

ABSTRACT

Project Name: The Clearing

Location: Newtown, CT, United States

Entry Category: General Design

The Clearing is the permanent memorial for the victims of the Sandy Hook shooting. Set in a rural context, the design favors simplicity and elevates ecology, allowing for the dynamics of seasonality and nature to interact with the processes of memory, trauma, and healing. Visitors may choose their own way among a network of paths towards a collective center. Here, surrounded by the victims' names and a pool of water, is the "Sacred Sycamore". This brave gesture is fragile in that it requires nourishment to persist. It is also resilient, encouraging us to remember the victims' lives, not their death.

Narrative:

The Clearing is the permanent memorial designed to honor the 20 children and six educators who were slain on Dec 14, 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The designers created a memorial space which is both open-ended and unifying in how it is experienced, honoring the full spectrum of emotions this tragedy evokes.

The guiding intent was to provide an ecologically grounded space in which visitors could participate, and which would grow with them over time. Three primary elements - the circle, the path, and the tree - are the hallmarks of a design that achieves these goals. A circling network of paths takes the visitor through meadows of native grass and wildflower, surrounded by Connecticut woodlands. The paths connect to one another, and allow the walker to experience the space in their own way and pace before arriving at a collective center, honoring both individuality and community in the process of grieving and remembrance. This concept emerged from listening deeply to the results of Newtown's own community engagement effort, and from speaking directly with survivors of trauma.

The entry of the memorial features a welcome plaque is inscribed with words of President Obama who spoke in Newtown the day after the shooting. The plaque also contains "Sacred Soil" - the cremated remains of flowers, teddy bears, and other items sent to Newtown in the aftermath of the shooting. As visitors enter the central memorial space, the songs of woodland fauna and gravel underfoot cease as they step into a cobblestone ring permeated by the creek-like babble of water. In the center, a water feature sits in a granite basin - the edge of the feature is engraved with the names of the victims. Stone detailing and water spiral inwards towards a planter at the center, where a young sycamore grows, offering life while symbolizing the young age of the victims. The motion of the water captures the form and cyclical energy of the landscape around it, encircling the tree. In the fall, the sycamore stays green as long as a month after the surrounding woods have lost their leaves, embraced by a gentler microclimate from the pool. Visitors are encouraged to give a candle or flower to the water, which will carry the offering around and across the space in an act of bridging the deceased and the living.

The design borrows generously from its context. Locally sourced planting and granite quarried in New England borrow directly from the surrounding rural landscape. Native perennials and shrubs lend an eco-emotional dynamic rooted in seasonality. The planting layout has moments of formality interwoven with loose drifts of meadow and understory which invite the wildness of the adjacent woodlands into the space. Large and small field stones found and excavated on site during construction are re-used throughout, grounding the space in soil and stone.

The site, ¼ mile away from the rebuilt Sandy Hook Elementary School, was chosen by the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission and donated to the town. Set in a low point of existing topography and surrounded by eastern hardwood forest, the site lends privacy and a meditative quality. On school days, one can hear the sounds of children playing at recess from the Memorial.

The project was funded by local taxpayers to retain the intention and needs of the community most impacted by the shooting, and as such was built on a humble budget. As designers, we are grateful to the collaborators, craftspeople, and laborers who built this project with the utmost respect and solemnity, bringing their best to create a special project in spite of limited resources.

Unique among memorials, The Clearing elevates process and ecology while bravely centering a living being as the focal point, rather than a cold piece of stone or metal. This approach leverages the site itself, as well as the most innate tools of a landscape architect, to remember that the victims lived, to honor them, and to provide opportunity for healing within the community of survivors. The project was opened in November 2022, shortly before the 10th anniversary of the tragedy.



