

Dwell: Reinhabiting Elkmont

Joseph Wessels | Self-Directed Project | Fall 2014-Spring 2015



Dwell

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House in Cucumber Gap, Elkmont, Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Photograph by J. Wessels, 2012



Sod home of John and Marget Bakken, Milton, ND, circa 1895.
Photographer Unknown ¹

Dwell

A new archetype can be forged that resolves the truths of living with what we value in our modern world.

In the Germanic origins of our language, the word for building, *baun*, meant to dwell. It was to remain, to stay in a place, to exist. The Gothic equivalent, *wunian*, added to be at peace, to remain in peace. An architecture for a place to dwell should identify with all people on these fundamental levels.

Two of the most critical issues in the way in which we dwell in the modern age are in our community relationships and in our relationship to the land. These relationships have become less tangible over the centuries as populations grow and technologies evolve. The result has been the separation of people from other people and people from the land. There was a time when architecture was worthy of the land it was built on. Homes and halls found their worth and beauty in economy, in functionality, and in their ability to create lasting connections. People put down roots and became an integral part of the settlement around them. They built in an impermanent way and instead found their permanence in relationships. These architectural ideals wrought a need for simplicity and truth in living.

How can we as a collective society establish a way to truly live in harmony with the land and each other? How can we design to be unified with the land while nurturing community and cultural connections, and how can building contribute to this unity on a fundamental level? Martin Heidegger counters these questions by stating, “Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.”

Dwell

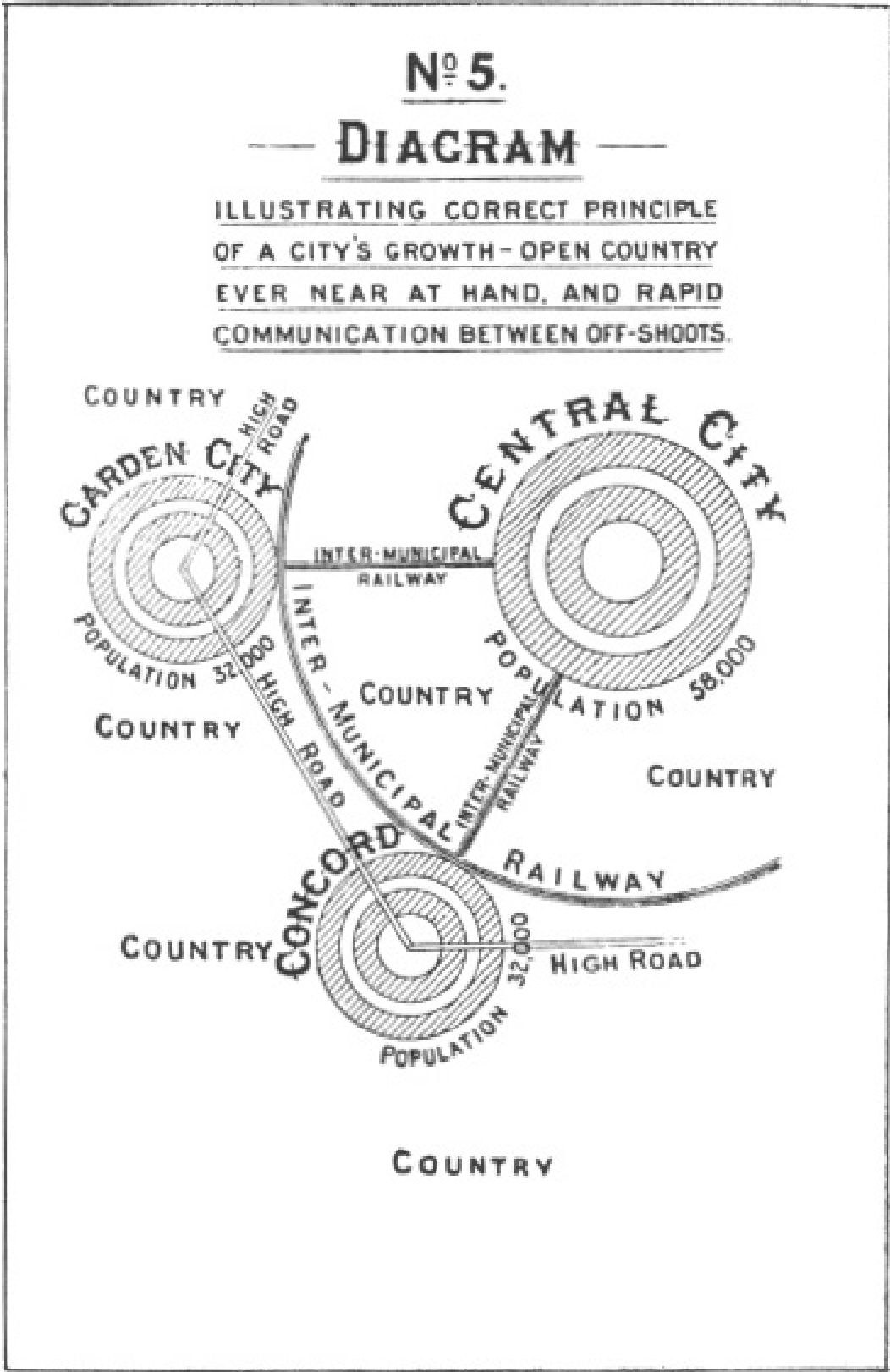
Through this thesis, I want to question the state of building and dwelling in the modern age and explore the implications of dwelling on our perception of society and self. According to Heidegger, “The proper plight of dwelling lies in this: that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.”

This study seeks to define a worthy relationship between man, place, and space within the frameworks of community and Nature.



House in Hensley Settlement, Cumberland Mountains
Image by J. Wessels, 2012

“...and in this way [simple oneness] designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time.”
-Martin Heidegger



Correct Principle Of A City's Growth, Ebenezer Howard, 1902 ²

Dwell

“A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”
-Wendell Berry

“When a land is removed from worship it is no wonder that conscience regarding the use of that land is profoundly deficient. We have no sacred places. We fail to recognize that cities and towns by their very conciseness and economy are great acts of conservation and deference, and that they alone offer any hope of protection of the land.”
-W.G. Clark

These quotes reflect the two issues that must shape program. With consideration to these values, the other principal issues are connectivity, scale, authenticity, and form.

I. Connectivity

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ebenezer Howard began developing the idea of the Garden City. This rationale of urban planning, outlined in *Garden Cities of To-morrow* called for self-sufficient communities comprised of open spaces, public parks, and boulevards. These centers were intended to be surrounded by proportionate areas of residences, industry, and agriculture. In diagram, garden cities existed as satellites of a central city, interconnected by highway and rail.

This idealization expounds on the potential for a community to exist as a function of its own social, economic, and spatial components, connected to larger city structures, but not dependent upon them.



The Forest Clearing by Ivan Shishkin
Oil on Canvas, 1896 ³

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II. Scale

With respect to the Garden City and New Town movements as a diagram of the full potential of this type of planning, the next issue to consider is scale. An exploration must occur to form bounds for this project, asking the question, “What must exist before the essence of a community is formed?” Defined space, built environment, infrastructure, and economic drivers must be examined in turn to determine what is necessary for a community to exist in its purest form.

III. Authenticity

“It would seem as if we are in a hopeless position, that our architecture has not developed a legitimate character as strong and sure as that early ideal that we think of as young America.”
-W.G. Clark

“You cannot simply put something new into place. You have to absorb what you see around you, what exists on the land, and then use that knowledge along with contemporary thinking to interpret what you see.”
-Tadao Ando

The nature of this project will be determined heavily by its site. Landscape has had a major influence on the development of American architecture and urbanism. The overwhelming character of vast open space is still fresh in our minds. This makes America an ideal canvas for this type of exploration. The city has developed here in opposition to the ideas of God, nature, man, and society. A new community structure should begin to reconcile these fundamentals with a clear, unique connection to place in which it exists.

IV. Form

“The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows. The shape changes but not the form.”
-Lao Tzu

People are more preferential about residential architecture than any other type. The forms in this project must foster strong emotional and spatial connections with the people inhabiting them. The users must be able to identify with the architecture and the positive spaces it creates on a basic level of human scale. Regardless of the site chosen and its influence, the architecture should be formed in a way that synthesizes cultural and contextual influences with universal human perceptions about home.



Original plan of Riverside ⁴

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A Precedent

Riverside, Illinois

The community of Riverside was begun in 1869 when the Riverside Improvement Company set the goal for itself to develop “a perfect village in a perfect setting.” Riverside is considered to be the first fully planned community in the United States. It is located eleven miles from downtown Chicago in an oak-hickory forest along the Des Plaines River.

Landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Clavert Vaux were commissioned by the company to design this community. The goal for the project was to “combine the pleasures of rural living with urban conveniences.” Olmsted and Vaux worked to achieve much more than this basic goal by designing to maintain a pastoral feel in an urban setting.

Olmsted and Vaux abandoned the commonly-accepted grid strategy of urban organization for a layout that followed the site’s natural contours. These curvilinear streets begin by following the Des Plaines River and branch out from that nexus, outlining a Grand Park system that connects the community with an additional 41 smaller parks.

Similarly to Ebenezer Howard’s later treatise, the community was designed with a central village square, located at the main train station. This connection to the “central city” of Chicago formed the locale from which the system of Grand Parks and residential blocks emanated.



Aerial photography of Riverside community ⁵

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A Precedent

Analysis

The design logic of the Riverside community has maintained its integrity through later waves of expansion. The community has retained a relatively open and rural atmosphere, despite the inevitable expansion of the city of Chicago. This appears to be due in part to the designers' success in finding and exploiting a unique condition of the site. In this case, the dense tree groves and riverbank topography gave the community something to build upon.

Combining the standard elements of a community with a unique condition gave the spatial and ideological design of Riverside an integrity that would not likely have otherwise remained so clear almost 150 years later. In moving forward, this situation is what I am looking for. Finding a space that can fulfill the basic needs of a community is not enough. A space that can be transformed into a place and truly dwelled in must have some special condition, something that makes it worthy of inhabiting.



Concept Montage, Randy Brown Architects ⁶

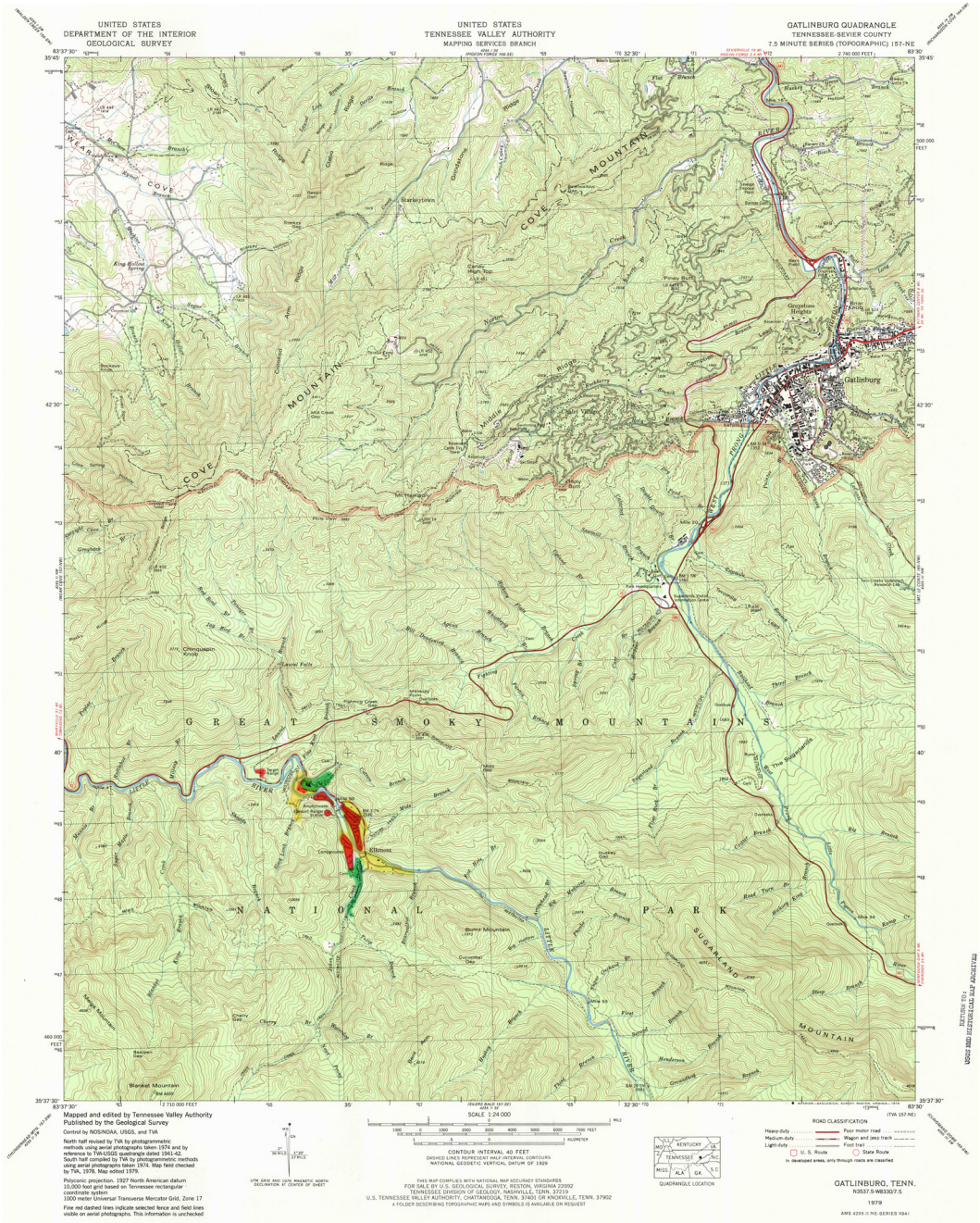
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In further examining the potentials for a site, a need for depth arises. For a project of this nature to have proper magnitude, a site should have strong relationships that form a framework that allows for the opportunity to create change.

