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Text



Putting Roosevelt Back into Play

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The National Parks Now Competition

REFLECTIONS

In 2014, the Van Alen Institute, in partnership with the US National Parks Service (NPS), put out a call for proposals to “create new experiences that connect [national] parks to larger, more diverse audiences throughout the [Mid-Atlantic] region.” The call listed six urban, suburban, and rural sites, all located within 200 km of New York City. I joined a multidisciplinary team¹ that responded with a proposal to animate the gardens and woodlands at Sagamore Hill National Historic Site – the former estate and primary residence of President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919). Although enthusiastically received and reviewed, our project did not win the competition: the jury was wary of (even temporary) architectural interventions, and preferred projects focussed almost entirely on cultural programming.

On the one hand, both the call and our response to it can be seen as part of a growing international discourse concerning the democratization and accessibility of heritage places and of cultural memory more generally. On the other hand, both documents show that attempts to democratize heritage still exist within the exclusionary frameworks of institutions, disciplines, and most importantly, the nation state. How then does one use architecture to mount a thoughtful, multidisciplinary critique of nationalist narratives inside national institutions?

I take the opportunity here to reprint excerpts from our competition entry in the context of a reflection on the roles and responsibilities of the academic-practitioner who responds to institutional mandates focused on the nation-building project. After all, the disciplinary languages of biodiversity², ecological design research³, and heritage conservation that we collectively deployed in our design proposal are deeply rooted in American nature conservation discourse, and thus broadly influenced by Theodore Roosevelt’s politics surrounding empire, race, and gender.⁴ In the case of our proposal, internal disciplinary interests and prejudices, in combination with real and imagined external institutional pres-

ures, conditioned our design ideas, and meant that our final text did not explicitly address the relationships between Roosevelt as a historical actor, Sagamore Hill as a space of governance, and the consequences of Roosevelt’s imperialism on the very “diverse audiences” that the NPS aims to attract.

The contradictions between the Van Alen Institute’s mandate to democratize public heritage and the NPS’s continued interest in celebrating Roosevelt as a national hero, are a mirror of the paradoxes that constitute the history of the President’s nature conservation practices. Roosevelt and his peers were responsible for delimiting and legally protecting hundreds of national forests, bird and game reserves, and several national parks, but simultaneously believed in the forced resettlement of Indigenous peoples who lived from these lands. As Finis Dunaway argues, the newly created parks were intended as ‘virginal’ places for the performance of white masculinity, and by extension, helped legitimize colonial and imperialist desires.⁵ Such behaviour naturally precluded habitation by Indigenous peoples, or, for that matter, the use of the lands by anyone other than white elite conservation-hunters. The political situation of national parks reflects broader contradictions between Roosevelt’s commitment to democratic civic and national institutions and his persistent racial nationalism.⁶ It was therefore of chief concern to me that the competition entry problematize the relationships between the achievements of nature conservancy, the contemporary audiences to which celebrations of these achievements are being addressed, and the occupation, racialization, and gendering of ‘nature’ in the name of conservation.

One of the ways in which we attempted to use design to support a socio-political critique was to create objects that linked Sagamore Hill with the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City. Both Roosevelt and his father were key figures in the Museum’s development: Roosevelt Sr. founded the AMNH, while Theodore himself contributed to the Museum’s collections from a young age, later helping to hunt animals displayed in dioramas that frame the monumental Ackley Hall of African Mammals. The Theodore Roosevelt Memorial – the Museum’s main entrance hall and its most opulent space – is an urban and extremely

← 1: Quentin Roosevelt picking daisies in the meadow at Sagamore Hill, 1904.



public celebration of Roosevelt's patriarchy. The Memorial's main façade is guarded, in Donna Haraway's description, "by an equestrian statue of Teddy majestically mounted as father and protector between two 'primitive' men, an American Indian and an African, both standing dressed as 'savages.'"7 Replete with enormous murals celebrating Roosevelt both as a diplomat and an imperialist, the memorial contains, together with other mythicized images, a depiction of the President's hunting expeditions to Africa – a reminder of his instrumental role in codifying the colonial gaze.⁸

