

# Forest Fire Lookouts in the North Cascades: From Utilitarian Sentry to Writer's Refuge

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## Preface

My first introduction to the literary heritage of forest fire lookouts came in the February 2011 Mazama Bulletin (17). In it, John Putnam reviews Gary Suiter's book *Poets on the Peaks: Gary Snyder, Phillip Whalen & Jack Kerouac in the North Cascades*. Gary Snyder himself was a member of the Mazamas mountaineering group, growing up in Portland, Oregon and going to school at Reed College, and his first two published writings appeared in the Mazama Annual books of 1946 and 1947.

My own connection to the Mazamas goes back to 1995, when I joined the organization after climbing the South Sister in the central Oregon Cascades with my parents and brothers. Both of my parents were long time members of the Mazamas, and my paternal grandparents were members of the organization as well, so a love of the outdoors came naturally to me.

Upon beginning my initial research last winter, I found the fact that these minimal pragmatic structures have such a remarkable literary legacy striking, and one not isolated to the North Cascades either. The fact that lookouts are slowly being displaced from their role in fire detection by newer technology has also meant an end to people's ability to inhabit these places for extended periods. This loss provided the impetus to create a new typology, restoring the ability of authors to experience these places, and connecting a new generation of authors to the beauty of the mountains.

Figure 1, Opposite: Desolation Peak Lookout, with Mt Hozomeen in the background. The site of Jack Kerouac's time as a lookout.



## Introduction

Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, protecting forests from wildfire became a national priority. Nowhere was this more imperative to the local economies than in the Pacific Northwest. As more effective means of surveillance were sought, lookouts became the ultimate means by which to maintain surveillance over vast territories; placing an operator in a permanent structure with a highly accurate sighting device and electronic communications. While their original role is slipping into obsolescence today, the literature lookouts inspired proves that today they are actually more relevant than ever. As the world has become more technologically advanced and globally oriented, society has increasingly disconnected itself from nature. Lookout structures provide the chance to reconnect with the natural environment.

Every summer, the National Forest Service would employ a solitary person to staff each lookout in order to detect forest fires early enough to fight them. While performing that task, lookouts gained a new perspective on their place in the greater world through an appreciation for the places they inhabited. The preservation of remaining lookout structures is vital, not simply for their historical value, but for their ability to provide visitors with a new perspective on the natural environment. The restoration of existing unused lookouts has already provided visitors with the chance to experience otherwise uninhabitable places for short periods of time. The placement of new structures, however, would allow more people to build valuable relationships with their natural environment, one that may even influence their perspective on how they wish to inhabit our planet.

This thesis proposes that structures in the wilderness provide a necessary service



Figure 2. The view north from Lookout Mountain Lookout, just east of Marblemount in the North Cascades.

by supporting extended occupation of the natural environment in a low-impact manner. Those stays in the wilderness provide people with a valuable new perspective on their place in the world. Inspired by the use of lookouts by writers, especially the beat authors Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Jack Kerouac, three structures are proposed that also represent the three philosophical understandings of how the environment is experienced, as put forward by the philosopher Allen Carlson.

At a public level, the new structures extend the experience of the summit out towards the horizon as the slope itself falls away. The experience creates a unique disconnect from the site itself, even while it creates the new experience of inhabiting the greater space beyond the summit and towards the horizon. For the three authors in residence each summer, the spaces within the structure provide a frame through which a unique understanding of the environment can be viewed. As Allen Carlson suggests, the natural environment can be viewed in multiple ways. Outside of their dwellings, each author will experience a sense of immersion within the natural environment. For the mountaineer, the natural environment is only fully appreciated during total immersion in it, so the first cabin reflects that need by opening up to its surroundings. For the philosopher, the landscape is appreciated through a level of disconnect, and is tempered by the intellectual exploration of it from a place of isolation. For the naturalist, the natural environment exists both as an immense system as well as its individual parts, from the geologic scale of the mountains themselves to the minute scale of local flora. For their cabin, specific views are framed to highlight those different scales. While each cabin conveys a different scale and type of perception, each also facilitates the inhabitation of a unique place, providing the author with a unique opportunity to appreciate it.



Figure 3. The panoramic view from inside Lookout Mountain lookout.



# Utilitarian Typology

## Origins

“The thing that binds all lookouts together is a love of nature.”

-Don Wolfe, longtime lookout on Black Butte, The Bulletin, Bend, Oregon

The United States was so heavily forested that early on in the nation’s history, forest protection was not a foreseeable issue, especially within the seemingly endless forests of the Pacific Northwest (Spring, Fish 9). Several fires in particular, however, brought the issue of forest protection to the nation’s attention. Perhaps the worst of these was the 1871 Peshtigo Fire in Wisconsin, which took the lives of 1,500 people while burning through 1,300,000 acres of forest. The tragedy drew significant public attention, resulting in the 1875 creation of the American Forestry Association (Spring, Fish 9, Egan 51).

By 1891, forest conservation had become enough of a concern in the face of unregulated logging that Congress gave the President the power to protect certain forests. Within approximately two years, 34 million acres were officially protected, including a significant portion of Washington State (Spring, Fish 9). While the forests were under the control of the Department of the Interior, no system of fire protection had yet been developed, and without oversight, logging operations continued much as they had prior to the regulations. Officials looked to Europe for how to manage the lands.

Gifford Pinchot, with a forestry degree from Yale and thorough knowledge of European modes of forest management through studies in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, was a natural choice to lead policy development. In 1896 he joined a government planning commission given the task of developing policy on how to manage the forests, and two years later became the head of the Division of Forestry

(Spring, Fish 9). The nearly simultaneous rise of Theodore Roosevelt to the office of President in 1901 provided Pinchot with a strong partner in his campaign to protect the forests from overuse, and together they would add another 132 million acres to the Forest Reserve System. In 1905 the Department of Agriculture was formed, under which the former Division of Forestry formally became the U.S. Forest Service 1907, with Pinchot as the head until 1910 (Spring, Fish 10).

Forest fires were a serious concern long before the twentieth century, but – without an organization to fight them – remained a fact of life. Within the United States, it would be the consolidation of the National Forest Service under President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot that would finally address the issue of forest fires in an organized fashion (Egan 71).

At first underfunded and understaffed, Roosevelt and Pinchot's interests were in the conservation of the wilderness and its protection from overzealous lumber barons. Far from being economically motivated, for Roosevelt and Pinchot conservation was a moral imperative based upon their love of the natural wilderness, a love they shared with mutual friend and environmentalist John Muir (Egan 71). To secure support for the new bureau, however, Roosevelt and Pinchot would have to appeal to people's economic and pragmatic sensibilities. They would make the claim that the new department would be able to put an end to forest fires, a serious threat to local economies and safety in the densely forested west. Thoroughly attacked at first, the newly created Forest Service was considered an obstacle to free capitalism and an infringement on peoples right to the land (Egan 70). By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, a series of events would shift public opinion in favor of the department, eventually allowing it to establish its widespread system of lookouts.



Figure 4: A forest ranger patrolling the forest on horseback prior to lookouts.



Figure 5: The 105 foot tall lookout tower in Sisters, Oregon, in 1921.

The realization that fires posed a serious economic threat to lumber rich regions at times forced private solutions. Fire lookouts were employed in isolated cases as early as 1870, in Helena, Montana, and in 1879 in northern California under the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. (Kresek 9) Those two lookouts, however, were stationed not to protect the forests, but to protect the company's property in the event of a forest fire, with the hope that early warning would allow for some level of protection.

The first documented instance of a forest fire lookout being employed to protect the forests came in 1902, on Bertha Hill in northern Idaho. In response to particularly dry conditions of that summer and reports of a large fire near the town of Yacolt in southwest Washington, the Clearwater Timber Company employed the camp cook as a fire lookout on the nearby hilltop. Later on, a lookout would be constructed on the hilltop that would be occupied each summer for the next eight decades, and is still used on occasion. (Kresek 250)

Lookout stations elsewhere in the following few years continued to be quite minimal. The earliest developed lookout sites consisted simply of steps attached to an old tree, often a dead snag whose limbs could be removed, with some sort of platform high enough to provide a view of the surrounding area. Man-made tower structures were the next development, though the lookouts were still open at this point, and were not permanently occupied.

Early attempts at fire management often involved rangers who would visit towers at set times during the day, or roam the forest or horseback; taking advantage of viewpoints when available to watch for fires. If smoke was spotted, they would first seek out the source and try to extinguish the fire themselves. Only when that proved ineffective would they seek additional help. The long periods between when a fire was

first spotted, when it was first addressed, and finally when a larger company of fire fighters could be called upon meant the system was relatively powerless to prevent large fires (Osborne 1). Furthermore, the number of rangers necessary to effectively patrol a given area made for a highly inefficient system.

Perhaps the greatest incentive to develop a more effective system of lookouts came in the summer of 1910. No permanent lookouts existed in northern Idaho at the time, and a particularly dry summer made for extremely high fire danger. Opposition to the Forest Service and National Forests had been significant up until this point, leaving the organization with a largely untrained and ill-equipped workforce when the forests did catch fire. On the 20th of August, numerous fires merged into one much greater blaze when a strong wind blew in from the west. In two days, more than 3,000,000 acres of forest burned a "path 260 miles long and 200 miles wide." (Kresek 249) The fire was responsible for the death of at least 85 people and countless livestock. The fire would go down in history as the largest wildfire in the United States, although not the deadliest. Support for the Forest Service grew exponentially as news of the disaster spread, along with numerous stories of heroism on the part of Forest Rangers during the blaze. Funding for the organization likewise grew, as did interest in developing a more efficient system of forest fire detection (Egan).



Figure 6: Sighting a fire using a portable firefinder, 1916.

"[T]he one and only site for a lookout house is on the extreme summit of the peak and where a maximum view of the surrounding country can be seen directly from the house itself."

- W. B. Osborne, *Western Fire Fighter's Manual*



Figure 7: A dispatcher plotting a fire, 1940.

## Permanent Structures

By placing permanent structures at key lookout points, fixed lines of communication were made possible, allowing local ranger stations to dispatch fire fighters as soon as a lookout spotted a fire. Structures could be placed in such a way as to maximize their view, minimizing the necessary manpower to keep watch over a given area, making for both a more effective and a more economical system. (Osborne, p1)

William B. Osborne describes the firefighting system as consisting of five components. Primary lookouts who devoted themselves entirely to detection and reporting of fires were the first. Secondary lookout posts used during more severe fire seasons would provide additional surveillance, but would also be on hand to help fire nearby fires if necessary. Firemen on call provide a third level of detection, roaming the forests, and fighting fires when detected. Rangers at the local ranger station are the fourth level, and maintain communication with lookouts. Rangers would plot fires on their own maps, triangulating the readings of multiple lookouts when possible, and with the advice of lookouts who could see the fire, would decide how to take action. Finally, there were the firemen who actually fight the fires. In all cases, the lookout would provide continuous reporting on the nature of the fire, providing the ranger station with current information throughout the course of the fire (Osborne 3).

The audacious siting of lookouts is a direct result of their purpose. As written in the 1924 *Western Fire Fighter's Manual*, "the one and only site for a lookout house is on the extreme summit of the peak and where a maximum view of the surrounding country can be seen directly from the house itself (Osborne)." When lookout sites were selected, "the first object [was] to give the man proper shelter and second to adopt a type of construction which will permit a maximum view of his territory at all

times.”(Osborne 6) When located at lower elevations or otherwise hampered by an obstructed view at ground level, towers raised the lookout structure high enough to provide an unobstructed view. On particularly tall towers, the lookout cabin would often be significantly smaller, providing daytime shelter and space for the fire-finder equipment, while a small cabin adjacent to the tower would provide living spaces. Lookouts in the North Cascades were primarily stationed on top of mountains, whose bare tops meant live-in cabins could be located on the ground or on relatively short towers.

The earliest standard typology of permanent lookouts were the “cupola” style lookouts. The prototype was constructed on top of Mt Hood in 1915 by Elijah “Lige” Coalman. As an avid outdoorsman, he first climbed the 11,245 foot mountain at the age of 15, and would go on to summit the mountain a record 586 times. Just like other early Forest Service employees, Coalman was drawn to working on the mountain on the basis of his love of the place. Coalman applied for the Forest Service lookout position before a lookout had even been constructed. His first accommodation on the summit of Mt Hood was simply a tent with a phone hooked up inside it (Kressek 25). Finding the tent a less than satisfactory accommodation for the fierce weather there, he designed a small square cabin with a ¼ size second story, and submitted it to the local Forest Service office. In approximately a month all the materials had been hauled up to the summit and the lookout constructed. Lige Coalman himself would man the lookout for the two summers following its original construction, and the lookout would be occupied each summer through 1932.

While refined from Coalman’s first example, the D-6 cupola model of lookout – named for District 6, the Pacific Northwest fire district – was a direct development of



Figure 8, top: The original Mount Hood lookout, as built by Lige Coalman. Figure 9, bottom: The cupola lookout space, with Osborne Firefinder and down-swinging shutters.

the lookout atop Mt Hood. The 12x12 foot lower level provided windows around the entire space for continuous observation of the surroundings. The small second level housed the fire-finding equipment, which had been developed by Osborne in 1914. These lookouts used a simple hipped gable roof, double hung or horizontally pivoting windows, and shutters that either hinged up to provide shade or were removable. In all, nearly 200 D-6s would be constructed in the northwest. The structures were economical, easy to build, and their parts could easily be packed into remote sites by livestock. While adding a level of complexity to the construction, the cupola provided a built-in increase in elevation for the lookout equipment, allowing even the ground-mounted models a clearer view of their surroundings.

Also utilizing the early cupola arrangement were several regional variations based upon local building practices. The D-1 model utilized in Montana increased the first floor to 14x14 feet and the first story was of log-cabin construction. The similar R-3 model used on the Nez Perce Reservation was nearly identical, but utilized hand hewn dovetail-tenon notched corners. (Kressek 11) Another variation of this design placed the second story over one corner of the lower level rather than centered over it. Referred to as "Cathedral Style" lookouts for their nave-and-steeple-like profiles, these also placed a premium on placing the lookout equipment higher up, and were built in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, none of these variations on the D-6 model remain.

Only very rarely were any of these early models placed upon a tower. The L-4 model introduced in 1929, however, was developed in part for that purpose. The L-4 was simpler to build, required less raw material, and provided more space to the occupant, while also combining the working and living spaces into one. The 14x14 foot lookout went through several variations, originally using a gabled roof from



Figure 10: Hidden Lake Lookout in the North Cascades, an early gable-roofed L-4 model, built in 1931.

1929 until 1932, then a hipped roof from 1933 through 1953, with post-1936 models equipped with extended ceiling rafters to which shutters bolted during the summer months. All of the structure's parts could be bought in kit form, delivered in bundles that were specifically sized for transportation via mule team. Smaller versions of hipped roof lookout included the L-5, whose footprint was reduced to 10x10 feet. Only a small number of L-5s were built, and they were only ever used for secondary lookout locations. An even smaller model, the 8x8 foot L-6, was meant purely for use on the tallest 80 to 100 foot towers, for which a separate cabin would provide living space.

While all earlier lookouts were made primarily of wood, galvanized steel towers also appeared in the Pacific Northwest during the 1930s, with a 7x7 foot cabin mounted on top. Based upon the windmill towers the Aermotor Company also built, the towers ranged in height from 35 to 175 feet, were easily assembled on site, and were economical to build. Owing to their small size, these lookouts were never occupied full time, and always had a support cabin with living spaces nearby. Although a number were built, the steel towers were a perfect conductor for lightning, and as a result were never as popular with lookouts or officials in the northwest region as other designs.

Emerging in 1953, the R-6 cabin is the most modern lookout type. The wooden cabins utilize a flat roof, included wide eaves for shade, and increased the interior space to 15x15 feet. Most R-6 model lookouts were placed on top of towers, generally ranging from 15 to 45 feet in height. When placed on towers, the lookouts were built with a narrow deck on all sides to provide access to shutters placed over the windows during the winter and to allow windows to be cleaned. Earlier lookouts were generally accessed by trail, and thus required their materials to be packed in by livestock. R-6



Figure 11: Desolation Peak Lookout, the earlier hipped gable L-4 model, built in 1932. Figure 12: Slate Peak Lookout, the later hipped gable L-4 with extended rafters, built in 1956.



Figure 13: Red Mountain Lookout in the southern Washington Cascades, a late flat-roofed R-6 model on a short tower built in 1959.

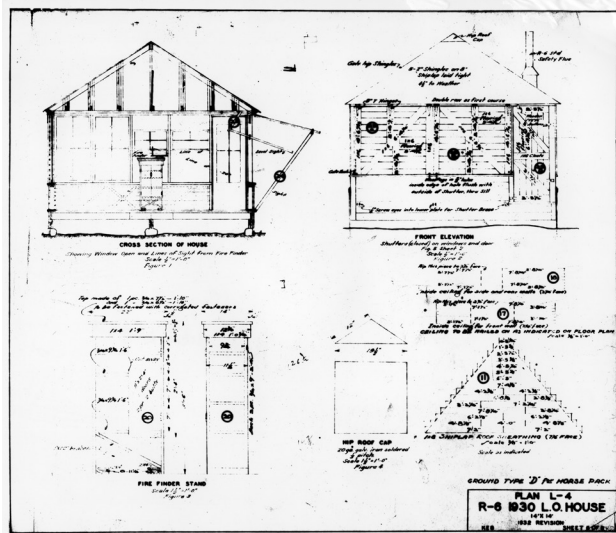


Figure 14: Plan Drawings of the early hipped gable L-4 model, with shutters and Osborne Firefinder stand.

locations on the other hand were often accessed by Forest Service roads, allowing for heavier construction.

The typical floor plan for all lookouts is square, placing the almost universally used Osborne Firefinder at the center of the space. By placing the two-foot diameter sighting device and integral topography map at an equal distance to every wall, the number of blind-spots are minimized, maximizing visibility for the device. Stands for the firefinder utilized three parallel bars, on two of which the instrument would sit at any given time. The instrument could be moved back and forth on either pair of bars while still maintaining the instrument's orientation, allowing for the sighting of fires otherwise behind the cabin's window mullions or corner posts. As the core piece of viewing equipment within the lookout, it took precedent over everything else. Within the early two-story cupola and cathedral style lookout types, the fire-finder was placed in the upper level, with no other furniture to obstruct the space. In later single-story lookouts, furniture was constructed such that it never interfered with the instrument's view.

