

HIT DELETE

THE NEARLY INVISIBLE DESIGN OF THE LAURANCE S. ROCKEFELLER PRESERVE HINGES ON THE APPROACH HERSHBERGER DESIGN BROUGHT TO A PROCESS OF ERASURE.

BY PHILIP WALSH





HERSHBERGER DESIGN, LEFT; D. A. HORSCHNER, RIGHT

LEFT

The new interpretive center lies at the junction of a sagebrush meadow and the forest's edge.

BELOW

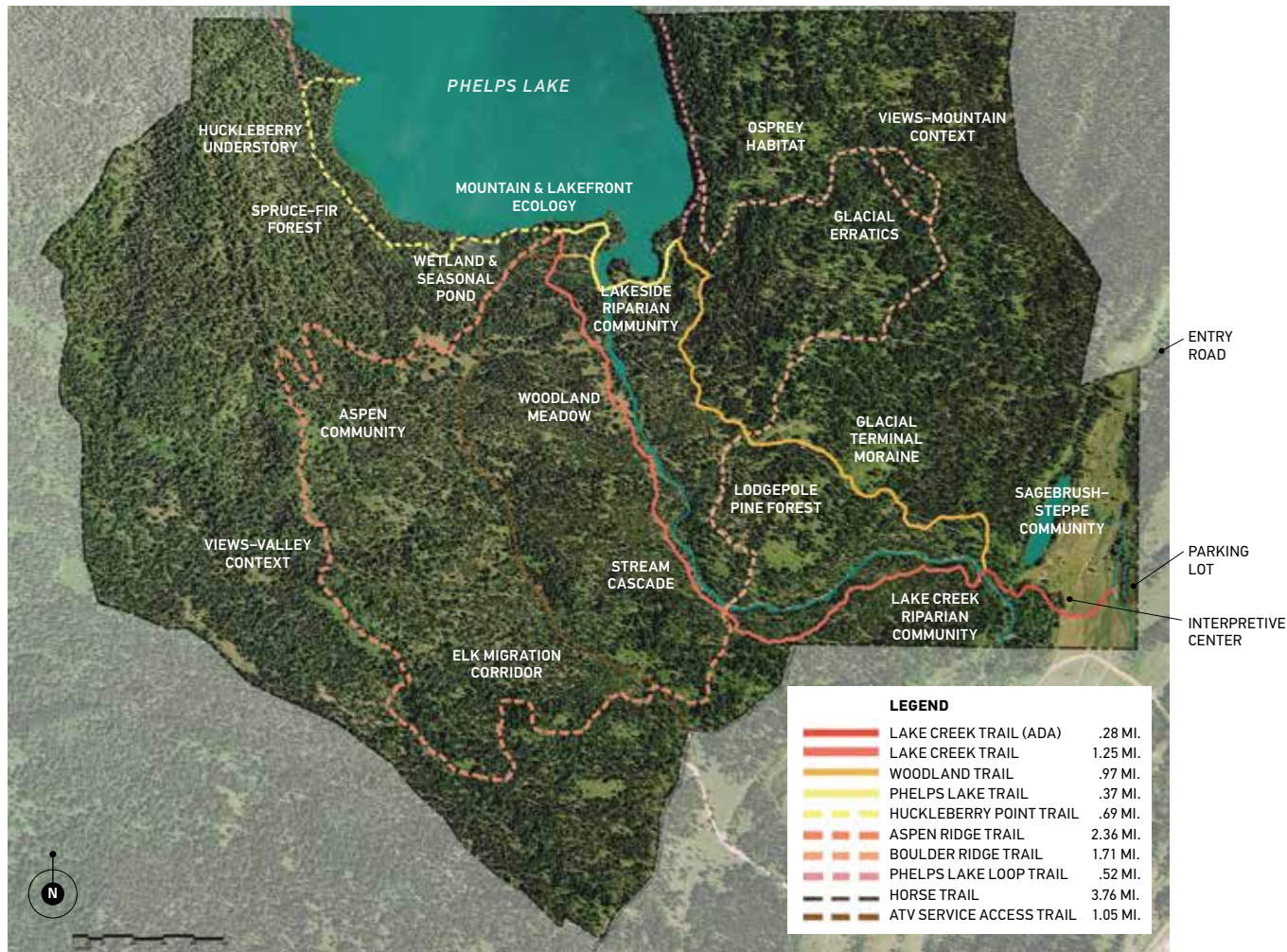
Grizzlies and black bears leave their marks on an aspen near the trailhead.

The scars show black against the tender, pale gray bark of the aspen's smooth trunk, a graphic contrast beloved by initial-carving vandals. Groups of four jagged lines in roughly parallel rows rise up the trunk to eight feet or more above the ground, the calling card not of restless teenagers, but of the black and grizzly bears that have visited here. "Check this out," said Chris Finlay, the chief of facility management at Grand Teton National Park, as we paused on the trail that runs past this tree, mere footsteps from the interpretive center at the Laurance S. Rockefeller Preserve. "So these are all hawthorns and chokecherries," Finlay said, sweeping his arm toward the surrounding thickets of shrubs, "and the bears, about a month ago, were thick in here. They come and just gorge themselves on the berries during hyperphagia. Now they're all gone."



