

GARDEN REFUGE: Supporting survivors of domestic violence with therapeutic, nature-based landscape interventions

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In an 8-week vertical studio, I asked the question, “What more can landscape architecture bring to the provision of emergency shelter for survivors of domestic violence?”

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS AN EPIDEMIC.

One in three women and one in seven men will be victims of domestic violence during their lifetimes.

The cyclical nature of violence means that children who experience or witness domestic violence will likely be in the same positions as adults.

Domestic violence shelters offer safe refuge during a time of crisis to survivors and their children.

According to psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith Herman, before more active therapeutic interventions can proceed, “the first step of any trauma treatment is ...[called] ‘regaining a sense of safety’...this initial stage is fundamental. ‘No therapeutic work can possibly succeed if safety has not been adequately secured.’”

Therefore, as Dr. Sue Stuart-Smith writes in her book, *The Well-Gardened Mind*, “The safe

enclosure of the garden is a therapeutic tool in its own right.”

With this understanding, I asked whether the provision of beautifully-designed, supportive, healthy, and trauma-informed crisis shelter gardens--with focuses on meeting children’s needs while also providing therapeutic natural spaces—could enable survivors to regain a sense of safety so they can open themselves to more active therapeutic interventions?

And further, could this provision contain the potential to help break the cycle of family violence?

Using principles of trauma-informed design, research on survivors of domestic violence and their unique psychological and physical needs and physiological responses to trauma, as well as the healing power of sunlight and nature, this project used Julie Moir Messervy’s concept of ‘first landscapes’ to employ comfortable spatial archetypes of prospect and refuge.

According to this concept, in childhood, people form connections to spatial archetypes where happy memories are made. They become places we feel comfortable and where we choose to dwell. They may also influence how we see beauty and meaning in gardens.

Leaving a life of violence usually requires extensive support and planning. From healthcare to legal and financial assistance, to finding a new school, job, and home, survivors must meet with a range of experts to rebuild their lives.

