

Suburban Sacred Space
Design with Collaborative Meaning for a Community

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Acknowledgement

I wish to recognize my original advisor, the late Professor Beth Diamond for pushing me to take my early concept to a much larger and more relevant scope.

May she rest in peace in her own sacred space.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Sacred vs. Profane	2
Boundaries.....	3
“Hierophanies”	4
Sacralization of Space	6
Design Intent	9
Dequindre Park.....	11
Eckstein Park.....	13
Denton Park.....	21
Conclusion	28
Bibliography.....	30

Note: Lighting software animated renderings are included in this project, as separate electronic files.

LIST OF IMAGES

Site Map: Macomb County.....10

Site Map: Warren10

Site Map: Red Run Parks10

PLAN A: Dequindre Park.....11

Figure A1: Arches, Detail12

Figure A2: Arches, Detail12

PLAN B: Eckstein Park.....13

Figure A3: Phoenix Section.....15

Figure A4: Phoenix Elevation.....15

Figure A5: Phoenix Rendering16

Figure A6: Phoenix Lighting - Focal17

Figure A7: Phoenix Lighting - Linear17

Figure A8: Phoenix Lighting - Ambient18

Figure A9: Walkway Lighting - General18

Figure A10: Walkway Lighting - Spring.....19

Figure A11: Walkway Lighting - Autumn19

Figure A12: Walkway Lighting - Winter19

Figure A13: Walkway Lighting - Summer.....19

Figure A14: Black Turtle Lighting20

PLAN C: Denton Park21

Figure A15: Labyrinth Rendering.....22

Figure A16: Blue Dragon Structure.....23

Figure A16: Entrance Pergola23

Figure A17: Ash Tree Pavilion.....24

Figure A18: Ash Tree Pavilion - Lighting.....25

Figure A19: Pathway - Lighting.....26

Figure A20: Labyrinth Pergola - Lighting26

Figure A21: Ripple Pits - Lighting27

ABSTRACT

The history of human society has developed closely with religious thought and traditions associated with the supernatural, the divine, and the extraordinary. In a modern consumerist society, the opportunity the role *the greater* plays in public space can be a rich context for consideration. This practicum explores that idea in two sections. In the first part, the history of sacred space in varying traditions is analyzed to inform the design decisions involved in creating such a public space. The separation of the sacred from the ordinary and the boundaries that divide them are reviewed. Physical manifestations of the sacred, as well as the act of sacralization are investigated. As cultures develop amid a complex series of interactions, the futility of imposing a fabricated meaning upon a neighborhood has been well recognized. The neighborhood's participation is essential in generating worth. Authenticity of meaning cannot be designed for immediate acceptance; rather it must be cultivated within a community.

In the second part, a template is proposed for a local suburban community and its visitors to foster significance in a public environment. Dequindre park, Eckstein park, and Denton park have been designed as a network of public spaces and trails along the Red Run, a creek running through Warren, Michigan. This creek is part of the Clinton river watershed, and feeds into Lake St. Clair. As a trail connects public areas along the creek, a structure of themes is reinforced throughout the passage. Areas of play, spaces of reflection, and procession of experience unite to emphasize a connection with *the greater*. The goal of this project is to contribute forms that emphasizes substance beyond the conventional, and offers people the opportunity to develop their own value of experience. Rather than force a narrow scope of specific metaphors into programmatic elements, a variety of traditions, ideas, and forms are evaluated for appropriateness in a public forum. Abstraction of symbolism is pursued to retain broad public appeal. Showcasing stormwater management in an aesthetically compelling way is employed to utilize awareness of actions and responsibilities as a strong asset for promoting a sense of ownership. Advocating mindfulness of surroundings and experience is a key design objective.

Sacred vs. Profane

Throughout history, the majority of cultures have expression of the sacred in some form. While the significance varies greatly through time, locale and societies, there are consistent traits that mark the sacred as it pertains to humanity. Mircea Eliade, influential historian of religion asserts, "The first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane.*"; that it is "something wholly other than the profane, basically and totally different." (Eliade, 1957). Since "the sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities" (*Ibid*), it is recognized that the sacred and the profane are mutually exclusive.

The source of the word "sacred" comes from the Latin *sanctum*, set apart and *sacer*, priest (Webster, 1998). The Hebrew word for "holiness," "kedushah" (Hebrew: קדושה) has the connotation of "separateness." The sacred interrupts routine and brings attention to the enduring (Tuan, 1978). The relevance of the sacred to a people can vary, as it can become a "point of departure for an endless multiplication of meaning". Regardless of its influence, the sacred is recognized as saturated with *being*; it is equivalent to a power, and reality. Power, as an attribute of the sacred, typically manifests itself in two ways: Order, and Violence (Tuan, 1978). Sacred order is complete and whole, yet it is open-ended. As the openness allows for reinterpretation, repetition, and reclamation, the potential is for people to participate in formalized rites with true involvement.

The term "profane" originates as a description of the ground around and in front of the temple (Webster, 1998). The profane is recognized as the mundane;

secular and separate from the divine. While the profane entails the everyday concerns of the individual, the sacred pertains to the interests of the group, particularly through the use of formal symbols and rites (Durkheim, 1915). In contrast to the organized structure expressed by the sacred, the ordinary affairs of the profane appear subordinate and meaningless. The repetition of pattern without scrutiny dissipates to mere routine; innocuous and subtly malevolent.

Yet, although the two realms exist in opposition to each other, a transition between the two planes of existence is recognized and integral to the societies involved. The sacred forces a nexus in a plane and allows discourse between modes of being (Eliade, 1957). Humanities' ability to communicate between the two worlds is prominent in identity, structure, and unity. "However diverse and variously elaborated these sacred spaces may be, they all present one trait in common; there is always a link clearly marked space which makes it possible (though under very varied forms) to communicate with the sacred." (Eliade, 1958, p. 369).

Boundaries

Because the sacred and the profane are generally perceived as mutually exclusive, the expression of the boundary governing the duality is consequential, and corporeal ambiguity is typically avoided. However, this is not always plausible, since geography and human scale are so essential to the realization of space; it is inevitable that the polar duality of the sacred and profane will be contested in some instances. Noted geographer Dr. Yi-Fu Tuan observes,

“Where physical boundaries are absent or conspicuous, processions serve to establish apartness.” (Tuan, 1978, p. 85). The systematic movement through space and experience becomes repeatable and formalized, underscoring the order of the sacred. The palpable awareness of position in a prescribed movement emphasizes the event of transition.

In Europe, during the Middle Ages, the walls of the cities were ritually consecrated as a defense against the devil, sickness, and death (Eliade, 1957). In times of crisis, the whole population would proceed around city walls to reinforce their supernatural quality of limits. This symbolic practice became widespread, for example; in Northern India during times of an epidemic, a circle is described around a village to stop demons of the illness from entering its enclosure (Crooke, 1894). Order takes position against the forces of chaos through separation and protection. Defense, in the form of a physical barrier, emphasizes the necessity of the divine to withstand the forces of chaos, and subsequently, death. The innate human desire for meaning can be brought into assembling the basic structure of organized survival.

“Heirophanies”

In terms of the sacred, the supernatural crosses the barrier into our world and manifests itself physically in various forms. Eliade used the term *heirophany* to describe these phenomena. “It could be said that the history of religions - from the most primitive to the most highly developed - is constituted by a great number of Hierophanies, by manifestation of sacred realities.” (Eliade, 1957 p. 11).

Consistently this is demonstrated in objects integrated in our natural world, i.e. monuments, temples, and even burial grounds. How the sacred object or space is perceived is of great relevance, yet the most powerful aspect of the sacred existing in our natural world is that it is recognized as representative of “other”. The enduring and effective attributes of the sacred are observed through the object itself, yet it is not exalted merely for being itself; rather, it is the perceived presence of the powerful and separate that is revered. The point of contact between two realities becomes a mystery to be experienced repeatedly, a source of orientation to which the rest of the society can respond to.

The occurrence of the sacred can be categorized as *substantial* or *situational*. (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). When the sacred is manifested as substantial, the experiential, the awesome, the uncanny is found to be the source of revelation. In a word, the substantial form of the sacred is identified as: “Holy” Rudolph Otto; “Power” Gerardus van der Leeuw; “Real” Mircea Eliade. It is found to be full of ultimate significance, and therefore timeless. It endures openly and thoroughly.

As a situational manifestation, the sacred is at the core of human practices and social projects. The physical act of consecration generates meaning. While it is claimed by some (Eliade, 1957, Rubenstein, 1969) that the sacred is never chosen, it only chooses, others assert that significance of the sacred alone is indeterminate and meaningless; the sacred is a by-product of sacralization (Strauss, Smith). Which viewpoint has more validity historically is not to be solved here. For the purposes of this project, it is accepted that ownership of a

public space can be an act, and the intentional, repeatable motions of an experience in that shared area have the possibility to cultivate significance on a level beyond the recreational. This act of creating meaning is demonstrated in large annual ceremonies at public memorials, and individual observances at cemeteries.

