

# People and Place

## *Understanding Salt River Bay*

7:30am August 23rd, 2010:

*Departure from Philadelphia International Airport to take part in a five day site visit for Rutgers University Department of Landscape Architecture senior design studio. Destination: St. Croix, an 83 square mile patch of land somewhere in the Caribbean. Having never been to the Caribbean before, my knowledge and expectations of the island were based almost entirely on what you see in the movies, (i.e. white sandy beaches and sparkling blue water.) Upon arrival I was pleased to find that the movies hadn't lied, the beaches did exist, however, over the next five days, I would discover that there was much more to the island than I would have ever expected. So we began unraveling the story of St. Croix.*



## ST. CROIX: CREATING A PLACE

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Edgar Lake, president of the Society of Virgin Islands Historians provided insight for us to many aspects of the island and its people, noting the deep historical legends, history, and culture within the land that should not only be preserved but celebrated as part of its heritage. He also posed the question to us "Can we find community?...something that I thought about during the rest of our time on the island and definitely not something to be forgotten as the project progresses. Another source for historical information was Sonia Dow who we met at the Estate Whim Plantation Museum. She gave us a glimpse into the dark history of slavery in St. Croix, and how that history remains a large part of St. Croix today. Even after slavery, the emancipation of the people and the new constitution only did so much. As the US was the seventh country to claim ownership of the island, most islanders were left in a total identity crisis as to where their citizenship stood. To this day there is argument as to what constitutes being a St. Croix Native. While studying the history of St. Croix, meetings and discussions were not the only medium for gaining information. Our four hour hike with Olasee Davis was definitely a 'hands-on' look at history. We explored the northwest quadrant of the island near Maroon Ridge, traveling parts of an old slave trail up to the remains of a sugar mill, eventually following the rocky coastline around, back towards civilization. The physical experience of the hike provided us with a sense of place that no map, pictures, or video could. It also provided us with useful ethno botanical information about the island vegetation, and reminded us that a lot of what we don't see, what is off the coastline that we became so familiar with, the marine habitat, is a key part of this project as well. Moving back further in time, before slavery and before Columbus, there was still history to be found on the island. Zandy Hillis-Starr and Meredith Hardy of the NPS brought to our attention just how much history there was, which ended up being just about everywhere we walked. The Ta'ino Indians had not only survived, but were prolific residents of Salt River Bay long before Columbus showed up. The remnants of their past can be found just about anywhere in the Salt River Bay area which is why the NPS requests that much of the park area is to be left for preservation or for archeological excavations. The ancient ball court at Columbus landing is long gone, but the cemented shells and sediment that seemingly pave the area are signs of the Ta'inos existence. As we learned more and more about the history of St. Croix, we were simultaneously learning about the culture of the island as well. Simply traveling around the island in our taxi van (driven by the extremely knowledgeable Joseph Ames), spending lunchtime at local eateries, grocery shopping, even spending time at the Arawak Hotel, we were always soaking in the culture. The Chicken Shack's relaxed atmosphere where people from all walks of life could congregate for some good food was a perfect example of island culture and the 'community' that Edgar Lake spoke of. An island with a population somewhere between fifty and seventy thousand, I couldn't help the reoccurring 'small town' feeling that I got, where everybody knows everybody. We delved into the culture of the youth on the island as well when we met up with Central High School students for a kayak tour around Salt River Bay. Many students mentioned of how little there is for them to do with their free time on the island. Much to my surprise, although they live on an island, most of the students had their life vests securely fastened on the kayak tour, as they did not know how to swim. There is definitely a sense of camaraderie and community between the youth of the island, but not necessarily a strong connection to the island itself. Many expressed the desire to leave the island in the future to follow other endeavors. Edgar Lake also commented on the youth of the island, confirming some of our findings. The island seems to act as a staging area for the younger population. They remain on the island as long as they need to, but if they can, they will leave the island to follow their interests elsewhere, whatever they may be. I think this is an important item to keep in mind as we move on to the programmatic elements of the park we design, especially when thinking about the outreach and education programs that could be provided by the park. Can we use those programs to influence them, leading them in a direction that may allow them to better themselves, and possibly the island? The island, set in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean Islands, about 60 miles southeast of Puerto Rico, St. Croix is a relatively small island about 27 miles long and 7 miles across at its widest point with varying terrain and climates. Having a site on an island this size was advantageous because it allowed us to explore large portions of the island in one day, noting the transformation of the land as we drove down out of the heavily forested mountains of the west into the low lying urban area of Christiansted and then again onto the windy roads along the rocky cliffs that make up the coastline heading towards Point Udall. The populated urban areas on the island are confined to the lower, more regular terrain that makes up the southern part of the island. Christiansted is the only substantial urban area on the north side of the island taking hold at the base of the mountains along the coast. Both Frederiksted and Christiansted have 'small town' qualities, possibly because the architecture gives the sense that you went back in time one hundred fifty years. It seems this is the sense of place that most people connect with on the island, not as much the obtrusive coastal resorts or the industrial area made up by the airport, oil refinery and aluminum mining on the south side of the island. It is the old world feeling, coupled with the community feeling and local hospitality that creates such a genuine sense of place, especially for visitors. Our site, Salt River Bay, is located just northwest of Christiansted. The bay and adjacent coastline is home to a wide variety of marine life, sea grass, the ever important coral reefs. The most pronounced feature of the underwater terrain is an extraordinarily deep and sudden drop off the continental shelf not even a thousand feet offshore. It is this drastic change in the sea floor so close to shoreline generates a powerful and deadly undertow, one of the reasons that so few of the islanders know how to swim. While we were at the beach, even in chest high water, there is an ominous feeling in the back of your mind that flares up every time you feel the pull of the water coming from the deep ocean that is just out of sight. The proposed site of the wet lab station for the MREC is located on the man made lagoon that lies a few thousand feet inside the bay. That area is mostly low lying flat terrain no more than a few meters above sea level. This provides easy access to the water, which is necessary for the wet labs, but also makes them extremely vulnerable to hazardous weather. The coastline of the site is constantly transforming, the lagoon where the wet labs will be located must be periodically dredged to allow for continuing boat traffic, while the lagoon on the other side of the old hotel peninsula is filling in with sediment, allowing the coastline of that area to slowly return to its previous undisturbed form. Northeast of the wet labs, closer to the ocean the hilly terrain rises up, peaking just above 110' at the top of the grassy slope. As you move inland, the perimeter around the bay becomes much steeper and heavily vegetated, greatly limiting access. Following the bay around, the terrain remains much the same until you reach the marina, and then finally out at the western side of the park at Columbus Landing the land flattens out to the beach. Inland behind Columbus Landing, the vegetated terrain rises up, mirroring the eastern side of the park. The visitor center currently under construction lies at the top of the hill with picturesque views across the bay to the MREC site. With this outline of the island and the site, we understand the general placement, purpose, and need for the park. As we move closer to design development, we must take the historical and cultural research and combine that with details, specifications, and constraints provided by the people involved in the project. This will give us the basis to begin creating feasible solutions to this design challenge. The NPS and the Department of Interior, along with the JCMS consortium are the big stakeholders in this park. It seems they are most concerned with the construction and success of the MREC, followed by the acknowledgement and preservation of the sites historic, archeological, and cultural qualities. Zandy and Joel of the NPS both put priority on building appropriately for the site; this includes taking into account sea level rise, hurricanes, and earthquakes. They want to preserve St. Croix while still having successful tourism that the locals can be a part of with outreach and education at the forefront of their concern for park program. Keeping that in mind, there should be major efforts put forth to use renewable energy throughout the park. With sunlight and wind both being very prominent on the site, there seems little reason that the park could not be self-sustainable. The next step in that process is to look at what happens in the event of a power outage or equipment failure. What backup systems could be implemented to provide continuous power to the research center to ensure its success? Backup generators are an option, but again the challenge is to implement them on the site without ruining the site's composition. Large backup generators often run on diesel fuel, in the attempt to be as 'green' as possible, maybe a conversion to biofuel would be worth looking at, depending on how often it is estimated the generators will run each year. Fresh water will definitely be an issue on the site. At our presentation to the consortium on August 26th we were reminded how important water is to the people of the island and how scarce of a resource it is. Not only is it important to the people, but runoff due to coastal development is one of the many factors affecting the coral reefs that the MREC will be so intently studying. I think it is imperative that as designers we look to arrange buildings and spaces in the most efficient way possible, minimizing footprint and the kind of environmentally damaging earthwork that comes with building development. In proposing construction on this site, we must consider all ways to collect, conserve, and reuse water. Some of the permaculture practices explained by Nate Olive of the Virgin Islands Sustainable Farm Institute could be explored in our attempt to improve the hydrology of the site. "Slow it, spread it, sink it" is such a simple phrase, but its importance to the future of this site is immeasurable. Nate also made me recognize the stunning qualities and importance of some of the vegetation on the island. Ideas that stem from this include exhibiting some of the 'star' plants of the island, educating visitors and instilling pride in locals. Also, Thatch Palms could be showcased, their historical use in the time of the Ta'ino, and the necessity for their population on the island to be reinstated. With every design challenge we face, whether it be organizing park program, earthwork, site circulation, etc. We must look back at the research we have done, considering all of the culture, history, and natural conditions that St. Croix holds. These are only the beginning thoughts and initial reactions to our trip to St. Croix. We will continue analyze and expound upon them, creating a solid base of knowledge representing the people and place that makes up St. Croix.