The berries or the bears? In either case, I hoped he was right. Finlay had already lent me a can of "bear spray," a red cylinder of compressed pepper spray the size of a small fire extinguisher. "Keep this accessible. Don't bury it in your backpack," he said. During the course of my late October visits to the LSR Preserve, as it is known locally, a can of the spray was either in the hands or on the belt of every visitor I encountered. Although the preserve is the product of meticulous design and construction on the part of thoughtful human beings, it is also part of wild nature. This, too, is by design. The tension between familiarity and risk is a common theme in the work of the landscape architects at Hershberger Design, the firm responsible for the planning and design of the new facility.

SITE PLAN



Located 14 miles north of Jackson, Wyoming, near the southern extremity of Grand Teton National Park, the preserve was the parting gift of Laurance S. Rockefeller (1910–2004) and his family to the National Park Service. Rockefeller worked with D. R. Horne & Company to develop the preserve in Wyoming, and the donation was announced in 2001. The land was formally conveyed in 2007. Rockefeller's death fell at the midpoint of the transformational process he had envisioned, but the Rockefeller Foundation and other groups involved made the decision to stay the course. The preserve opened to the public in the summer of 2008, and in 2014 it won an ASLA Professional Honor Award for its many environmentally sensitive features and its distinctive approach to public engagement with the wilderness.

"He was very, very hands on," said Mark Hershberger, ASLA, of Laurance Rockefeller. "He wanted it to be consistent with the family and their whole

ethic of conservation." Hershberger founded Hershberger Design in 2001 and was later joined by his wife, Bonny Hershberger, ASLA. The couple met while working at Design Workshop's Aspen office. "We wanted a practice that focused 100 percent on the Jackson Hole area. And that's what we do," Mark Hershberger said.

Rockefeller's lifelong commitment to conservation and to the national parks in particular is too complex to even summarize here (the Yale historian Robin Winks published a book on the subject in 1997). This exceptional career was rooted in this place: The LSR Preserve has taken the place of the JY Ranch, a dude ranch of some 3,400 acres purchased by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in 1932. Laurance Rockefeller's father conducted an arduous and often controversial campaign to preserve the Grand Tetons from encroaching commercial development by purchasing vast tracts of it through his shell corporation, the Snake River Land Company.

OPPOSITE TOP

The Lake Creek bridge is built with Douglas fir, and has a clear span of recessed steel beams beneath it.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM

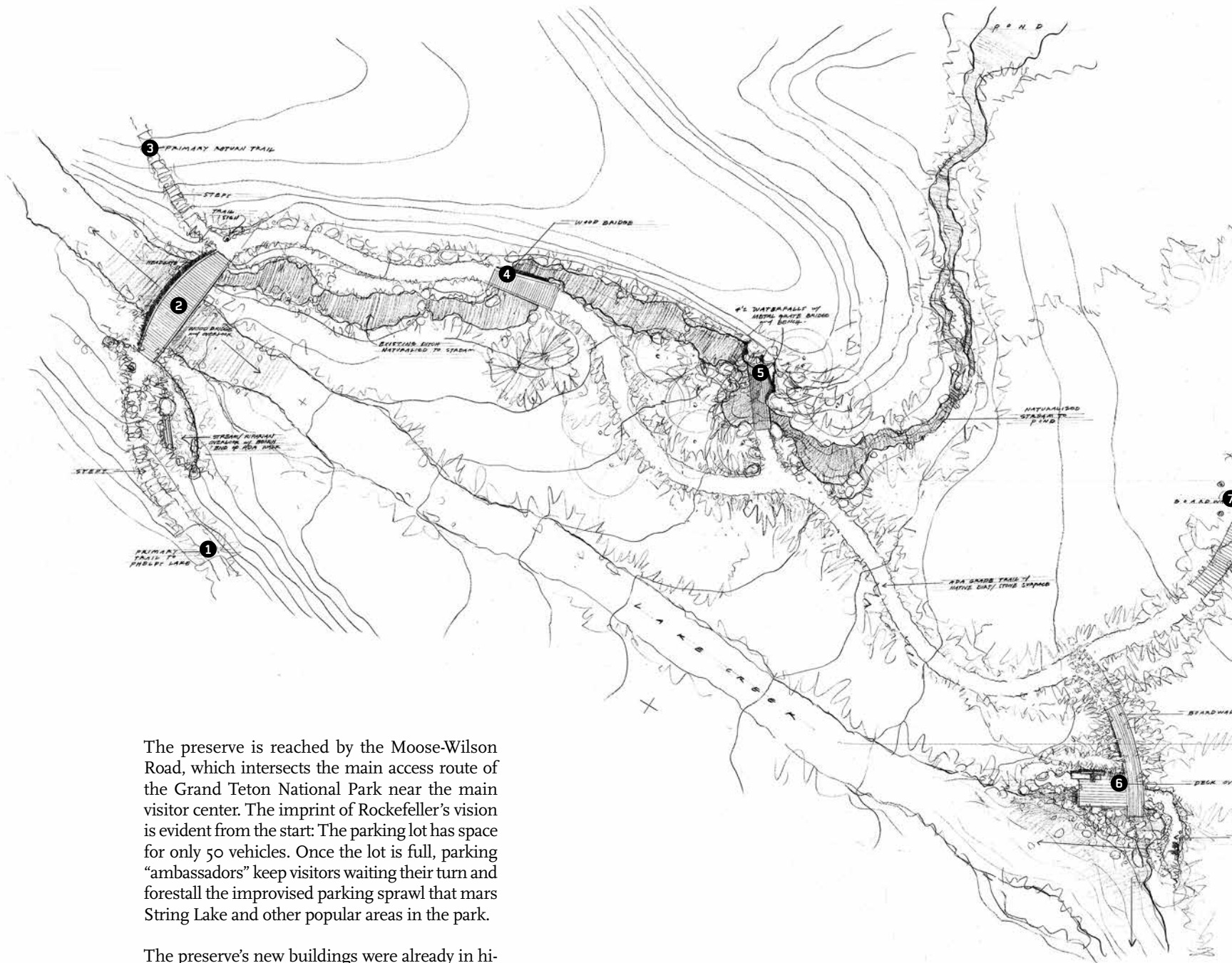
Existing cabins on the property were moved by truck to new locations.