In order to highlight this very urban (civic) reflection of Roosevelt's relationship to nature conservation, we decided to digitally link the AMNH's mammal and bird dioramas to the pastoral landscapes of Sagamore Hill. We hoped that what we called "eco-pods," "sensory-pods," and "nests" (Figs. 9–15) would allow for an experiential juxtaposition of various types of representations of natural environments, and for a recognition of some of the incongruences that exist between landscapes, their representations, and vectors of power. Designed as tools to inform urban youth about waning suburban biodiversity, the pods were also meant to act as commentaries on the manipulation of percep-

tion in diorama art, and on the causal links between killing, conservation, and empire.

For example, the specific semi-transparent pod illustrated in our competition drawings (Fig. 15) is imagined to disrupt sightlines between a diorama of the Birds of Oyster Bay (the region where Sagamore is located) and a contemporary statue of Theodore Roosevelt. This interference brings attention to the connections between Roosevelt's public and private lives, and the intentional ways in which he situated these lives in rural or urban settings. The pod's digitally programmable surfaces allow for different multisensory experiences to be superimposed on the Oyster Bay diorama in an attempt to link the languages of socio-political and ecological critique. The pod is intended as a space for recollection, where urban dwellers can examine the shifting boundaries between city, country, and wilderness, and consider the violent displacements that have continuously character-

↑ 2: The new boardwalk leading to the beach and the ecologically significant Diamondback Terrapin nesting site.

ized economic activity in North America. Many of the sister interventions placed at Sagamore – including the so-called ‘bear trap’ (Figs. 11–13) and the projection screen situated in Roosevelt’s former firing range (Figs. 7 and 8) – act as commentaries on various aspects of the President’s life, and function as pedagogical spaces where visitors can learn about the challenges of contemporary nature conservation practice.

Given the complicated lineage of the ecology and conservation movements, how can one bring critiques of colonialism and racism out of the periphery and into the centre of multidisciplinary and collaborative design projects that respond to nationalist institutional mandates? Does the multidisciplinary team model allow for a strong and central political critique to emerge from a design proposal? And finally, is it enough when such a critique is implicit to the design process, or must it be made explicit in the accompanying texts (both in the project proposal and on site)? I hope that the following competition entry, in combination with my reflections in this short introduction, stimulates the reader to consider the place of academic critique in design practice.

↓ 3: The forest at the water’s edge.

Jerzy Elżanowski



Competition Entry

Constructing Value: Growing Community at the National Parks, Sagamore Hill National Historic Site

Team Lead: Giancarlo Mangone

Team: Johan Voordouw, Filipa Valente, Jerzy Elżanowski, John Zelenski

PROJECT APPROACH – DESCRIPTION

What is the role and value of the Parks system in the 21st century?

Our research shows that positive individual and group experiences of natural environments can promote eco-friendly behavior, and sensitize people to the increasing impoverishment of natural habitats. By delivering immersive, community-centered activities, the National Parks Service (NPS) can be designed to effect responsible, long-term behavioral change at local, regional and national scales. The NPS can function as a resource for surrounding communities, providing key social, cultural, and economic value, resources, and opportunities. Using Sagamore Hill as our laboratory, we propose to develop a series of site and university-based workshops and research projects, digital applications, design charrettes, and a pilot installation. We can maximize the scope of our plan and increase both visitorship and NPS funding by leveraging existing programs and management plans, and by promoting community-based initiatives for ecological research through green gyms and citizen science projects. Finally, we propose to increase rural/urban dialogue by digitally connecting the ecological history of Sagamore Hill to the existing 'Birds of Oyster Bay' diorama at the American Museum of Natural History.