This map not only represents St. Croix as geographic area, but as an expression of the people, history, and culture that make up the island as we experienced it. The map allows physical features of the island such as the topography and coral reef habitat to be expressed topographically while simultaneously using the text from our "people and place" project to reinforce the multitude of other cultural, historical, and environmental qualities of the island. Emboldened text within the map shows the key terms, people, and places that we interacted with on St. Croix and will be the guiding principles that inform the design of the Salt River Bay Site.

*“The deep contours of this culture are of deep memory”-Edgar Lake*

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Above: Meeting with Sonia Dow at the Estate Whim Plantation Museum.

Below: History of the island, cast in stone at the Whim Plantation Museum



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Above: Olasee Davis explains the history of the site inside the old sugar mill.

Below: Getting a closer look at coastal terrain and marine habitat.



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Above: Virgin Kayak Tours with the local school students

Below: Example of the relaxed atmosphere found at the Chicken Shack.

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Above: Meredith Hardy, Michael Bayer, and Karen Koltes of the NPS discuss with Bob Logan the history of Columbus landing.





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*“Culture is usually understood to be what defines place and its meaning to people. But place equally defines culture.”-Lucy R. Lippard*

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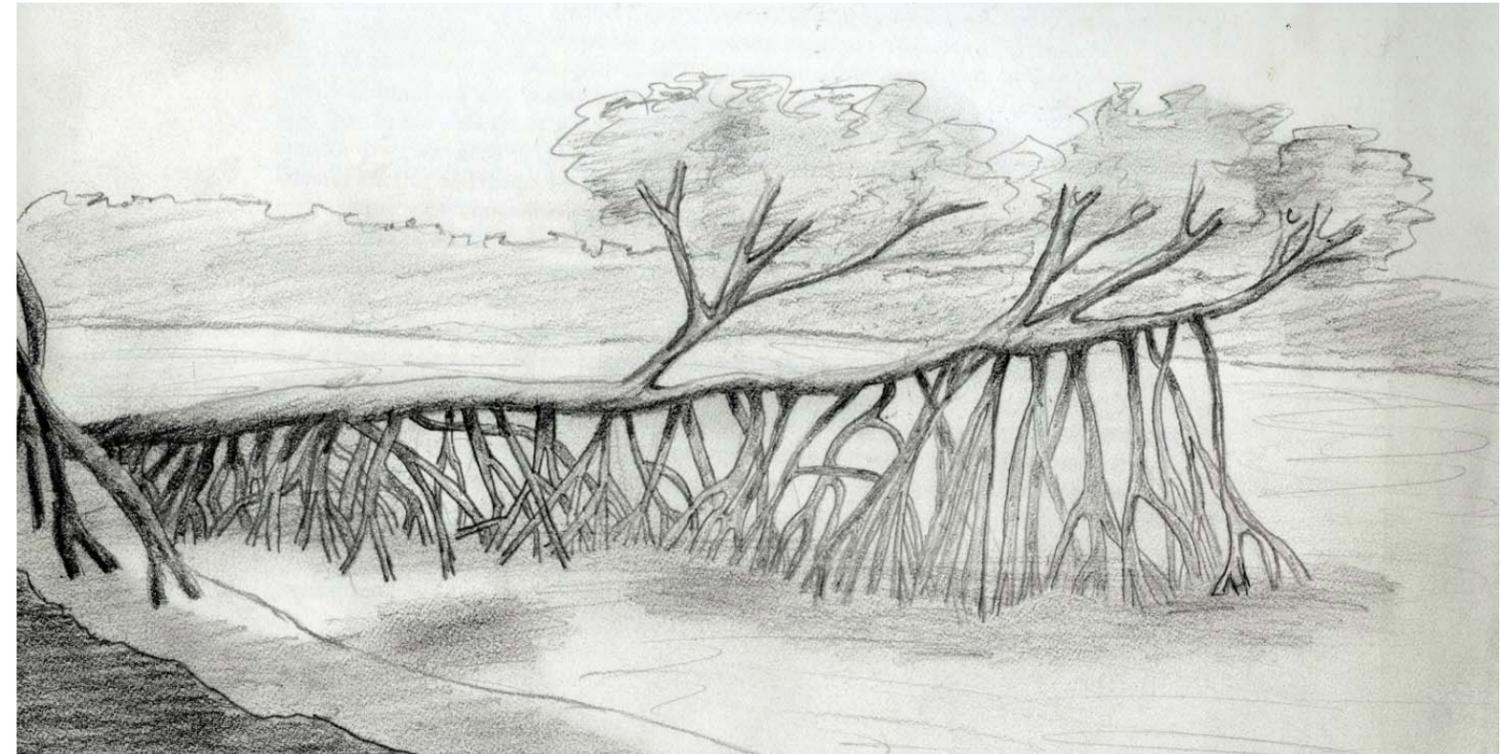
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Right: Elevation of the land rises up 110’ above the bay on the eastern side of the park