Sacralization of Space

The complexity, history, and structure of the ritual affect how the spaces' formality is both perceived and maintained by both the community and the individual. The act of consecration, the sacralization through ritual, motion, and practice on a human scale provides and reinforces significance. The ritual itself insists that it will endure as both relevant and separate from the profane. If the sacred is marked by order and structure, and the profane is identified with chaos, the act of sacralization must be replicable and understandable. Whether the ritual is disclosed to a select few (clergy, shamans etc.) or widely practiced by the community as a whole, a clear set of actions constitutes the practice of consecration. Often there is an approach to sacred space that forces a series of gestures, of physical acknowledgement to the disparity between sacred and profane. Temples frequently have an entrance that disrupts the normal pattern of human movement designed to illuminate such a dichotomy. If such actions can be reproduced in a simple and clear manner that is available to all, it can be expected that sacrality of a place can be aligned with democratic values of public space. Authority is not required to garner validity or dictate experience;

involvement can be open and subjective to any who choose to participate (Krieger, 2000).

Because space can be considered as appropriated, possessed or owned, the character of a place gains power. The politics of property are vastly important, for if people are exiled from a place, they become exiles of the sacred. The appropriateness of Warren as a site for exploring the sacred in public space is clear; if one word would be used to summarize the geographical activity of Metropolitan Detroiters in the latter half of the 20th century, it could be *division*. Following the Detroit riots of 1967, a large exodus of the middle-class white population fled the city to relocate in the outlying suburbs and to Warren in particular. Separation and exclusion inevitably became a cultural and economic norm. Because the sacred appears as both substantial and situational, the opportunity exists for open participation to occur democratically. Using motifs and elements that imply open meaning without asserting specific cultural norms is a starting point for developing a program that maintains public appeal.

Just as several conditions by which the sacred appears can be understood, so, too are the circumstances of desecration identifiable. Purity being a distinguishing character of the sacred, destruction of boundaries has tremendous implication. As the sacred purports order and structure of itself, neglect can be a powerful indicator of defilement. Lack of involvement can occur through abandonment or dispossession. The politics of ownership and exclusion factor greatly in perpetuating the significance of location. In either case, acts of reclamation immediately reassert the meaning of a place publicly.

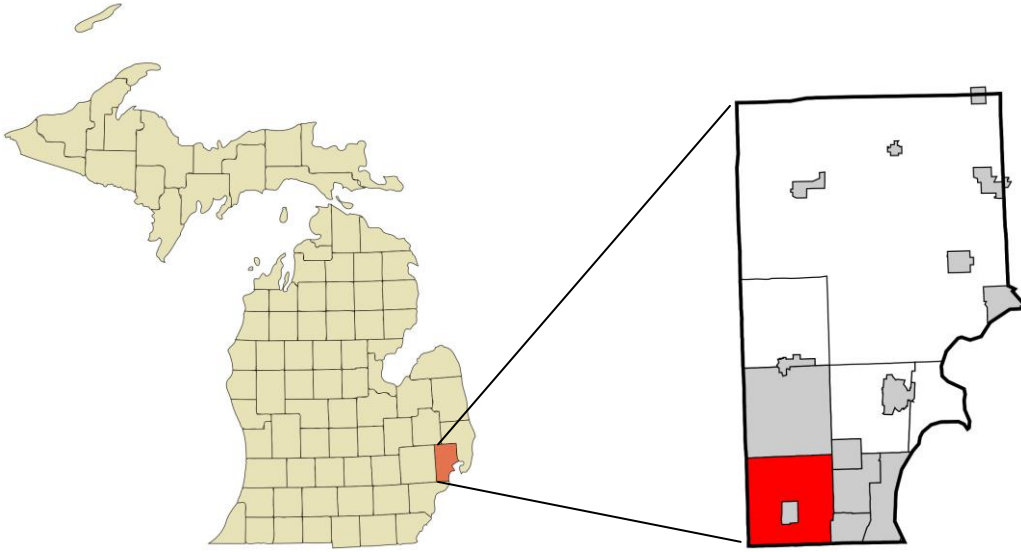
When the sacrality of a place is at stake, the opportunity for revitalization becomes a powerful factor in asserting validity. In the polluted conditions of the Red Run compromise both the purity of the ecosystem and the status of its worth to the community, then actions to mitigate contaminants carried in by stormwater runoff become bold declaration of ownership and value. Displaying such efforts in an interesting and active fashion can be a strong catalyst for awareness.

Thoughtful, vibrant design can escalate the transformation from neglected backchannel to decontamination showcase which gains acceptance on a large scale. When transition or procession signifies the shift from the ordinary to the distinctive, this can invite acknowledgement of value in the public realm. A form that refers to something greater than itself can inherently gain some of that importance in the viewer's eye. Manifesting these concepts within a program and encouraging interaction with them can be a starting point for a community to place value and take that further. I've taken these observations as the basis for an understandable template that asserts democratic values, offers programmatic elements and encourages public participation in a manner that cultivates the significance that only a community can provide for itself. It is my hope that this project can be a resource and guide for future planning and development in neighborhoods where significance of public space has diminished in the face of mere consistency.

Design Intent

The premise of the entire project is cultivating meaning through participation. Among the directions (ritual observance of natural processes, direct manipulation of the environments shape and aesthetic) through which this is achieved, procession is foremost. Movement through the program connects spaces as well as events and moments. By directing movement through the environment, the project immerses the participant as a dynamic physical component in a three dimensional space. “A rite can have this (sacred) character; in fact, the rite does not exist that does not have it to a certain degree.” (Durkheim, 1915 p52). Outdoor environments are easily observed to be in a constant state of flux to varying degrees and this project showcases the changes of natural processes and effects as well as makes the actions of people apparent. By giving people a forum to define their experience and affect the aesthetic of the environment, identity of voice becomes related to identification with space, and leads into creation of *place*.

Three areas along the Red Run were selected to be developed, Dequindre park, Eckstein park, and Denton park.

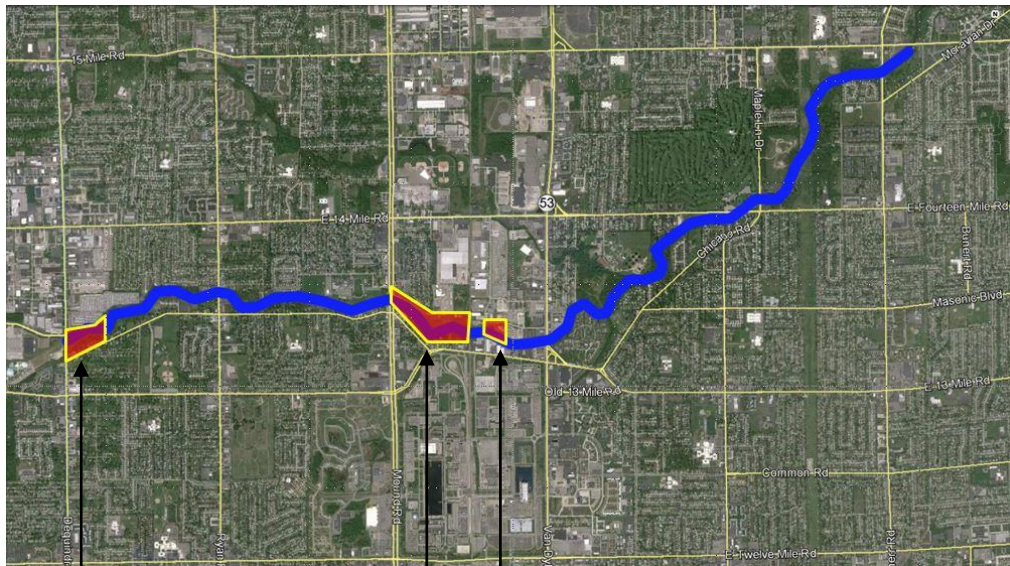


Location of Macomb County in Michigan

Location of City of Warren

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warren,_Michigan)