Following a preliminary site analysis, we propose a comprehensive design strategy that identifies a series of nodes that will be the topics of our in situ workshops. We suggest re-establishing part of the original farm at Sagamore, including a café and assembly space in the former firing range (to be cleared under the existing management plan), and exploring the potential of interactive interventions within the woodland and the ecologically unique salt marsh with its endangered Diamondback Terrapin. These no-

des utilize immersive acoustic and visual projections centered on architectural beacons – temporary, inexpensive installations to be designed and built in collaboration with the community of Oyster Bay.

We pair each architectural intervention with specific research and conservation goals: For example, a summer café provides locally grown food. "Teddy Food" will be harvested from the community-run garden placed in the same location as the Roosevelts' original vegetable garden, reducing the local communities' ecological footprint, and generating new funding streams. In an effort to reverse the behavioral implications of the Shifting Baseline Syndrome (in reference to the progressive impoverishment of our rural and urban ecosystems), a second intervention – a projection "nest" is hung in the forest. Based on information collected in a (proposed) historical site biodiversity analysis project, projections simulate the acoustic and visual richness of pre-suburban ecologies, and demonstrate the value of the site's once richer ecosystem that included birds such as the quail and the flycatcher.

With our team's diverse disciplinary strengths: architecture, ecology, interactive experience design, psychology, and heritage conservation – we aim to maximize the social, economic, ecological, and historical value and quality of the site, thus developing a deep sense of place.

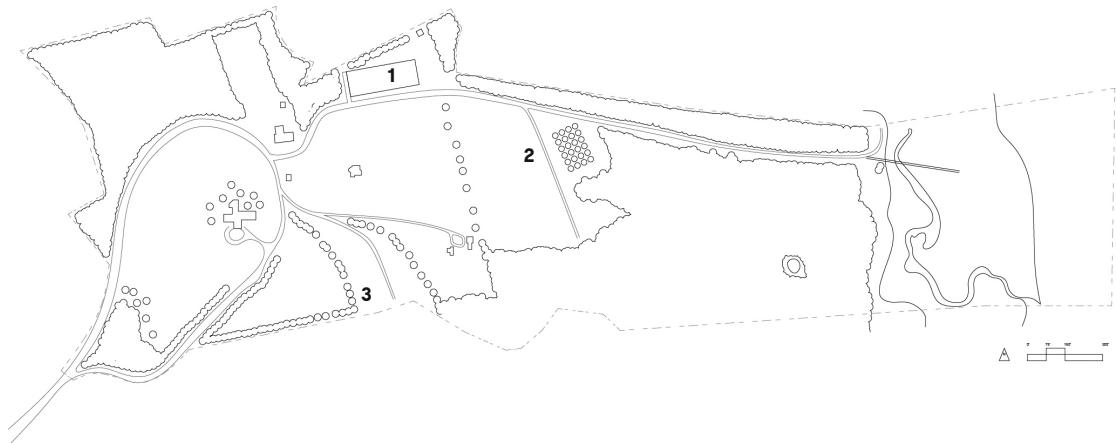
Team members will integrate the project into their courses at Carleton University through design studios, research electives, and graduate research projects. They will hold multidisciplinary student workshops across the faculties of Engineering, Science, and Arts. Selected students and faculty members will work with community groups at Sagamore Hill to design and build the proposed interventions. Early

post-project assessments will consider if and how the workshops and installations fulfill existing and future NPS needs.

If completed, our project will act as a model intervention for other NPS sites: It will make a

positive change in Americans' perception of the natural environment at a national level; provide diverse examples and guidelines for how National Parks can add value to local communities; and finally, it will increase revenue, visitorship, and public valuation of national parks.

