

Vesterheim Heritage Park

Celebrating Norwegian-American Immigration

/ Location /

Decorah, IA

/ Category /

General Design

/ Abstract /

Vesterheim Heritage Park is a curated experience linking visitors to the journey immigrants endured to establish a foothold in America. The landscape architect transformed a mown landscape with a disparate collection of historic settlement structures into a sustainable landscape that creates a stronger context in which museum staff can tell the immigration story to the public. Heritage Park provides improved access to the entire collection and more strongly links the structures to the site and the unique landscape of the Driftless region. The landscape architect led the project team through design, documentation, grant and fundraising support, interpretive development, and construction administration.

/ Narrative /

The Vesterheim Museum in Decorah, Iowa is a nationally significant cultural institution in a vibrant college town. As museum staff engaged with a series of architects to envision the future of the growing museum collections, the landscape architect remained a consistent guiding voice. Our work focused on the grounds: an underutilized two-acre mown lawn, home to an array of eleven historic buildings, many of which had been moved to the site over generations. The buildings exhibited various life-ways of the early Norwegian settlers in the area and included homes, workshops, schools, and outbuildings. The structures also portrayed a variety of construction techniques evolved from traditional Norwegian craftsmanship. Prior to this project, visitors walked across a lawn randomly between structures without the benefit of an understandable sequence or planned experience. Routes to historic buildings were not ADA accessible, preventing

an aging membership from visiting, and views of adjacent commercial back of house structures competed with the grounds.

The landscape architect worked with museum staff to optimize the experience of moving through the collection with minimal relocation of the fragile historic structures. Within the circulation, program rooms were designed to be used for tour groups, during museum festivals and for folk art classes to showcase skills such as glass blowing, wood carving and wool dying. An accessible route was developed linking the site across a significant grade change. An informal performance space was added for museum programming and linked to the main grounds with a new stair, both accented with hand carved posts and forged iron railings.

While the museum is located on a vibrant downtown main street, the side entrance was difficult to locate. The landscape architects designed a welcoming entrance terrace with café seating, gardens and program cueing areas. One historic building which blocked the view into the expansive grounds from the museum entrance was relocated. Visitors are welcomed by an experiential interpretive installation reflecting on the daring transatlantic crossing. A limestone terrace depicts the size and shape of the original ships used by immigrants to cross the Atlantic. The 'ship' terrace is constructed with regionally sourced limestone and installed as permeable paving. This sustainable strategy solved a stormwater drainage issue which had plagued the museum for years. Sails were installed to draw attention to the museum, draw visitors into the site and further interpret the experience of this brave journey.

At the historic mill which encloses the north end of the grounds, museum staff longed for a large space that would facilitate folk art classes such as wood peg construction and timber carving techniques. The courtyard is framed on three sides by existing structures and a shade structure to frame the fourth. A heritage garden was designed with a deer proof yet visually accessible fence for growing flowers, vegetables and plants used for dyes. The regional limestone paving was repeated in this space to maintain continuity within the site.

Collaboration with museum folk art instructors produced several installations including carved wooden gateways, railing posts and signs and a wooden peg shade structure. The collaborative design process involved sketches by the landscape architect and scale models produced and shared by carvers. Local steel fabricators forged handrails and custom brackets for the project.

The addition of artisan produced carved wood posts, signs and gateways, pegged wood structure and railings to the custom benches, cut limestone amphitheater and pavers merge the notions of traditional and contemporary Scandinavian art.

The transformation of the site from a mown lawn to a native landscape has a dual purpose. Plantings provide an interpretive experience to visitors about the native woods and prairie plants of Iowa and the experience of early immigrants; and the landscape frames the narrow site, screening unwanted adjacent views. Museum staff and visitors experience the changed landscape but many sustainable initiatives are invisible. Aggregate storage areas below permeable limestone paving and a rain garden treat stormwater, and soil throughout the site was transformed through soil quality restoration practices. These sustainable initiatives qualified for significant grant funding through the State of Iowa Water Quality Initiative.