- Relationship to history
- Relationship to culture
- Relationship to Nature
- Relationship to politics
- Relationship to people
- Relationship to industry

These are the key factors that I am looking for in a site for this project. Dwelling cannot exist in a vacuum. The complexity of society continues to demand that people address complex issues, and any community of value will be a product of its own complexity.

An example of the qualities this project will require is Soddy, and earth-sheltered home by Randy Brown Architects. This project was commissioned by a Nebraska couple who wished to build a home on twenty acres of prairie. The montage on the left visually articulates the overlap of historical, cultural, and natural issues that blend together to give the project depth.



2013 USGS Map showing Elkmont (lower left) and Gatlinburg (upper right).

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Elkmont

An Abandoned Community

The Elkmont area was settled in the early 1900s as a logical place for a locomotive switching area. Conventional rod-engine locomotives ran through Maryville and Walland from Knoxville to the base of the mountains, while geared locomotives, called “Shays,” navigated the steeper mountain grades. A logging operation grew around the area, and the town of Elkmont was soon formed.

In 1910, unused land was deeded to two groups from Knoxville for hunting and fishing. The beauty of the land ensured the popularity and frequency of visits from the new users, and two areas were quickly developed as small resort communities. The town of Elkmont faded away as the logging industry left the area, and the Appalachian and Wonderland Clubs grew in popularity without regulation for nearly twenty years.

In 1927, an act was passed creating the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The land along the Little River was annexed by the newly created park, and a battle began that would last over sixty years. Over the following decades, the park slowly claimed the land from the communities. Cabin by cabin, families were forced to give up their invalidated leases and leave behind decades of accumulated memories. Influential members of the Appalachian and Wonderland Clubs fought at the state and national levels, taking action as far as the United States Congress, but by 1991, the entire Elkmont area was owned by the National Park.

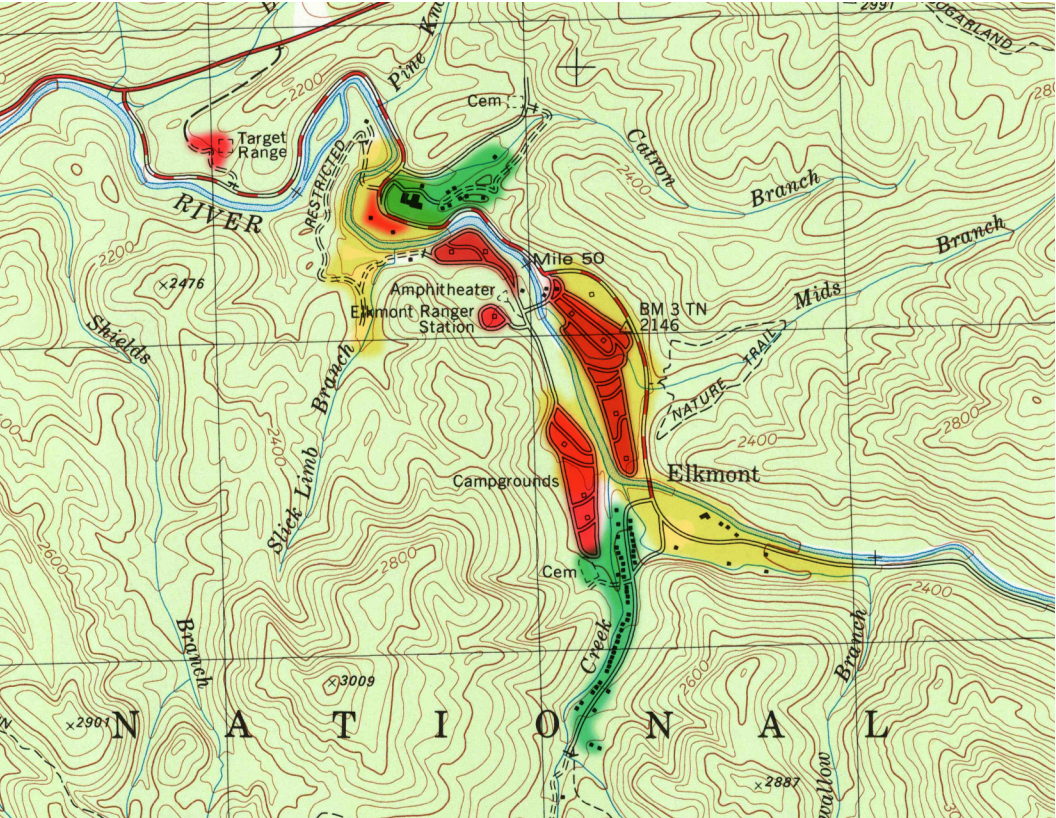


Diagram of pre-GSMNP communities (green) and post-GSMNP infrastructure (red).

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Elkmont

Discordant Conditions

Today, the abandoned Elkmont community exists in a state of disrepair. The remaining homes are maintained only enough to keep them from completely collapsing. Near the end of the twentieth century, the Appalachian Club was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Just prior to this unexpected development, the new improvement plan for the park called for the removal of all structures from the site. These more recent events have created a division of opinions on what the fate of Elkmont should be.



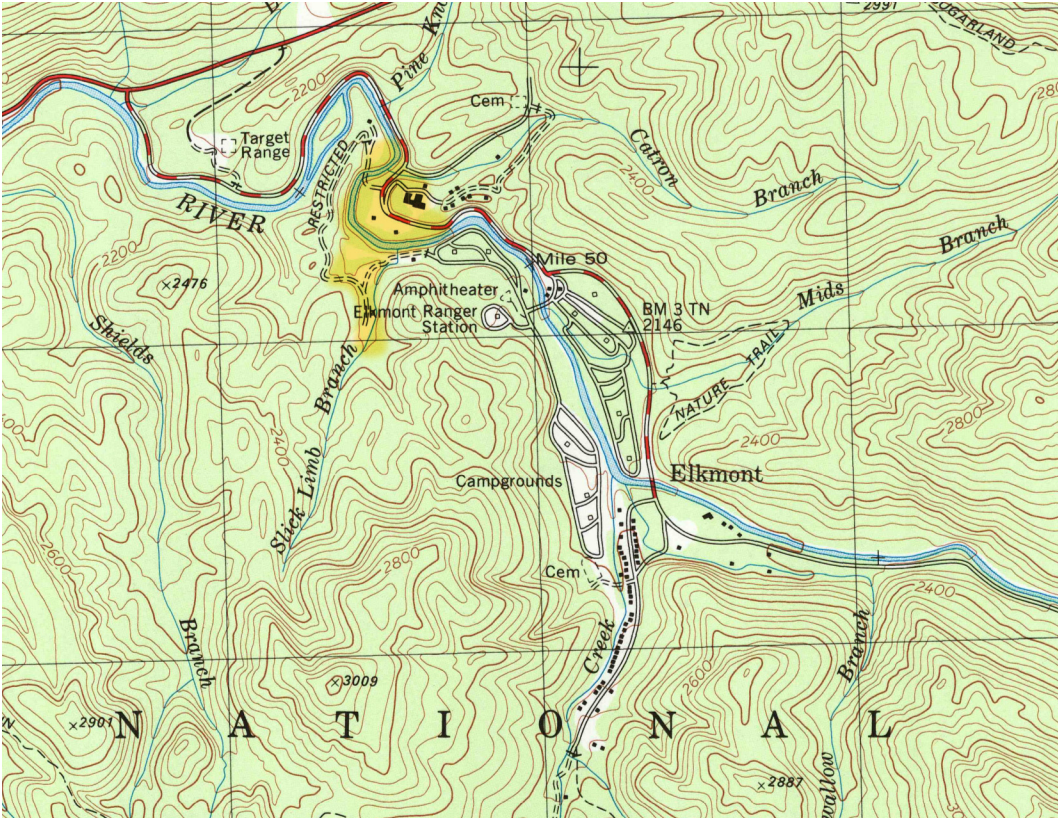
Bridge spanning Little River
Image by J. Wessels, 2014

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Chronological Spatial Diagramming

Camp LeConte, late 1890s

The first rudimentary settlement in the area was formed next to the junction of the Little River Railroad and the Shay lumber locomotives. The Little River Lumber Company formed and began moving employees into the community.





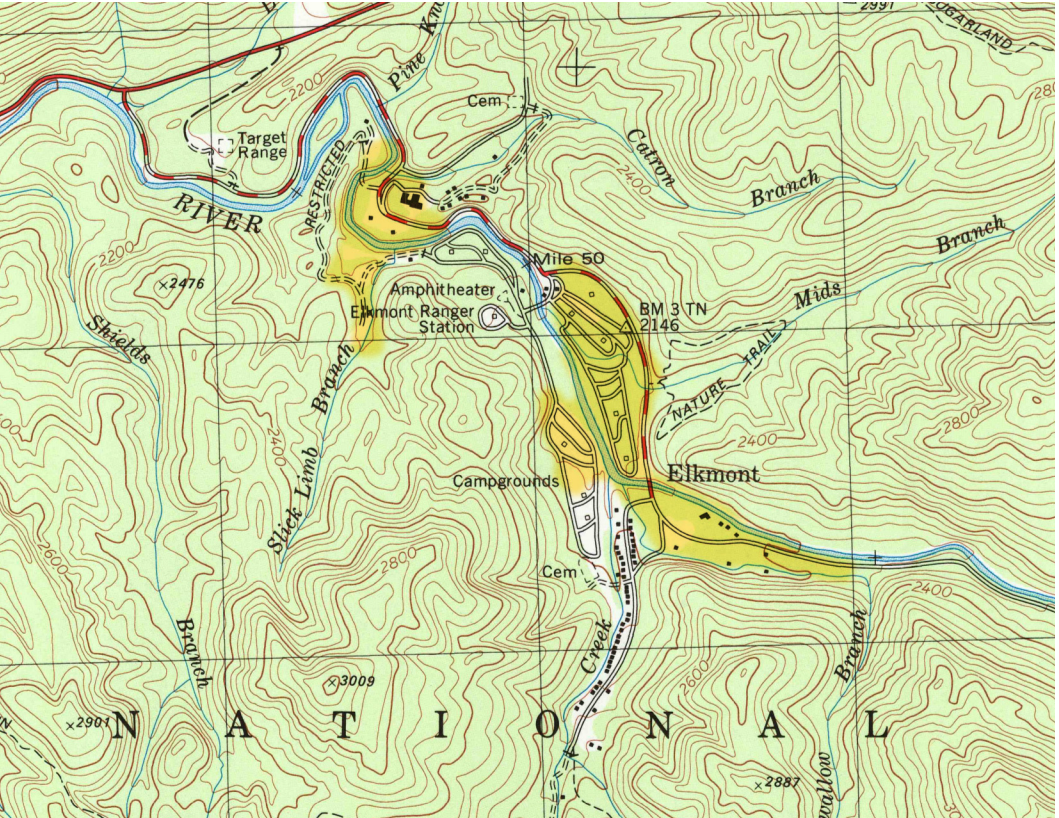
Cabin in disrepair
Image by J. Wessels, 2012

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Chronological Spatial Diagramming

Town of Elkmont, early 1900s

The success of the Little River Lumber Company quickly grew Elkmont into the second largest town in Sevier County. Land was cleared as homes and stores spread along the river valley.