Developed by W. B. Osborne in 1914, the firefinder is a type of alidade, or sighting device, utilizing a round base with a rotating pair of sites. The operator oriented the sites to be perfectly in line with the fire for the azimuth, and the angle off the horizon was read manually off the far site or a scope pin-pointing the fire would provide the angle. A topographic map of the area with the lookout's location at the center of the device helped to identify the specific location of the fire. The lookout would record horizontal and vertical angles, and after checking the co-ordinates on a set of panoramic photographs taken from the lookout, would call in the location of the fire to the local ranger station.

The interiors of the lookouts placed all furniture at the perimeter of the room.

Food and the cold-storage cabinet was always placed along the north side of the space. A small wood-burning stove provided heat to the space as well as a cooking surface. Shelves of books, a storage cabinet, a small cot with rope stretchers and canvas pad, and a small table and chair made up the rest of the minimal furnishings. Earlier lookouts especially tended to have low ceilings of six and a half to seven feet. Windowsills were no more than three feet off the floor, and usually less, with windows extending to the ceiling. Furniture was no higher than the windowsill, in order to preserve maximum visibility out of the space.

The geographic isolation of the lookout structures meant the operator was largely left to their own devices, however, lookouts also had a number of daily duties. At set times during the day they would call in their weather and each morning they would receive the projected forecast from the ranger station. While early lookouts made use of telephone line, the tendency of the lines to break meant that radios would become the preferred method of communication, especially after World War Two. Because battery power was precious, specific times were set for checking in. In the North Cascades during the 1950s, in an effort to relieve the sense of isolation, an hour was set each evening for radio use when lookouts could socialize with each other.

During the day, lookouts were expected to keep a constant watch on the surrounding territory to spot any fires that might develop. A friendly rivalry existed between lookouts over who first reported a developing fire, and occasionally led to overly eager false calls. Another rivalry was sparked by aircraft being used for fire spotting, with lookouts especially striving for the earliest and most accurate sightings. Personnel in the lookout structures felt a sense of pride in their work, but also felt they were competing for the future of their jobs. Providing maintenance of the structures

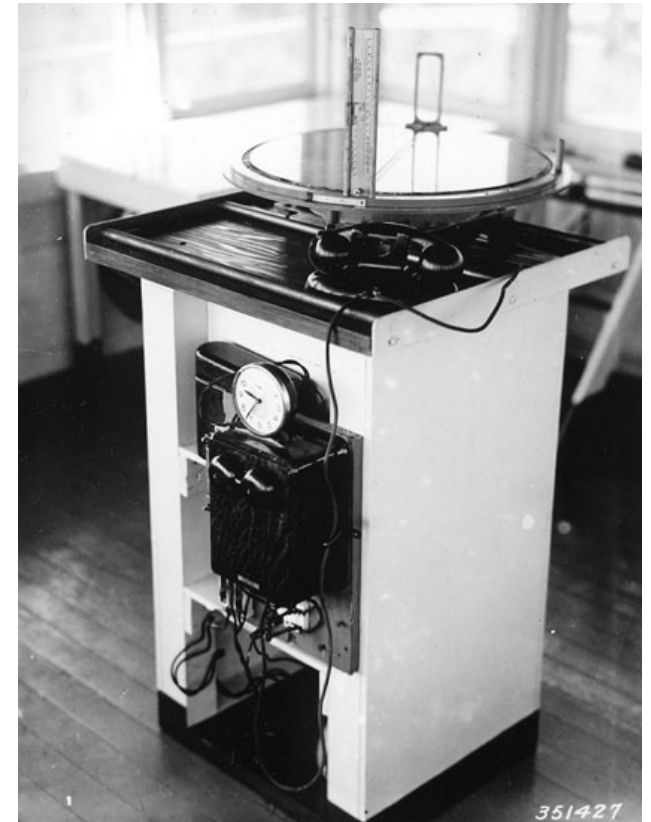


Figure 15: The all-important firefinder, resting on the far two of three bars along the top of the stand. The telephone is immediately on hand while siting the fire.



Figure 16, top: A female lookout making her routine scan of the landscape in 1919. Figure 17, bottom: An early aerial fire patrol in 1922.

and a military cleanliness were duties of the lookouts, cleaning the all-important windows on a frequent basis, and maintaining a tidy space in case anyone did stop by. Prior to radios taking over, finding breaks in telephone wires was another important task.

As the lookout structures lose their utilitarian purpose, their aesthetic as an object in the landscape is intensified by its diminished role as a functional tool. When looking at the lookouts, the romanticizing of them often strikes one as inevitable. Especially the early L-4 models display an elegant simplicity of form and economy of material. Their large expanses of glass face out over enormous expanses of wilderness. As hikers throughout the Pacific Northwest have discovered upon reaching a summit with one; the place they seek to inhabit for only a few minutes or hours at a time is the place lookouts occupy year round. While humble in many ways, the lookout structures seem to strike a heroic pose with often remarkably audacious placement. Rather than shrinking away from any exposure, they seem to boldly face out into it. Rarely appearing new and perfect, the weathering of their facades evokes a rugged honesty. As an object in the landscape, they highlight the immensity of their surrounding natural environment.

While built for a utilitarian purpose, the lookouts also recall the image of a Victorian gazebo. The garden they occupy, however, is not a carefully manicured and designed space, but an immense wilderness. As a marker of place, especially for hikers or backpackers, the lookouts constitute a utilitarian folly within that wilderness. While certainly not created for an ornamental purpose, they provide a remarkable juxtaposition between the natural and the man-made, representing the place of mankind within the greater environment.

As aircraft and thermal-imaging satellites have taken over much of the role that forest fire lookouts used to play, the dichotomies of the structures perhaps becomes clearer than when they were purely utilitarian. Now removed in part from their purpose, they can be viewed both for their formal and utilitarian characteristics. Today they serve as markers of place for hikers, and represent a historic relationship to nature.

While seemingly destined for the history books by the 1970s and 80s, a number of lookouts continue to be used today, especially in regions that experience high levels of fire danger. Lookouts have proven their continued value and have even seemed to see resurgence in some areas. With a human operator often able to identify a whiff of smoke before a plane or satellite, the lookout's value as a source of early detection remains superior in some places to newer technologies. While it's unlikely lookouts will ever return in the numbers they were built in during the early part of the twentieth century, their role in fire detection hasn't completely disappeared, and they will likely live on for a long period to come in limited use.



Figure 18: Park Butte Lookout, perched on a rock outcropping on the southern side of Mount Baker, built in 1933 and available today as a hiker's shelter.

## A Refuge for Writers

While the lookouts undoubtedly occupied places of great beauty, inhabiting lookouts was not for everyone. The spaces were only as large as was necessary, and as a result were relatively cramped. Insulation was virtually unheard of in them, so the spaces tended to be cold at night and often proved drafty in foul weather. Alternately, without shading over the structures or ventilation of the attic spaces, they could become quite warm during the day; a fact operable-windows and up-swinging shutters could only go so far to prevent. Perhaps the greatest problem for many occupants, however, was the lack of personal interaction with others. As Jack Kerouac would write, “the trouble with Desolation, is, no characters, alone, isolated (Desolation 14).” Couples sometimes staffed lookouts together, but for everyone else, the spaces almost inevitably became quite lonely. For many of those who chose to work as a lookout, the quiet and solitude was exactly what made them so appealing, checking in via radio only at set times of the day and when a fire was spotted, and otherwise left to themselves.

For writers and academics, this was often a perfect combination for otherwise free summers. Seattle high-school teacher Martha Hardy was the first to recount her experience autobiographically when she wrote her book *Tatoosh* about her summer atop the mountain of the same name in 1943. The narrative follows from when she packs up to the lookout in June through when she packs out in early October following the first snow. She recounts the trials of living in the isolated place, along with the beauty she found there. The book also recounts the transformation of her relationship to the site through the summer. At first she is able to perceive the beauty of the surrounding mountains, but the site is overall foreign to her. As the summer passes,

“But although I was fully aware of the practical aspect of my responsibility, there was another feature of my job that moved me far more deeply, namely the beauty on which my eyes were privileged to dwell continually” (46).

– Martha Hardy, *Tatoosh*

however, she is able to perceive the many facets of beauty to the site itself, eventually feeling a deep connection to it, and referring to the surrounding landscape as “my hills (228).” Among the unique aspects of being a lookout is the level of responsibility they felt towards the land they protected, a fact that would begin as their professional duty, but would go on to become an ethical interest as they gained a love for the place. The transformation is one that each author would go through, learning more, not just about the place, but also about themselves.

The Washington Cascades would play host to three more significant authors in the following decade. Gary Snyder would be the first in 1952 in Crater Mountain lookout, and in 1953 on Sourdough Mountain lookout. Philip Whalen would join him in the North Cascades at Sauk Mountain in 1953, and spend the following two summers at Sourdough Mountain lookout. The third would be Jack Kerouac in 1956, at Desolation Peak.

Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen were long time friends, having met and studied at Reed College together. Whalen was the better part of a decade older, and was attending college on the GI Bill. The two quickly bonded, however, over a common passion for literature, poetry, and Buddhism, and were roommates while in Portland and later on in San Francisco. While both had grown up in the Pacific Northwest, especially around Portland, they were also remarkably different. Whalen was by far the more introverted of the two, and despite a love of nature, was never particularly outdoorsy or athletic, usually content to bury himself in his reading and writing. Snyder on the other hand would grow up in the outdoors, worked in the lumber industry, and was an active mountaineer from the time he was a teenager. While Whalen would savor his time as a lookout, for Snyder, the outdoors would remain a source of constant

“Without my willing it or knowing how it came about, I was a rock with the rocks, a bee with the bees, a flower with the flowers. My ears drank in the murmur of the wind, my skin the sunshine, my eyes the flutter of a small blue butterfly over a mat of lavender phlox. I was part of all I saw and heard and felt” (159).

– Martha Hardy, *Tatoosh*

“High above us and far away the house sat alone on the very tip of the earth, flaunting its smallness in the face of infinity itself” (227).

– Martha Hardy, *Tatoosh*



Figure 19: Gary Snyder at Crater Mountain Lookout.

“Down for a new radio, to Ross Lake,  
and back up. Three days walking.  
Strange how unmoved this place leaves  
one; neither articulate or worshipful;  
rather the pressing need to look  
within and adjust the mechanism of  
perception” (4).

– Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold*

inspiration throughout his life. In June 1954, after being denied work as a lookout for that summer, Snyder would write Whalen, stating, “I am physically sick for wanting to be in the mountains so bad. I am forced to admit that no one thing in life gives me such unalloyed pleasure as simply being in the mountains (Suiter 111).”

For Snyder, “simply being in the mountains” was one goal, but it supported a variety of pursuits for which the quiet solitude also offered an ideal place. By then deeply interested in Buddhism and Eastern thought, the small lookouts provided a space in which to study and meditate. In *Earth House Hold*, Snyder describes his ways of passing time while at Sourdough Mountain lookout as being “Chinese; plus Blake’s collected, Walden and sumi painting” (21). His time spent as a lookout is specifically mentioned in at least four of his works, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* from 1959, *The Back Country* from 1967, *Earth House Hold* from 1969, and *Mountains and Rivers Without End* from 1996. The periods he spent in the two lookouts were clearly influential, and yet much of his writing about them is very matter-of-fact about the day to day details. His appreciation for the place is clear, yet the wistfulness also present reveals the character of someone for whom the lookouts were also a means. As he states in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*:

“Two seasons on lookouts (Crater Mountain in 1952, Sourdough Mountain in 1953) in what was then the Mount Baker National Forest, not far south of the Canadian border, gave me full opportunity to watch the change of mood over vast landscapes, light moving with the day—the countless clouds, the towering cumulous, black thunderstorms rolling in with jagged lightning strikes. The prolonged stay in mountain huts also gave me my first opportunity to seriously sit cross-legged, in the practical and traditional posture of Buddhist meditation” (156).

For Snyder, the space of the lookout and the mountains constituted one space, while

literary and meditative states of mind constituted another. While it would be several years before Snyder would begin his formal Buddhist training in Japan, his knowledge of Eastern literature was already significant. His appreciation for the poetry of the mountain hermit Han Shan—in English ‘Cold Mountain’—would go on to inform the nature of his writing about the lookouts. In the afterward he wrote for North Point Press’s edition of his book *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, he would describe how the simplicity of Eastern poetry allowed readers to consider deeper meanings for themselves, rather than revealing themselves in more straight-forward manners. Considering his poems in that light especially, his experience within the lookouts reflected his interest in living simply, as well as his appreciation for more mundane details in life.

Snyder identified closely with nature, and would become a strong advocate for the environmental movement. While rarely making the specific statement, the natural environment was a major part of his spirituality, a fact his letter to Whalen in the summer of 1954 made clear. Lookouts provided him with the place to explore that spirituality over an extended period, and would provide an experience that powerfully influenced his own work and thinking.

While Whalen would spend more time in the lookouts than any of the other authors, his specific references to them would also be the most minimal. The only published poem of his that would directly reference his experience in lookouts was “Sourdough Mountain Lookout”, from his book *Like I Say*, from 1960. Like Snyder, Whalen found the space perfect for meditation and studies, but for Whalen, the setting was possibly more valuable for its peace and quiet than for its spectacular setting. Whalen in many ways was Snyder’s opposite. Whereas Snyder had been an avid

“The little cabin—one room—  
walled in glass  
Meadows and snowfields, hundreds  
of peaks” (19).

– Gary Snyder, *The Back Country*



Figure 20: Approaching the summit of Crater Mountain, near the end of where the ledge is maintained.

mountaineer from the time he was a teenager, Whalen was bookish and preferred a sedentary life of reading and writing. As Snyder related to John Suiter,

“I was able to convince him [to apply for lookout work] by saying ‘it’s not hard work to pack up there, once you get there you don’t have to do much, you’ll have plenty of time to read, and they pay you. . . and the view is lovely. And he discovered that he liked it” (Suiter 51).

Suiter also relates the fact that Snyder and Whalen were intellectual equals, even if Whalen looked the part far more than the adventurous and seemingly blue-collar



Figure 21: The panoramic view from Sauk Mountain, with the North Cascades to the left (east of the site) and the Skagit River flowing out to the west toward Puget Sound to the right.

Snyder, whose work experience was more in line with the rangers than with most people from the city (52). While not yet fully immersed in Buddhism when he spent time in the lookouts, he had already begun to delve into it, and his appetite for literature was clear given his intention to “reread all of Shakespeare, plus Chaucer in Middle English” during his six weeks on Sauk Mountain in 1953 (Suiter 67). 1954 would provide a similar length of time spent on Sourdough Mountain, and in 1955 he would spend a full 9 weeks on the mountain. His experience of the place was as much about immersing himself in his literature as in the place, but there’s little doubt from the poem about Sourdough Mountain that he loved his time there, where he could be alone with his thoughts in the landscape. Whereas Snyder seemed to find meaning in the mundane realities of life as a lookout and living in the present, Whalen seemed to find

purpose through the contemplation of the cosmos and literature. In the poem, Whalen observes the beauty of the landscape, but more than and end in itself as they were for Snyder, the surroundings provided a departure point for his thoughts to roam on themes of consciousness and meaning. Early in the poem he writes,

“Then I’m alone in a glass house on a ridge  
Encircled by chiming mountains  
With one sun roaring through the house all day  
& the others crashing through the glass all night  
Conscious even while sleeping  
    Morning fog in the southern gorge  
    Gleaming foam restoring the old sea-level  
    The lakes in two lights green soap and indigo  
    The high cirque-lake black half-open eye” (40).

His descriptive passages quickly turn into musings and thoughts on life and his past, punctuated by quotes to Heraclitus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, and finally the Buddha. Descriptive details periodically bring the poem back to the mountain setting, but more to ground his thoughts than to highlight their existence. While Whalen almost seemed to strive to remove himself from the place, the poem also illustrates the power the landscape held over his imagination, and it is clear that he treasured his time in the mountain cabins.

Upon his arrival back at the ranger station at the end of the 1955 fire season, Whalen would read a letter from Snyder inviting him to read at an early October gallery reading in San Francisco (Suiter 133). The letter mentioned the soon-to-be famous Allen Ginsberg, who was still relatively unknown on the west coast, and unknown to Whalen. Also on his way and still virtually unknown was Allen Ginsberg’s friend Jack Kerouac (Suiter 135). Although Kerouac wouldn’t read at the Six Gallery, he would be



Figure 22: Philip Whalen at Sourdough Mountain lookout.



Figure 23: Jack Kerouac on the occasion of Gary Snyder's going away party, shortly before his stay on Desolation Peak.

a conspicuous presence there, as he would recall in his book *The Dharma Bums* (13). The night would mark “the birth of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance” according to Kerouac (Dharma 13), and by some, “the first synthesis of the East and West Coast factions of the Beat Generation” (Suiter 148). The weeks leading up to the event would also mark the beginning Whalen and Snyder's friendship with Kerouac. Snyder's friendship in particular would be a guiding force for Kerouac over the next few years. Snyder would widen Kerouac's knowledge of Han Shan, the “Chinese scholar who got sick of the big city and the world and took off to hide in the mountains” (Dharma 18). He would go on to dedicate *The Dharma Bums* to Han Shan, who would in a sense become a model for the Beat Movement, leaving the consumer world behind for a simpler life. Snyder would also introduce Kerouac to the beauty of the mountains, on a trip up Matterhorn Peak in the Sierra Nevadas, also related in *The Dharma Bums*. Between learning about Han Shan, being introduced to the beauty and purity of the mountains, and listening to Snyder and Whalen describe the North Cascades' evocative landscape (Suiter 168), Kerouac would become entranced by the idea of becoming a lookout himself. In fact, Suiter also cites Kerouac's yearning for such an experience a number of years before, even describing his desire to become a “Thoreau of the Mountains” (169).