PARK LOCATIONS

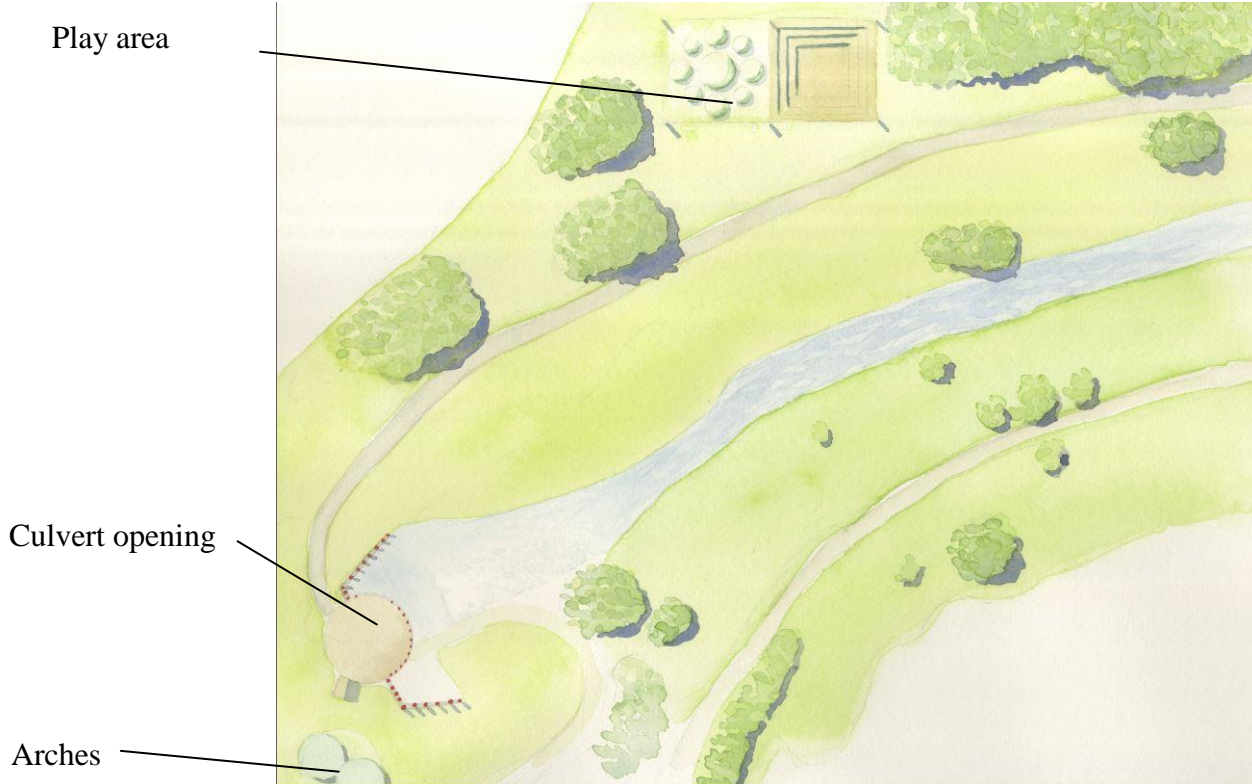


Dequindre park

Eckstein park

Denton park

DEQUINDRE PARK (Plan A)



Dequindre park is currently an open area adjacent the western border of Warren where the Red Run is daylighted. The proposed design will incorporate a pair of abstracted temple structures near the entrance. Existing sacred iconography was referenced, but literal representations would likely isolate and inhibit ownership, thus, non-literal representation would be required to maintain an open interpretation. A cathedral of “stained glass” is surrounding a duo of trees that reference the Garden of Eden’s Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and Tree of Life. The shape of Gothic arches has a powerful symbolism to western audiences - particularly in Warren, which has 22 Catholic churches. The traditional imagery of cathedral stained glass is taken in a new direction; rather than depicting explicit forms of saints or angels, brightly painted planters holding

colorful annual plantings will decorate both sides of these arched panels (A1).



A1

The planters will be able to slide laterally, inviting participants to create their own arrangements of color, shape and design (A2).

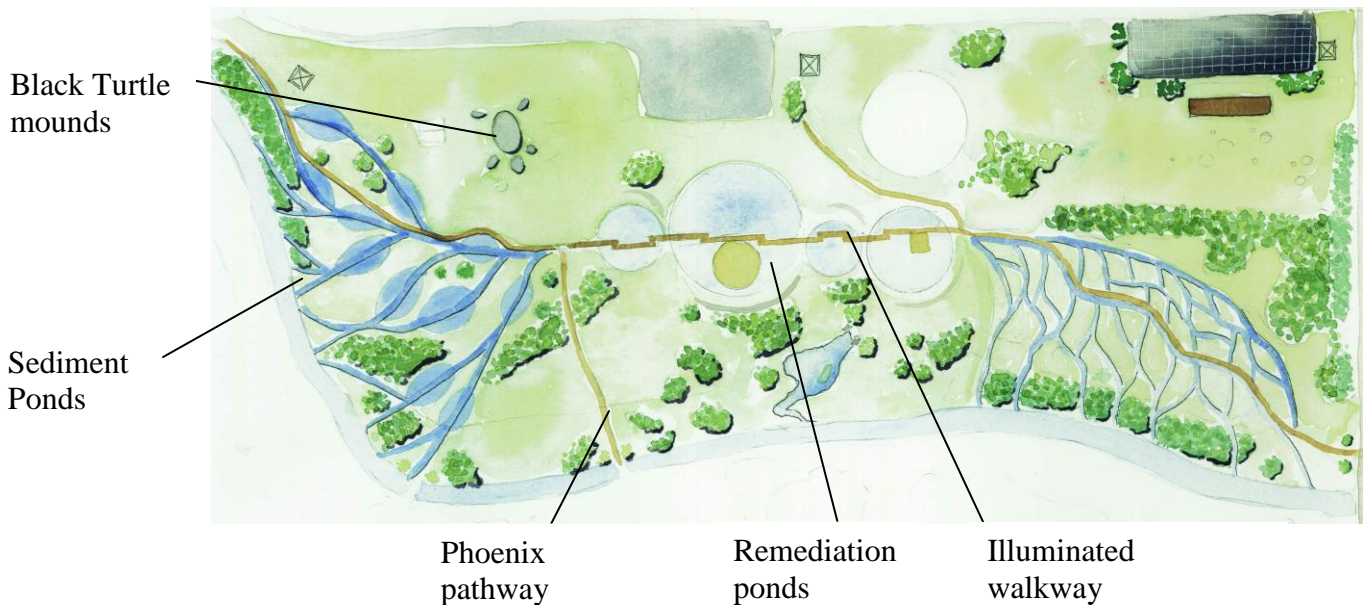


A2

Constantly changing, the impermanence of these designs endlessly offers new opportunities for involvement.

Near the arched planter is a play area containing a series of earth mounds for climbing, as well as steps leading into a recessed toddler play area. The form is taken directly from the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, using six trees in place of minarets (image 1). The recessed area descends to a maximum depth of 3 feet to provide a space for parents to observe all activity within, while the symmetry and rectangular plan references the city's strong grid of collector roads.

ECKSTEIN PARK (Plan B)

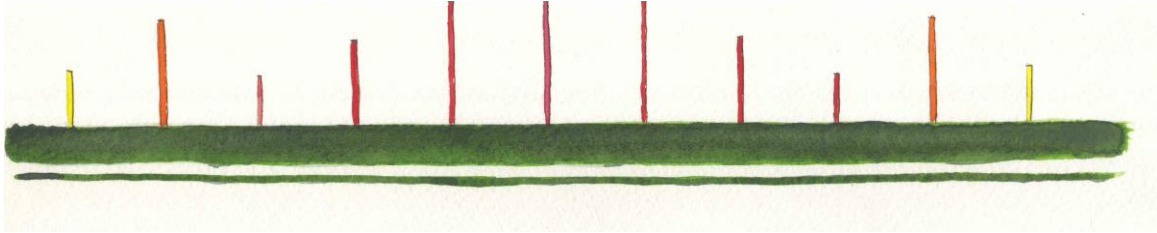


Eckstein park is a large area, currently consisting of mostly open space and a few baseball fields. The western portion of the proposed design has a stormwater remediation function. The design includes a series of inlet channels that direct water from the Red Run into braided channels containing leaf-shaped sediment ponds which begin the process of removing pollutants from the water.

Only a selected portion of the creek's water is to be channeled into the bioremediation segment. The main path leading in from the West diverts into several directions, with low bridges that traverse the tributaries. The water will then be moved through the series of ponds filled with phytoremediation plants. The main walkway through the park moves across these ponds and promotes consideration of the purification occurring below. The style of Japanese walkways that join a series of planks in a parallel, non-linear fashion has been utilized here. The frequent shift in direction commands attention to the immediate space, and by directing the focus of the observer downward, forces the bioremediation processes into view. The remaining water is then directed through a series of micropools and islands that allow infiltration and potential use for a small portion of community farm plots. Water levels will need to be monitored for consistency in order to be successfully utilized in such an endeavor, and analysis will be critical.

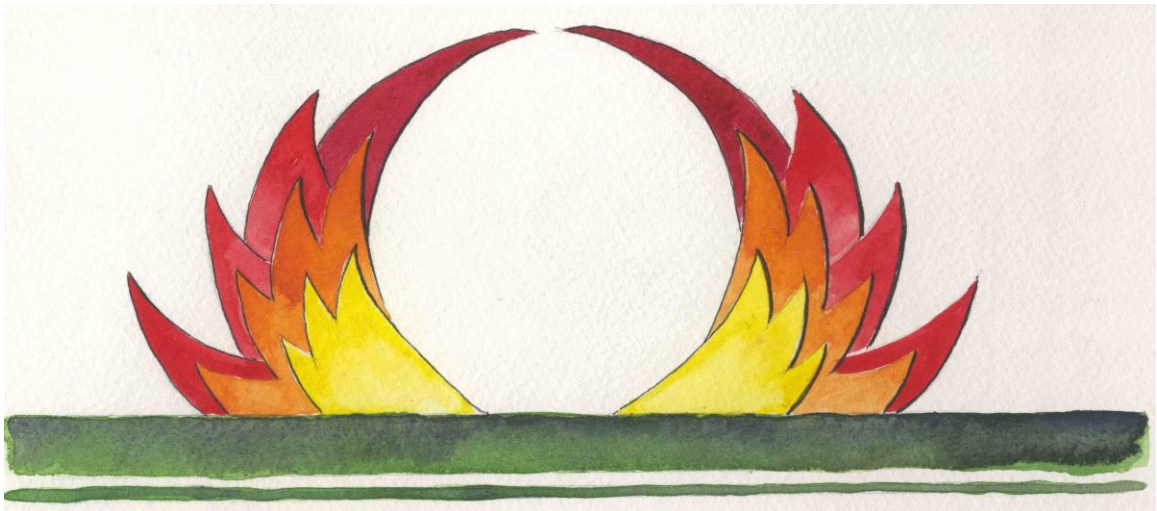
Japanese gardens have a basis in Chinese geomancy: the red phoenix is the guardian of the South, the black turtle is the guardian of the North, the blue dragon guards the West and the white tiger guards the East (Keane, 2001). These four icons are represented physically throughout the project's locations in various degrees of abstraction. In Eckstein park, mounds that break the groundplane indicate the shell, limbs and head of the Black Turtle. The sloped forms encourage climbing play, and the five peripheral mounds are specified to be below 3 feet, to facilitate visibility of small children. The bridge across the

southern entrance to Eckstein Park is greeted by the dynamic wings of the Red Phoenix (A3).



