

Chimera Obscura
Wayfinding vestiges in rural Iceland

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Abstract

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PROJECT ABSTRACT

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As tourists, we travel to learn, we travel to experience, and through the journey we attempt to gain insights into another culture.

As pilgrims, we travel to learn, we travel to experience, and through the journey we attempt to gain insights into our own culture.

The scale of these journeys may vary, but there are moments of convergence. These intersections are charged with the responsibility to make heritage legible to populations of varying cultural literacy.

These significant cultural markers need to teach.

In the progression from learning, to understanding, to mastery, the ability to teach is indicative of the highest level of comprehension. A touchstone of this caliber serves the pilgrim in their journey for enlightenment. It serves the tourist in their introduction to the themes.

This thesis proposes a pilgrimage route punctuated by wayfinding vestiges in the Westfjords of Iceland.



*For Þórhildur Þorsteinsdóttir & Vikingur Heiðar Þorsteinsson,
whose cultural inheritance I borrowed,
and which served as my map for this thesis.*

I tried to treat it with care.



Around 950 AD, a man called Gísli Súrsson settled in Iceland. A saga was written about his life that is still known today.

In the saga, Gísli commits a murder to avenge the death of his brother-in-law and uphold his family honor.¹

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A confession.

I am not an architect.

I am working to become an architect. It is a struggle. I came dangerously close to completing my master's degree in architecture without developing my own definition of architecture.

Fortunately, at the onset of my thesis journey, my committee Chair asked me to provide my definition of architecture. To my alarm, I had no working definition of my own. I could take the words of others, camouflage them in synonyms and shake them up like the best martini, but the words and sentiments were not my own. They rang empty. Worse than lacking my own definition was that it had not occurred to me to develop one of my own.

This sat in my heart while I travelled Scandinavia for five months by bicycle as a Valle Scholar. It was in northern Norway, as I moved through the Steilneset Memorial by Louise Bourgeois and Peter Zumthor that I began to develop my own definition of architecture.

I walked slowly down the corridor.

I read 91 names.

I listened to the haunting echo of my footsteps.

I wept.

The detective in me that is always examining how something is detailed and achieved was silenced. I was not trying to decipher how it was built. I just experienced the materials, the sounds, the light, the sequence of spaces and the imbued narrative. I appreciated the aspects that I consider make architecture, without trying to look behind the curtain.

I allowed it to be theater.

On my fourth visit to the memorial I wept again. The ritualistic tears repeated; it was then that I had finally drafted a working definition of architecture for myself.

Architecture is a building that causes an architect to stop thinking like an Architect.

I brought this definition home with me. It sat with me while I worked. I dissected it, rotated it, and looked at it from all sides. I realized that, though beautiful, it was nebulous. This definition did not provide me anything that I could apply while I worked. It was a retroactive metric. I needed to do better.

This thesis charts my struggle. It charts the development of my definition of what architecture is, to me; a definition that I can begin to apply. It is merely a few footsteps of my journey. It is a journey that I intend to continue.

Tally-ho.



*Goddess of golden rain,
Who gives me great joy,
May boldly bear report
Of her friend's brave stand.
I greet the sword's honed edge
That bites into my flesh,
Knowing that this courage
Was given me by my father.*

This was Gísli's last verse. As soon as he had spoken it, he jumped off the crag and drove his sword into the head of Eyjólf's kinsman, Thord, and split him down to the waist. In doing so, Gísli fell down on top of him and breathed his last.

Everyone in Eyjólf's party was badly wounded, and Gísli had died with so many and such great wounds that it was an amazement to all. They say that he never once retreated, and as far as anyone could see his last blow was no weaker than his first.

Thus Gísli's life came to an end, and although he was deemed a man of great prowess, fortune was not always with him.¹

Figure 04. [Opposite]

Geirþjófsfjörður, Iceland

Abandoned fjord in the westfjords of Iceland. Gísli Súrsson fought his final battle and ultimately fell in this location.





2. ROOTS PRECEDE ROUTES

*No Germanic people, in fact no nation in Northern Europe, has a medieval literature which in originality and brilliance can be compared with the literature of the Icelanders from the first five centuries after the settlement period.*¹

Sigurður Nordal (1931)

Eight hundred years ago significant works of literature were written in Iceland. The Íslendingasögur, or “Sagas of Icelanders”, are stories that describe the lives of Icelanders in the late 9th through 11th centuries. In contrast to contemporaneous medieval writing, the sagas are written in prose and reflect the struggle and conflict that arose within the societies of the second and third generations of Icelandic settlers.² The sagas are written about the prominent families that settled the country 1000 years ago.

The island nation has a long oral tradition of storytelling strongly rooted in place. The fjords and farmlands described in the sagas can be identified and trod upon. For centuries, the cultural canons were embodied in the people, told and retold.³ Several hundred years after the time of action, the sagas were written and recorded by anonymous writers.

Figure 05. [Opposite]

Pingvellir, Iceland

Many crucial events in Icelandic history took place at the site. Therefore, Pingvellir has a special place in the Icelandic consciousness. Pingvellir is also remarkable for its geology and the ecology of its lake. It lies on the junction of the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates, whose divergence has formed the great rift valley with its many crevasses and gorges. It is Iceland’s oldest national park.

In 2004, Pingvellir was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List and is currently the most visited site in Iceland by domestic and international travelers.



Today the sagas are taught as part of the Icelandic primary school education.⁴ Having been removed from the countryside, they are a discourse in Old Icelandic and medieval literature. Several of the narratives are part of the nationwide curriculum. They explore themes of love, revenge and honor.

The global literary impact of the Sagas was limited by familiarity with the geography and the inaccessibility of the Icelandic language. In the 1890s, W.G. Collingwood and Jon Stefansson wrote ‘A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland’ which illustrated the saga sites. They theorized that the sagas took for granted that the reader was familiar with the landscape, and that an understanding of the landscape was critical to allow the reader to ‘stage these dramas’.

Figure 06. [Opposite]

Snæfellsnes Penninsula, Iceland
Berserkjahraun (Berserker’s lava field)

In the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, two Swedish Berserkers, insanely violent characters that could psyche themselves up for battle, are set to an impossible task by a farmer: to clear a passage through a lava field in exchange for the farmer’s daughter’s hand. Once the Berserkers succeed, the farmer who never intended to give up his daughter murders the Berserkers by trapping them in a scorching sauna and slaying them as they try to escape.



“The old saga-teller’s audience knew the country, and needed no landscape description, except here and there a word to fix the weather or time of year; ...” ⁵

The Englishman and Icelander spent two months traveling the country by horseback ‘over a thousand miles of rough and roadless country.’ The pair visited the sites of almost every Íslendingasögur. They sketched and took notes visiting sites that were typically neglected by tourists of the time. At the conclusion of their pilgrimage they surmised:

“For every touch of human interest in the sagas – pastoral, romantic or sublime – there was, and still remains, a landscape setting no less sweet, or strange, or stern.” ⁶

“We have seen the homes of the heroes. They are no longer empty names to us, no longer formless dreams; and with their reality the great dramas of old start into life and action. It is as if a curtain had gone suddenly up: as if our eyes were opened, at last, to the glory of the North.” ⁷

Figure 07. [Opposite]

Héðinsfjörður, Iceland
One of the sites of the Svarfdæla saga.

Svarfdæla saga is a sweeping debut story set in Medieval Iceland, Denmark and Norway. It is the search for survival when loyalty is met with treachery and deceit. The story begins as two unbending rivals compete for power for a prominent valley in the north of Iceland, and the beautiful aristocratic woman who stands between them.



The Icelandic language has several characters that date to medieval times, namely eth and thorn.

Eth [capital Ð, lowercase ð] is pronounced as the ‘th’ in ‘bath’.

It is used within or at the end of words

Thorn [capital Þ, lowercase þ] is pronounced as the ‘th’ in ‘this’.

It is used at the beginning of words.

The word Thor, in Icelandic is spelled Þor, but is pronounced similarly to English.

The primary characters in *Gísli* saga are:

Gísli (Gisli): The main character of the saga who decides to seek out vengeance for the murder of Vestein. He kills Thorgrim because he believes he is the murderer. Gísli is outlawed by his own sister.

Auð (Aud): Gísli’s wife and Vestein’s sister. She stays loyal to her husband even when faced with her own death.

Þorgrím (Thorgrim): Thordis’s husband and the suspected murderer of Vestein. Refused to make the oath with Vestein because he felt it would cause him more trouble and stress.

Þorkell (Thorkel): Gísli’s brother who lives on a farm with Thorgrim. Thorkel chooses to help Gísli but only to a certain extent. The two sons of Vestein, in search of vengeance, kill Thorkel.

Vésteinn (Vestein): Gísli’s brother-in-law and best friend who is murdered in his sleep.

Þórdís (Thordis): Wife to Thorgrim and sister to Gísli. After Thorgrim’s murder she remarries Þork and urges him to avenge the death of his brother Thorgrim by killing Gísli.⁹

Figure 08. [Opposite]

Vestmanna, Faroe Islands

The Icelandic Sagas include one saga about the settlement of the Faroe Islands. Starting as a historical recounting of the Norse settlement of the Faroe Islands, the *Fereyinga saga* soon moves on to the main story, the life of villain protagonist Thrand of Gotu. He was a shrewd Faroese chieftain who resented the intrusion of both Christianity and the Norwegian King on the Faroe Islands, both embodied by his heroic antagonist Sigmundur Brestisson.

Numbering around 40 manuscripts, Icelanders themselves do not typically read all of the sagas. Yet, the literature is regarded with a passionate, nationalistic pride and the stories are known even if one has not read the actual texts.

“National identities are co-ordinated, often largely defined, by ‘legends and landscapes’, by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised home-lands with hallowed sites and scenery. The symbolic activation of time and space . . . gives shape to the ‘imagined community’ of the nation.”⁸

There is a palpable pride in the literary works of the first settlers of Iceland. Additionally, there is a national discussion encircling how to make them more accessible to visitors without turning the country into a medieval theme park. I believe the voice missing in the conversation is how to make them more accessible to Icelanders, to preserve the legacy and enrich the domestic engagement of the sagas. It is this facet of the conversation that can begin to inform how to develop tourism infrastructure that does not reduce the sagas to a caricature.



3. OF TOUCHSTONES AND TURMOIL

In this convulsive age of uprooted populations and extensive diasporas, holding onto places – and sensing fully the goodness contained therein – has become increasingly difficult, and in years to come, I expect, it may everywhere be regarded as a privilege and a gift.¹

Keith H. Basso,
*Wisdom Sits in Places:
Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*

As tourists, we travel to learn, we travel to experience, and through the journey we attempt to gain insights into another culture.

As pilgrims, we travel to learn, we travel to experience, and through the journey we attempt to gain insights into our own culture.

The scale and pace of these journeys may vary, but there are moments of convergence. These intersections are an opportunity where the tourist can don the culture of the pilgrim. This engagement can enrich the experience of the visitor. Conversely, the occasion to impart one's culture serves to enhance the experience for the local. In the progression from learning, to understanding, to mastery, the ability to teach is indicative of the highest level of comprehension. A placard of this caliber serves the pilgrim in their journey for insight. It serves the tourist in their introduction to the themes.

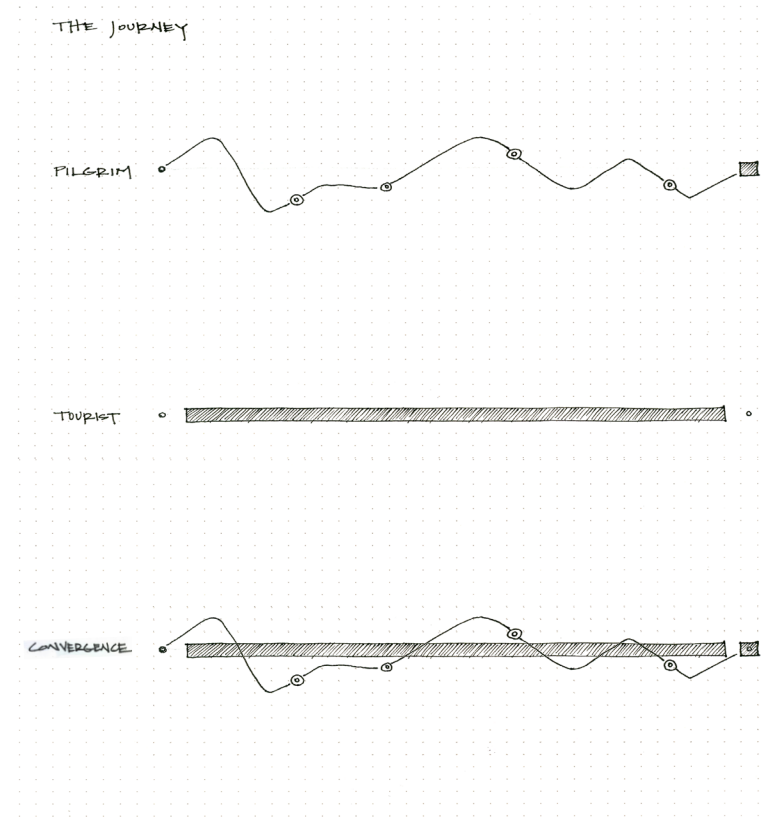


Figure 09. [Opposite]

Moments of convergence illustrated by cattle tracks in the snow as seen from above.

Figure 10. [Above]

Diagram of pilgrimage versus tourism. In pilgrimage, the destination is at the end of the journey. In tourism, the destination is in the journey.



The underpinning of this thesis is to investigate how to make a cultural undercurrent embedded within a landscape legible and accessible to populations of varying cultural literacy. The intention is to look for moments of intersection in the manner with which pilgrim and tourist populations travel and provide an opportunity to reveal the meaning of place. It examines the way a people can preserve, reveal and share their culture. The stance is that if the approach to tourism infrastructure is one that prioritizes the local, it can provide a richer experience for the visitor. This thesis will be explored through the Icelandic sagas.

This proposal has no clear typology.

The programmatic exploration has been methodical. The initial proposal was for a pilgrimage route punctuated by remote reading rooms. These would be shelters that would allow for the reading of the sagas in situ. The vision for these was a hybrid of a bird blind and library reading room. Explored and abandoned typologies include: a chapel, writing retreat, overnight shelters, classrooms, cairns, landscape chess pieces, a visitor center, an archival storytelling space, fire pits, and perhaps that nothing should be built. (See Appendix)

With a myriad of buildings that could be built, it is first necessary to determine if anything should be built. In Iceland, rural areas are depopulating.² The living conversation of the sagas is shifting from the countryside to the structure of cities and classrooms. There is a domestic exportation that is occurring. The existing population is concentrating in the urban centers while at the same time the population is expanding.³ The connection of the sagas to the landscape requires fortification. The cultural canons, so long embodied in

the people, the stories that live in the landscape, are vulnerable.

“I maybe belong to the last generation that was sent to a farm in the summer as a child. The old men in the countryside, they had their view of the Icelandic Sagas, and they were part of a living discussion.”

“While the point of view in the rural areas is to try and understand the local conditions and grounds, and in that context, then it seems to come alive for people. And then you come here to the city and sit in classes in Haga school and high school, and then all of a sudden doubts arise that this or that is not possible, and then the context is completely different.”⁴

- Snorri Freyr Hilmarsson

This exploration has led to the concept of wayfinding vestiges. Icelanders do not need visitor centers for their sagas; all that is required is a trace, an echo. The approach to this project is one of reverse archaeology. There are stories that live in the landscape. Additionally, each person brings with them a story that lives within them. These vestiges are meant to reflect these stories and to weave the strands together to build a living saga; the saga of present day Iceland.