By early 1956, Jack Kerouac wrote to Snyder about his assignment as the following summer's lookout at Desolation Peak. Snyder would excitedly write back about the many things he would experience in the North Cascades. In the late spring Kerouac would hitchhike his way back out to the west coast for several weeks in San Francisco, spending time with Snyder before finally hitchhiking north to the ranger station in Marblemount. Though he wrote the most famous accounts of the lookouts,

Kerouac was also the most out of place in them. Almost constantly on the move otherwise, Kerouac sought work as a lookout at the urging of Snyder and Whalen, partially as an attempt to ground his life and hold a real and regular job for a change. His account of Desolation Peak in *The Dharma Bums* highlights the beauty and “dreamlikeness” (184) that he felt there, but glosses over struggles with loneliness that he also experienced. The deeper account of his stay in *Desolation Angels* would remark, “[f]or the trouble with Desolation, is, no characters, alone, isolated” (14). His own purpose in becoming a lookout sheds some light on exactly what he found there. Rather than looking specifically to commune with nature, his constant search for meaning in life led him to “come face to face with [himself]” (Desolation 4).

Kerouac’s experience was by far the most complex of the three, blending times of extreme loneliness with periods of exhilaration and amazement at his surroundings. Unlike both Snyder and Whalen, Kerouac would not return for future seasons. Upon returning he would find that while spiritually enlightening, “the vision of the freedom of eternity which [he] saw and which all wilderness hermitage saints have seen, is of little use in cities” (Kerouac, *Desolation* 73).

That all of these authors and others have chosen to spend time in lookouts is clearly a result of the freedoms, quiet, and isolation present. What is striking are the similarities and variations their experiences contained. Inevitably, all of them gained a new appreciation for the place they inhabited, an appreciation whose depth could only be gained through lengthy occupation of their given site. Through their isolation, each would also take significant time to look inwards towards themselves, reevaluating their own lives and place in the world, even as they looked outwards onto the landscape. While the mountains in all their ruggedness was a primary draw for Snyder,

“Yes, for I’d thought, in June, hitch hiking up there to the Skagit Valley in northwest Washington for my fire lookout job “When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves on mules and I’m alone I will come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain” but instead I’d come face to face with myself, no liquor, no drugs, no chance of faking it but face to face with ole Hateful Duluoze Me. . .” (4)

– Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*

for Whalen the landscape was a pleasant and enjoyable side note for a summer of virtually uninterrupted freedom to read and write. Hardy, though not a mountaineer in Snyder's sense, was outdoorsy enough that her summer on Tatoosh was an opportunity to become better acquainted with nature. For Kerouac, the real purpose was inward, but he would also find significant inspiration in his surroundings, especially Mount Hozomeen, referred to in both *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels* as "the void." The mountain would be a primary fixture of his experience there, and an object of meditation throughout his summer there.



Figure 24: The view south from Desolation Peak Lookout. Ross Lake is to the right and 4,500 feet below, and Jack Mountain is to the left with Nohokomeen Glacier clearly visible.

Outside of the Washington Cascades, a number of other authors have chosen to work as lookouts. In 1919 Norman Maclean, author of *A River Runs Through It* would work in part as a lookout during his summer working for the Forest Service. Edward Abbey, the outspoken environmentalist and author of *Desert Solitaire* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, would spend a number of summers as a lookout during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in his beloved southwest. In particular, Abbey is frequently compared to Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, due to the deep connection to the natural environment that comes through in his writings. More recently, authors Phillip Connors and Don Scheese have written books sharing their experiences as lookouts over a number of years. In all cases the authors choose the line of work in part due to a desire for the peace and quiet available, and in all cases an increased value of the environment and sense of connection has been a key result.

## The Experience of Place

In order to properly examine the experience of each author, as well as how others might experience these places, it became necessary to examine some of the philosophy about how one experiences place. While each place has its own character and is visually the same for anyone present at a given time, each lookout or author also brought their own experiences and perspectives with them that would help to shape their understanding of the place they inhabited.

Allen Carlson, a prominent philosopher on the subject of environmental aesthetics, proposes that one's environment can be perceived in essentially three ways; as individual natural objects or phenomena, as picturesque views, or finally as an encompassing environment. Whereas aesthetics typically refers to man-made objects, especially art, we also perceive beauty in the natural environment, thereby attaching human values to it. While man-made objects of appreciation have a finite scale, however, aesthetics concerning one's environment refers to something encompassing and almost without scale. Likewise, the aesthetics of an environment deals with something within which the viewer exists, rather than as separate entities (Carlson xvii). Environments have at times existed outside the realm of aesthetic philosophy in part because of the fact that often there is no designer or artist responsible. Without human intention present in their creation, they have been perceived to be without aesthetic value of their (Carlson xviii).

In his book *Aesthetics and the Environment*, Allen Carlson notes that the aesthetic enjoyment of nature in Western cultures can be traced back to Petrarch, for whom climbing mountains held particular meaning through the enjoyment of their vistas (3). Religious associations prior to the Renaissance had dictated the belief that

“Viewing the environment as a seamless unity of organisms, perceptions, and places, the engagement model beckons us to immerse ourselves in our natural environment in an attempt to obliterate traditional dichotomies such as subject and object, and ultimately to reduce to as small a degree as possible the distance between ourselves and nature. In short, aesthetic experience is taken to involve a total immersion of the appreciator in the object of appreciation” (7).

- Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*

“Whether he [an American] beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic—explores the central wilds of this vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is still in the midst of American scenery—it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity—all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!”

– Thomas Cole, from *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages* (878)



Figure 25: *The Oxbow*, by Thomas Cole, from 1836.

wilderness was wild and unvirtuous, and mankind was tasked with taming it. According to Carlson, “[it] took the rise of a secular science and equally secular art forms to free nature from such associations and thereby open it for aesthetic appreciation.”(3) By the period of the Enlightenment during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, critical thinking and science had brought about the new belief in the “rationality [of] the physical world” (Gardner 836) that would allow for artistic depictions of the landscape.

As science and philosophy had searched to develop a new understanding of the natural world, art reflected that newfound interest in nature in landscape paintings. Especially as the Romanticist Period took over from the Enlightenment, depictions of the landscape took on emotional characteristics beyond the literal depiction of landscape views. As the nineteenth century progressed, the Industrial Revolution would push a new concept of the natural environment as virtuous, as civilization became synonymous with pollution and social inequalities associated with industrialization. In England, John Constable and William Turner’s works would become some of the most significant depictions of the landscape, while in the United States the most significant works were those of the Hudson River School. Exemplary among these was *The Oxbow* by Thomas Cole, from 1836, which highlighted the beauty of the untamed wilderness against agricultural lands in Northampton, Massachusetts. By depicting natural landscapes with the emotional charge artists felt, the work conveyed the aesthetic value such places possessed.

Contemporary to Thomas Cole was naturalist and painter John James Audubon, who would pursue both a scientific and aesthetic interest in the birds and animals of North America. His magnum opus *Birds of America*, completed in 1839, would be widely published, fueled by the contemporary interest in nature. Like other naturalists,

the art he produced focused on specific species, with any background providing a backdrop rather than a focal point of the art. While objective in nature, his works also inspire an admiration for the beauty present in nature.

The two artistic themes of landscape and naturalist paintings directly correspond to Carlson's landscape and object models of appreciating the natural environment, which he also refers to as "subjective" and "objective" models (xix). The concept that nature can be viewed in these different ways acknowledges the different scales at which we can observe it, from the level of species to ecosystem. Carlson pushes the idea that the final way of appreciating nature, through a position of immersion in it, is the only true way to fully appreciate it. He refers to this model as the "engagement" model of appreciation.

While each form of appreciation can be separated out as distinct, what is also interesting within the "engagement" model is that each of the other types of appreciation can also be present. Lookouts, even as they learned to love the environment they were immersed in, would also find distinct views within that environment particularly appealing, along with individual objects or phenomena. That an overarching appreciation of place through immersion is somehow superior to other ways of appreciating nature perhaps simplifies the question too far. The complexities of individual species and beauty present within their specific adaptations is a remarkable thing on its own, and cannot be fully appreciated when considering an all-enveloping environment. Likewise, the unique qualities within a specific view are lost when the greater environment is considered or specific objects picked out. That a true appreciation for nature and place involves a combination of these scales as well as the shifting back and forth between them becomes clear when their individual values and



Figure 26: Barn Owl, from the folio Birds of America by John James Audubon, from 1833.

disadvantages are considered.

One disadvantage to the “engagement” model is the fact that total immersion may become overwhelming. As Carlson puts it, “in attempting to eliminate any distance between ourselves and nature, the engagement model may lose that by reason of which the resultant experience is aesthetic. . . within the Western tradition the very notion of the aesthetic is conceptually tied to disinterestedness and the idea of distance between the appreciator and the appreciated” (Carlson, *Aesthetics* 7). While the placement of a structure might otherwise be considered a barrier to immersion in a place, the structure may in fact create the perceptual distance necessary to aesthetically appreciate it, especially during inclement weather. For lookouts then, appreciation of their place was in fact enhanced in a way by the fact that they were housed within a structure. Tactile experience of the site was had every time they walked out of their structure, while a visual connection to it was always available.



Figure 27: Approaching the summit of Desolation Peak at dawn.

## Conclusion

While developed for a completely utilitarian purpose, the fact that writers gravitated towards lookouts from early in their development is no surprise. Even as authors sought lookouts largely as an isolated place in which to write, however, the spaces also provided authors with a unique sense of connection to their greater environment. As the spaces continue to be lost, their ability to provide the unique experience they provided is also being lost. In a world where technology and widespread development has only increased the level of separation we feel from the natural environment, the ability to retreat to a space in the wilderness offers a valuable experience.

Allan Carlson's three approaches to appreciating the natural environment offer a useful framework with which to understand both the scales at which it can be appreciated, and how different people may appreciate it. It perhaps falls short of a broader understanding of experience in which people mix the various scales within their day to day experience. Even as each author had their own distinct experience of the natural environment, those experiences also spanned the scale from animal tracks and fauna to geologic and celestial scales. Snyder's experience most closely fit the "engagement" model, while Whalen seemed to fit the "subjective" and Kerouac the "objective" models. Each model holds a significant level of validity then, and in fact may even constitute a necessary facet of one's environmental experience in order to truly appreciate it fully.

Possibly the most important environmentalist in the history of the United States was John Muir. While aesthetics may strike one as frivolous when considering the value of our natural environment, their value as a key to how we learn to appreciate

"Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten" (XIX).

- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*



Figure 28: One of three Sooty Grouse spotted at the summit of Desolation Peak.

the natural environment and then transfer that into our own ethical actions is actually quite critical. Aesthetics on their own may seem self-serving, but the love of place that they inspire is anything but. For John Muir, aesthetic appreciation for the natural environment formed a key aspect of his ethical framework for trying to save our country's wilderness. If anyone can be said to have appreciated the natural environment using the "engagement" model, it would be Muir, for whom week-long trips in the Sierra Nevada Mountains were not uncommon, and for whom particularly inclement weather was an opportunity to more fully experience the place. In his book *The Mountains of California*, he would describe numerous trips of his through the wilderness, fully immersing himself in it, and yet, explanations of the beauty of the place span each scale. In the chapter *A Near View of the High Sierra* he would describe the evening in particular. "This was the alpenglow, to me one of the most impressive of all the terrestrial manifestations of God. At the touch of this divine light, the mountains seemed to kindle to a rapt, religious consciousness, and stood hushed and waiting like devout worshippers" (57) Clearly an aesthetic appreciation contributed more than simply a passing pleasure, but for him what can be qualified as a religious zeal to protect our natural environment. Chapter 14 in the same book, titled *The Wild Sheep*, would take on a naturalist's viewpoint, preaching his intense admiration for the hearty animals.

While not associated with the environmental movement, it may be noted that just as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau took significant inspiration from nature, so did the philosopher Martin Heidegger. From his cabin in the Black Forest Mountains he would look out on the green hillsides and observe their distinct changes in light and mood throughout the day, even making the statement, "My whole work is sustained and guided by the world of these mountains and their people . . . People in the city

often wonder whether one gets lonely up in the mountains . . . But it isn't loneliness, it is solitude . . . Solitude has the peculiar and original power of not isolating us but projecting our whole existence out into the vast nearness of the presence [Wesen] of all things." The translation in contemporary times of that appreciation for place into an ethic concerned with its protection is not a significant stretch, and supports the idea that fostering an emotional connection to the natural environment is an important step towards its protection.

That first-hand knowledge of the mountains and their ecology plays a significant role in creating a wilderness ethic isn't a new concept either, but one that has played out in numerous ways. Already present near the south end of Ross Lake is the North Cascades Institute, which is devoted to educating people about the natural environment as a way of building appreciation for it. That the institute was formed in the 1980s as the environmental movement was gaining traction is no coincidence. Strong support for conservation, unsurprisingly, also comes from mountaineering organizations including the Mazamas, for whom the mountains provide a recreational resource, if not a spiritual one as well.



Figure 29: Panorama from the site of the original Devils Dome lookout.



# A New Typology

## Devils Dome

Today, in the face of so few lookout structures still fulfilling their original function, the ability of people to dwell in the spaces they provided for extended periods has largely been lost. The connection to the natural environment those spaces historically provided their occupants is clear from the literature they inspired, yet today, as people have become increasingly estranged from their natural environment, that need is even greater. The restoration and maintenance of existing structures provides the valuable service of introducing people to these wild places, but it fails to restore the ability of people to become intimately familiar with the place through extended occupation.

That the North Cascades were particularly significant in the literary history of lookouts made them a natural choice for where to place a new structure to re-establish that literary tradition. That many of the original lookouts have since been destroyed in turn means that a number of former lookout sites are now empty, and all have trails leading to them. Placing a new structure on one of these sites also creates a direct connection to the lookout tradition that inspired the new space.

The area is also holds remarkable beauty, with rugged hillsides leading up to bare mountaintops above the tree-line, and a variety of distinct alpine ecosystems. For hikers in particular, the Devils Dome loop is popular for spending approximately 20 miles above the tree-line. The most significant mountains in the area include Jack Mountain northwest of the smaller but impressively rugged Crater Mountain. Mount Hozomeen's twin summits are visible throughout the area, and while the individual lookout sites aren't necessarily as impressive from a distance, they were often sited at

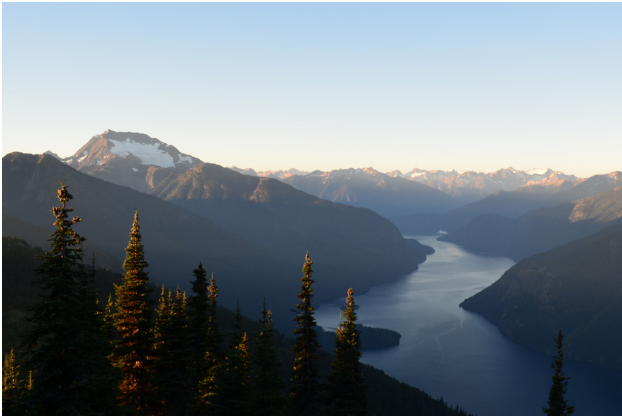


Figure 30: Ross Lake and Jack Mountain from Desolation Peak.

the crest of long ridgelines whose slopes off either side tend to fall off quite steeply.

Among the lookouts that were occupied by authors, Sauk Mountain is the furthest west at the edge of the North Cascades area, with the dense mountains of the North Cascades on the east, Puget Sound and farmland to the west, and the Skagit River and Highway 20 immediately south. Sourdough Mountain is just west of Ross Lake's south end, while Crater Mountain is almost due east on the opposite side of the lake. Desolation Peak is towards the north end of the lake on its eastern side. Each of these lookouts is within 40 miles of the others, defining a distinct region in which their narratives and poems took place.

Today, Sauk Mountain and both lookout sites on Crater Mountain are now bare, while both Sourdough Mountain and Desolation Peak continue to host lookouts each summer in their ground-mounted L-4 model cabins. While Sauk Mountain was considered as a project site, it proved too heavily trafficked by day hikers, being only a two-mile hike from the trailhead to the lookout site. Despite its remarkable view, the site would offer neither the sense of isolation or solitude that an author would look for. Crater Mountain on the other hand is further from the trailhead, but now looks down on Highway 20 to the southeast. While the site would provide an impressive location for a new writer's cabin, the site fell out of use by lookouts immediately following Snyder's stay there in part because of how difficult it was to reach. A fixed rope was necessary to safely scale a particularly exposed section of climbing, and bringing food and supplies to the site required a hoist to haul it up. Its height of more than 8,000 feet also meant the summit was quite barren, suffered from particularly difficult weather, and as a lookout was less useful because clouds often surrounded it when lower lookouts had full visibility.



Figure 31: On the Devils Dome Trail near its intersection with the Jackita Ridge Trail.

Centrally located between Crater Mountain, Sourdough Mountain, and Desolation Peak is the former Devil's Dome lookout site. The site was developed in 1935 as a secondary lookout with a ground-mounted 10x10 foot L-5 model hipped-roof cabin. Despite its status as a secondary lookout, it would be regularly manned through the 1950s before being abandoned in 1968 (Kressek 128). With a summit at 6,982 feet, Devils Dome has a remarkable view of the surrounding mountains, and has a direct line of site to Desolation Peak, Sourdough Mountain, and Crater Mountain, along with Slate Peak lookout to the east. The site is far enough from any roads to ensure the sense of isolation necessary to gain a true sense of immersion in the wilderness. While the Devils Dome trail is popular with backpackers, traffic is still light enough that a structure sited strategically would still provide the author with plenty of privacy.



Figure 32: Looking east from Devils Dome, the southern slopes of Devils Ridge is forested and has a variety of alpine foliage, while the northern slopes are extremely steep and rocky.