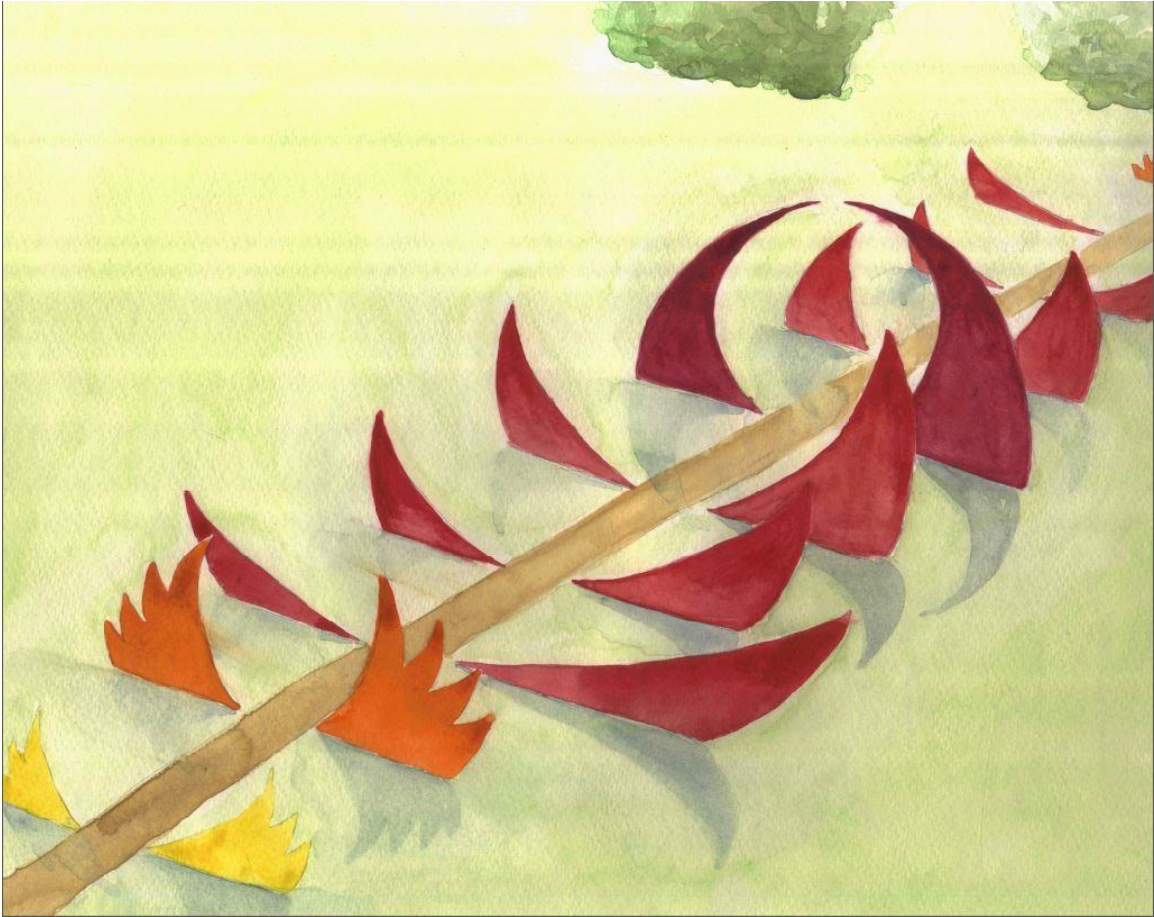
A3

Staggered metal structures of red, orange and yellow rise from the groundplane to frame a circular negative space which subtly referencing the waterdrop motif of the entire project (A4).



A4

Viewed from the most areas of the park, the structures appear to be little more than a loose collection of related shapes, but the varied shapes of the structures are aligned to form the flaming wings of a phoenix rising from the ground as people walk along the linear path. (A5)

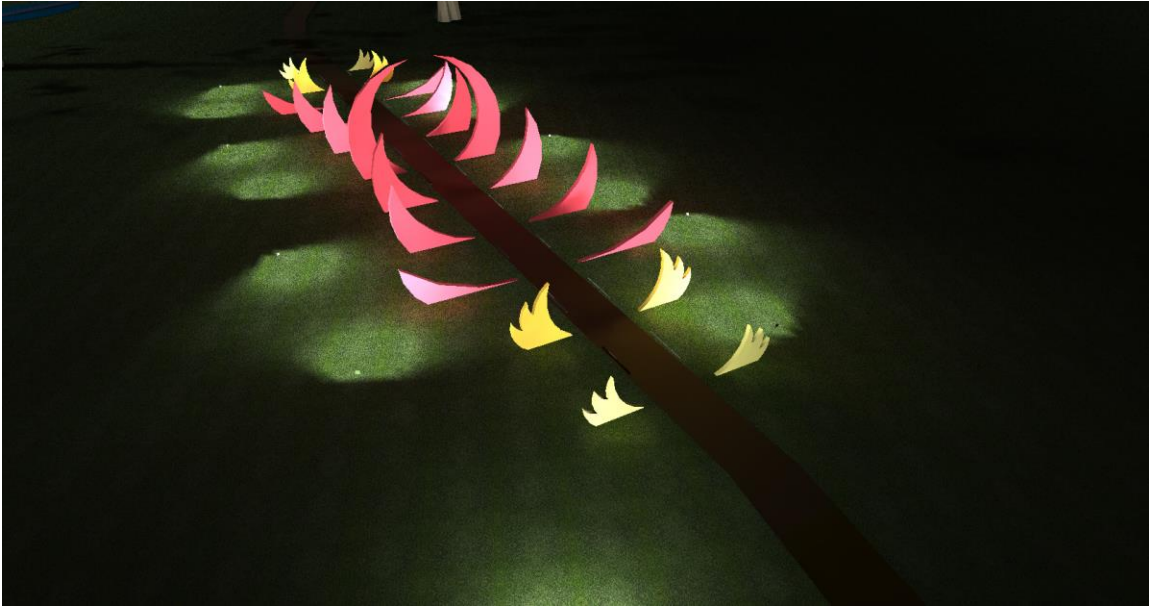


A5

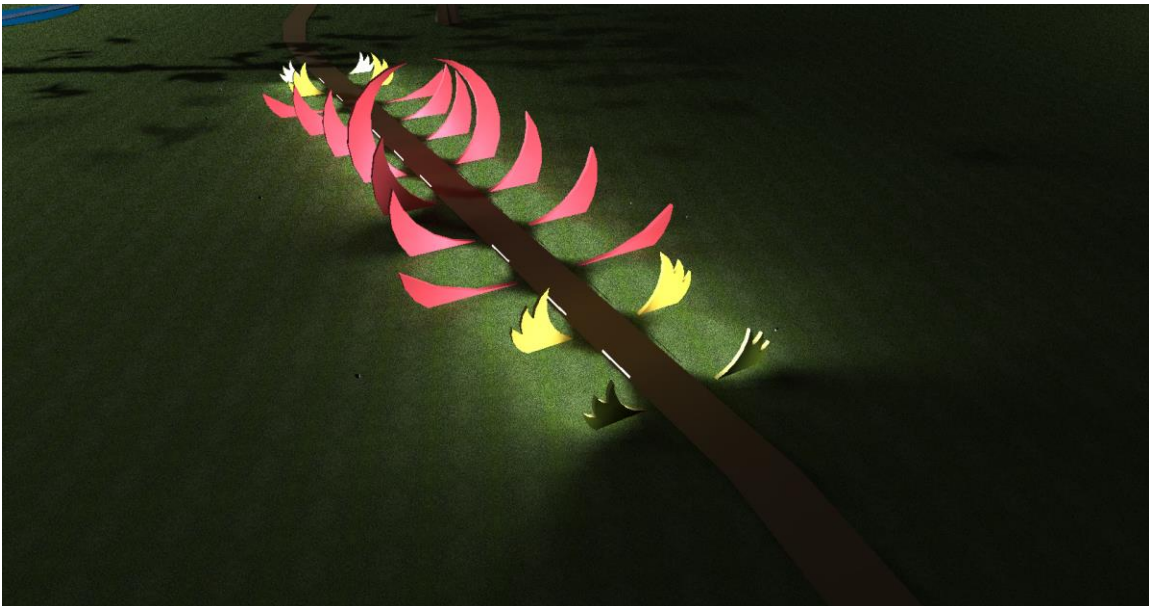
This dynamic was intentionally designed as a dichotomy - to emphasize the transition of entrance and to also allow for freedom of interpretation outside of a specific vantage point.