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Below: Looking from the east side of the park across the bay to the visitor center.  
 Bottom Right: Sketchbook drawing of the same view across the bay.  
 Top Right: Sketchbook drawing of the mangroves that line much of Salt River Bay.



*“The MREC concept seeks to minimize the amount of land developed for the MREC and to restore the remaining land area to more natural conditions while protecting archeological resources.”*

*- From International Institute for Sustainable Laboratories student design factsheet*



Above: Site visit to the eastern side of the park. Zandy Hillis-Starr points out important archeological areas and site constraints on an aerial image.

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*Keeping that in mind, there should be major efforts put forth to use renewable energy throughout the park. With sunlight and wind both being very prominent on the site, there seems little reason that the park could not be self-sustainable. The next step in that process is to look at what happens in the event of a power outage or equipment failure. What backup systems could be implemented to provide continuous power to the research center to ensure its success? Backup generators are an option, but again the challenge is to implement them on the site without ruining the site's composition. Large backup generators often run on diesel fuel, in the attempt to be as 'green' as possible, maybe a conversion to biofuel would be worth looking at, depending on how often it is estimated the generators will run each year.*

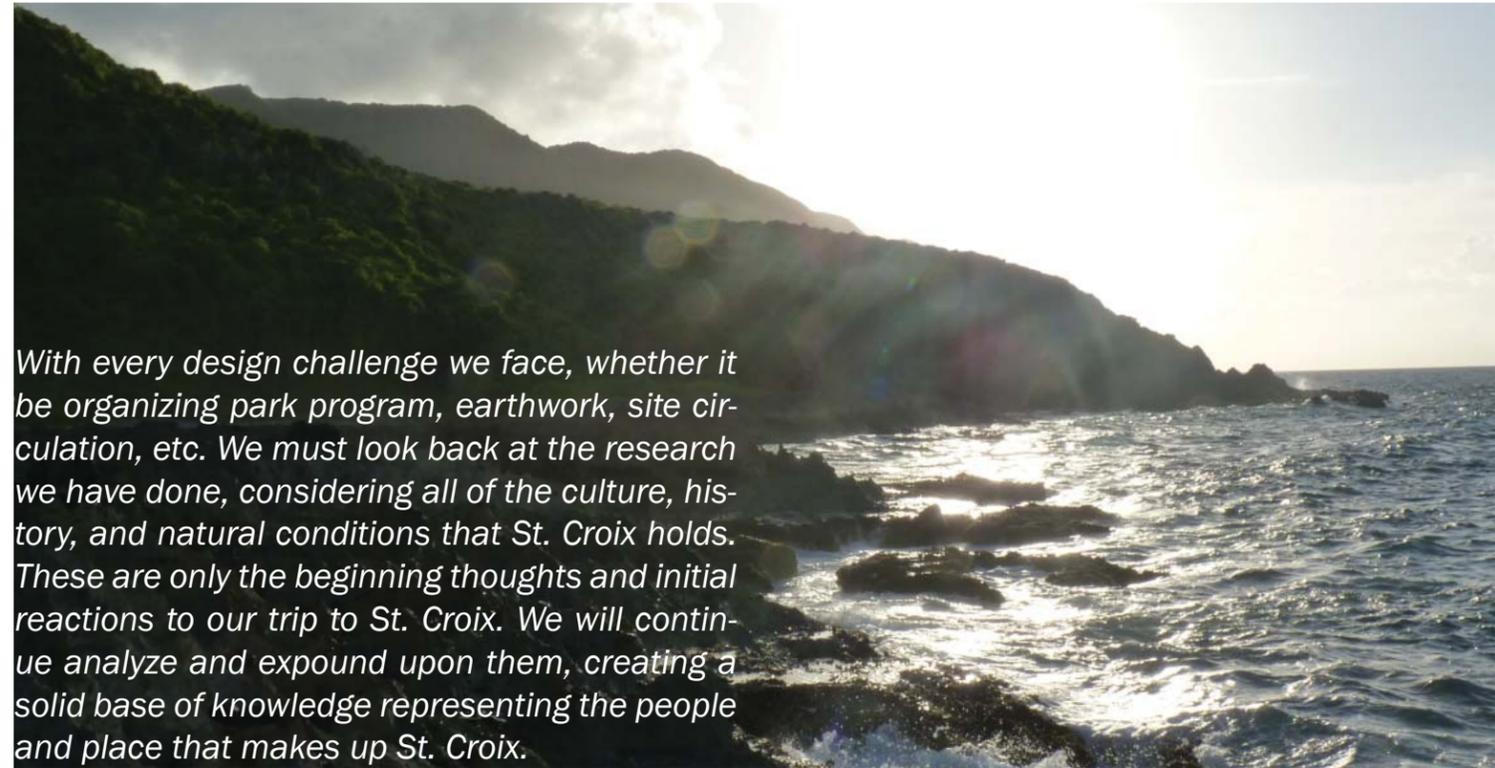
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Below: Guinea grass blowing in the wind exemplifies one of the options the site has for alternative energy production



