



TRANSFORMATIVE LANDSCAPES:  
*Through an Immersive Lens*

GRACE LEE

## Abstract

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In a world where design and thinking have become quantifiable and didactic, the profession of landscape architecture has become saturated with ecological design. Data-driven methodology is practical and necessary; however, we, as landscape architects, begin to detract from our position as artists of the land. We need to value the ephemeral qualities of the land in order to evoke awareness. Landscape Architects should design immersive and experiential landscapes that transcend our understanding of the world not only for ecological benefit, but also for each individual experience. Transformative landscapes are the gateway to contemplative revelation.

## 01 | PREFACE

Introduction  
Site Context

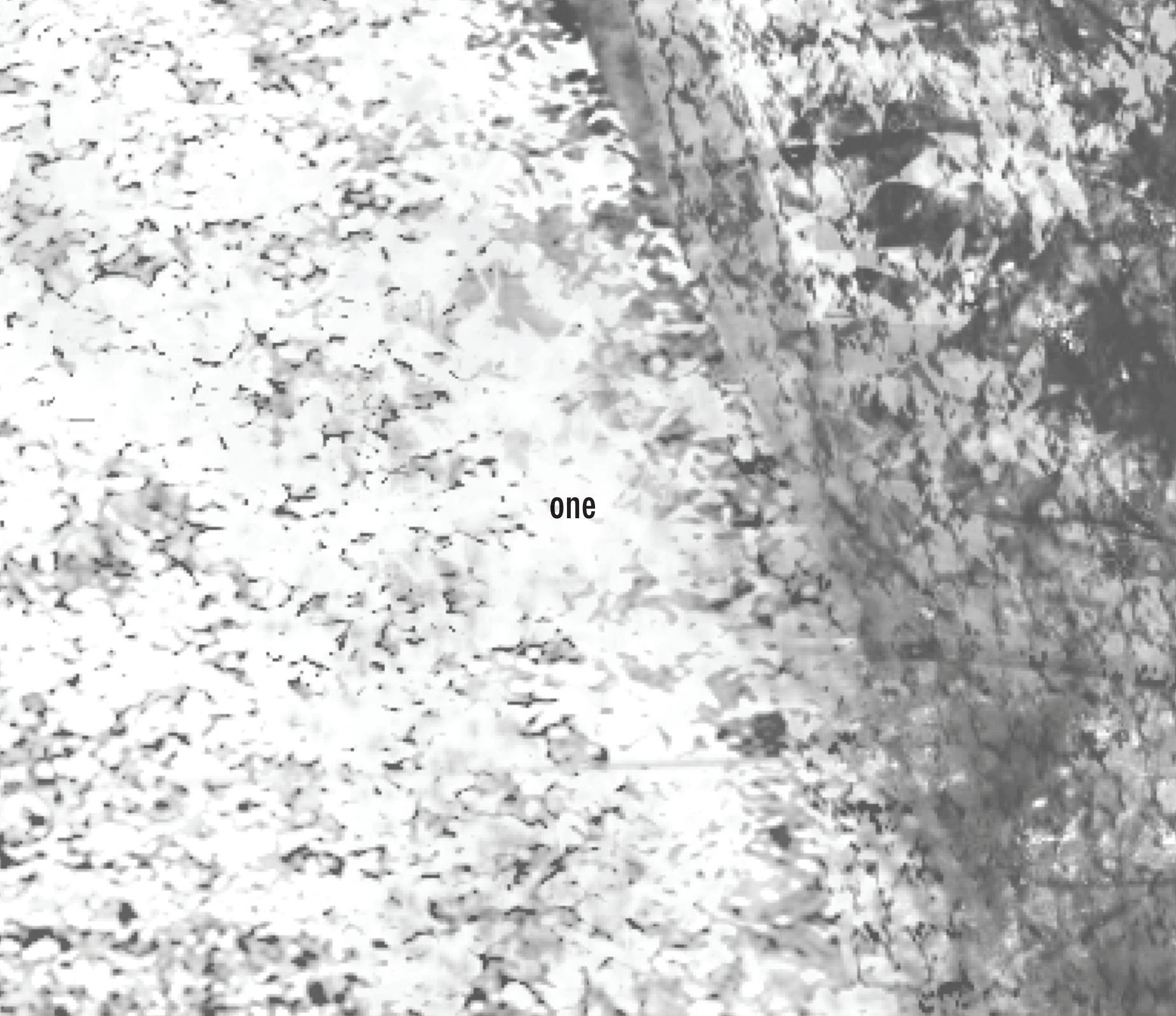
## 02 | PROCESS

Design Iterations  
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List of Illustrations

