

GLORIOUS, SOMBER DECAY Living with Death in the 21st Century



Glorious, Somber Decay
Living with Death in the 21st Century

Catherine J. Smith

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture
in
Architecture

Paul Kelsch, Chair
Paul Emmons
Marcia Feuerstein

May 9, 2023
Alexandria, Virginia

Keywords: death, composting, burial, grief, sustainability

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Abstract

In today's death industry, many standard burial practices inhibit decomposition and ensure that land used for cemeteries has little ability for adaptation or improved ecological health of the site. Western culture has increasingly disconnected itself from death, often ignoring the inevitable until it is too late and making grief and mourning an isolating endeavor. This thesis seeks to address issues of climate and social resilience in death spaces, as well as creating an architecture that relieves the fear and disconnection to death and the mourning process prevalent in our society.

The site is the former coal storage field of the Alexandria Power Generation Station in North Old Town, Alexandria, Virginia. The power plant was shut down in 2012, and has sat unoccupied, in part because pollution from the power plant has depleted soil nutrients and created a brownfield site.

In this project, practices like Natural Organic Reduction (NOR), natural burial, and grave renewal are used to develop an adaptive site condition that embraces change and quite literally continues to build upon itself over time. Using the composted material from NOR on site will help restore the ecological health of the site by diluting the contaminated soil and creating a method of phased layering to prevent overcrowding or filling up of burial plots.

The architecture is designed to celebrate the natural processes of death, and to embrace the mourning process for those still living. As the visitor enters the building, they leave the "land of the living" and descend into the ground. As they travel through the building, natural light is gradually reintroduced to the interior spaces, and the visitor literally and metaphorically rises back out of the ground, as a symbol of healing and relief from their grief. Ceremonial spaces provide extensive views out over the site to connect both with the beautiful scenery of the Potomac River and the burial grounds surrounding the building, demonstrating a body's natural return to the earth after death.

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General Audience Abstract

In today's death industry, many standard burial practices inhibit decomposition and prevent sustainable land use of cemeteries. Western culture has increasingly disconnected itself from death, often ignoring the inevitable until it is too late and making grief and mourning an isolating endeavor. This thesis seeks to address issues of climate and social resilience in death spaces, as well as creating an architectural design that relieves the fear and disconnection to death and the mourning process prevalent in our society.

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In this project, practices like Natural Organic Reduction (NOR), natural burial, and grave renewal are used to develop an adaptive site condition that embraces change and a more sustainable method of death care. Composted material from NOR used on site will help restore its ecological health by diluting contaminated soil and creating a method of phased layering to prevent overcrowding or filling up of burial plots. The architecture is designed to celebrate the natural processes of death, and embrace the mourning process for those still living by providing views out over the site to connect with the beautiful scenery of the Potomac River and the burial grounds surrounding the building, demonstrating the body's natural return to the earth after death.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Paul Kelsch, Paul Emmons, and Marcia Feuerstein for letting me discuss death, grief, and decomposing with both grace and humor. Your guidance and teachings have made this last year one my favorite in higher education. Thank you especially to Paul Kelsch for teaching me just about everything I now know about landscape architecture. The project would literally have not been possible without you.

Thank you to Jeff Hodes and Emily Miller with the Green Burial Council, Matt Levinson with Sol Levinson Funeral Home, and David Heiby with Gravestone Stories for donating their time and knowledge to this project.

Thank you to my Mom for giving birth to me on Halloween - by far the best day to be born, and for indulging my fascination with the macabre. I'm sorry you never got to wear the beach ball costume.

The title for this thesis is a quote from Susan Rademacher Frey in a 1986 article describing the Bloedel Reserve in Washington.

*“The second pair teems with birth, life, and death: the Anteroom in **glorious, somber decay** with microscopic life digesting the woods into fertile humus”¹*

1. Frey, Susan Rademacher (1986). A Series of Gardens. *Landscape Architecture*, 76(5), 54–128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44676543>

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DEFINITIONS

aquamation, n. -

1. also 'alkaline hydrolysis', the chemical process of rapidly decomposing a dead body to mostly tiny bits of bone resembling ash by immersing the body in a pressurized chamber containing a heated alkaline solution (as of potassium hydroxide) followed by drainage of all liquid and pulverization of remaining bone

charnel house, n. -

1. also 'ossuary' or 'bone house'; a vault or building where human skeletal remains are stored

columbarium, n. -

1. a room or building with niches for funeral urns to be stored.

cremation, n. -

1. the process of reducing a dead body to mostly tiny bits of bone resembling ash that involves exposing the body to flame and intense heat followed by pulverization of bone fragments

cemetery, n. -

1. a burial ground

embalm, v. -

1. to preserve a corpse from decay, usually by arterial injection of a preservative, such as a formaldehyde-based chemical solution

formaldehyde, n. -

1. a colorless pungent irritating gas CH_2O used chiefly in aqueous solution as a disinfectant and preservative and in chemical synthesis

mausoleum, n. -

1. a large tomb

2. a usually stone building with places for entombment of the dead above ground

Natural Organic Reduction, n. -

1. abbrev. NOR; also 'human composting', the contained, accelerated conversion of human remains to soil

2. a process using aerators to hold human remains together with straw, wood chips, and/or other natural materials for a period of time of about four to six weeks, eventually resulting in reduction to a soil material

An Abridged History of Death and the City

The relationship between death spaces and the urban environment has continuously evolved throughout history. During the Roman Empire, all burials were required to take place outside of the city, leading to the creation of vast necropolises, or subterranean cities for the dead. Cremation was extremely common, though with the eventual rise of Christian ideologies, this practice fell out of favor, and burials in or nearby churches became more common.

Barring mass disease or conflict, Christianity required a church burial. However, plots were not typically kept in perpetuity. After a period of time, any remains would be removed to a charnel house, and the church plot would be available for another body.

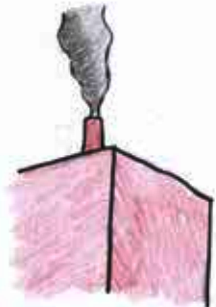
The Reformation and rise of Protestantism created a desire for permanent burial plots marked with a gravestone or monument. Churchyards quickly became grossly overcrowded.

Continued overcrowding and industrialization throughout western Europe led to the Garden Cemetery movement in Europe and the subsequent Rural Cemetery movement in the US. Landscaped cemeteries were moved outside of the city, and became natural oases for repose, escape, and appreciation of nature while having awareness of one's own mortality. Pere Lachaise near Paris, and Mount Auburn near Boston became the leading examples of these respective types of death space design.

However, moving burials to larger tracts of land outside of the city is only a temporary solution. For many burial grounds, the only way to fit more bodies is to buy more land. Part of this thesis proposes a more sustainable land use strategy around burials. If building out is no longer possible, this thesis proposes that instead cemeteries should look to build up.

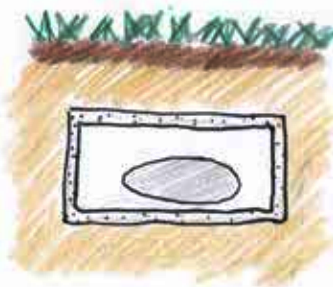
Cremation

In 2021, 57.5% of Americans chose cremation as their end-of-life plan, a number that has steadily increased over the last century largely due to cost considerations. Though often advertised as a more eco-friendly option, one cremation uses the same amount of energy and emits the same amount of carbon as about two tanks of gas. In total, cremations create 360,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide every year.