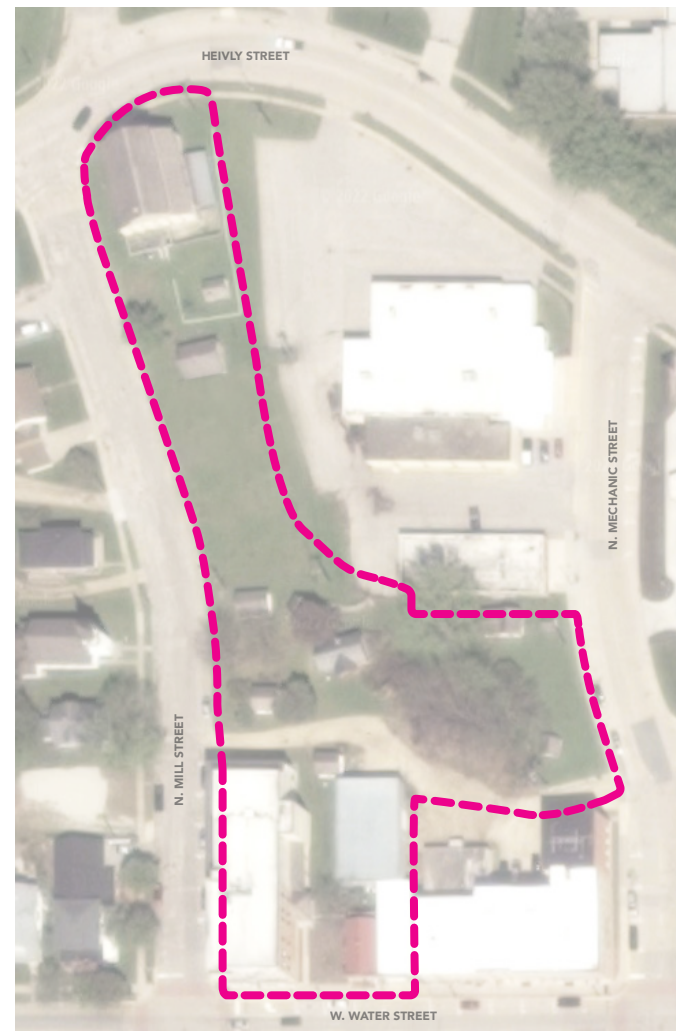
The transformed museum grounds have allowed the institution to utilize its property for expanded programming and events. Outdoor classes and gatherings now have dedicated space with access to utilities, visitors have an understandable and accessible route to learn about the immigration experience, and the community has a green space open to the public year-round in the heart of the downtown district. Heritage Park is a celebration of immigrants and the struggle to become established in a new world.



Vesterheim Heritage Park

Celebrating Norwegian-American Immigration

A curated experience linking visitors to the journey immigrants endured to establish a foothold in America.



Two acres of mown turf are transformed to create a landscape of outdoor rooms, a framework for artisan creations, places of respite and learning opportunities.

plan overview





**from concept
to reality**

From concept to reality, the landscape architects knit a series of disparate historic buildings together, creating program space and an understandable museum experience.