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a highly textured, granular surface. The texture is irregular and porous, resembling a wall of small stones or a large rock formation. The lighting is somewhat uneven, with brighter areas on the left and darker, more shadowed areas on the right. In the center of the image, the word "one" is written in a simple, black, sans-serif font.

one

A black and white photograph of a dense forest. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a dappled pattern of light and shadow on the leaves and branches. The overall tone is serene and natural.

## PREFACE

## Introduction

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Immersion, by definition, implies the physical act of being immersed into something; to absorb; to plunge; to seek. It is the driving force that causes one to enter, but also to emerge physically and mentally from a transformative state of mind.

“To watch the sun sink behind a flower clad hill. To wander on in a huge forest without thought of return. To stand upon the shore and gaze after a boat that disappears behind distant islands. To contemplate the flight of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds. And, subtle shadows of bamboo on bamboo.” -Zeami Motokiyo<sup>1</sup>

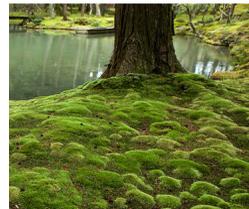
The objective of this thesis is to create a design that will “give ourselves over to the mysterious non-objective presence” of transformative experiences through immersion (Kosky, 53).

The profession of Landscape Architecture has become heavily saturated in the environmental discourse where quantifiable data and analysis drives initial design processes. Furthermore, technological advancement along with media continues to heighten ecological awareness by encouraging individuals to develop simple solutions that will benefit the environment. Ecology is a fundamental and necessary component of design and should not be undermined; however, transformative experiences are just as important because they have the capability to engrain a lasting impression on the user. The combination of aesthetic and contemplative experience can change our awareness of the world. Landscapes nor human experiences remain static, so we should analyze and design landscapes through an immersive lens.

Working with existing conditions grounds the framework for any design implementation. Landscape architects should allow the unpredictable nature of the landscape to manifest itself through minimal intervention. We should analyze ephemeral qualities of the site and amplify existing elements to create unexpected sensorial, physical, and mental experiences. Understanding how each component within a space shifts through time correlates with the different experiences we create for the user. Unlike didactic landscapes that examine and expect functionality, transformative landscapes nurture people to admire and contemplate their surrounding environment. By doing so, we can change people’s perceptions of the environment on how landscapes work and how landscapes should be viewed.



III. 7 Moss Garden of Saihō-ji



III. 7a, 7b, 7c Moss Garden of Saihō-ji

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### Moss Garden of Saihō-ji

The concept of *yūgen* is an integral part of traditional Japanese culture, arts, and aesthetics. Loosely defined, the term suggests a ineffable sense of mystery and depth procured from a profound awareness of the universe. It implies the impermanence of nature and the brevity of life. This sense of *yūgen* is present in the Moss Garden of Saihō-ji; the enlightenment that one hopes to understand relies on impression, memory, and experience accepted with time.

## Ideation

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How can landscape architects create  
transformative experiences through immersion?



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First representation of the idea of immersion that captures the physical interaction with surrounding space. How can these elements capture the mental immersion that is obtained through experience and transcends beyond words?

## Site Context

Four-columned, red brick buildings, manicured lawns, and concrete paths saturate Auburn University's campus. This is the aesthetic identity of Auburn University. The daily commute to and from campus depends on efficiency and inevitably becomes a monotonous routine.

The 2.9-acre site, now owned by the university, is adjacent to the Donald E. Davis Arboretum and the Auburn Church of Christ parking lot, which provides free parking amenities. Therefore, the church and arboretum experience heavy foot traffic during active school semesters.

Key existing components in the site are the bamboo forest and dense canopy dispersed throughout the site and the two residential houses. The bamboo forest is the ephemeral boundary that separates the arboretum from the proposal site. A tethered fence currently shows an actual divide separating the two areas. Connecting the arboretum with the site can integrate open circulation and opportunities for future activities.