Traditional Burial

Many traditional cemeteries encourage embalming of the body and require burial in a concrete or steel-lined plot in addition to a wood or metal casket. Typical burials are 5 to 6 feet below ground, beyond the typical level of organisms that break down organic material. These practices make decomposition nearly impossible, and require huge areas of land to continue to stay in operation.



Aquamation

Though often advertised as a more eco-friendly option, one cremation uses the same amount of energy and emits the same amount of carbon as about two tanks of gas. Aquamation uses a fraction of the energy of fire, and can significantly reduce funeral greenhouse gas emissions. A body is placed in an alkaline liquid solution, pressurized, and heated, eventually turning to ash.



Natural Organic Reduction

NOR uses a fraction of the energy required for cremation or traditional burial, and none of the toxic chemicals. A body is placed in a large aerator along with organic material like wood chips, and warm air is pumped through as the aerator is periodically turned to facilitate the decomposition process. Within 4 weeks, the body is fully decomposed, and transformed into about 1 cu. yard of soil. This soil can then be collected by the family or donated to an ecological restoration site.



Natural Burial

Natural burials, typically do not require the body to be embalmed. The body is wrapped in a bio-degradable material, like cardboard or wood, or just a shroud, and buried 3 to 4 feet below ground without a liner. The body is able to naturally decompose, and any nutrients are returned to the soil.



Recompose

Seattle, Washington

Founder and CEO of Recompose, Katrina Spade, created the original idea for Recompose in her Masters of Architecture thesis. Recompose facilitates a process called Natural Organic Reduction (NOR) or human composting. Advertised as requiring a fraction of the energy of a traditional burial or cremation, NOR uses aeration (pictured, left) to decompose a body within 30 days, transforming it into soil that can then be picked up by the family or donated to an ecological restoration site.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Duck Run Natural Cemetery

Penn Laird, Virginia

Duck Run is a certified Natural Cemetery, one of only two in the state of Virginia, and is the only one to use grave renewal. The cemetery covers 8.5 acres of naturally restored land, which was once a dairy farm. Though only 35% of the 5000 grave plots are renewable, General Manager Glenn Jennelle stated in a Green Burial Council Webinar that 70% of their cemetery's sales are in the renewable section.

Duck Run operates their grave renewal on a 75 year rotation. After that time period, the plot will be available for re-burial. The cemetery plans to use the lift-and-deepen method, where a grave is opened, and any remains from the previous occupant are gathered together and buried deeper in the ground before the next set of remains is added.

The cemetery also includes a butterfly garden and catch-and-release fishing pond for visitors.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Potomac River Generating Station / Alexandria Power Plant

The Potomac River Generating Station, or GenOn Power Plant, was a largely coal-powered facility originally built in 1950. Prior to the plant's construction, the site was a largely unoccupied tract of land outside of the original bounds of the city of Alexandria. Swampy conditions along the river and the early construction of railroad tracks leading to the Potomac Yard just north of the site likely made it less than ideal for construction.

The power plant was shut down in 2012 after an extended campaign by local residents for EPA violations, pollution, and health risks. Since then, the plant has sat inoperable, though the adjacent PEPCO station at the north end of the site is still in use. Recent redevelopment plans approved by the City of Alexandria aim to demolish the power plant and add a number of high rise mixed-use buildings to the site.

The image to the right shows the existing site conditions, including topography.

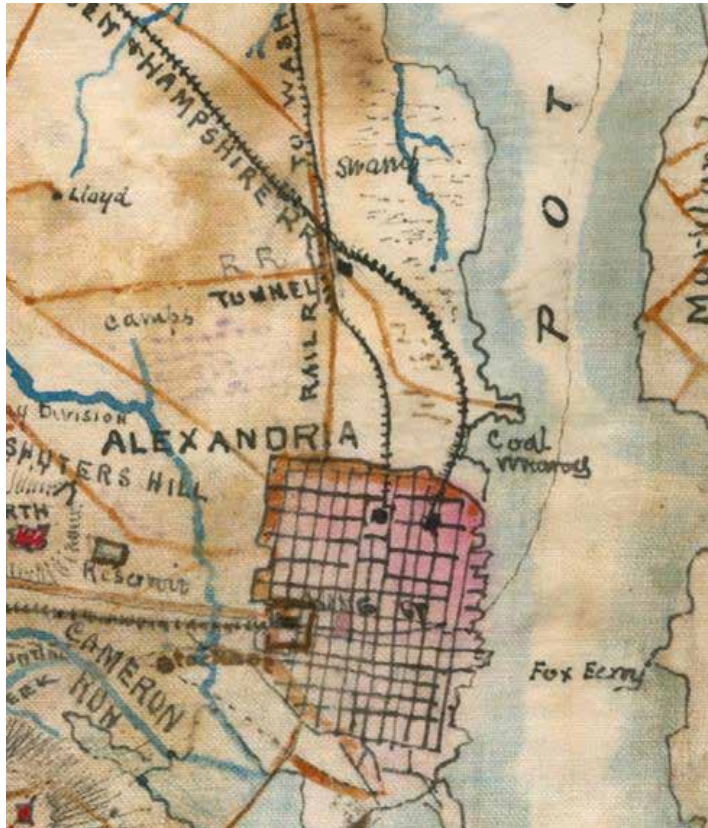


Fig. 7: 1861 Civil War map of Alexandria, VA



Fig. 8: 1946 photo map of Alexandria, VA



POTOMAC RIVER

MT. VERNON TRAIL

COAL STORAGE FIELD

RAILROAD TRACKS
(NOT IN USE)

HIGH-RISE
RESIDENTIAL

N ROYAL STREET

BASHFORD LANE

MID-LOW RISE RESIDENTIAL

0 100 200 ft



POWER PLANT



The site is located directly adjacent to the Potomac River, with easy access to Old Town Alexandria, and the Mount Vernon Trail, a pedestrian and bike trail that runs 18 miles along the river between George Washington's former Mount Vernon residence and Theodore Roosevelt Island. The site has direct views to the northeast and southeast across the river.

For this project, I have chosen to focus the design on the site of the previous coal storage field, which covers an area of about 7.2 acres. Given its condition as a brownfield site, part of this project aims to dilute and eventually cap the polluted soil through the use of natural burial and by incorporating the soil creation through human composting.



Fig. 9: Photograph of the Alexandria Power Plant while in operation, including the coal storage field



Fig. 10: Photograph of the Alexandria Power Plant while still in operation from across the Potomac River



View from N Royal St and Bashford Ln.



View north of coal storage field.



View northeast of coal storage field.



View from Mt. Vernon Trail looking north towards power plant



View northeast across Potomac River



View southeast across Potomac River

Glenstone Museum

Potomac, Maryland

Glenstone includes a nature art park on over 300 acres of land and an indoor gallery space with rotating art exhibits. The site design by PWP Landscape Architects creates a journey through a number of different landscape typologies, including “restored meadows, woodlands, walking paths, wetlands, and outdoor art,”^x all while maintaining ecologically responsible practices to continue to maintain the site.

