GATHERING THE LANDSCAPE: 
A Community Arts Center on Lookout Mountain

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ABSTRACT

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With a tape measure and a pad of newsprint, to document, understand and re-present a natural place was the first goal of this thesis. From this understanding a new built presence, a redefinition of the site, is sought, to gather its essential properties and bring them close. This thesis aims at achieving a continuity of experience between the built and the natural, at achieving new transformative readings of each, in which one order is juxtaposed against and thereby defines the other.

Focusing on the exchange between these two worlds, explorations are made into levels of built and unbuilt, into where, how, and how much to transform what was there. Through this interplay of inside and outside, built and natural, permanent and transitory, the intention is to bring to people a new awareness and sense of belonging to the site, of the dynamics of natural forces, and of their specific location in the context of these larger orders. For ultimately, all architecture is an infill project relative to the earth. It is our connection to this outer world upon which our sense of belonging depends.

Thesis Supervisor: Jan Wampler
Title: Associate Professor of Architecture
Dedicated to my mother.
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As part of the site analysis, understanding the geological formation of the site was vital to understanding its character and structure, while also perhaps giving clues as to how the building itself might be formed.

The site is situated in Johnson Crook, a south-facing indentation along the bluff of Lookout Mountain in the town of New Salem, Georgia. As part of the sinuous course of the Appalachian system, stretching over 1,500 miles from Newfoundland to Alabama, its making is due to collisions which happened over 300 million years ago. Huge plates containing North America, Africa, Europe and South America slowly crept closer to each other, finally joining to form a super-continent, leaving marks on their plate edges. The
Appalachian Plateaus, of which Lookout Mountain is a part, is the last in a series of deformations resulting from this collision emanating westward from the Blue Ridge. The pointed metamorphic rock of the crystalline Blue Ridge stands in sharp contrast to the flat sedimentary rock of the Appalachian Plateaus. Limestone laid down in the sea underlies this plateau region. Where pushed up as mountains and exposed, this soft limestone has eroded away to form present day valleys. Conversely, the valleys, where hard layers of sandstone had been deposited, have survived to become present day mountains. So ironically, the mountains today are the skeletons of ancient valleys, the eroded remnants of a taller range, the "Old Appalachians."

The strata of these sedimentary Appalachians have been flexed into a succession of anticlines and synclines, with folds crowded tightly against each other. These folds trend in a northeast-southwest direction, parallel to the major structural axis of the folded Appalachians, though they are often broken and overturned by faults. Large thrust faults underlay the Appalachian Plateaus. Low angle thrusts tore loose
higher parts from lower parts along weak shaly layers, carrying sheets of rock atop others miles northwest.

The site testifies to this ancient formmaking. Resistant sandstone projects high as ridges on Lookout while the more vulnerable limestone, which forms the lower third of the mountain, has been eroded by water and the acid from rotting leaves, dissolving out large cavern systems.

The horizontal layering of the sandstone is a strong feature of the site. These layers vary along the bluff edge from small thin layers to places where the rock bedded in big, thick slabs. This finely layered sandstone makes up the top zone of the bluff wall. Behaving like shifting plates, these sheets of rock weave in and out of the trees, cantilevering far out in places to form dramatic outcroppings. Shifting and colliding along the edge, they reflect the dynamics of the shifting earth sheets which first formed the Appalachians.

Below this top layer, the bluff wall, where the insides of the earth are revealed, is composed of rock of a different character. Older, more weathered sandstone has been divided vertically into larger chunks by planes
of stress perpendicular to the bluff. Many of the cumulative layers have been cemented together, with the rock appearing round, soft and lava-like. Undulating horizontal lines sweep the rock face, like paths of energy describing the stress flow, evidence of the ancient force and folding of the rock. The great round rock walls undulate as well, as if pushed out by some force behind.

On a larger scale, the site can be seen as two giant plates colliding. An upper bluff forms the crest of the site while a lower bluff sweeps in below. Understanding the bluff as two larger pieces proved valuable later in determining where and how the building might sit relative to this collision point.
Beyond its geology, further site analysis aims at understanding the natural organization of this place as a meaningful system of spatial relationships, as a set of 'insides' from the macro to micro levels. It is a site so built by the earth that it can be seen as a piece of architecture itself, with its own rules, structure and essential character.

LOCATION

The situation of this site offers excellent opportunities for orientation. Located in a south-facing concavity, Johnson Crook, which opens up to the long narrow valley between Lookout and Sand Mountains, it is a place where natural exposure and enclosure collaborate. Even within the large scale...
of the southern Appalachian range, it is identifiable as a habitable niche. Cradled in this cup looking southwest along the Appalachian Valley you have no question as to where you are or what boundaries define your immediate world.

