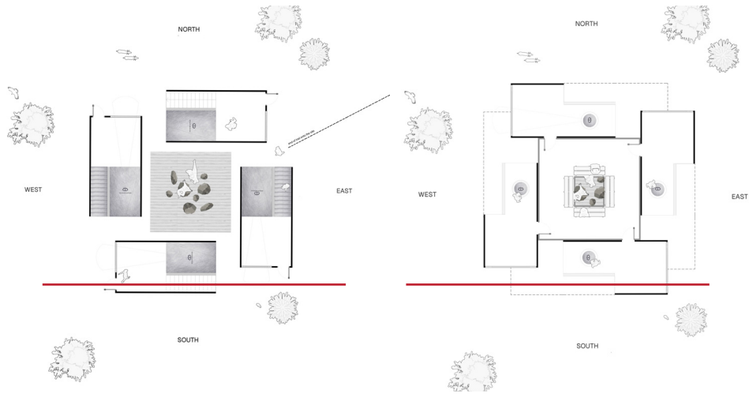
4 (Corresponds with Circulation Diagram)

ANAMORPHIC TIME

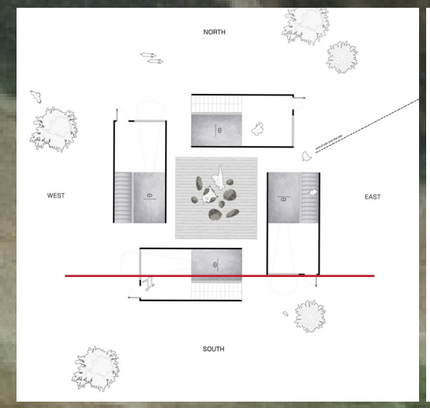
5 (Corresponds with Circulation Diagram)

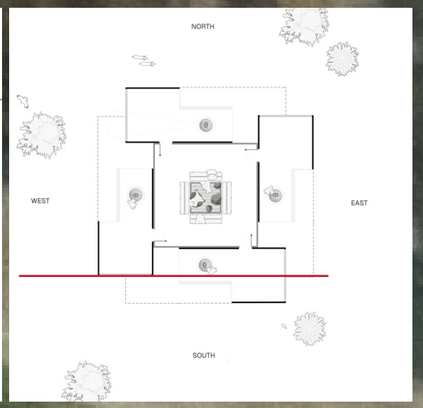
PRESERVED TIME

06 Sections



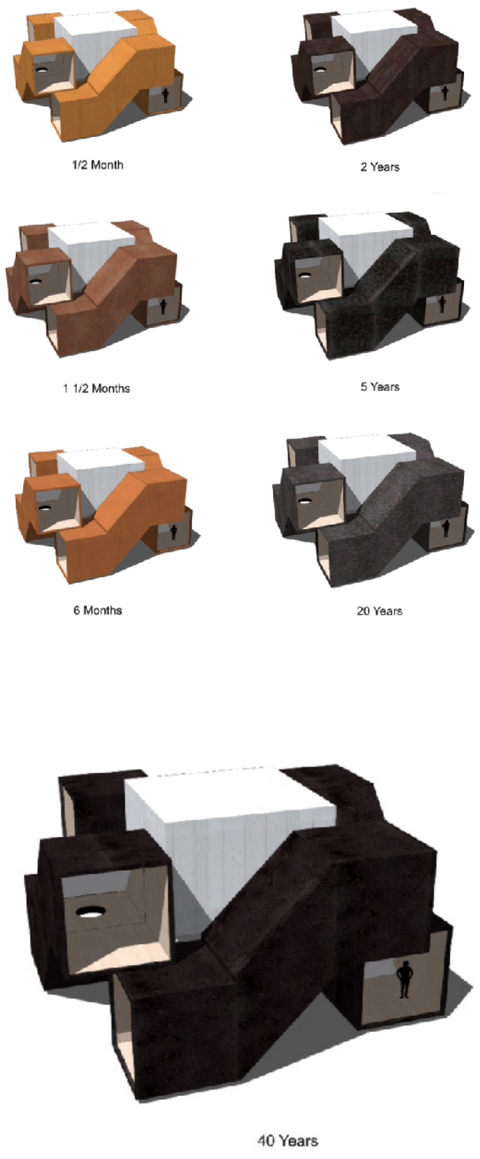
1/4” = 1’





Corten Steel + Shou Sugi Ban: An Expression of Ephemerality + Preservation

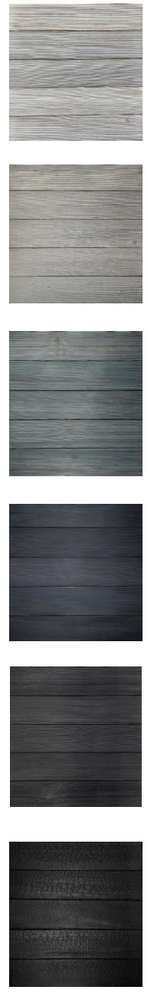
Corten Steel, also known as weathering steel, is a powerful material choice for expressing ephemerality because it makes time visible on its surface--constantly reacting to air, moisture, and light. Like Ansel Adams' photography, it reveals what is otherwise unseen: the slow transformation of matter in response to light, weather, and time. The evolving tones of Corten--reds, oranges, and browns--also mirror the colors of earth and rock in Glacier National Park, reinforcing a connection with the landscape.

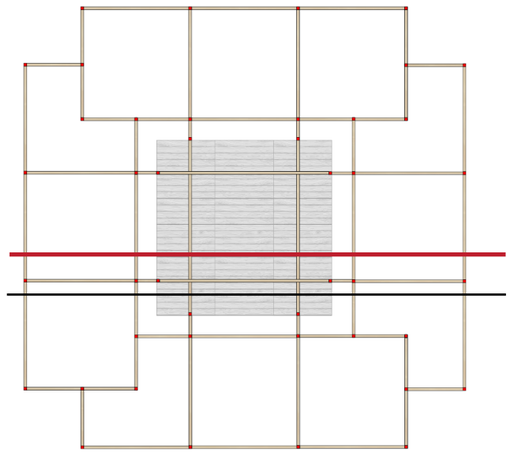


Pioneer Millworks' Shou Sugi Ban treatments are unique in their thoughtful fusion of traditional Japanese wood preservation techniques with modern sustainability and design versatility. Using reclaimed and sustainably harvested wood—including Douglas fir, a species indigenous to Glacier National Park—the company reduces environmental impact while offering durable, high-performance materials.

Boards are sealed and treated post-charring to enhance weather resistance, UV stability, and fire performance, making them ideal for interior and exterior use in harsh climates. Crafted in their New York and Oregon mills, the products support local industry while ensuring shorter lead times.

For the central volume of the Ansel Adams Gallery containing his photography, these materials are a beautiful and metaphorical fit—visually evoking the textures of preserved, charred earth, reinforcing this space's intent to evoke preserved time.





Benefits of Mass Timber

Pre-fabricated mass timber offers a compelling solution for a gallery dedicated to Ansel Adams in Glacier National Park.

Minimized Impact

Offers excellent stregth to weight ratio. The lighteight structure allows for smaller foundations and less impact on the existing landscape. There is also less material waste on site with pre-fabricated members. Process waste is contained in a factory.

Speed of Construction

Components are manufactured off-site and assembled quickly on-site from a kit of parts -- reduces construction time and labor costs, and increases safety

Precision + Quality

Factory fabrication allows for high precision and consistent quality control. Tighter tolerances lead to better fit and finish.