Ownership of a space can be encouraged by promoting participation. Inviting people to interact with the built environment and temporarily alter the lighting schematics offers a direct involvement with the immediate experience of place. Series of luminaires have been specifically placed in groupings along control channels that can be dimmed or turned on/off. By offering the ability to illuminate large sections of the environment, this design encourages individuals to emphasize select segments, explore connections of elements, and create shifts in atmosphere. Along the Red Phoenix pathway, spotlights can be

activated for close, dramatic uplighting to provide strong contrast (A6), linear fixtures mounted horizontally along the path can be controlled to increase direct light outwards (A7), pole mounted lights can bath the structures in a general wash of uniform illumination (A8), or multiple combinations.



A6

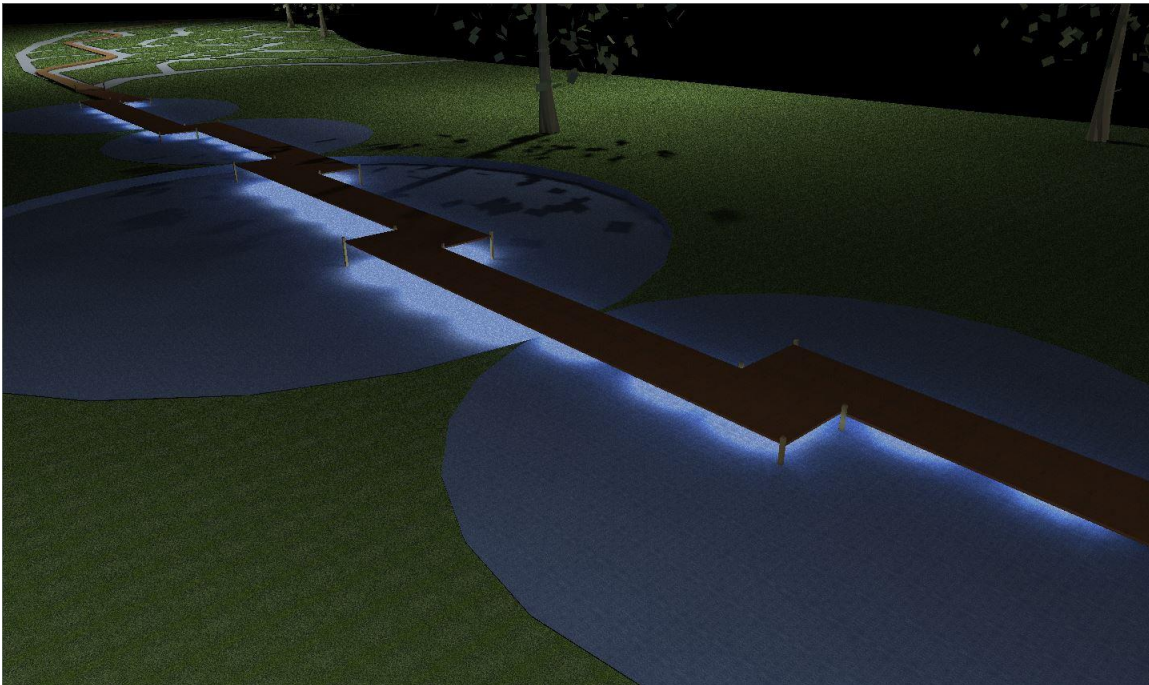


A7



A8

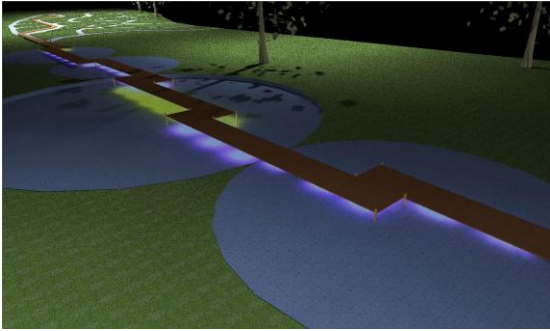
The bridges over the phytoremediation ponds have linear LED strip lights that illuminate the water underneath the walkway (A9).



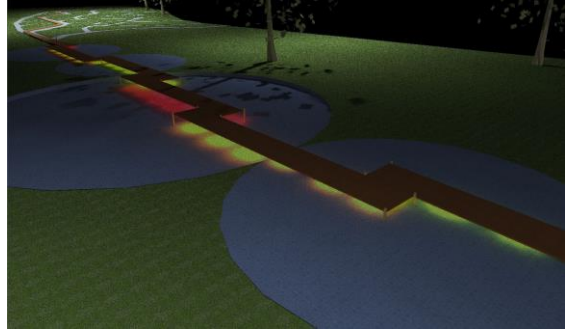
A9

Not only does the lighting control system promote interaction with place, but attention is inherently focused on the bioremediation process as an amenity to the community. These lighting components have been specified to have color

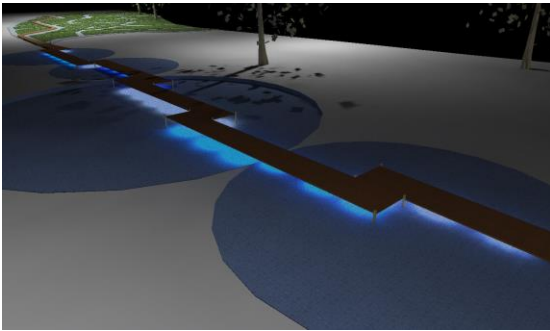
palettes that will coordinate with the seasons. Pinks, purples, and yellows will be employed for spring (A10), reds, yellows, and oranges for autumn (A11), blues, and whites for winter (A12), and greens and yellows for summer (A13).



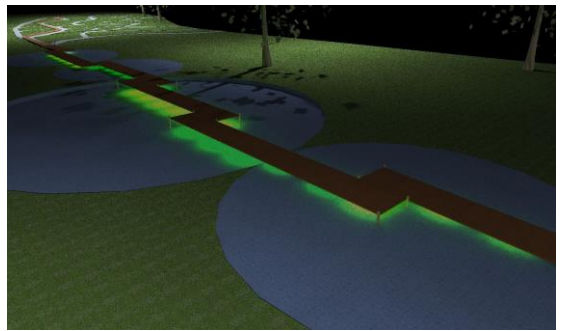
Spring (A10)



Autumn (A11)



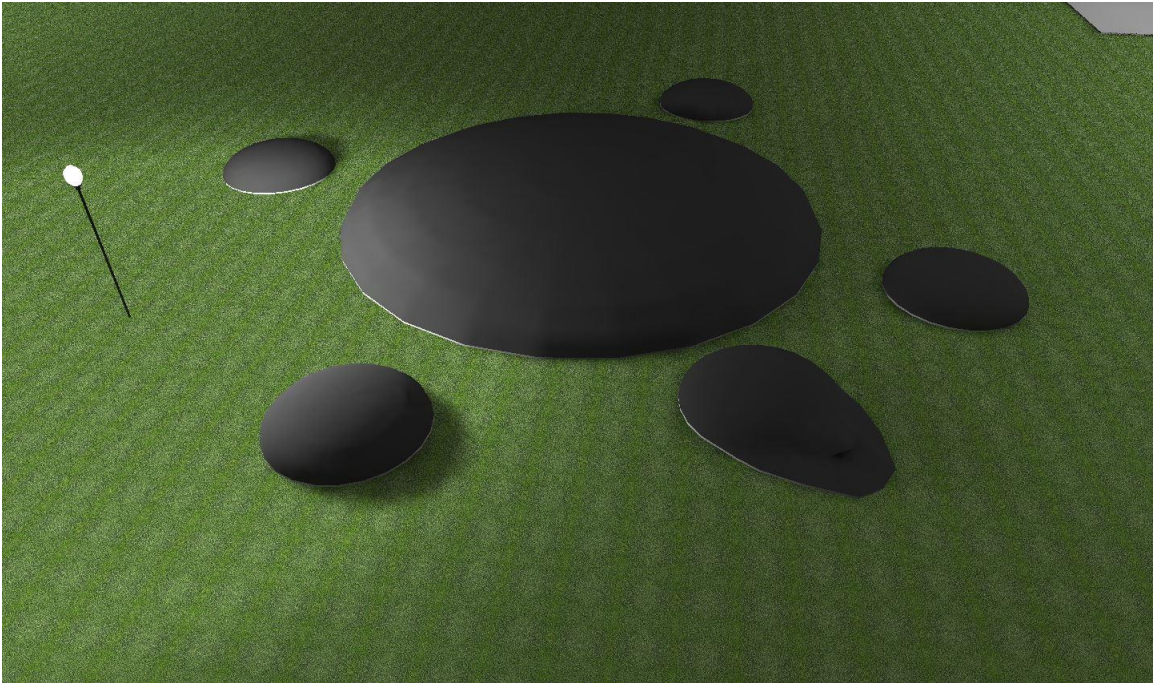
Winter (A12)



Summer (A13)

