



Rest Stop Vending Machine, California (2033)

Citation

Cascio, Jacob Anthony. 2022. Rest Stop Vending Machine, California (2033). Master's thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Design.

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Rest Stop Vending Machine, California (2033)

**A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Landscape Architecture,
Harvard University Graduate School of Design**

by

Jacob Cascio

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

May 2022

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Jacob Cascio


Danielle Choi

*Jacob Cascio
Advised by Danielle Choi*

Rest

Stop

Vending Machine,

California (2033)



In the federal highway rest stop there are parking spots, picnic benches, a shade structure or two, and an irrigated lawn. There is also a vending machine. Vending machines are, by law, the only commercial activity allowed in rest stops; commercial activity is not allowed because it is opposed to rest. This thesis indexes rest to aesthetic sensibilities like comfort and peace, but above all to beauty. The project emancipates beauty from the relational or performance imperatives typically framed in landscape discourse; the apprehension of a beautiful landscape is instead immediate, discrete, and perceptible. The vending machine is the apparatus to distribute beauty, while the rest stop's material components—water, toilets, walls, cars, and plants, both living and synthetic—are redirected to create vignettted experiences of the beautiful, in which dissonance is an essential trait. Press a button and encounter beauty!

Thank you to my advisor, Danielle Choi, whose guidance and patience brought this work forward. I value your sensibility, your language, your insight, and your willingness and encouragement to go somewhere weird.

Thank you to my family and my dear friends. I hold you so close.

Thank you California - I can't wait to come back to you.



Rest stop along a Federal Interstate. Courtesy of restareahistory.org

This is a rest stop along a federal interstate.



**Coalinga-
Avenal
Rest Area**



Here's one I'll redesign: the Coalinga-Avenal Rest Area along I-5 in California's Central Valley.

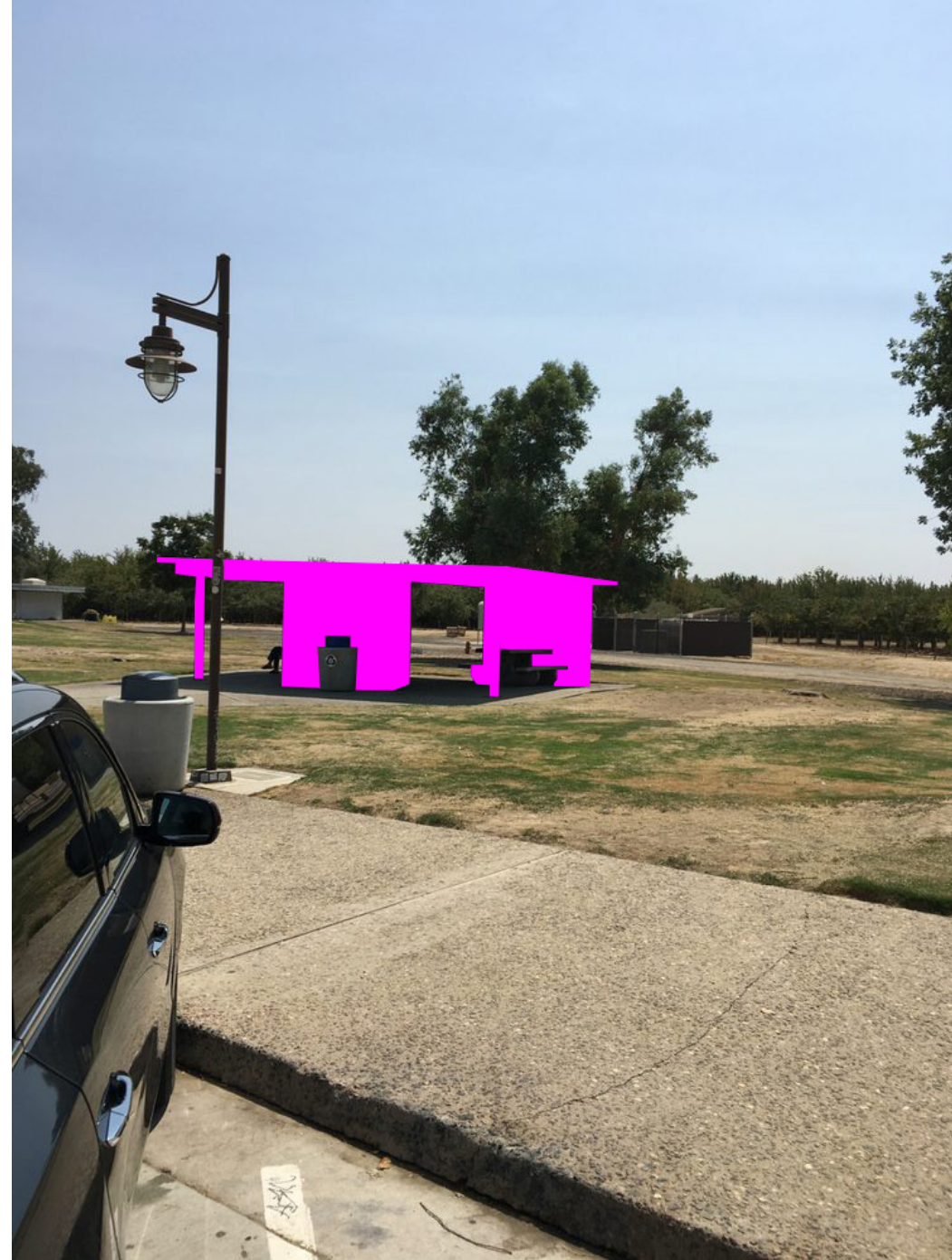


Photo by Fred T. for Yelp, August 2021.

You will encounter specific and limited things in a rest stop – these are defined by federal law. There will be a picnic area with a shade structure...