The various types of spaces at Glenstone create opportunities for visitors to engage in both active and passive engagement with both the art pieces and the landscape, which may be interpreted as landscape-as-art.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

Lakewood Cemetery Garden Mausoleum

Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Lakewood Mausoleum is actually the second mausoleum constructed at Lakewood Cemetery, and is immediately adjacent to the original building. Designed by HGA, the new building includes event spaces and a series of columbarium rooms that hold cremated remains. The building is partially built into the hillside to better integrate into the landscape, with the upper level meeting the cemetery access road, and the lower level opening towards a memorial garden and reflecting pool. Visitors can descend to the memorial garden either through the building or adjacent to it along an exterior site stair.



Figure 15

Figure 17

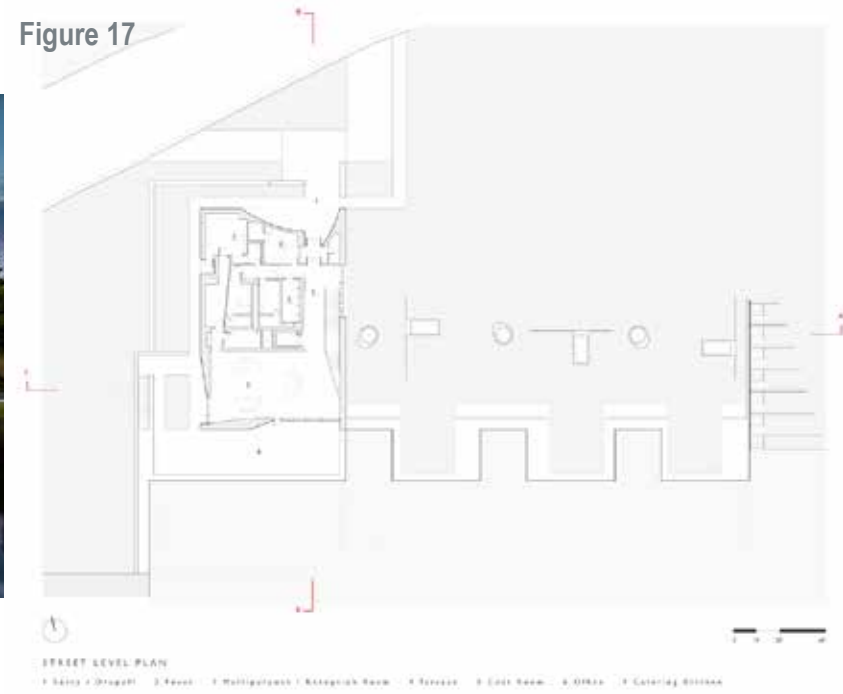
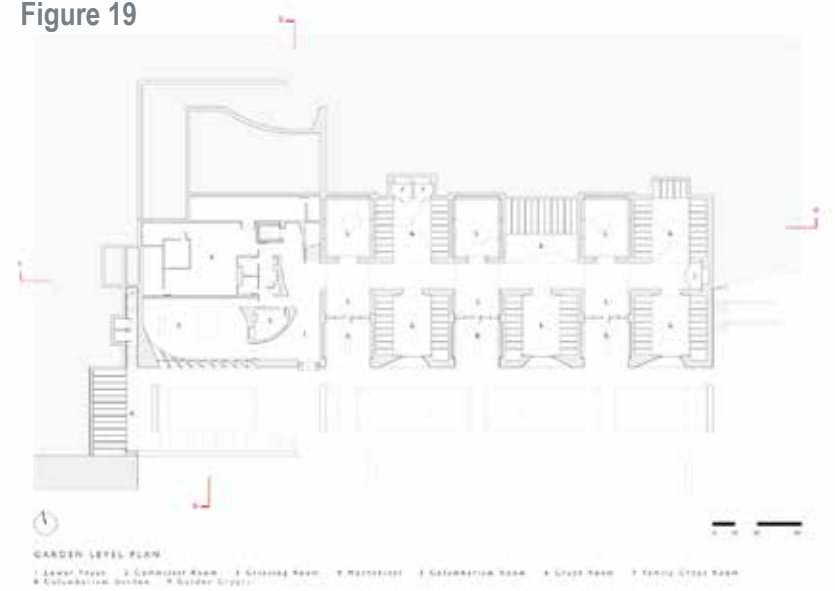


Figure 18

Figure 19



Before starting design, I created a series of collages to demonstrate the different settings I wished to create within the project. These included both indoor and outdoor spaces where visitors, many of which are assumed to be going through a process of mourning, can experience solitude, reflection, or harmony within their surroundings. The themes demonstrating in these collages was then carried through to the architectural and landscape design of the project.



The Room of Care - In her book *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, author Caitlin Doughty describes her ideal death space as “a beautiful crematory with huge windows that let in gobs of natural light. [...] it would be beautiful because death would be embraced. It would be a place of experience, with rooms for families to come and wash their dead. Where they could feel safe and comfortable being with a body until its final moment.”¹

1. Doughty, Caitlin (2014). *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.



The Great Beyond - Taking advantage of the site's adjacency to the Potomac River, and its relative height to the water, I want to create a series of extended views across the site. These may be spaces of mourning for those dealing with the death of a loved one, or a spot for a visitor to meander off of the nearby trail and have a quiet moment of contemplation. The directed view towards the surrounding landscape and the extension towards the water aims to give the sense of solitude without the visitor feeling lonely.



A Sense of Enclosure - Though the strategy of grave renewal makes large groups of trees unfeasible for most of the site, I hope to create strategic instances of enclosure that can act as outdoor “rooms” for events such as an end-of-life celebration or funeral.



Meadow Ecology - Many traditional cemeteries, sometimes called “Memorial Parks” make use of turf grass that requires frequent mowing, watering, and possibly chemical treatments to maintain. I intend to create a meadow ecology on my site. Meadows are more adaptable to disturbances, and can provide habitat space for birds, insects, and smaller animals.

This thesis aims to address the unsustainable practices that are common in the modern death industry, and provide a possible solution to how we develop death spaces, especially in urban environments where land becomes an increasingly valuable commodity.