When trying to determine whether or not to build, and if so, what to build, it is valuable to first look at those who have elected to build before you.

Figure 11. [Opposite]

This site intentionally left blank.
unbroken coastal vista near Vadsø, Norway



Louise Bourgeois & Peter Zumthor
Vardø, Norway
 2011

During the seventeenth century there were a series of witch trials in Northern Norway. At that time, the population of the region of Finnmark was approximately 3000 people. Over one hundred people were brought to trial. Ninety-one were found guilty and executed.⁵

Prior to 2011, had one visited the site of the executions there would have been no evidence of the atrocity. The site is in the far northeast of Norway. The arctic conditions foster low growth, cloudberry and worn stone formations. A concrete slab that was a former mink farm was the evidence of man on the site.⁶

The initial design strategy was that architect Peter Zumthor would build an enclosure to surround a sculpture by Louise Bourgeois. She asked him to go first. After one night sleep, following his site visit, Peter Zumthor responded with a long, linear building inspired by the local fish drying racks that dot the countryside. Louise responded with a sketch of a flaming chair surrounded by mirrors. The enclosure was square in plan. Upon receiving this sketch Peter spoke with Louise and deferred that they would build to her sketch. She responded, ‘No, we will do both.’⁷ The paired works, the ‘line and dot’ were ultimately built.

Both interventions employ sound as a powerful device.

Sound provides cohesiveness to the procession between the two spaces. In

the long linear passage, the echo of one’s footsteps on the suspended wooden floor within the fabric cocoon is haunting. It gives the impression of a death march towards to dark recesses of the terminus of the corridor.

The fire in Louise’s sculpture “The Damned, The Possessed and The Beloved” is fueled by gas. It is not a fire that crackles, the small ports that provide the flame hiss and roar. The suspended mirrors that surround the flaming chair provide a visual echo.

Without the memorial designed by Louise Bourgeois and Peter Zumthor there would be no evidence of what occurred at the site of Steilesnet. They both tell the same story in a different manner. The long, linear Zumthor move gives a name to each person. It provides a sense of the scale of the atrocity. The fire of Louise Bourgeois’ response reiterates the horror of what transpired; it elicits a visceral response. It is the pairing of them that tells a more complete story.

This precedent is powerful in both presence and gravity. The weight of the air within the space feels heavier. The limit of this precedent is the typology. A memorial is not appropriate for the Icelandic sagas. The sagas in Icelandic national consciousness are not about mourning, but pride.

Figure 12. [Opposite]

Vardø and Vadsø, Norway

To build or not to build.
 Photograph of Steilneset Memorial
 collaged over unbuilt coastal vista.



RUTA DEL PEREGRINO

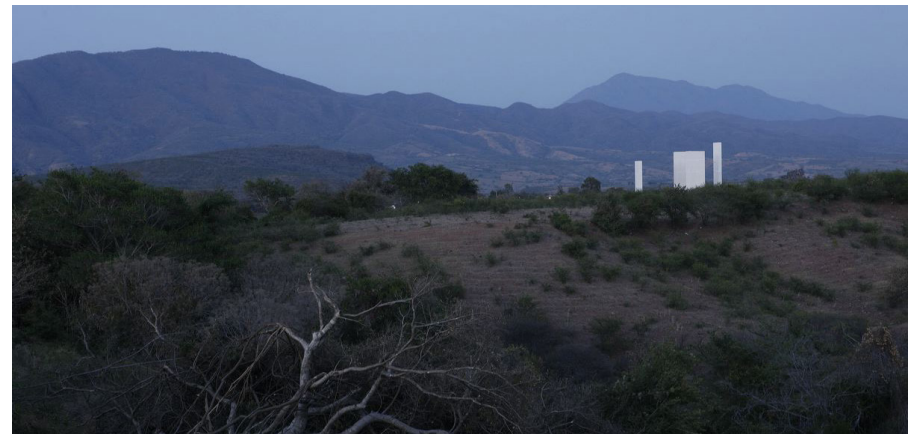
Tatiana Bilbao, Derek Dellekamp & Rozana Montiel
Talpa de Allende, Mexico
2012

For over 200 years, during Easter week, two million Mexican residents take part in the Ruta del Peregrina -- a 117 kilometer pilgrimage through the mountains range of Jalisco that is centered around the adoration to the Virgin of Talpa.⁸ The destination for the pilgrimage is a church in the little town of Talpa de Allende.⁹ In an effort to provide the route with better conditions, the government has hired seven architecture firms to build nine architectural landmarks that provide shelter, services, and viewpoints for the pilgrims.

The typologies of the Ruta are: Sanctuary (3), Look Out Point (3), Gratitude Open Chapel (1), Sleeping Shelter (1), and Cistern (1).¹⁰

There are lessons and limits to this pilgrimage route as a precedent. The structures are built of durable materials: stone and concrete. The landmarks serve a secondary function; wayfinding. Some are several stories tall with finishes that contrast with the surrounding landscape. The applicability of this model is limited in that it relies upon an existing user group and pilgrimage route. This allows the typologies to be less clearly programmed. They will be found, explored and used, as the pilgrims need them.

This thesis proposes an Icelandic pilgrimage route that does not exist. The proposal will need to provide room for participation. There should be the opportunity for visitors to leave something. The constructs should exist, grow and develop due to their contribution.





TIMMELSJOCH EXPERIENCE

*Werner Tscholl Architects
Italian & Austrian border
2010*

The Timmelsjoch is the deepest, non-glaciated indentation in the main Alpine ridge between the Reschen Pass and the Brenner Pass. Once a mule track, the road links the Passeiertal valley and the Ötztal valley.¹¹ Constructed in 2010, the architectural sculptures are located at several stopping places along the route. They educate travellers about the natural surroundings, the history, the culture, the communities and the economy of the region.¹²

There are five sculptures; two on the Austrian and two on the Italian. There is a museum, on the border, at the highest point of the pass.

Walkway: toll booth & viewing platform

Smuggler: A walk-in cube located where the Timmelsjoch road crosses an ancient smuggling trail

Telescope: viewing platform that frames views of two mountain peaks

Garnets: two garnet-shaped structures, modeled on the geological rock formations found in the region, serve as an exhibition room and a viewing platform

Pass Museum: pays tribute to the pioneers of the high alpine road and their accomplishments.¹³

The strength in this precedent is that it is using shelters to educate about the history of the region. The limitation is that it relies heavily on signage for communication, which is restricted in the depth it can convey. This precedent is primarily for the tourist.





NASJONALE TURISTVEGER

*various Architects, Engineers & Artists
throughout Norway
1994 - present*

The approach Norway has taken to bring tourists to the lesser-travelled regions of the country has been to designate 18 scenic and secondary highways as the National Tourist Route. These routes showcase the breadth of Norwegian nature and the design of the architectural interventions foster national identity. The overall goal of the project is to increase tourism in the rural areas through which the roads run.¹⁴

Though not officially included on the National Tourist Route, this study includes the Norwegian Wild Reindeer Centre Pavilion. This shelter is located at the edge of Dovrefjell National Park, overlooking the mountain Snøhetta. Dovrefjell is a mountain range that forms a barrier between the northern and southern parts of Norway. It is home to Europe's last wild reindeer herds and is the natural habitat for many rare plants and animals. A long history filled with travellers, hunting traditions, mining, and military activities has left its mark on this land. The Dovre mountains also holds significant importance in the Norwegian consciousness. National legends, myths, poetry, and music celebrate the qualities of this powerful place.¹⁵

The strength in this shelter as a precedent is that it is sited in a landscape that has natural and cultural significance. Particularly compelling is that the typology is at its essence solely shelter. Additionally, the availability of fire within the shelter addresses another primal human need. These qualities in tandem provide opportunities for visitors to dwell, linger and socialize.



33 | 34





KLEMET ENVIRONMENTAL THEATER

Hans-Petter Bjørnådal
Hemnes, Norway
2013 -- temporary construction

This outdoor environmental theater is titled 'Klemet' after a powerful sami shaman that lived in this valley in Norway. Klemet was of nomadic decent living a sedentary lifestyle with the farmers. The memory of his spirit is deeply engrained in the local history.¹⁶ The two wood frame towers stand as the edges of the stage, projecting sound and light onto the audience. The towers represent the shaman's drum sticks rising out of the ground. Haystacks serve as a stage presence and stand for the bucolic landscape and the farmers that inhabited it. The heller rock, which at one time provided housing for the shaman and his family, was recreated through traditional sami building methods.¹⁷

The valley is the theater, while the built structures are temporary. The theatrical, communal, and participatory nature of the installation is evident. This program would provide opportunities for a dialogue among participants beyond what has been provided.

There is a puppeteer in Þingeyri who performs a play about Gísli saga.¹⁸ The limits with performance spaces as a typology are that they require scheduling, coordination and enough participants to warrant the event. The population of the region would not support a dedicated theatrical performance space. This thesis will challenge the scale of theater. The sagas live in the landscape, and the landscape is the stage. What will need to exist is a theatrical experience that is scaled to the individual; it is a solo performance, for oneself.





HOFSÓS SWIMMING POOL

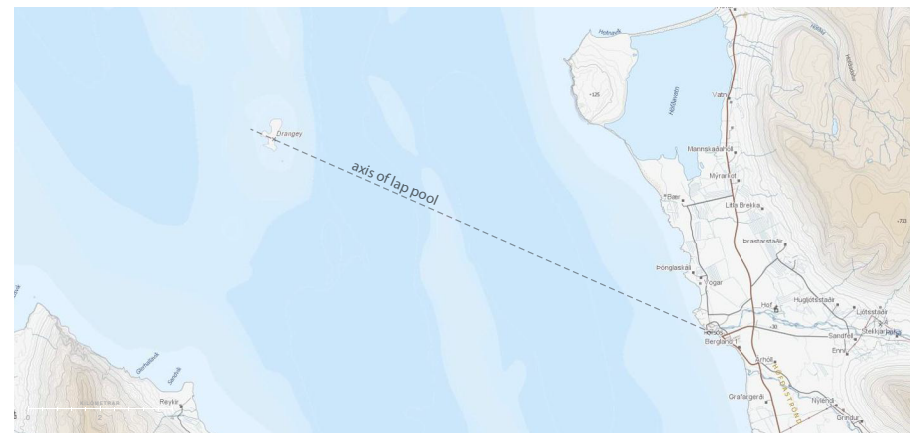
BASALT Architects
Skagafjörður -- Hofsó, Iceland
2010

Grettir Ásmundarson lived as an outlaw in Medieval Iceland for 18 years, longer than any other outlaw according to the *Íslendingasögur*. The story is told that to escape a battle Grettir made a mighty swim to the island of Drangey in Skagafjörður in northern Iceland. It was on this island that he was ultimately slain.¹⁹ (Figure 29, opposite page)

There is a strong bathing culture in Iceland. Most villages, no matter how small, have a public pool that is frequented by families. When BASALT Arkitektur was commissioned to build a public pool in the city of Hofsó they drew upon the culture latent in the place when designing the public amenity.²⁰

The architects introduced design moves that strongly connect the experience of swimming to Grettir's saga. The pool is sited near the drop of the bluff providing an unbroken vista to the fjord below. The strongest design move is the orientation of the pool. It is oriented on axis with the island of Drangey. Swimming laps along the length of the pool holds the island in the swimmers sight. It is as if one is recreating that mighty swim first undertaken 1000 years prior.

To achieve this level of imbibing the local culture requires an extremely sensitive understanding of local culture and the meaning of place. The goals of this thesis will be to attempt that using another Icelandic Saga, the saga of Gísli Súrsson.





*If you go to Haukadalur with the book in your hand and read it, you can turn directly to the places which the saga describes and see them before you. It is as though the earth is talking to you and telling the story.*¹

Pórir Örn Guðmundsson

The population of Iceland by the close of 2014 was 325,671.²

The number of international visitors to Iceland in 2014 was 997,556.³

The annual influx of international tourists to Iceland is staggering. Iceland is a small country and the number of international visitors dwarfs their population annually. Tourism has a marked impact on the Icelandic economy, ecology and societal makeup during peak times.

Tourism is important to Iceland.

The Icelandic Tourist Board is working to contend with the vast numbers of tourists. They have developed a Tourism Strategy for 2011-2020 that passed a parliamentary resolution.

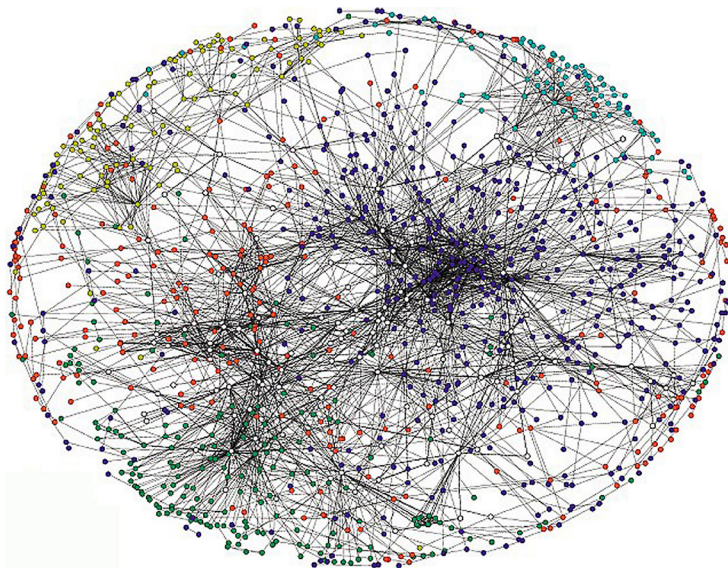
The elements that are relevant to this thesis are namely (emphasis added by author):

1. to engage in systematic development of tourist destinations... to create the opportunity to lengthen the tourist season, reduce seasonal fluctuations, and **contribute to better distribution of tourists throughout the country.**⁴

2. The development of tourism infrastructure shall aim at **protecting nature**, and the tourism strategy shall aim at incorporating the concepts of sustainability and **responsibility for Iceland's culture** and natural surroundings.⁵

Figure 34. [Opposite]

Haukadalur near Þingeyri, Iceland



“... the more I read the sagas in close succession in situ here in Iceland, and follow up the connections between them physically moving from one place to another and from one region to another, the more I think that the sagas are best understood not as individual, discrete narratives, but as a network of interlinking and overlapping narratives.”⁷

-Dr. Emily Lethbridge

Figure 35. [Above]

This network combines the character associations between the five major Icelandic sagas, including overlapping characters in Egil (blue), Vatnsdæla (yellow), Laxdæla Saga (green), Gísla (turquoise) and Njáls Saga (red). White nodes represent characters who appear in more than one of these sagas.

Figure 36. [Opposite]

Map of international and domestic traveler distribution and quantities throughout Iceland. (2013 data) (Drawing based on data from the Icelandic Tourist Board.)