Originally a working ranch, JY Dude Ranch was typical of tourist development in Jackson Hole during the early 20th century. Despite gently rolling topography with magnificent views of Albright Peak and ample water from Phelps Lake and its outflow Lake Creek, the thin soil studded with granite cobble could not support profitable farming. Philadelphia entrepreneurs developed the failed ranch into a fantasy cowboy retreat between 1906 and 1929. It housed up to 65 guests in 48 buildings, including log cabins, mess halls, stables, and corrals. The Rockefeller family gently revised the ranch over the decades but never violated the simplicity of the place, which indeed verged on the spartan.

“Some of the guest cabins didn’t even have bathrooms,” Finlay said.

“For this project, it was more about how do we erase, how do we take away,” said Bonny Hershberger. “It wasn’t about putting stuff there. It was about how do you take it all away and make it look like it wasn’t there.” In the six years between the announcement of the gift and the project’s completion, every structure on the site, and the bulk of the roads and trails that had served the JY Ranch, were removed. The cabins and barns were trucked to new locations. The architects Carney Logan Burke of Jackson designed an interpretive center and several service buildings to house composting toilets at key locations within the preserve, among the first projects within the park service to be awarded LEED Platinum status, Finlay told me.



The preserve is reached by the Moose-Wilson Road, which intersects the main access route of the Grand Teton National Park near the main visitor center. The imprint of Rockefeller's vision is evident from the start: The parking lot has space for only 50 vehicles. Once the lot is full, parking "ambassadors" keep visitors waiting their turn and forestall the improvised parking sprawl that mars String Lake and other popular areas in the park.

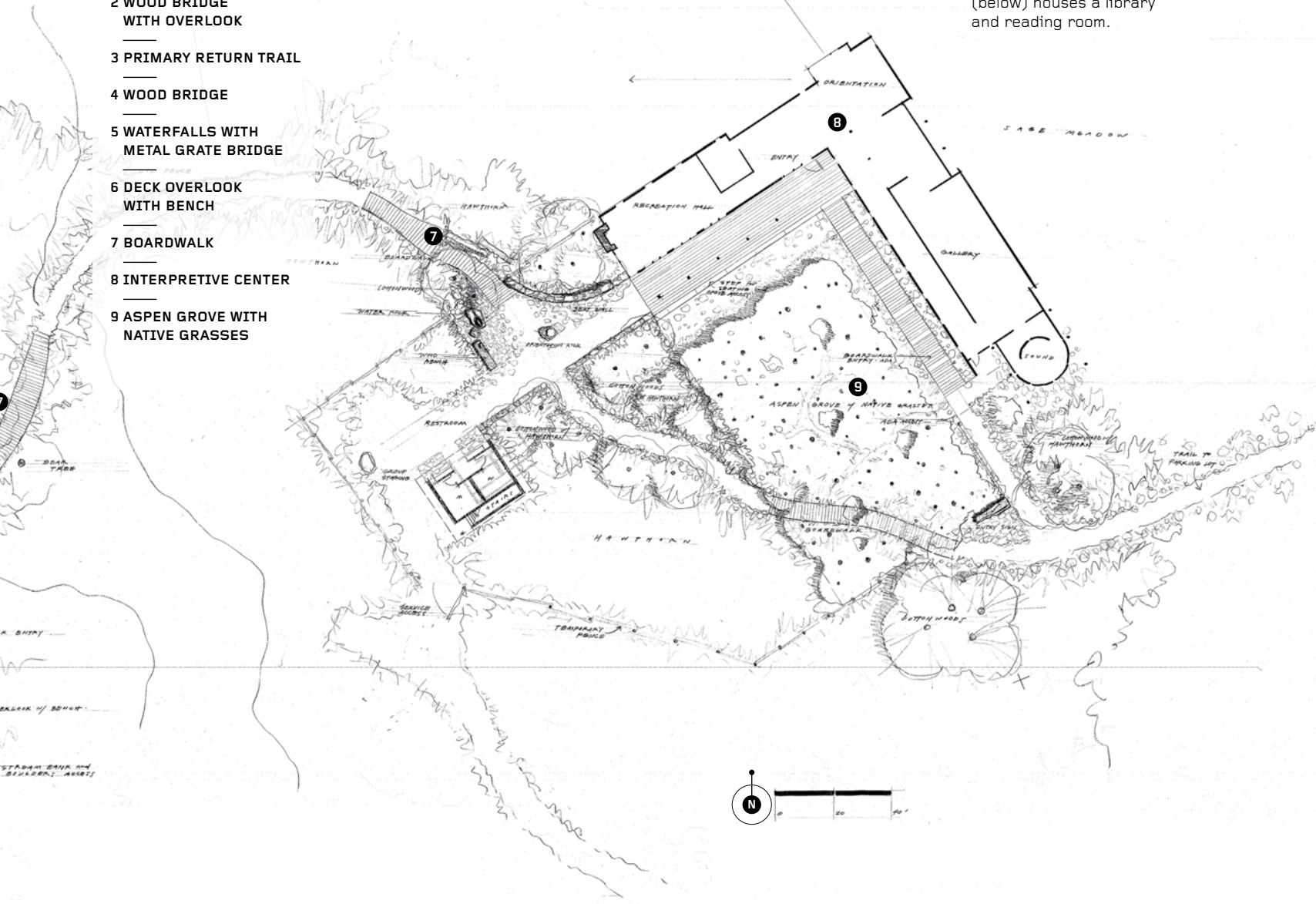
The preserve's new buildings were already in hibernation by the time of my visit, their windows boarded up against the coming winter. Their exteriors combine lodgepole pine members with granite boulders and cobble in a way that evokes both the dude ranch vernacular as well as the midcentury modern flavor of Jackson Lake Lodge to the north, built in 1955. The interpretive center's fieldstone chimney merges at its base into free-form groups of granite boulders that edge its site. Throughout the preserve, stone that was uncovered during the removal of the buildings was reincorporated into the design. "Ninety-five percent of the boulders that you see out there