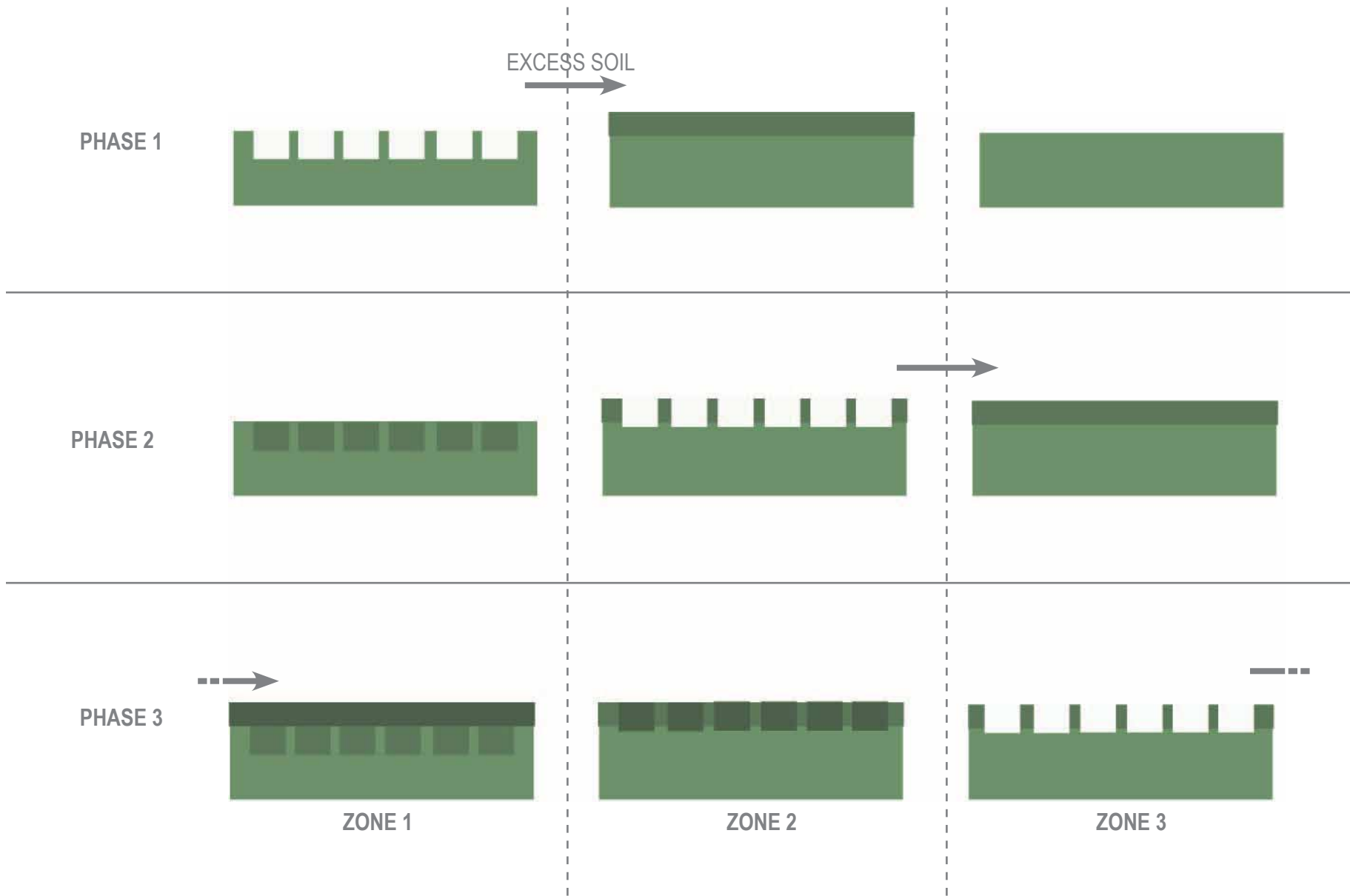
I plan to utilize several of the strategies I investigated during my research phase to create an environmentally and fiscally sustainable cemetery that will also rehabilitate a brownfield site without requiring the use of concrete or imported earth to cap the contaminated soil.

1. **Natural Burial** - as discussed previously, natural burials do not require embalming of the body and prohibit non-degradable burial containers and grave vaults. The body is placed directly into the grave plot and allowed to decompose naturally.

2. **Grave Renewal** - grave renewal has been extremely common in many European countries even in the 21st century, and has also been used in areas like New Orleans where ground suitable for burial is in short supply. In combination with natural burial, it is likely that all remains from a body will have completely broken down in a matter of decades. Unfortunately, it is also often common for family members who wish to visit the grave of the deceased to become less common over time, at least in much of the United States. With practices like the lift and deepen method used at Duck Run Cemetery, it is possible to continue to utilize a plot of land for burial multiple times over, negating the need for continual acquisition of new land.

3. **Natural Organic Reduction** - the byproduct of NOR is soil, 1 cubic yard per composted body. While the family may wish to keep a small amount similar to cremated remains, it is not likely that they will have use for the total amount, especially when living in more urban setting.

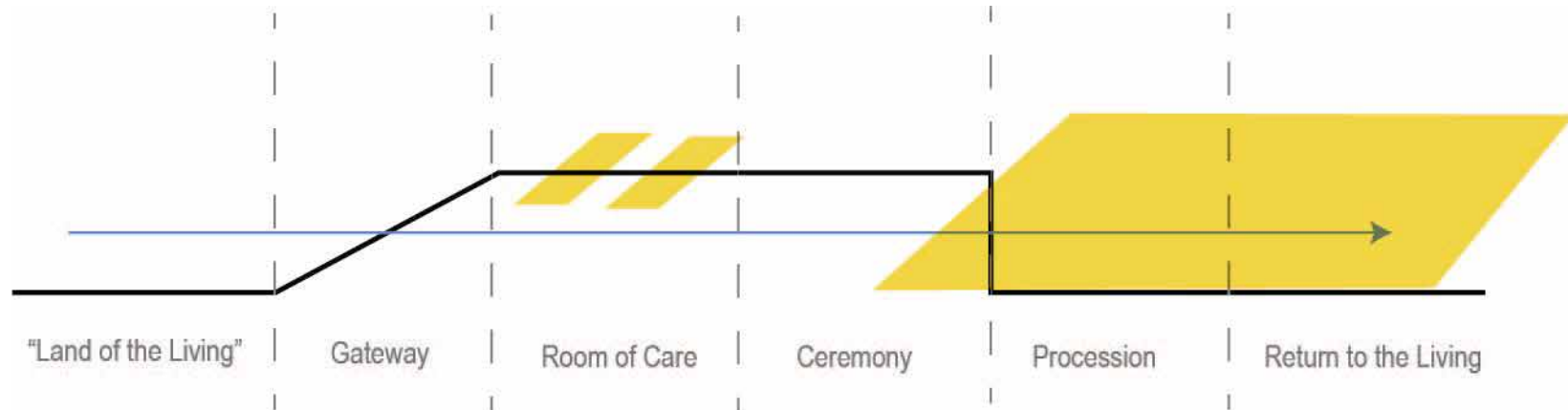
As opposed to the typical renewal method of “lift and deepen,” the excess soil created through NOR can be used to create a new layer of earth over filled burial plots. The site is divided into three burial zones (see Site Plan) that will each be phased as shown in the diagram to the right. When one zone is being used for burial, the excess earth from excavated plots will be combined with NOR soil and added to the subsequent zone until all of the plots in the first zone are filled, and the second zone is fully covered. With three burial zones, by the time an already-filled zone is returned to after an estimated 75 years (similar to the time line of other grave renewal facilities), all of the remains buried there will have fully decomposed, and an additional earth layer will allow enough room for a new phase of burial.



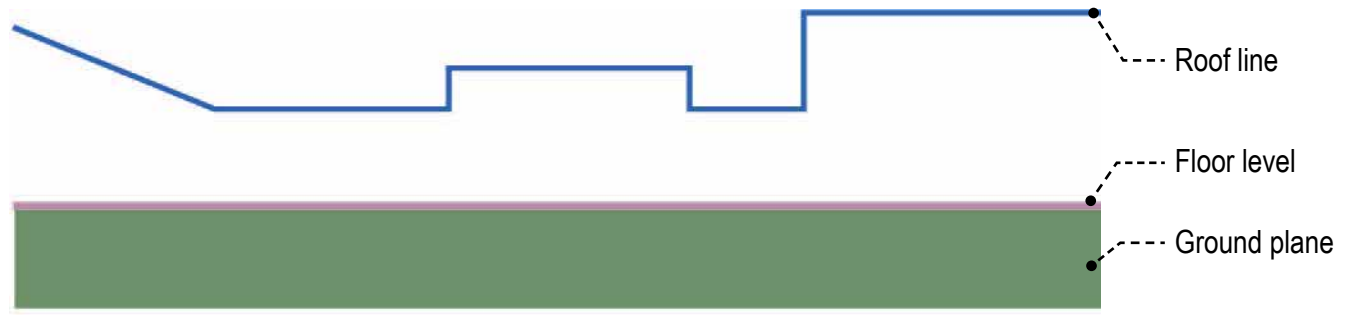
The architecture of the building and its extension onto the site is designed to be a metaphorical journey through death and the subsequent mourning process. Visitors are encouraged to move through a procession within the building, starting by descending into the earth. The return to the “land of the living” is demonstrated through changing spatial characteristics like raised ceilings and material changes, as well as increasing natural light through skylights and windows strategically integrated into the processional pathway.