Phenomenology

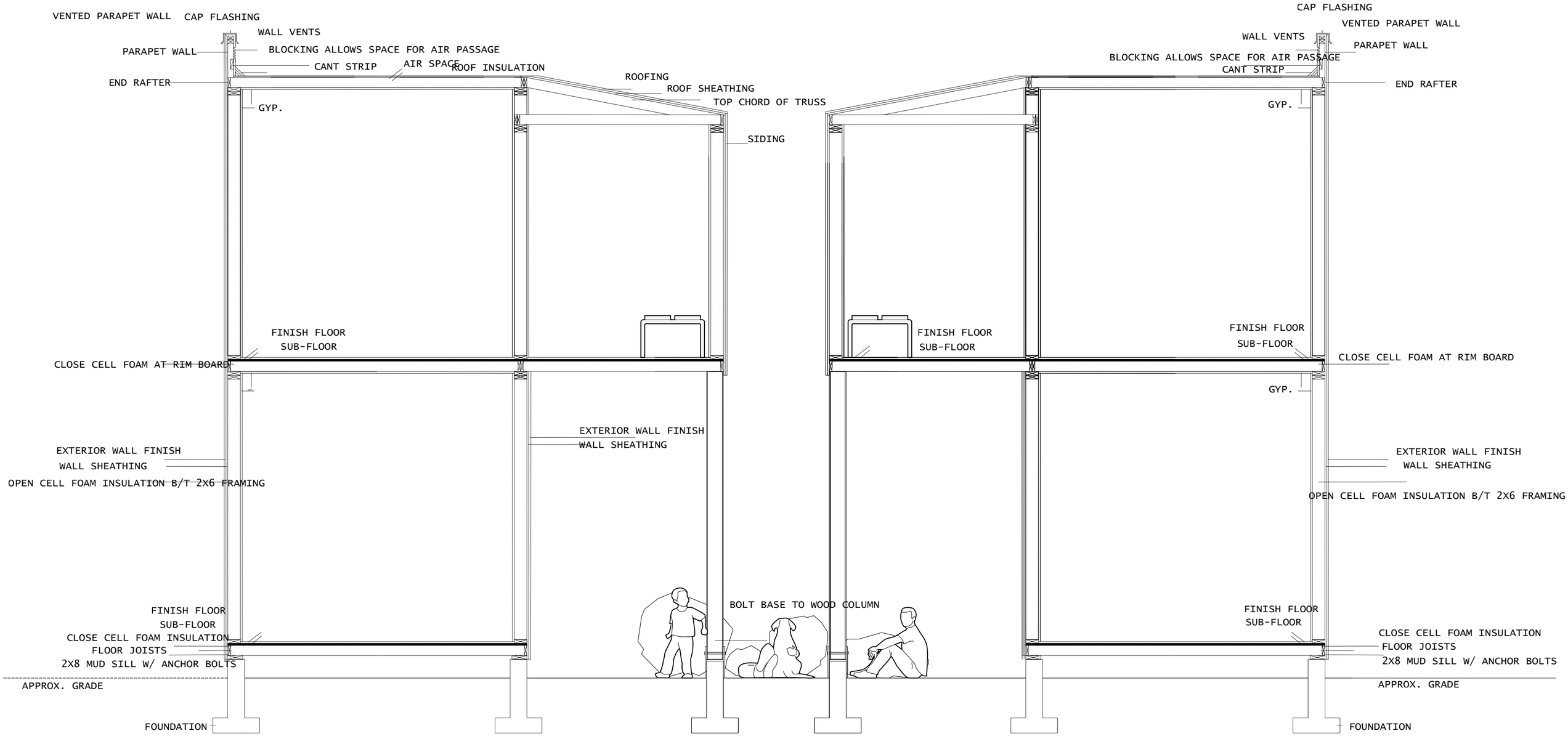
Felt response to touch and visual warmth of material -- inherent connection to nature

Sustainability

Wood is a renewable resource. with a circular, Cradle-to-Cradle life-cycle . It has a lower carbon footprint compared to concrete or steel. Pre-fab reduces material waste and supports carbon sequeestration.

Expression of Structure

There is an inherent honesty to mass timberconstruction with the integration of material, process, and form. The forthright expression of truth aligns with Ansel Adams. The repetition of structure also lends itsself to repetition and regularity---a useful tool for reinforcing perspectives. There are also opportunities for wonder and revelation by breaking the logic in select instances.


VENTED PARAPET WALL
CAP FLASHING
WALL VENTS
PARAPET WALL
BLOCKING ALLOWS SPACE FOR AIR PASSAGE
CANT STRIP
AIR SPACE
ROOF INSULATION
END RAFTER
ROOFING
ROOF SHEATHING
TOP CHORD OF TRUSS
GYP.
SIDING
FINISH FLOOR
SUB-FLOOR
CLOSE CELL FOAM AT RIM BOARD
EXTERIOR WALL FINISH
WALL SHEATHING
OPEN CELL FOAM INSULATION B/T 2X6 FRAMING
EXTERIOR WALL FINISH
WALL SHEATHING
FINISH FLOOR
SUB-FLOOR
CLOSE CELL FOAM INSULATION
FLOOR JOISTS
2X8 MUD SILL W/ ANCHOR BOLTS
APPROX. GRADE
FOUNDATION
BOLT BASE TO WOOD COLUMN
CAP FLASHING
VENTED PARAPET WALL
WALL VENTS
PARAPET WALL
BLOCKING ALLOWS SPACE FOR AIR PASSAGE
CANT STRIP
END RAFTER
GYP.
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SUB-FLOOR
CLOSE CELL FOAM INSULATION
FLOOR JOISTS
2X8 MUD SILL W/ ANCHOR BOLTS
APPROX. GRADE
FOUNDATION

Artists + Architectural Allies

The origins of this thesis inquiry grew from a deep fascination with artists who manipulate light, perception, material, form, and space to transform the viewer's relationship with time and reality.

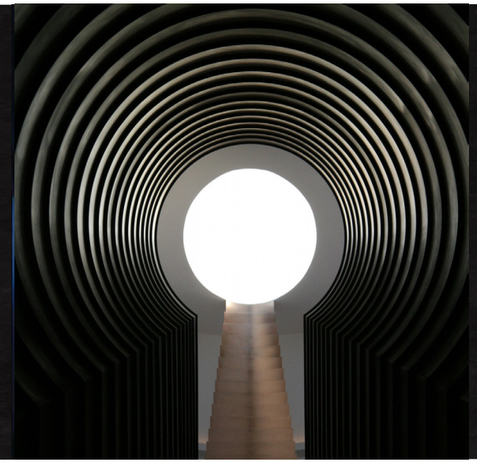
Early inspiration came from the work of **Abelardo Morell, James Turrell, Georges Rousse,** and **Olafur Eliasson**—each of whom engages visual phenomena to create ephemeral yet powerful, lasting experiences.

Additionally, **Peter Zumthor**'s writing in Atmospheres and Thinking Architecture, about the art of space and time and the importance of occupant experience was a significant influence. **Steven Holl**'s writing in Parallax also inspired light studies relating to the interplay of aperture geometry and admitted light.

Together, these artists inspired a pursuit: to create an architecture that does not simply house perception but orchestrates it—offering encounters with light, material, and space that make time visible, experiential, and emotionally resonant.

Abelardo Morell

James Turrell

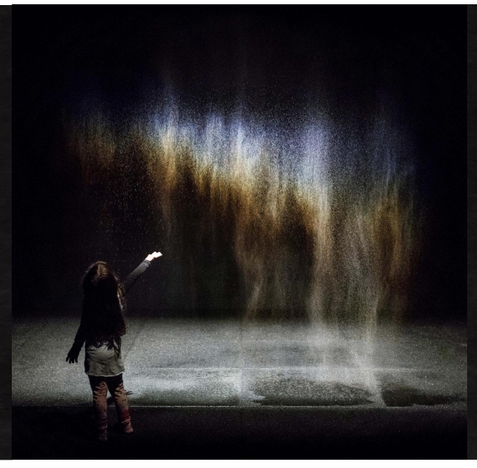


Finally, James Turrell grounded the inquiry in the purest manipulation of light and perception. Through his precisely constructed spaces, Turrell removes the ordinary reference points of architecture to reveal light itself as an object. His work showed that architecture could slow perception to stillness, allowing visitors to internalize a single moment of awareness as a lasting memory. His Roden Crater project is an example of how perception of an object, in this case the sky, transforms in response to a spectators relationship to it. Revelation occurs through approach.