In looking at the 2013 international and domestic tourism data we can begin to comprehend (Figure 35):

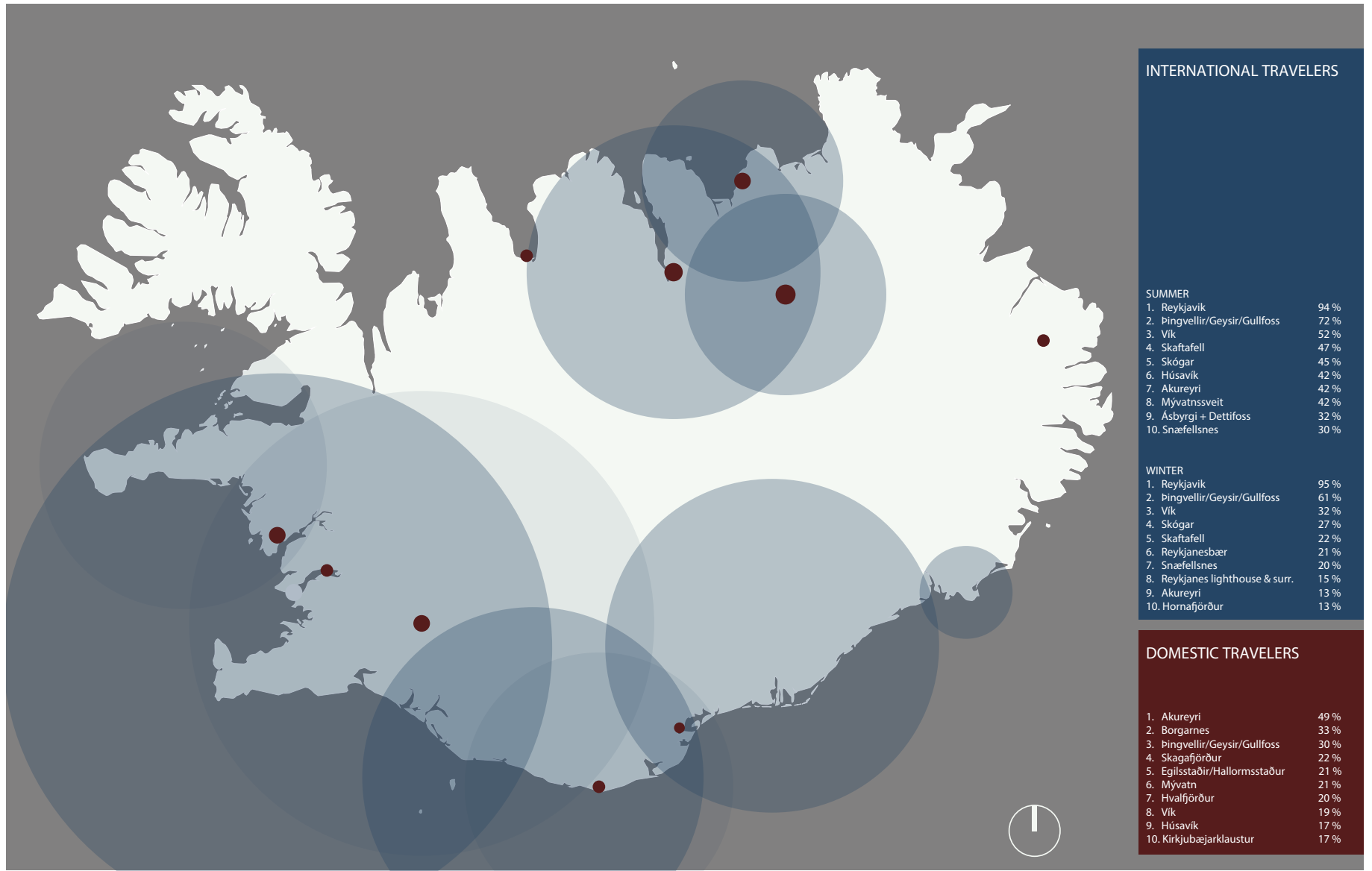
1. the quantities of tourists in the country, and
2. the overall distribution throughout the country.

These trends illustrate opportunities for better tourism distribution and areas to focus on.

Surveys by the Icelandic Tourist Board list ‘Icelandic Nature’ as a primary reason for international travel to Iceland with almost 80 percent of respondents listing this as a reason for travel. ‘Icelandic culture/history’ was listed as a reason for travel by 40 percent of respondents.⁶

“It is hard not to think that Iceland’s landscape will always dominate visitors’ impressions of the country, and provide the main focus of Iceland’s promotion as a tourist destination. However, the experience of the natural environment can surely only be enriched further through engagement with the nation’s literary history, in particular because it allows the visitor to get closer to the native perception of the landscape.”⁸

Fortunately, there is a cultural touchstone that is strong in its own regard, but can also augment the visitors experience with the landscapes of Iceland; these are the Icelandic Sagas.



INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS

SUMMER

1. Reykjavik	94 %
2. Þingvellir/Geysir/Gullfoss	72 %
3. Vík	52 %
4. Skafafell	47 %
5. Skógar	45 %
6. Húsavík	42 %
7. Akureyri	42 %
8. Mývatnsveit	42 %
9. Ásbyrgi + Dettifoss	32 %
10. Snæfellsnes	30 %

WINTER

1. Reykjavik	95 %
2. Þingvellir/Geysir/Gullfoss	61 %
3. Vík	32 %
4. Skógar	27 %
5. Skafafell	22 %
6. Reykjanesbær	21 %
7. Snæfellsnes	20 %
8. Reykjanes lighthouse & surr.	15 %
9. Akureyri	13 %
10. Hornafjörður	13 %

DOMESTIC TRAVELERS

1. Akureyri	49 %
2. Borgarnes	33 %
3. Þingvellir/Geysir/Gullfoss	30 %
4. Skagafjörður	22 %
5. Egilsstaðir/Hallormsstaður	21 %
6. Mývatn	21 %
7. Hvalfjörður	20 %
8. Vík	19 %
9. Húsavík	17 %
10. Kirkjubæjarklaustur	17 %



The Íslendingasögur, or “Sagas of Icelanders”, are about 40 manuscripts that describe the lives of the prominent families who settled the country. For centuries, the cultural canons were embodied in the people, until they were written and recorded by anonymous writers.

Figure 37. [Above]

Site of the Grœnlendinga saga which tells of the colonization of Greenland by Erik the Red.

Figure 38. [Opposite]

Map of the Saga-Steads of Iceland. Includes the *Fereyinga saga* which tells of the settlement of the Faroe Islands. (Drawing based on information from *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-steads of Iceland* by W.G. Collingwood.)

The sagas are written in a style where they do not give much description of the landscape, but the sagas live in the landscapes. Place names are explained through the events in the sagas and there is physical evidence of the narratives. There exists a feedback loop where the stories enrich one’s view of the landscape and conversely the stories themselves are far richer when they are staged within the sweet, strange, and sublime landscapes of Iceland.

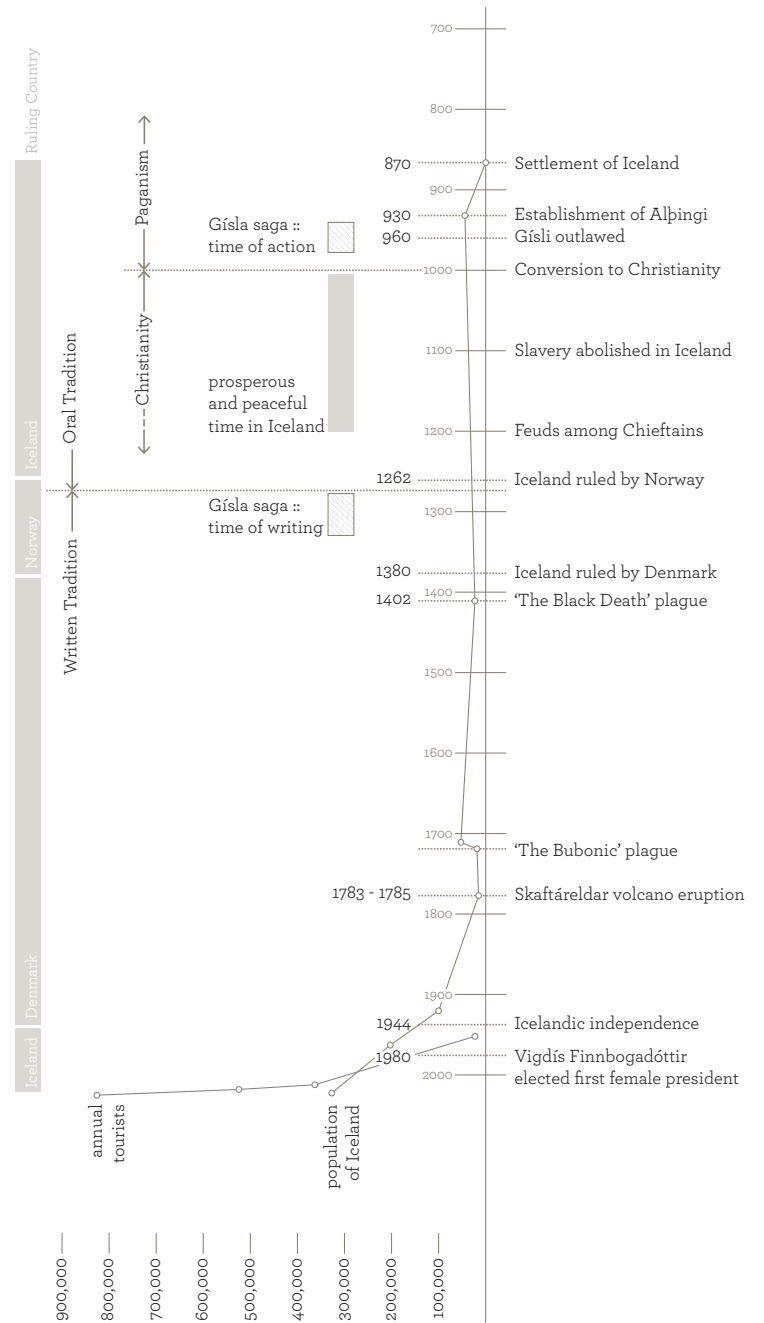
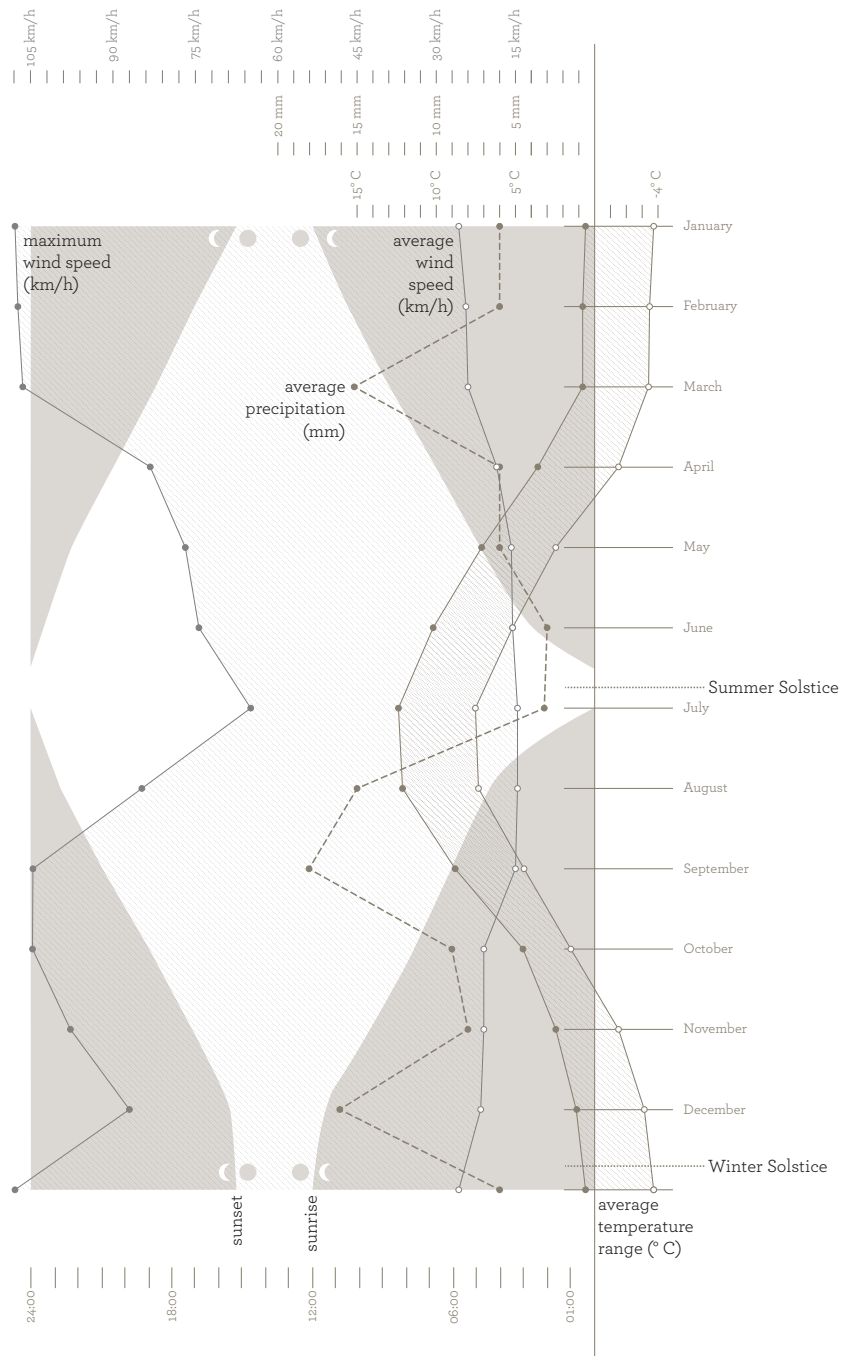
There is a strong potential for the sagas to enhance the experience of the Icelandic landscape for visitors. The sagas remain a part of how Icelanders view their rural landscapes and how they view themselves as a nation. Facilitating tourist engagement of the saga past is a way of meeting the local culture through environment.⁹ From my experience as I traveled, being knowledgeable and interested in the sagas allowed me to begin a conversation with any Icelander; it was remarkable.



- Bandamanna saga
- Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss
- Bjarnar saga Hítödelakappa
- Brennu-Njáls saga
- Droplaugarsona saga
- Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar
- Eiríks saga rauða
- Eyrbyggja saga
- Færeyinga saga
- Finnboga saga ramma
- Fljótsdæla saga
- Flóamanna saga
- Fóstbreðra saga
- Gísla saga Súrssonar
- Grænlandinga saga
- Grettis saga
- Gull-Þóris saga
- Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls
- Gunnlaugs saga orms tungu
- Hænsna-Þóris saga
- Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds
- Hárðar saga ok Hólmverja
- Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings
- Heiðarvíga saga
- Hrafnkels saga freygoða
- Hrana saga hrings
- Kjalnesinga saga
- Kormáks saga
- Króka-Refs saga
- Laxdæla saga
- Ljósvetninga saga
- Ölkofra saga
- Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu
- Svarfðæla saga
- Þorsteins saga hvíta
- Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar
- Þórðar saga hreðu
- Valla-Ljóts saga
- Vatnsdæla saga
- Víga-Glúms saga
- Víglundar saga
- Vopnfríðinga saga

- + PRIMARY SAGA
- + SECONDARY SAGA
- + TERTIARY SAGA





The sagas have different readings, meanings and roles with relation to Icelandic national identity depending on the reader. The range is a spectrum upon which these points lie:

In rural Iceland the sagas are regarded as history and as fact. They are seen as a cultural inheritance.

In urban Iceland the sagas are regarded as allegories, written at the time of Iceland's conversion from paganism to Christianity. The view is that the stories are based upon real people and that the core events have occurred, but that the stories have been sharpened for the church's agenda.

In mainland Europe the sagas are regarded as literature. There is even a conflict about how the stories came to be written. The legacy of oral tradition is discounted and rather the idea that the narratives were written by learned men (not rural farmers) is touted.