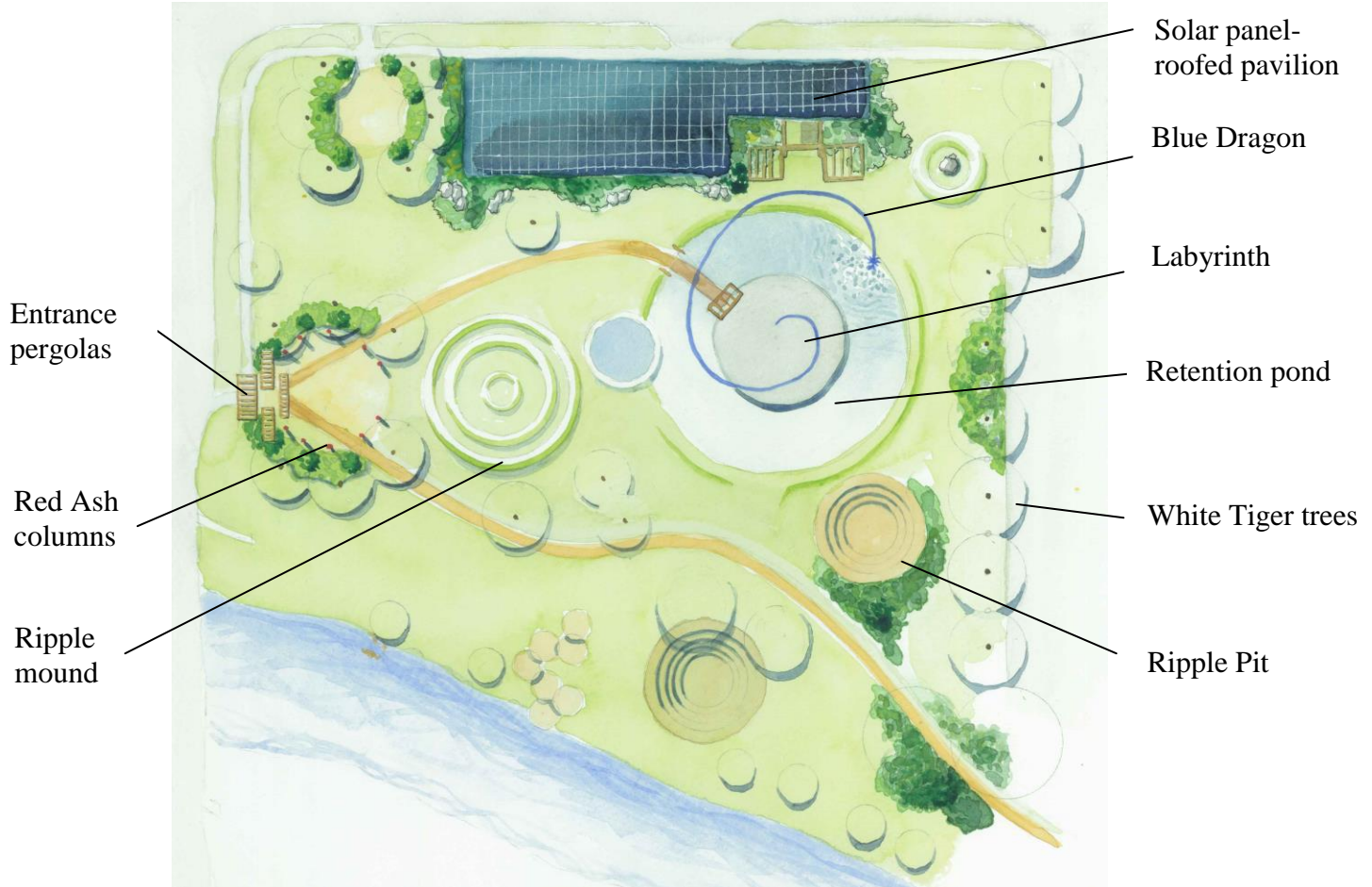
Within these seasonal palettes, each segment of the parallel segments can be dimmed, and color selected. Common post-top decorative globes illuminate the black turtle children's mounds, and this traditional style was selected to

underscore the stability that the turtle represents (A14).



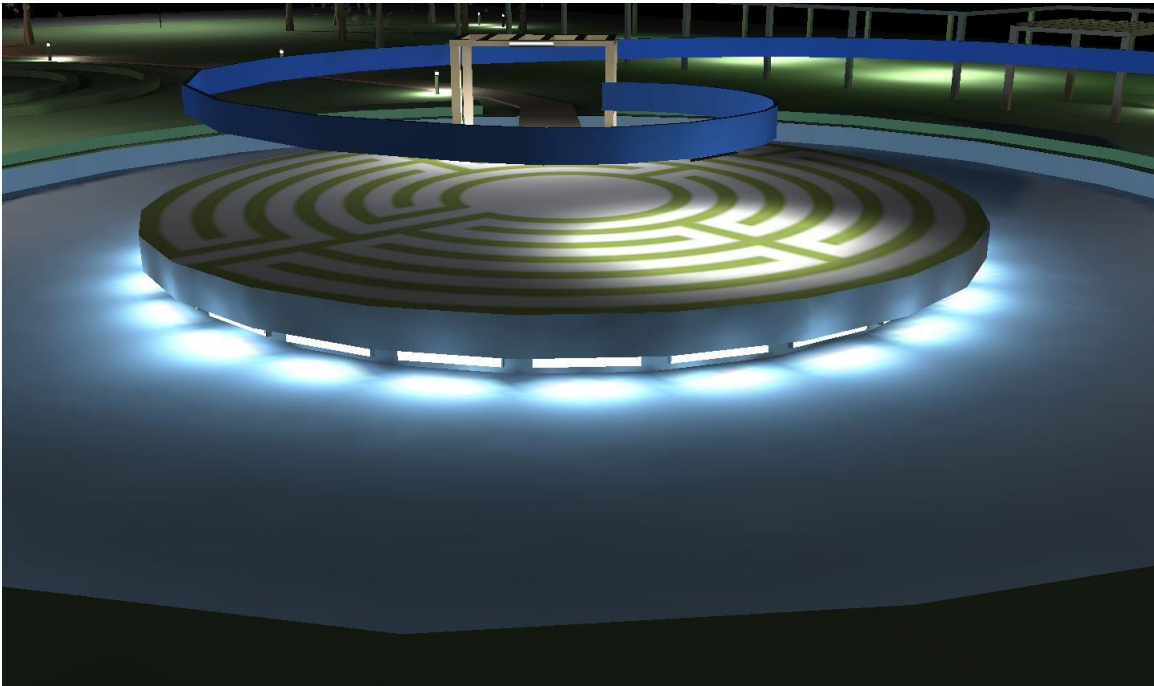
A14

DENTON PARK (PLAN C)



Denton park is currently an open area with a simple ditch performing as a retention pond. This project's design proposes to transform the neglected area into a vibrant space, establishing the water cycle as a visual theme. As raindrops land in water, they produce a series of concentric circles that overlap into other ripples – this form was selected as a major motif in the design process. In Denton park, this circular shape is employed in the western entrance pavilion, the labyrinth pedestal, the land forms of the ripple mounds and in the descending ripple pits (Plan C).

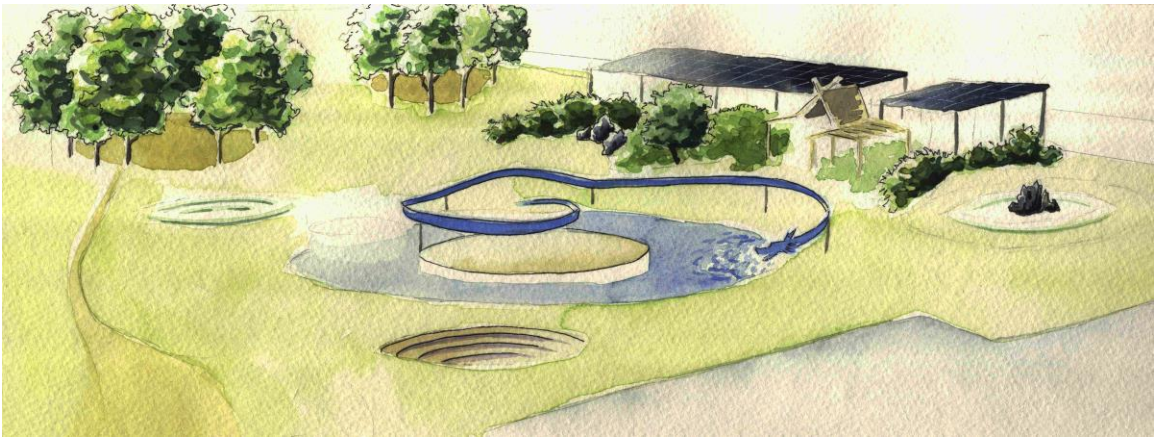
While a common perception of labyrinths is that of a complex puzzle to be solved by successfully navigating from an entrance to a separate exit, that format actually constitutes a maze, and the misconception owes much to the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Typically, the tradition of a labyrinth is a winding path with one opening used as both entry and exit with nothing to be solved. It is essentially contemplative movement unimpeded by decision making - an environment where the participant finds the restriction of direction can provide the freedom for reflection. Placing a labyrinth pattern on the surface of the pedestal above the retention pond merges the process of bioremediation as concurrent with reflective movement (A15).



A15

Awareness of procession is fused with awareness of process and is given the opportunity to be valued.