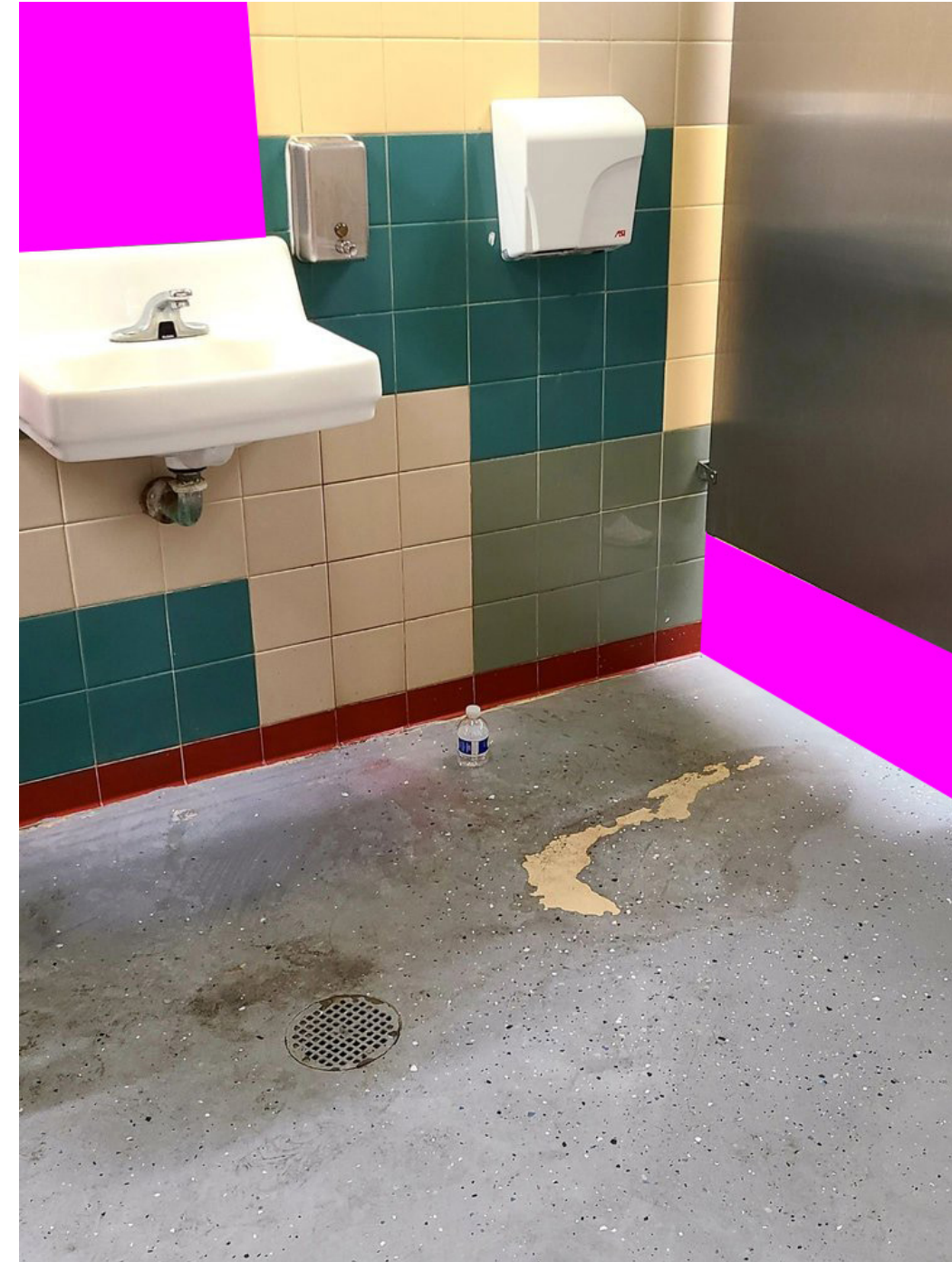


Photo by Leslie D. for Yelp, October 2020.

restrooms...



Photo by Jo Anna S. for Yelp, January 2016.

parking spaces, for both passenger vehicles and semi-trucks...



Photo by Daniel C. for Yelp, October 2020.

pet areas...



My dad operating a Coalinga-Avenal rest stop vending machine.

and vending machines. Vending machines are, by law, the only commercial activity allowed in rest stops. Commercial activity is not allowed because it is opposed to rest, and here the state recognizes that fact. I'm going to appropriate this space. The vending machine is my way in.