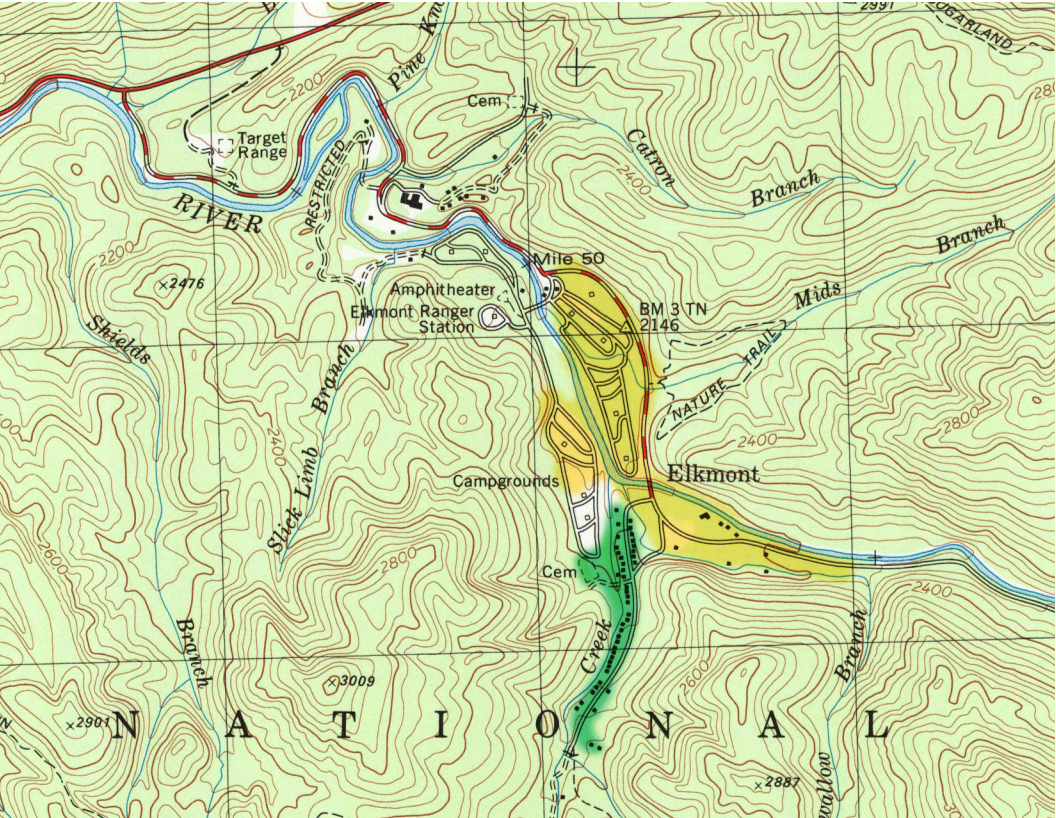
Main street through Appalachain Club
Image by J. Wessels, 2014

Dwell

Chronological Spatial Diagramming

The Appalachian Club, 1910

The Little River Lumber Company, always looking for additional profit ventures, deeded 50 acres of land that it did not intend to log to an organization called the Appalachian Club for a hunting and fishing camp. An additional 40,000 acres of land were deeded as hunting and fishing area.





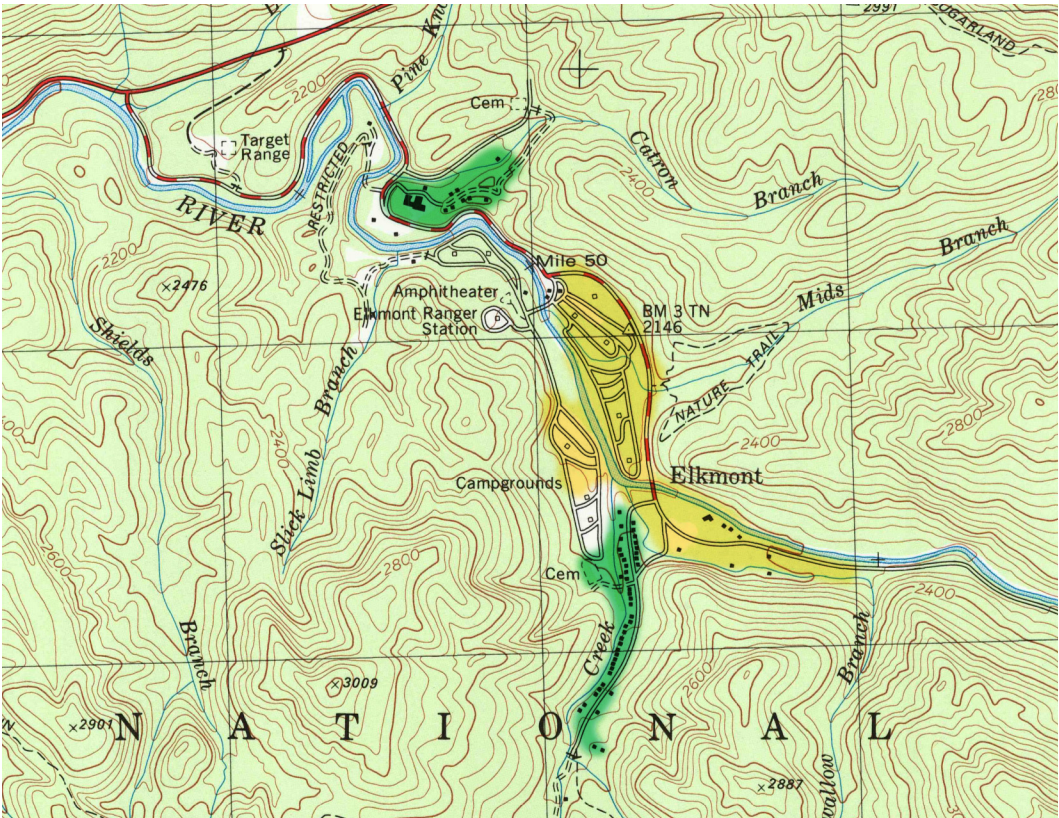
The Wonderland Club Hotel
Image by J. Wessels, 2014

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Chronological Spatial Diagramming

The Wonderland Club, 1912

Two years later, 65 acres of land was sold to another company seeking to build a hotel and community, emboldened by the recent success of the Appalachian Club. An additional 823 acres was deeded to the company as a natural area for the club.





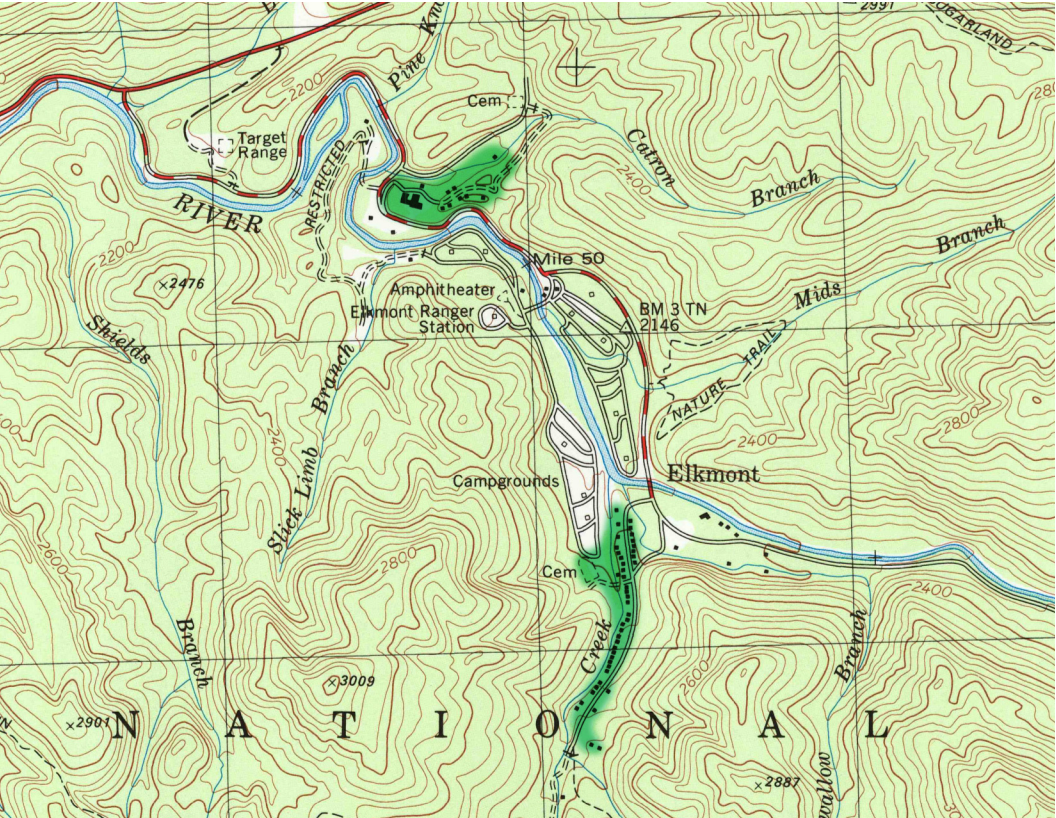
Abandoned Cabin
Image by J. Wessels, 2014

Dwell

Chronological Spatial Diagramming

Disappearance of Town of Elkmont, mid 1920s

When the Little River Valley was thoroughly logged, the Little River Lumber Company withdrew from the area. The Little River Railroad was soon deemed unprofitable and quietly dismantled. A road was quickly paved to allow access to the two remaining clubs, and a void was left along the river.





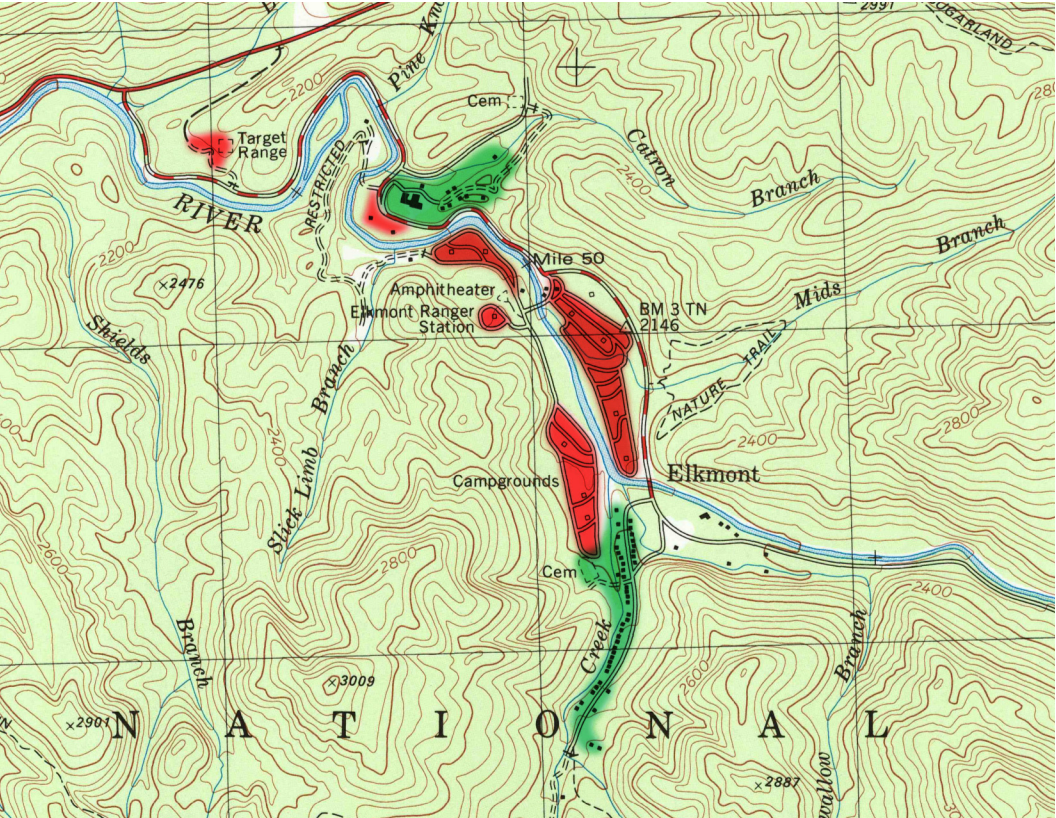
Occupied recreational vehicle campsite
Image by J. Wessels, 2014

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Chronological Spatial Diagramming

Addition of National Park Infrastructure, 1970-Present

Beginning as early as 1950, the National Park considered the Elkmont area as a possible location for a campground. Beginning in the 1970s, new infrastructure was slowly added along the river. As of 2014, Elkmont now additionally consists of three camping areas, a ranger station, three large parking lots, and a maintenance area. Lumbering recreational vehicles and colorful tents exist in strange juxtaposition with melancholy cabins fading into the landscape.