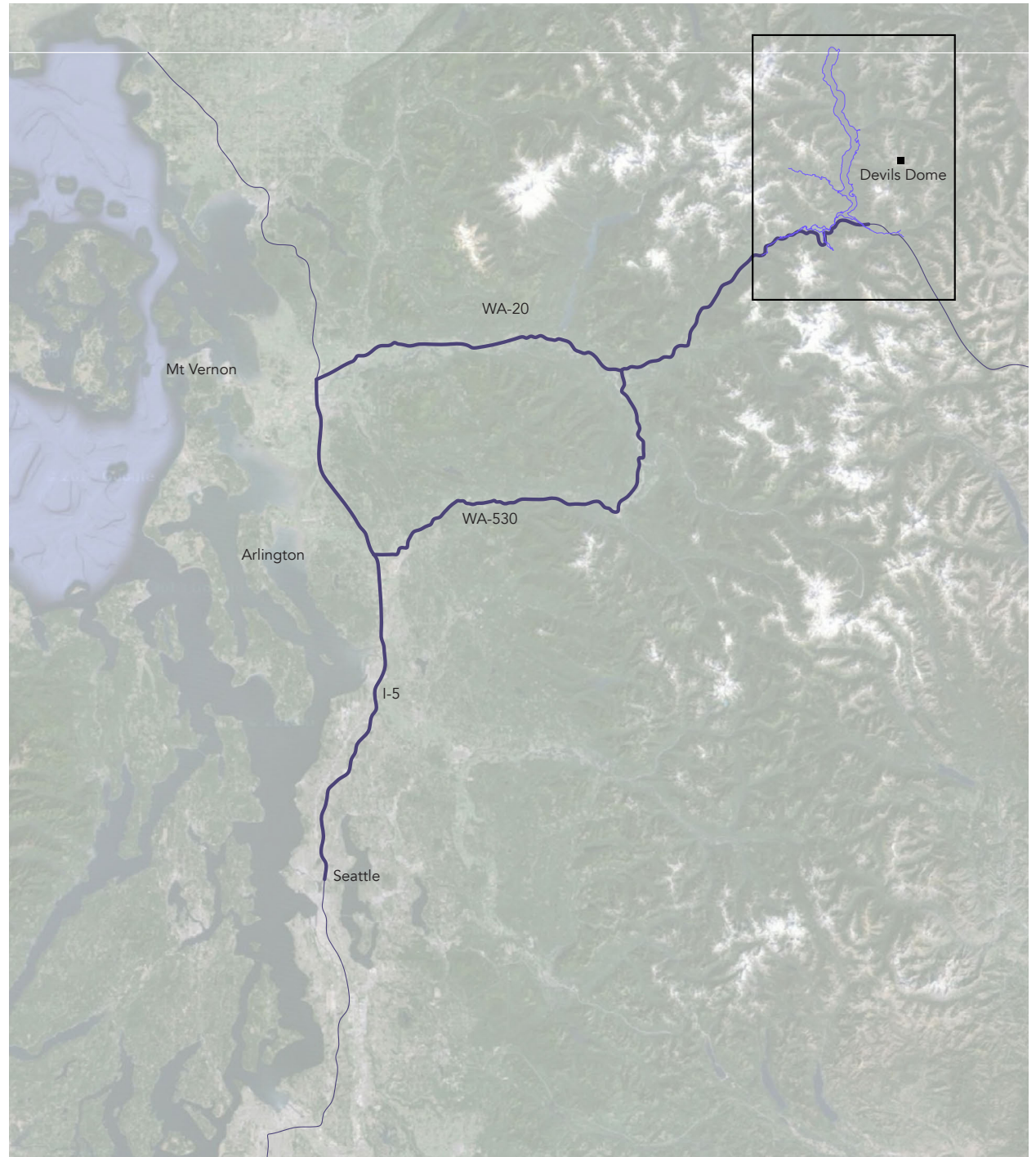
The site also provides a prime balance between visual scenery and site connections. Less than a mile to the west along the Devils Dome Trail a stream flows year round, with lush vegetation adjacent to it. Situated along a substantial east-west oriented ridgeline, the slope to the south falls off fairly steeply to the south, with a mix of high alpine foliage and small trees on the southern slope. The northern slope falls off quite steeply, and is largely devoid of foliage and is composed mostly of rock outcroppings and scree. To the east, the trail leads to Devils junction, where following the right hand trail follows the Jackita Ridge Trail, while the trail to the left leads to the Pacific Crest Trail less than ten miles away, so day hikes from the site are a distinct possibility.

Figure 33: The former lookout site as it exists now. Several of the former foundation stones can be seen with holes bored through them, and some of the steel lightning protection is still present.



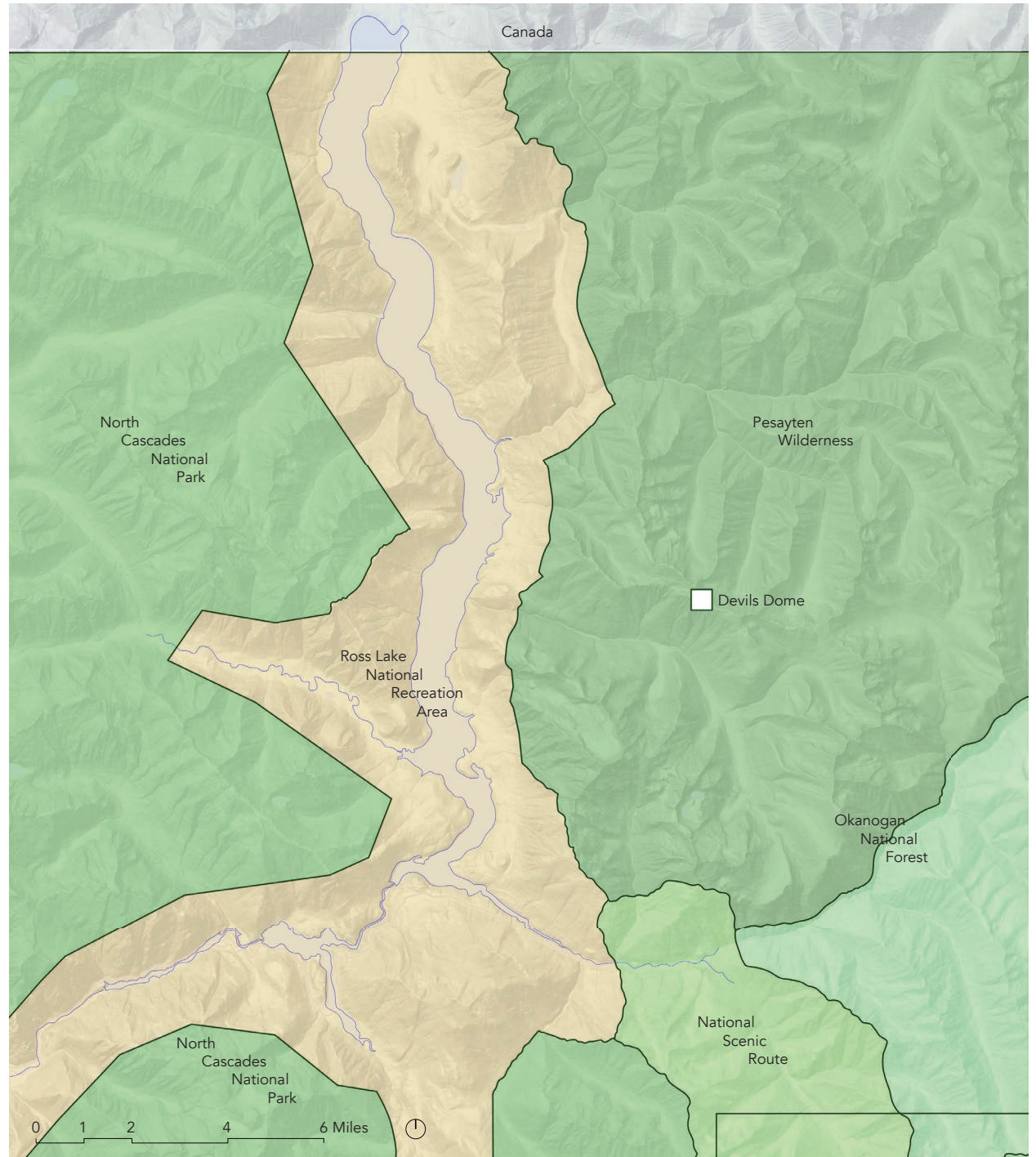
## Location

The Devils Dome site is located approximately 100 miles northeast of Seattle. Trailheads to hike to the site are reached via interstate five and highway twenty.



## Land Designation

Devils Dome is within the Pesayten Wilderness, which is a subdivision of the Okanogan National Forest. To the west are the Ross Lake National Recreation Area and the North Cascades National Park, while land around highway twenty to the south is also protected as a National Scenic Route.

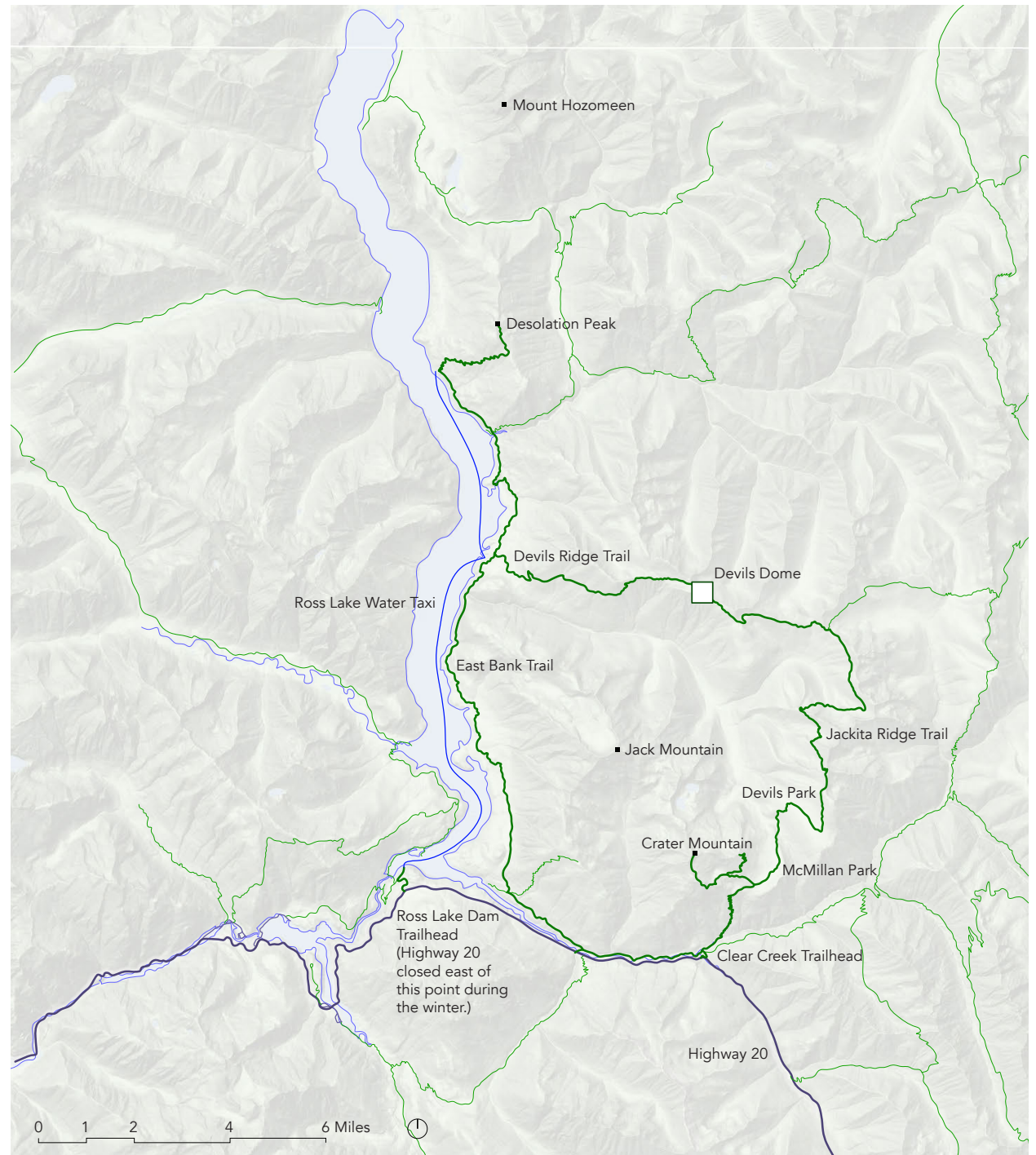


## Roads and Trails

Highway 20 to the south is the only major road in the vicinity. Roads off of it only serve dams and camping areas adjacent to the highway, which is closed east of the Ross Lake Dam Trailhead during the winter.

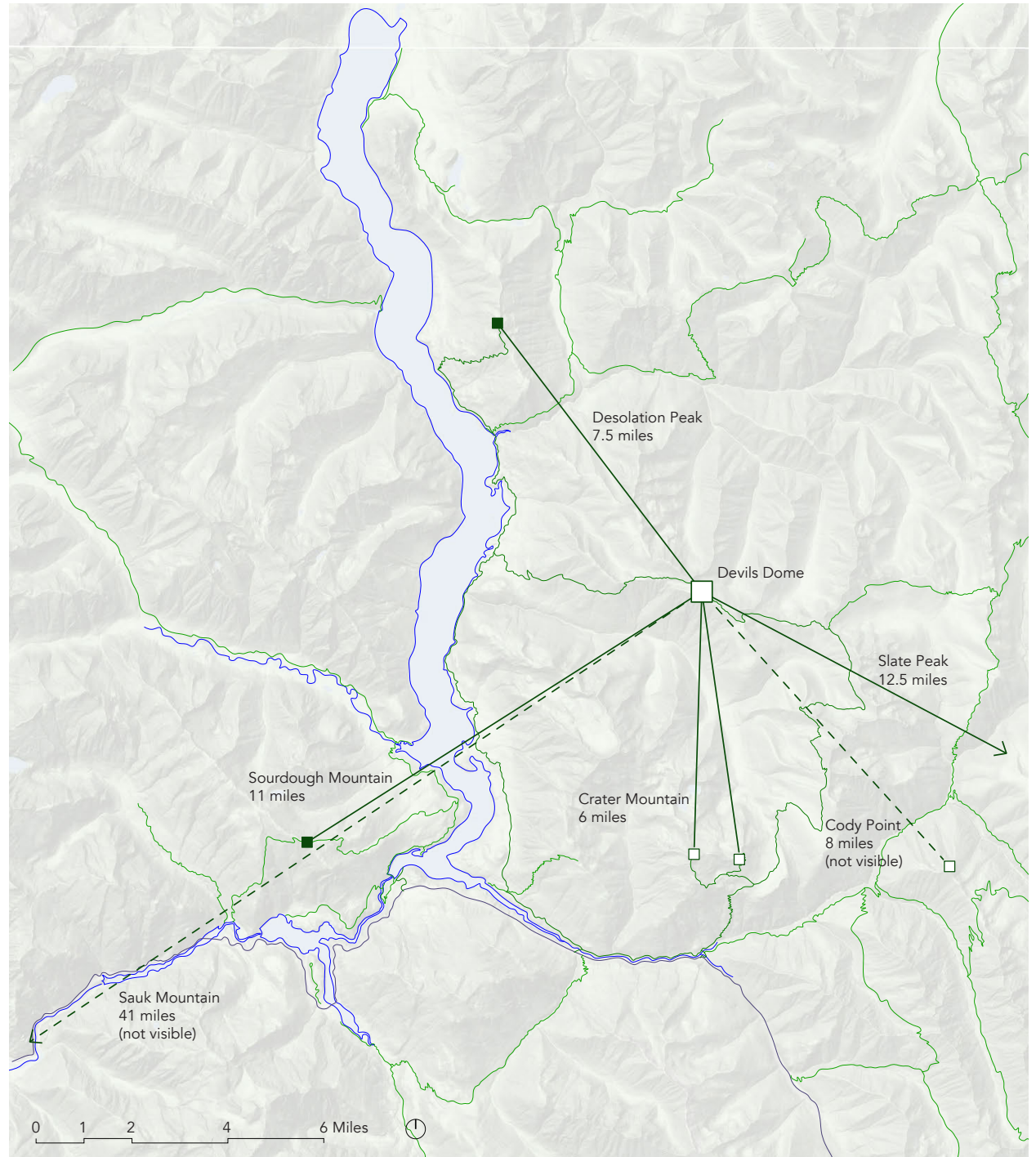
Boat traffic on the lake is limited, although a water taxi service allows trailheads up and down both sides of the lake to be reached.

Trail systems in the area are significant. Devils Dome can be reached from the south via the Jackita Ridge Trail and Devils Dome Trail, or via the Devils Dome Trail from Ross Lake. The Popular Devils Dome Loop is often completed as a counter-clockwise loop from Clear Creek Trailhead and including the East Bank Trail near Ross Lake.



## Nearby Lookouts

Devils Dome is located near a number of other lookout locations, and was originally set up as a secondary lookout. Sourdough Mountain, Desolation Peak, and Slate Peak lookouts are all still intact and visible from the site. Crater Mountains two lookouts have both been destroyed, but both were visible from the site. Cody Point and Sauk Mountain lookouts are no longer intact, and their sites are obscured by other land masses.



Western Approach from Ross Lake

The most likely approach for those getting packed in at the beginning of the summer is via Ross Lake. A short hike is taken from Highway 20 to reach the water taxi dock, the boat travels 8.5 miles north on the lake, and the hike in from there is 8 miles long, with just shy of 5,400 feet of elevation gain.



Figure 38: On the right is Devils Dome, viewed from the west.

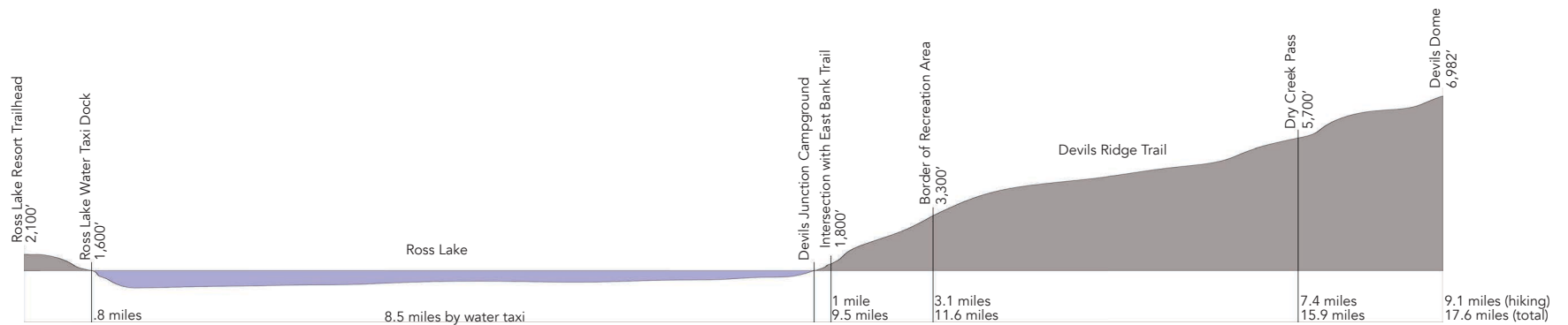


Figure 39: Elevation changes for Ross Lake route.