Georges Rousse

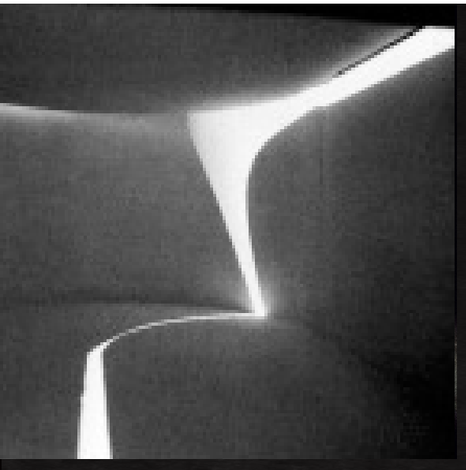
Georges Rousse introduced the idea of anamorphosis into the conversation. In his work, distorted paintings fill abandoned spaces, only aligning into a coherent image from one specific vantage point. Through Rousse, the realization emerged that architecture could choreograph movement and discovery—
requiring the viewer's physical participation to complete the image or the moment. Space could be dynamic and activated by perception.

Olafur Elliasson



Olafur Eliasson expanded the inquiry into revelation and the perception of time. He proposes that perception is a dynamic collaboration between observer and phenomenon, unfolding through time and space. Visitors complete his artworks through bodily awareness, becoming active participants in creating ephemeral moments. These experiences, marked by wonder and revelation, are internalized with clarity and preserved as memory. Through his use of natural elements, geometry, mirrors, light, and color, Eliasson's work suggests that architecture can also frame evolving experiences and preserve the ephemeral—where time is felt through heightened attention and presence rather than measured by the clock.

Steven Holl



Steven Holl's work reinforced my belief that architecture is not static, but rather a lived experience unfolding in time, capable of revealing deeper truths about our relationship to place and the natural world. Steven Holl profoundly influenced my understanding of architecture as a temporal and perceptual experience. His explorations of light, movement, and materiality—especially as articulated in Parallax—shaped my approach to framing time through architecture by claiming portions of light.

Peter Zumthor

In the chapter of Thinking Architecture titled 'Shaping Temporalities: The Art of Space and Time', Peter Zumthor emphasizes architecture as a spatial and temporal art, capable of crafting emotional resonance through materiality, movement, and atmosphere, which directly informed my exploration of framing time and experience. Zumthor's ideas about guiding occupants through sequences of spaces—balancing composure and seduction, openness and intimacy—encouraged me to think of architecture not as static form but as a voyage of discovery.

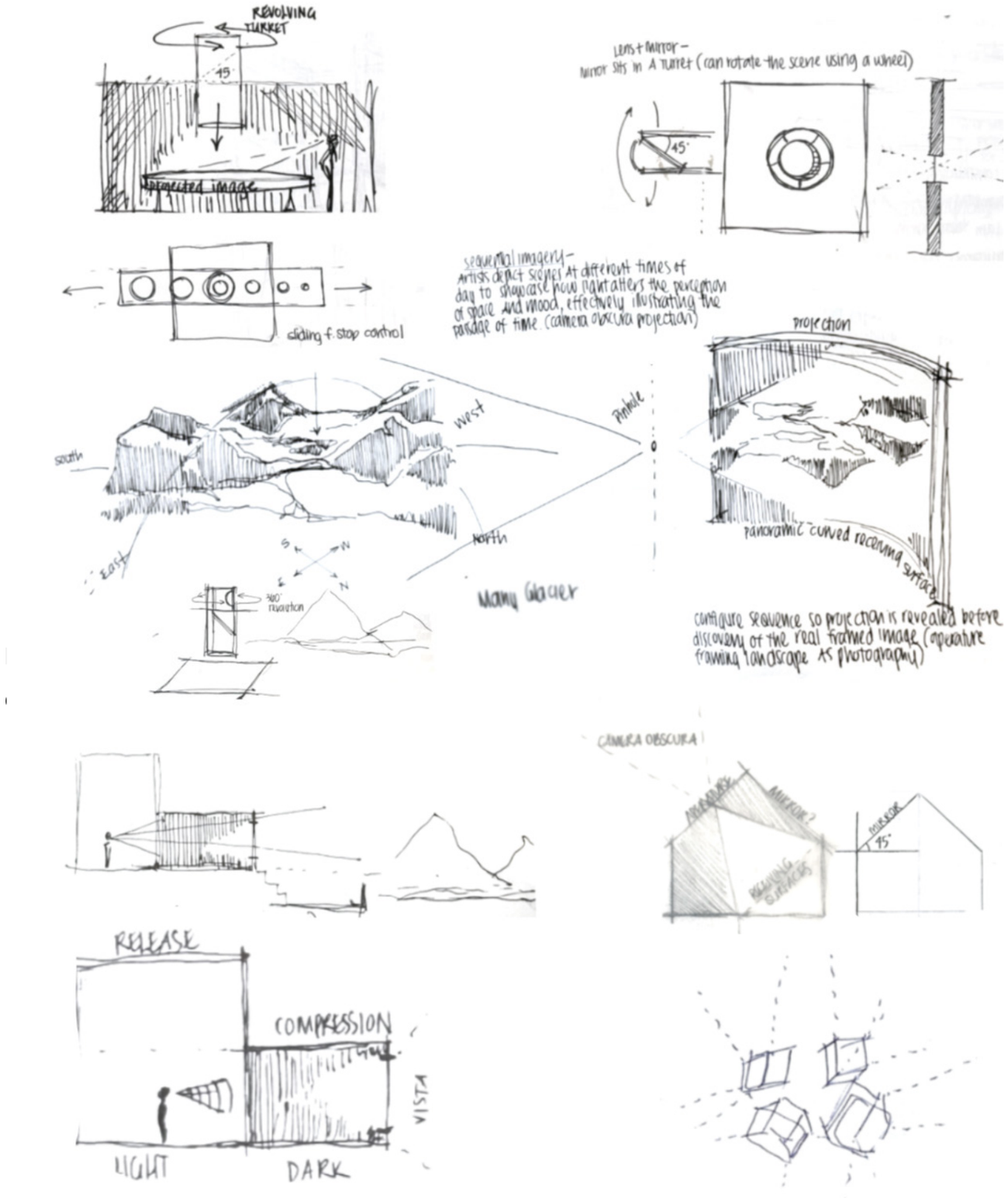
His belief that meaningful architecture is measured by how it makes people feel, rather than by its formal qualities alone, pushed me to prioritize sensory impact, presence, and the careful shaping of ephemeral moments in my work.

Early Explorations: Light and Perception

Unlike most other projects in school when I was assigned a building typology and site at the beginning, thesis is a project where I was able to start with an exploration of ideas, then choose a building typology and site that would best suit them.

My early explorations were driven by a fascination with how perception can be shaped, distorted, and revealed through controlled interactions of light and geometry. Visual perception offered a way to think about architecture not as static form, but as an unfolding experience—something dynamic, alive, and dependent on the viewer's position in space and time.

The camera obscura—an ancient device where light passes through a small aperture to project an image—captured the phenomenon of active perceptive space through its demonstration of how light frames reality and can also momentarily hold it still. The camera obscura offers a powerful metaphor for how architecture might capture and transform fleeting conditions, like a camera for lived experience.