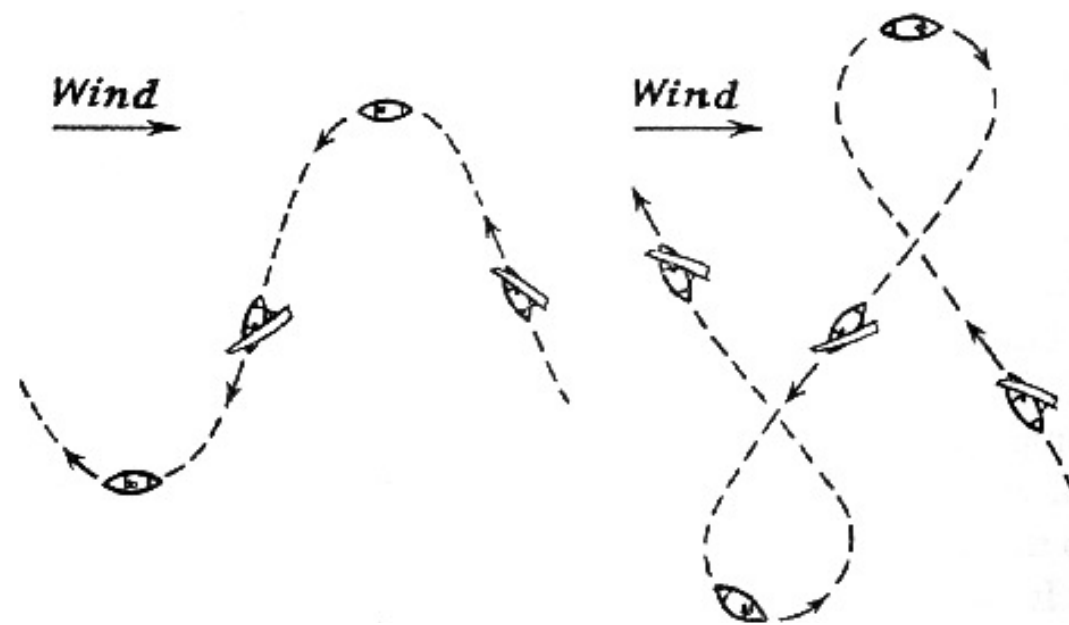


Tacking in a new direction

After forming a thesis and identifying a site, a challenge was put forth: what risk will you take in your project? An invitation was issued to boldly step outside of the traditional framework of programming and imagine what the project could become.

The cultural and historical worth of this place is far more important than the preservation of the land.

The uniqueness of Elkmont demands that it be preserved. The small community brought together generations of people from across the country year after year. They lived and in some cases died and were buried in this small river valley, until they were forced out by a government agency dedicated to preservation.



Dwell

A Program

A timeless archive, a temporary home

A program should be added to Elkmont that values all functions of the site equally. Abandoned in the decomposing skeletons of these homes are layers of memory that should be collected and preserved. No singular collection yet exists to chronicle the stories of this place. I propose a twofold program that allows people to reinhabit Elkmont in a way that is purposeful and meaningful.

First, an archive that would aggregate the memories of Elkmont. This new piece in the fabric of the community will seek to resolve the existing conditions with new form and purpose.

Second, a place for those who wish to contribute. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park continues to benefit from professionals in a great variety of fields. This component of the program seeks to form a nexus, in conjunction with the archive, to host those with something to contribute at the site for at least a month at a time. Historians, artists, storytellers, biologists, and all other manner of professionals will contribute something to the archive at the end of their time on the site, transforming a repository for history into a living collection.

These two components will seek to transform Elkmont back into a true community, building upon history, gathering people with a common purpose to shape the future.



Cabin front porch
Images by J. Wessels, 2014



Hand cut timbers and river stone chimney
Images by J. Wessels, 2014

Dwell

The Last Bedtime Story

A series of imagined moments in this project from fellow self-directed project students

Marianela:
There's a worn patch in the carpet next to the bed where he steps down each morning; a window and a tree whose lifespans coincide.

Ali:
Every morning it's the same routine. I get to sit on the same sofa, look at the same painting, and listen to the same Sinatra album. And damn it if I'll ever change.

Jennifer:
The campfire's home
a hiker in solitude
he dwells near the warmth
amidst the columns of trees
the wind his one lullaby

Taylor:
Outside looking in or inside looking out? The mirage is never clear.

Gustavo:
Cross dissolve:
Welcome to Pleasantville! Everything is in black and white. One figure remains in color. The architect. He stands by his window sipping his whiskey as he dreams dwell deep in the horizon.

Holly:
A hobbit in the woods, I call this place home.
No bright lights, no fancy cars.
I can hear myself think out here, and I like that.

Garrett:
A green yard, a reliable porch, a musical roof, a warm hearth, and a good cup of joe. This is what a home is worth to me.

Chloe:
The creak of a rocking chair, the babble of stream nearby, the silent swish of trees in the summer breeze. He takes a deep drag from his pipe and thinks, "Yes, this is home."



Homes in disrepair
Images by J. Wessels, 2014



Dwell

The Last Bedtime Story

A series of imagined moments in the project

Thomas:

I use to excavate dinosaur bones in the dried up river bed behind my house, where I carved swords and pretended to turn super saiyan...until we got neighbors.

Lewis:

Autumn air lit by sunrise. Freshly painted doors open to the beaten path. Invitation.

Matt:

Worthy.

Emily:

morning mist surrounds the camera,
a warm pancake breakfast breaks the fog around the home

Cody:

I sit on my front porch, and so too does my neighbor.

Jared:

Sitting on the porch sparking a flame. No one around. Could not be happier.

Professor Scott Wall:

The light on the walls comes from a fire nearby. The room is dim. Things in corners are etched in light from shadow.

When daylight comes it will stream through holes in the roof. It's a place to hang your hat each night. And to take it down again each morning

Joseph:

He steps into the room; his gaze drifts across the dusty furniture and out the window. The place is becoming cluttered, but he doesn't mind. These insignificant things tell the story of a lifetime.



Sod home of John and Marget Bakken, Milton, ND, circa 1895.
Photographer Unknown ¹

Revised Abstract, beginning Spring 2015

A timeless archive, a temporary home

Two of the most critical issues in the way we dwell in the modern age are in our community relationships and in our relationship to the land. These connections have become less tangible over the centuries as populations grow and technologies evolve. The result has been the separation of people from other people and people from the land. In the Germanic origins of our language, the word for building, baun, meant to dwell. It was to remain, to stay in a place, to exist. The Gothic equivalent, wunian, added to be at peace, to remain in peace.

An architecture for a place to dwell should identify with all people on these fundamental levels. This study seeks to define a relationship between man, space, and place within the frameworks of community and Nature.

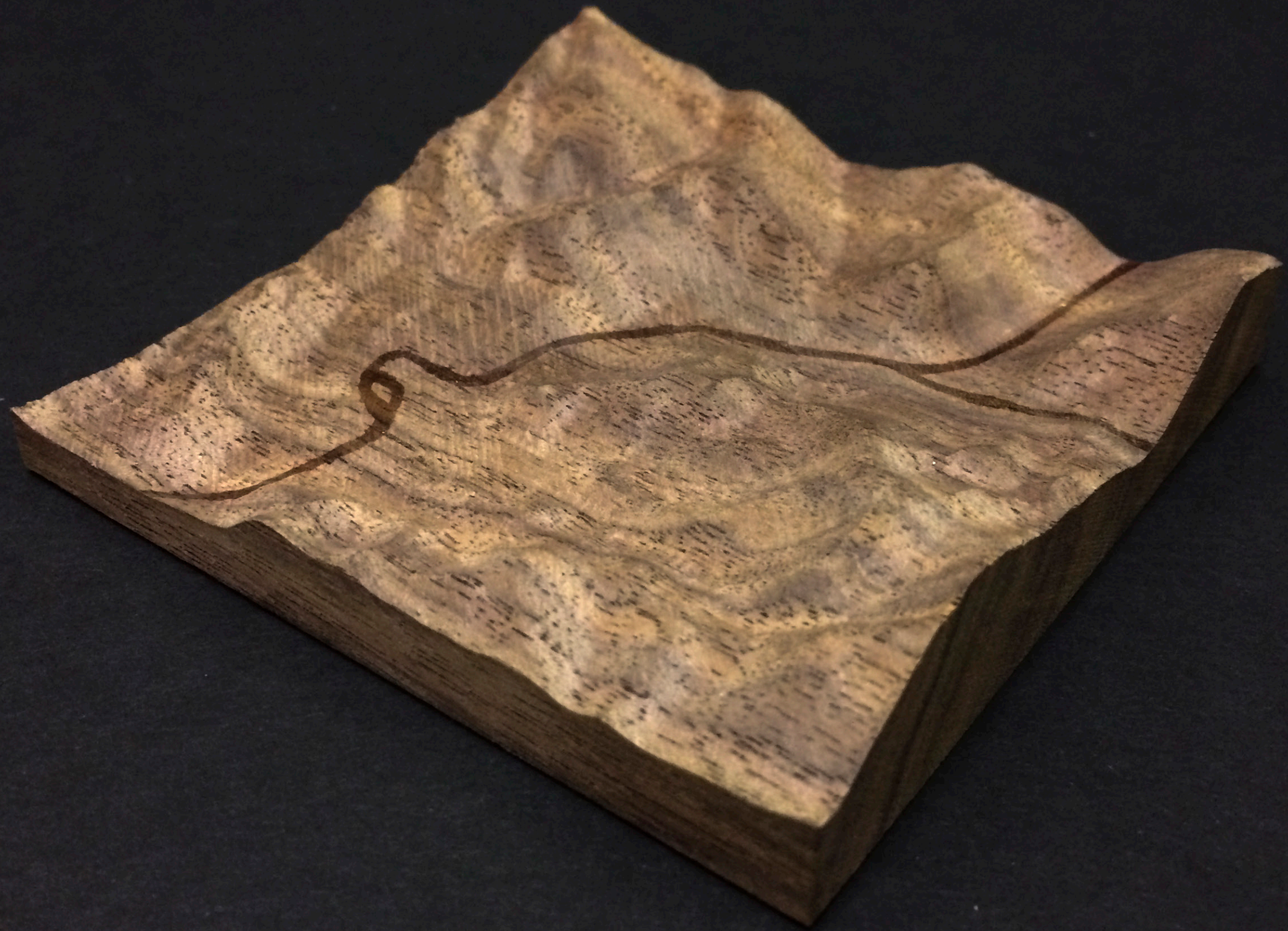
The former community of Elkmont exists in a suspended state. Since 1927, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park has systematically evicted the residents of this historic, tightly knit community and inserted its own foreign elements into the community fabric. Neglected homes decay in stark juxtaposition to recreational vehicle campers and asphalt parking lots. In this situation, the cultural and historical worth of this place are far more important than the preservation of the land.