## Place

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The existing bamboo forest, residential houses, and dense canopy are key components that can be strategically amplified to exude a deeper immersive experience for the user. Minimal design interventions should guide the users through a choreographed sequence that subdues their awareness to the transient nature of the landscape. This mental immersion contributes to the user's overall impression based on memory and experience.









A black and white photograph showing a highly textured, granular surface, likely a wall or a large rock formation. The texture is composed of many small, irregular particles or grains. The lighting is somewhat uneven, with a brighter area on the left and a darker, more shadowed area on the right. The word "two" is printed in a simple, black, sans-serif font in the center of the image.

two

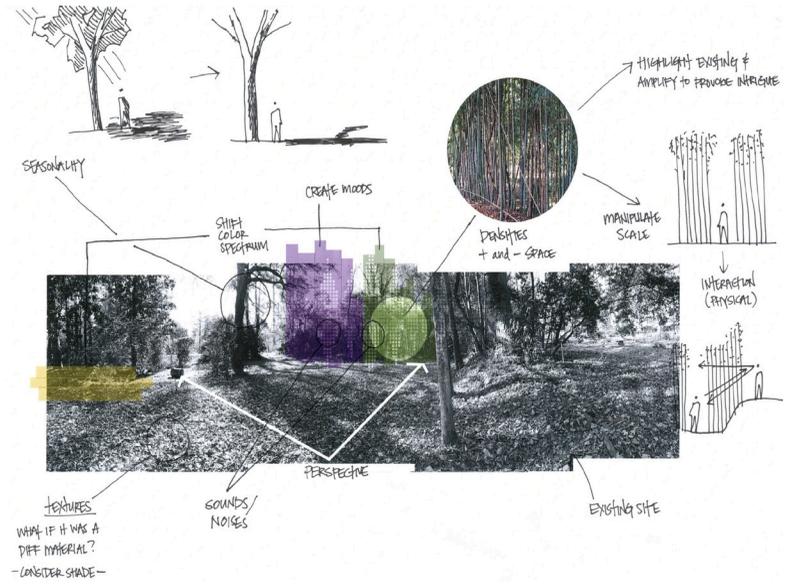


# PROCESS

## Design Intervention

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Research and design different methods of thinking to illustrate techniques incorporated in the final design. Identify case studies that have approached this method of thinking and design and how they have influenced design iterations.



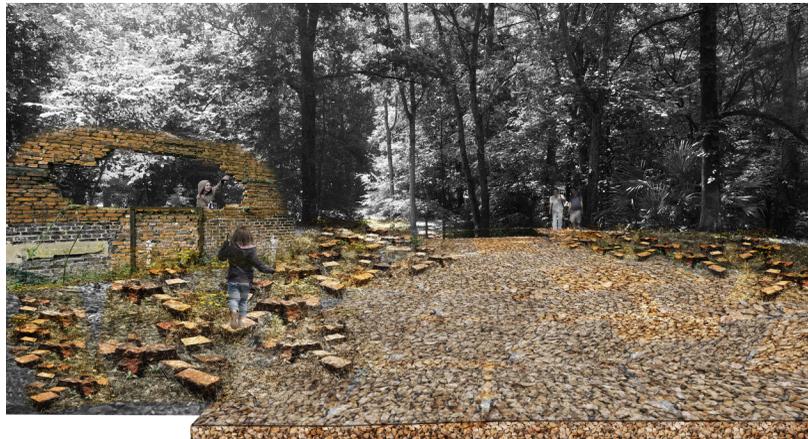
## Approach

Diagramming and sketching techniques and key elements that embody an enhanced transformative experience

## Texture

Textural components can be added to the landscape via materials or plants. The tall grasses that serve as partitions underneath the canopy separate the movement within this space. People walking through this space become encompassed by the height of the plant, but are still able to see through divide as they walk around the materials.

Recycling and reusing the same material in different forms and textural composition can blur distinct edges to where the design is unnoticeable. This detail becomes apparent when the user becomes fully observant of his or her surrounding.



## Enclosure

Deconstructed brick from the existing houses can be recycled to create an unexpected physical immersion. By playing up the vertical form of the bamboo forest, two brick retention walls, extending roughly 200 feet, structure a direct singular path through the site. Wall height is proposed at 7 feet to exceed the average person's height, but also to provide enough enclosure to expose a focused overhead viewshed.