I. California (2033)

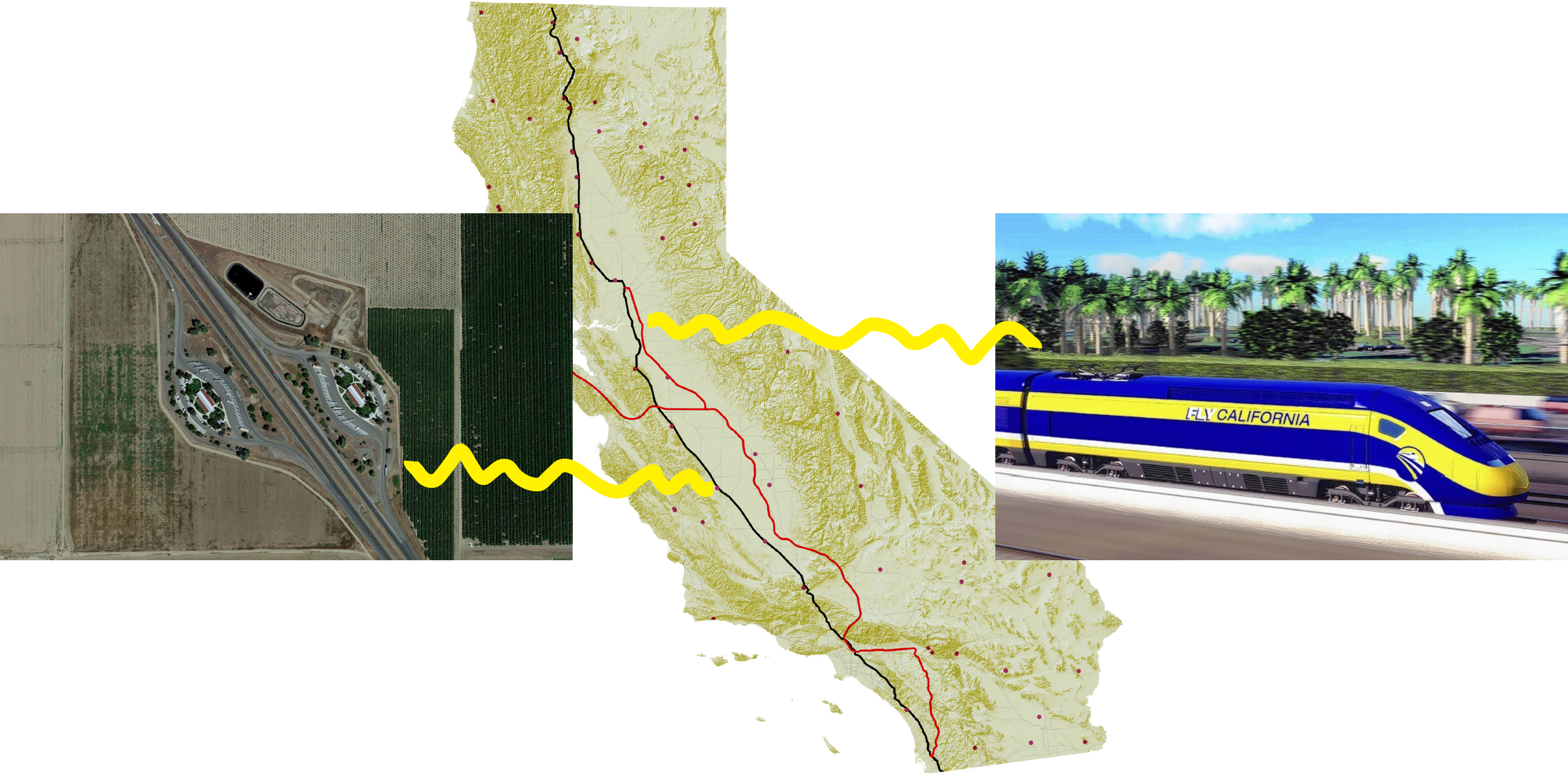
II. Beauty

III. Vending Machine



Courtesy of California High-Speed Rail Authority

2033 is the projected first-phase for a proposed high-speed rail. It will run here on the red line along the eastern side of the Central Valley.



My rest stop is along Interstate-5, shown here in red. The train will demand a new relationship with the highway rest stop, and an opportunity to redesign arrises.



These two transportation corridors will stare at each other from either side of the valley, while between them runs one of the world's largest constructed water transportation systems. The southern San Joaquin Valley is not fertile, but rather a semi-arid desert, and this massive irrigation network does the cultural work of advancing an idea of California Providence. These are three very big infrastructures that run the length of the valley. What do we miss when traveling at the speed of these systems?

I. California (2033)

II. Beauty

III. Vending Machine

“A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about... A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea...”

*Susan Sontag
“Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964)*

In “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag writes, “A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about... a sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea.”

We sometimes talk about sensually experiencing a designed space, but I still can’t grasp the limits of that conversation; though Sontag lays out the challenge, I’d like to try and talk about it. I’m beginning to draw contours here around my own project, where I’m locating a conflict between sense and, to use a landscape term that maps nicely onto Sontag’s quote, systems.



Tiffany Lamp

Sontag, though, is talking about camp, that sensibility which worships the artificial, the overly-wrought, the synthetically decorative. The camp sensibility dethrones seriousness. Sontag describes the Tiffany Lamp, here in the form of a palm tree, as an example of camp, as it so ornately misses its mark.



Washingtonia robusta

If camp is necessarily synthetic, then beauty flits between the synthetic and the natural at its own discretion. A palm tree might be beautiful, just as a painting of a palm tree might possess the quality of beauty. What gives beauty this flexibility?

CAMP



*Camp
Sensibility*

Let me pause here and clarify a few terms. Sontag describes camp as a sensibility, which we should consider distinct from an aesthetic property like beauty. A sensibility is quite like a sensitivity, an openness or ability to receive and respond to particular sensory qualities. In this way, a sensibility is perhaps best understood as a component of an aesthetic property; a lens that is required to make certain properties legible. Camp, for example, is finite; something either is or is not camp, and it takes the camp sensibility to see it. In designing for beauty, which is an aesthetic property available that is available to everyone, where does sensibility fit in?



I'll frame the design project as a kind of sensibility, a lens that is turned towards an aesthetic property like beauty and so is better able to facilitate its apprehension; the design helps make beauty legible.



Sustaining beauty. The performance of appearance A manifesto in three parts

Elizabeth K. Meyer, University of Virginia School of Architecture

Abstract

Sustainable landscape design is generally understood in relation to three principles - ecological health, social justice and economic prosperity. Rarely do aesthetics factor into sustainability discourse, except in negative asides conflating the visible with the aesthetic and rendering both superfluous.

This article examines the role of beauty and aesthetics in a sustainability agenda. It argues that it will take more than ecologically regenerative designs for culture to be sustainable, that what is needed are designed landscapes that provoke those who experience them to become more aware of how their actions affect the environment, and to care enough to make changes. This involves considering the role of aesthetic environmental experiences, such as beauty, in re-centering human consciousness from an egocentric to a more bio-centric perspective. This argument in the form of a manifesto is inspired by American landscape architects whose work is not usually understood as contributing to sustainable design.

Aesthetics / Beauty / Ethics / Performance / Sustainability

Part one: Introduction

Landscape design practitioners and theorists understandably focus on the ecological aspects of sustainability; this seems reasonable given that the site and medium of our work is landscape - the actual topography, soil, water, plants, and space - and imperative given the growing consensus about the impact of human action on the global environment. Beauty is rarely discussed in the discourse of landscape design sustainability and, if it is, dismissed as a superficial concern. What is the value of the visual and formal when human, regional and global health are at stake? Doesn't the discussion of the beautiful trivialize landscape architecture as ornamentation, as the superficial practice of gardening?

I find American landscape architecture's limited discussion of sustainability curious, especially given the profession's history. In the nineteenth century one of its leading practitioners, Frederick Law Olmsted - a former farmer, journalist, and director of the US Sanitary Commission during our Civil War - came to make urban public parks and landscapes because of their perceived agency as spaces of urban social and environmental reform. For Olmsted, parks performed in two ways: they were environmental cleaning machines, open spaces of healthy sunlight, well-drained soils, and shady groves of trees reducing temperatures, absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. Landscape architectural works such as urban parks, promenades and boulevards, public gardens, parkways and suburban residential enclaves were cultural products that responded to and then altered the processes of modernization and urbanization.