I am introducing another theory about the potential role of the sagas in medieval Icelandic society. During the time of oral tradition, prior to written maps, the sagas were a wayfinding device. They were a vehicle for the society to build a shared mental map of the landscape. The terrain is so rugged there; I imagine navigating was difficult. Many of the place names of the regions are related to their local saga. The stories could have helped to provide a system of way finding that would be relatively easy to teach through narrative.

Figure 39. [Far Opposite]

Climate Data for Ísafjörður, Iceland. This is the largest town in the Westfjords. (Drawing based on data from Veður, The Icelandic Meteorological Office.)

Figure 40. [Opposite]

Timeline of settlement of Iceland. (Drawing based on information from the National Museum of Iceland)



For mid review, I explored responses to each of these readings in isolation.

When the sagas are *history*, the landscape is an *artifact*.

When the sagas are *literature*, the landscape is a *stage*.

When the sagas are *navigational*, the stories live in the landscape as *cairns*.

As a wayfinding tool in medieval Iceland, knowing these stories could have been a matter of life and death. The sky is volatile. The earth is volatile. Navigating in the landscape would have been perilous.

Figure 41. [Opposite]
Brewing storm in Iceland.



Now there are roads, street lights, gps and satellites. Our need for wayfinding has shifted. It is not always a matter of life and death.

In thinking about stories that endure, part of why I believe they have longevity is that they speak to universal themes: love, death, loneliness, and the search for meaning. These tenets of the human condition are tenets because they are all of our stories. They are all of our tiny tragedies, joys and triumphs. The need for external wayfinding, for moving through the world has diminished.

What we need now is internal wayfinding.

Figure 42. [Opposite]

Námaskarð Hverir near Myvatn, Iceland



Figure 43. [Above]

Site of Gísli saga Súrssonar

Figure 44. [Opposite]

Map of international and domestic traveler distribution overlaid with saga steads.

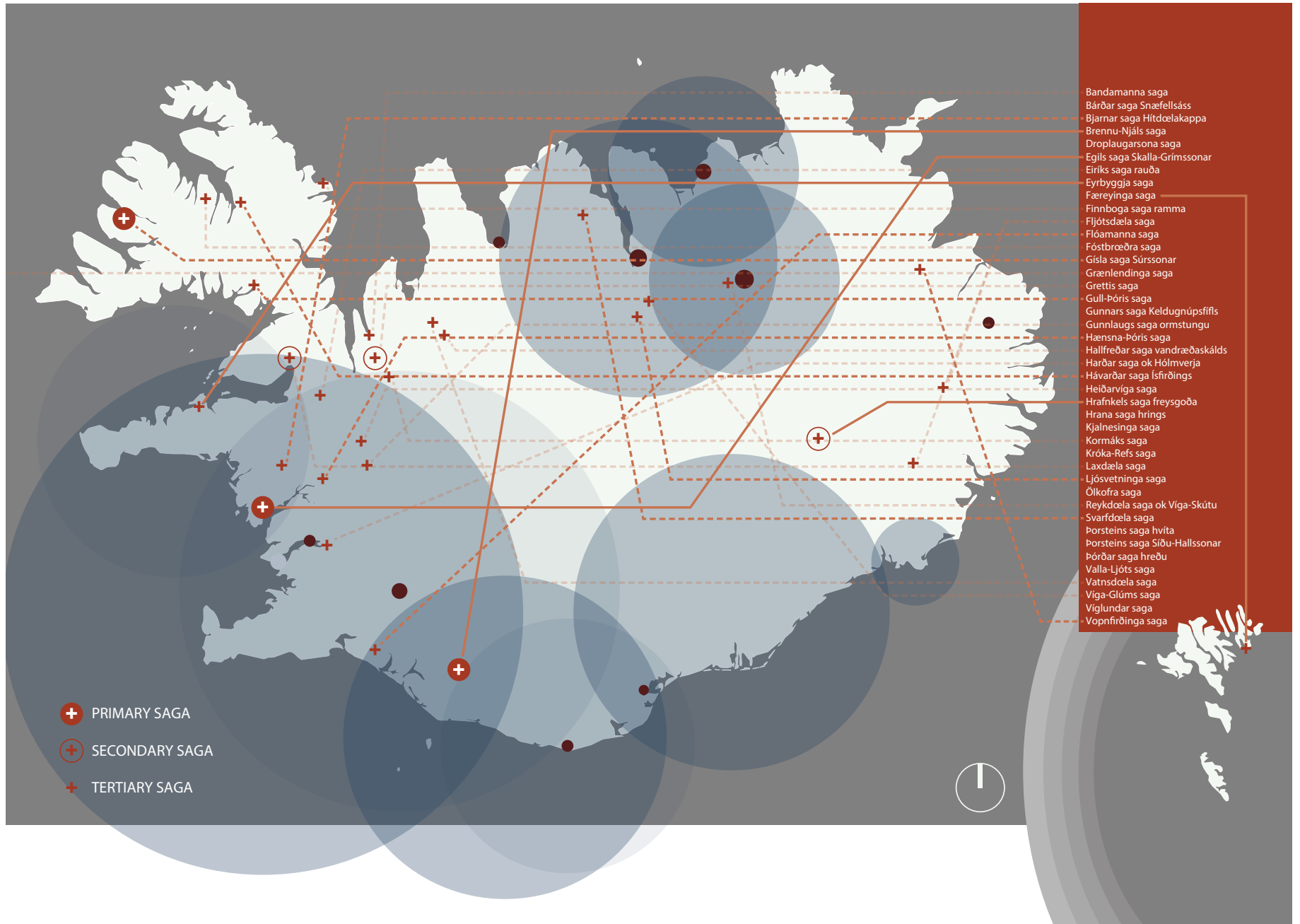
I initially set parameters for saga selection for this thesis that identified the need for three sagas that represented varying levels of influence and importance.

A major work. I sought a saga that is typically taught to schoolchildren. Half the population lives in Reykjavik, so proximity to that city is important. By selecting a saga that is taught as part of the curriculum and providing amenities that would support school groups, this vestige could have a reasonable, initial user group. That would be beneficial to the development of future saga sites.

A secondary work. I sought a saga that is currently underrepresented in tourism infrastructure. This vestige would ideally be associated with a nearby rural town to provide the visitor with lodging amenities and to bolster the local economy.

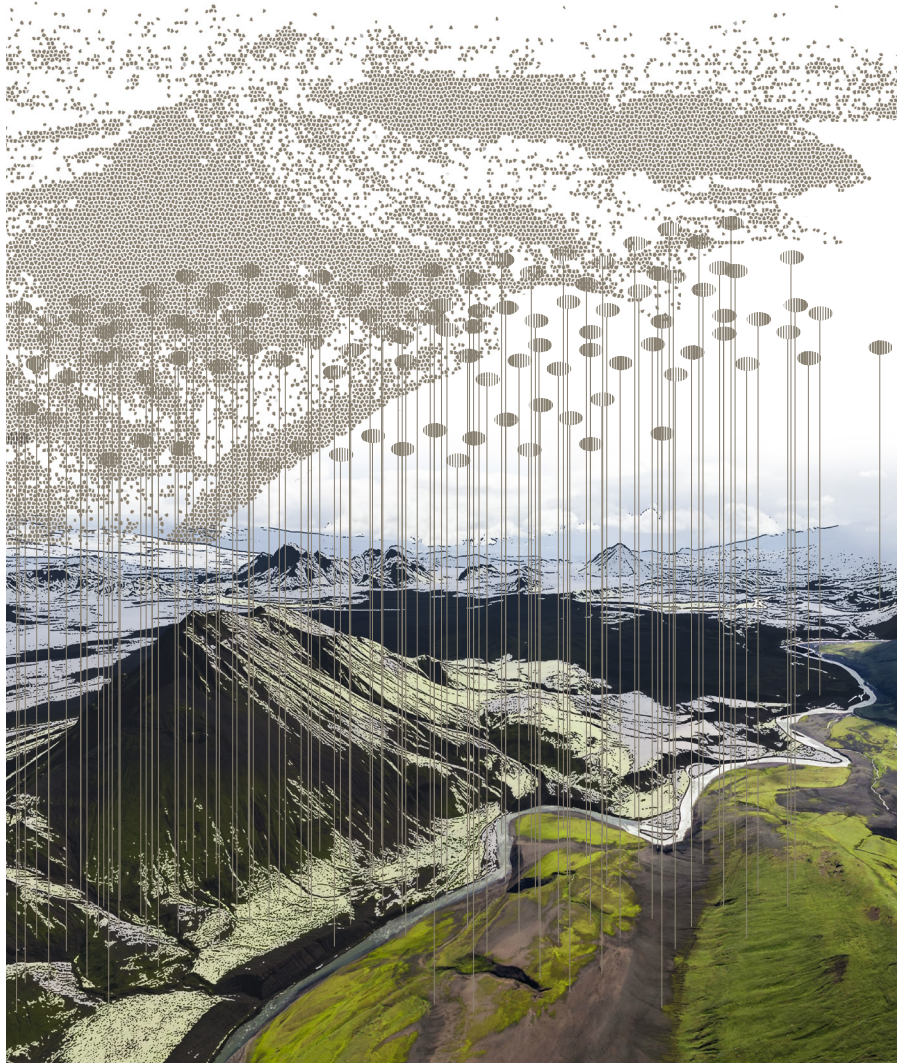
A minor work. I sought a saga that would be more remotely sited. Dramatically sited, I envisioned this vestige could serve as the ambassador for the collection.

Now let us overlay where the sagas are rooted with where the international and domestic tourists currently travel (Figure 43). I applied the criteria I had developed in looking for a primary, secondary and tertiary saga. Instead of needing three sagas to cover the range of scales that I intended to explore, I was able to meet all of these criteria with Gísli saga Súrssonar. (Figure 42)



- + PRIMARY SAGA
- + SECONDARY SAGA
- + TERTIARY SAGA

- Bandamanna saga
- Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss
- Bjarnar saga Hítödelakappa
- Brennu-Njáls saga
- Droplaugarsona saga
- Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar
- Eiríks saga rauða
- Eyrbyggja saga
- Færeyinga saga
- Finnboga saga ramma
- Fljótsdæla saga
- Flóamanna saga
- Fóstbreðra saga
- Gísla saga Súrssonar
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- Grettis saga
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- Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls
- Gunnlaugs saga ormsungu
- Hænsna-Þóris saga
- Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds
- Hárðar saga ok Hólmverja
- Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings
- Heiðarvíga saga
- Hrafnkels saga freygoða
- Hrana saga hrings
- Kjalnesinga saga
- Kormáks saga
- Króka-Refs saga
- Laxdæla saga
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- Ólkofra saga
- Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu
- Svarfdæla saga
- Þorsteins saga hvíta
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- Þórðar saga hreðu
- Valla-Ljóts saga
- Vatnsdæla saga
- Víga-Glúms saga
- Víglundar saga
- Vopnfríðinga saga



“The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds.”

- John Dewey

“Driving into view of the island Drangey in Skagafjörður, ... one of the authors of this paper would often be told of how the hero Grettir found refuge there when he was outlawed from human society, only to later meet his death on the island. That telling might be followed by the story of how a particular rock beside the island called Old Woman is indeed a troll who got caught in the dawn and turned to stone while trying to cross the fjord—her husband Old Man collapsed prematurely some 300 years ago. To this then might be added the story of one of the authors’ grandfather who, as a young man, was stranded on the island while hunting puffins. Thus, Saga lore, national history, personal history and folklore might all be fused together in a landscape feature creating a powerful sense of belonging.”

Excerpt from *Speeding Towards the Future through the Past: Landscape, Movement and National Identity*

Gísli saga Súrssonar is:

A major work: Gísli saga has been on the national school syllabus for several decades.¹⁰ It is the first saga taught in school where the students are tasked with critically examining the text. It is studied when the students are approximately 15 years old.

A secondary work: The region is underrepresented in tourism, both domestic and international. The westfjords do not lie on the Highway 1, also known as the ‘Ring Road’. The village of Þingeyri has a population of 250 people. The community is associated with the Saga Trails board. There is an annual festival held at the beginning of July celebrating the region’s saga history. The community has built turf reconstructions to house the festival.¹¹

A minor work: The Westfjords offer an undeniably powerful landscape; they are both remote and dramatic

Figure 45. [Opposite]

Conceptual collage exploring the layering of stories in the Icelandic landscape. Saga lore, folklore and person history work in tandem to create a sense of place. In moving through the landscape with stories; travels in space become travels in time. History becomes spatial.

Figure 46. [Following Spread]

View of the road into Þingeyri from the southern approach.







When I began investigating the sagas, I discovered that there is not a single site for each saga, but rather a myriad of places associated with the stories.¹² (Figure 46)

The story of Gísli Súrsson and his family spans from Norway, to Iceland and Greenland. The approach to site selection for this thesis was to select sites using the literature as a framework. The tact was to take moments in the story where characters made decisions that propelled the story forward. From the large number of place names that are associated with the text, several were identified as pivotal moments in the story.

My thesis has four sites. These four sites are tied to the saga, a single story. The intention of this thesis is to explore ways to make this single story relatable to many, even those who are not initially intrigued by the sagas. My position is that for a visitor to understand the value of these stories to a local, one must be able to relate them to their own story.

For that reason, I have related the events of the saga to the four struggles of the human condition as outlined by existential psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom: mortality, loneliness, freedom, and meaninglessness. (Figure 47)

“... the inevitability of death for each of us and for those we love; the freedom to make of our lives as we will; our ultimate aloneness; and finally the absence of any meaning or sense to our life. However grim these givens may seem they contain the seeds of wisdom and redemption.”¹³

These tenets are the underpinnings of everyone’s story.