The existing canopy provides an ephemeral enclosure that accentuates light and dark. Areas along the wall with dense canopy cast a darker fuller shadow as opposed to the areas with sparse or no canopy exposes more sunlight. The walls exaggerate the stark contrast between light/dark and dense/open that would not be as prevalent if the walls were not there.



## Juxtaposition

Juxtaposing vertical and horizontal form, the field contrasts the vertical height of the existing canopy, the bamboo forest, and the walls. Without easing into the transition, the path enclosed by walls abruptly opens up into an open field, drastically shifting the user's sense of scale. This is also an indication of the distinct transition between one choreographed sequence to the next.

Determining the plant species depends on color, texture, form, and seasonal change. A lavender field grabs the user's attention because of the distinct contrast from the white wall to a sea of purple. Using a monoculture plant species focuses on the field as a whole rather than a random assortment of plant species. Even within a monoculture, different shades and hues of purple subtly blur edges to drastically emphasize expansiveness as our eyes adjust to the overwhelming juxtaposition from white to purple. It is the opposite effect of looking into a painting of a vast, open field. The field frames itself as a boundless room that seems to extend infinitely outward.



## Color

Plant palettes should be based off of seasonal and ephemeral change. A simple fleeting moment can leave an immense impact when considering experiences. Intensity of contrast to textures, materials, and flora can drastically change the mood of a space.



## Mystery

Working with an existing bamboo forest simplifies the portrayal of immersion because the forest, itself, embodies a sense of mystery and ephemerality without foreign manipulation. The vertical scale of the bamboo grounds and encompasses the user underneath its thinly textured canopy, exposing pockets of light that glisten with the movement of the leaves.



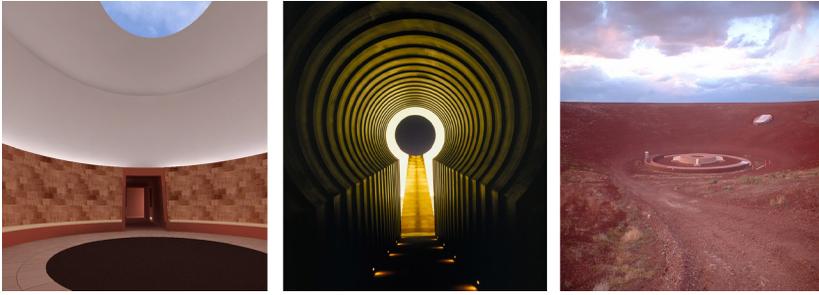


## Ephemerality

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A white gravel path that cuts through a dense canopy of trees creates a tunnel of shadows. The depth perception caused by denser areas disorients the actual distance to the other end of the path. A contrast between light and dark is revealed as the user disappears into the darkness of shadows and emerges out into the sunlight. This transient moment may only be feasible at specific hours before the sun sets.

During the winter months, this ephemerality may not be as exuberant as it is in the summer months. However, a different ephemeral form can take precedence over the initial moment. The skeleton of the branches reveals the different textural elements of bark. The glow of the fresh white gravel has now faded from continuous use and the opaque shadows fade into the crevices of the now rustic gray path. The attention to such details may not be noticeable at first; therefore, we must design experiences that transition the user to observe and admire



III. 26a, 26b, 26c Roden Crater



## Roden Crater by James Turrell

### Case Study One

American artist James Turrell is a pioneer of transformative light use in modern art. He manipulates the use of light to illuminate a profound admiration for a non-objective world.

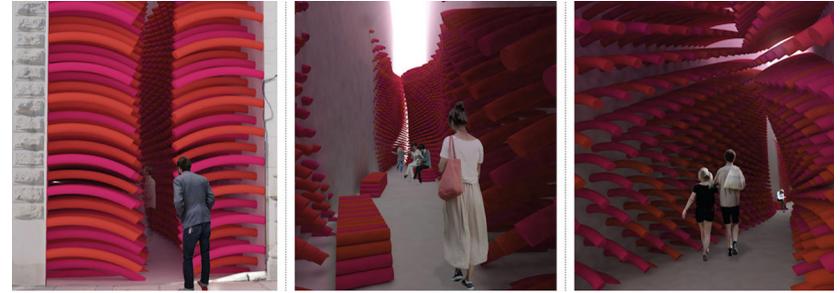
Roden Crater is a land art project that transformed the inner cone of an extinct volcano into a naked-eye observatory. It is a controlled environment specifically designed to contemplate and experience celestial phenomena and light.