Meyer, Elizabeth K. "Sustaining Beauty: The Performance of Appearance." from *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (2008). pp. 6-23.



ELIZABETH K. MEYER

Beyond "Sustaining Beauty"

MUSINGS ON A MANIFESTO

In 2007, I had grown dissatisfied with the status of sustainable design discourse in landscape architecture. By adding an additional dimension to the "three Es" of sustainability—environment, economy, and equity—I asserted that sustainable design needed to be more than a technical response to improving ecosystem function or increasing access to public space. From Vitruvius to modern landscape architects Charles Eliot and Jens Jensen, designers have written of the inextricability of aesthetics, function, and structure. Motivated by that knowledge, I called for (re)inserting aesthetics into the sustainability triad (see list below).¹

After writing this declaration of my values

and beliefs in manifesto form, I continued to expand my knowledge of sustainability discourse in readings and discussions with my students, as well as through public lectures.² Two journals, one academic and one professional, published the manifesto, thus increasing the range and type of reader (Meyer 2008a and 2008b).³ Their collective responses were startling. In the twenty-five years I have been lecturing and writing about contemporary landscape design topics, no other publication has touched such a strong chord, elicited so many varied responses, or reached such a broad audience.

Therefore I want to share my musings about the values, often implicit, behind the

Meyer, Elizabeth K. "Beyond 'Sustaining Beauty:' Musings on a Manifesto." from *Values in Landscape Architecture and Environmental Design: Finding Center in Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Elen Deming. Louisiana State University Press, 2015.

In landscape discourse I most immediately align beauty with Elizabeth Meyer. In 2007 Meyer wrote a manifesto on reinserting beauty into the critical reception of landscape architecture. That manifesto, though, regards beauty if and only if it is attached to a relational process like sustainability. She amended this manifesto in 2015, detaching it a bit from the performance imperative. I appreciate in the amendment how she makes space for synthetic elements, and how she describes dissonance as an essential part of the beautiful. We see that clearest in the examples used in each manifesto...



2007



George Hargreaves Associates, Crissy Field Park (1999)



2015

Taylor Cullity Lethlean Landscape Architects, Central Sand Garden (2012)

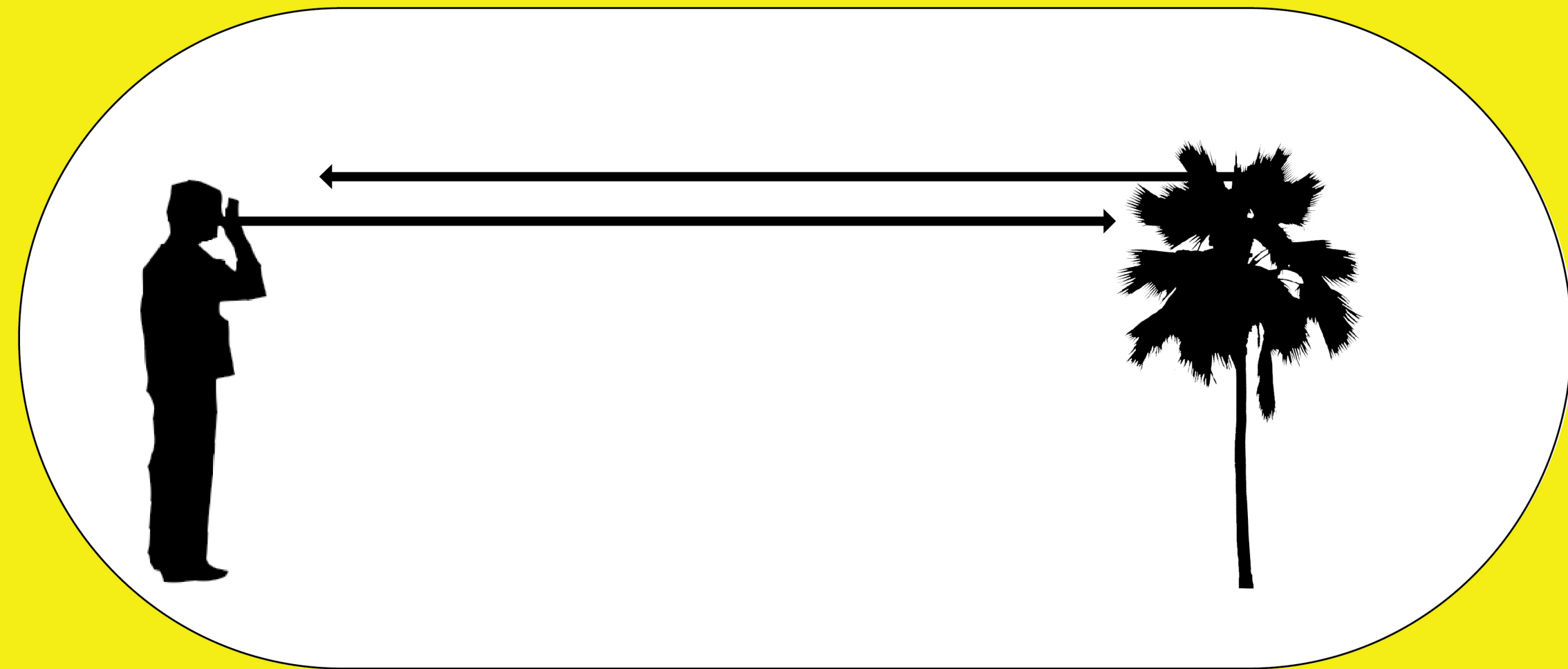
where first she's attached it to a performing wetland, and later to a highly synthetic botanical garden, where sensory dissonance is a driving design interest. For example, we see dissonance here in the color contrast between the gravel and the planting, and in the unnaturally-shaped plant beds.

Yet Meyer still makes beauty contingent to links between "design, ethos, politics, socio-ecological networks, and bodies." Those are of course valid and important values, but their contingency is wrong for beauty. If we are to experience a landscape only in terms of its relational capacity – as sustainable or networked – I wonder the degree to which we are able to aesthetically engage at all, as the mind constantly searches for a connective thread and ignores what is immediately, discretely, and particularly perceptible. I do not, in this project, value landscape systems like sustainability because I think they themselves are beautiful; I rather engage with systems only insofar as they are a means to beauty.