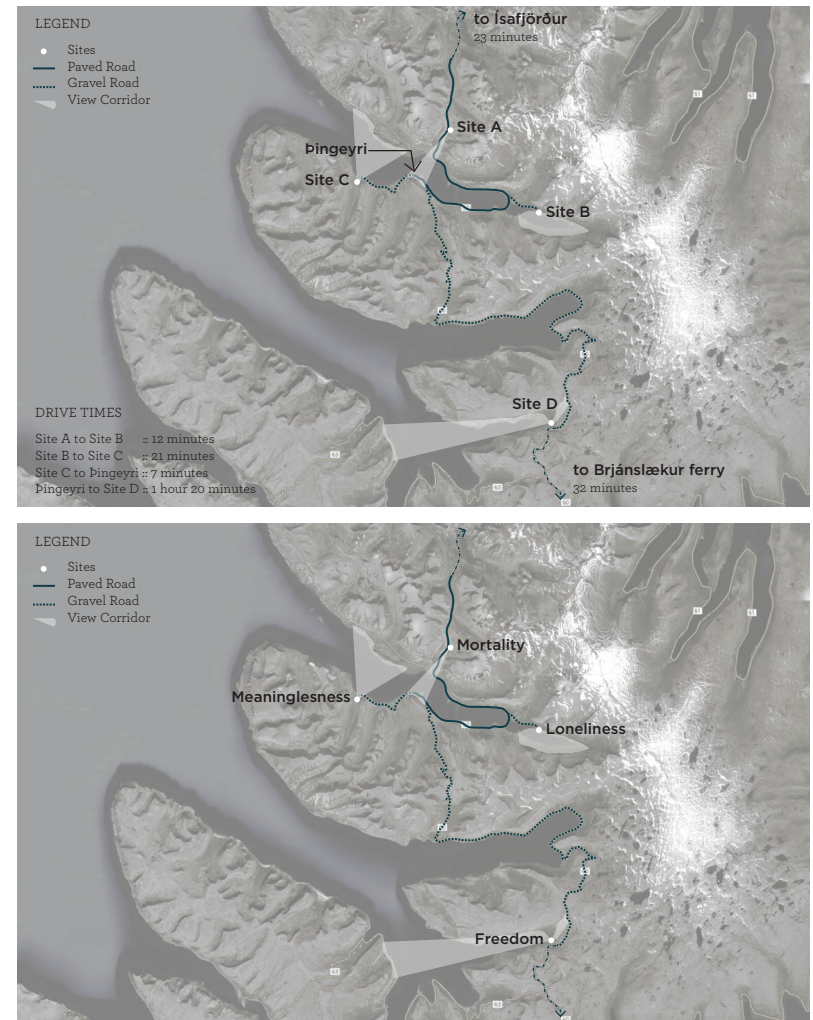
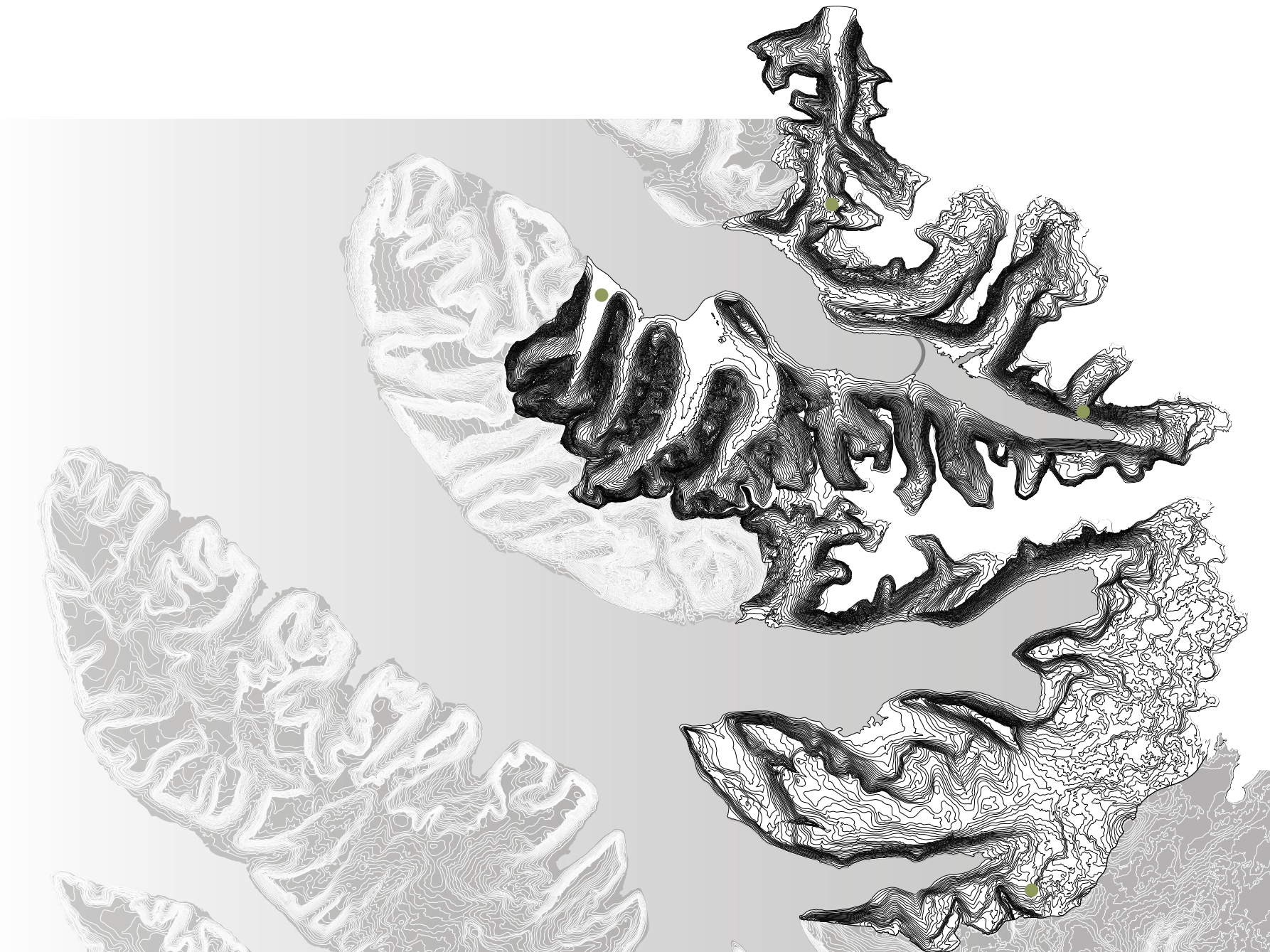


Figure 47. [Opposite]

Selection of thesis sites using literature as a framework: from the potential sites, key sites were identified as those where characters made decisions that propelled the story forward. Had they acted differently, the saga would have ended, or never been written. (Drawing based on data from Icelandic Saga Map by Dr. Emily Lethbridge)

Figure 48. [Above]

Thesis sites and related existential tenets



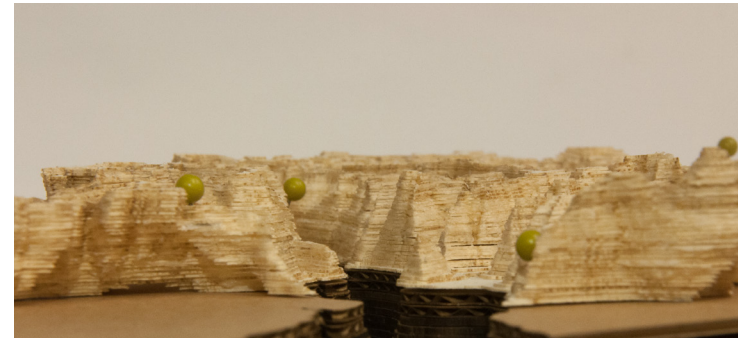


Figure 49. [Opposite]

Site plan of the extent of the proposed route with curated topography overlay.

Figure 50. [Left]

Site model of the curated topography. The modeled landscape was limited to what would be experienced while traveling on the proposed route. Model is built from 50 layers of watercolor paper. Scale 1" = 1200'.

Figure 51. [Above]

View into fjord from the water.



Man – let me offer you a definition – is the storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall – or when he's about to drown – he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.¹

Graham Swift, Waterland

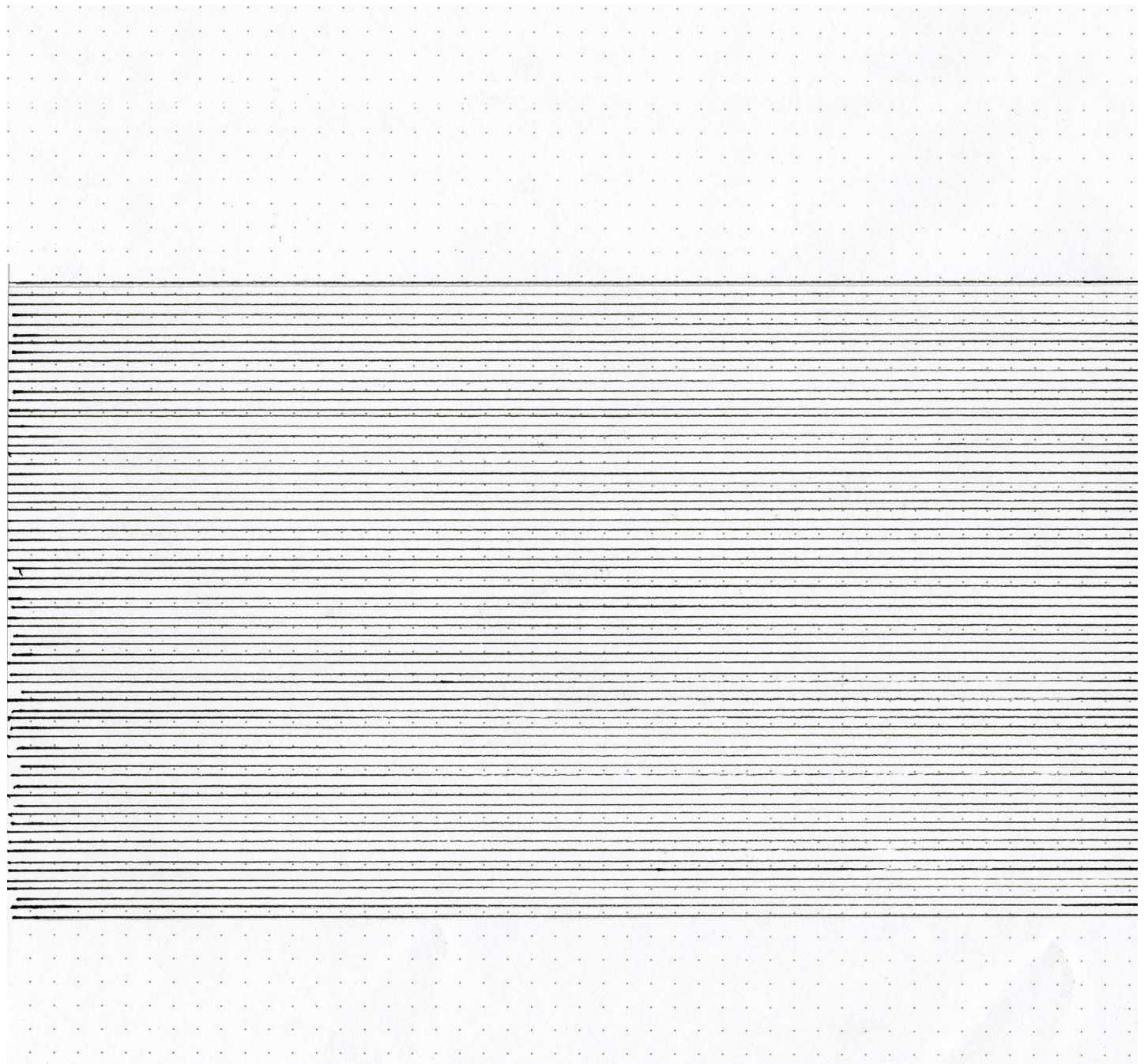
The intention of this project and the program is to mark this single story and to explore way to relate it to everyone's story. I will attempt that by telling my own story.

I would like to introduce my protagonist, the
Wall: masonry over concrete.

In addition to the wall, there is the aspirant, the one who aspires,
Plate of Steel.

Figure 52. [Opposite]

Ferry wake from Stavanger to Sauda, Norway



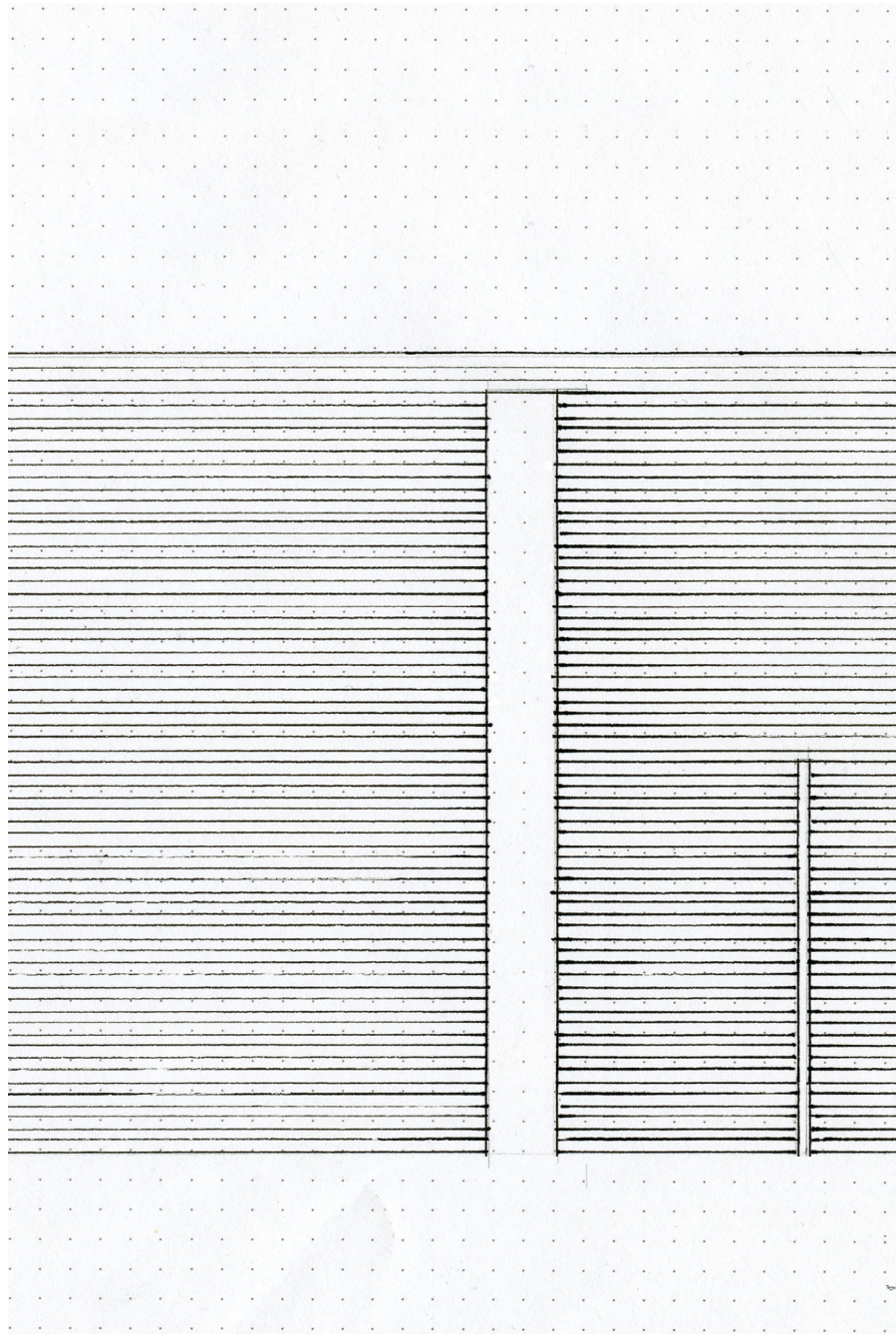


Figure 53. [Spread]

hello Wall & Plate of Steel

A protagonist is the leading character. They are an advocate or champion of a particular cause or idea. An aspirant is the character who has ambitions to achieve something.