Light, Geometry, + Camera Obscura Inspired Sketches

Early Explorations:
Light and Perception

I also sketched ways to apply anamorphism to architecture, as I was fascinated by the experience of alignment in architecture and the feeling of being in the right place at the right time. Anamorphism requires a vantage point to experience a complete, recognizable whole.

I love the resulting sense of awe and wonder about the presented object in view. Anamorphism gives architecture the potential to create moments of revelation—experiences that are hidden until precisely the right convergence of space, light, and viewer occurs.

Together, these ideas inspired an investigation into how architecture could move beyond form-making to become an instrument of perception—staging encounters with time, light, and memory.

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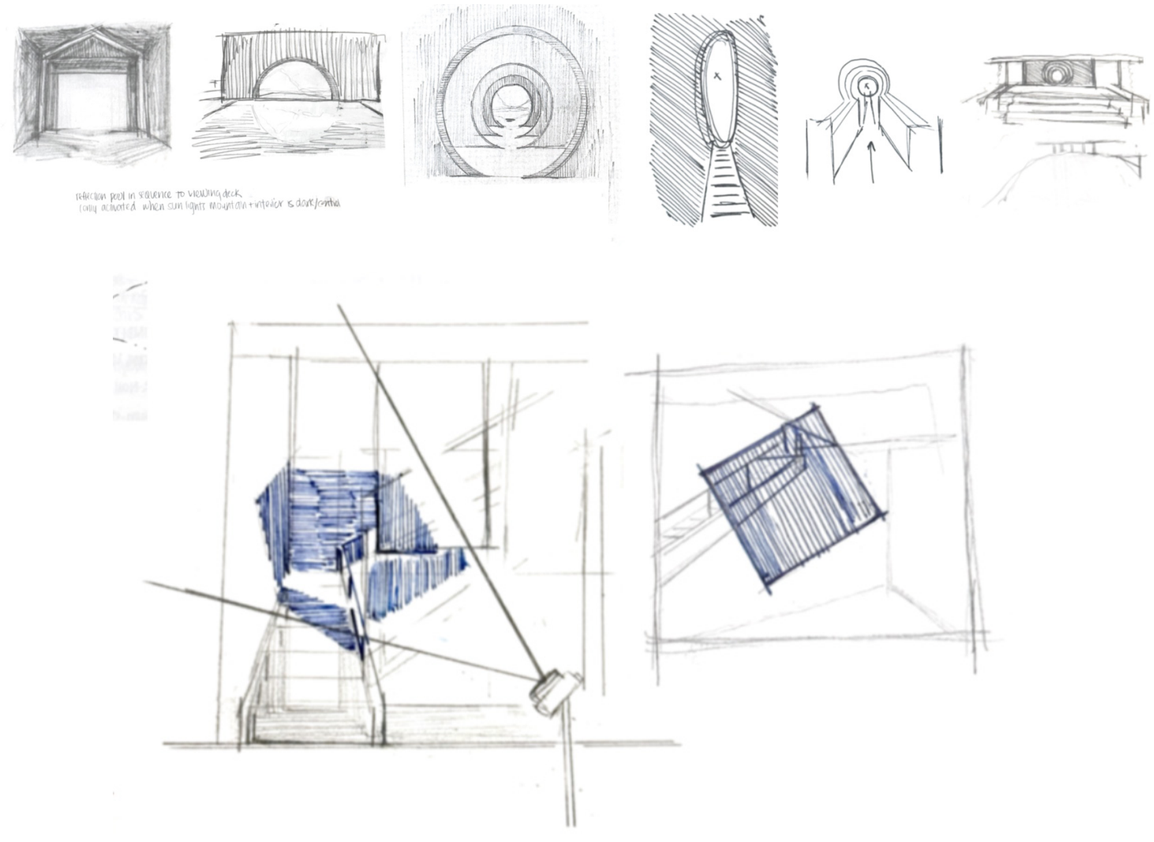

Light, Geometry, + Anamorphism Inspired Sketches

Early Explorations:
Light and Perception

I continued to sketch but also made a departure into physical model-making to explore the translation of my 2D drawings into 3D volumes, with a particular focus on how a play on visual perception would cause moments of awe, wonder, and revelation.

This included model-making of a miniature Ames Room and of a camera obscura–both in an effort to understand conditions of space required to achieve these plays on perception.

The Ames Room takes advantage of depth perception. Constructing the physical model taught me how crucial the correct lighting (especially in the interior corners) is in order to be successfully tricked by the vantage point on the geometry. Referential elements such as a skewed window and door to fit the perspective also supported the visual illusion of an orthogonal room, despite an actual angular geometry.

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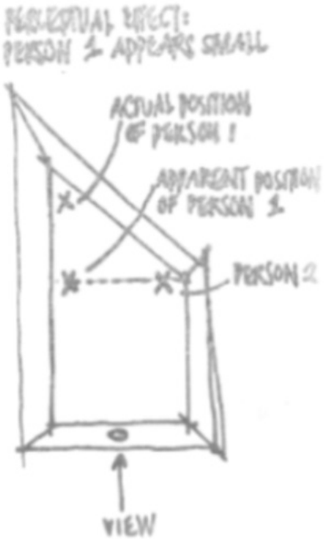
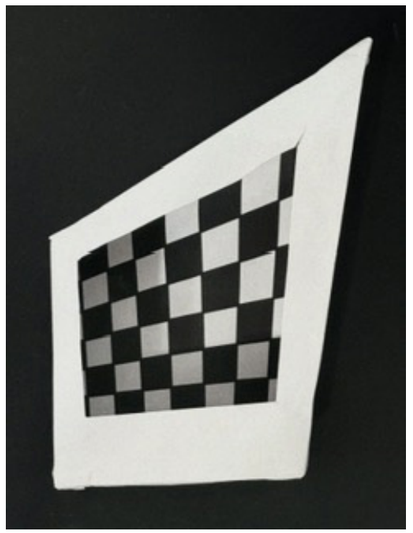
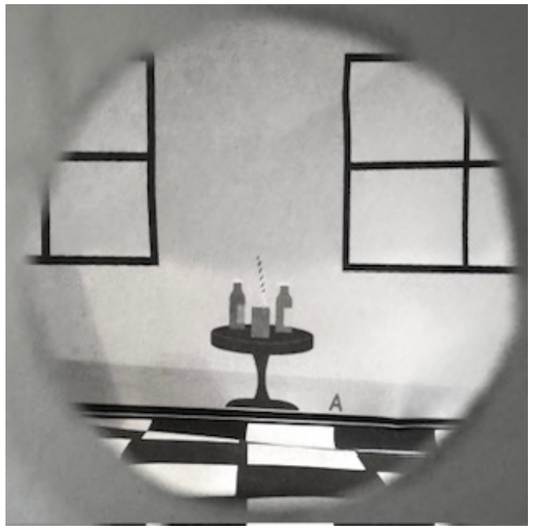
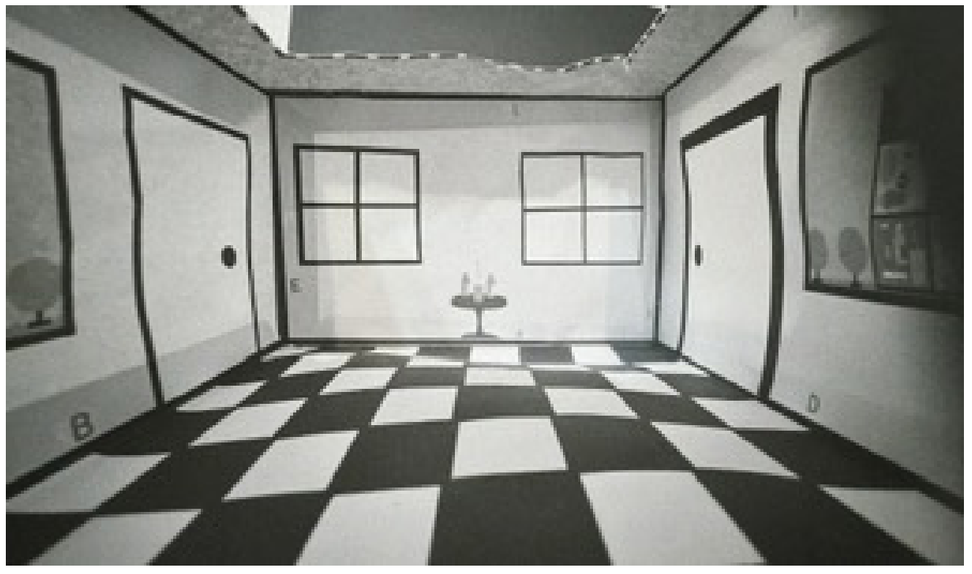