Here I look to Elaine Scarry, who teaches at Harvard in the English Department and writes on beauty. She uses the example of the palm tree, of one day apprehending its beauty when she'd previously thought it was not beautiful.

Elaine Scarry by David Levine, for the *New York Review of Books*



If this is Meyer's mode of apprehending beauty, where primacy is given to the flow of energy between objects, and where the objects themselves are flattened and made almost interchangeable...



Scarry gives primacy to beauty on its own terms. Beauty introduces the possibility of self error, and in the same thrust propels us toward truth. It is a radical decentering act where we are placed adjacent to something or someone else. From this decentering, beauty then demands care, attention, and creation - or, perhaps more correctly, re-creation, as we attempt to bring about what we find beautiful in new forms.

At the same time, beauty asks us to look back to find precedent. In the case of the palm tree a precedent may mean another palm tree, but it could also mean the recollection of dappled sunlight through some slivered surface, or maybe the silver tinsel on a cheerleader's pompom bouncing light in a different, but not altogether dissimilar way. Scarry's beauty moves between objects and moments that have no scalable relationship; they do not fit together in any other way besides they are imbued with the same aesthetic quality. Relationship here is not bound by a material or sequence or flow, but rather to an aesthetic pleasure.



Ray and Charles Eames' "Solar Do-Nothing Machine"

As a design sensibility, I'll be borrowing from the Eames' "Solar Do-Nothing Machine." Solar power is harnessed to make a bunch of shiny swirly bits move. In this rejection of a "productive" output, there is immense room to play. Aesthetic pleasure is infused into this system.

I. California (2033)

II. Beauty

III. Vending Machine



Evaporative Sewage Treatment Ponds

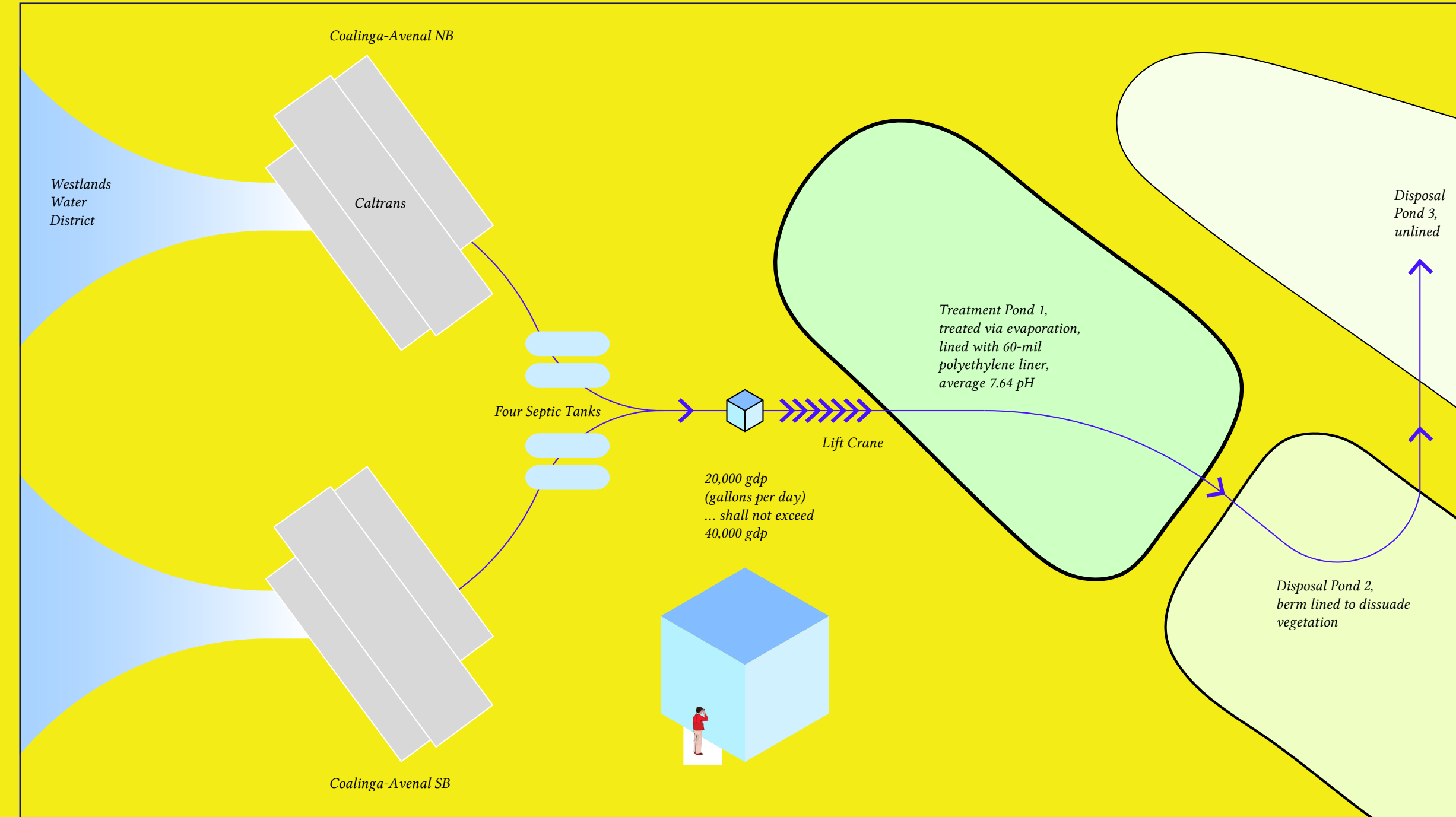
Parking

Comfort Station

Coalinga-Avenal Rest Area



This is the site of my design, the Coalinga-Avenal Rest Area. The design appropriates preexisting features of the site, specifically parking spots, comfort stations with restrooms and drinking fountains, and three large sewage treatment ponds.



Here are the ponds in context; this is the current water system at the Coalinga Avenal rest area. The site receives water from the Westlands Water District. Greywater and sewage, an estimated 20,000 gallons per day, are pumped to the three evaporation ponds.



My design treats this water system in the same vein as these infrastructures. These big systems move stuff around the big valley. I want a small system of moving materials that does the same, but in the pursuit of beauty.