Some of the permaculture practices explained by Nate Olive of the Virgin Islands Sustainable Farm Institute could be explored in our attempt to improve the hydrology of the site. "Slow it, spread it, sink it" is such a simple phrase, but its importance to the future of this site is immeasurable. Nate also made me recognize the stunning qualities and importance of some of the vegetation on the island. Ideas that stem from this include exhibiting some of the 'star' plants of the island, educating visitors and instilling pride in locals. Also, Thatch Palms could be showcased, their historical use in the time of the Ta'ino, and the necessity for their population on the island to be reinstated.

Below: Nate Olive educates the group on sustainable and organic agricultural practices.  
 Right: 'Pain-Killer' leaf, used to medicate a swollen bee sting sustained by Bob Logan.  
 Far Right: Nate Olive the history of the Thatch Palm as it was used by the Ta'ino



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# ECOLOGICAL MESHES

BENJAMIN ANDREWS

The site design for Salt River is the product of research, exploration, inventory, and analysis of St. Croix. In basic principle, the site needs to serve and acknowledge the many users, site requirements, and issues, not only of Salt River Bay, but in some cases of the island. The design for the Salt River site expresses the concept of creating meshes, taking multiple elements and intertwining them to create a greater fabric for the park. At the same time, program areas are also designed to incorporate multiple site issues (physical, cultural, historical, etc.) and directly engage visitors with them providing a more tangible experience.

Entering the site from the new entry road, the visitors can catch a glimpse of the wet lab building and water front area through designed breaks in the tall trees. Off the right side of the road, the maintenance building is tucked away into the vegetation of the land while remaining close to the wet labs and boat launch for convenient access. The final turn in the road brings the visitor up the hill with the main campus buildings in full view on top of sweeping vegetated terraces.

The built structures on the site are designed and arranged to “mesh” existing landform and positive pedestrian circulation while creating views, comfortable micro climates, and open space. The main building and museum are built into the land so that there is a seamless transition from the pedestrian drop off area, through both buildings and out to the park trails. All of this is done while changing over twenty five feet in elevation. Entering from the primary parking area, visitors will use the front walkway that climbs through the terraces to the west entrance of the main building. From the secondary parking lot and drop off area, visitors come through the second floor entrance on the east side of the main building that faces the wide open campus space. The education building sits off to the side of the campus space, ending at a tree-lined trail leading out to an overlook. This overlook at the edge of the campus is a quiet, private space with views towards the ocean. The dormitories for the students and researchers are located north of the museum and main building with views across the open green terrace out to the park area below.

Along the trails, park programs are structured to provide visitors with a connection to the many functions of the site. Integrated within the reforested hillside, the high point of the hill has directed views to areas of importance around the site. For example, to the north is the coral reef, to the west is Columbus Landing, to the south is the site of the old river, and to the east is Buck Island. Curved walls that help delineate the different views will also have information inscribed in them about each view, educating visitors on different historical and ecological areas while simultaneously laying them out from the best viewpoint in the park.

Moving downhill from the overlook, there are two trail options, the first trail switches back and forth along the steep topography, making the hike easier and also giving the visitors the ability to experience the proposed sediment traps that would be constructed along the slope to slow and collect runoff. This runoff would normally erode the hillside and increase the sediment load on the fragile coral reef. The second trail is for the more adventurous hiker, a steep slope that moves more directly down the west side of the hill as an option for the visitor that wants to experience the extreme terrain of the area.