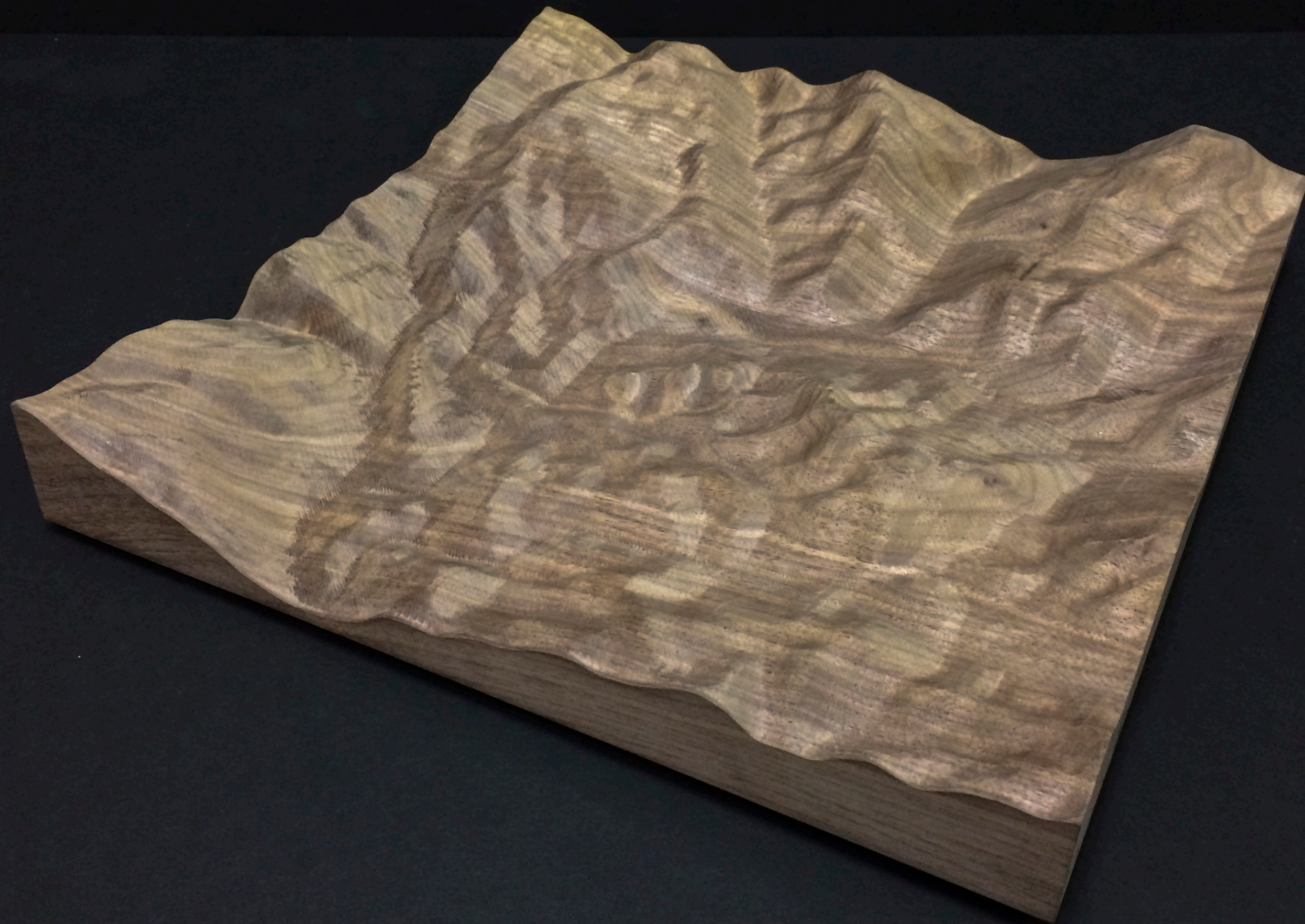
This river valley exists as its own archive, telling the story of people with diverse backgrounds who came together to form a community. This physical archive must be curated. Elements that compartmentalize the site and inhibit understanding must be removed and reconstituted in a meaningful and useful way.

A logic for operating on the site was formed through examination of how people and animals behave in the valley and surrounding mountains, both historically and in the present. Political and legal issues were ultimately of little importance, while the movement of fireflies and the soft places left in grass by sleeping deer were vital to the resulting architectural gestures.

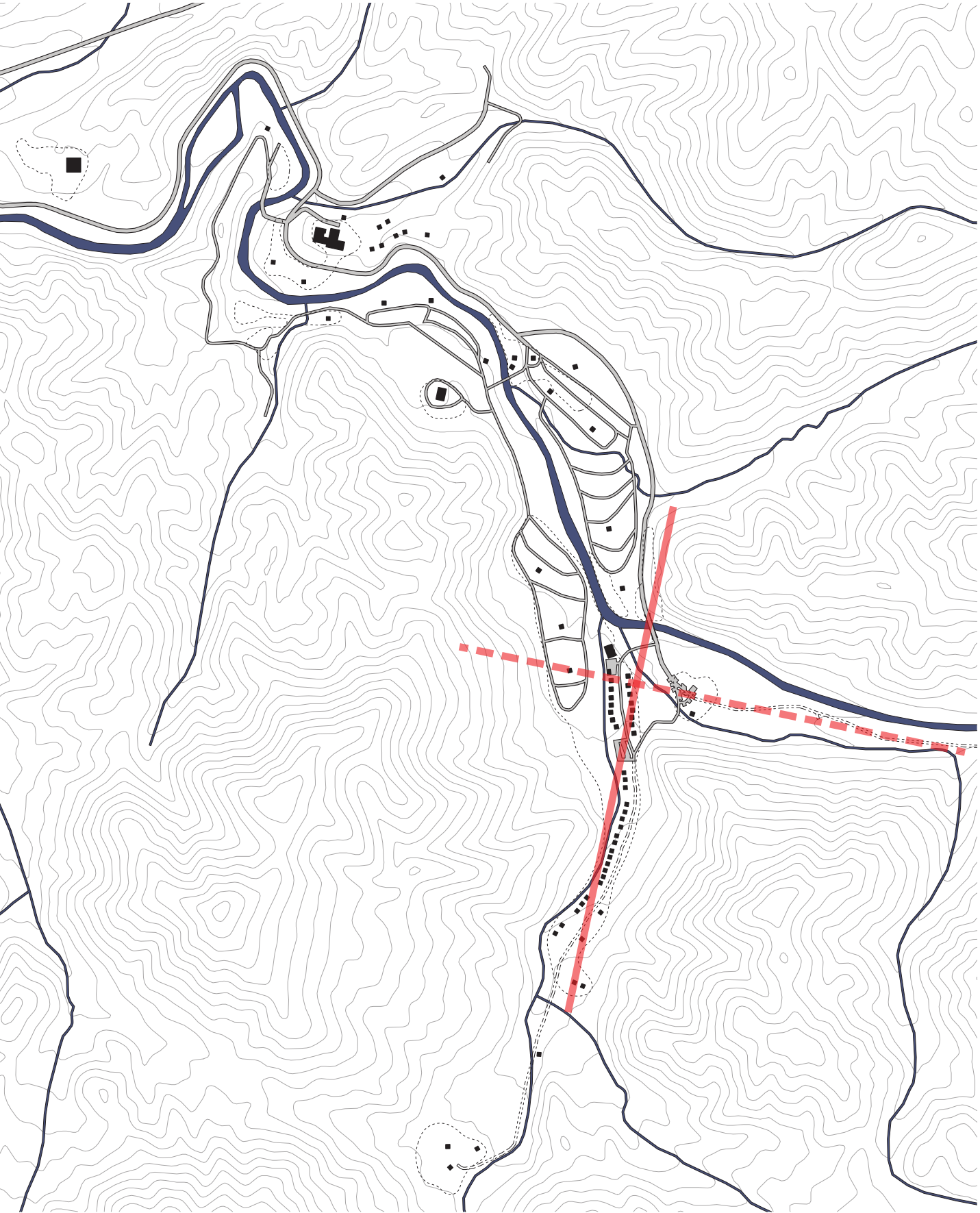
This study explores the potential of architecture to craft new life from historical and social decay, gathering people with a common purpose to shape the future.

“The proper plight of dwelling lies in this: that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.”
-Martin Heidegger









Elkmont Valley

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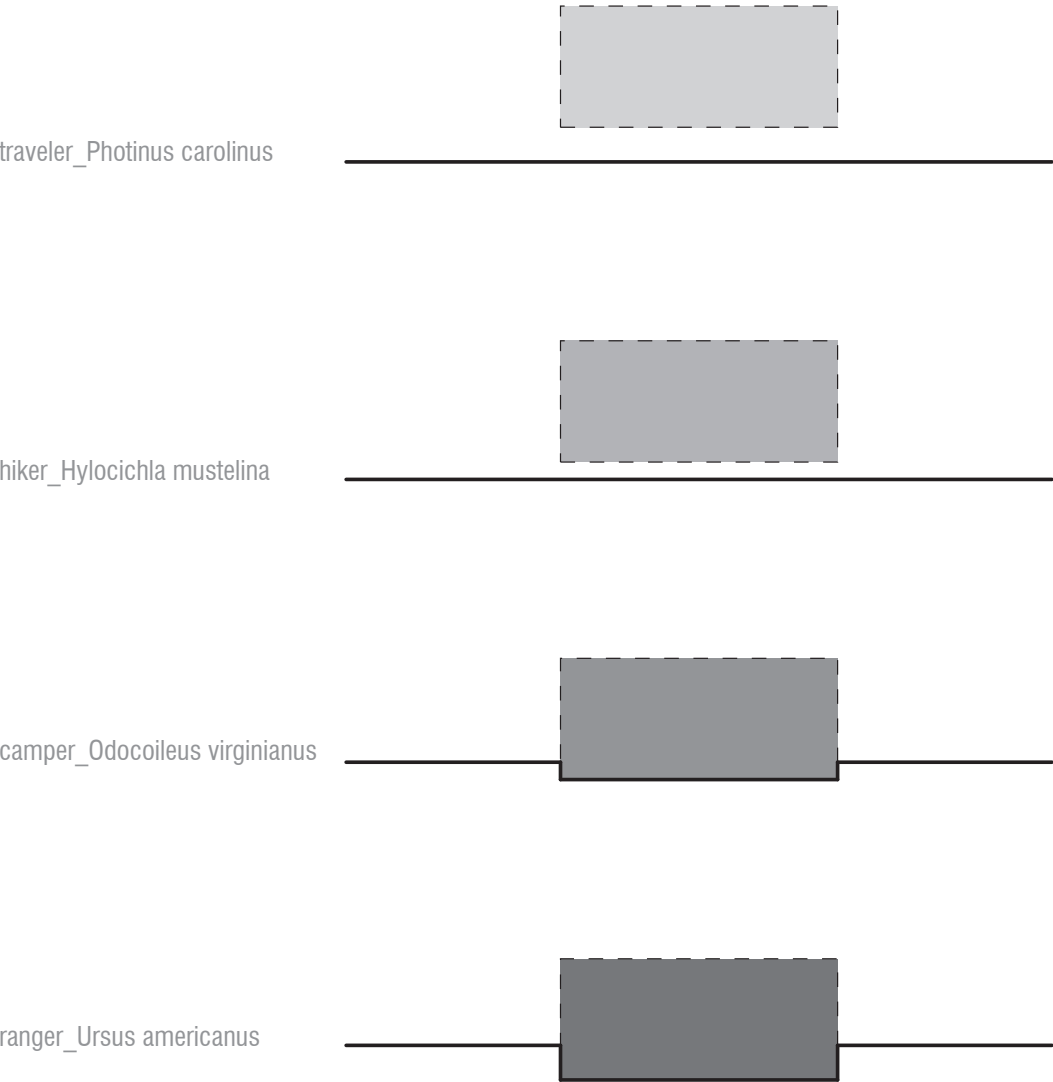
A timeless archive, a temporary home

Through study of history, culture, and physical properties of the Elkmont Valley, a discontinued axis was identified. This axis was once part of the Elkmont logging community and now sits juxtaposed to the historic community and campground axis.

A series of angle parking spaces and an outhouse were added by the National Park Service in this area, effectively creating a false turn around, actually discouraging some visitors from experiencing the historic community.

This zone is ideally located at the end of the valley procession, creating the perfect opportunity to place a new nexus from which to reinhabit this community.

To further organize the design process, four types of users were identified. The manner in which these users inhabit the valley were correlated to native animals, adding a further connection to Nature.