## Devils Dome via Jackita Ridge

The more popular route to the site is along Jackita Ridge. From Clear Creek Trailhead Canyon Creek is crossed within the first mile and the trail briefly parallels the creek before climbing the majority of the route's elevation over the next four miles. McMillan Park is a lush high wetlands area, while Devils Park is approximately level with the tree-line and is made up of high alpine meadows, and the trail stays mostly above tree-line through to Devils Dome.



Figure 40: Approaching Devils Dome from the east.

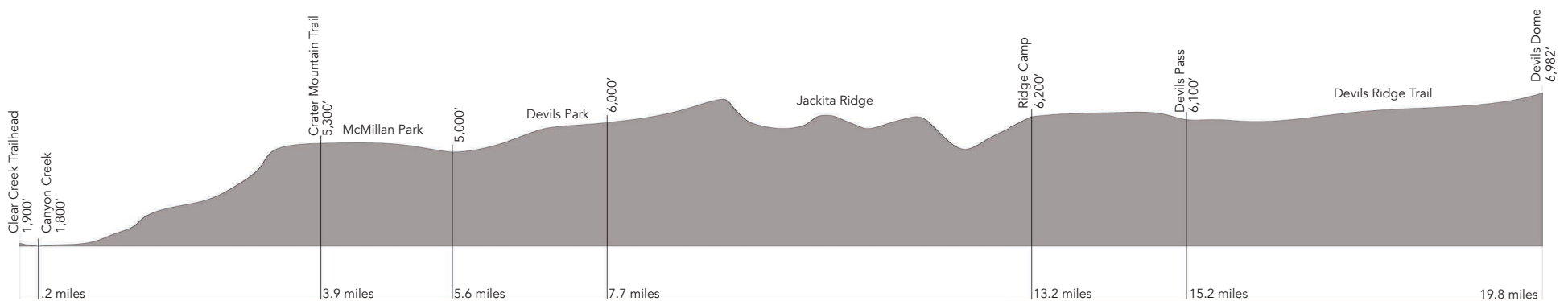


Figure 41: Elevation changes for the Jackita Ridge route.

## Writers Cabins

In designing a space for writing, the program developed to reflect an understanding of the experience of place. In this distinct area of the North Cascades, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Jack Kerouac all spent time, but only Snyder and Whalen were present simultaneously; during the summer of 1953. During that summer, however, they utilized the open radio hour in the evenings to talk back and forth and share their work and daily experiences with each other. While isolation and solitude were key draws of the space, periodic contact with others also constituted a necessary outlet, especially creatively. While Kerouac would listen to the evening conversations when he was present in 1956, he rarely took part, and lamented the fact that neither Whalen nor Snyder were present that summer, leaving him without any of his creative contacts with which to share his thoughts. While isolation and solitude constituted necessary aspects of the experience, the ability to creatively collaborate suggested by the radio hour and especially the creative relationship the three authors shared pointed the way for the creation of three separate writers spaces.

That each of the three authors had a distinct perspective on the natural environment, roughly relating to Allan Carlson's writings, suggested the idea that each writer space would highlight one of those types of experience. That each author would still experience each scale of experience is still enabled, yet each space highlights one as the primary experience.

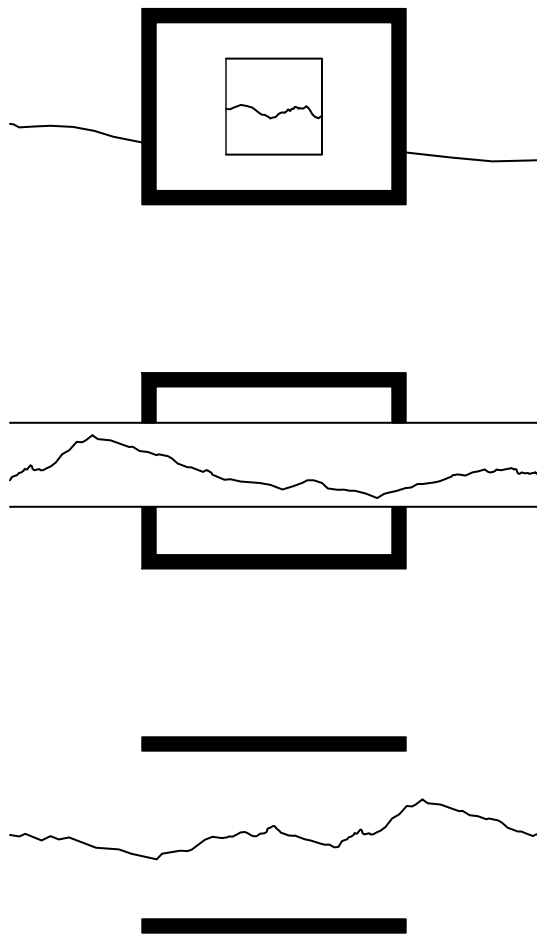
In order to support three distinct experiences with the necessary isolation to experience a level of solitude, three individual cabins became an integral part of the scheme. By placing the structures below the level of the summit, the structures would gain a level of separation through the use of the natural topography, while the

"I was trying to see the mountains but only occasional gaps in the blowing fog would reveal distant dim shapes." (183)

- Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

Figure 42, Opposite: Aerial view of the site from the southwest, with the trail in the foreground. Even during the summer, the weather would not always be idyllic, and dense fog or rain will at times be a fact of life on the site.





panoramic view from the summit would remain unobstructed. While each structure has a view spanning more than 180 degrees out from their site, the ability to provide a full 360 degree panoramic viewpoint helped support the idea for integral roof decks, an amenity that also allows backpackers the ability to conceptually and physically walk “out into the view.” The experience references the experience lookouts had, but also provides a new experience of the site, raising one above the site itself, and highlighting the immense space of the surrounding environment. By situating those roof decks as three separate walkways radiating out from the original lookout foundation stones, the site lines of the original lookout are referenced, while their positioning on axis with the former literary lookouts creates a visual connection to the legacy of the area.

The original lookout foundation stones would be repositioned to reference the plan of the original structure, and to provide a sort of council ring where the three authors and any visiting backpackers could engage each other. By orienting the decks towards the other lookout sites, they also reference the connection lookouts had to one another, often for weeks or months at a time speaking to no one other than those whose peaks they looked out at.

During the winter months, the writers scholarship program would receive applications for each of the three writers spaces. Each cabin would hold an individual scholarship application program, geared towards authors whose interests lie in the natural sciences, philosophical interests, and outdoor interests. By choosing authors whose interests and character are roughly in line with the individual huts and each other, the site becomes a small creative campus each summer where authors are invited to work on individual projects with the opportunity to collaborate with each other.

Figure 43, Above: Diagrams describing the spatial experience of the Allan Carlson’s three approaches to the natural environment, the “objective,” “subjective,” and “engagement,” from top to bottom respectively. Figure 44, Opposite: Site Plan.

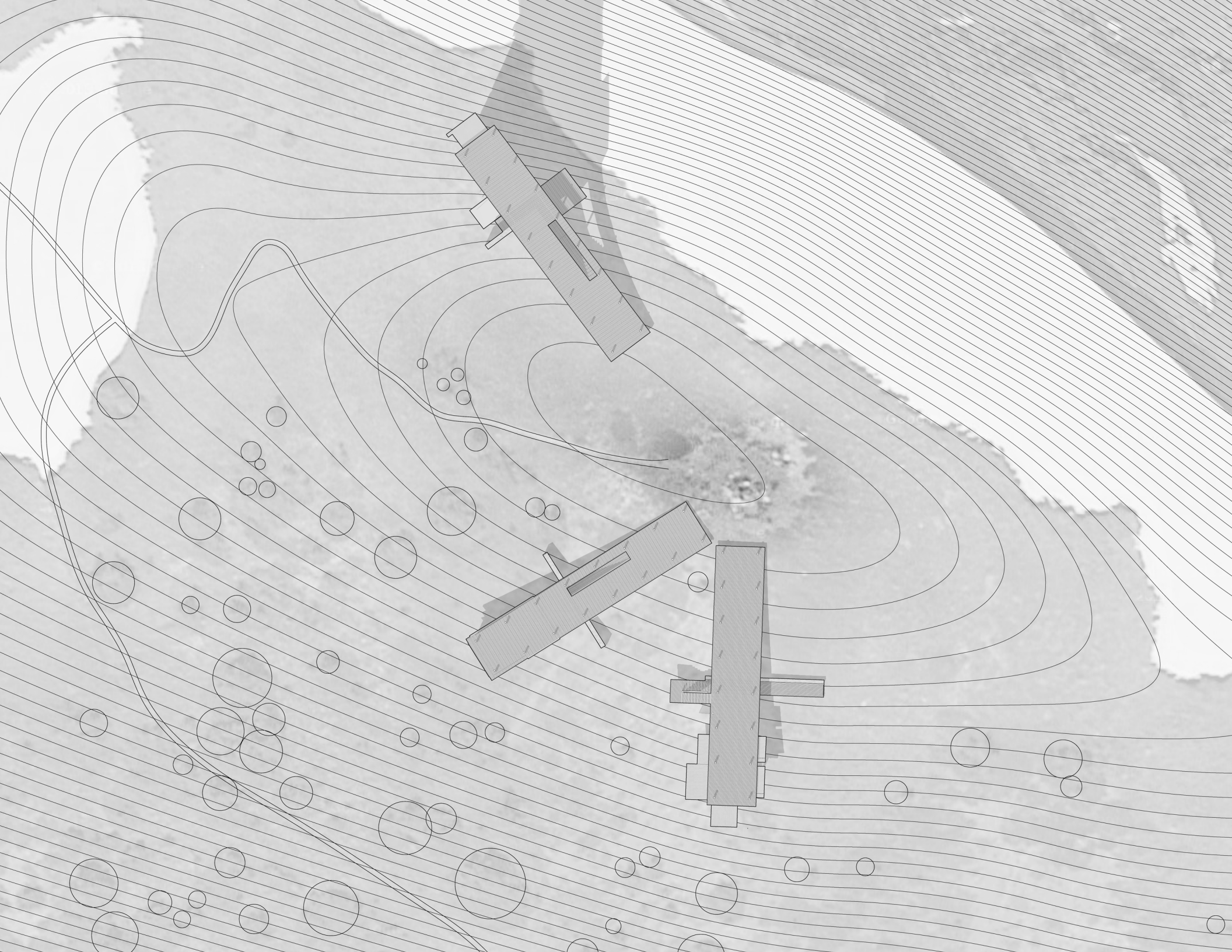
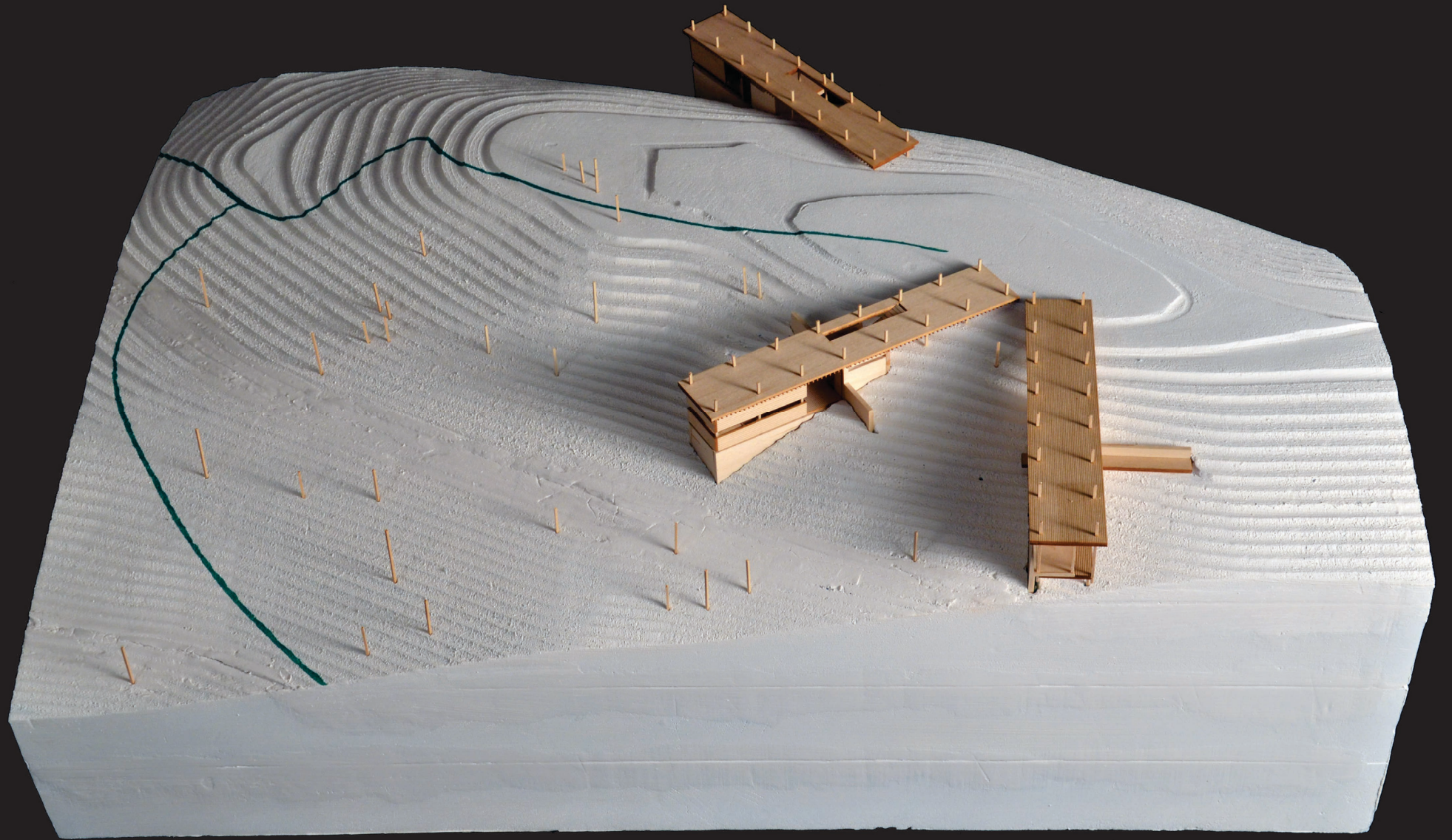


Figure 45, Opposite: Site Model with one foot topographic steps.

While the systems design for the cabins was not the focus of this thesis, the rough systems were drawn out as an integral aspect of the design. Each cabin was designed as two separate spaces. The primary living space includes a desk, bookshelves, a bed or space to lay out a sleeping bag, combination wood stove, oven and cook-top, a space for firewood, and a kitchen area, which would include a small sink and hand-operated marine-style pump faucet. The living spaces are approximately 200 square feet each, approximately the same size as standard lookouts. The secondary support space includes a composting toilet with vent, battery storage for the photo-voltaic system, 300 gallons of water storage; to be collected via rooftop drains, filtered and UV treated, and a shower. Wastewater would be evaporated off trays under the raised cabins.

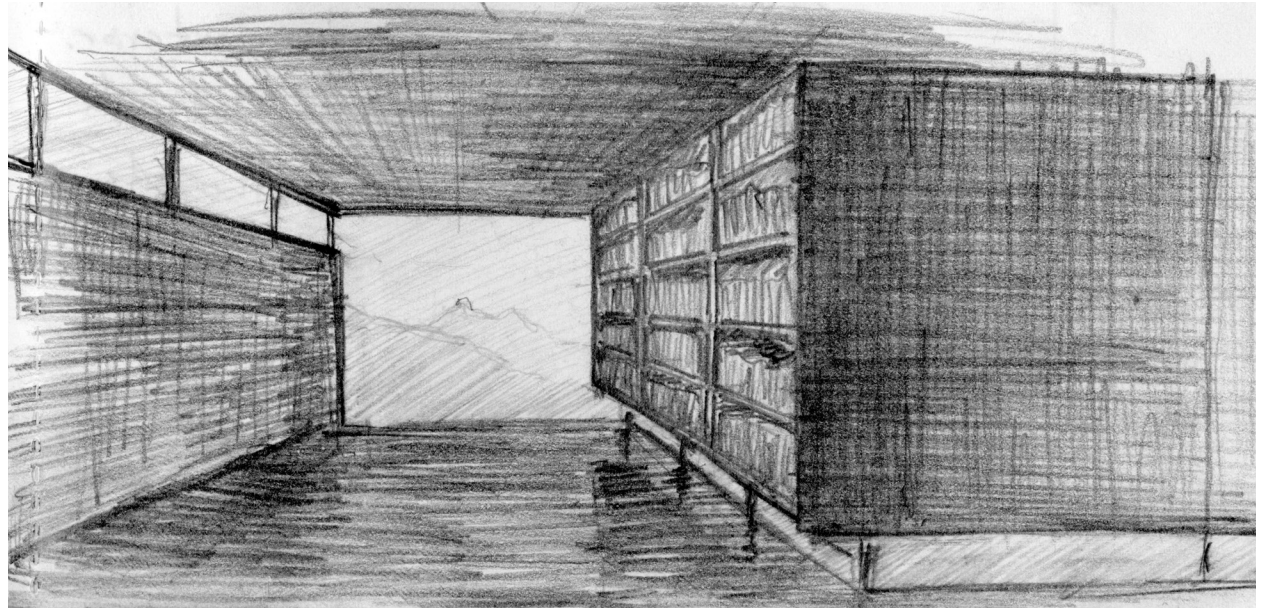
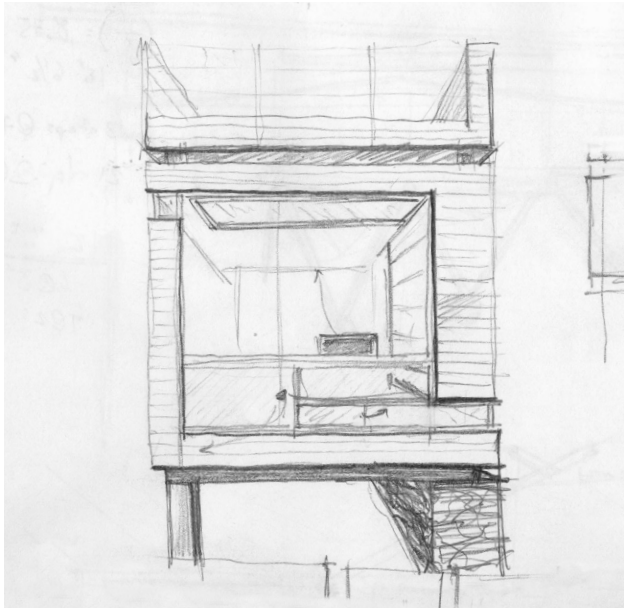
Each cabin includes shutters that flip up to provide a level of shade in the warm parts of the summer, and fix back down to protect the windows during the harsh winter. Railings are provided by extending the structural columns up through the roof decks and attaching steel cables between them. The steel cables are then grounded by secondary cables at multiple locations on each cabin. The railings provide a support to lean against when enjoying the view, but also provide the necessary lightning protection for the cabins.