were placed," Mark Hershberger said. Their appearance is flawless: Dings and scrapes from excavation equipment were later sandblasted away.

A trail that leads from the parking lot takes you across a fragrant sagebrush meadow to the interpretive center, which stands just at the point where the meadow gives way to a forest of cottonwoods, aspens, and pines on higher ground. The trail splits, allowing repeat visitors to bypass the chapel-like reading room of the center and head directly into the woods.

PLAN

- 1 PRIMARY TRAIL TO PHELPS LAKE
- 2 WOOD BRIDGE WITH OVERLOOK
- 3 PRIMARY RETURN TRAIL
- 4 WOOD BRIDGE
- 5 WATERFALLS WITH METAL GRATE BRIDGE
- 6 DECK OVERLOOK WITH BENCH
- 7 BOARDWALK
- 8 INTERPRETIVE CENTER
- 9 ASPEN GROVE WITH NATIVE GRASSES



BELOW

The “front country” trails that lead to the Lake Creek bridge (at left) meet ADA standards. The interpretive center (below) houses a library and reading room.

The preserve offers a graded series of experiences that introduce people to the wilderness. Just past the interpretive center, a drinking fountain made of repurposed iron set into a boulder encourages the filling of canteens, or at least a ritual drink, before setting off into the woods. The path follows the edges of a wetland area where a deck and a broad bench made of a single piece of Douglas fir invite you to pause. The fir benches, cut and milled just over the border in Idaho, are consistent throughout the preserve. The scale and simple form—they are just giant slabs—immediately

bring to mind the pioneer minimalist Carl Andre’s work, as do the boulders that are often placed near them.

The “front country” section of the preserve is fully accessible to people with disabilities. The trail is wide enough for several people to walk abreast. The elements of the design are meant to engage you through all your senses. For example, a former irrigation canal has been reconfigured to create a waterfall that can be approached by an expanded-metal walkway, which lets you place your hands



and even your feet in the water. “We wanted folks who can’t get down and experience water to experience water,” Mark Hershberger said. “There is nothing colder than Rocky Mountain stream water. That water was snow three days ago.”

A wooden bridge spans Lake Creek, the point at which the accessible component of the trail reaches its end. As a visual cue, the bridge draws you out over Lake Creek, and its deck swells outward to accommodate anyone who pauses to listen to the stream flow over its rocky bed and watch the water sparkle. As you step off the far edge of the

bridge, the footing is immediately rougher, a tactile cue that more demanding terrain lies ahead.

The bridge also entices you onto a one-way loop. The Lake Creek Trail picks up at the far end of the bridge and carries you to the lakefront. Along the lakefront, the trail intersects the Phelps Lake Trail. Another trail, the Woodland Trail, gives you a natural option to return to the trailhead by a different route, satisfying a sense of exploration. Keeping you from having to walk against the flow of traffic is just one of the techniques that Hershberger Design used to enhance the meditative

ABOVE

A sage meadow is now where a road once was.

OPPOSITE

The interpretive center is among the national parks’ first LEED Platinum buildings.