The experience begins with the journey to the remote desert in northern Arizona. By separating the project from any or all manmade distractions, the observatory can successfully provide an unlimited view of the sky. The site contains tunnels and apertures that lead to a viewing chamber where the user is physically immersed into the environment.

Turrell's manipulation of the Skyspace directs the user's viewshed upwards towards a specific section of the sky where the shifts of light and color are intensified. The sky is opaque during the day because of the sunlight, but it becomes transparent as celestial objects become evidently visible at night. The white walls of the upper crater reflect enough moonlight to create a natural ambient light.

Light and space, according to Turrell, should entice contemplative revelations that provoke our understanding of the universe. He emphasizes the importance of contemplation as a means for transformative thought and experience.

III. 26 Roden Crater



III. 27a, 27b, 27c Delirious Frites

## Delirious Frites by Les Astronautes

### Case Study Two

The Canadian design collective, known as Les Astronautes, reinvigorated a disused alley in Quebec, Canada via art installation. Pool noodles inserted into wooden panels line up against two buildings to evoke a jungle-like, organic atmosphere. The stark contrast from the history surrounding the area creates an unexpected intervention that throws users into a completely different environment.

The narrowness of the alley, along with the drooping pool noodles encourages physical interaction with the installation. Users are encouraged to touch and immerse themselves into the foam tubes. The use of red and pink pool noodles brings vibrant and playful illumination to the alley, even at night. Les Astronautes' design has successfully juxtaposed history and tradition with modern design strategies to bring awareness to and appreciation for neglected spaces.



III. 27 Delirious Frites



## Color Field Paintings by Mark Rothko

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### Case Study Three

Stemming from economic strife and cultural isolation, artists of the Abstract Expressionism movement emphatically portrayed the value of self expression in their work. As an influential member of the movement and an advocate for revolutionary thought, Mark Rothko championed for new expressive form that led to his infamous color field paintings.

Influenced by mythology and philosophy, Rothko incorporated primal colors and archaic forms on large canvases to provoke a spiritual experience that resonates through basic human emotions and the uncertainty of life. He sought to reveal the process of each painting through his technique of layering colors, exposing texture, and blurring edges.

“An indefinable space, but it is having an effect on you physically. You feel engulfed, totally surrounded by it.” -Bruce Marden<sup>2</sup>

The monumental scale of these paintings immediately captivates viewers and entices them to move closer to the work. The incredible amount of detail cannot be captured from a single glimpse; therefore, viewers must take the time to observe in order to understand Rothko's intentions.

Similar to our eyes adjusting to a dark room, our eyes begin to distinguish between hues and boundaries of color. The paintings begin to vibrate and pulsate and create an overwhelmingly organic experience. The unexpected value and indescribable experience can only be attained when the viewer approaches through observation and admiration rather than examination.

*III.28 Four Darks in Red*



A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a highly textured, granular surface. The texture is irregular and porous, resembling a wall of small stones or a large rock formation. The lighting is somewhat uneven, with brighter areas on the left and darker, more shadowed areas on the right. The word "three" is printed in a simple, black, sans-serif font in the center of the image.

three

A black and white photograph of a dense forest. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating a dappled pattern of light and shadow on the foliage. The overall mood is serene and natural.

## IMMERSION

## Vision

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To ground the essence of yūgen not only as an aesthetic element, but also as a perceptive connection between users and the site.

## The View

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Emerging from the bamboo forest, the user expects the path to lead to his or her destination. However, their viewshed reveals an unexpected structure exposed itself through the canopy of leaves. Curiosity compels the user to divert from their initial destination and enter the mysterious structure present in front of her.

The unpredictable sequence of passage and movement through the site has been carefully choreographed to entice and surprise the user.