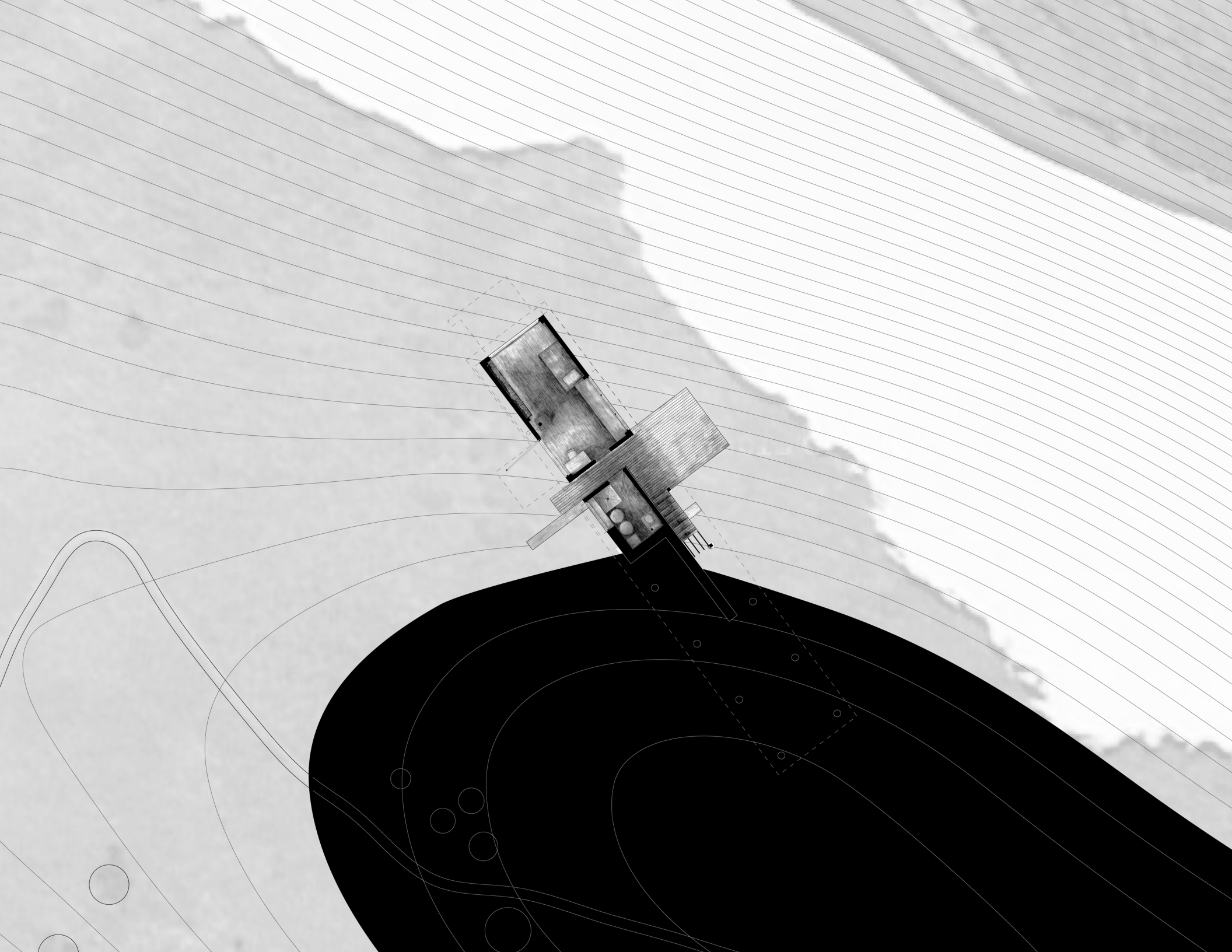


## The Naturalist's Cabin

Originating from the Allen Carlson's "objective" approach to appreciating nature, the first cabin one encounters on the trail to the summit is dedicated to the naturalist's conception of nature as a series of distinct objects and phenomena. The cabin is also influenced in part by Jack Kerouac's experience in the North Cascades, and the focus he placed on Mount Hozomeen, which he referred to as "the void" in both *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*. Expressing two vastly different scales by which one can appreciate the natural environment, the naturalist's cabin takes in one view of Desolation Peak's ridgeline to the northwest with Mt Hozomeen beyond, with their geological scale, and the Devils Dome site itself taking in the scale of local flora adjacent to the cabin.

Figure 46, below left: Study drawing of cabin with a roof deck option that was discarded. Figure 47, below right: The perspective study that would evolve into the final scheme. Figure 48, opposite: Cabin plan.

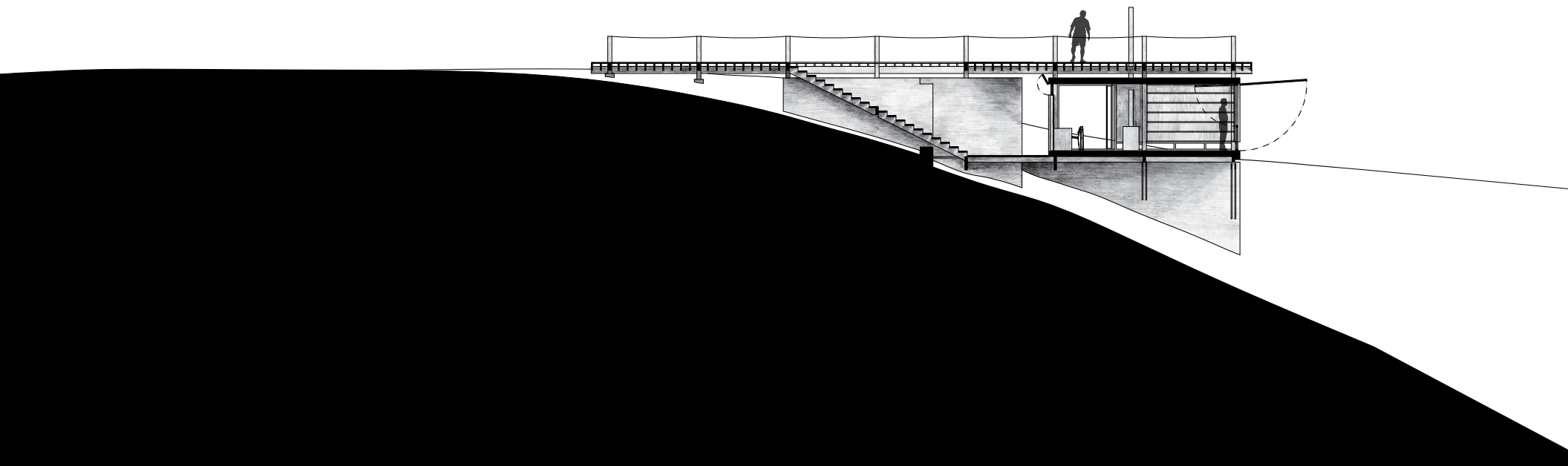




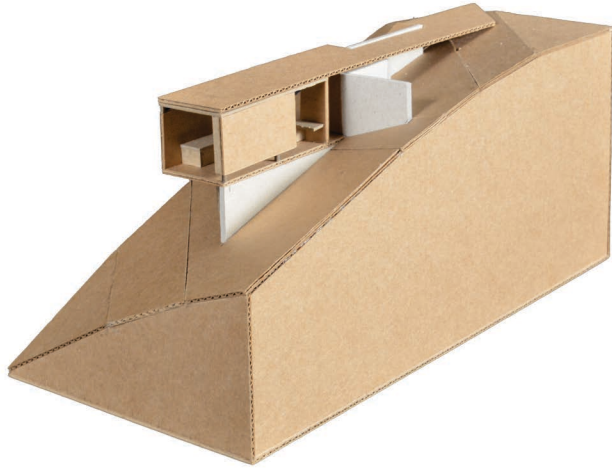
The cabin is reached from the summit by walking out along the roof deck and down a set of stairs to the lower level. To the right, Devils Ridge falls off steeply and ruggedly down rocky cliffs and scree slopes towards the Middle Creek and Grizzly Creek sub-drainages, which both flow into the larger Three Fools Drainage. At the bottom of the stairs, a deck cantilevers out to the northeast over the drop-off, allowing the scale of the space to be appreciated from the author's level. To the left, a breezeway juxtaposes that experience by leading into the grassy Devils Dome hillside with its small shrubs and alpine flowers. Symbolically the breezeway links the geologic scale of the drainage with the intimate scale of the hearty alpine flora.

Figure 49, below: Cabin section. Figure 50, opposite: Perspective of the writer's space, with window looking onto the site adjacent to the cabin.

A door off the southeast side of the breezeway leads into the support and utility space, which is day-lit via a wide clerestory window. On the opposite side of







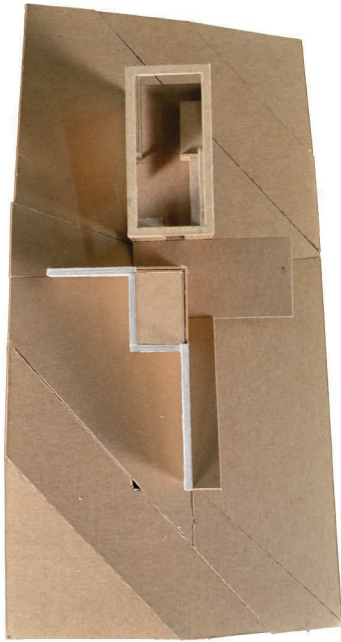
the breezeway, the author is able to enter their living space. A floor-to-ceiling picture window on axis with Desolation Peak views the adjacent ridgelines and Mount Hozomeen in the distance. The upper two thirds of that window-wall hinges in and up to let in the breeze, while the lower window frames provide a railing for the author to lean on. The kitchen and fire-wood storage is on the right, with the bed beyond. During the day if the author chooses to read on the bed with their back on the built-in headboard, they would be oriented in order to take in the whole view. On the right is the built in bookcase, with the stove on the near side of it, and the writing desk is immediately adjacent to the door to the left, with a large pivoting window opening onto the hillside.

While the exterior views juxtapose the drainages with the hillside, the interior views juxtapose the ridgeline and mountains with the hillside. In each case, views are specifically framed to take in a specific experience of the landscape. Mirroring the fact that lookouts took in a panoramic view, the cabin likewise has windows that completely surround the space, however, in this case they are distorted to focus on specific views to the northwest and southwest. Those areas of window are connected via low windows on the southwest, taking in light at the floor level during the afternoon when extra light is less desirable. Clerestory windows on the northeast and southeast sides complete the band of windows around the space, and bring in extra light during the morning. A short window the width of the kitchen space brings light directly onto the counter.

By placing the writing space adjacent to the door and facing inward towards the mountain rather than out, the introspective aspect of being a writer in these spaces is highlighted. Looking out to the right of the desk, a view of the site greets the author, creating a more intimate writing space than in the other cabins.

Figure 51, above: Final Study model, with gray material for the masonry walls. Figure 52, opposite: Perspective looking out towards Mount Hozomeen and Desolation Peak.





Structurally, two 'L' shaped masonry walls create a solid core structure surrounding the footprint of the utility space. Uphill from that space, the masonry extends to ceiling height, which downhill the walls support the utility space, deck, and cabin from below. The masonry provides the primary lateral bracing for the structure. The remaining structure is made out of wood, with concrete footings at the base of columns, not unlike the lookout structures themselves. Cross-bracing for the columns under the cabin help to maintain stiffness side-to-side, while longitudinal stiffness is provided by the structure being anchored to the mountain where the deck meets the summit.

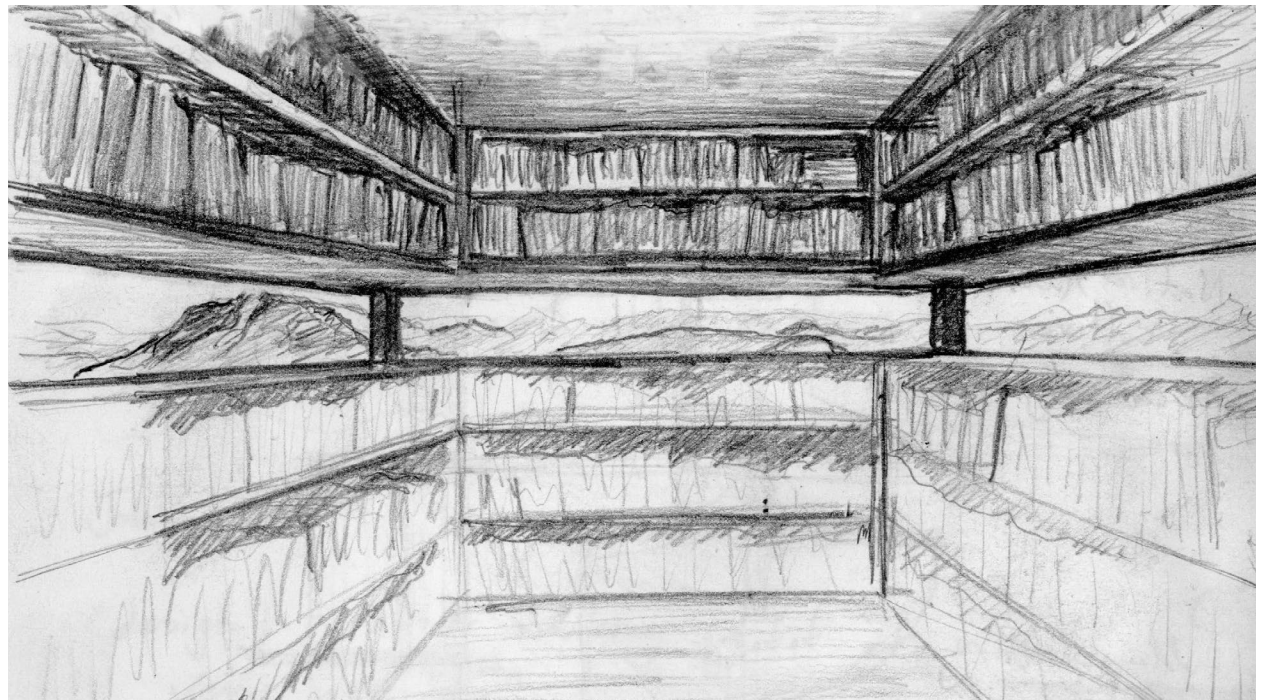
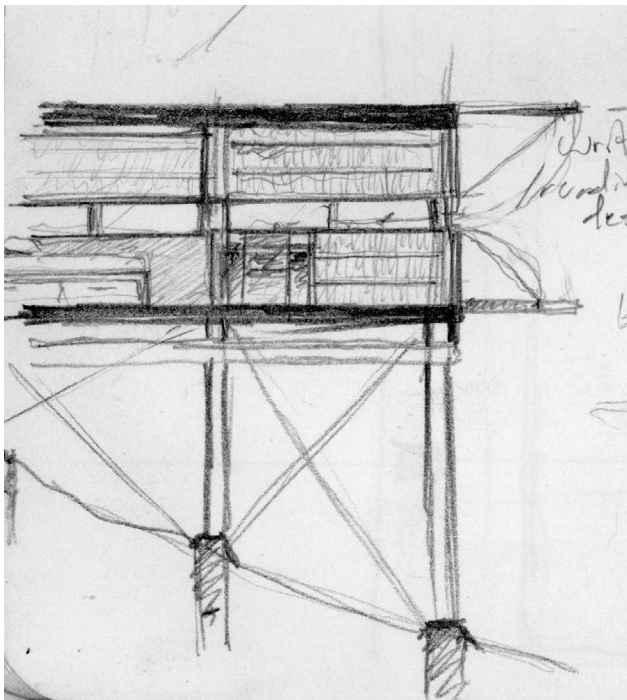
Figure 53, above: Final study model with the roof deck removed . Figure 54, opposite: Perspective from the west during a thunderstorm.