HERSHBERGER DESIGN, TOP; D. A. HORSCHNER, BOTTOM

PLANT LIST

SEED MIX FOR DRY MEADOW AREAS

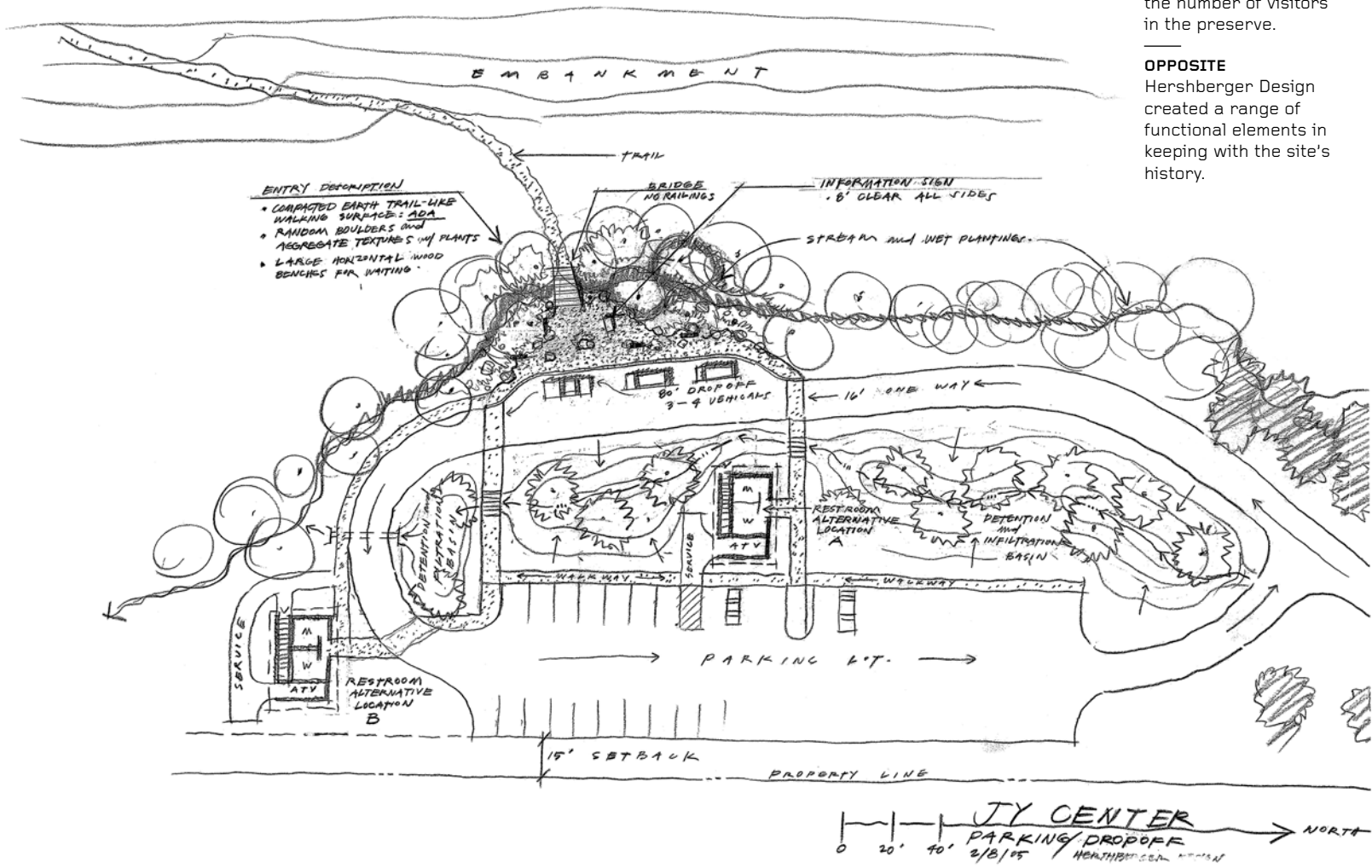
- Achillea millefolium*** (Common yarrow)
- Achnatherum hymenoides*** (Indian ricegrass)
- Amelanchier alnifolia*** (Saskatoon serviceberry)
- Artemisia tridentata ssp. tridentata***
(Basin big sagebrush)
- Artemisia tridentata ssp. vaseyana***
(Mountain big sagebrush)
- Eriogonum heracleoides*** (Parsnipflower buckwheat)
- Festuca idahoensis*** (Idaho fescue)
- Leymus cinereus*** (Basin wildrye)
- Machaeranthera tanacetifolia*** (Tansyleaf tansyaster)
- Phleum alpinum*** (Alpine timothy)
- Poa alpina*** (Alpine bluegrass)
- Poa secunda*** (Sandberg bluegrass)
- Purshia tridentata*** (Antelope bitterbrush)
- Thinopyrum ponticum*** (Tall wheatgrass)

PLANTS AND SEED MIX FOR FORESTED AREAS

- Alnus incana ssp. tenuifolia*** (Thinleaf alder)
- Aquilegia coerulea*** (Colorado blue columbine)
- Ceanothus velutinus var. velutinus***
(Snowbrush ceanothus)
- Crataegus douglasii*** (Black hawthorn)
- Geranium viscosissimum*** (Sticky purple geranium)
- Mahonia repens*** (Creeping barberry)
- Pinus contorta*** (Lodgepole pine)
- Populus tremuloides*** (Quaking aspen)
- Prunus virginiana*** (Chokecherry)
- Pseudotsuga menziesii*** (Douglas fir)
- Symphoricarpos albus*** (Common snowberry)