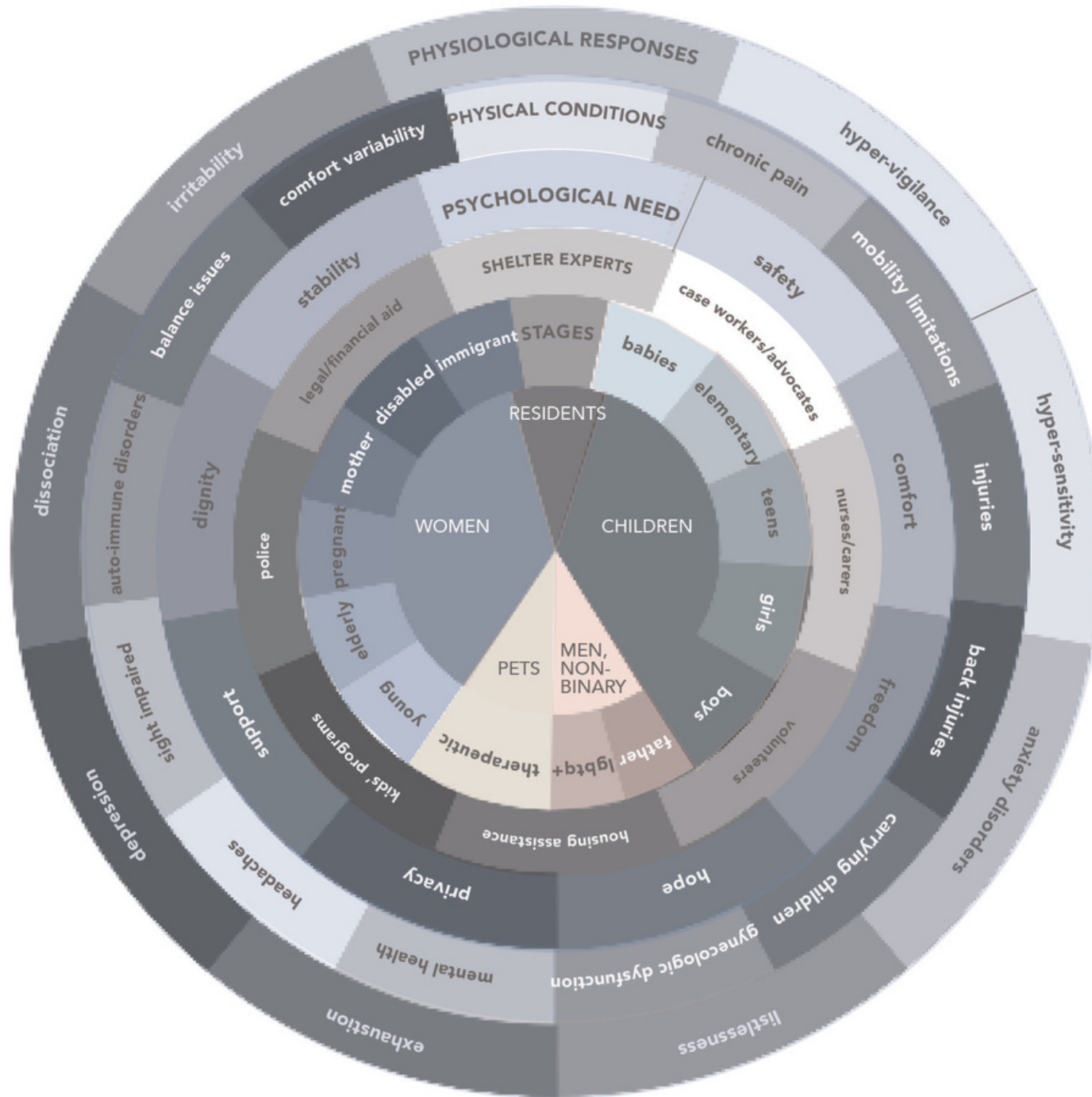
These meetings require discreet spaces that can provide visual and audible privacy, yet maintain clear sight lines to keep an eye on children and/or perceive the space as safe.

Various survivor backgrounds, wide-ranging needs--psychological and physical--unique physiological responses to personal traumas, and wide-ranging time frames for stays require that the shelter must be many things to many people.

The use and concept of ‘first landscapes’ presented design archetypes from which to assemble and make sense of this spatial puzzle to meet survivor needs.

I hope to continue this research to create both a pamphlet and illustrated design considerations book for landscape architects to reference when undertaking the design of outdoor spaces at shelters for survivors of domestic violence.

Understand survivor needs



Various survivor backgrounds, wide-ranging needs--psychological and physical--unique physiological responses to personal traumas, and wide-ranging time frames for stays require that the shelter must be many things to many people.



PLAN



This plan's footprint was loosely based on an "anonymous" shelter I worked for. The non-profit has since completed a purpose-built shelter that, employing best-practices, is more visible in the community.

This design melds existing realities and best principles of both an anonymous and purpose-built shelter.

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|--------------------|------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. HARBOR | 2. SKY | 6. CHICKEN COOP | 10. PROMONTORY | 14. RAISED BEDS |
| 3. PLAY | 4. SEA | 7. PRIVATE PARKING | 11. DOG/PET KENNELS | 15. STORAGE |
| 5. MOUNTAIN | 8. ISLAND | 9. CAVE | 12. ENTRY | 16. CRISIS HOUSING |
| | | | 13. PORCH | 17. GARAGE |

SAFETY: ACCESS + SECURITY + LIGHTING



PUBLIC

Public-facing exteriors should blend with the neighborhood. Raised beds offer opportunities for longer-term residents to re-engage with the community and shelter volunteers.

SEMI-PUBLIC

Privacy and safety must be balanced with freedom and maintenance of sight lines from the porch and interior to the street and surrounds. Residents can visit with members of their support networks here.

PRIVATE

Fencing, hedges, and strategically placed trees secure private zones and keep residents from being overlooked by neighbors. Clear sight lines allow parents to supervise children.