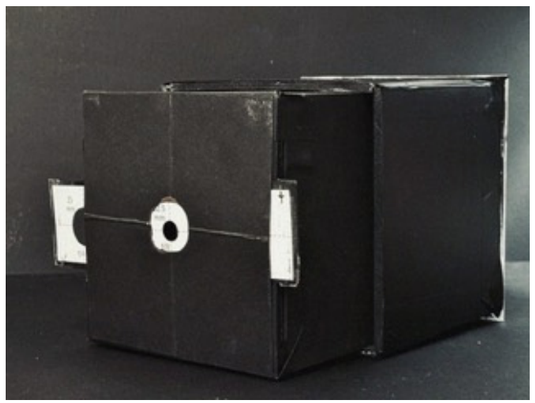
Ames Room

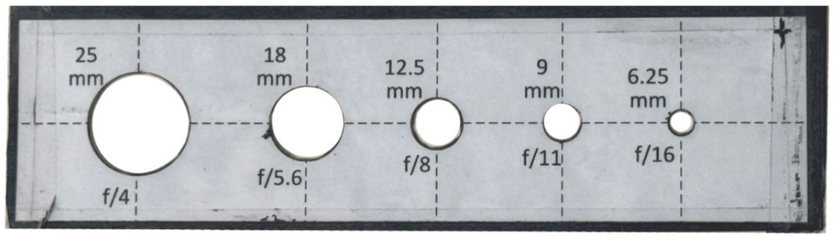
Physical Model

Early Explorations:
Light and Perception

Constructing the camera obscura model explained how camera obscuras work, as well as how its projection changes by manipulating different variables of its construction. I learned that the camera obscura's projection was optimized when the diameter of the aperture was adjustable. Like on a camera, a dilating or closing lens adjusts light entering the hole according to the intensity of light of surrounding conditions at any given point in time.

The projection was also optimized when the throw distance of light could be adjusted–meaning the distance from the pinhole to the receiving surface. When light intensity is low, a shorter throw distance is required to still perceive a projection. When light intensity is high, it enables the receiving surface to be further from the pinhole opening, and a projection remains visible. A perfect combination of light intensity, aperture diameter, and distance to a receiving wall results in a high resolution projected image. The image to the right pictures a clear projection of a light fixture in my apartment, on the translucent surface opposite of the aperture.



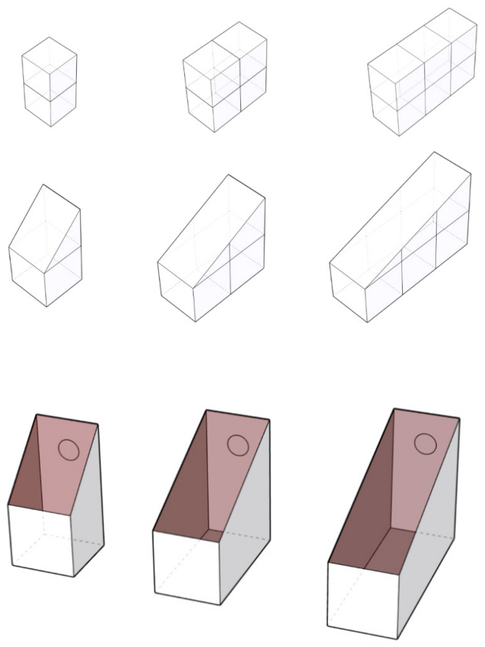


Camera Obscura with Sliding f-stop Control
Physical Model

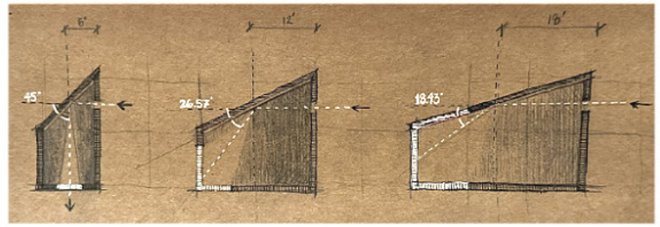
Evolving the Idea: From Camera Obscura Projections to Reflected Light

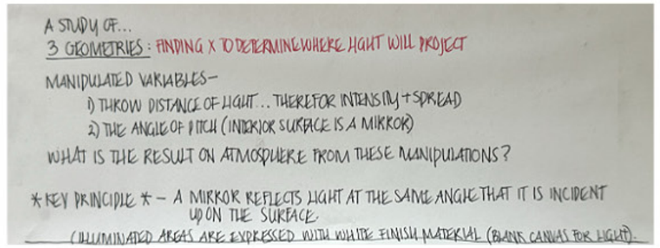
Through the initial camera obscura model, I learned the value of using multiple fixed geometries to explore perceptual differences, rather than relying on a single adjustable mechanism. By creating distinct volumes with unique configurations, each serving as a point of reference to the others, I was able to investigate how spatial experience changes based on geometry—without the need for dynamic or moving parts that could degrade over time.

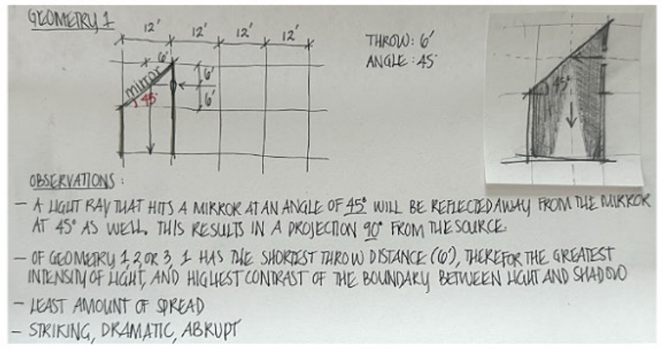
To ensure a consistent perceptual experience regardless of external light conditions, I shifted away from relying on precise camera obscura projections. Instead, I enlarged the pinhole into a fixed aperture that admits light continuously, transforming the inquiry from projection-based phenomena to the spatial effects of light interacting with reflective surfaces. This evolution marked a departure from the camera obscura as a literal device, and instead emphasized how fixed geometries and mirrors modulate light to create stark or diffused atmospheres. The three resulting volumes explore how perceptual shifts can be driven by the animated interplay of light and reflection, rather than mechanical transformation—establishing a more permanent, yet dynamic, architectural experience.