01



02



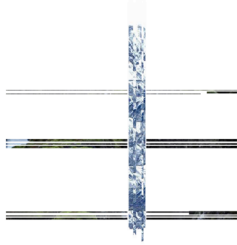
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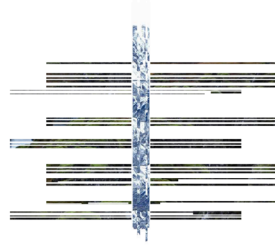
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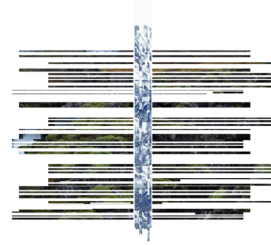
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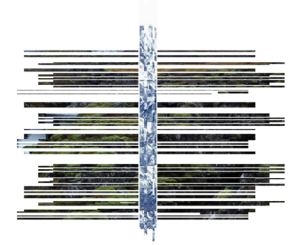
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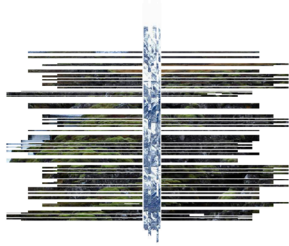
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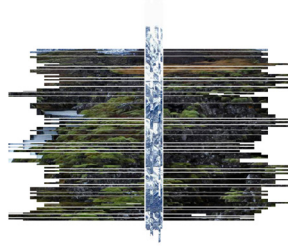
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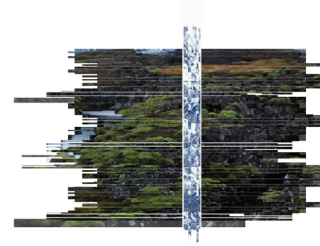
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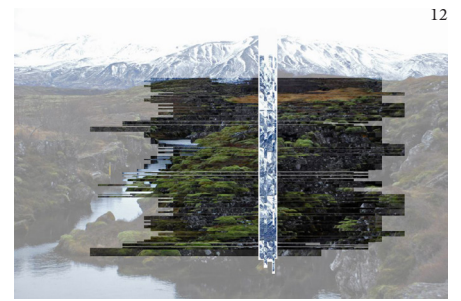
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11



12



13

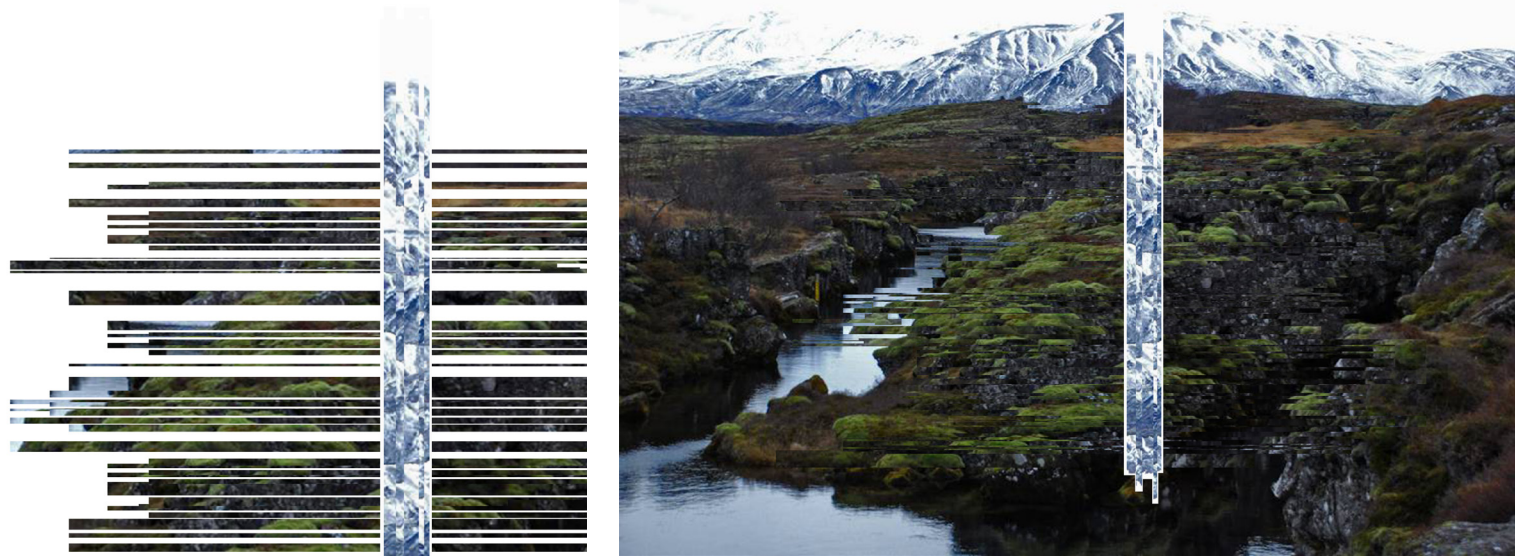


14



The wall is built not only from the bottom-up, but from the interior out. The concrete core is an armature. This armature works to mediate between the cultural canons of each specific place and the existential tenets of the universal themes. It is only at moments of revelation that the core is known.

Until then, it's qualities are a mystery.



The lava stones are an accumulation. Just as cairns communicate as wayfinding devices comprised of stones from previous travelers. These lava stones are the many voices of each place: the past, the present and the future. It is with intention that they are scaled to the hand.

I could not build a concrete wall alone, but I could place a stone.

Figure 54. [Spread]

Conceptual collage illustrating the construction of the protagonist and its relationship to the landscape.

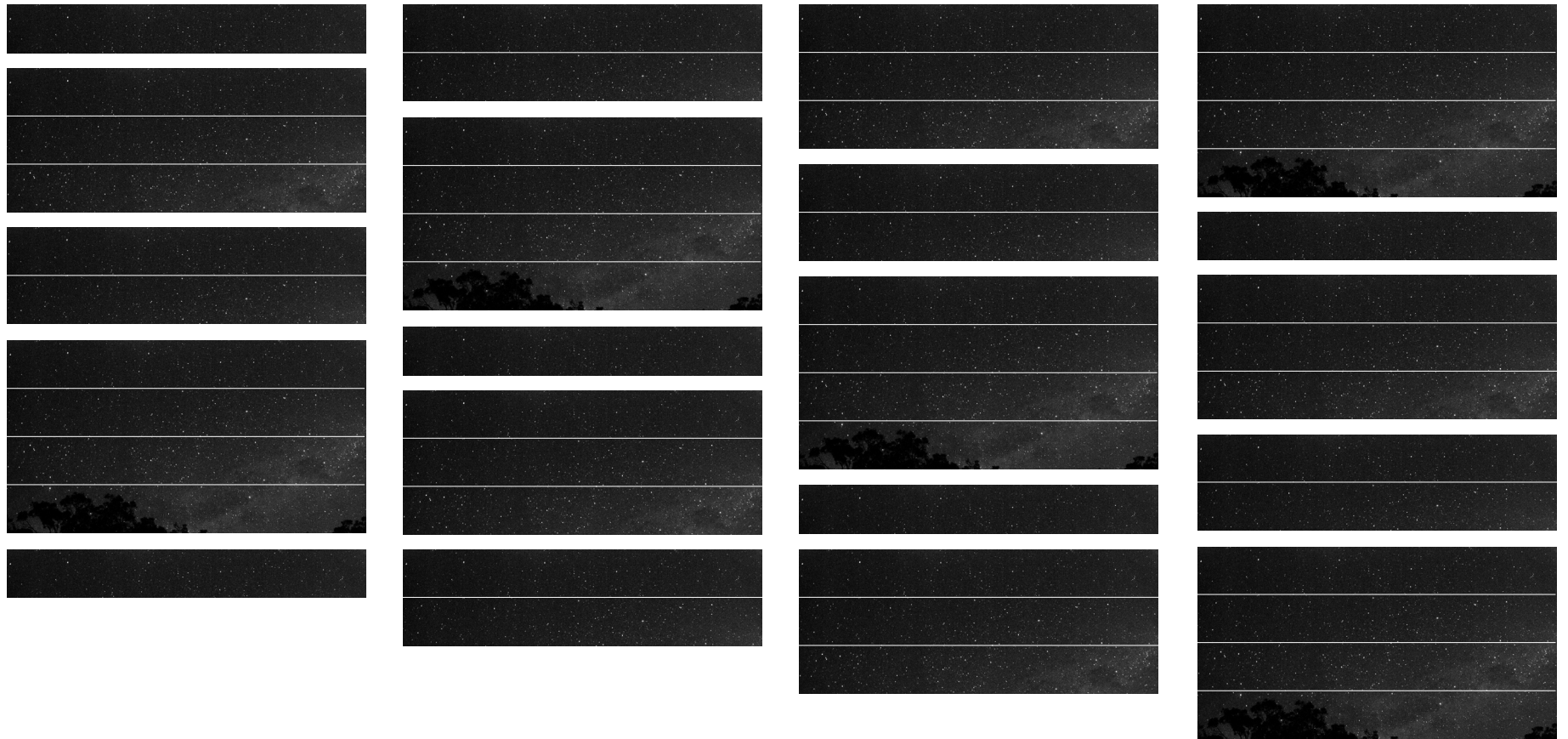
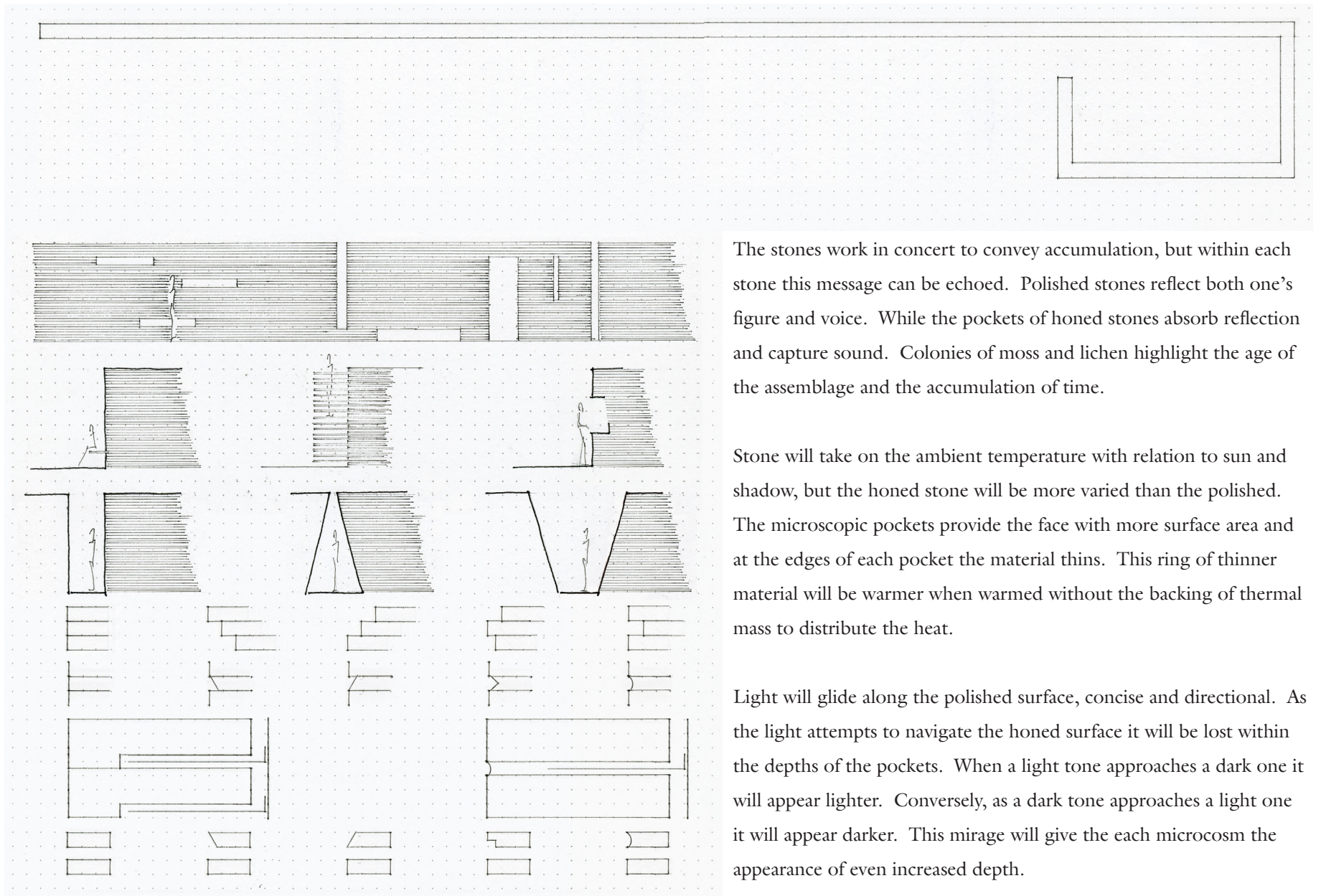


Figure 55. [Spread]

Conceptual collage illustrating the haptic qualities of the lava stone and challenging assumptions of perceived scale.

Just as we do, lava rocks express their age. New lava is black and shiny. Minerals coat the surface giving it an oily sheen. As time passes, weathering removes this and the rock become more subdued in color. The lava stone will typically have many small pockets formed from the vacating of gases during the eruption. Moss and lichen use these voids as footholds; over time the flora turn the lava gray.





The stones work in concert to convey accumulation, but within each stone this message can be echoed. Polished stones reflect both one's figure and voice. While the pockets of honed stones absorb reflection and capture sound. Colonies of moss and lichen highlight the age of the assemblage and the accumulation of time.

Stone will take on the ambient temperature with relation to sun and shadow, but the honed stone will be more varied than the polished. The microscopic pockets provide the face with more surface area and at the edges of each pocket the material thins. This ring of thinner material will be warmer when warmed without the backing of thermal mass to distribute the heat.

Light will glide along the polished surface, concise and directional. As the light attempts to navigate the honed surface it will be lost within the depths of the pockets. When a light tone approaches a dark one it will appear lighter. Conversely, as a dark tone approaches a light one it will appear darker. This mirage will give the each microcosm the appearance of even increased depth.

Each of these conditions are notes that work in tandem to create an atmosphere. They exist. As we begin to work out from the microscopic pocket of the stone's face we can make choices that emphasize, exacerbate, mitigate, and negate these fundamental conditions of the material.

The face of the stone can be hewn to fracture or capture light.
To promote or discourage the accumulation of water and life.
To encourage or repel the caress of one's fingers.

The design intention can be reiterated within the joints between the stones.
The mortar, the indicator that the wall was built in one pass and the signal of a single builder can be eradicated with the suppression of the joints themselves.

An apparently dry-stacked stone reverberates that I can place a stone.

The chorus repeats with the relationship of stone to stone.
The play of light and manufacture of shadow.
The accumulation of detritus.
The journey of the hand.

The intention becomes a crescendo in the wall.
Plumb, battered, overhung, single, paired.
That which looms when alone can convey shelter when mirrored.
Constriction can be communicated directly or implied.
These conditions exist as a moment.

The face of the wall can be pushed and pulled for our habitation.
We are the debris.

Pushed and pulled for our traversing.
We are the light.

Just as there is a symphony of communication in the presence of the wall; its absence is of equal volume. A void framed by wall is intentional. We peer through and attempt to read what the author has striven to frame. When located above our height the void pulls our eye and spirit upward. When below our height we will crouch. We work to orient the datum of our eye height with the void.

Time is introduced with movement; through the procession the wall plays an active role. It can work to enclose, to collect, to deny, to lead.

My thesis is that the culture embedded within the landscape can be made legible by the well-organized absence of information.

My vehicle for exploration is the wall.

Figure 56. [Opposite]

Diagrammatic study of the wall:
design intention explored from the
scale of the grout to the procession
alongside and through the wall.



A path is a prior interpretation of the best way to traverse a landscape, and to follow a route is to accept an interpretation, or to stalk your predecessor on it as scholars and trackers and pilgrims do. To walk the same way is to reiterate something deep; to move through the same space the same way is a means of becoming the same person, thinking the same thoughts. It's a form of spatial theater, but also spiritual theater, since one is emulating saints and gods in the hope of coming close to oneself, not just impersonating them for others.¹

*Rebecca Solnit,
Wanderlust. A History of Walking*

I biked around Scandinavia for five months. I was alone a lot, but I only felt the ache of loneliness when I was in cities. When I was surrounded by people, I felt the most alone. I first felt this pain, when after a month of biking, I arrived in Iceland's second largest city, Akureyri. Several days prior to that, I had this overwhelming sense that I was exactly where I was supposed to be, in every sense.