PLANTS AND SEED MIX FOR WETLANDS AREAS

- Alnus incana ssp. tenuifolia*** (Thinleaf alder)
- Calamagrostis canadensis*** (Bluejoint)
- Carex aquatilis*** (Water sedge)
- Carex nebrascensis*** (Nebraska sedge)
- Cornus sericea*** (Red osier dogwood)
- Crataegus douglasii*** (Black hawthorn)
- Deschampsia cespitosa*** (Tufted hairgrass)
- Eleocharis palustris*** (Common spikerush)
- Juncus torreyi*** (Torrey's rush)
- Populus angustifolia*** (Narrowleaf cottonwood)
- Salix exigua*** (Narrowleaf willow)
- Schoenoplectus acutus var. acutus***
(Hardstem bulrush)
- Scirpus microcarpus*** (Panicked bulrush)
- Typha latifolia*** (Broadleaf cattail)



BOTTOM
A small parking area is monitored to control the number of visitors in the preserve.

OPPOSITE
Hershberger Design created a range of functional elements in keeping with the site's history.

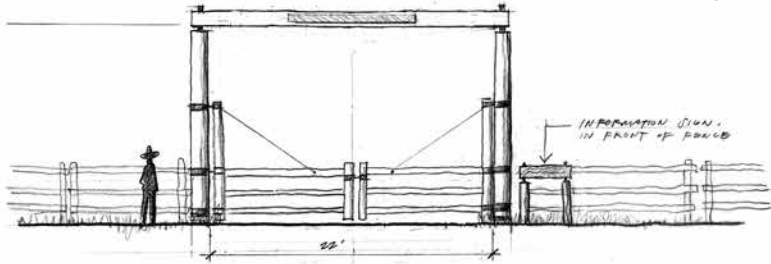
mood of the preserve. "I spent a lot of time in the mountains," Mark Hershberger said. "I spent a lot of time hiking." The sense of solitude of the deep woods can be found remarkably close to the entrance of the preserve. The entire loop is just 2.9 miles long, just an hour or two for an average hiker.

The shore of Phelps Lake opens to magnificent views of Albright Peak, some 10,552 feet high, and Death Canyon. Two huge Douglas firs mark the site of the main lodge of the JY Ranch, where a bench and a grouping of boulders now form a viewing area that faces the mountain range. As I hiked out to watch the sunrise there, mule deer and red-tailed hawks were my only companions. Viewed from the lakeshore, the mountains are illuminated from their peaks downward, as if they were shrugging off a dark curtain.