Scaling down to the size of the site, approximately 600 feet by 350 feet, the task is to map the site in terms of paths, places, districts, landmarks, similar to a Kevin Lynch image map, a way of naming, and thereby locating you. Similarly, most of the names in
this region refer to some physical location: Lookout Mountain, Plum Nelly ("Plum out of Georgia and Nelly out of Tennessee"), Valley View, Eagle Cliff.

Three major outlooks divide this stretch of bluff into two nearly equal halves of 270 feet each. The middle outcropping is the most prominent projection, marking the precinct of dramatic rocky ledges that distinguish the upper bluff. Steps built between these rocks lead to a cave underneath. Traveling along the edge, the land descends to another set of steps built at what seems to be the collision point of the upper and lower bluffs, marked by a pile of crashed rocks, as if frozen in the midst of colliding. These steps lead to a lower dish-like place, with the land eventually climbing up again to the third major outlook. However if you follow the flow of the land down, you are led naturally to venture below the bluff and walk along its bottom edge. The land comes up here from below, as if to greet you, decreasing the usual drop of 25 feet to only 10 feet. With a big round boulder marking the place of descent, it seems a natural entrance to the world of the cool, undulating rock walls below.
Behind the paths which play along the edge, the forested ground slopes gently back to the road, except for the flat clearing around the old house of the artist who once owned this land.

The movement of the land is another essential characteristic of the site. Like a river downstream, you are carried along by the current of the land with outlooks, platforms and the lower dish-like space acting as pools and eddies catching the flow.

In addition to events occurring parallel to the bluff, distinct zones mark your movement perpendicular to the bluff. The site more than anything else is an edge. You are always aware of your position in relation to this powerful, large scale, referential edge, the thing you share with everyone else along the bluff, the belly of the mountain.
THE APPROACH SEQUENCE

The movement toward the edge actually begins with your drive to the site. Openings between trees offer peeks to the vista beyond, punctuating your journey to the back of the mountain. Driving up to the site, enough light filters through the forest to let you know the edge is near. Dense woods constrain your movement as you ascend toward the bluff. Once free from the forest, the blue mountains, like the sea, rise on the horizon in the distance.
The view out is partially obscured by a thin, teasing screen of trees, which marks the zone just behind the bluff. The Jack Pine, a rugged, Japanese-like pine tree grows directly out of the rock, with hovering horizontal ledges of green, similar to the ledges of rock below. Here the immediacy and detail of the near is juxtaposed against the infinity of the valley beyond. The light and openness draws you to the bluff edge.
Being out on the tips of the rocky ledges, you are finally free from any immediate containment, wide, open, up and out. You are in the treetops. The sky dominates and the land rolls out from beneath you forever. Release. Calm.
In sharp contrast is the more enclosed earth-dominated world of the bluff wall below. Here the walls act as light-catchers, drawing your attention up to the sliver of sky revealed between the bluff edge and the treetops. A cool, dappled light is cast on these powerful rocks from the screen of trees, seeming even lighter in relation to the rock wall. Here also, you feel very much down, up against (nearly in) the earth, in contrast to the high-up, close-to-flight feeling of the outercappings above.
The program for the building is an arts and crafts center, a loose gathering of workshops, studio and exhibit spaces, where classes are held, studios can be rented and shows are open to the public. A place of healing, rejuvenation, reconnection, where people come to get their hands in some clay.

Several places of similar program were visited as references, the Penland School in North Carolina coming closest in terms of atmosphere and organization. Like a summer camp, modest buildings were linked by paths organized around a communal space. Buildings had been acquired as needed and modified ad hoc over time. Every workshop had some form of accompanying outdoor workspace. A quiet, casual activity of making hummed about the place.
A couple of sheds sit on the site. Mostly farm buildings and tobacco barns spot the country here. Often aged and partially delayered, they eventually become screens. Tin roofs are lightly laid over these structures, tilted and propped up by poles. Valuable references for building here, these sheds, barns and lean-tos have an appealing ease and casualness with which they sit on the land. The sparseness and humility of these structures seem appropriate to the program of rough, simple workshops.
In approaching the design, the task is to gather these identified essential properties of the site through building. The journey from the road down to the bottom of the bluff wall with the discovery of distinct zones along the way serves as the generator for the building. Whereas all other structures on the bluff have been plopped along its edge, this project seeks to connect the worlds of up, down, front and back, thus calling attention to the as yet unappreciated contrasts which exist on the site. To get up and out in the space of the edge and down next to the wall below, to have some building presence in all the zones of the site is to offer a new way of experiencing this place. To describe and choreograph this journey, as a built
representation of passage through a natural landscape, the site is revealed to you as you move through. Travelling through the site relative to the building is nearly as physical an activity as travelling relative to the landscape, climbing up and through the building as you would the site. The intent is that both the program and the architecture communicate to you physically, through your body, the way the site does so powerfully itself.