Of the entire world, the entire globe, I was where I was supposed to be. I was biking through the rolling hills of farmland and I was singing out loud as I biked, John Denver's 'Country Road, Take me Home'. I felt so content and joyous. I could feel the light inside of me shining. I arrived in Akureyri, set up my campsite, ventured into the city and was hit with a loneliness that I had not yet experienced.

I had no home, no network, nothing... and I was surrounded by people who seemed to have all those things. I passed a street musician who was playing an Icelandic song. His song ended and he started playing 'Country Road'. I was overwhelmed. My eyes filled with tears. That moment, that coincidence, made the loneliness manageable. I was able to give it meaning. I was able to be with my loneliness but not feel despair.

I tell you this story to illustrate the intention of this project. These wayfinding vestiges are not meant to make you feel lonely. They are not meant to symbolize loneliness. They are to provide an armature, something to help you address, the loneliness that you brought with you.

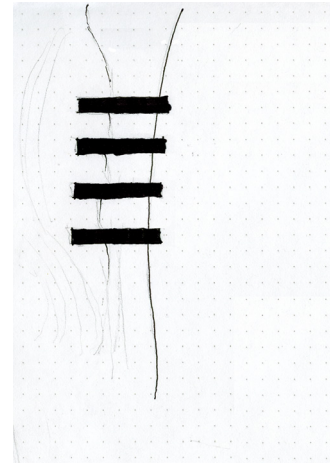
Figure 57. [Opposite]

The author's steed in Bodø, Norway



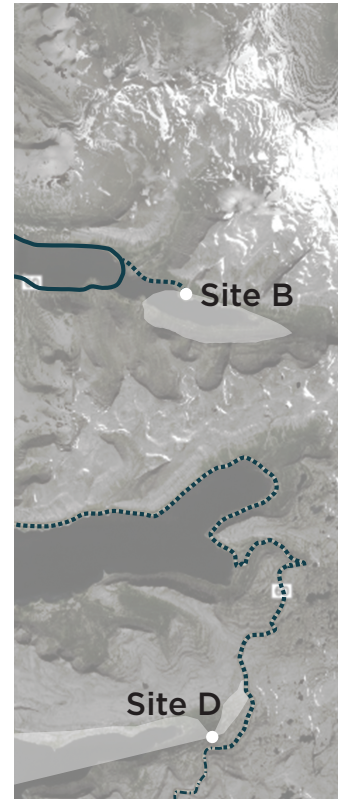
Loneliness

wall isolates water



Gísli Súrsson and his family moved to Iceland from Norway. The family had three brothers and one sister. One brother stayed behind in Norway and the other siblings established farms in Haukadalur, a valley near Þingeyri in the Westfjords. There was a spring assembly held in the heart of Dýrafjörður. The family arrived as part of a group of 40 men. The group drank, lazed about, and did not contribute initially to the proceedings.

Rumors began that though the family got along presently, that this would not last. To counter this the two brothers, Gísli and Þorkell, and their respective brother-in-laws, Vésteinn and Þorgrím initiated a blood brotherhood ritual. Right before the ritual was complete, Þorgrím withdrew his hand saying that he was already bound to Gísli and Þorkell, that that was enough trouble, he did not have any reason to be bound to Vésteinn. This angered Gísli as Vésteinn was his brother-in-law. This event fractured the family and divided loyalties. It set in motion the systematic isolation of family members that ultimately led to the deaths of all men involved.



Dýrafjörður

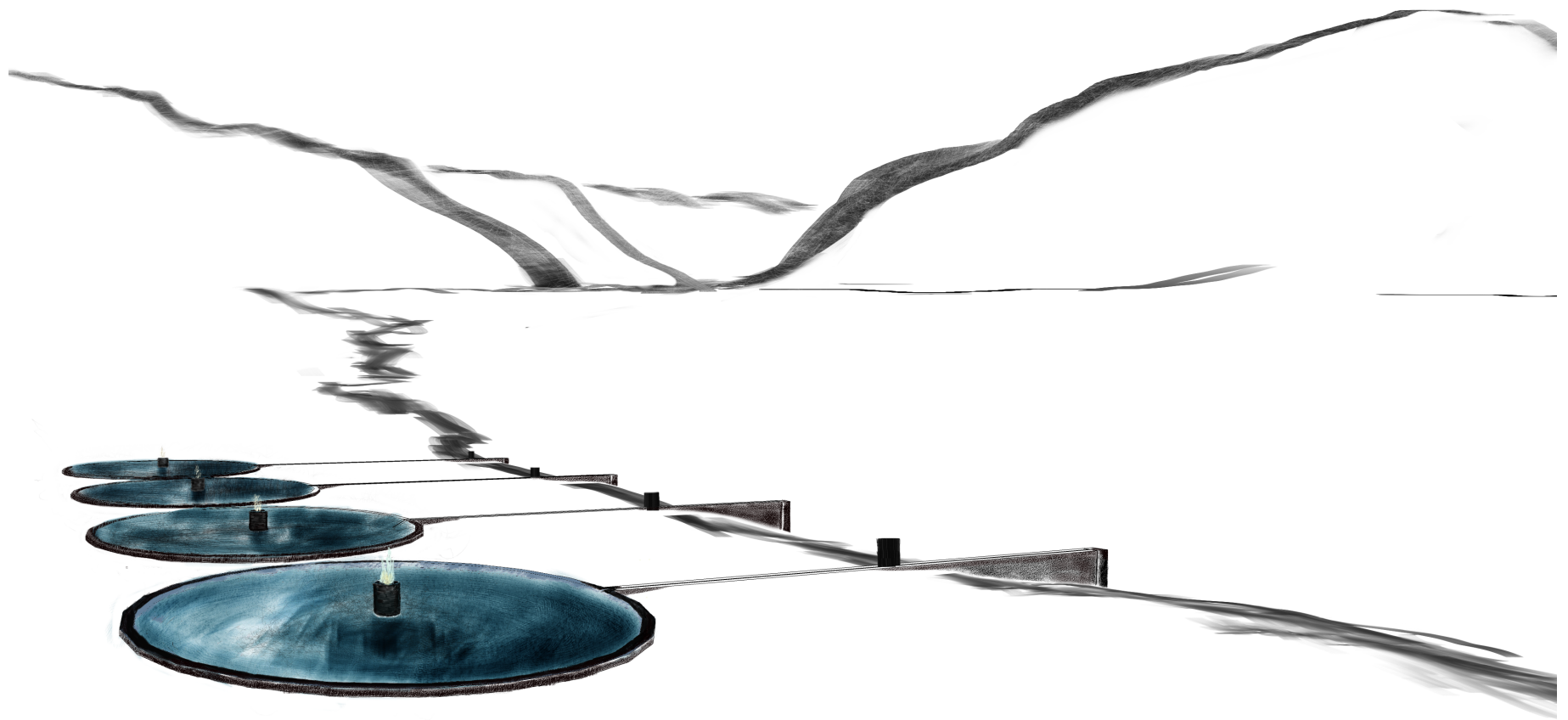
former assembly site
SITE B

Location of failed blood brotherhood.

This event fractured the family and divided loyalties. It set in motion the systematic isolation of family members that ultimately led to the deaths of all men involved.

Site Conditions

accessibility: gravel road
current conditions: gravel parking
Saga signage
landslide zone
winter access restricted

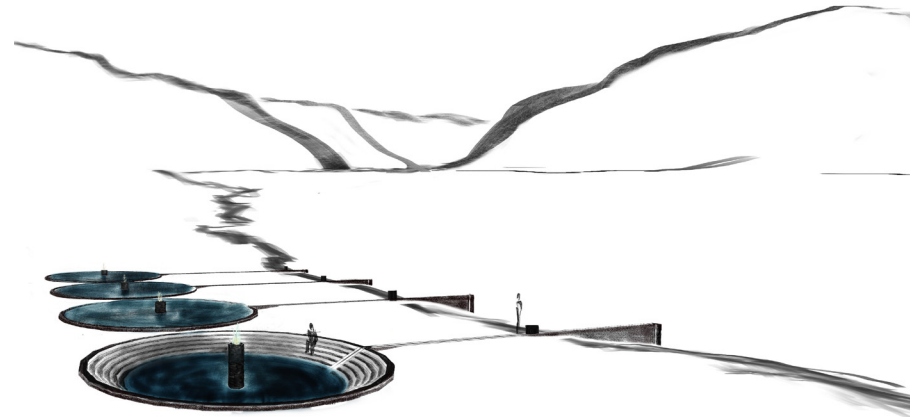


WALL ISOLATES WATER

As one approaches the site, what they first see are four unreachable flames. The reason for their distance and unattainability is varied. Wall has surrounded them, isolated them, but not hidden them. The ache of their isolation is evident and insurmountable. They are each encircled with what appears to be a low wall and reflecting pool. Parallel runnels extend to the fjord, feeding the pools. Near the shore is plate of steel, poised to stop the flow of water, should one engage it.

Once the flow of water has ceased, the reflecting pool begins to slowly drain. The dropping water level reveals not the bottom of a pool, but steps leading down below grade. Each step takes one lower and frustratingly closer, but not close, to the flame. Disengaging plate of steel will again flood the quasi staircase. From empty to full, each pool takes 3 hours to completely fill, the number of years between the family settling in Iceland and the failed blood brotherhood. From full to empty, each pool takes 13 hours to drain, the number of years that Gísli was an outlaw, before he was ultimately slain.

Each vestige is inwardly focused, but the swath of land between them is latent with potential. It is at that moment, when two people sitting, back to back, could turn and no longer be alone.



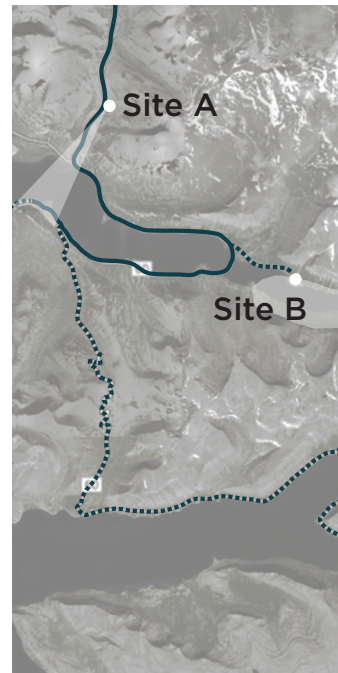
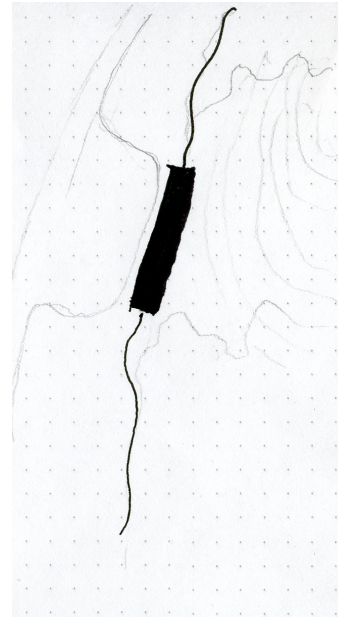


Mortality

wall interrupts water

The brothers, Gísli and Þorkell lived as neighbors in Haukadalur. Þorkell overheard his and Gísli's wife talking about their loves. Þorkell's wife, Asgeird, confessed to being in love with Auð's brother Vésteinn. There was the insinuation that they had had an affair, and the implication that it was still happening. Þorkell stewed in his public humiliation. Vésteinn left Iceland.

Time passed and there were rumors of Vésteinn's return. He was headed to Haukadalur for a feast. Gísli sent men on horseback to warn him to not come. The parties missed one another. When the warning party realized the error, they double-backed, caught Vésteinn and relayed Gísli's warning. Vésteinn's response was that if they had met him sooner, he would have returned home. But at this point, he said, 'All waters flow towards Dýrafjörður and I will proceed.' Following the feast, he was murdered in his sleep.



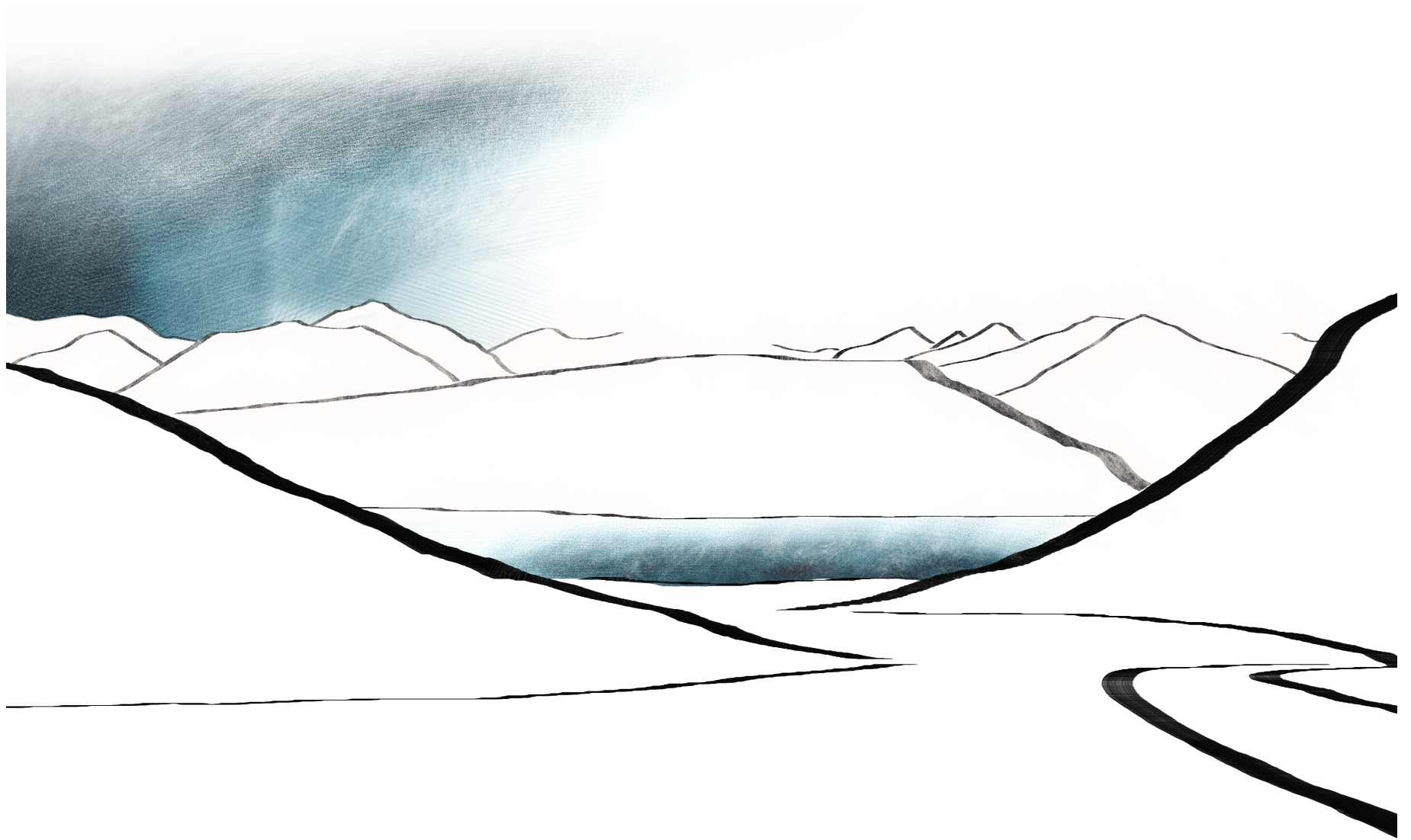
Road from Ísafjörður

mountain pass
SITE A

'All waters flow towards Dýrafjörður'

Site Conditions

accessibility: access directly by road
current conditions: gravel parking
Saga signage
two wood totems carved by Þingeyri resident



WALL INTERRUPTS WATER, maybe

From high atop the plateau peaks of the region, water continuously drains to the fjords below. Like the passage of time, the trajectory is unstoppable. Wall looms. Death anxiety waxes and wanes over the course of our lives. So too does wall provide for varying relationships with water, with time. Each attempt of wall to interrupt the water is thwarted by gravity.