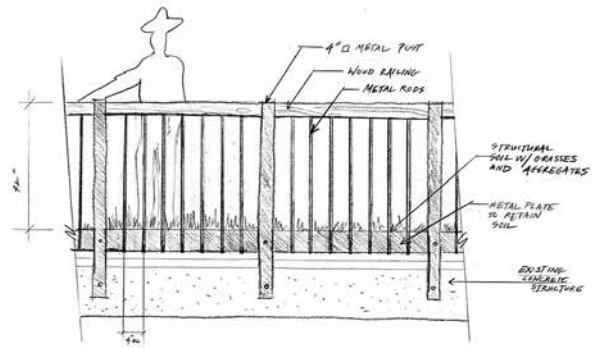


HERSHBERGER DESIGN, TOP; D. A. HORSCHNER, BOTTOM

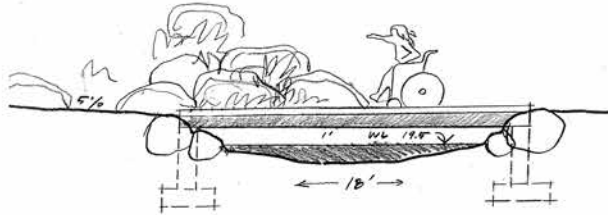
ENTRY GATE



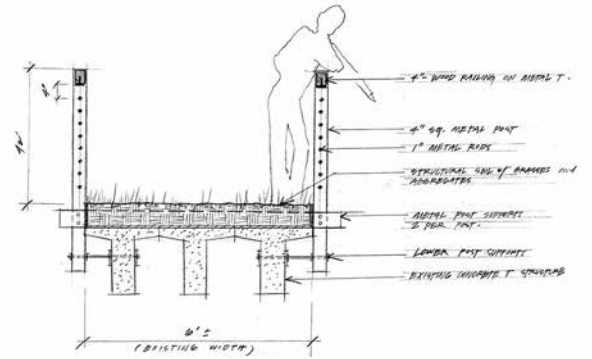
SOD BRIDGE



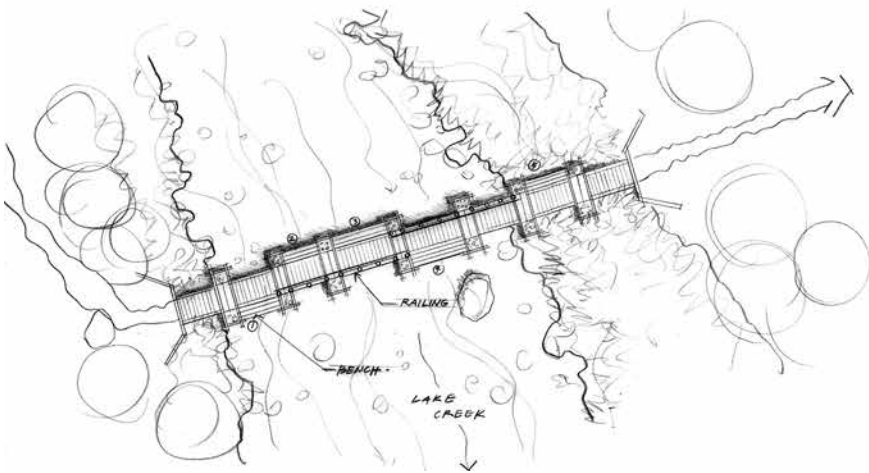
PLATFORM BRIDGE



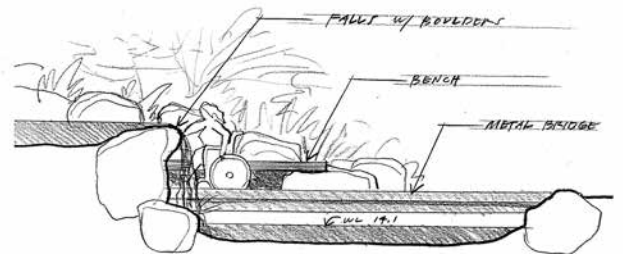
SOD BRIDGE ELEVATION



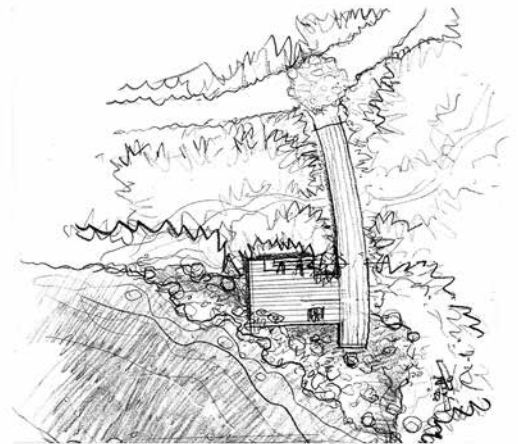
SITTING BRIDGE



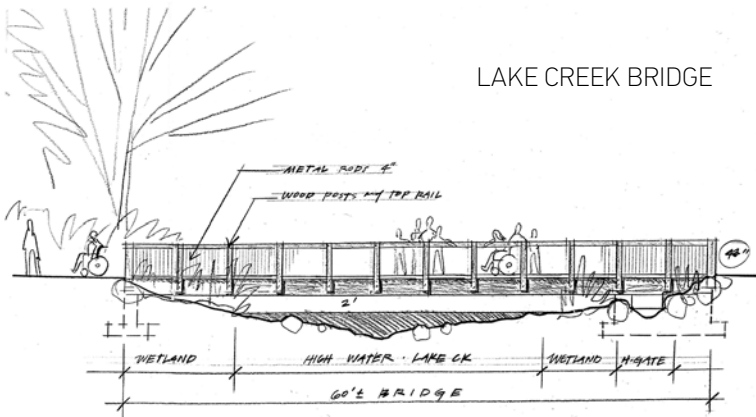
WATERFALLS



LAKE CREEK OVERLOOK



LAKE CREEK BRIDGE



RIGHT

A waterfall cascades over the bed of a former irrigation canal. Metal grating allows the water to flow through the path itself.

OPPOSITE TOP

This curved wooden boardwalk overlooks a stretch of Lake Creek.