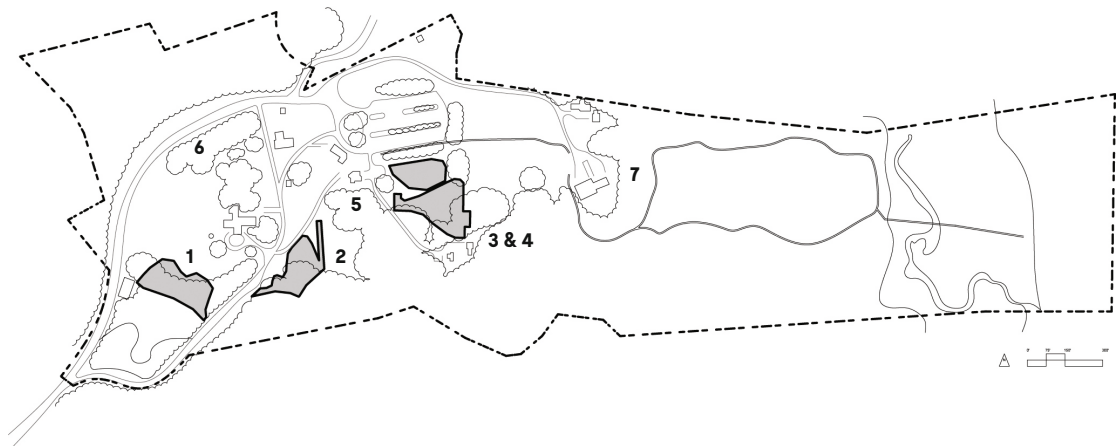
SITE PLANNING (1919 & CURRENT)



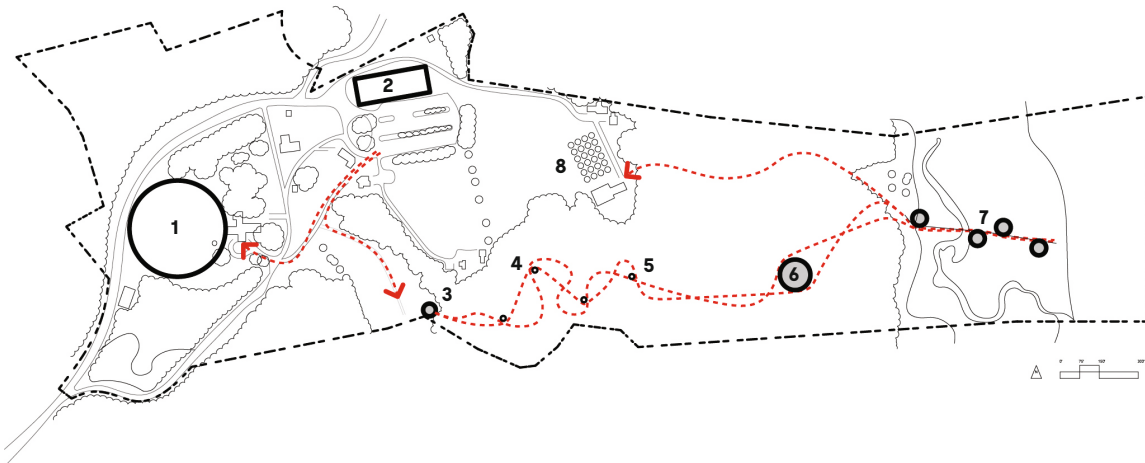
↑ 4: Plan of the 1919 estate. Critical to the proposal are: 1) the historic vegetable garden, and 2) the orchard. The removal of trees in the southern part of the site is an important step to re-establishing the historic target shooting range (3)

↓ 5: Site plan indicating works currently in progress
 1) Clearing and stump grinding in the West Lawn
 2) Removal of existing wood pile, vines and clear fence line
 3, 4) Clearing and stump grinding in North Field

5) Removal of evergreens near New Barn
 6) Removal of 12 marked trees
 7) Removal of five marked trees



SITE PLANNING (PROPOSED)