To more easily find a correspondence between the built and the natural, the site is abstracted in a model which generalizes the outcroppings as square platforms and describes the wall below as cylinders.

Seen in the first sketch model, the building describes this diagonal movement from the road to down below, leaving the natural bluff edge to survive and move independently through. Thus the building has its own direction, moving through the landscape as the bluff and other directional ridges of rock cut through the trees. The diagonal sweep of the upper bluff of outcroppings is also reinforced as it is carried spatialized up into the building in the form of built platforms and

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projections.

The choice was made to build in the lower part of the land, sweeping behind the crest of the site which stands with strength on its own, already actively built with ledges, steps and walls. The area of the site which does need reinforcement, however, is the ill-defined lower dish-like place, marking the meeting place of the upper and lower bluffs and upper and lower worlds. It is here where you descend to below and here where the two bluffs collide, their reverberations seemingly creating what is now molded into an amphitheater, a south-facing bowl, a microcosm of Johnson Crook made concrete and local. This geological event anchors the building at this juncture point, metaphorically implying that the same forces which formed these bluffs also formed the building, thus tying it to the site in a profound way. By focusing the building on this fissure point, and intensifying it, the site is revealed in a way which describes its formation. Thus the form of the site can be read as describing a place for the building, and the building in turn redefines the form of the site.

Since the revelation of the wall

Since the revelation of the wall...
below was primary, this is the piece of landscape which the building grabs most aggressively, including it in the territory of the building and thus intensifying its character. A building which in later models becomes more screenlike against the heavy wall, provides a built edge juxtaposed opposite the natural one, defining a kind of tight urban space between the two, a semi-enclosed indoor/outdoor space. Up above, the building again defines a space between its built edge and the edge of the outcroppings opposite. So when moving along the bluff, you are always moving in relation to a built edge on one side and a natural one on the other.

Through a second model, the building emerges as more distinct, referential pieces which describe movement toward and down the bluff. These larger chunks of building seek to address the scale of the site through their more than 120 foot lengths and to define a more densely built spine for the complex which dissipates to the naturally dominated world. In their placement the buildings set up an alternation relative to the bluff. Traveling along the upper walkways
Upon entering the center from underneath the first building piece, the view out to the bluff is denied until you have reached the central courtyard, where it opens up dramatically to your right. Hence the buildings evolve as screens, measured filters through which to perceive the natural surrounds, opening and closing to views out, similarly to the trees behind the bluff. Between them, the view opens to the bluff then reverses with a courtyard opening to the hill behind, then opens to the bluff side again at the amphitheater.

The overwhelming view out to the valley is more powerful if blocked and then revealed, is made special if viewed through layers, frames and screens.
Screens and other structures found in and around the site offer framed views out, enhancing the natural through a built context, illustrating how the layered zones which comprise the site could be intensified through layers of screens and openings placed in relation to them, building alternations of light and dark.
To begin to conceive of building as selecting from a whole range of partial to complete definitions is an important goal in the design of this project. By using only pieces of building, different degrees of enclosure, and thus exchange with the outside, are possible. Within the building, leaving out a floor, a ceiling, or a wall allows the outside to come in and complete it, to animate it. Conversely, out in the landscape, the power of definition that simply a roof or a stone wall or some steps carry is evident in structures existing on the site.

Similar to fields of elements in the landscape which overlap, build in density, intermingle and dissipate, the layers of the building weave together. Moving through the site as it exists, you move between rocks, through screens, and under canopies. Built anologies are offered by the building, as it becomes penetrable and separates into passing fields of roofs, walls, floors and frames. With only pieces of the building moving out into the landscape, parts of the outside are partially enclosed, bringing them into the territory of the building. The landscape as a composition of passing rhythms and subtle definitions, is used as a model for the building.
Through the interplay of the relative permanence of the building and the everchanging nature of the natural, each is enlivened by the other. To find a balance between these two worlds, each sharing characteristics of the other, is the search of this thesis. Marc Treib addresses this topic with clarity in his article "Inflected Landscapes" of Places /Vol.1, No. 2. Describing the inflected landscape as being in the middle of the two extremes of merging with the landscape and 'standing separated from it, he states:

"Inflected landscapes such as this occupy that middle zone between the natural and the made, creating a state of soft tension that evokes a perceptual ambiguity between the identities of both the natural and the constructed. Contributing to this ambiguity, the exact nature of their interrelationship seems to shift and change under differing environmental conditions."