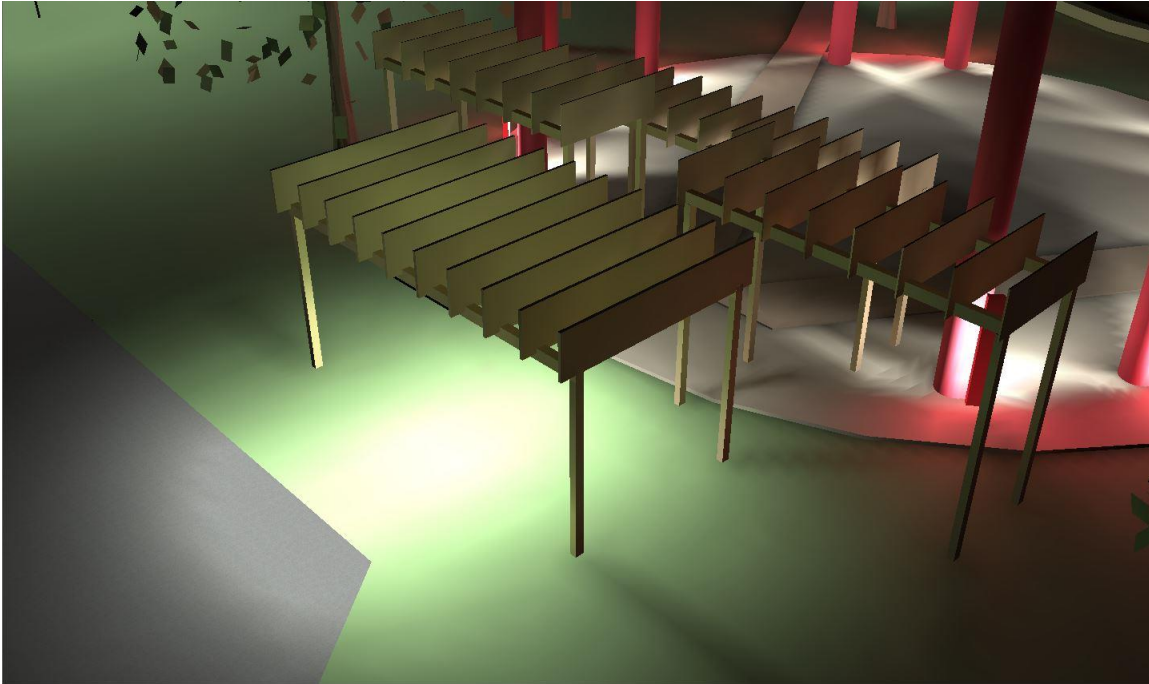
Above the pedestal, the Blue Dragon connects lighthearted appeal with the contemplative purpose of the labyrinth. This playful winding metal structure encircling the retention pond takes the most literal shape of the four Chinese guardians (A16).



A16

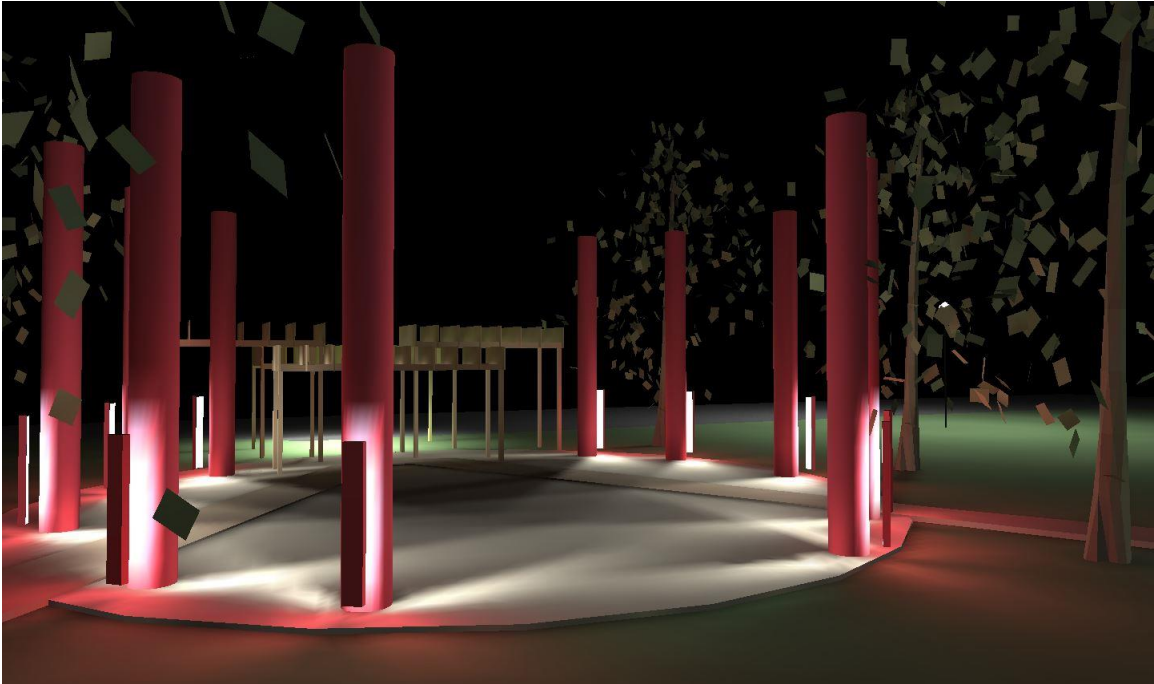
Conversely, the most abstracted form is the White Tiger of the East, represented by the alternating plantings of Black Walnuts (*Juglans nigra*) and Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) trees, the dark strong branches of the *Juglans* and the contrasting black/white patterning of the *Betula* bark recalling the striped hide of a white tiger (PLAN C).

The western entrance into Denton park has a series of pergolas that mark a clear distinction between the surrounding residential/commercial area and the park (A17).



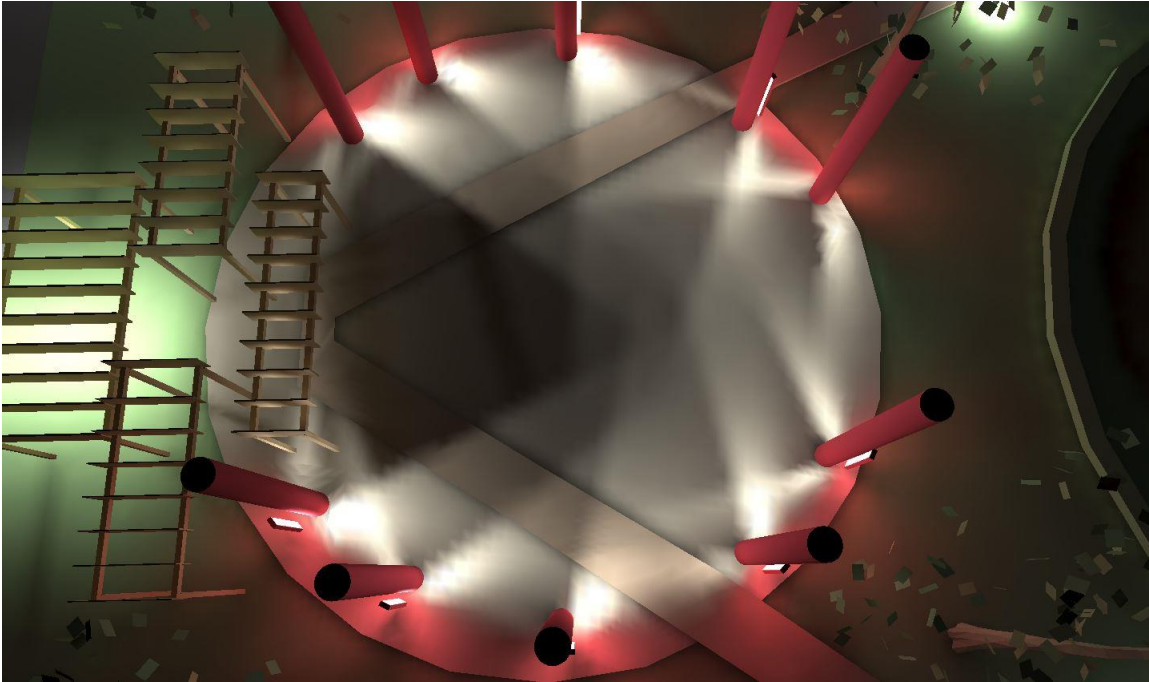
A17

A traditional post-top decorative luminaire is located next to the western entrance. This familiar form is easily recognizable and selected to provide familiarity as well as general lighting safety. The western entrance pergolas have set canopy lighting that provides an illumination level of 10 footcandles (fc), which is bright and inviting. Immediately after making the transition through the framework, the open pavilion has a general ambient illumination of 0.7 fc. This contrast is still within an acceptable Visual Comfort Probability index (VCP) so as to not cause discomfort, but large enough to bring attention to the shadowing effect across the pavement. This large circular pavilion is ringed with 25 foot columns made from dead ash trees, painted red (A18).