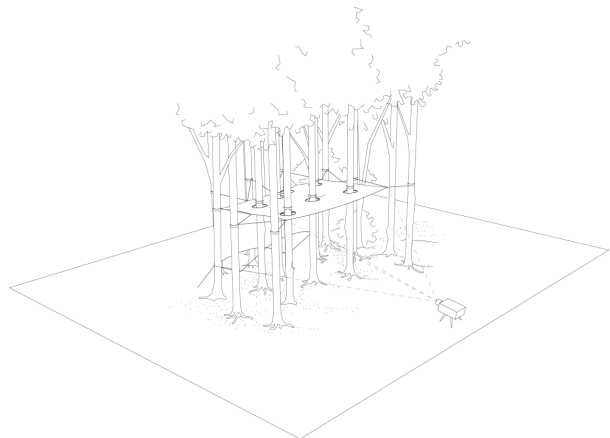


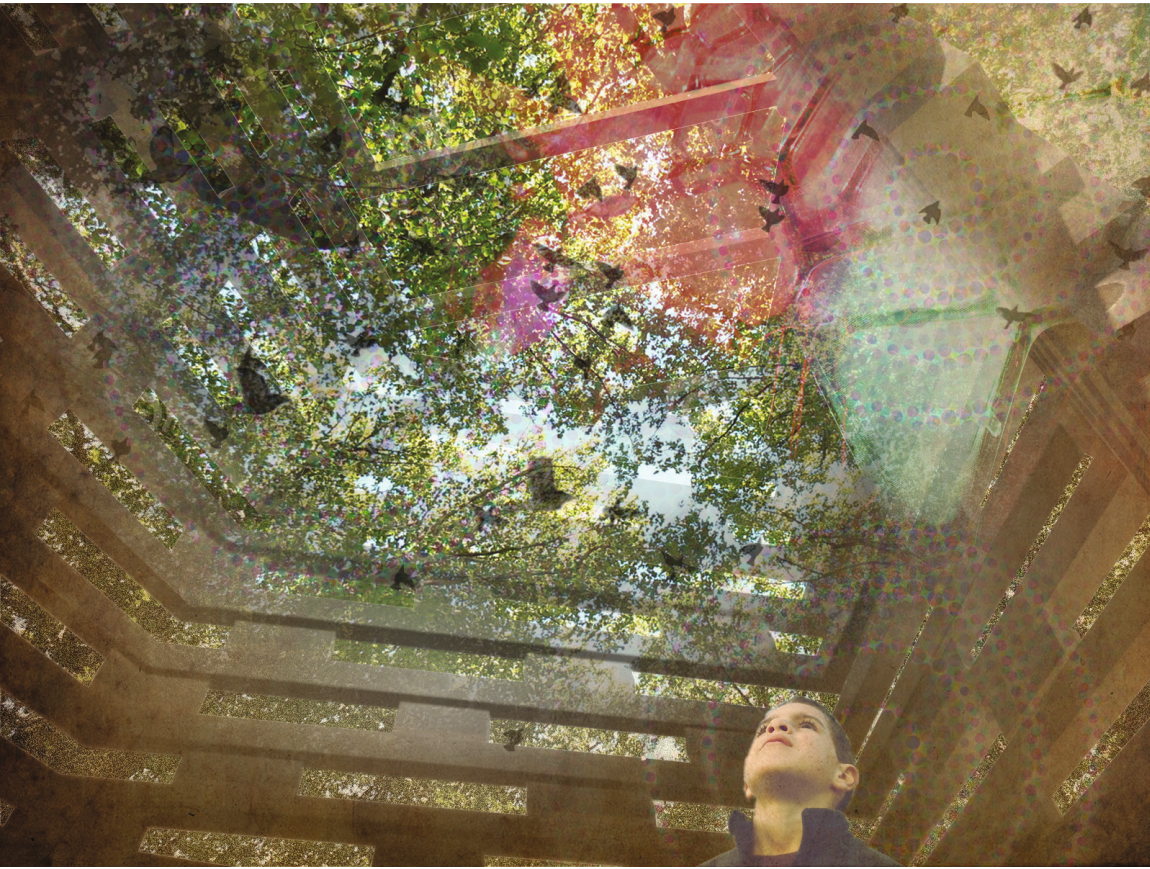
↑ 6: Schematic site plan for a series of phased proposals:
1) the Daisy Field (in progress), 2) re-established vegetable garden, 3) Forest-edge Projection Screen in the old target shooting range, 4) Eco Pods linked to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, 5) The Bear Pit, a larger interactive social space in the forest, 6) re-established Heron Colony pond, 7) Terrapin Pods in the ecologically significant marsh 8) Re-planted historic orchard