- Entry/gateway
- Layered entry points; lock, security screens
- Security system/camera
- Lighting (see night plan)

CARE + ORDER + CIRCULATION




CIRCULATION

 Formal/Main Pathways ensure clear sight lines, unobstructed groundplanes & legible wayfinding

 Informal Pathways

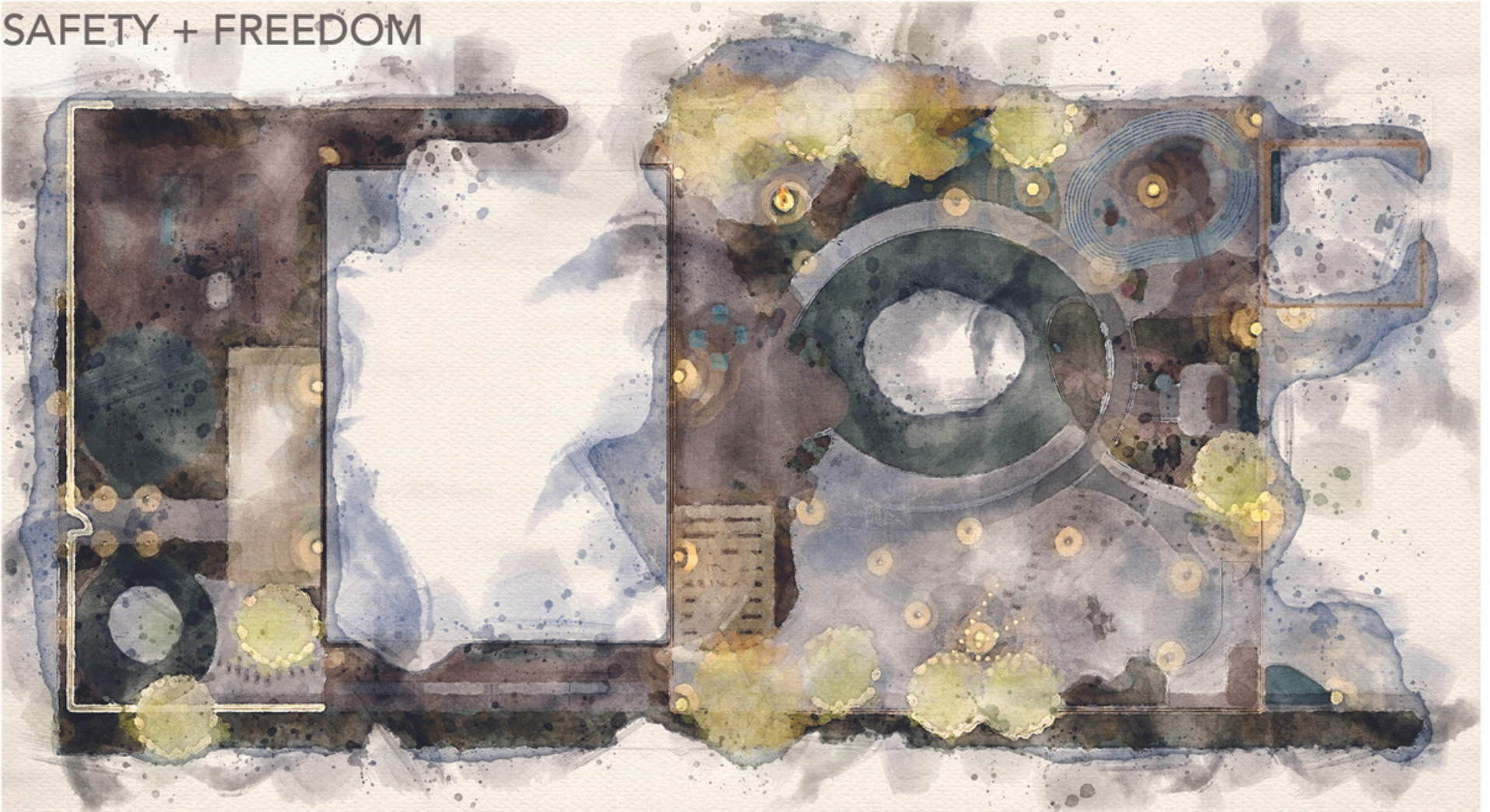
ORDER

 Toys and clutter can create conflict between residents. Generous storage keeps pathways and sight lines clear and the garden clean and comfortable.