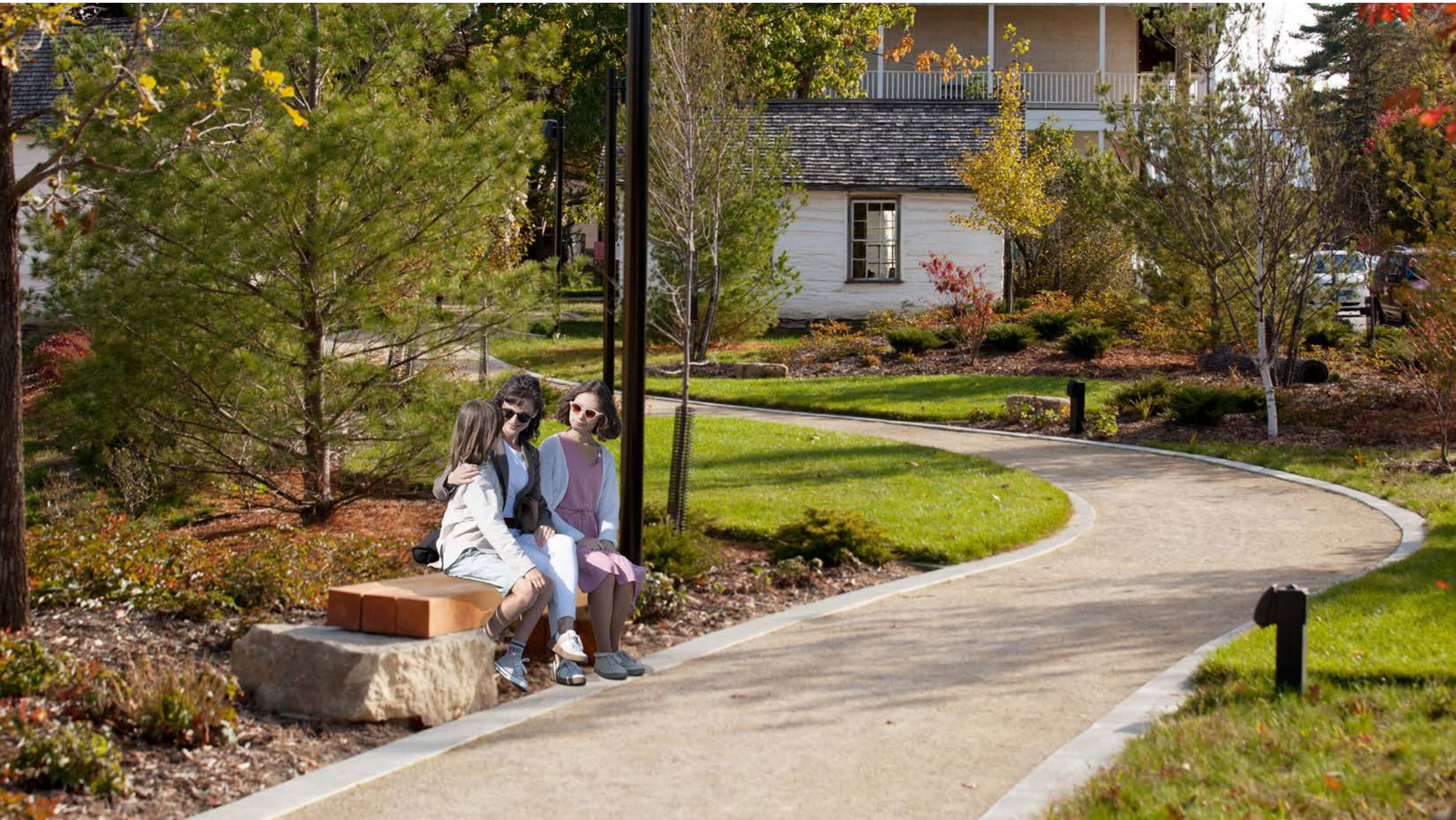


transformation of a landscape

The grounds were transformed from a mown lawn to a native woodland landscape dotted with program spaces. The woodland provides an educational opportunity and frames the narrow space, screening unwanted views. A pathway links the exterior collection and provides accessibility. The grounds are public and complement the adjacent vibrant downtown district.

creating a flow

The sinuous walk guides visitors through the exterior collection, frames views and screens adjacent commercial development. Small turf areas are available for programming and display, custom benches made from regional materials provide areas of pause in the landscape.



linking the landscape

The museum grounds were home to varied styles of historic architecture and significant topographical change. A main pathway links the structures and provides interpretation. To prevent damage to structures, the design was developed with only one historic building relocated.