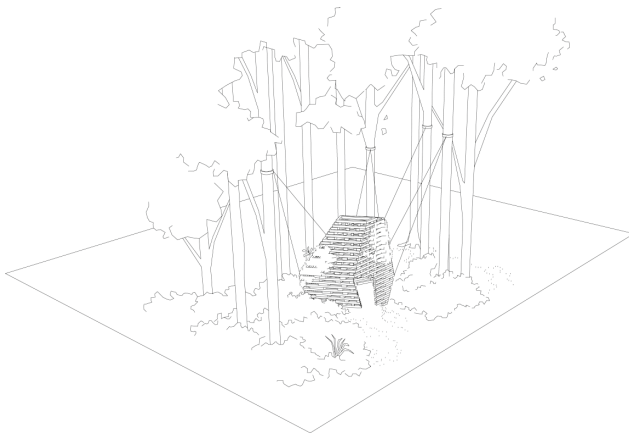
↑→ 7, 8: The Forest-edge Projection Screen is the entrance point to the forest walk. Located at the end of the gulley in the old target shooting area, the projection is developed through the proposed artist in residence program. The overhanging screen darkens the space below making projections more visible during the day, and acting as a beacon that draws visitors away from the house and into the woodlands. The purpose of the screen is to disperse visitors across the site, reducing the congestion at the Roosevelt residence and at other popular attractions on site. Projections will juxtapose images of the historic, social, and ecological significance of the site, and introduce visitors to interventions placed throughout the woodlands.

FOREST-EDGE PROJECTION SCREEN



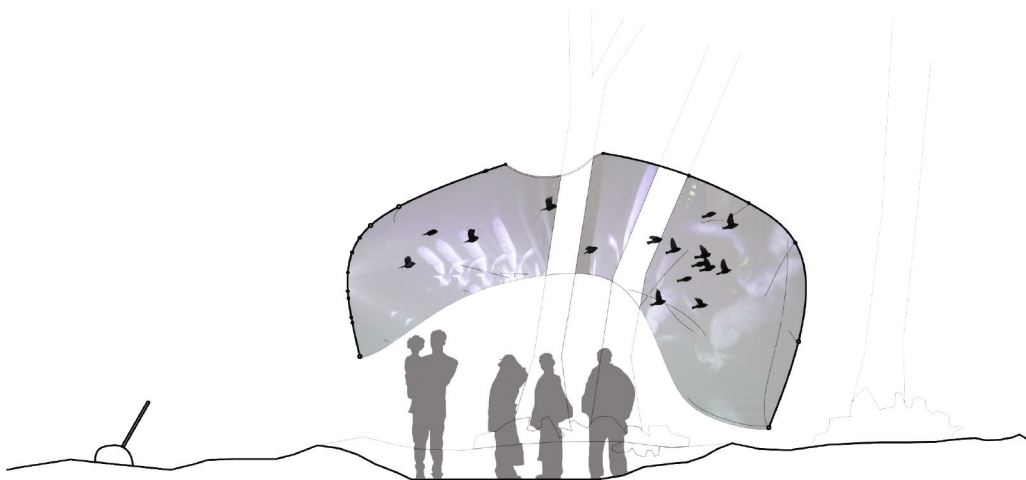
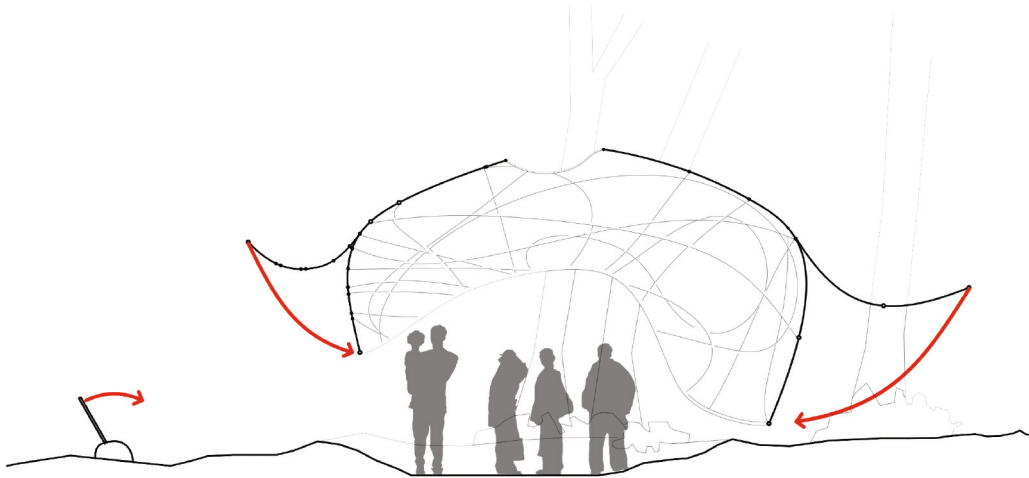