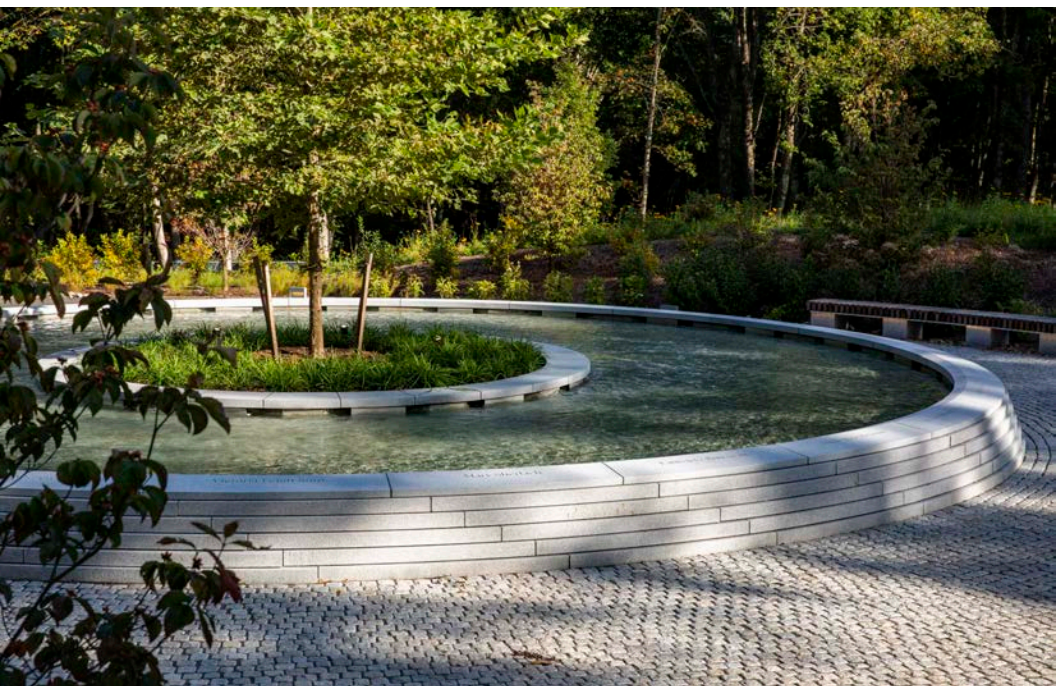
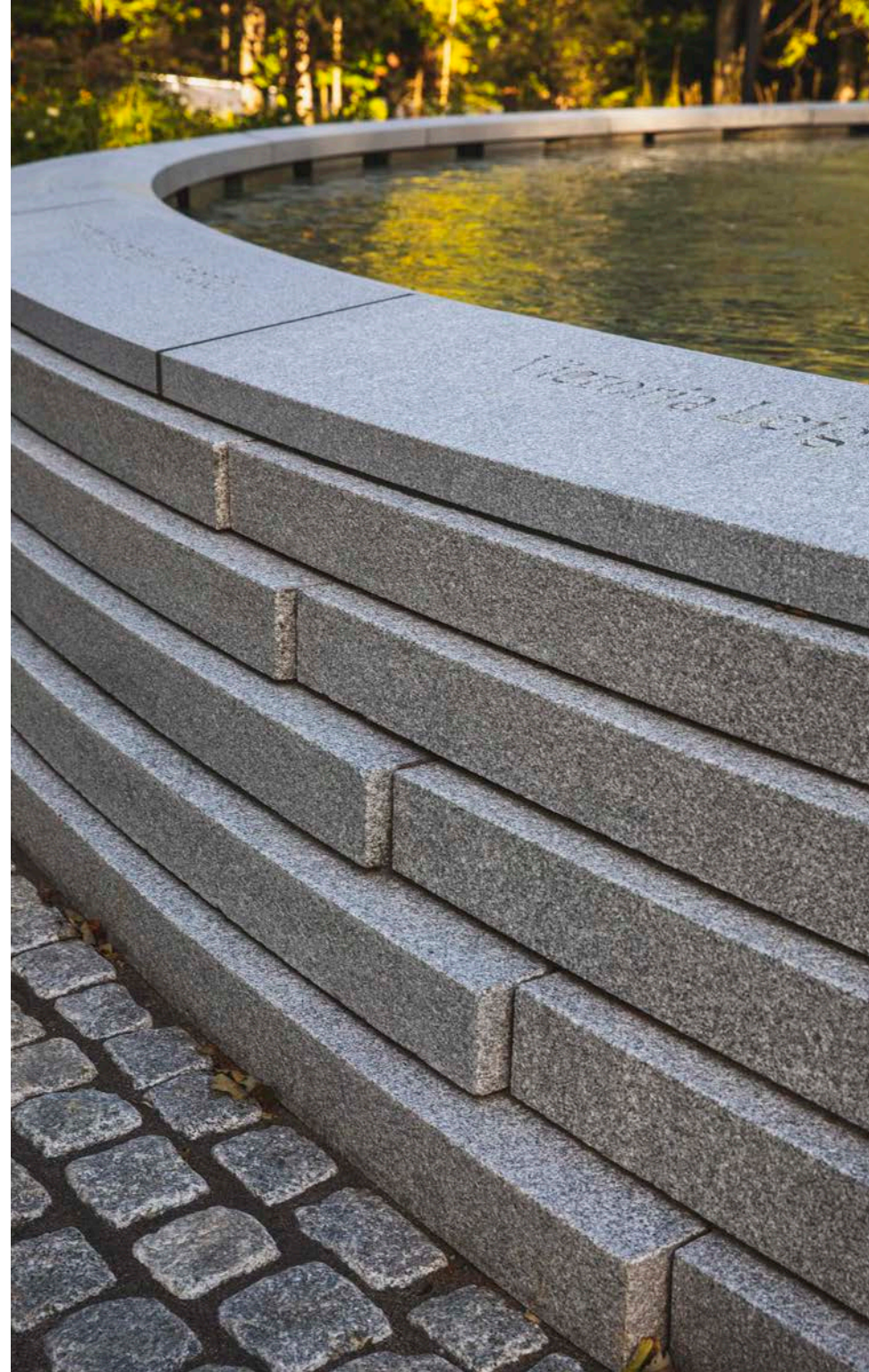
01 | The memorial consists of a circling network of pathways which allow visitors to find their own way to a collective center. Names of the shooting victims are arrayed in granite around a pool of water which spirals inward towards a sycamore tree, carrying the motion of the landscape.