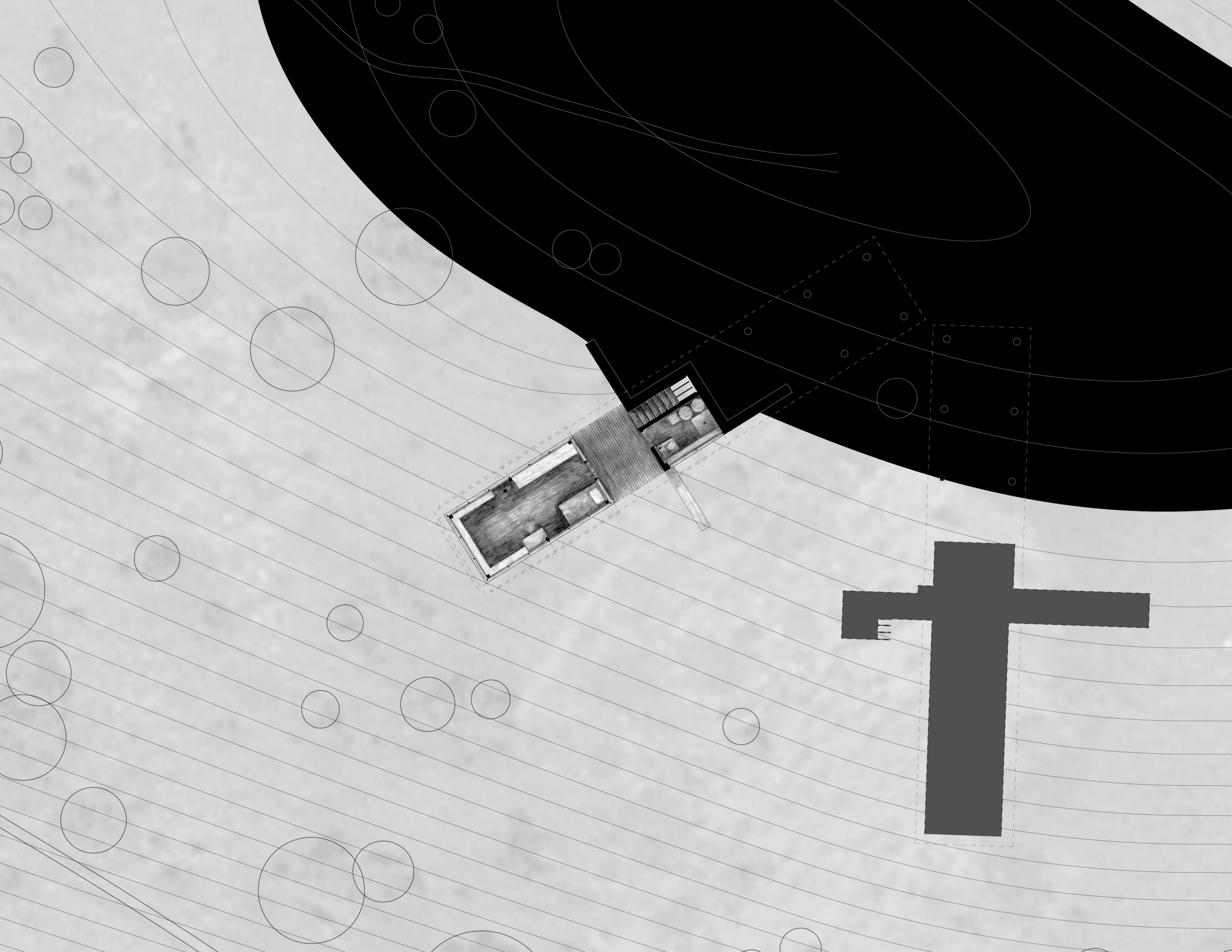


## The Philosopher's Cabin

Based upon the "subjective" approach to nature, the southwest cabin provides the most lookout-like experience, with windows surrounding the living space providing a panoramic view of the landscape. The author's space is again reached by walking out on the roof deck and down a set of stairs, but whereas the naturalist's stairway was open to the adjacent drop-off, the stairs into the philosopher's cabin are bound by a stone retaining wall on the right and the utility space on the left. The experience of enclosure opens up at the bottom of the stairs at a broad breezeway that is cut into the hillside. Retaining walls stretching out past the roof deck on either side reinforce the idea of looking-out onto the landscape.

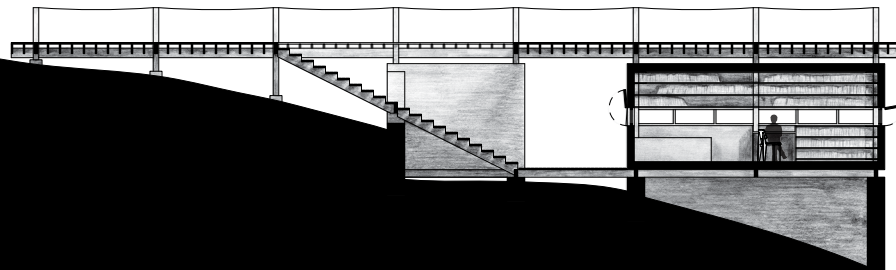
Figure 55, below: Section study exploring the idea of the cabin end opening. Figure 56, below right: The perspective study that would form the idea for the final design. Figure 57, opposite: Cabin plan.





The cabin is entered from the center of wall opposite the stairs under the roof deck. On the right is the kitchen counter, with cabinets and firewood underneath. The stove is just beyond the counter space. Opposite the stove is the writing desk, with the bed immediately adjacent to the entry on the left. Bookshelves line the walls above and below the band of windows, whose sill is at three feet above the floor, and whose tops are only four and a half feet above the floor. While walking around, then, the view is lost, and the literature that lines the bookshelves becomes the focal point. Once sitting down at the writing desk or on the bed, the band of windows is at eye-height and the full panoramic view is revealed. The depth of the wall and bookshelves creates a distinct sense of separation from the view, framing it as a distinctly separate entity. While not favoring a specific view in particular, the cabin is on axis with Sourdough

Figure 58, below: Cabin section. Figure 59, opposite: Night time interior perspective from the bed.



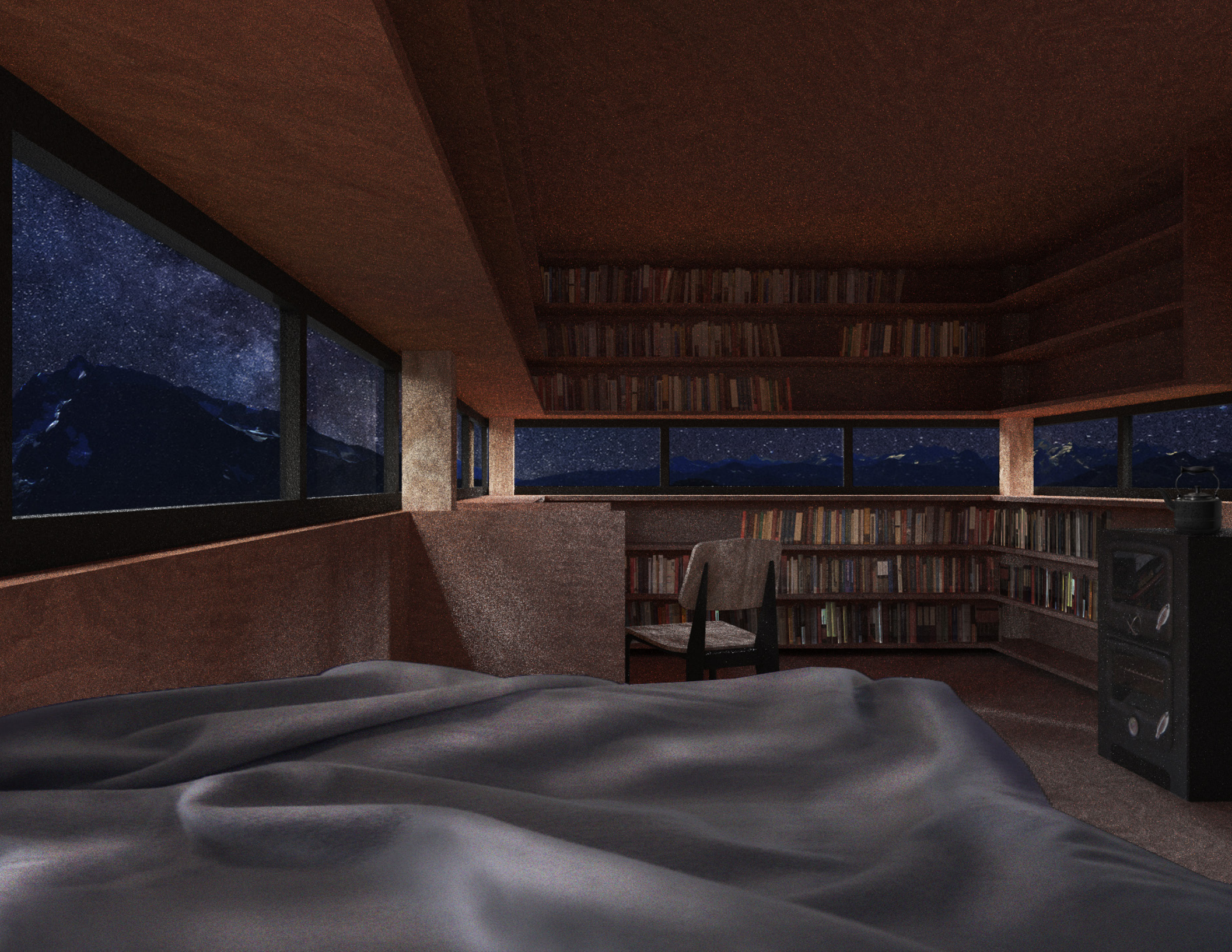


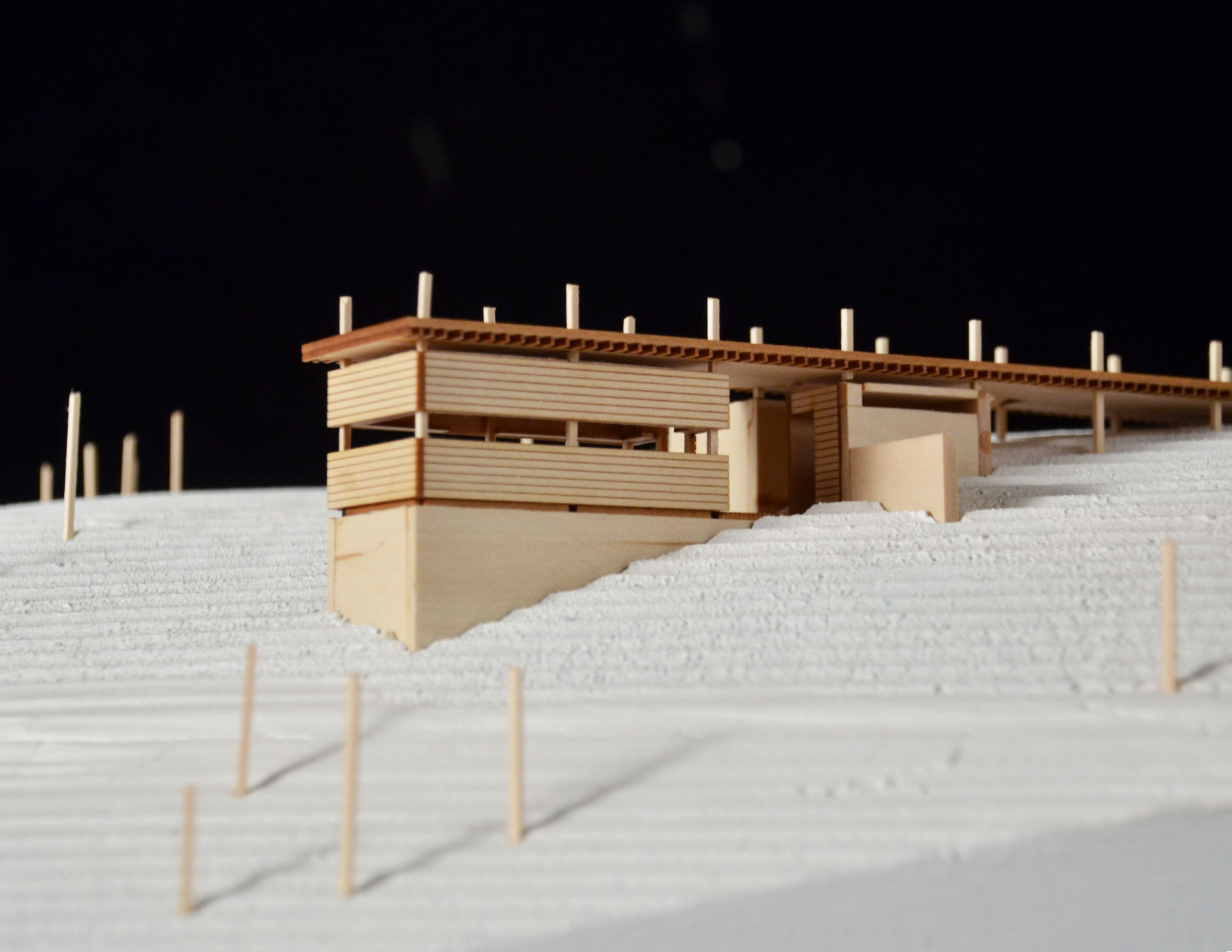
Figure 60, below top: Final study model with retaining wall perpendicular to the view, and with earlier stairway location. Figure 61, below bottom: Roof perspective. Figure 62, opposite: Perspective of cabin in final model.



Mountain and includes views to the west past Ross Lake and towards Mt Baker, and to the south towards Jack Mountain and Crater Mountain.

The philosophers hut provides an experience in which the distant landscape is viewed through the context of past authors. As a space in which to appreciate literature, the horizontal interruption of the bookshelf for the windows almost becomes a shelf on which the view sits. While the Naturalist's cabin takes in specific views and the Mountaineer's cabin opens up to draw the surrounding environment in, the Philosopher's cabin maintains a level of detachment and distance for the author. The simple and largely symmetrical space provides a sense of peace to the space that supports a more person perception of the surroundings.

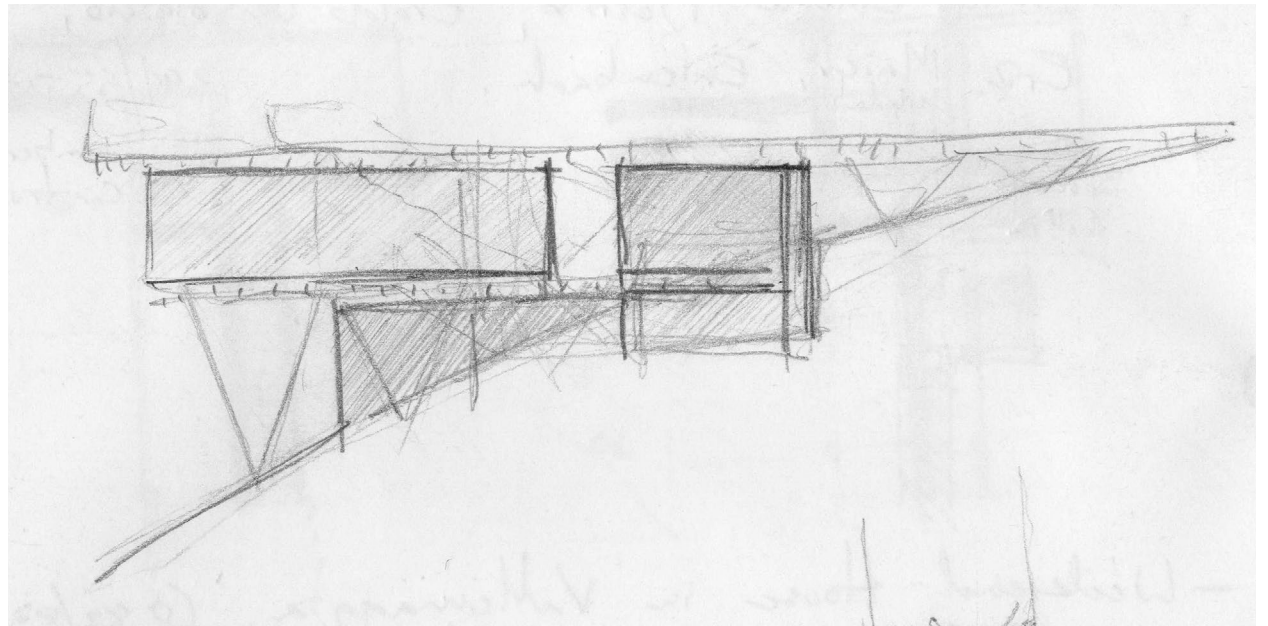
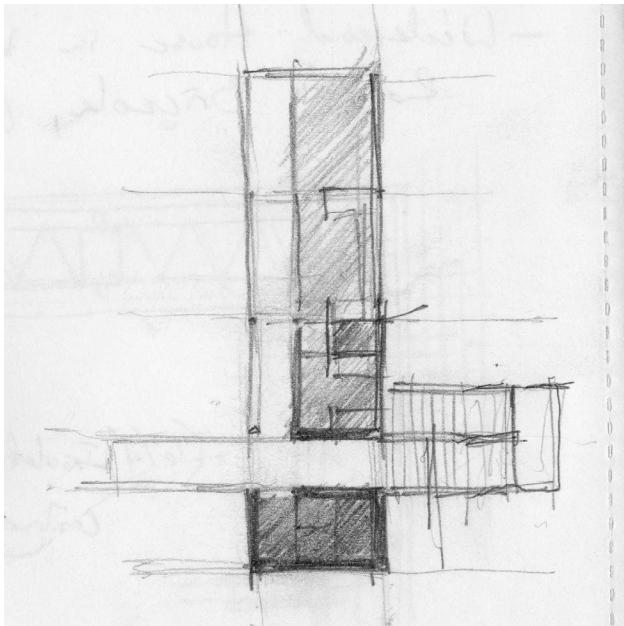
Structurally, the philosopher's cabin is the most solidly grounded, with masonry retaining walls along the back of the utility space that extend into the landscape, and foundation walls that support the cabin on all sides.