01_dwelling

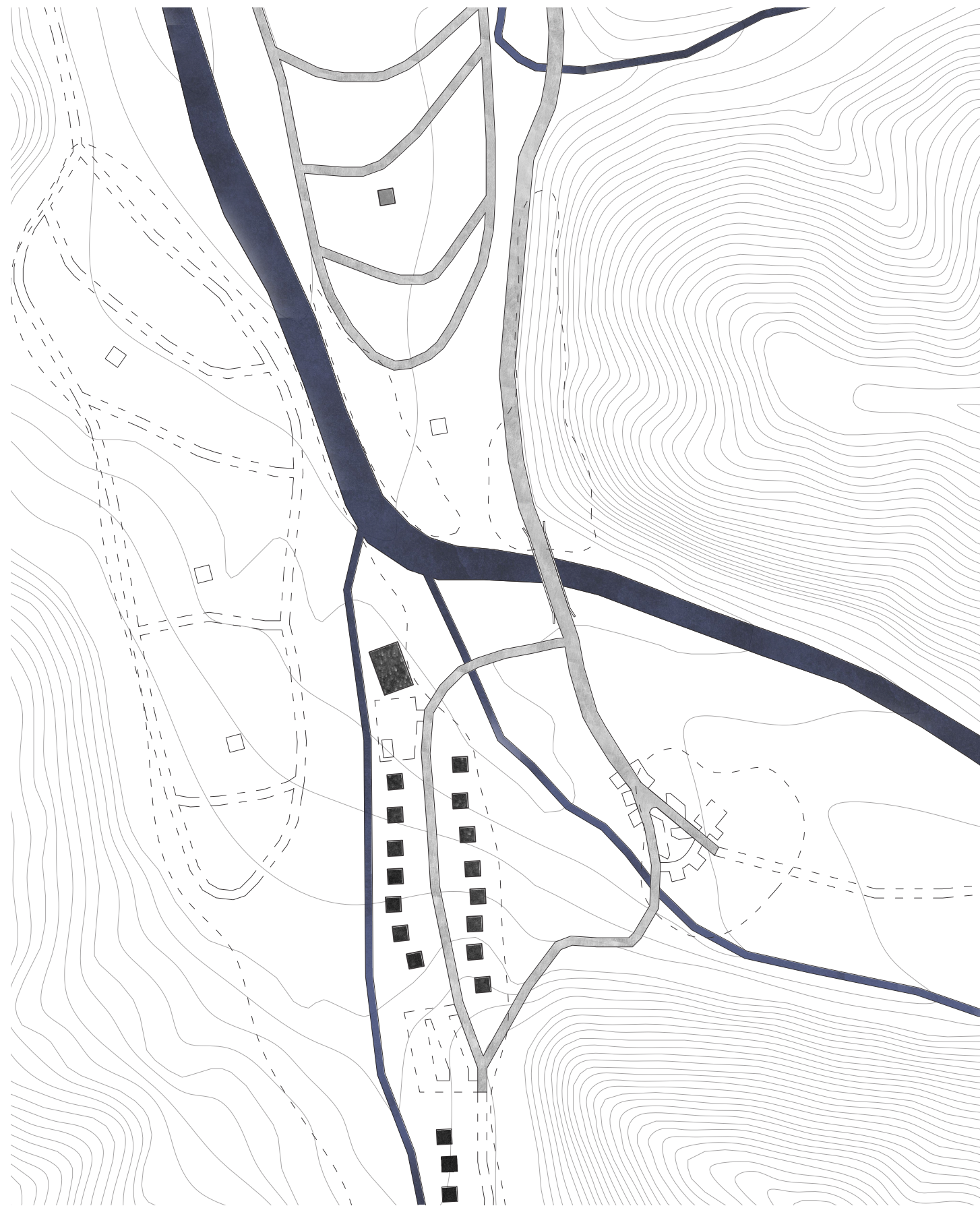
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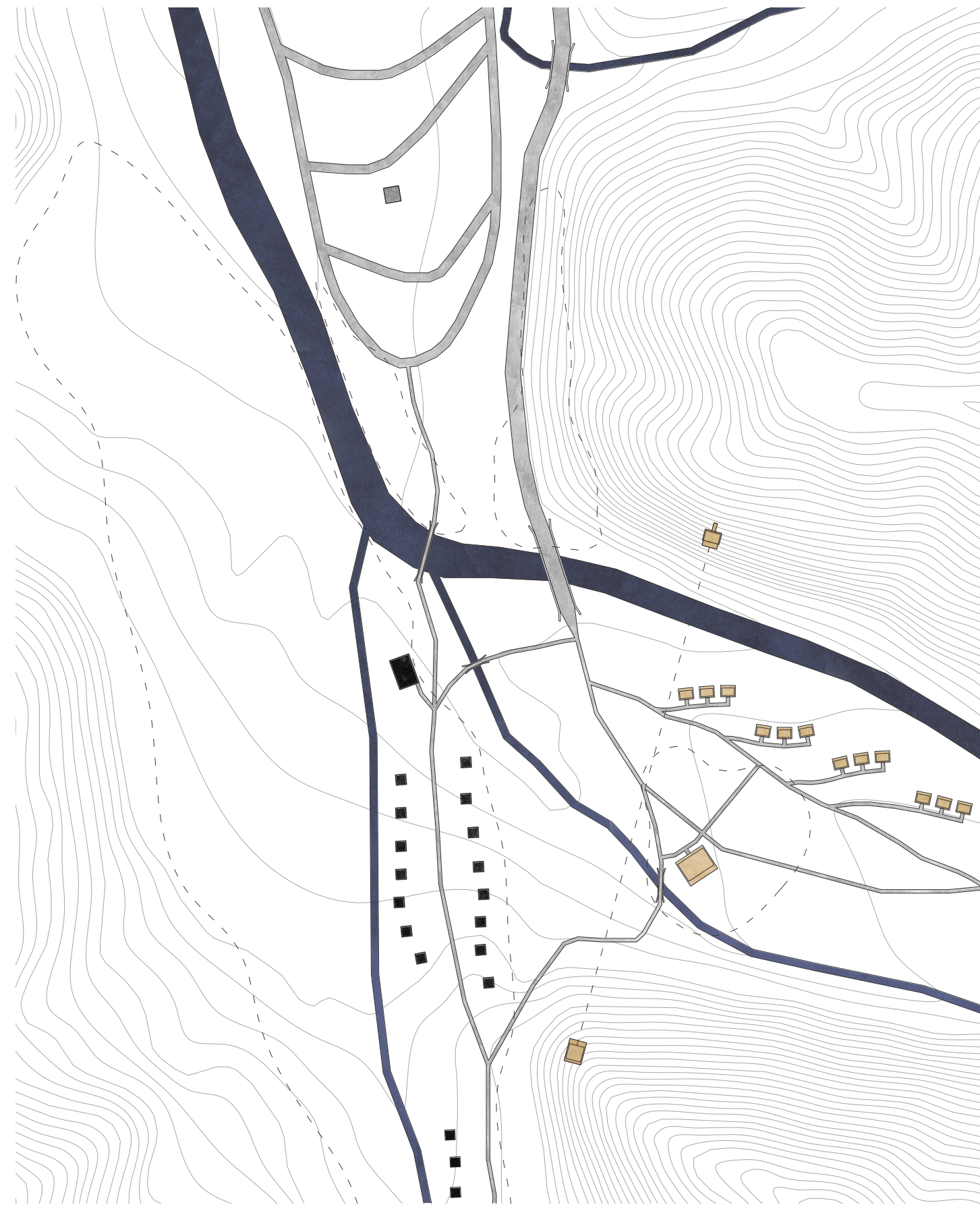
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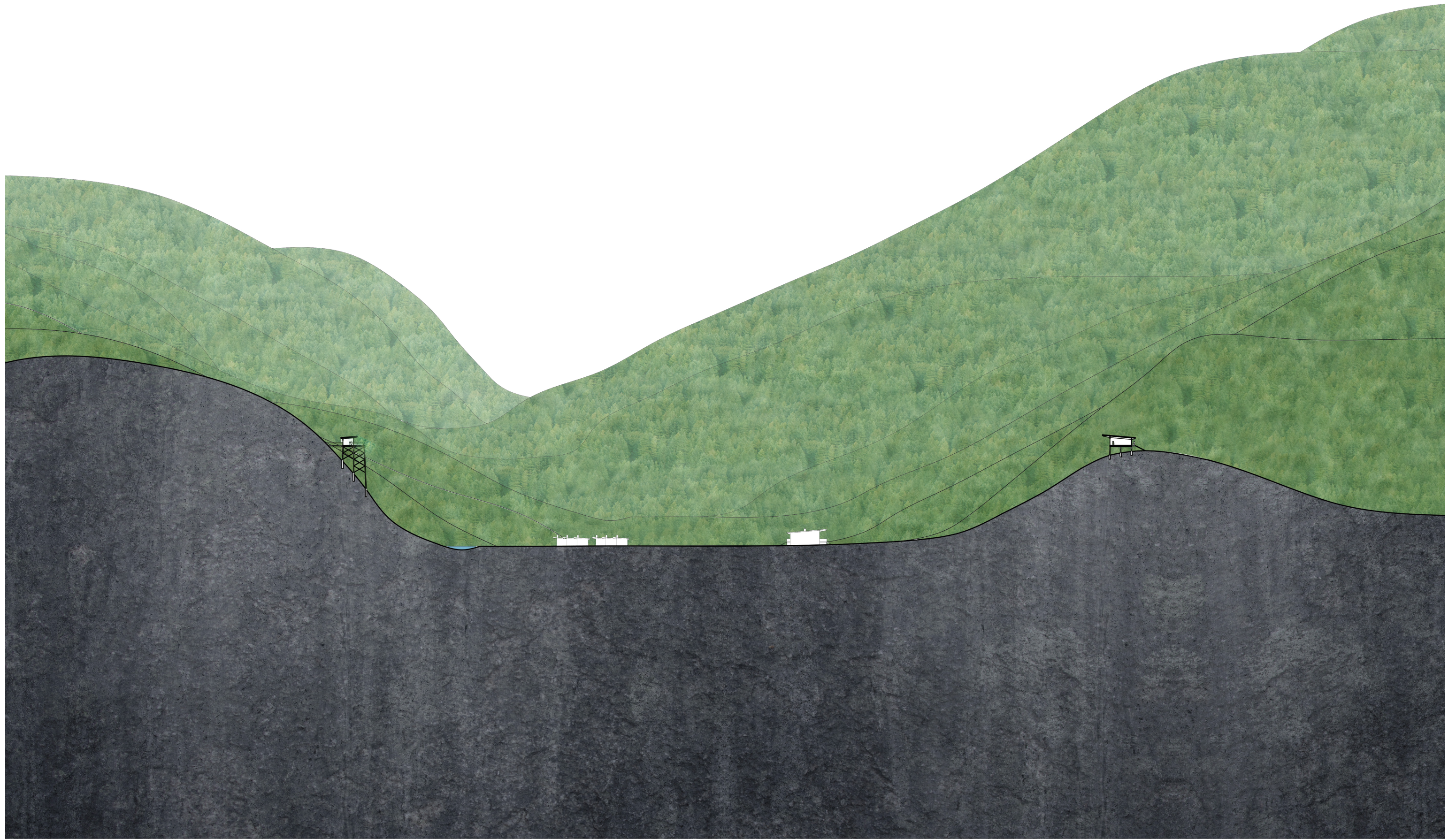
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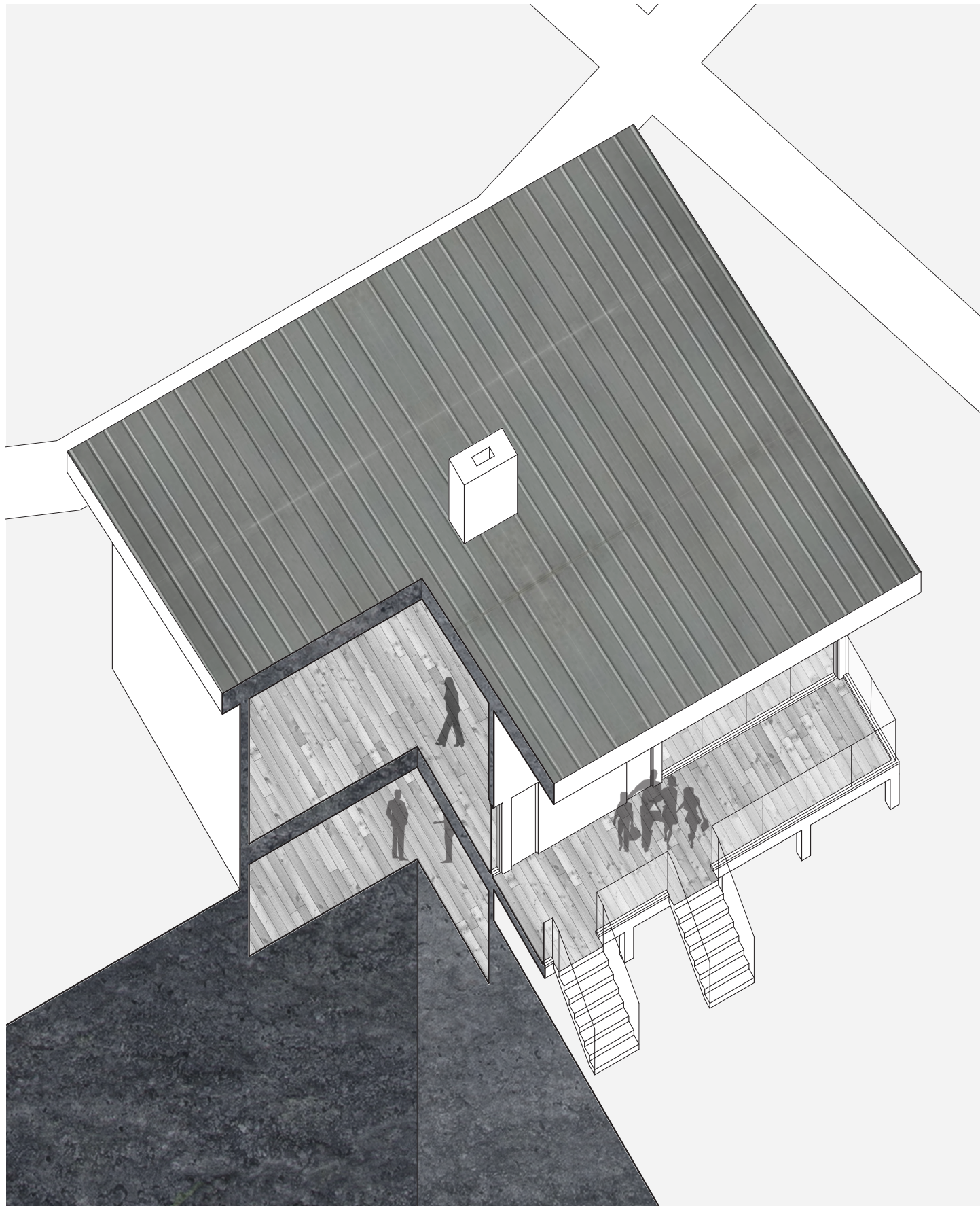