The rest stop vending machine will help create the conditions for apprehending beauty in this new rest area. Here's how:

IIIa. Conditions

IIIb. Gardens

Play Animation

*This is Coalinga Avenal in its larger context, with surrounding almond fields and the southern coast range to the south;
Here is the ever-present California Aqueduct, which brings Sierra snowmelt from the north;
We begin in January, the start of the rainy season, which briefly turns the mountain grasses a striking green;
The almond trees come out of dormancy in March in a stunning bloom. This is a special time, with green mountains and pink fields;
The moment is quick, and soon the rain is gone;
Irrigation begins in the almond groves. Hundreds of thousands of trees spaced twenty feet apart are irrigated by drip;
Irrigation is heavy in the summer, reaching its zenith in July;
The almonds are harvested in August, and irrigation tapers off after that;
The Tule Fog arrives towards fall, a meteorological phenomenon that blankets the entire Valley in a low-lying, dense fog. My first design move is to access this precipitation, which I'll do with evenly-placed synthetic palm trees that capture fog in their netted fronds. This water is collected via the palm's trunk, then pumped on-site.*

*My redesign formalizes the rest area's treatment ponds;
Parking pavers, oriented with the highway and spaced twenty-feet apart, cover the entire site;
Running lengthwise along these parking corridors are irrigation pipes set ten-feet above the ground. They look like this;
This allows water to be accessed across the entire site;
These pipes serve another function, as they suspend heavyweight canvas curtains;
These, along with plastic orange construction fences that swivel across parking corridors, create a circulation scheme that is ever-changeable. It may look like this;
Curtains are pulled lengthwise, and construction fences swiveled in such a way as to create an enclosure;
When viewed with the parking pavers we see the possibilities;
Here's the site's drivable space, its parking zones with transportable semi-truck pavers;
And here's how vehicles might move around the site;
Let's talk urine! The site has single-use stalls, with drinking fountains set out front;
The bathrooms might be dispersed like this, with underground pipes that funnel urine to three treatment ponds;
This is diluted 10:1 with water, tempered with agricultural hay, then pumped through the aerial pipes we saw earlier.*

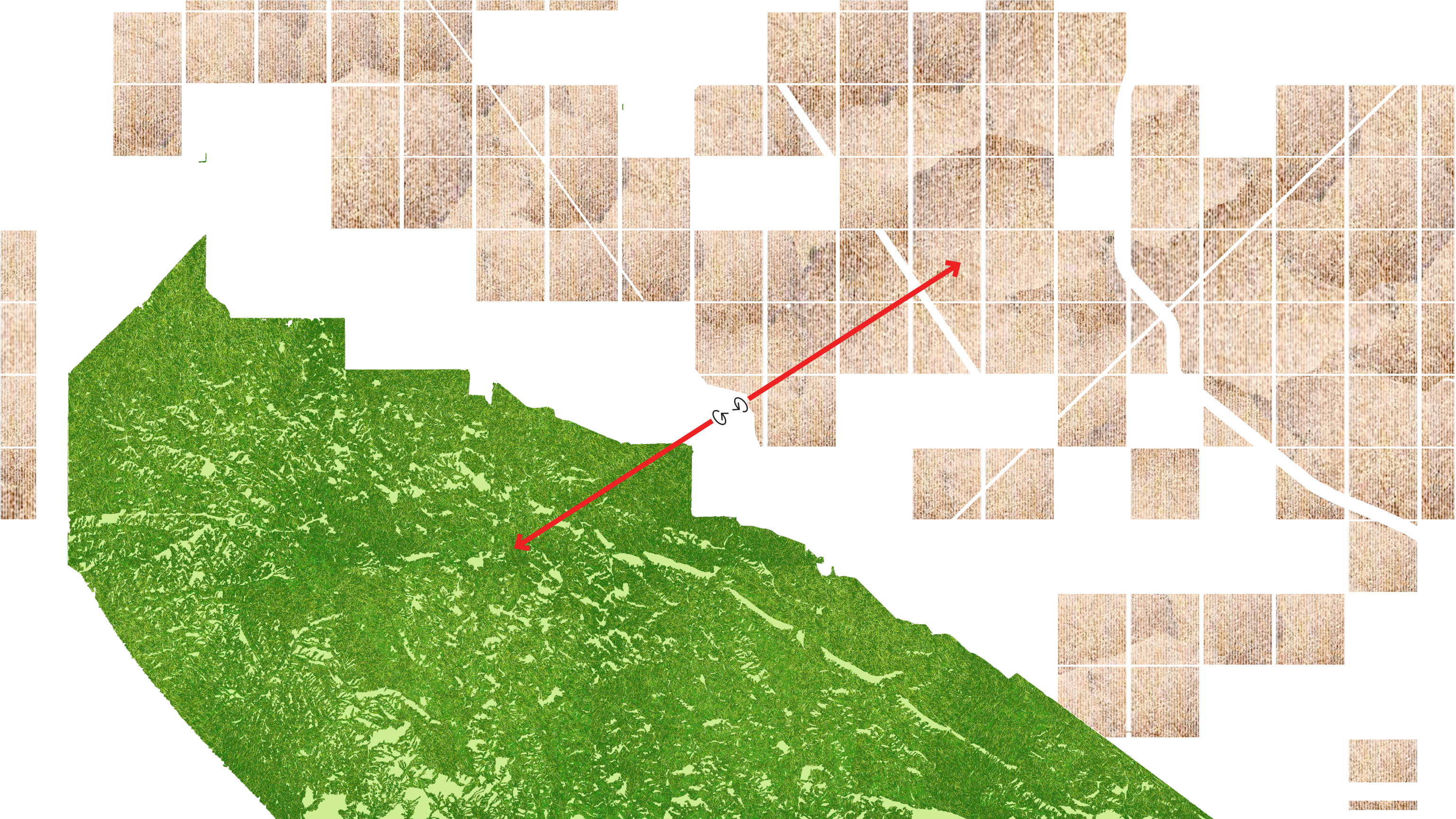
*This is the process by which gardens are planned. There are 40 vending machines dispersed across the site;
These correspond to one garden with a dominant species;
Show here is the A3 vending machine, which corresponds to a Meyer Lemon garden;
Dissonance is introduced here;
The vending machine registers the most popular beverage, which is also assigned a species, and records it on thermal print receipt paper;
Here the agave has prevailed, and so agave is introduced to the lemon garden;
In this way, the gardens are designed for unique dissonance by juxtaposing two species that may have nothing to do with one another.*