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Unexpected opening into a field that captures the attention of the user who is already disoriented from the walled path



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Textures, shadows, and illumination amplify the path. The walls block the hot summer air and provide cool patches where there are denser areas of canopy



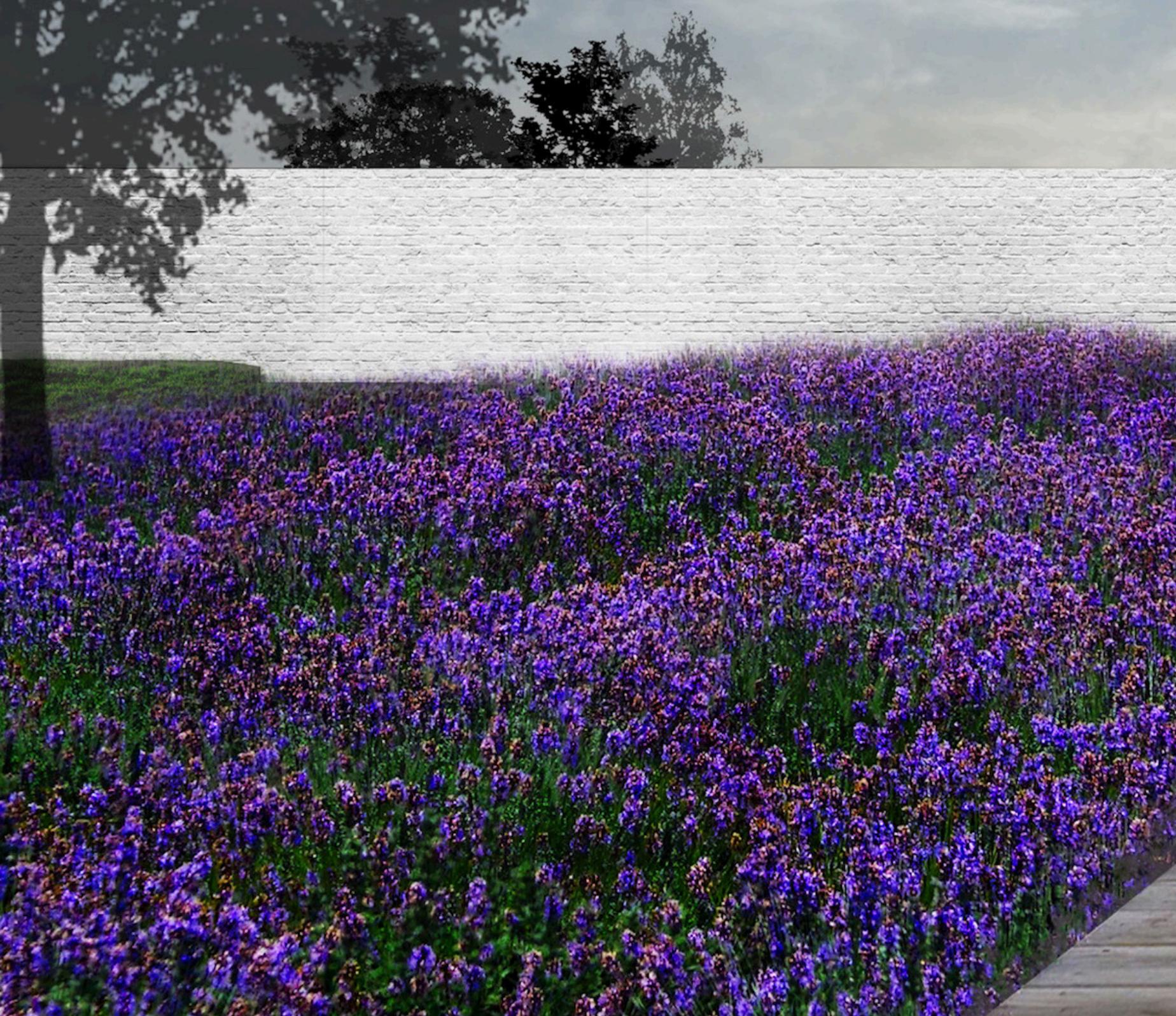
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As the leaves start to fall, the colors shift to hues of red and orange. The crunching of the leaves evokes nostalgic memories as the user walks towards a red field.



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Winter months expose the bones of the trees. The skeletal shadows evoke an eerie sense of mystery that is accentuated by the dark hues of gray. A spark of wonder lies at the end of the path as the sumac field comes to full fruition.