02 | Black-eyed Susan's are among the first generation of successional species incorporated into the hand-seeded meadows. They will dominate for the first two-three years before giving way to more patient wildflowers.



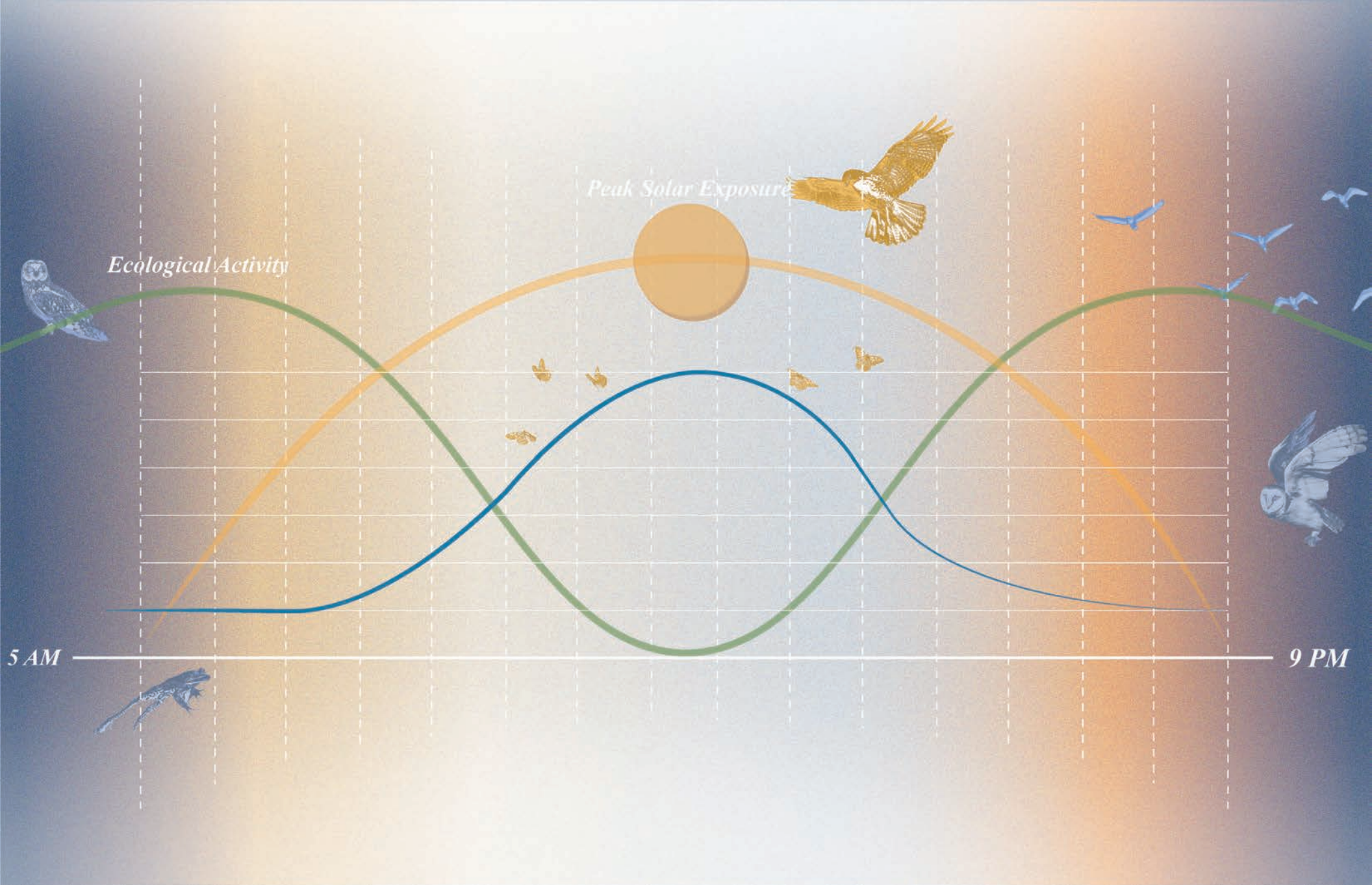
03 | Evening light rakes the Memorial in October, accentuating seasonal transition. Braided pathways allow visitors to find their own way and take the time they need to arrive at the central feature, honoring the reality that trauma is different for all of us.