Ecologically, Salt River Bay is a wealth of resources. Unfortunately, when Hurricane Hugo ripped through St. Croix in 1989, huge areas of precious mangrove were destroyed. A park like Salt River should not only be a place for people to experience natural landscapes, but to help restore and improve the landscape as well. As part of this restoration, a mangrove nursery program has been proposed on the existing salt water pond. Boardwalks act as bridges across the pond that allow for easier maintenance of the mangroves as well as access for park visitors to the nursery.

As archeology is such a huge part of this site, it is important to give the visitors a view of the archeological process, not just the remains and artifacts that come as the final product. Trails with viewing platforms are constructed along the pathway in areas where archeological digging has been designated. This provides the visitors with a greater understanding and appreciation for the site and its history.

In the low lying areas of the park, there will be a few main trails that lead through areas of higher traffic such as to the camping area, boat and kayak launches, and the mangrove nursery. There will also be unmarked exploratory trails through breaks in the taller vegetation where visitors can hike through the vegetation, exploring the area and allowing them to create a more personal experience of the park for themselves.

The water and marine life are an important part of the park that the visitors need to have access to. The beach area will serve as a kayak launch where tours can be provided to guide and educate visitors on marine history and ecology in the bay, as well as an alternate form of access to the visitor's center and Columbus Landing on the western side of the bay. A separate launch that leaves from the wet lab docks will provide boat tours across the bay and out to deeper water to allow people to experience the immense canyon, beautiful coral reefs, and transportation to Buck Island.