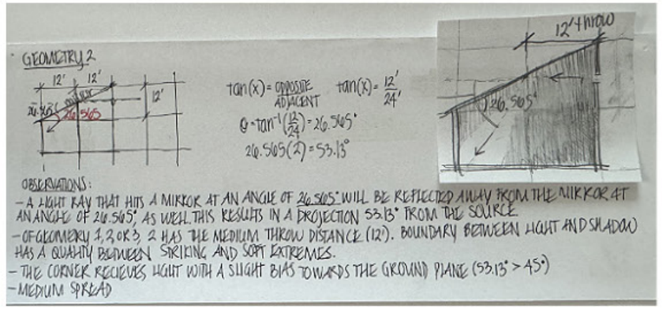


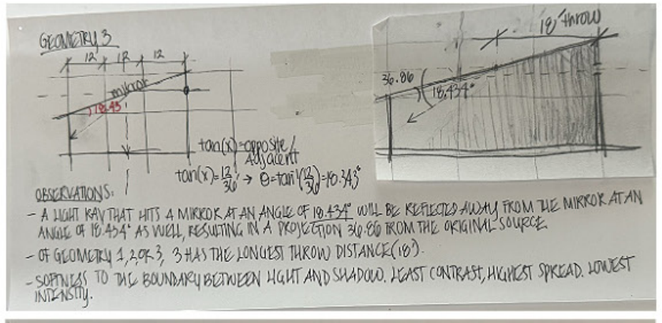
Digital Mock-Ups of The Three Geometries

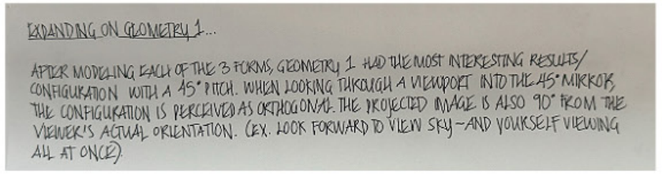










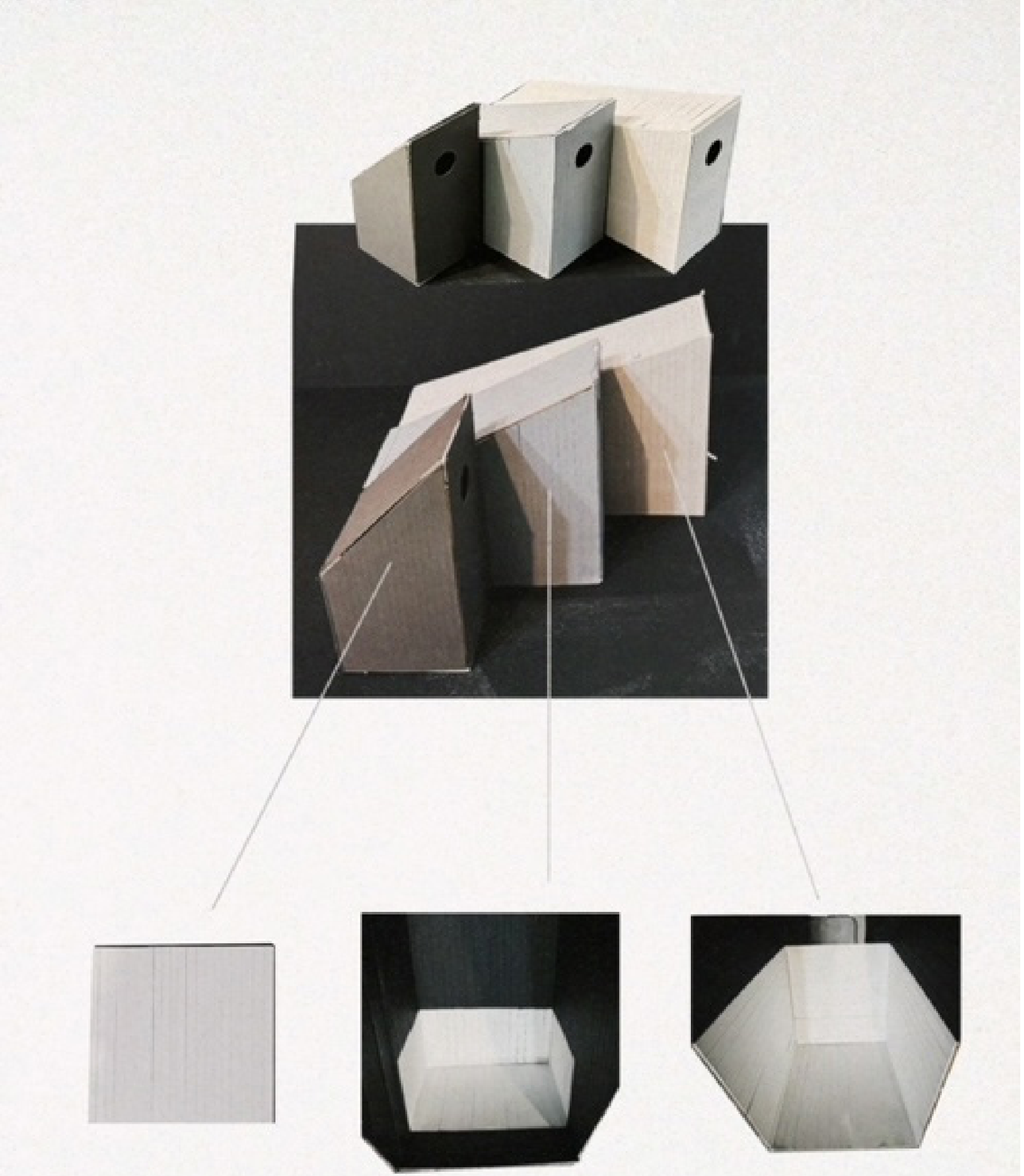


Three Reflected Light Geometries

The three geometries could be incorporated on a site together as frames of reference to each other, or one could be chosen as the most compelling, then repeated. The commonalities between the 3 geometries are 1) a tilted mirror at a varying degree which is the reflective pitch over a confined volume, and 2) a hole through which light enters and reflects off of that mirrored pitch in the direction of a receiving viewing plane.

The 3 models demonstrated how varying mirror angles of a pitched roof also have consequences in throw distance. This is the distance between the light and a receiving surface, or in this case the distance from opening to mirror, and mirror to receiving surface. Each configuration had different resulting visual effects–primarily perceptible differences in the boundary between light and shadow. The shorter throw distance of the 45 degree geometry resulted in a sharp boundary, whereas the gradual tilt of the 18.4 degree mirror resulted in a longer throw distance and a soft boundary between light and shadow. The pitch directly impacts the intensity of light when it reaches the receiving plane and how broadly that light is cast.

Within each of the physical models, I applied white paper exactly where the light should fall according to trigonometry, reflecting off of the mirrored pitch. Each volume progressively demonstrated a more diffused spread of light and more oblique angle of reflection.