IIIa. Conditions

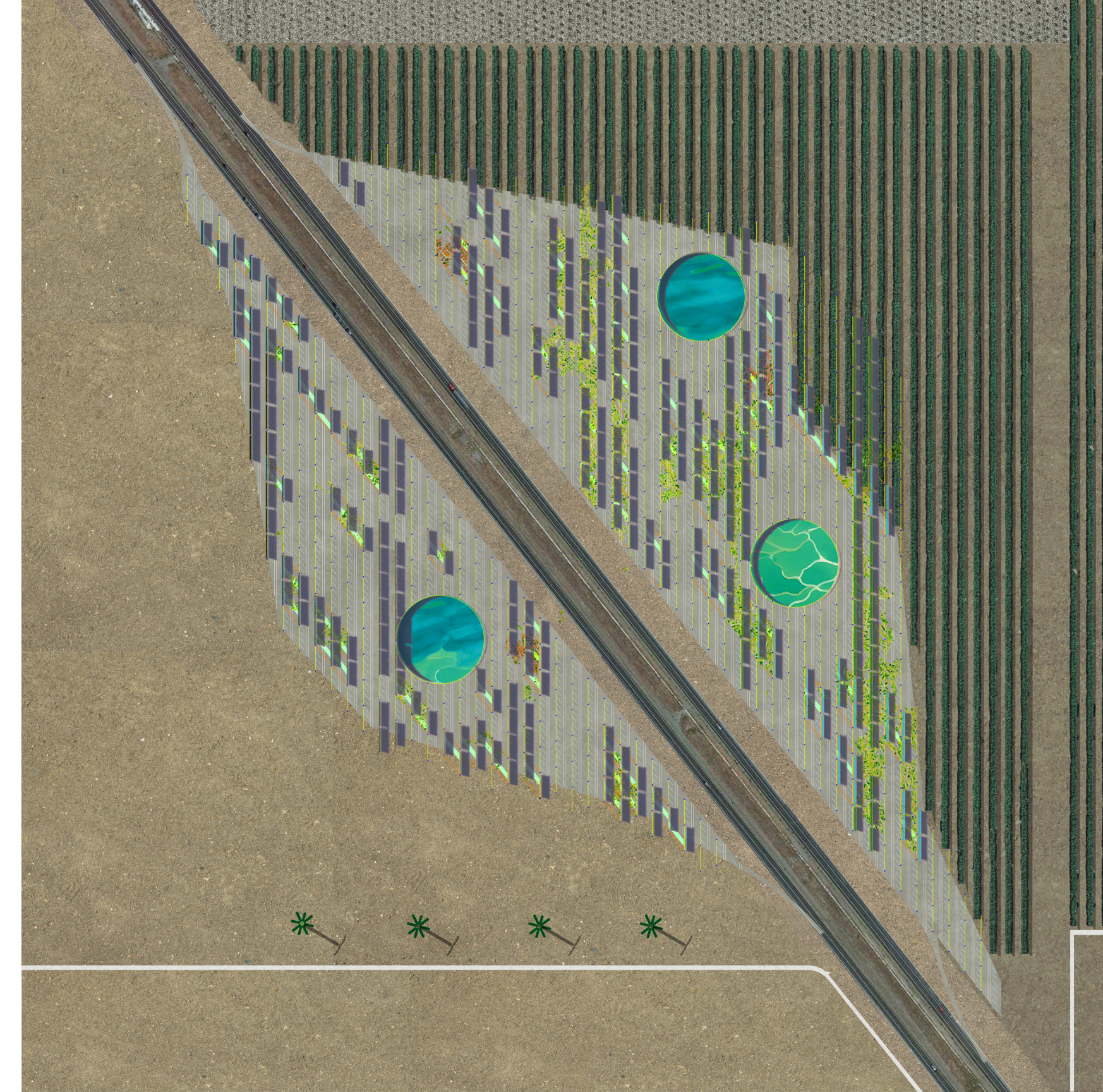
IIIb. Gardens



All these moving bits, this water collection and diversion, is being put towards making dissonant, beautiful gardens at this site in the Central Valley.



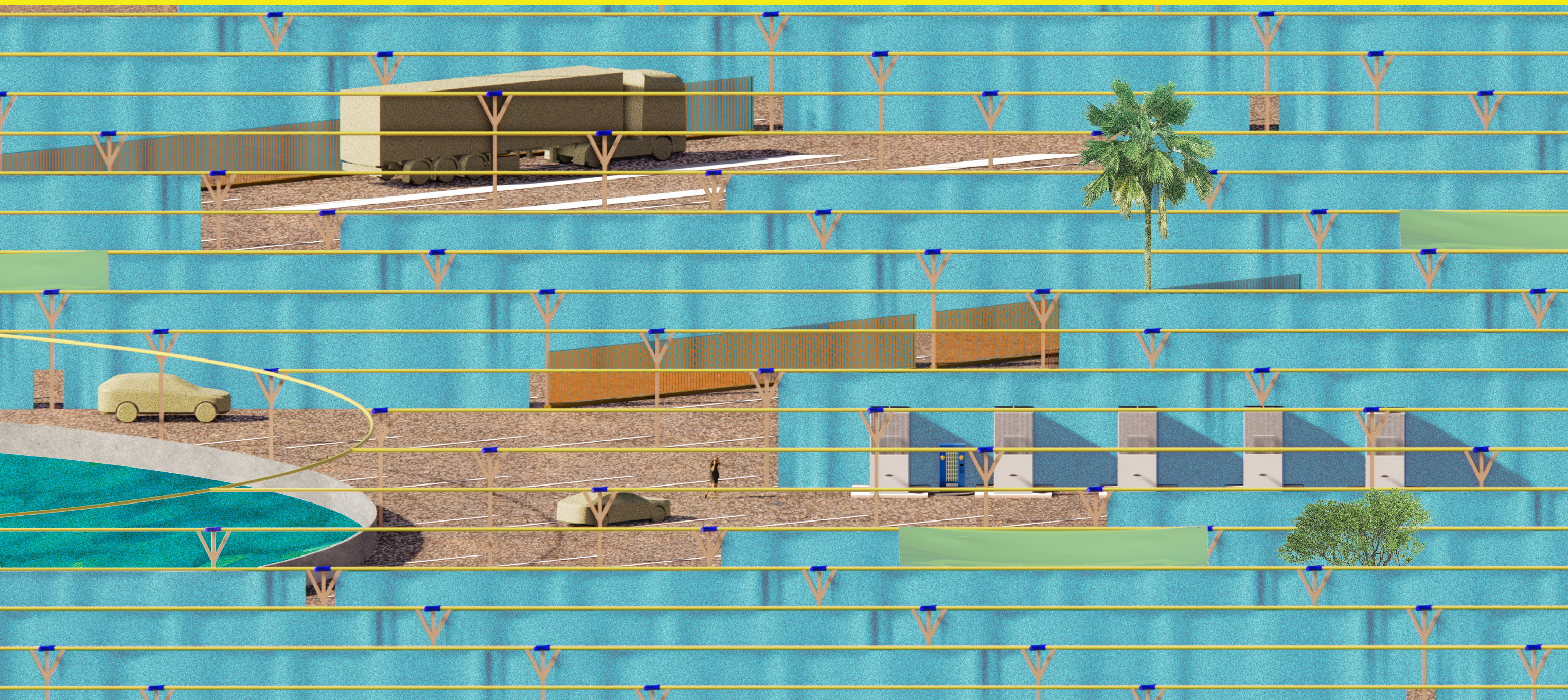
As the site is malleable, these gardens will shift biannually according to this view. I'll plan around this moment of pink and green.