# 400 SCALE



# 100 SCALE



# CIRCULATION



## PEDESTRIAN

- HIKING PATHS
- LAGOON BRIDGE
- OUTDOOR SPACES
- MANGROVE NURSERY

## VEHICULAR

- PARKING
- ENTRY ROAD
- LAB ACCESS
- LAB BOAT LAUNCH
- MAINTINENCE ACCESS

# PARK USAGE



## PUBLIC

- MUSEUM
- MAIN BUILDING
- EDUCATION BUILDING

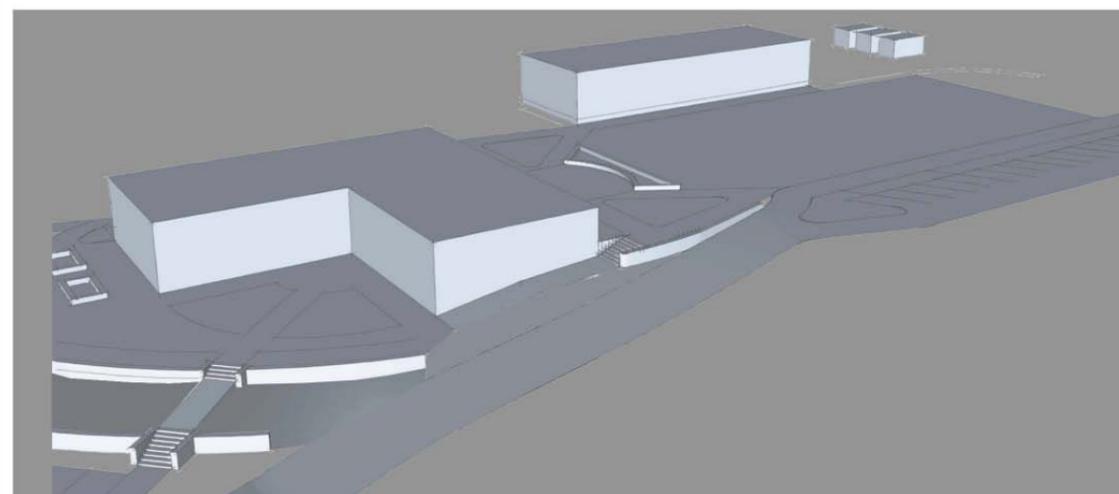
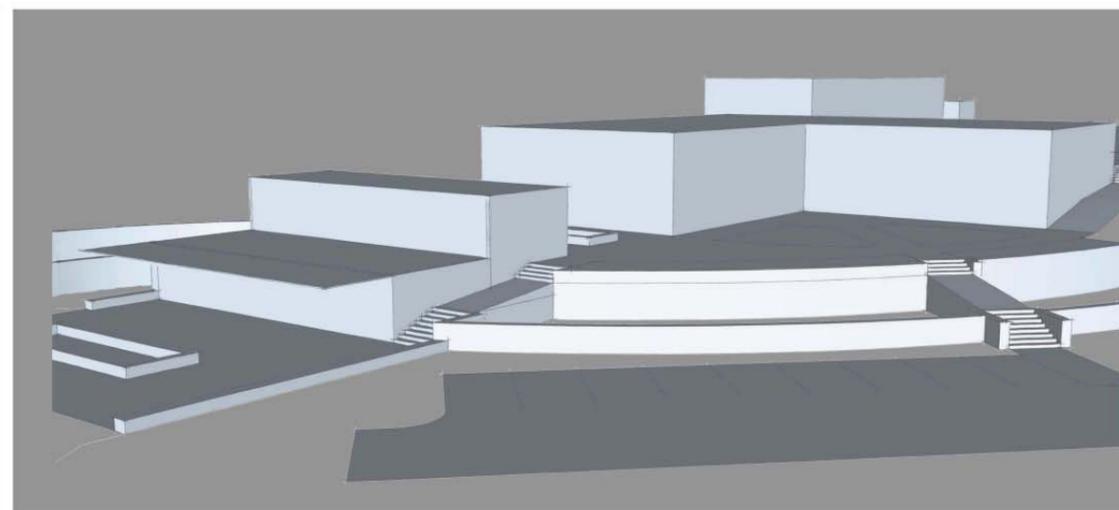
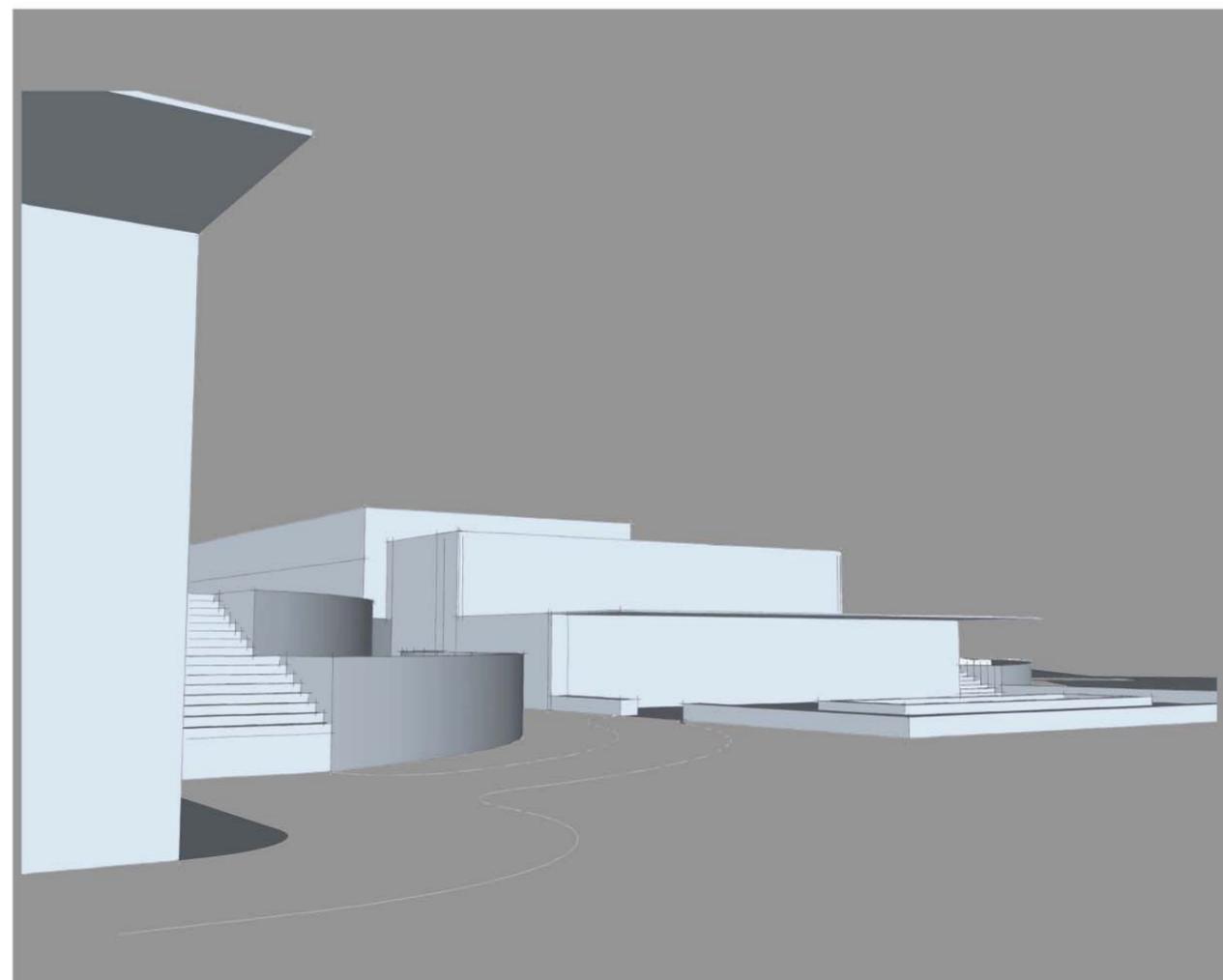
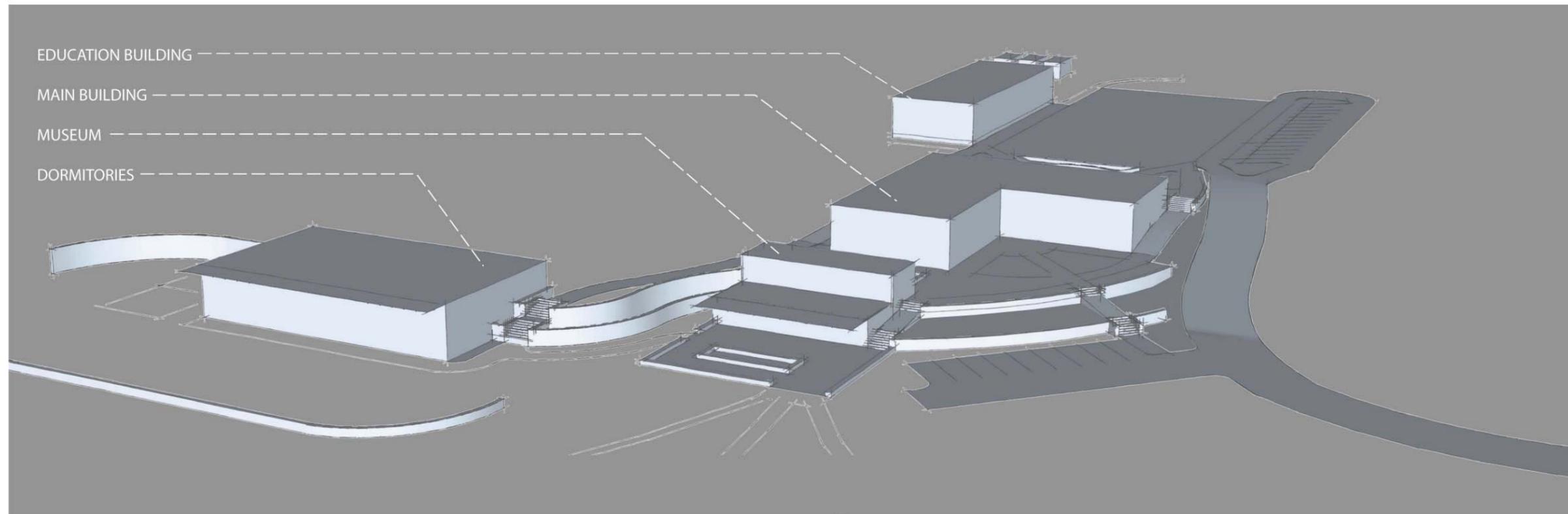
## PRIVATE