CARE Care may be lacking in human relationships, so caring activities for non-human elements can be therapeutic. It provides meaningful pathways to caring for humans and is especially important for children recovering from trauma.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. RAISED BEDS | 5. BIRD BATH |
| 2. POTS & WATERING CANS | 6. CHICKEN COOP |
| 3. BIRD FEEDERS | 7. DOG KENNELS |
| 4. BIRD HOUSES | 8. CLOTHESLINE NEAR PLAY |

SAFETY + FREEDOM

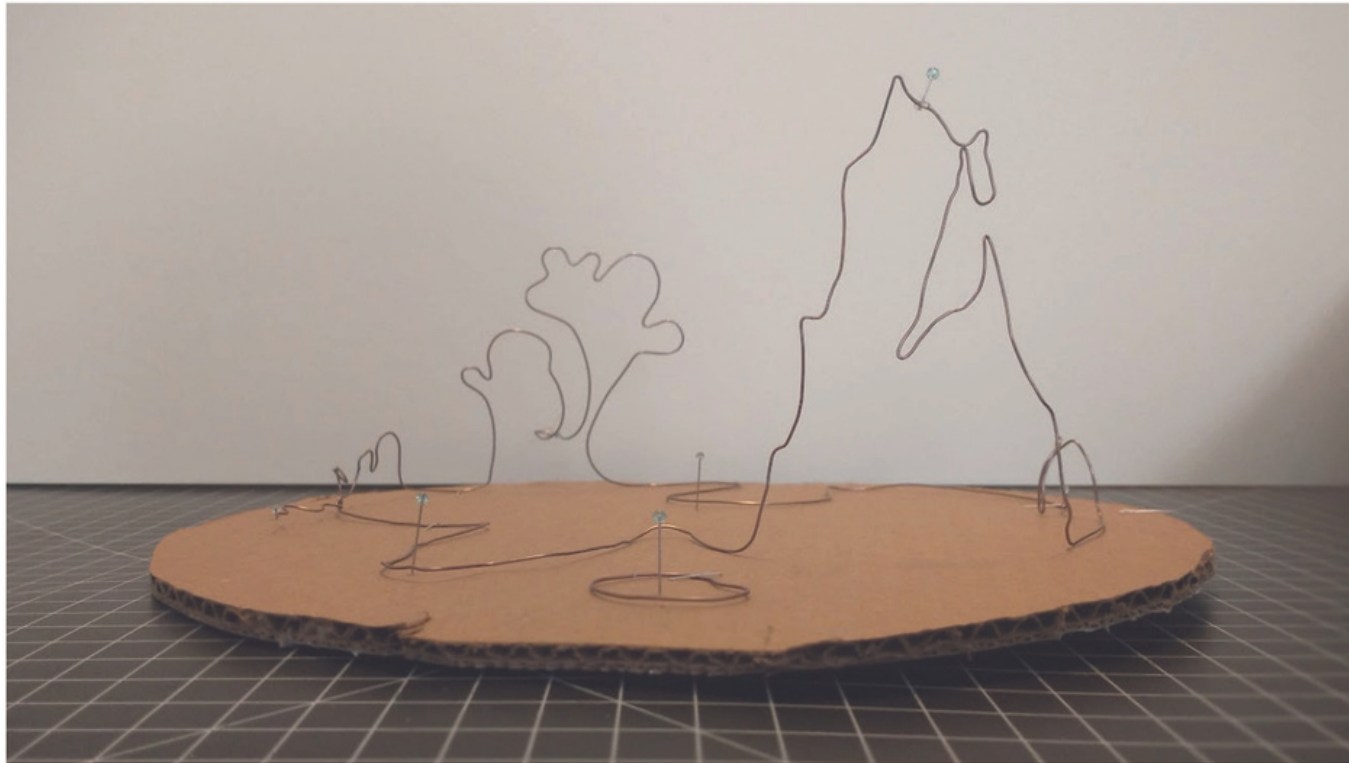
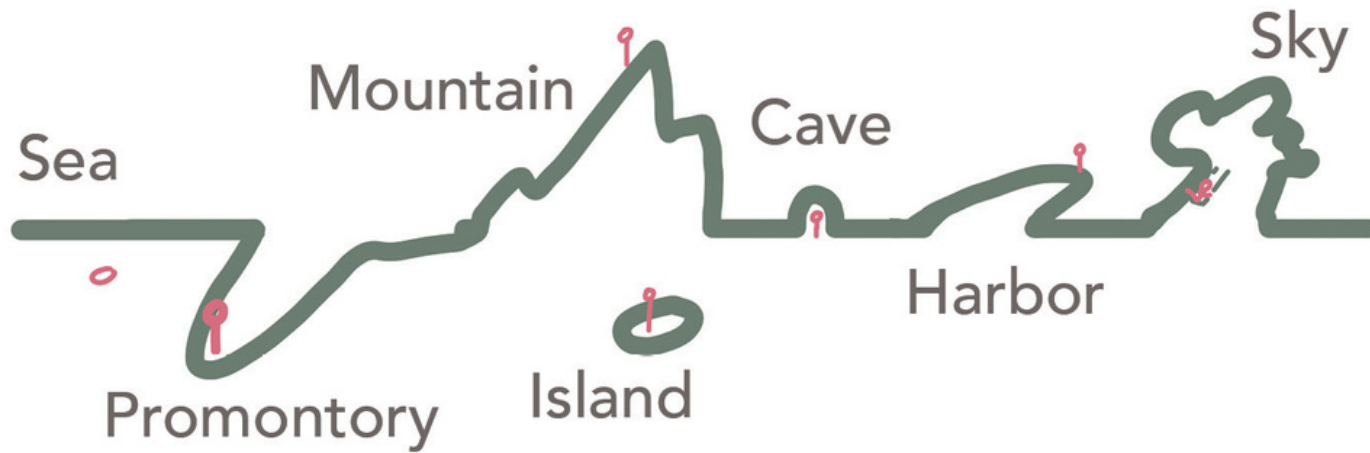