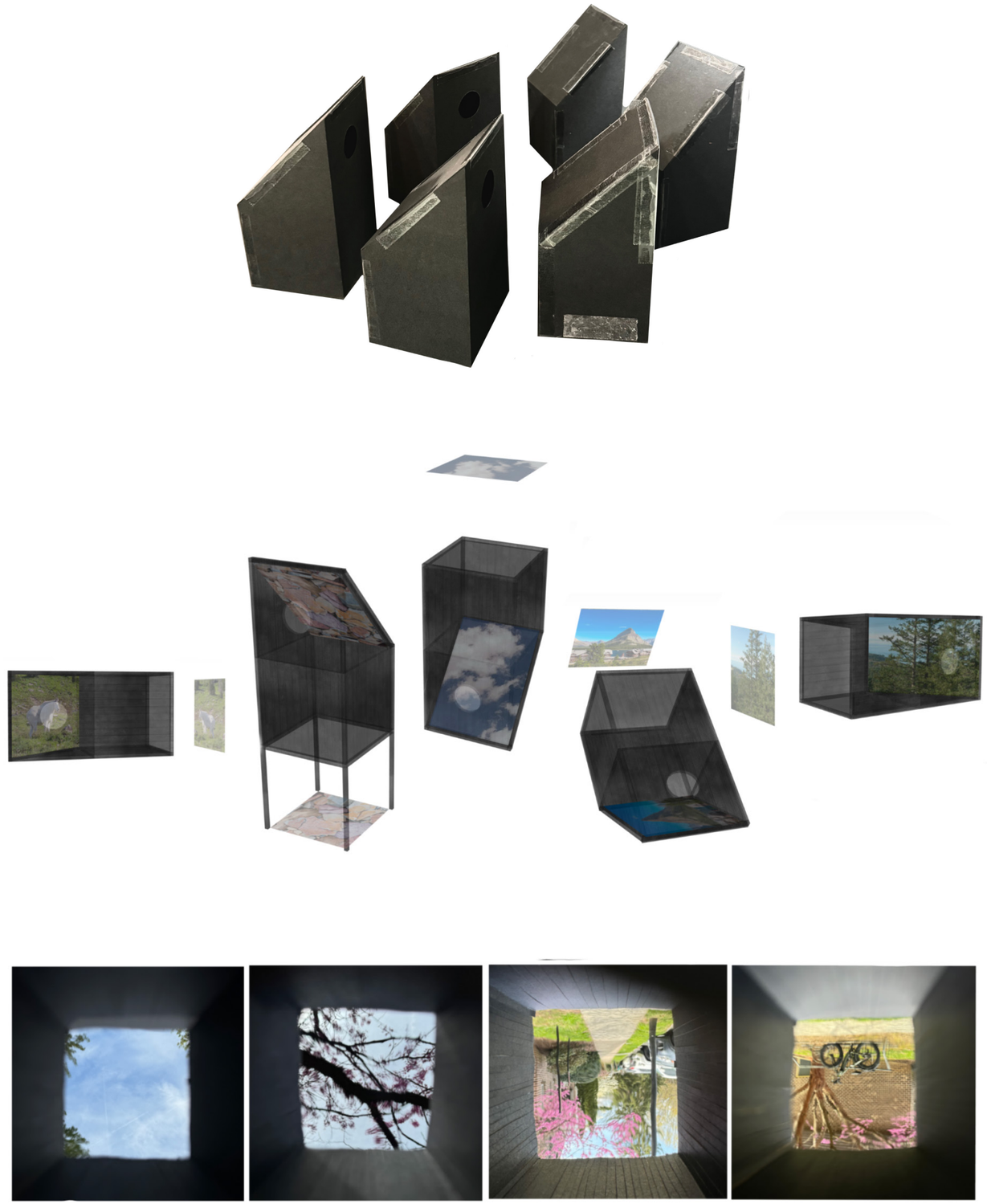
The Three Geometries Physical Models

White Paper Inside Indicates Where Light Falls Within Each of The Three Geometries

Lessons from Model-Making
Final Commitment: The 45-Degree Periscope Geometry

Through modeling the 3 geometries (a 45 degree, 26.5 degree, and 18.4 degree mirror), the volume with a 45 degree mirror elicited the most interesting viewing experience through a different orientation than the models were originally designed for. The varying designs were intended to be about differences in the quality of light from within the enclosed volumes, however when stepping outside the volume, and using the aperture for light to pass through as a viewport from the outside of the volume to inside the volume, the geometry becomes a vessel acting as a periscope.

A periscope inspired space with one 45-degree mirror captures light and redirects the light's image to the eye exactly 90 degrees from the source. The viewer's perceived image is exactly 90 degrees opposite of what is expected from the viewer's body orientation. When looking out, you could see a view of up or down. When looking up or down, you could see a view out or behind. The wonder of this condition creates pause until an understanding of the geometry at play is reached. This geometry became the architectural core--framing and reorienting perception.

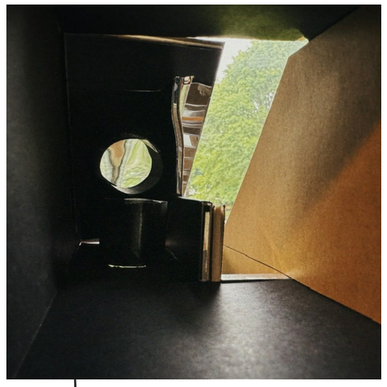


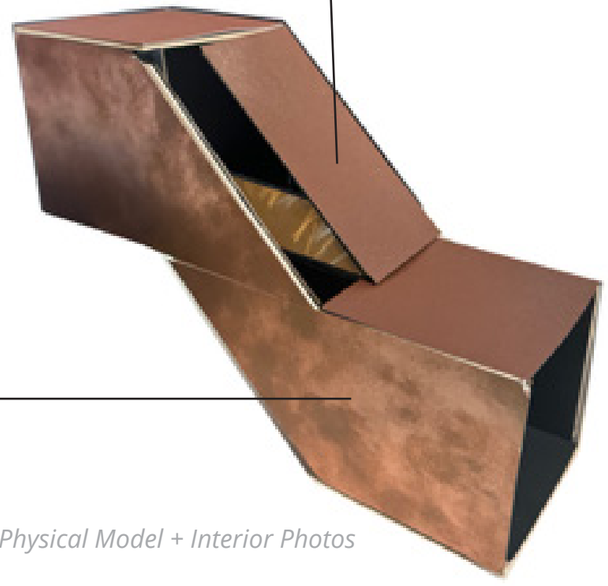
Physical Models and Digital Mock-Ups of the 45-Degree Geometry in Varying Orientations

Final Commitment: The 45-Degree Geometry

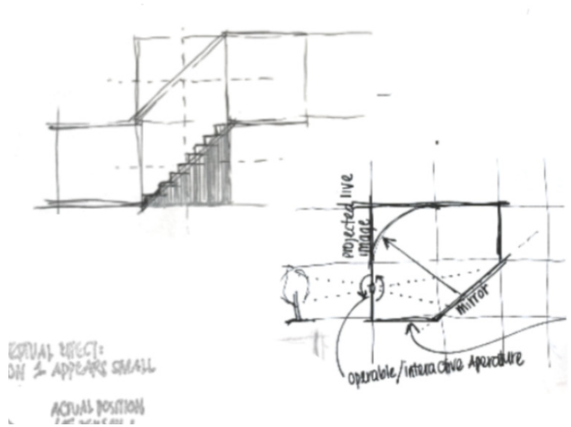
Initially, dynamism of light in relationship to a reflective geometry animated the experience within each of the three volumes. Now, the project shifted to become about how varying geometries of a mirror in relationship to light and in relationship to a viewer's position shift visual perception of what is captured. Dynamism of light and of occupants animate the experience, rather than moving architectural parts.I committed to the 45-degree geometry and physically modeled multiples of it so that I could arrange the discreet parts into whole compositions with the resulting experiences I wanted within the architecture.

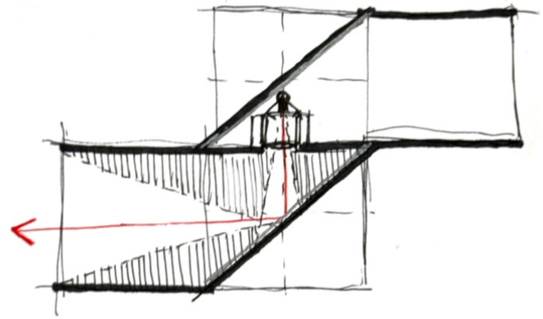
Matching the holes of two volumes allowed for the experience of first an upright projection--meeting the eye after reflection off of two 45-degree mirrors. Then, when inhabitants peer up or down into the opening, they will have an inverted experience of the same image just perceived, revealing the role of the mirrors and geometry as they interact with light from the surrounding landscape.