Gardens may be dispersed on site according to the given driveable space. Another moment of dissonance arrives in the knowledge that these gardens are made available when the entire valley is awash in irrigation. In the driest season, in this arid desert, gardens will bloom.



The almond groves are in bloom in March. A garden featuring Meyer Lemon and Agave is moved to take advantage of the spectacle. A hose allows the garden to maintain a steady green, yellow, and blue-grey. Travelers rest under an awning, and enjoy a beverage from the vending machine.

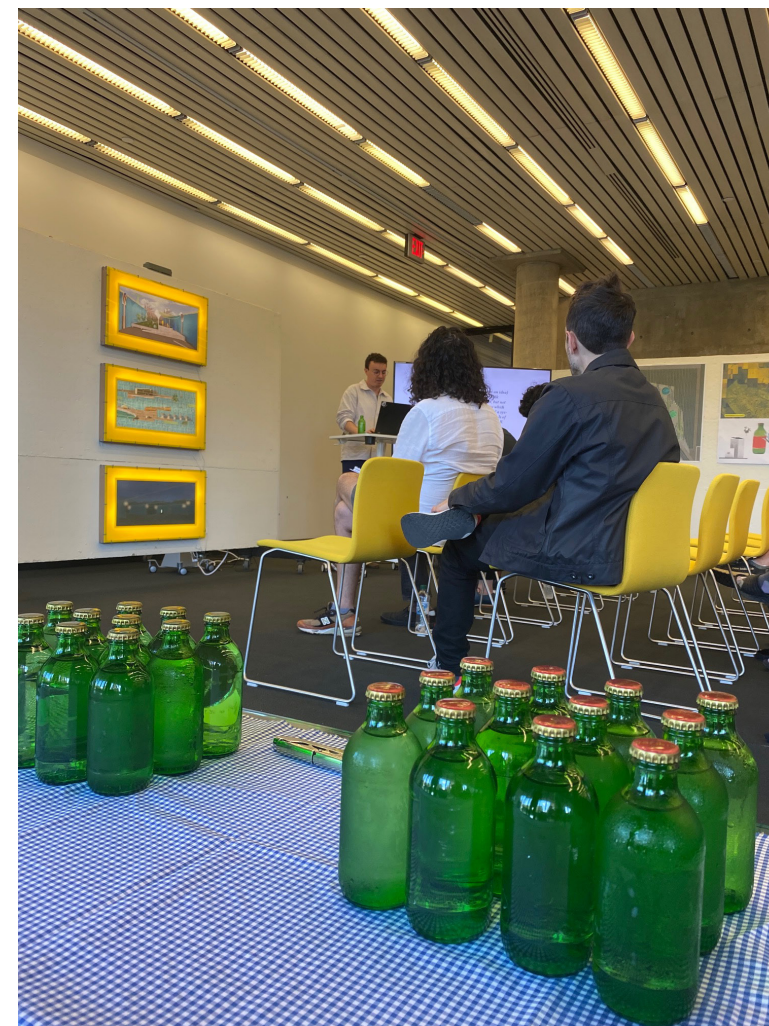


The site is a series of openings and enclosures. Gardens peak above the tops of dividing curtains. A traveler leaves their car and heads to the bathroom.



The rest stop is open 24/7. People might be resting in their parked cars.

This project indexes rest to aesthetic experiences like comfort and peace, but above all to beauty. Beauty is encountered in small, discrete moments. It's found in lighting, in texture, in glass; in the way a manzanita might juxtapose with a Sierra mint. When you're parked on the side of the I-5, you can finally encounter the Coast Range as it is, rather than as an endless gold border framing your north-south, south-north trajectory. Encounter the mountains, encounter everything, immediately, and give it time!



The final installation was quite simple. Serendipity brought these yellow chairs to the Loeb Library Lobby, which I arranged to face one rolling board. I stood next to the board at a podium, and to my left was a screen on which I presented a slide deck and an animation. There were two kinds of beverages available in small, green glass bottles: a sparkling water and a sugared lemon drink similar to Sprite.

I wanted the focus to be on my final images - on the qualities evoked by the design - with no annotation or explanatory text. The yellow lightbox is a reference to the way my design uses synthetic elements to corner beauty; I do this by partitioning space with materials to create enclosures, and this lightbox does a similar visual work. The effect is to force the eye towards the middle, or perhaps to blur the larger image itself. Everything is in there.

Credit to Jon Levine (GSD MArch '23) for constructing the boxes, and for making use of these blue zip-ties I've carried with me since 2018 (because I thought they were beautiful); Canal Plastics in New York City, for supplying this gorgeous, opaque yellow acrylic.



Thank you!

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