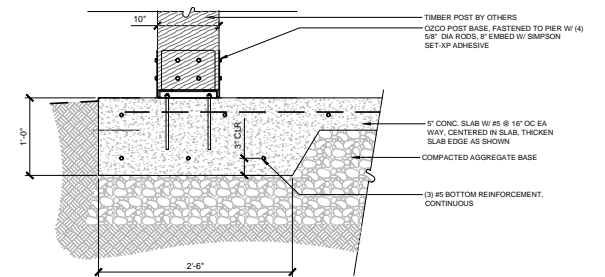
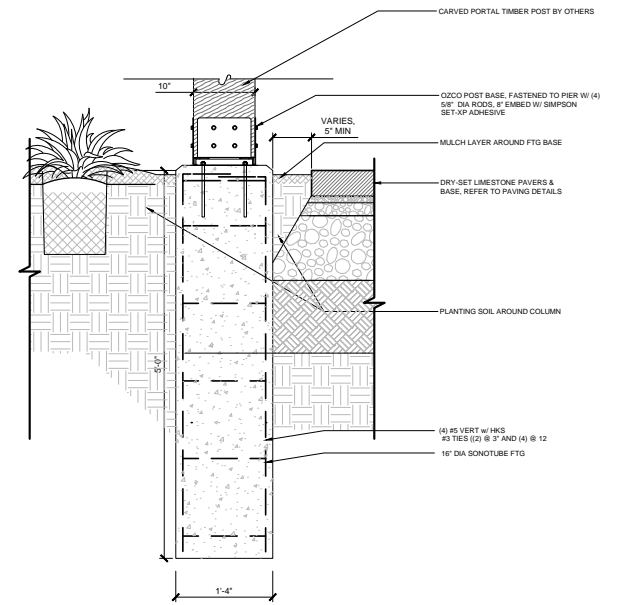
The landscape architects collaborated with museum folk school carvers to create designs for hand hewn wood carvings which warm the landscape throughout the site. After initial sketches were created for the carver, scale models were delivered to the LA's office.

**collaboration
with artisans**



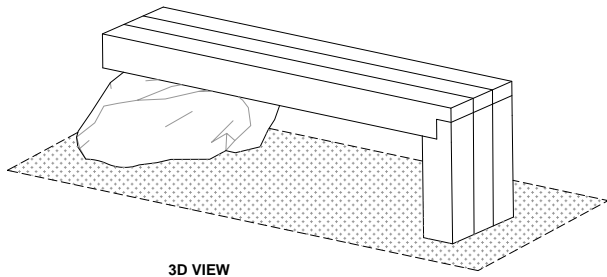
crafted gateways

The narrow site is bounded by city streets. To create edges and celebrate the craftsmanship of the museum folk school, the landscape architects collaborated with artisans to construct several gateways into the grounds.

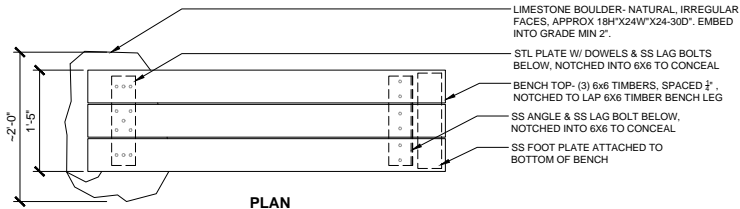


Integrating work by museum folk school artisans was key to the project, and connects the beauty of traditional and contemporary design. The Mill terrace, designed for classes and workshops, includes a deer-proof garden for growing heritage vegetables, flowers and plants used for dying wool.

**modern meets
traditional**



3D VIEW



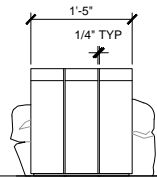
LIMESTONE BOULDER- NATURAL, IRREGULAR
FACES, APPROX 18H"x24W"x24-30D". EMBED
INTO GRADE MIN 2".