Physical Model + Interior Photos





Sketches of Two 45-Degree Geometries Interacting and Digital Mock-Ups As An Architectural Space

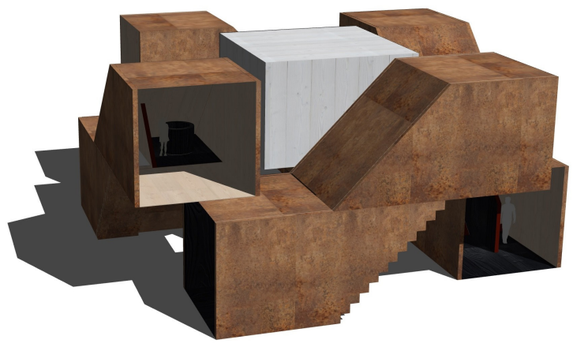
Choosing the Typology: A Gallery for Ansel Adams

At this point, I was ready for a building theme, typology, and site because I was firm on the ideas I had been exploring–how visual perception can be shaped through composition of light, geometry, and material. I had also been exploring themes present in early camera technology, and was interested in applying these mechanics to architecture.

A gallery for Ansel Adams in Glacier National Park would support my ideas because Ansel Adams, coveted for his black and white photography of the American West, was highly concerned with light control in his process to achieve the full desired tonal range present in his work. Additionally, he was driven by a deep purpose of revealing the wonder of nature, ultimately encouraging others to support its preservation. Ansel Adams renders time still and makes viewers of his photography more present in the world when they return to it. Through his lens, Ansel Adams draws viewers' attention to not only grand vistas, but to intimate details in nature, such as intricate leaves and lichen, that contribute to the whole of a landscape evoking instant awe. Revealing these scales of intricacy establishes a stronger sense of reverence towards nature for the viewer, and consequential sense of responsibility toward it.

The architecture of a gallery for Ansel Adams in Glacier National Park is an object in the landscape, delicately perched upon a mountaintop as a gesture towards minimal impact, where direct and indirect views of the surrounding context are presented through apertures and mirrors as an object of awe, wonder, revelation, and reverence. The architecture intends to deliver a contemplative experience, as visiting hikers oscillate between modes of being-in and observing nature. My main criteria for the massing of the object in the landscape was that it would provide a view of every scale and direction. There is no front or back to the building–rather, it is a pinwheel offering a 360 experience.

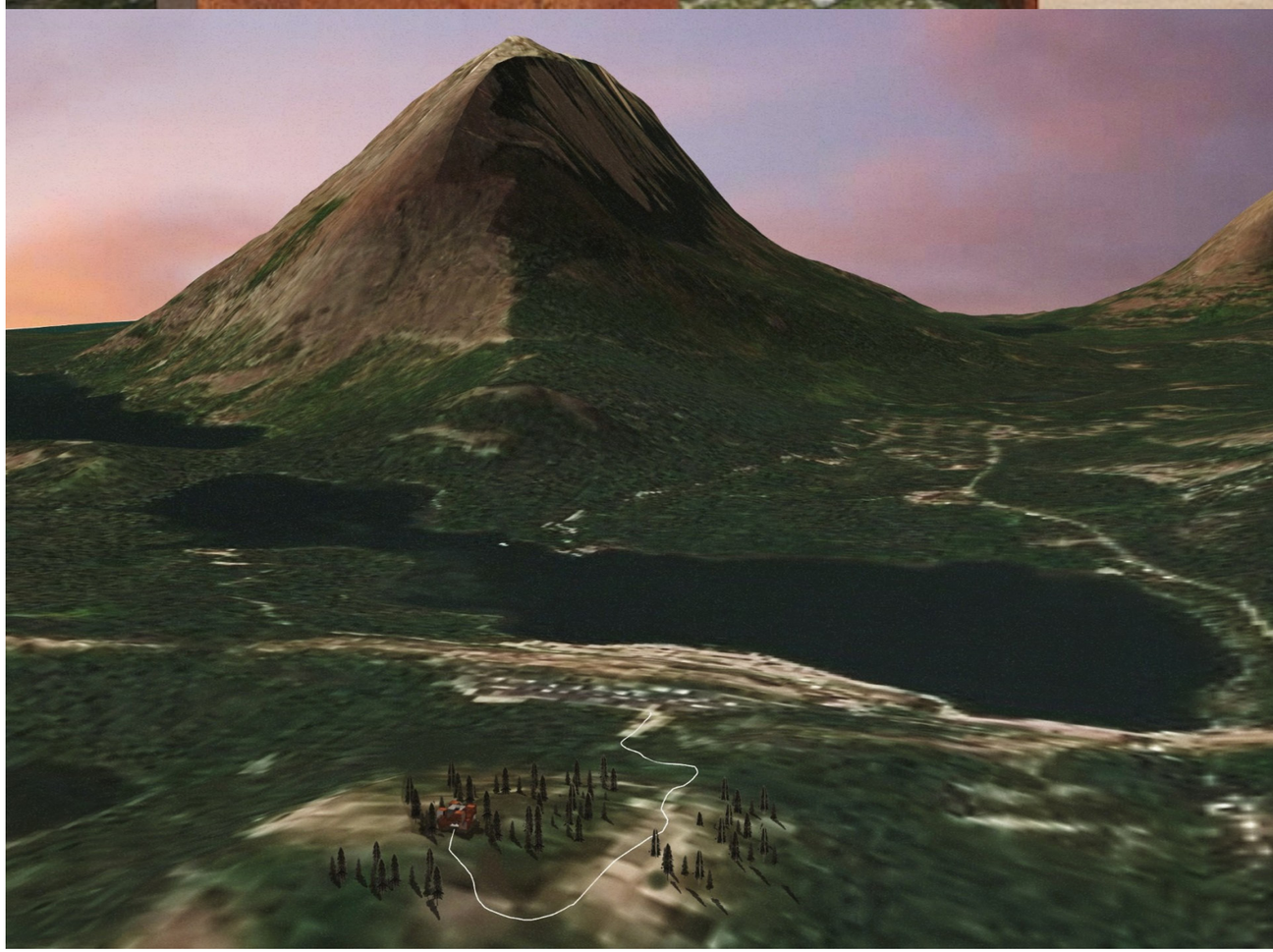
Additionally, the direct and indirect views include aspects of the foreground, midground, and background, encouraging the viewer to reflect on all scales of the surrounding landscape–the most immediate that they engage with physically, and the most distant they engage with perceptually. In a sequence of animated frames unfolding in real time, visitors transition from lived moments within the landscape, immersed in Glacier National Park, to lived moments within the object in the landscape, where experience resembles inhabiting one of Ansel Adams' large format cameras. Finally, visitors reach a contained, protected volume where time stops. The central, enclosed gallery for viewing Ansel Adams photography is a precious time-capsule, where preserved moments of Glacier that Ansel Adams so carefully documented are on display.



A Poetic Continuation of Adams' Vision

In continuing Ansel Adams' legacy through design, this architecture does more than house images—it becomes an image-maker itself. Through intentional framing, calibrated apertures, and reflective geometries, it invites visitors into moments of revelation and wonder that shift how they perceive time, nature, and themselves. By embedding poetics of perception, light, material, and composition into architecture, my thesis uses art as a medium to transform how people see and experience the world -- particularly with regard to their place within temporality and permanence. Visitors negotiate past, present, and future in the context of Glacier National Park.

The design transforms fleeting experiences into lasting impressions, deepening awareness of our place within the continuum of the natural world. Just as Adams captured the ephemeral to inspire preservation, this thesis proposes that architecture, too, can become an instrument of stewardship—one that heightens perception, honors temporality, and ultimately fosters a renewed sense of reverence for the enduring landscapes we are privileged to inhabit.



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