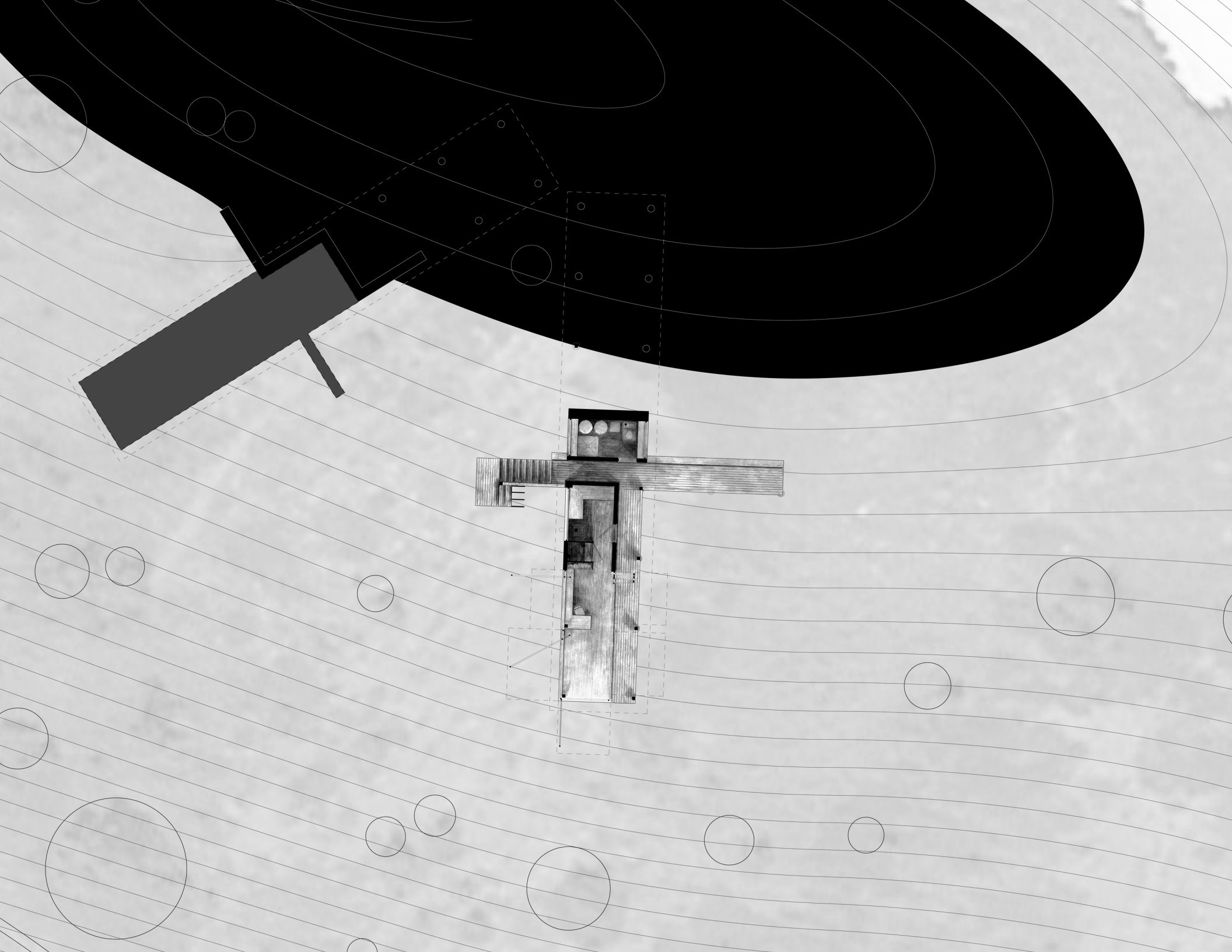


## The Mountaineer's Cabin

The final hut is on axis with Crater Mountain, the most rugged lookout location in this area of the North Cascades. As the lookout Gary Snyder was stationed in during his first fire season, it also made sense as the location for the author who was the most experienced in mountaineering. Informed by the "engagement" model of experiencing natural places, this cabin is designed for the author who is seeking total immersion in the place. Rather than entering on-axis with the view, the space can be reached either using a stair perpendicular to the view from the roof deck, or from a walkway that stretches out into the landscape off the opposite side from the stair. Rather than being defined by interior and exterior spaces, the mountaineer's cabin contains spaces that open up to become exterior spaces, and exterior pathways leading out into the

Figure 63, below: Plan study drawing. Figure 64, below right: Section study drawing. Figure 65, opposite: Cabin plan.





landscape. Rather than a deck to sit on or retaining walls to sit against and look out, the pathway leads out for the author to experience the area while wandering around it.

The utility space is on the summit-side of the walkway. Under the eastern side of the roof deck, a private deck stretches out on axis with Crater Mountain adjacent to the longer and narrower floor plan of the living space. The kitchen is accessed off this deck, with a large closet space next to the door and counter, firewood, cabinets, and the wood stove in a more enclosed part of the cabin. Entering the space and walking to the left, the space opens up with floor-to-ceiling windows completely surrounding the space except for above the desk and low bookcase on the right. Conceptually, the cabin opens out into a sleeping ledge almost like a permanent bivouac. Pivoting windows on the right and facing out towards Crater mountain allow the walls to almost completely disappear, while a folding window-wall system on the left folds back to

Figure 66, below: Cabin section. Figure 67, opposite: Perspective of writing space, with windows fully open, and open floor space for sleeping beyond desk.

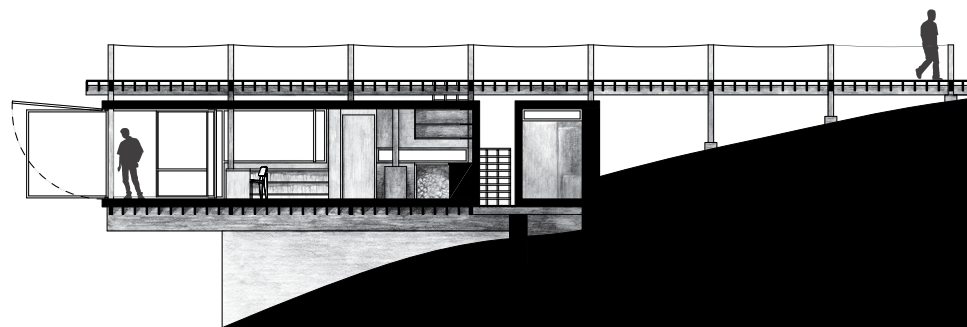


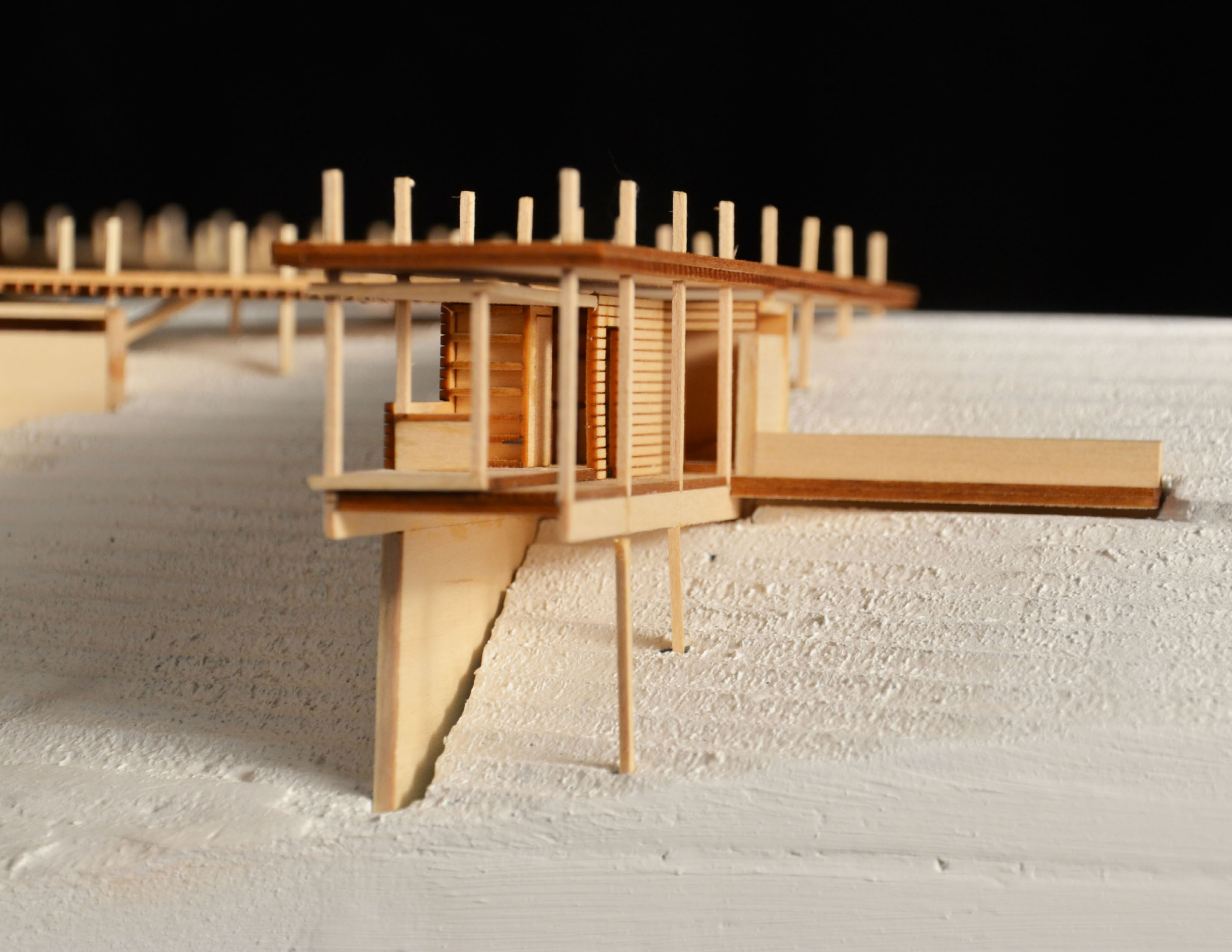




Figure 68, above top: Perspective from the east.  
Figure 69, above bottom: Perspective from stairs.  
Figure 70: Perspective of final model.

allow the final wall to open up, connecting the interior space to the deck. In order to heighten the sense of exposure, the mountaineers hut cantilevers out over the landscape. During colder weather, the deck adjacent to the living space also provides a private exterior viewing platform out onto the landscape.

The structural system for this hut utilizes a 'U' shaped masonry wall forming three walls of the utility space, with a low wall crossing under the front of the utility room. The right hand masonry wall as one looks out towards the landscape stretches out under the cabin to support the right side of the cabin until the second to last column, after which the structure cantilevers out. Under the right hand side and also supporting the stairway are wooden elements.



## Reflections

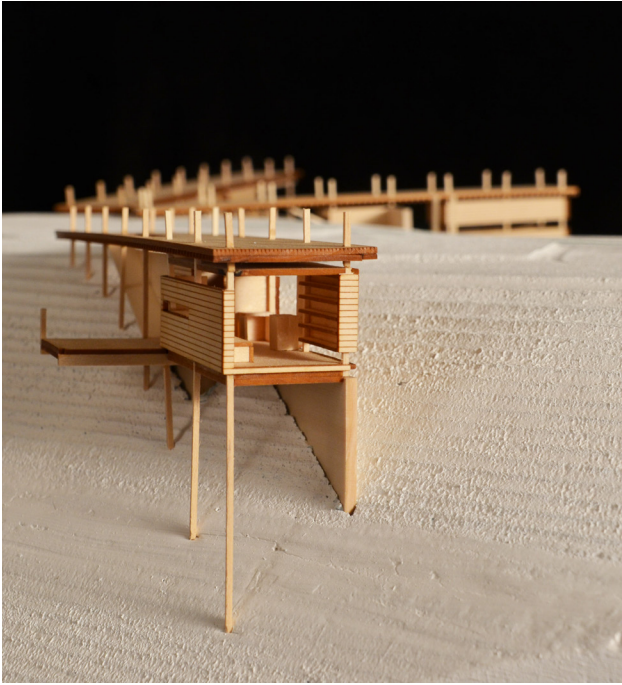


Figure 71: Final model, with the Naturalist's Cabin in the foreground.

This thesis began as an exploration of forest fire lookouts and how they influenced a number of different authors, especially Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Jack Kerouac. In growing to include an examination of what the experience of those cabins was, an exploration began into the various ways in which we interact with and view the environment. The lookouts themselves became the structure that enabled those experiences. As their ability to support their specific experience of the natural environment has declined — owing to their own decline — it has to be wondered what values are being lost besides the close oversight of the forests that they were built for. The inspiration that Snyder, Whalen, Kerouac, and others felt to write about their experiences is the same inspiration that today compels people to restore and maintain them as hikers shelters. Even while that restores the ability to experience the original structures and places, it fails to provide the duration of experience that allows one to truly get to know a place. That knowledge of a single place is what this thesis eventually focused on, even as it strove to analyze an existing typology and develop a new one.

That these specific authors chose to isolate themselves in mountaintop settings is not so very unusual, and marks them as part of a greater community of nature-writers who took inspiration from the land. Henry David Thoreau chose site next to a pond in the woods. Aldo Leopold chose a worn-out farm in the Sand County of Wisconsin. Martin Heidegger a small cabin on a hillside in the mountains of the Black Forest. Each space had its degree of isolation, although none were as remote as the lookouts. For each author, the space marked a place where, away from all the distractions of a more-

or-less modern world, they could reflect on exactly what mattered to them. The ethics, then, that emerged from each of their meditations bear remarkable resemblances to each other. The value of a simpler lifestyle, the realization of what is important, and the feelings of connection to the land are a few of them. Edward Abbey, likely the most vocal and probably the most controversial author to spend time as a lookout, was one of the more outspoken environmentalists of the last half-century. His book *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is often credited with being the inspiration for so-called eco-terrorism, and yet, his book *Desert Solitaire* reveals a love and level of understanding for the southeast environment that is remarkably similar to Aldo Leopold's level of understanding of the Sand County related in *A Sand County Almanac*.

That western lifestyles are badly out of tune with the natural environment is nothing new. In a world where that is the clear reality, spaces in which people may live in tune with nature for a time may be a critical step towards shifting values in a direction towards the environment. To quote Aldo Leopold's forward to *A Sand County Almanac*,

"Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture." (Leopold, pXIX)

Lookouts provided the space in which to see oneself as part of that larger community, in part because of the appeal of the beauty present around them. Ironically, the lookouts were built in part to specifically watch over the commodity that the forests represented.



Figure 72: Final model, from the southern side of the site.

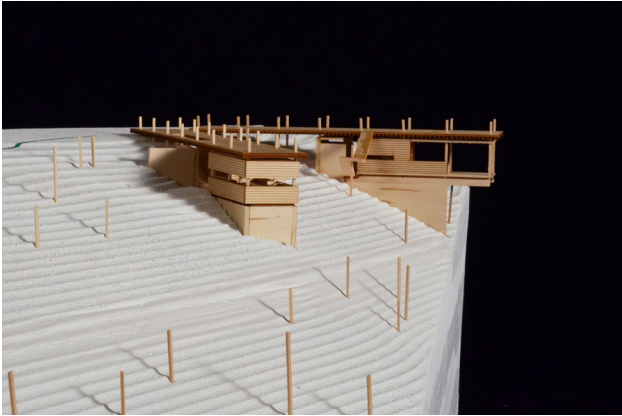


Figure 73: Final model, with the Philosopher's Cabin in the foreground and the Mountaineer's Cabin on the right.

In response to my final presentation, I would propose that the existing design is meant primarily to convey several specific ideas about the experience of the natural environment, and that the final design would be a place of departure for further development. The exploration specifically of lookouts pushed the idea of reusing a mountaintop location that is now vacant. The exploration of related literature, however, points to the fact that the natural environment can be powerfully experienced in a variety of settings, and further developments of the scheme might very well take that more specifically into account. As existing, the cabins shift their relationship to the mountain from being firmly planted on the ground to being cantilevered out above it, but have avoided more specific questions of ecosystem and shifts in placement upon the slope. One possibility could even be that each hut specifically took on a different ecosystem, one perhaps above the timberline, one at it, and one within the forest. Alternatively, if the huts were situated along a single trail or other organizing feature, one might be located adjacent to Ross Lake. Regardless of all that, the final design focused on the philosophical understandings and approaches to viewing nature, and maintained similar siting in relation to the summit as a way of creating unity and focusing on the different articulations that are possible within a similar framework.

In regards to the actual locations of the cabins and their proximity, further development might focus on creating more distinctly separate spaces. As was pointed out, the northwest cabin has a much more distinct separation from the other cabins, and as a result allows more autonomy and privacy for that author. The two southern cabins are close enough together that a true sense of isolation and independence might be difficult to truly attain. The concept of creating a visual connection from the

former Devils Dome Lookout site to the other neighboring lookout sites I maintain is still a strong one, but only so long as it reinforced the separate experiences being articulated in each.

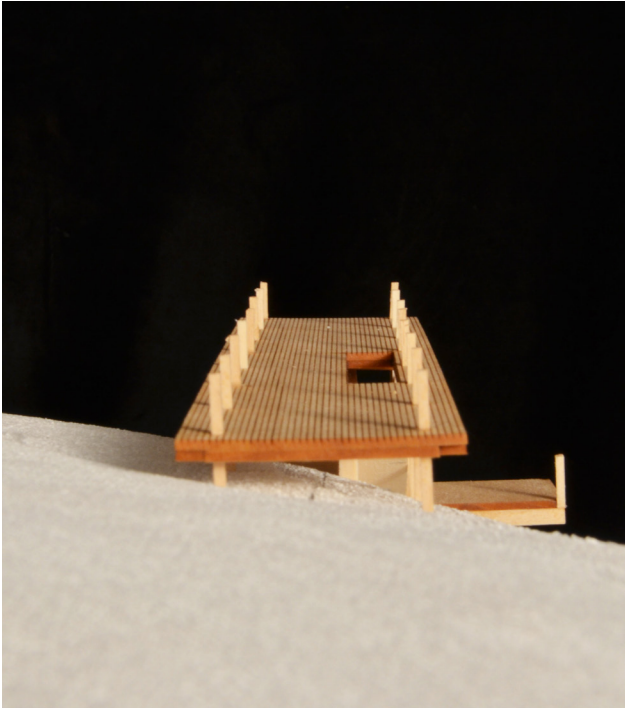


Figure 74: Final model, looking out of the Naturalist's roof deck.

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- 35 Figure 26: Drawn from nature by J J Audubon.



Figure 71: Pilchuck Mountain Lookout, a popular hiker's destination northwest of Seattle that has been turned into an interpretive space for visitors.

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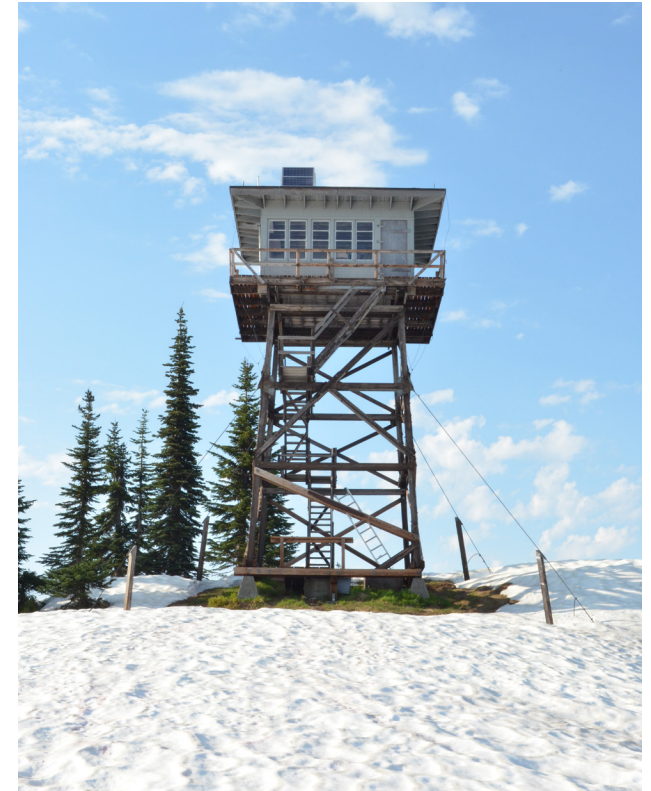


Figure 76: Lookout Mountain Lookout, an R-6 cabin on top of a 30 foot tower.