ECO CAPSULE

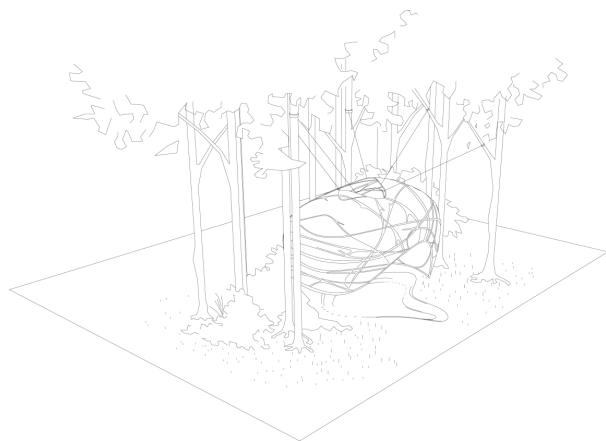


←↑ 9, 10: The Eco-capsule is an individual immersive, acoustic, and projection-mapped pod. It relates past ecological diversity to present conditions. The interior of the pod includes a projection of the forest outside, with missing species mapped over the projection surface. Additionally, this pod links to the Birds of Oyster Bay diorama located at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City (see rendering).

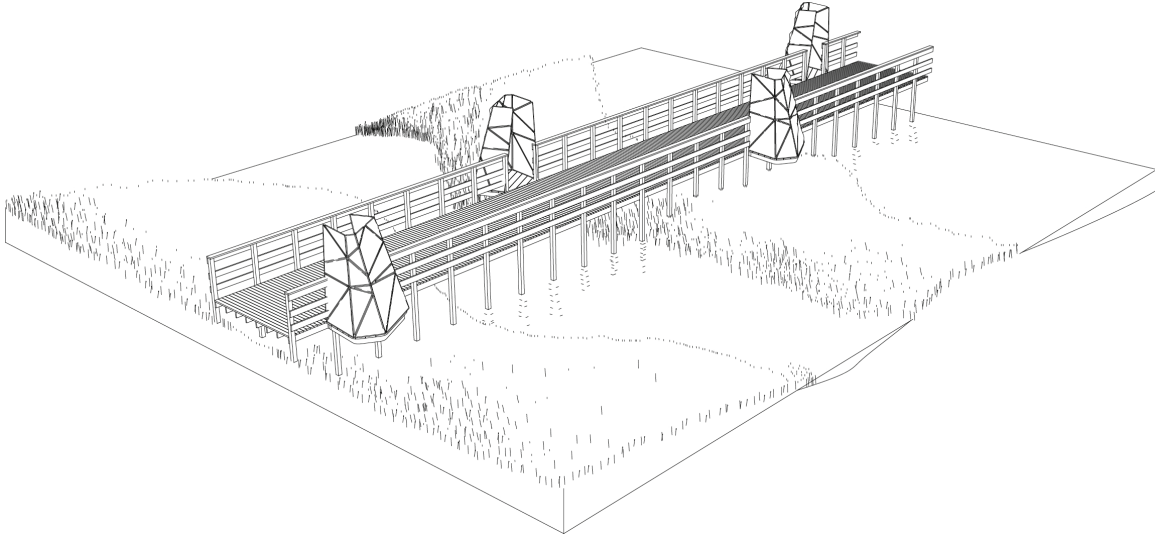
THE BEAR TRAP



↑→ 11, 12, 13: The Bear Trap is a larger social space in the forest. The structure is lightweight and able to transform. It is a place where groups of people can meet to virtually experience the plant and animal diversity from Sagamore's past. Once the sides enclose a group, the projections begin. Visitors see the woodlands change over time, and understand the deeper historical, social, and ecological importance of the place.



THE TERRAPIN PODS



↑ 14: The Terrapin Pods are interactive light kiosks that shield visitors from the coastal wind. Each pavilion contains displays that indicate water level, salinity, eco-health, etc.

↓ 15: Through real-time video link, the proposed pod connects the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall to the Eco-capsule placed at the President's estate at Sagamore.

BIRDS OF OYSTER BAY DIORAMA, AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY



1 Led by Giancarlo Mangone, the team included Johan Voordouw, Filipa Valente, Jerzy Elżanowski, and John Zelenski. The following students offered assistance with research and drawing: Jesse Robertson, Ben Connolly and John Gaitan.

2 Contemporary notions of biodiversity need further exploration in the context of Roosevelt's fear of social diversity and his complicated relationship to social Darwinism; see Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 9, 14-15. Interestingly, the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) condemns social Darwinism as a misapplication of Darwin's theories on biological diversity to human social conditions, but does not relate this critique to Roosevelt's beliefs on the subject; see "Social Darwinism," AMNH, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/darwin/evolution-today/social-darwinism>; cf. "Theodore Roosevelt," AMNH, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://www.amnh.org/explore/science-topics/theodore-roosevelt>.