The ceremonial spaces are arranged and aligned to gain optimal views across the site and towards the river. After observing that funeral homes are often enclosed, and have minimal views either out of or into the building, I wanted this project to include glazing to give visitors a direct connection to the burial spaces and the world beyond - both of the dead and the living.

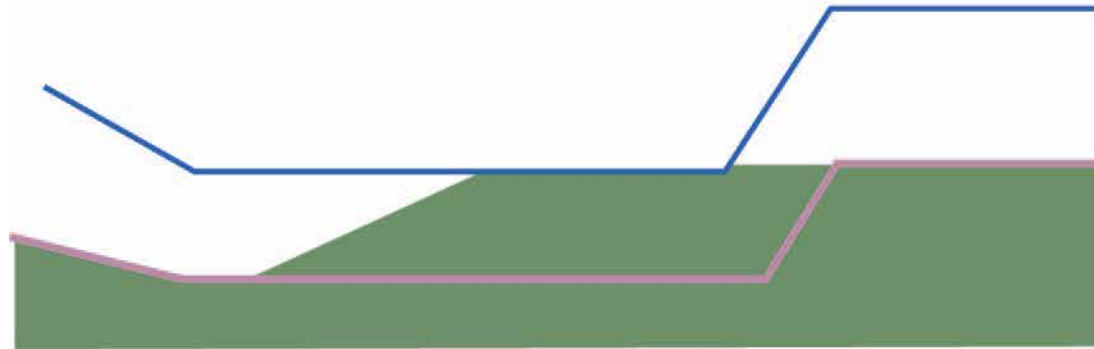
As shown in the diagram to the right, I examined different possibilities to manipulating the building’s floor and roof lines, as well as the ground plane to create the experiences of descension and ascension. The final design takes advantage of the eventually rising of the ground plane to eventually submerge part of the building.



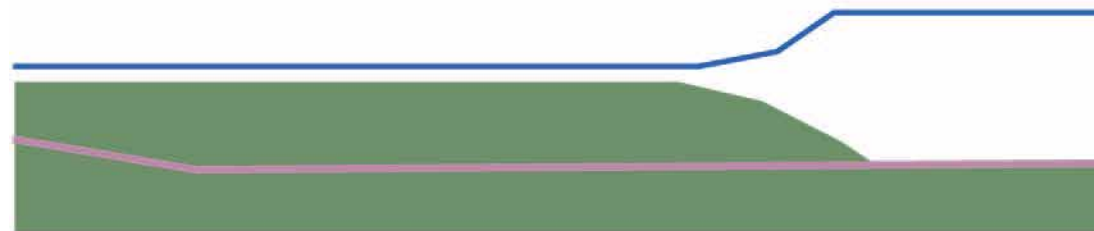
Expansion and
Contraction of Roof
line



Manipulation of ground
plane and floor level



Manipulation of ground
plane and roof line



SITE PLAN

POTOMAC RIVER

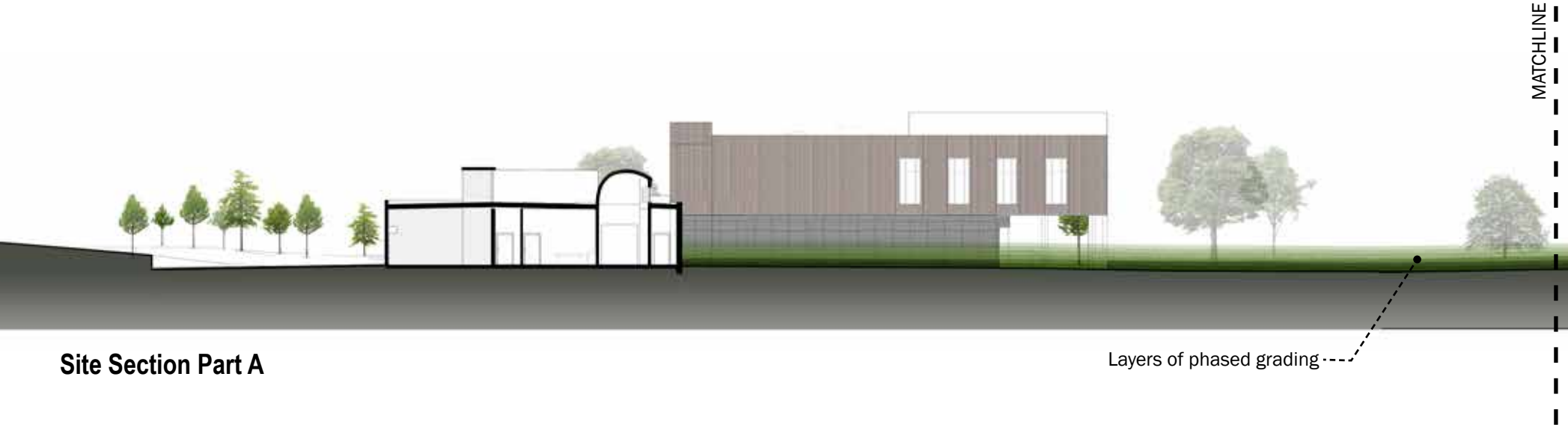


1. PARKING LOT
2. BUILDING ENTRY
3. MORTUARY AND GREENHOUSE
4. GARAGE DRIVEWAY & ENTRANCE
5. MAINTENANCE ROAD
6. REFLECTING POOL
7. MOURNING GROVE
8. MT. VERNON TRAIN ACCESS BRIDGE
9. MEMORIAL VALLEY
10. SOUTHERN VIEW POINT
11. BURIAL PLOTS
12. RETAINING WALL

SITE SECTION

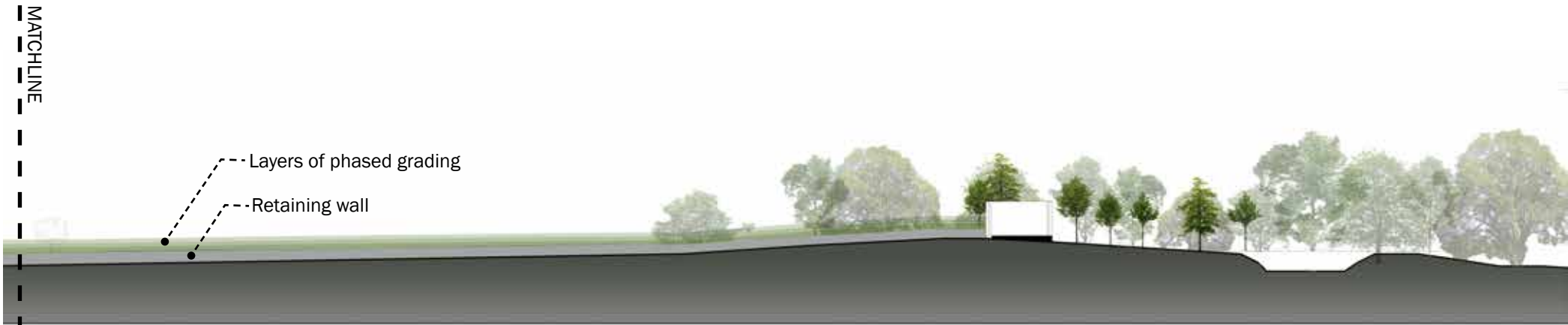
Over time, the additional soil created through the NOR process will be distributed throughout the site, raising the ground level in each of the three burial zones. Each zone is separated by stone retaining walls that can be continually added to as the ground plane rises. The exterior walls of the building that frame the burial grounds have also been constructed as retaining walls to support the additional soil.