LIGHTING

Exterior lighting at night can do many things, including:

- + make people feel welcome, alter mood and behavior, and impart resident dignity;
- + create clear zones without physical barriers;
- + enable access to high-use areas like clotheslines and smoking areas;
- + extend clear sight lines into the evening, enhancing perceptions of safety.

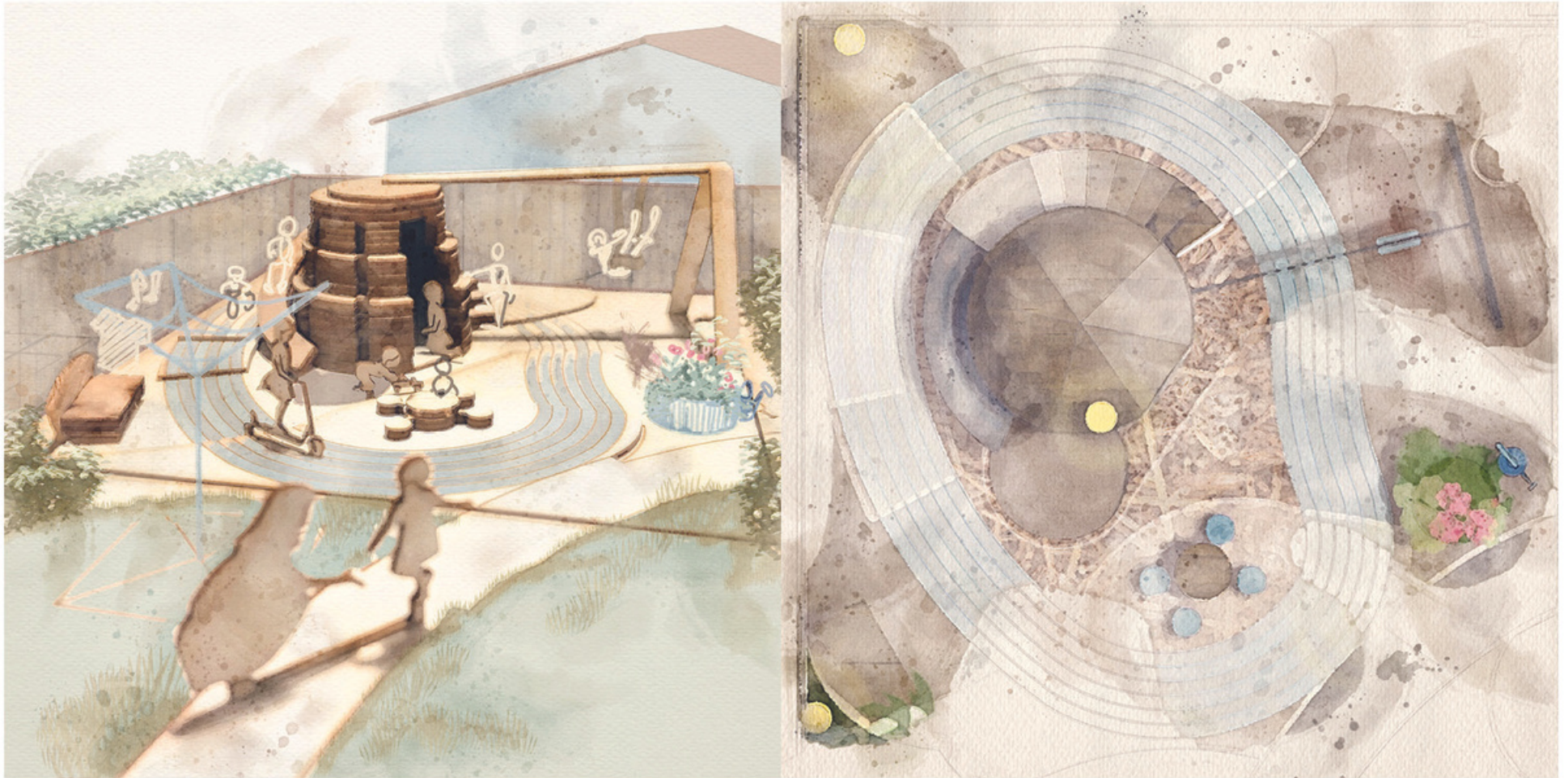
Employ 'first landscapes'



"First landscapes" presented ways in which to arrange the garden's spaces, with options for prospect and refuge. These include variations of spatial archetypes that include Sea, Promontory, Mountain, Island, Cave, Harbor, and Sky, illustrated above and in model below.



"First landscapes" present ways in which to arrange the garden's spaces, with options for prospect and refuge. 25 sq. ft. sections are arranged with consideration to how each interacts with the other. A designated play space and a "breath" rests in the center to limit visual complexity.