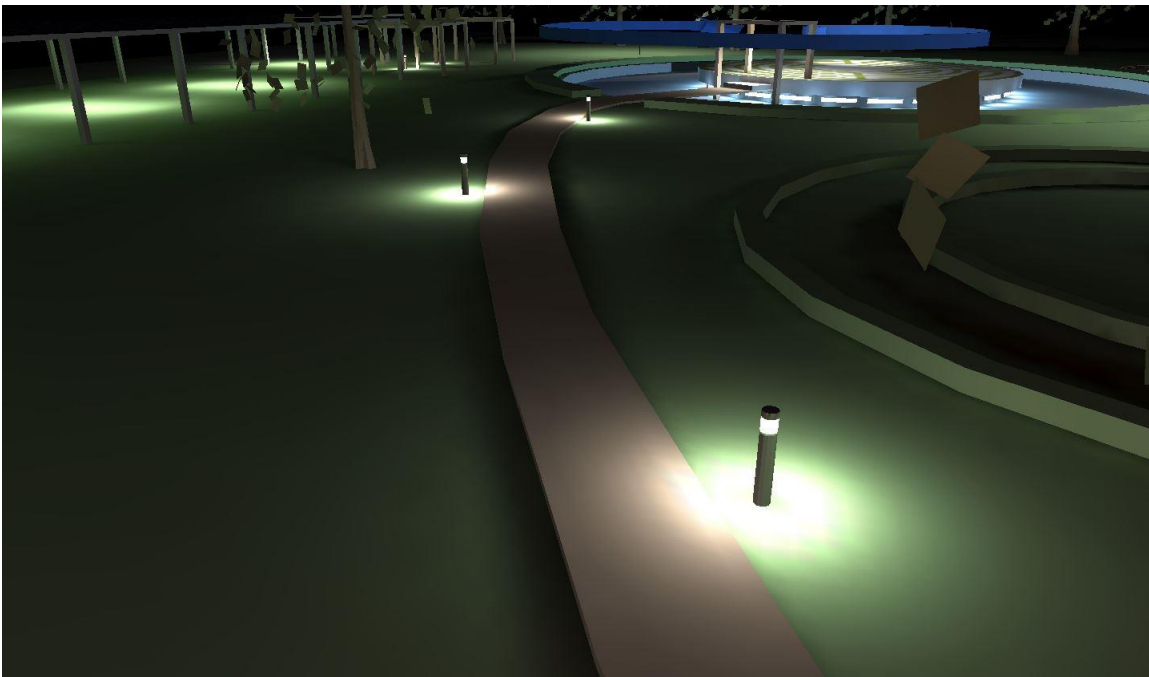
A18

The recent widespread destruction of the local ash tree population caused by invasive emerald ash-borer is placed in the forefront as a reminder of humanity's impact on native ecosystems. Luminaires have been placed directly behind the red ash trunks for strong backlighting that casts stark shadows across the open pavilion, and adjacent operating controls can create designs using shadows, emphasizing a strong lineal element even as the medium itself suggests the transience of such an experience (A19).



A19

Pathways moving through the park are illuminated with 3 foot bollards, a common choice for walkways (A20).

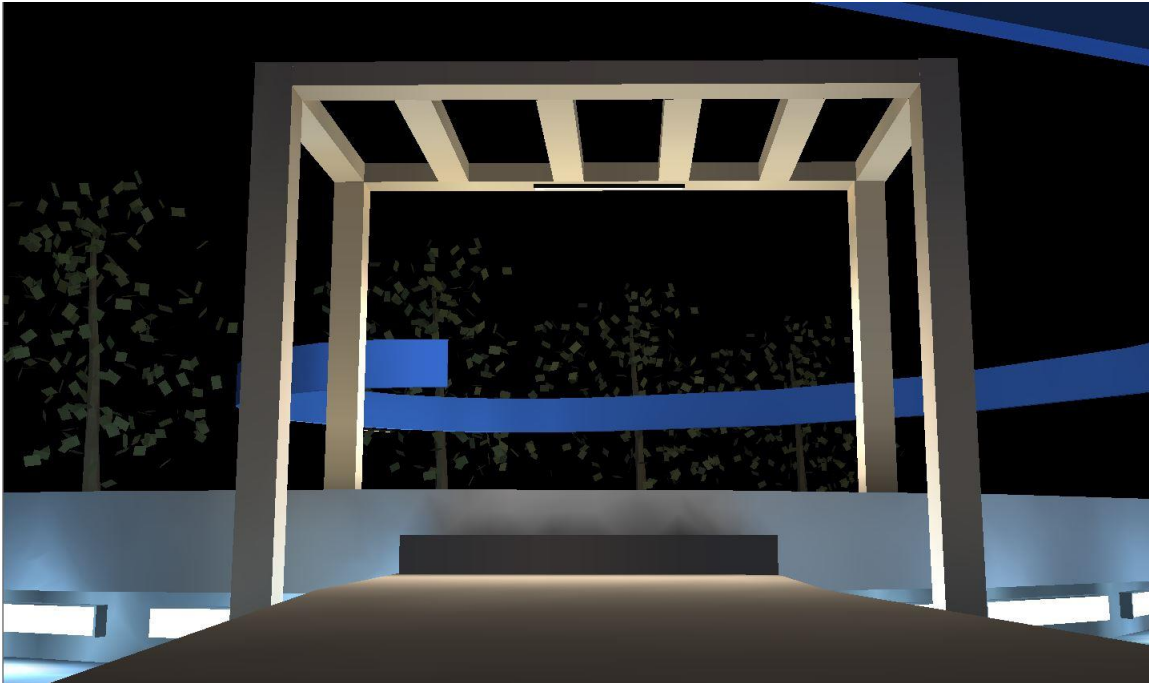


A20

This traditional form has been selected to de-emphasize the focus on lighting in this area and serve the primary function of foot traffic safety, allowing people the simply move through the park. A continuous series of focal elements can quickly

get tiresome, and simple breathing space in the design was planned to balance the events of the experience as well as underscore the tradition of sacred contemplation.

The retention pond has an entrance pergola illuminated to 5fc, clearly marking the transition from the general park into the labyrinth (A21).

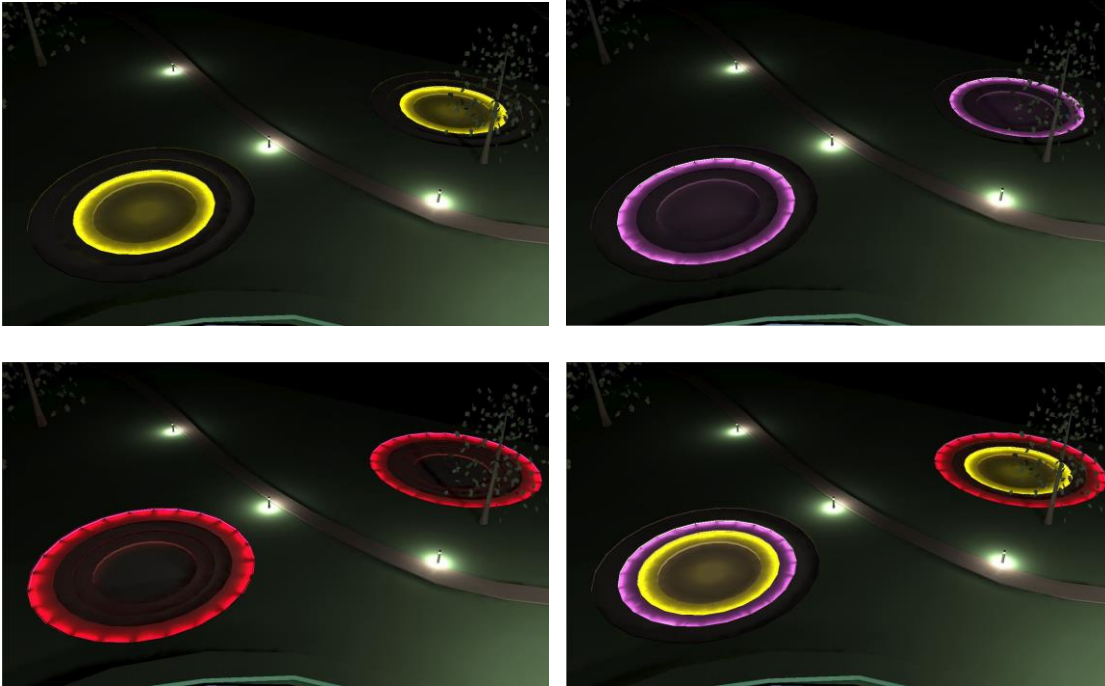


A21

An additional flood light is placed in the metal dragon structure to illuminate the walking path to an average of 3fc, with a Max/Min uniformity of 4 to 1. This will allow for clear distinction of the path lines as people walk the labyrinth.

Luminaires have been placed under the labyrinth pedestal to give general illumination to the retention pond – these have been specified for an IP-68 rating (submersible below 3 feet of water)(A15).

The descending ripple pits have linear LED lighting around the circumference of each concentric ring, with color schemes that can be controlled to activate various combinations of rings (A22).



A22

LED lighting has been specified throughout all lighting locations to reduce energy usage (and relatedly carbon emissions) as well as maintenance. Simple, durable controls will be required to endure the strain of Michigan's harsh winters as well as years of forceful use from excited children and enthusiastic teens.

Conclusion

Selecting a drainage creek that is largely ignored and transforming it into an amenity showcasing responsible stormwater treatment is the basis for public cultivation of meaning in a space. Meaning cannot be assigned to a place remotely; it must be cultivated and perpetuated by people who value that place. Exploring *the greater* through movement, interaction, observance and play can foster democratic values in a public space. Pathways, focal points, entryways and transitions are established to guide passage as well as attention with the

intent of bringing bioremediation processes to awareness. The reclamation and purification of stormwater is presented as a dynamic physical process as well as overarching metaphor. Sacred physical forms like cathedrals, mosques and mythological guardian animals subtly reference historical traditions but are abstracted to keep interpretation open and imbue a sense of mystery. Dynamic control of atmosphere through open lighting controls encourages creativity and personal experience. These elements provide the opportunity to develop a sense of ownership that gives value to an area, marking it as worthy, and potentially, sacred.

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