He goes on to cite Gunnar Asplund's Woodland Cemetery as a project which straddles this edge.

"The architect orchestrates the sequence of movement and view; the path leads from the natural, to the inflected natural, to the highly wrought, to the celestial."

A seemingly natural grove of birch trees occurs along this path, but is revealed to be planted as a perfect square and placed upon an intentionally shaped knoll, its order subtly reflecting the rhythm of a portico colonnade across the meadow. Further down the path at the chapel, the trees are continued into what you would expect to be a more formal walled courtyard space, inflecting the texture of the forest and creating an ambiguity between inside and outside, the natural and the designed.

By working within the whole range of built to natural forms, from editing trees, to re-arranging the natural, to the range of partial to complete architectural forms, opportunities for correspondence between the two worlds are greater. Team Zoo is a team of Japanese architects whose work illustrates well the possibilities of working with such a palette. Shown here, a miniaturized landscape of hills and valleys is molded within the courtyard of the Kasahara Elementary School, plant vines complete the roof of the Nakijin Community
Center, stone walls and earth terraces define an edge and enclose an amphitheater at the Ishikawa Municipal Park, and bougainvillea adds a living layer to the partially enclosed spaces of the Nago City Hall.

Using these examples as references, the design strives to employ this range of vocabulary in addressing the issues of how much to build where. The main public path along which the workshops are organized transitions to simply roofs and low walls near the front outcroppings and a purposefully molded landscape in back. The amphitheater is bounded by a curved screen of columns carrying a copper band, which serves as an exhibit structure, and by a berm which encircles the sculpture garden running round its perimeter. A light wooden bridge leading to a lookout tower also encloses the territory of the amphitheater, acting as an entrance gate to this lower area, defining it a large collective outdoor room.

In recognition of the importance of this amphitheater area as a transition to the world below and as a concretization of the collision between bluffs, round masonry forms are
introduced here, abstractions of the round earth walls of the bluff. Being of the same family of form as the natural wall below, these round terraces emanate from this collision point, as if pushed up from below and continue behind the building in the form of earth mounds. Masonry is pushed up in other places as stabilizers to the wood framework and occasionally as tall piers, light catchers, acting as markers along the path of the building. The light wooden frames step over and float within this masonry like trees over the rocks, in keeping with the chronological sequence of how this place was formed.

The frames of the building act as built references against which to measure the rise and fall of the land, as the ground moves in underneath them and as the frameworks move across and down the bluff. Carrying high ridge beams from which pieces of roof are hung, they are recurring units of construction defining a human rhythm through the place. A measured screen through which to view the natural, they provide a reference from which built outcroppings may project.

Within this structured rhythm of recurring pieces, however, distinct places, markers and events occur, to retain and even heighten the sense of bodily movement and location, here as opposed to there, which exists on the site untouched today: moving under buildings and bridges, out to the rocky ledges or back into the courtyard and down the hill, moving up and out to the lookout tower, a focusing point where you can gather in the world around you and feel at the center of it, or down the steps between the rocks, into the amphitheater, and then out to the rock balcony from which you descend to below.

Travelling through the site relative to the building is nearly as physical an activity as travelling relative to the landscape, climbing up and through the building as you would the site. The intent is that both the program and the architecture communicate to you physically, through your body, the way the site does so powerfully itself.

Donlyn Lyndon describes building in the landscape in *Places* / Vol. 4, No. 4:

"By shaping and surfacing the land itself or by making floors that create large, simple areas for use and stairs that lead from one level to another, the architect
is building a choreography ... the play of paths across the land and up through structures to varying points of outlook is one of the principal pleasures of the place."
A. Exhibit
B. Sculpture Garden
C. Woodshop
D. Ceramics
E. Glazing
F. Glass Blowing
G. Cafe
H. Office
I. Supply Shop
J. Amphitheater
K. Parking
L. Indoor Exhibit
M. Printmaking
N. Drawing
O. Studio
P. Weaving
Q. Papermaking
R. Dye Shed
S. Enamel
T. Lookout Tower