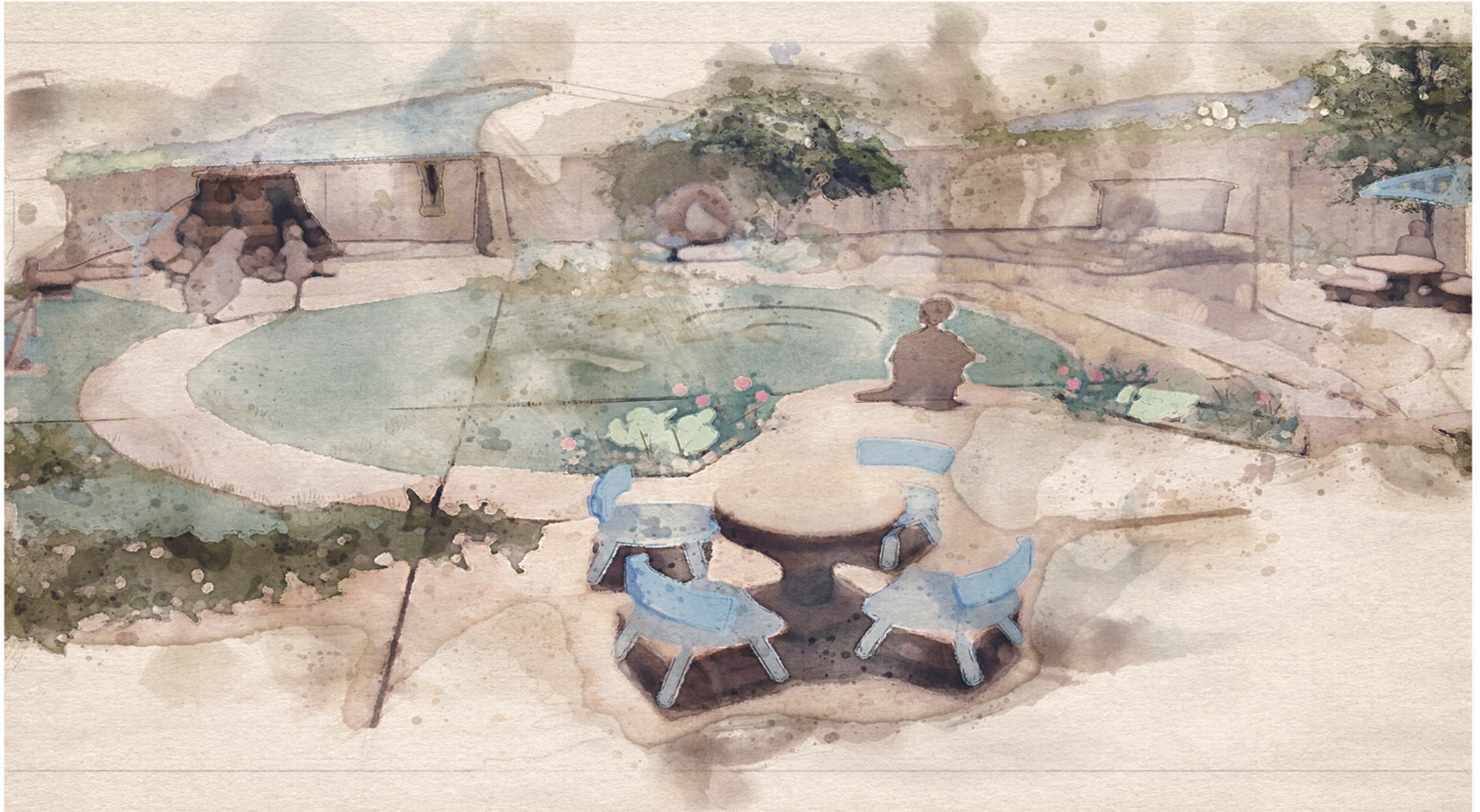


PLAY

For children, the impacts of witnessing or experiencing violence can affect brain development and cognitive abilities. Kids who grow up in fear learn not to be curious.

Child-focused spaces should encourage safe play, purposeful movement, and curiosity. Therapeutic activities can include sand-play, swinging, and caring for their own plants with a watering can. Child-sized furniture and cozy nooks in the fort permit social and quiet play options for children processing trauma in their own ways. Seating for parents and clear sight lines throughout the garden foster parent-child relationships. Toy storage under the slide stairs and bench helps reduce resident conflicts over clutter.

Here, all "first landscapes" are represented.



PROMONTORY The promontory is a place of transition between building and garden, allowing prospect over the entire garden. Like a child being held by a trusted parent, this vantage point can be exhilarating--an edge where the world can be scanned, yet the viewer remains safe in the proximal connection to the shelter building.