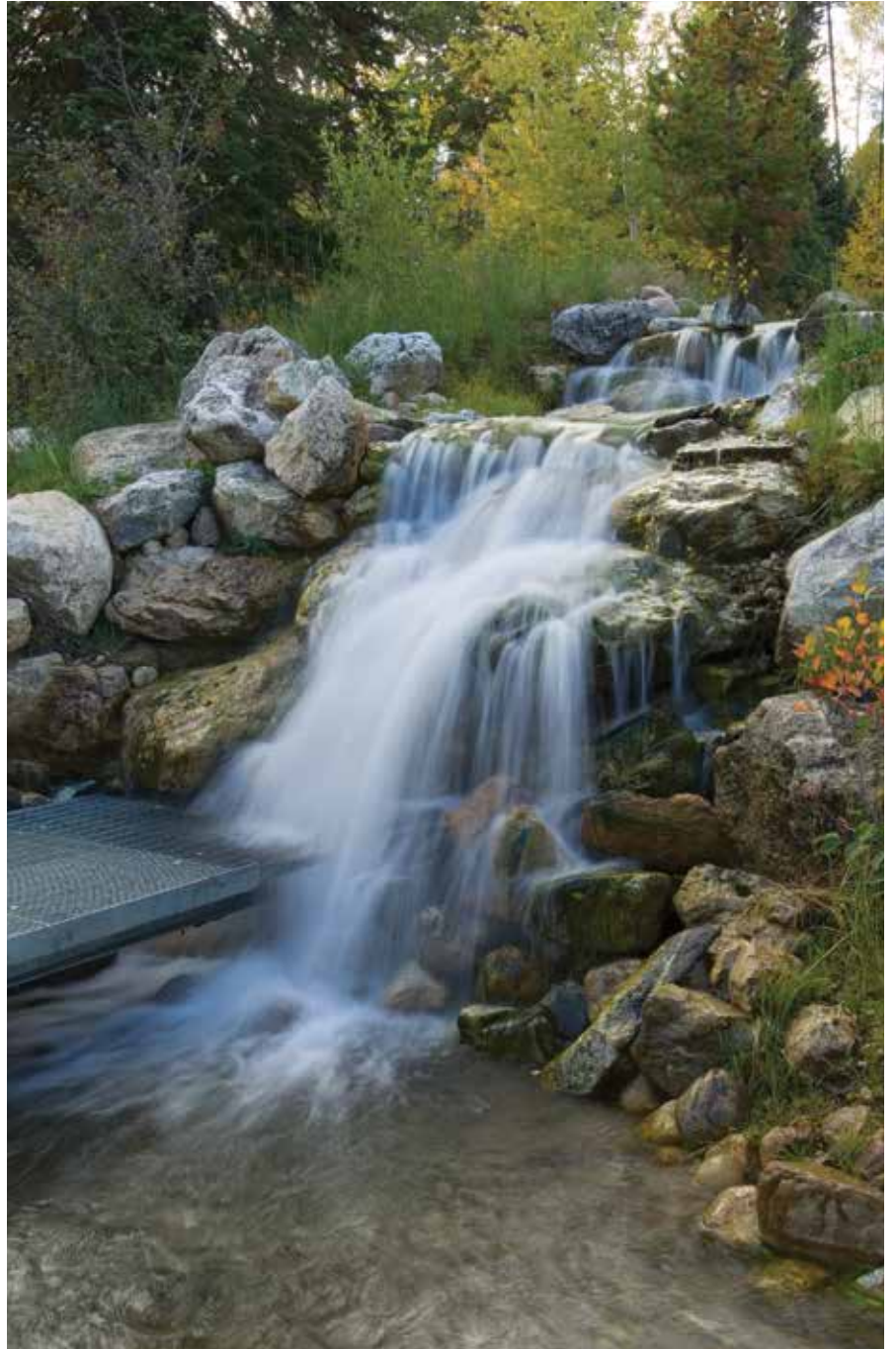
OPPOSITE BOTTOM

A metal boardwalk traverses a wetlands area.

Other benches and groupings of stones have been placed at intervals along the shore to encourage a deeper connection with aspects of the view and the setting. Before the gift of the land was made, the Rockefeller property blocked off the southern portion of the lake. A loop trail now follows the contours of Phelps Lake and rejoins the backcountry trails that lead up into the canyon and beyond. A wooden bridge that once carried automobiles to the center of the ranch has been reconfigured as a place to gather and enjoy the headwaters of Lake Creek. Metal decking snakes across a wetland area, allowing an intimate experience of the lacustrine ecosystem. A whole palette of options opens up for the visitor.

The Hershberger Design team provided additional trails within the preserve to offer people the chance to go more deeply into its terrain. The Boulder Ridge Trail loops due east, into somewhat more elevated ground. To the west, the Aspen Ridge Trail takes a longer route to return to the interpretive center. Hiking out this trail at sunset, I found myself on the heels of a herd of elk who left their distinctive, slightly sharp scent on the air behind them.

Jackie Skaggs, a former spokesperson for Grand Teton National Park, has reported that something on the order of \$20 million was spent to develop the preserve, much of it spent removing the traces





D. A. HORSCHNER, TOP; HERSHBERGER DESIGN, BOTTOM

of decades of occupation of the site. (Many of the buildings were transferred to a new Rockefeller property outside the park, and others were given to the National Park Service for reuse.) Rockefeller was well aware that his own vision for the land could not be carried out by the park service itself. First and foremost, historic preservation protocols would have kept the JY Ranch intact. Furthermore, funding for a restoration project of this scale would have been next to impossible to obtain.

As the longtime Grand Teton guide and philosopher Jack Turner has said, “If you’ve never had a genuine wilderness experience...then why would you be drawn to it? That’s why it’s so important for those of us who love wild places and wild animals—and what happens to our minds when we’re in their presence—to do our best to get people out there and help bring them into the experience.” The national parks face the challenge





NIC LEHOUX

LEFT

This repurposed vehicular bridge offers tiered seating at the Lake Creek headwaters on Phelps Lake.

of balancing wild nature, with its inherent risks and uncontrollability, with the diverse needs of an Internet-connected and heavily stimulated public. Laurance S. Rockefeller's intent was to provide a new paradigm for the parks of the 21st century, one that balances education, entertainment, and the silent meeting of the wild. With the help of Hershberger Design and the national parks community, he found a formula that works. ●

PHILIP WALSH IS A WRITER BASED IN CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS. HE CAN BE REACHED AT PHILIPWALSHPHD@GMAIL.COM.

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