STL PLATE W/ DOWELS & SS LAG BOLTS
BELOW, NOTCHED INTO 6X6 TO CONCEAL

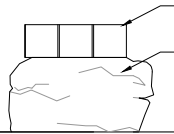
BENCH TOP- (3) 6X6 TIMBERS, SPACED 1"
NOTCHED TO LAP 6X6 TIMBER BENCH LEG

SS ANGLE & SS LAG BOLT BELOW,
NOTCHED INTO 6X6 TO CONCEAL

SS FOOT PLATE ATTACHED TO
BOTTOM OF BENCH



ELEVATION
TIMBER END



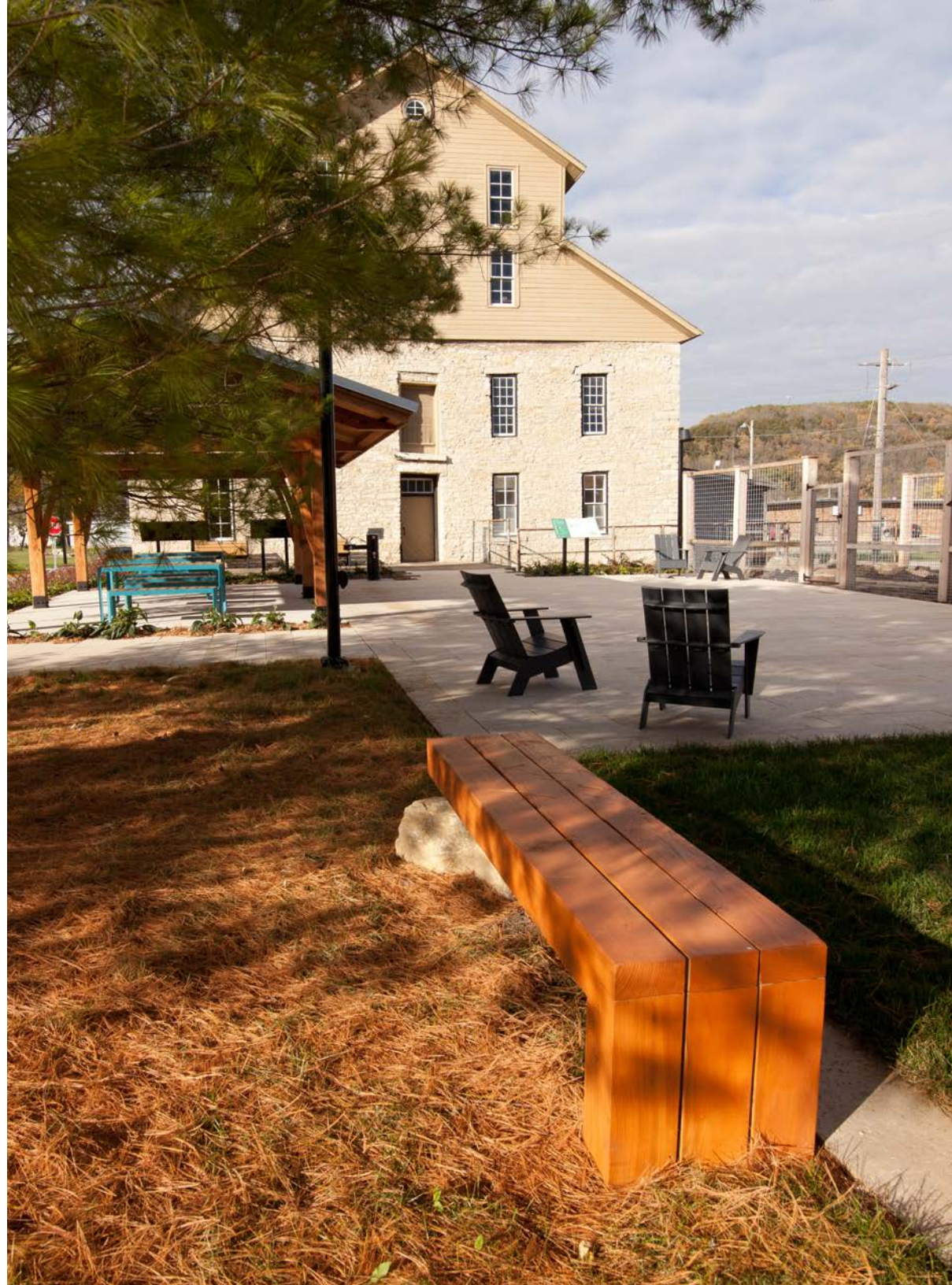
ELEVATION
BOULDER END

BENCH TOP- (3) 6X6 TIMBERS, SPACED 1"
NOTCHED TO LAP 6X6 TIMBER BENCH LEG

LIMESTONE BOULDER- NATURAL, IRREGULAR
FACES, APPROX 18H"x24W"x24-30D". EMBED
INTO GRADE MIN 2".