- WET LAB
- MAINTINENCE
- DORMITORIES

30 SCALE

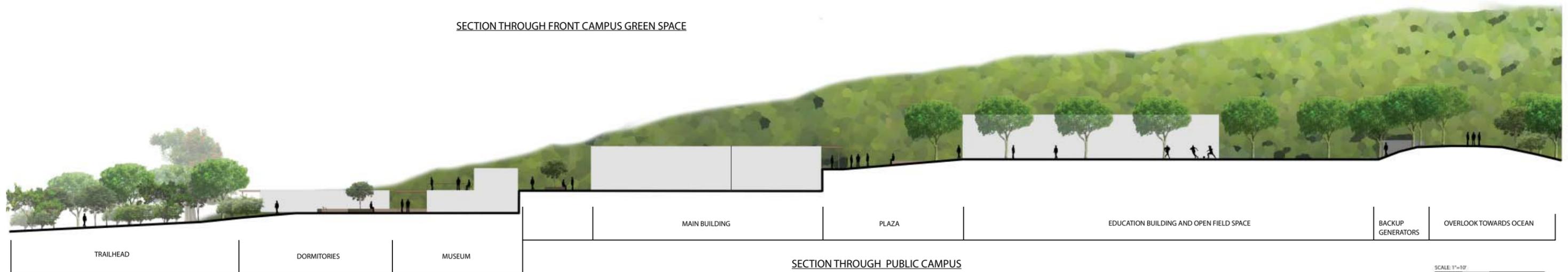


SCALE: 1"=30'  
0' 25' 150'  
NORTH





SECTION THROUGH FRONT CAMPUS GREEN SPACE



SECTION THROUGH PUBLIC CAMPUS

SCALE: 1"=10'  
0 25 50