The “valley” that runs down the center of the site will not have additional soil added, so that visitors can walk through the site and see the effects of change on the site over time. The stones in the retaining wall are expected to be stacked masonry so show layering over time, and can also be engraved with the names and locations of those who are buried on the site.

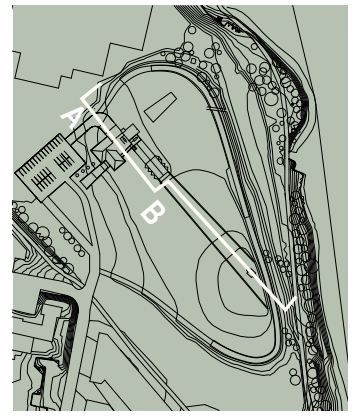


Site Section Part A

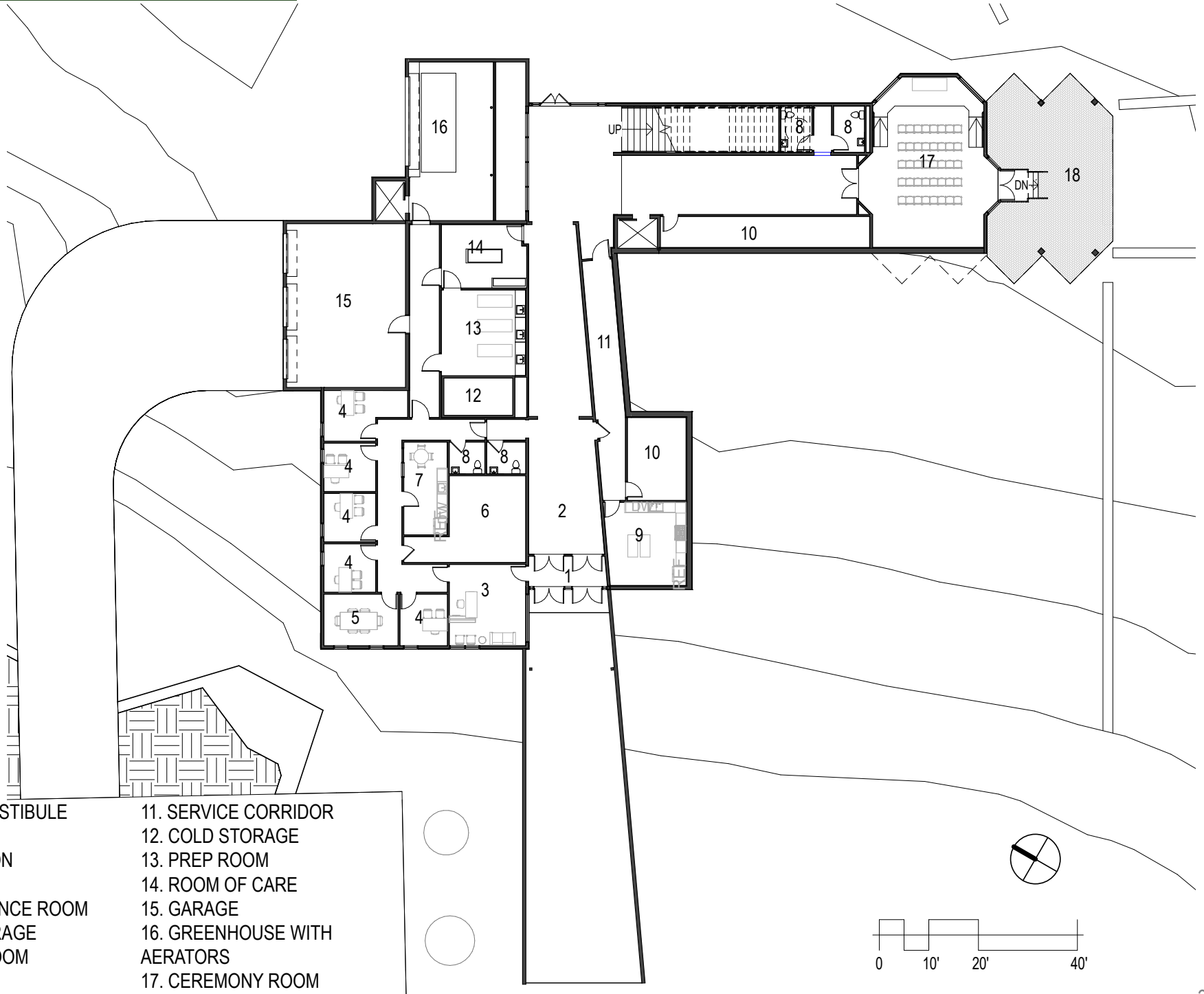
Layers of phased grading



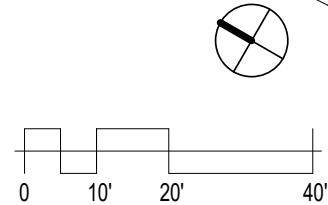
Site Section Part B



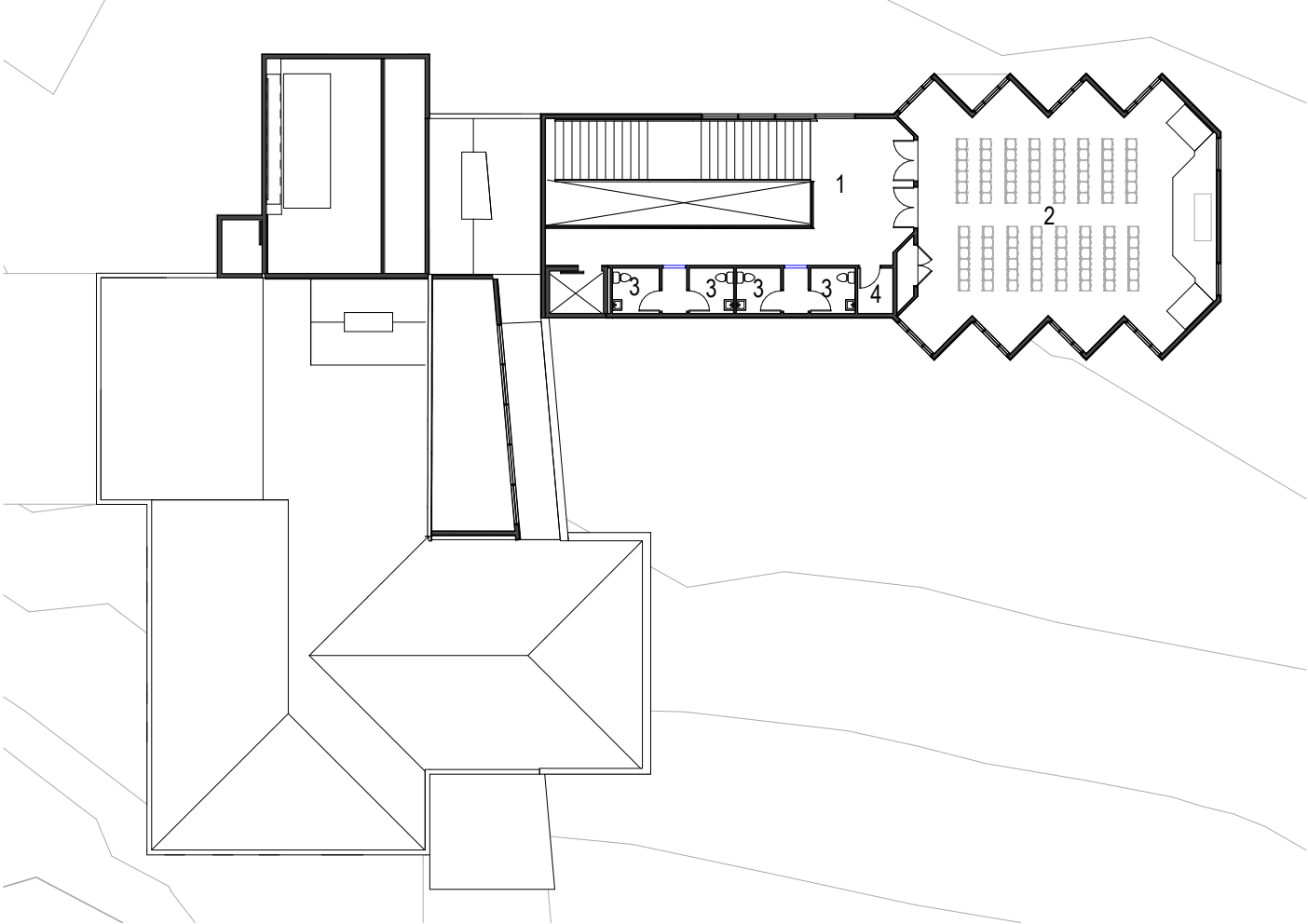
FIRST FLOOR PLAN



- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. ENTRY VESTIBULE | 11. SERVICE CORRIDOR |
| 2. LOBBY | 12. COLD STORAGE |
| 3. RECEPTION | 13. PREP ROOM |
| 4. OFFICE | 14. ROOM OF CARE |
| 5. CONFERENCE ROOM | 15. GARAGE |
| 6. FILE STORAGE | 16. GREENHOUSE WITH AERATORS |
| 7. BREAK ROOM | 17. CEREMONY ROOM |
| 8. TOILET | 18. OUTDOOR CEREMONY SPACE |
| 9. CATERING KITCHEN' | |
| 10. STORAGE | |

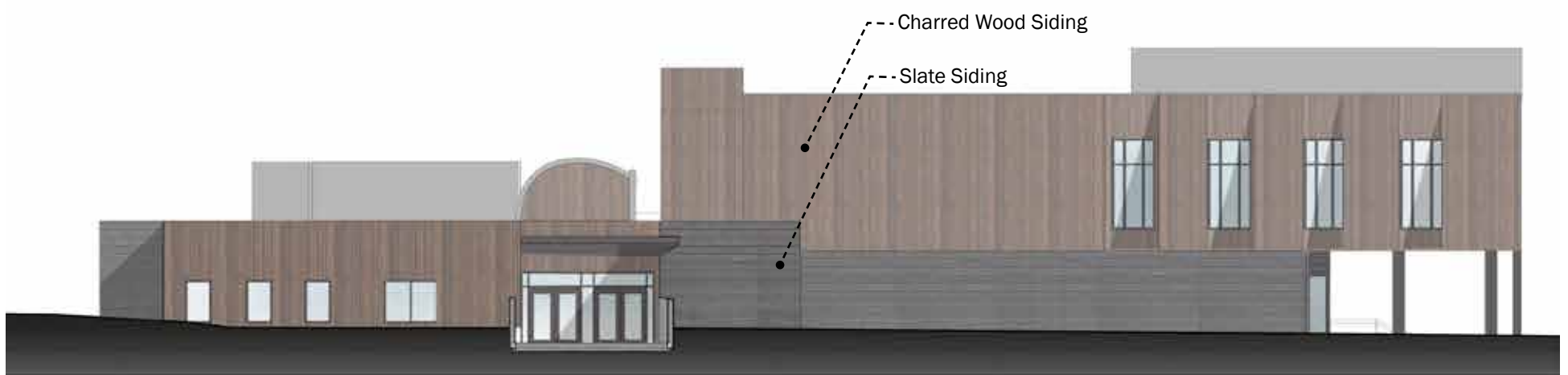


SECOND FLOOR PLAN



- 1. LOBBY
- 2. CEREMONY ROOM
- 3. TOILET
- 4. STORAGE

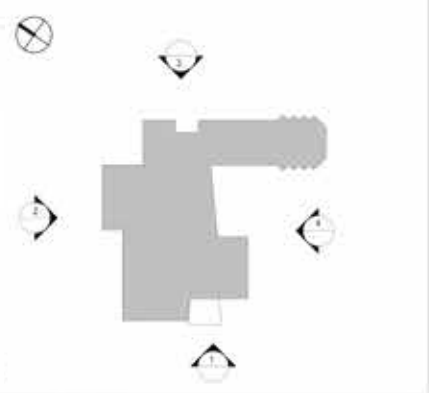




1. Front Elevation



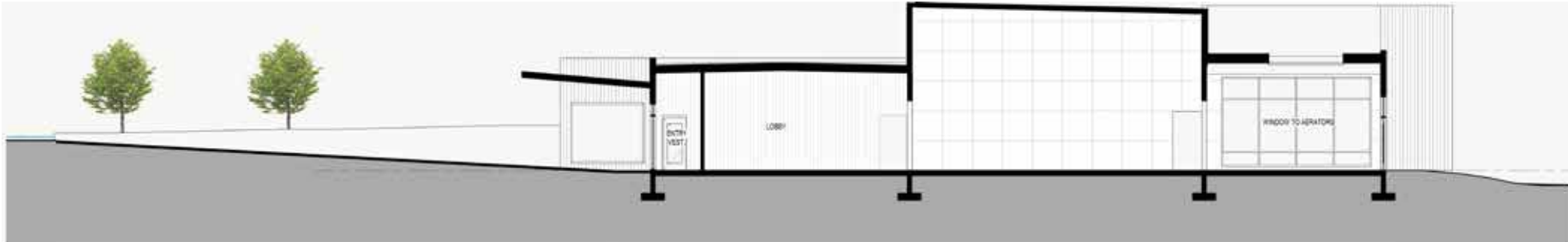
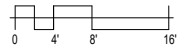
2. North Elevation