3 'Ecological design research' or 'environmental design research' is an approach that combines design with experimental methods. Its purpose is to consider the relationships between people and the built and natural environments. Researchers such as Giancarlo Mangone and Patrick Teuffel see the potential of so-called 'constructed habitats' that dynamically engage with ecosystems and promote biodiversity; see Sang Lee, *Introduction to Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture*, (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2011), 24.

4 For a detailed analysis of Roosevelt's theories on race, see Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*, 21-44. For gendered settler-colonial landscapes, see Eva Mackey "Death By Landscape: Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology," *Canadian Woman Studies* 20 (2000): 125-130. For an early investigation of "feminine" landscapes in America, see Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

5 Finis Dunaway, *Remembering Nature: Environmental Images and the Search for American Renewal, 1890-1970*, PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 2001, 5, 17; cf. Dunaway, "Hunting with the Camera: Nature Photography, Manliness, and Modern Memory, 1890-1930," *Journal of American Studies*, 2 (2000): 207-230.

6 For a thorough analysis of the contradictions and confluences between civic and racial nationalism, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 10, 15-16, 59-60.

7 Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Amy Kaplan (Durham: Duke University Press 1993), 21.

8 For a high quality reproduction of the mural entitled "Roosevelt's Explorations in Africa," as well as an image of the equestrian statue, see James Gardner, "Monumental Confidence," *The Magazine Antiques*, January/February (2013): 204. The article, as well as the AMNH website, are good examples of how colonial, gendered, and racist positions are implicit to, and deeply embedded in, the popular American historical imaginary.

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1 Edward S. Curtis, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

2, 3 Competition documents, Van Alen Institute/National Parks Service.

4-15 Giancarlo Mangone, Johan Voordouw, Filipa Valente, Jerzy Elżanowski, John Zelenski.