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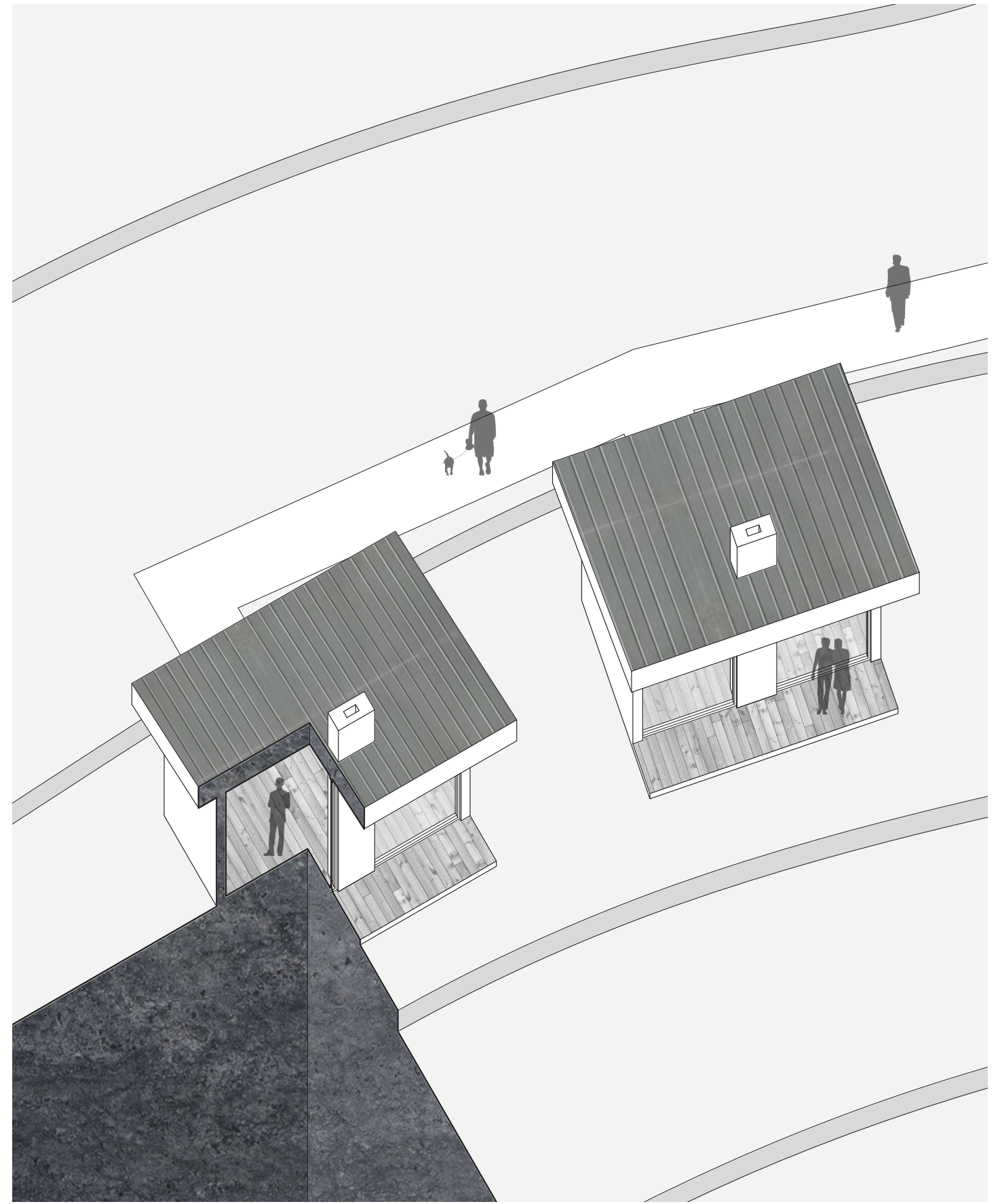