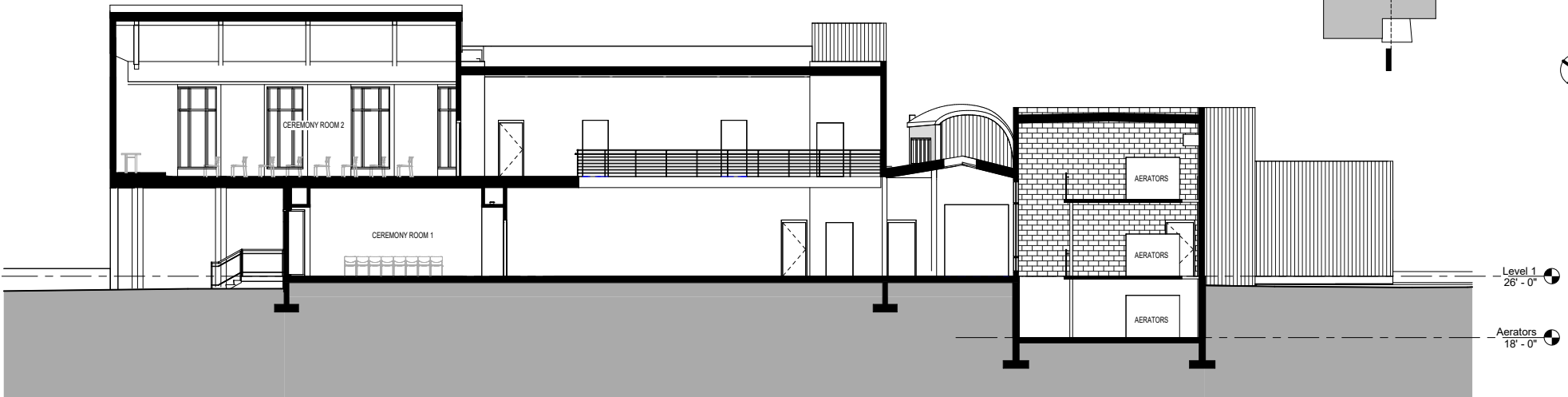
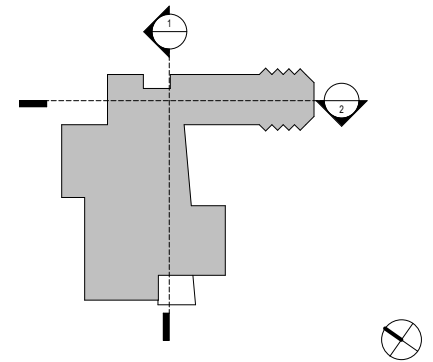
3. East Elevation



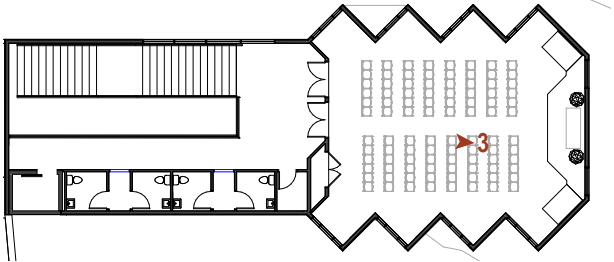
4. South Elevation



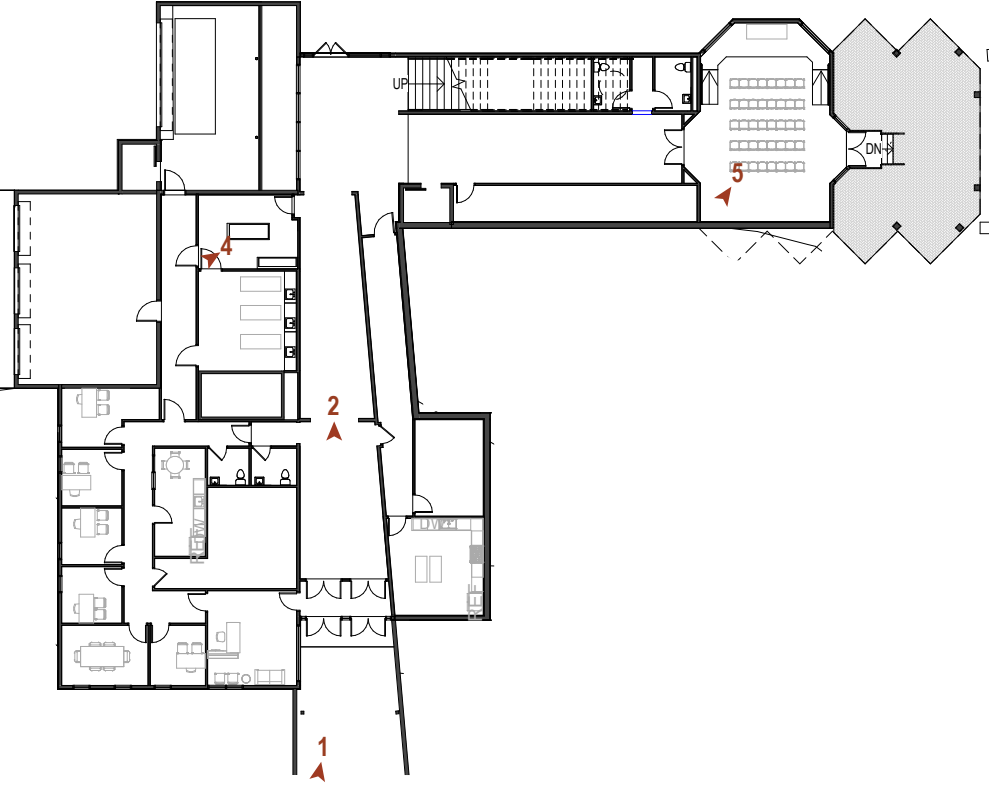
1. East-West Section



2. North-South Section Through Ceremony Rooms



Second Floor Key Plan



First Floor Key Plan



1. Exterior view towards front entrance and burial grounds



2. View down ceremonial corridor towards aerators



3. View inside second floor ceremonial room





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Figure 2. <https://recompose.life/our-model/#our-location>

Figure 3. <https://www.dezeen.com/2023/02/07/recompose-human-composting-facility-seattle/>

Figures 4, 5, 6. <https://duckruncemetery.com/gallery/>

Figure 7. Map from Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/gvhs01.vhs00032/?r=-0.123,0.607,1.275,0.768,0>

Figure 8. Map from Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91685685/>

Figure 9. Photo of GenOn Potomac River Generating Station while still in use. <https://revitalization.org/article/the-long-awaited-redevelopment-of-an-abandoned-coal-fired-power-plant-in-a-prime-spot-on-the-potomac-river-is-at-hand/>

Figure 10. Photo of GenOn Potomac River Generating Station while still in use. <https://wtop.com/news/2012/10/power-plant-closure-may-improve-arlingtons-air/>

Figures 11, 12, 13, 14. Photo of Glenstone, Photos courtesy of PWP Landscape Architecture. <https://www.pwpla.com/projects/glenstone>

Figures 15, 17. Photo of Lakewood Mausoleum exterior. Photos courtesy of HGA. <https://hga.com/projects/lakewood-cemetery-garden-mausoleum/>

Figures 16, 18. Plan drawings of Lakewood Mausoleum. https://www.archdaily.com/326697/lakewood-garden-mausoleum-hga?ad_medium=gallery

All other photos are taken or created by author.

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