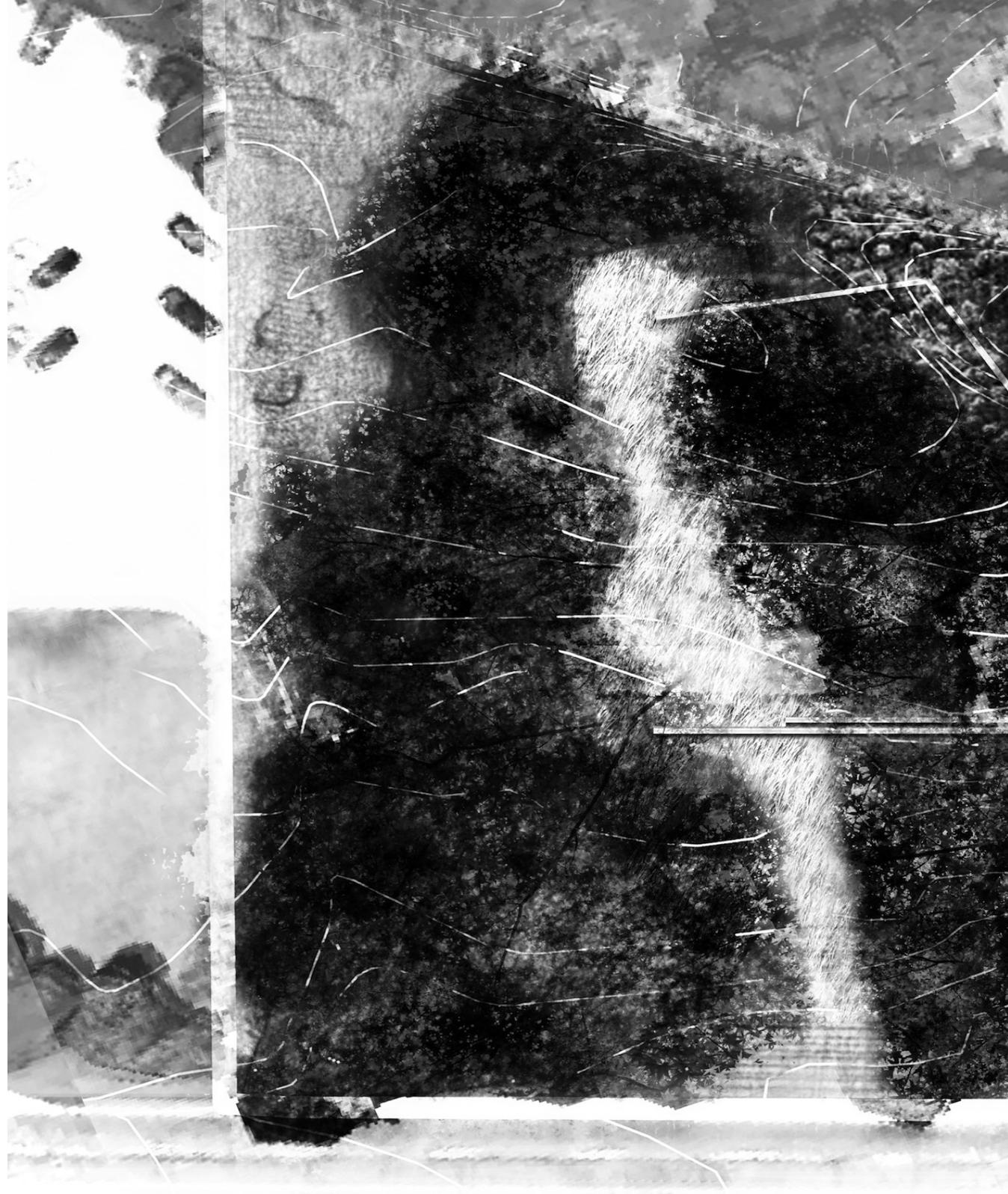


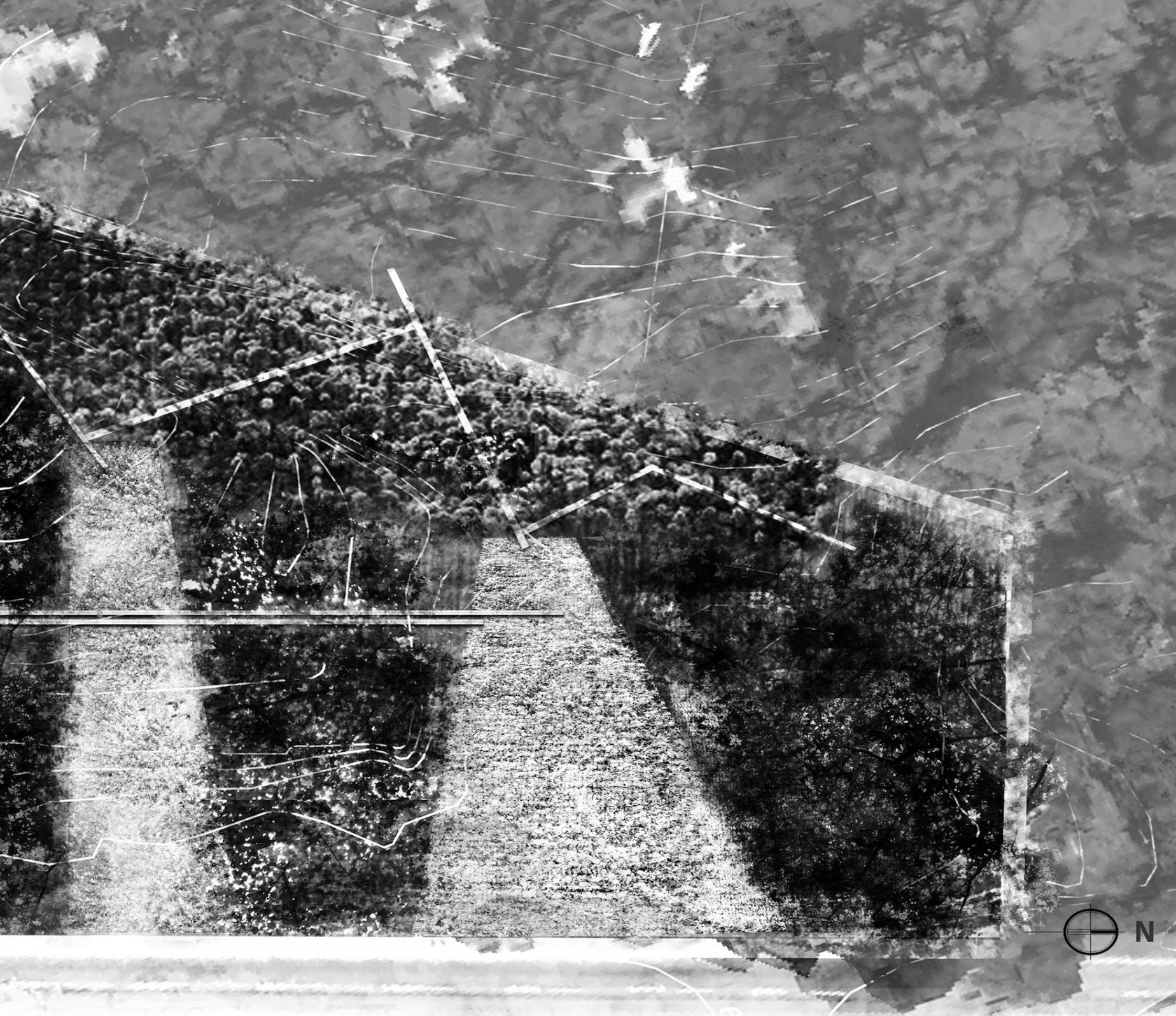
## Site Plan

Entering the site from the arboretum, a path extends through the abmboo forest. Elevation changes along the path leading to a prospective reflection area that opens up into a vast monoculture of sumac. The sumac field reaches its full potential in the late autumn to winter months when the red berries emerge. The elevated seating area extends the view outward towards South College Street allowing the user to understand that the field continues past the walls.

The second contemplation space sinks into the terrain and monoculture field of lavender. From this view, one can see another person emerge from the opening of the wall. The viewshed establishes a framed view of the field in contrast to the wall. The person coming out of the opening in the wall becomes disoriented by the knowledge of a field. Within the confines of the wall, the user is only susceptible to the ephemeral and sensorial amplifications provided in a vertical viewshed.

This strategic, yet unpredictable sequence of movement throughout the site defines how minimal intervention through amplification can reveal the mystery, depth, and contemplation of the landscape.







## Reflections

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The overall significance of the proposed research and design was to convey the importance of experiences that we, as landscape architects, provide for users. Ecology will always be a prevalent factor of design that should not be undermined.

That being said, the methods used in this thesis evaluate the spiritual and contemplative aware that transformative landscapes portray and that didactic design not the only way to convey important issues that affect the world that we live in.



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**PREFACE**

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## Illustrations

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