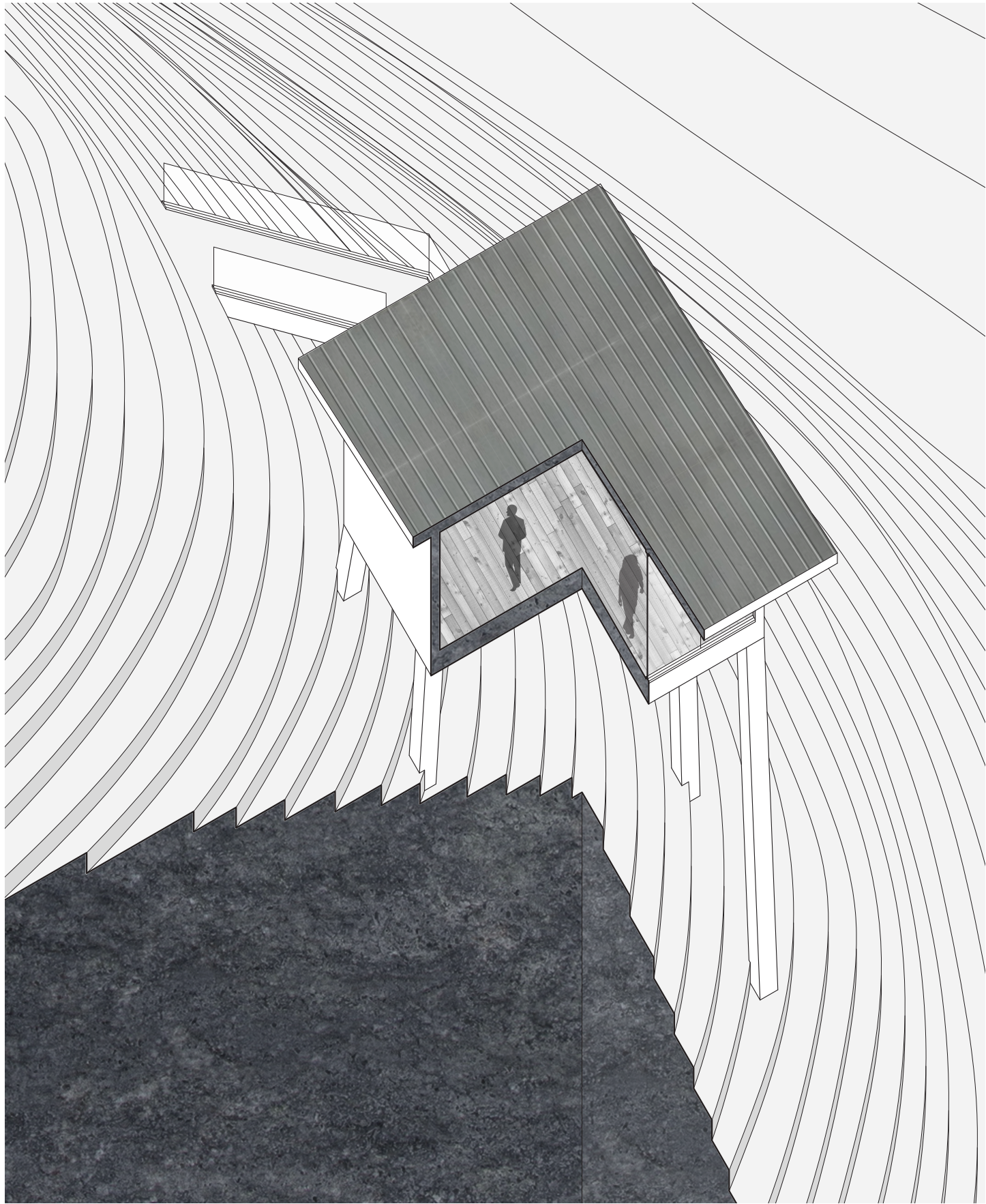
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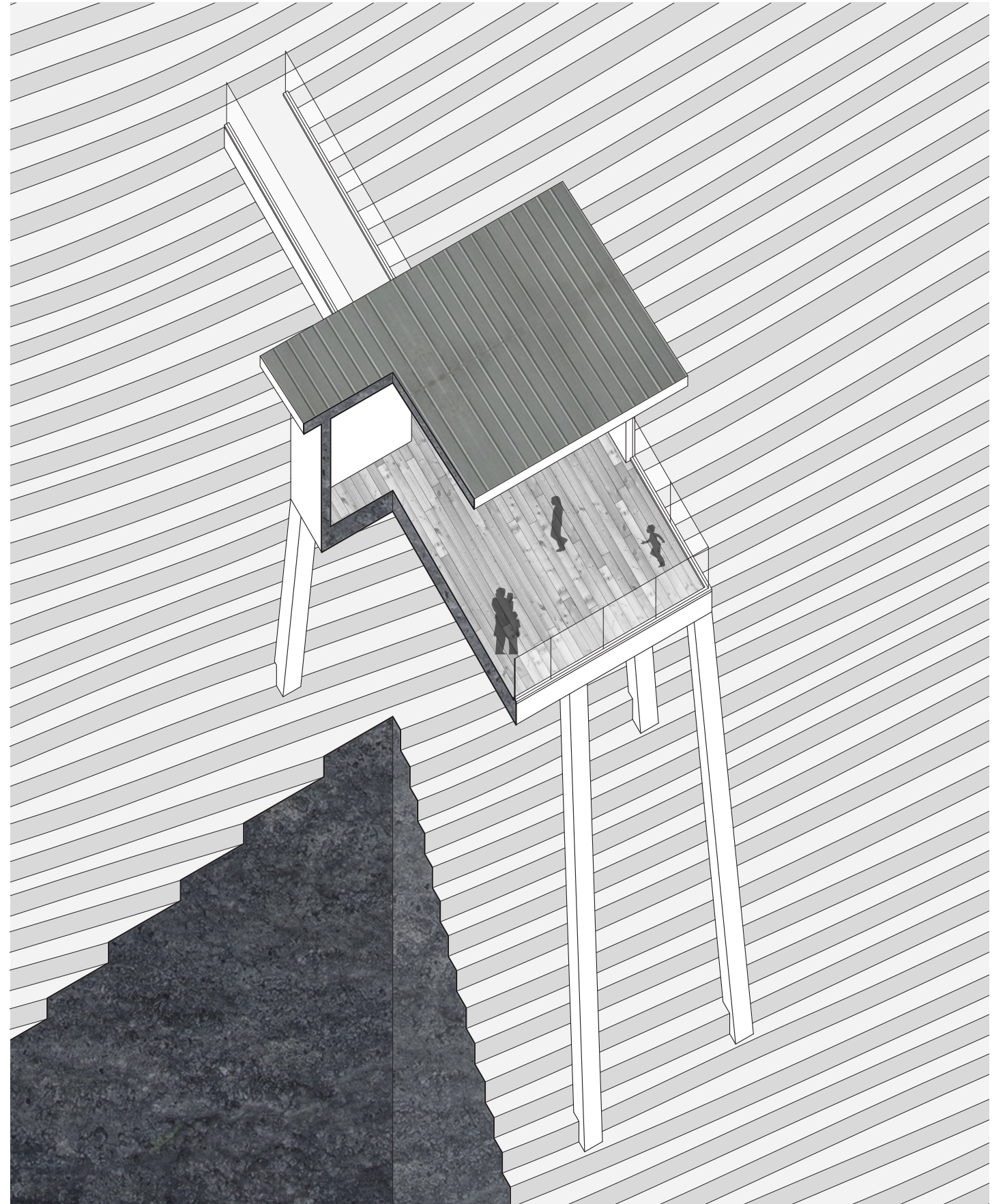
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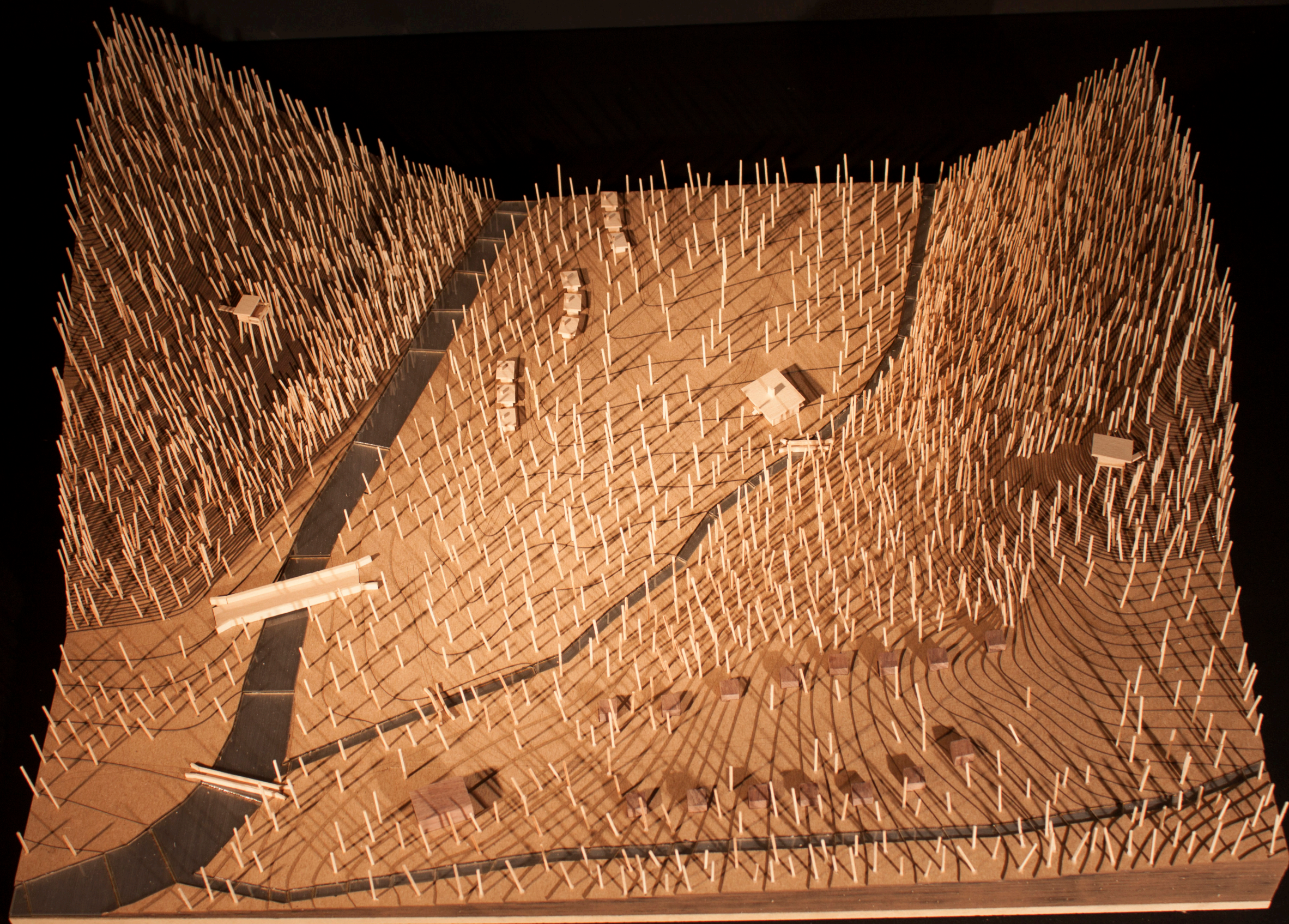
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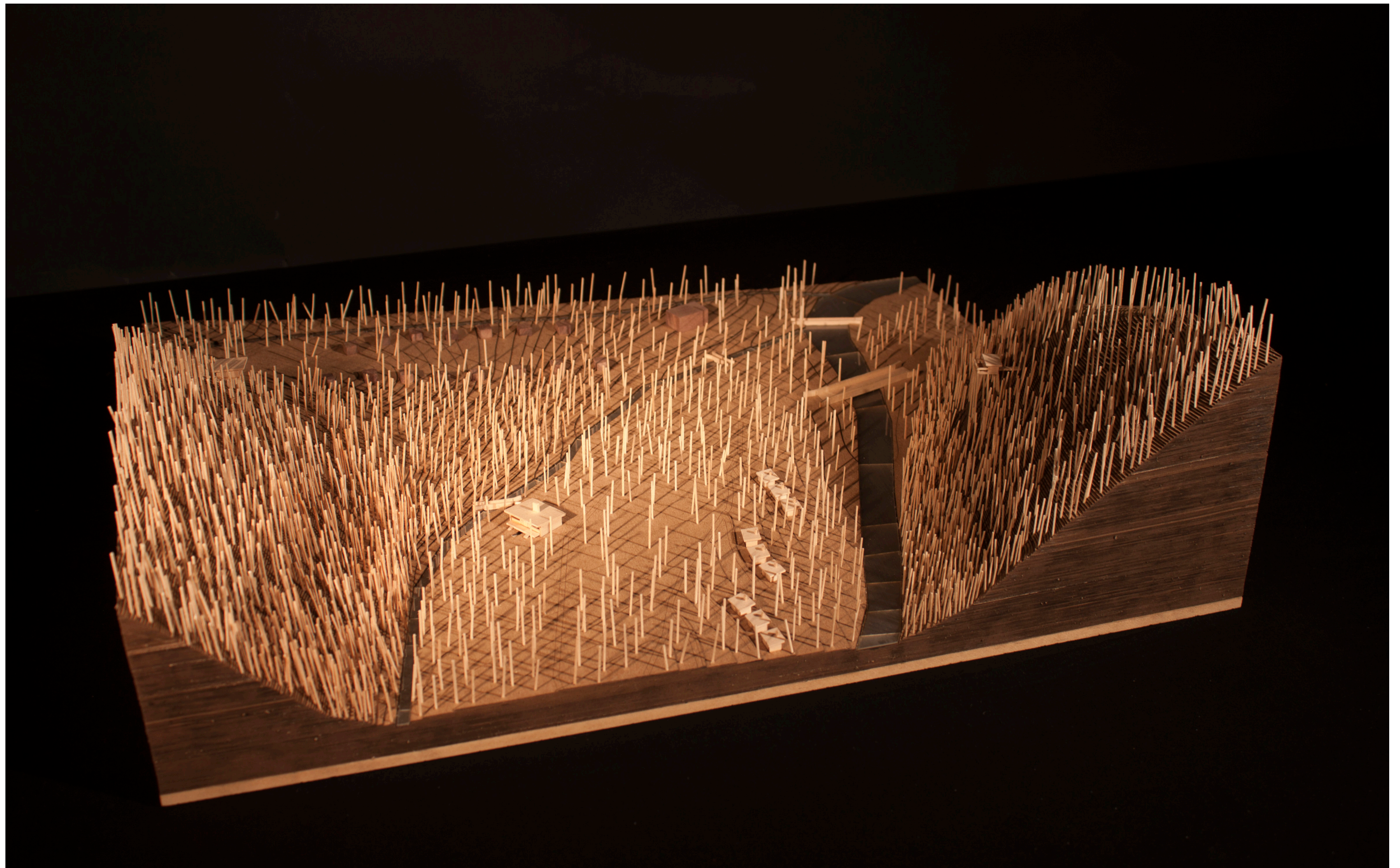


traveler_Photinus carolinus

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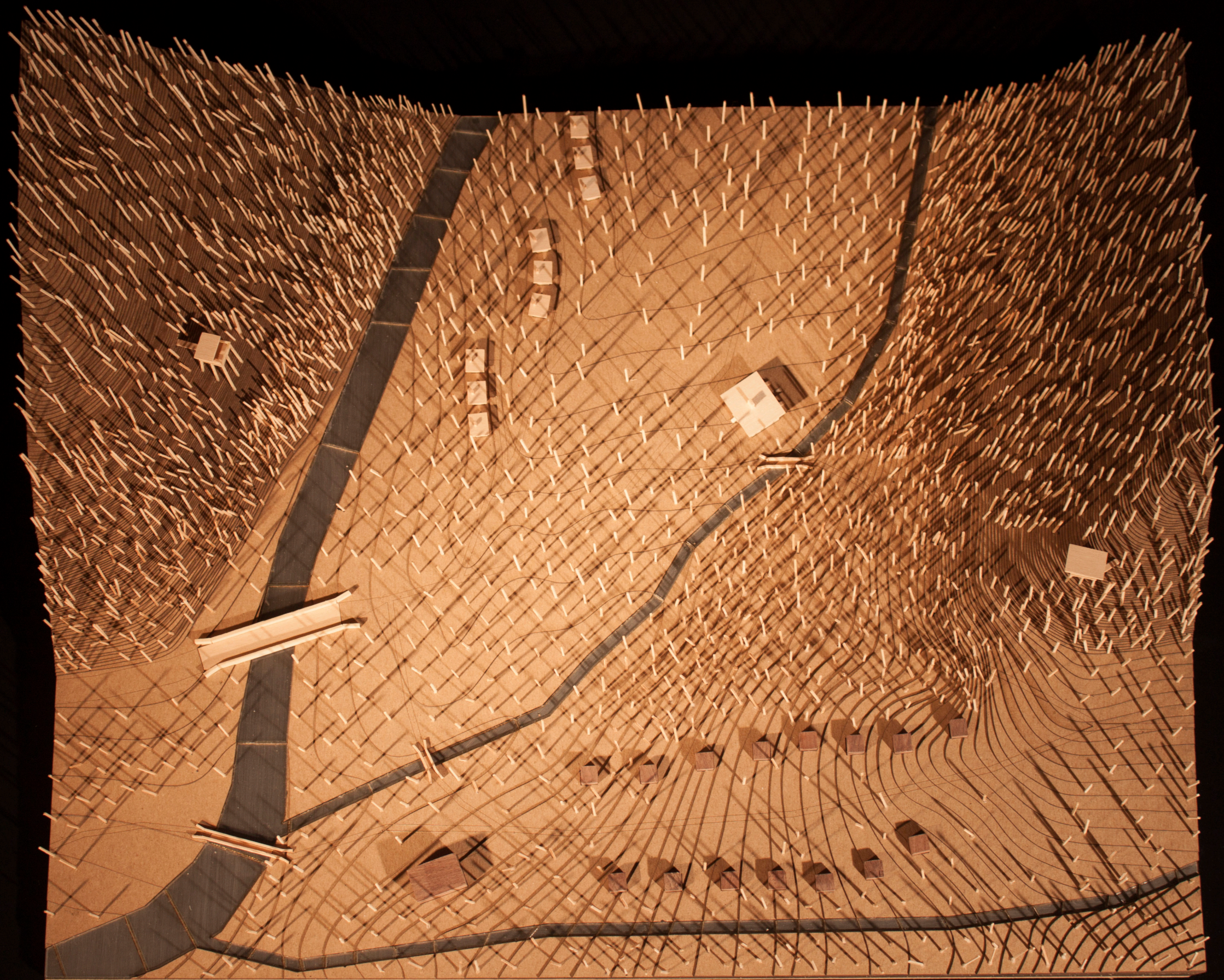












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