Natural elements of the landscape are incorporated into modern benches. These elements tie the woodland landscape and historic site to the contemporary uses of the space.

**innovative
details**





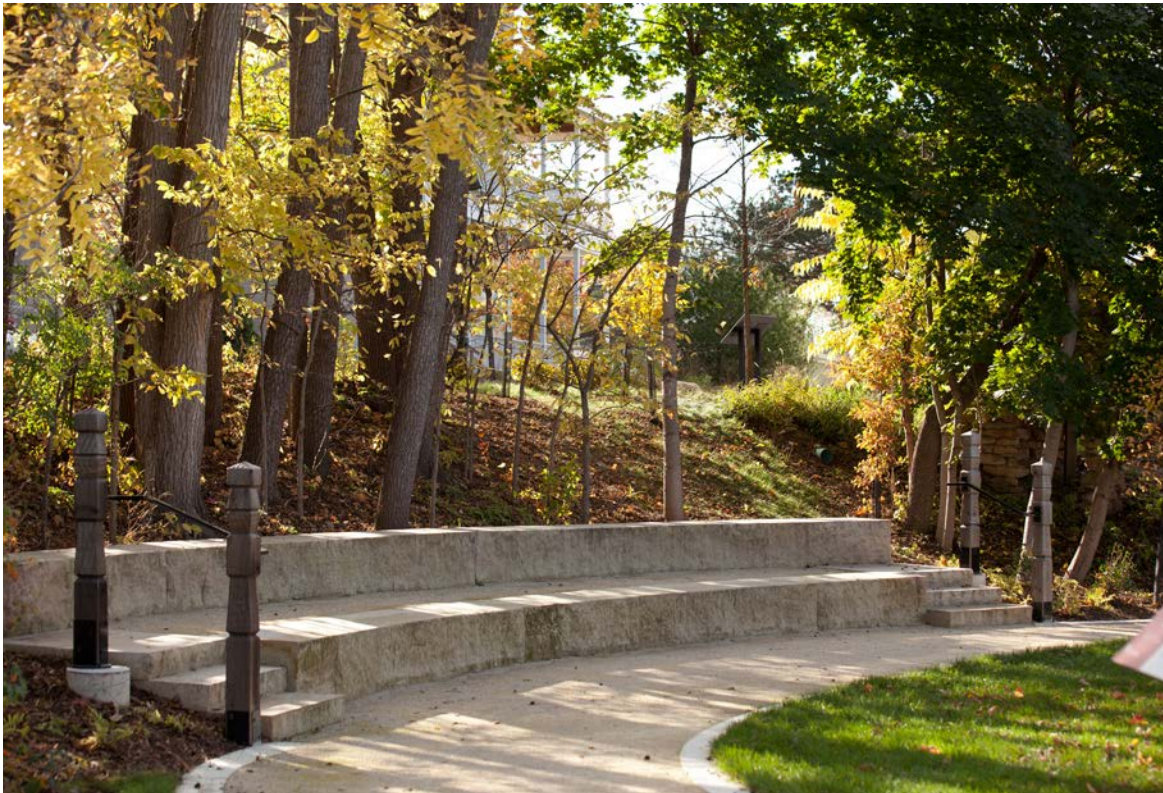
double duty on materials

The highly textured and varied patterns found in the historic structures were complemented by the modern use of cut limestone paving, installed as a permeable surface to provide subsurface infiltration for stormwater.



craft combined with sustainability

Regional materials were used throughout the site for paths, stairs, walkways and walls. While folk school staff carved wood elements, local fabricators sculpted railings and other site furnishings.





resilient + sustainable plantings

Diverse native shrubs, and pollinator-friendly perennial gardens frame small programmable turf spaces. In connecting spaces, no-mow turf and sedges were planted to further sustainable practices.



Formerly blocked by a structure, this corridor draws visitors into the grounds from the museum entrance and main street. The limestone terrace interprets the size of the ship which carried the first Norwegian immigrants across the Atlantic, and functions as permeable paving. The sails also function as a glowing gateway beacon.

**welcoming
space**





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