04 | Locally sourced granite acts as a finely laid frame, rather than the primary object of the Memorial which is a living tree and water. Depending on time of day, the water within may be a mirror for the landscape around it, or a steady creek-like babble.



05 | Visitors are invited to place candles or flowers in the water, which will carry them in circles, eventually bringing them to the center of the feature. This act symbolizes crossing the void between the living and the deceased.



06 | The water feature is designed to respond to the ecological dynamics of the site. Water is calmer at dawn and dusk when reflections are most dramatic and nature most active. When the sun is high and fauna shelter in the woods, the water increases intensity to create an inviting sound.



07 | The planting design drifts between formality and informality, inviting the wildness of the surrounding woods to interlace with the memorial clearing.



08 | The specimen tree in the center sits within a micro-climate created by the pool around it. As a result, it retains its green significantly longer than the surrounding landscape. In the foreground are field stones excavated during the construction of the water feature.



09 | The collaborators, craftspeople, and laborers who participated in the implementation of the memorial were instrumental, and approached the work with respect and solemnity.



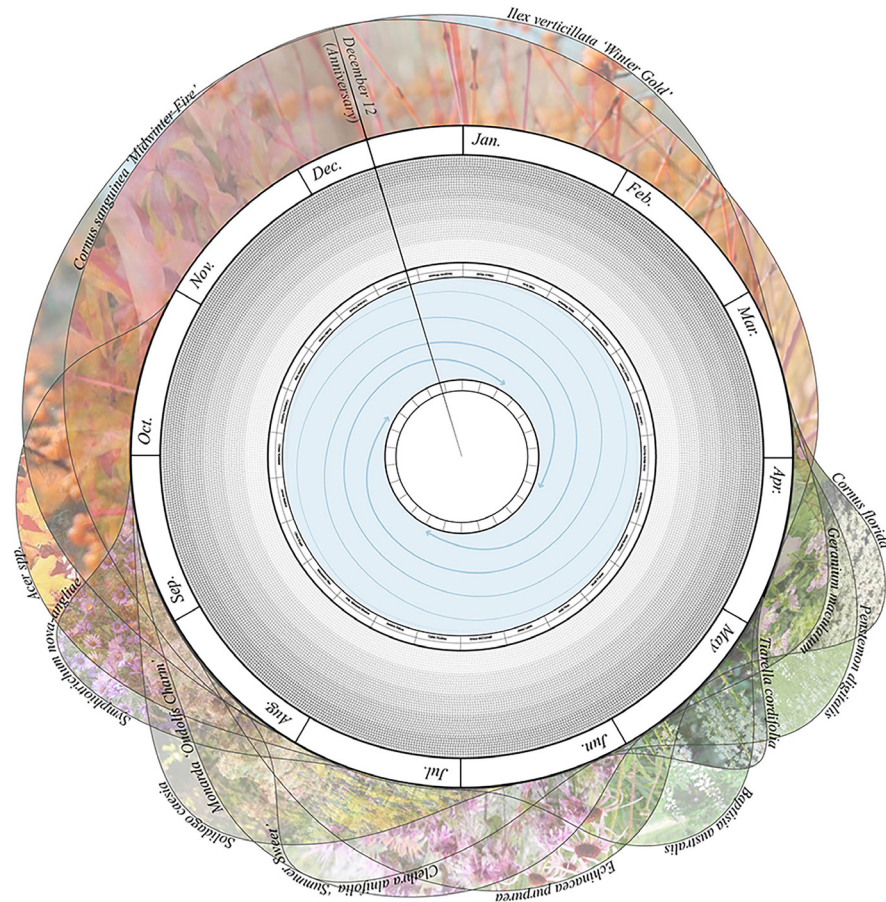
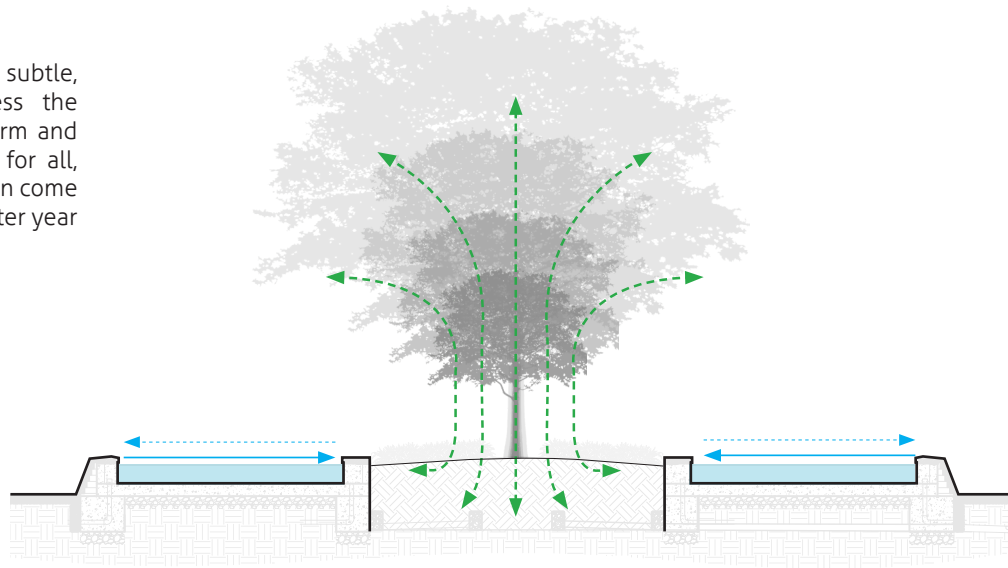
10 | Fieldstones found in-situ are set as informal seating and allow visitors to take in the periphery of The Clearing. Soft shadows linger in untamed woods, lending a sense of mystery.



11 | The site plan preserved existing woodlands and water features, working within a clearing that was used for little-league baseball in the past. The existing trees at the perimeter of the clearing lean into the space, lending a feeling of comfort.



- 13 Ecology and seasonality provide a subtle, dynamic palette which better address the experience of trauma survivors than form and material permanence. The Memorial is for all, but especially for the community who can come and visit month after month, and year after year to see the space grow and change.





14 | The Memorial is situated in a rural New-England landscape, a quarter of the mile from the rebuilt Sandy Hook Elementary School (near the top of this image). On school days, one can hear children playing at recess from the Memorial.