While wall has attempted to stop the flow of water. Plate of steel marks it. Located at the shore, plate of steel has been configured as a vessel. This vessel which collects the water that escapes from wall has been tempered. When full, it rotates and strikes a block, it provides not a tinny, metallic clang, but a deep tone emanates. It carries. The sound is faint at the furthest reaches of the course way, but grows increasingly louder as one approaches the point, where all attempts to stop the water have failed, and it is released.

I do not know the form of this vestige. Each line I draw feels trite, and perhaps the initial response, interrupt, is too prescriptive, too aggressive. In my attempt to approach mortality in a way that will be universally meaningful I have one touchstone that I have developed. It is the scale.

That it should go from clouds to tide. Just as we rarely see the full arc of the lives of the ones we love, we do not see our parents as children or hopefully our children in their death, this vestige should not be experience wholly from one vantage point. Perhaps one should never be able to experience it in its entirety. That is what I know so far.



Freedom

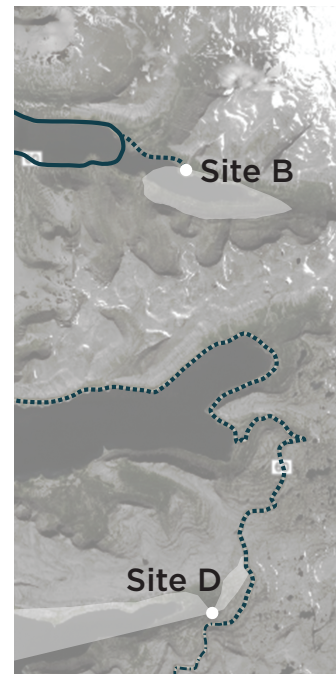
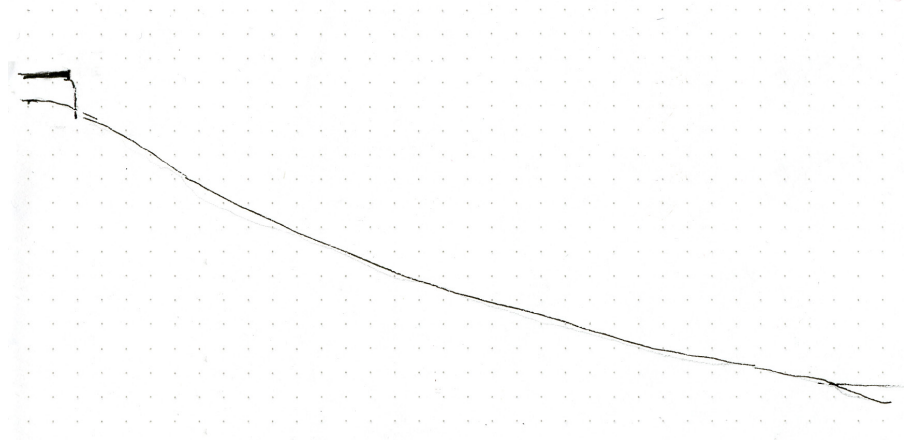
wall yearns for water

Gísli was an outlaw for thirteen years. In Iceland at the time, if you were an outlaw, anyone could kill you with impunity. The saga includes stories of his nearly being caught; his escapes were swift, comical. His final seven years grew progressively darker. He was tortured by nightmares forecasting his death. He became afraid of the dark. He was unable to sleep.

He hid a majority of the time in Geirþjófsfjörður. That is where he was ultimately tracked, surrounded and stood his last stand. He fought alongside his wife Auð and their foster daughter. They positioned themselves atop Einhamar, a rocky outcropping. Surrounded by fourteen men, Gísli fought off his attackers one by one. He killed many of them. He fought bravely, strenuously. He was dealt a mortal wound, but it wasn't instant. Defiantly he gathered his eviscerated entrails, secured them with his belt and continued to fight. As he weakened he requested that his attackers halt, that they were going to get when they had come for.

He stood, spoke one last verse about his love for his wife and the honor he had striven for, he jumped off the crag, drove his sword into another attacker, killed him, fell down on top of him and breathed his last.

It was in death, that Gísli found freedom.



Geirþjófsfjörður

abandoned fjord
SITE D

Site where Gísli hid for 13 years and was ultimately slain.

Site Conditions

accessibility: restricted access
current conditions: requires winter closure
foot + boat access only
prefabrication ideal

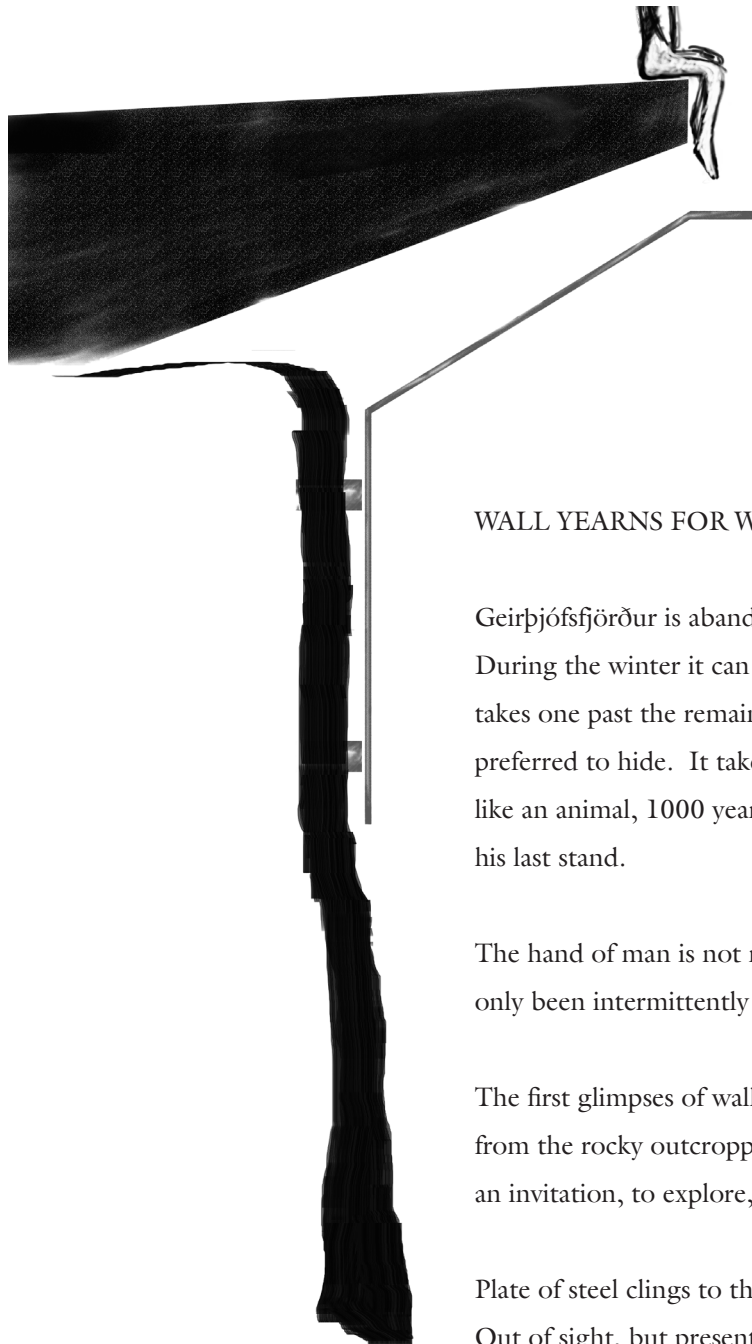


The existential struggle with freedom is bonded with anxiety. It is the recognition that we live in a universe that has no inherent design. We are the author of our own lives and consequently responsible for the choices we make. It has implications; it means that beneath us there is no ground.²

There is nothing. There is an abyss. There is a clash between our confrontation with groundlessness and our desire for ground and structure. It is here, in the idea of self-construction, where anxiety dwells.³







WALL YEARNS FOR WATER

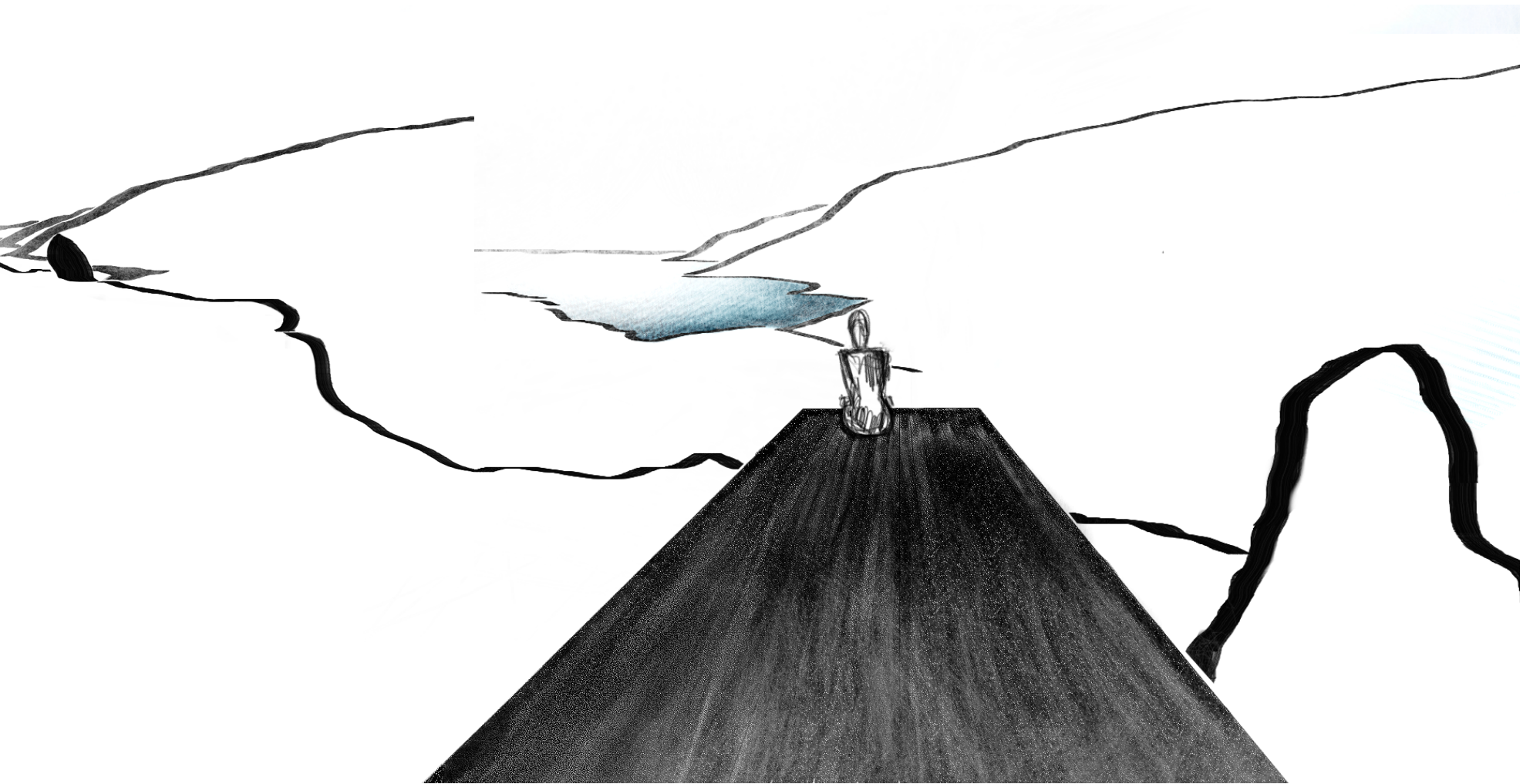
Geirþjófsfjörður is abandoned. It is only accessible by foot and by boat. During the winter it can be impossible to get there. To walk through the fjord takes one past the remains of Auð's farm where Gísli was sheltered, loved, and preferred to hide. It takes one past depressions in the ground, where Gísli hid, like an animal, 1000 years ago. Ultimately it takes you to Einhamar, the site of his last stand.

The hand of man is not readily apparent in Geirþjófsfjörður. The fjord has only been intermittently occupied. There are only vestiges, echoes.

The first glimpses of wall are along the periphery, indistinct. Wall emerges from the rocky outcropping and attempts to bridge the void. It's extension is an invitation, to explore, to sit, to approach the abyss.

Plate of steel clings to the face of the rocky outcropping.
Out of sight, but present. Waiting, to attempt to catch if you fall.

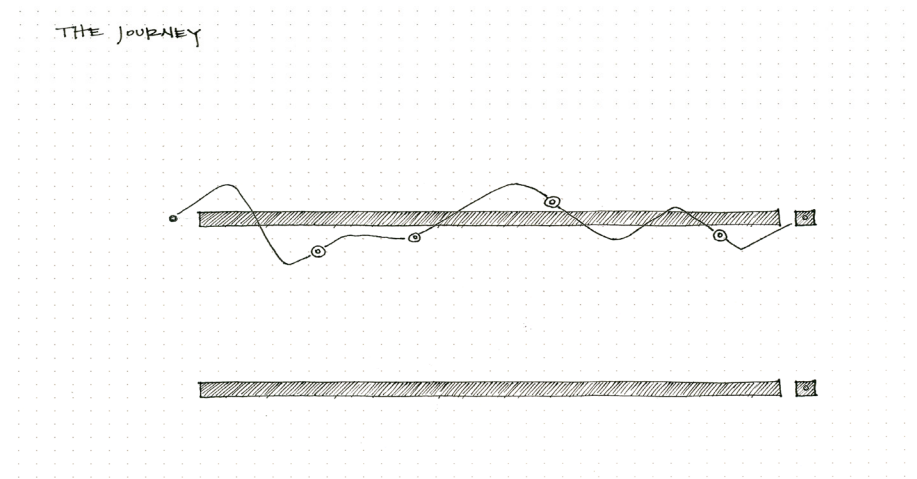






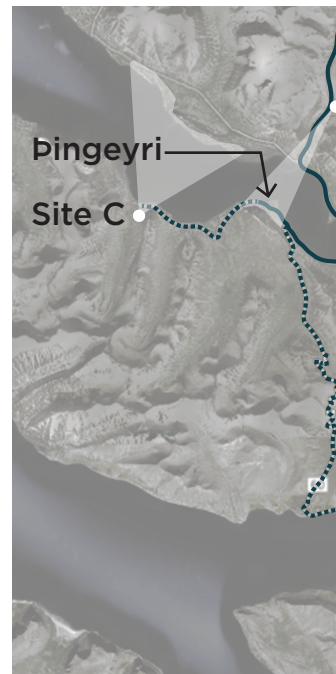
Meaninglessness

water becomes wall



Gísli was dead. Þorkell was dead. Þorgrím was dead. Vésteinn was dead.
If we must die, if nothing endures, then what sense does anything make?

Framing meaning as a search implies that there is a destination; that it is a quest, it is a pilgrimage. I believe it is here that we look to the tourist. That the meaning of life is not a search; that it is something we create. It is in the journey; it is through the journey, that we construct meaning.



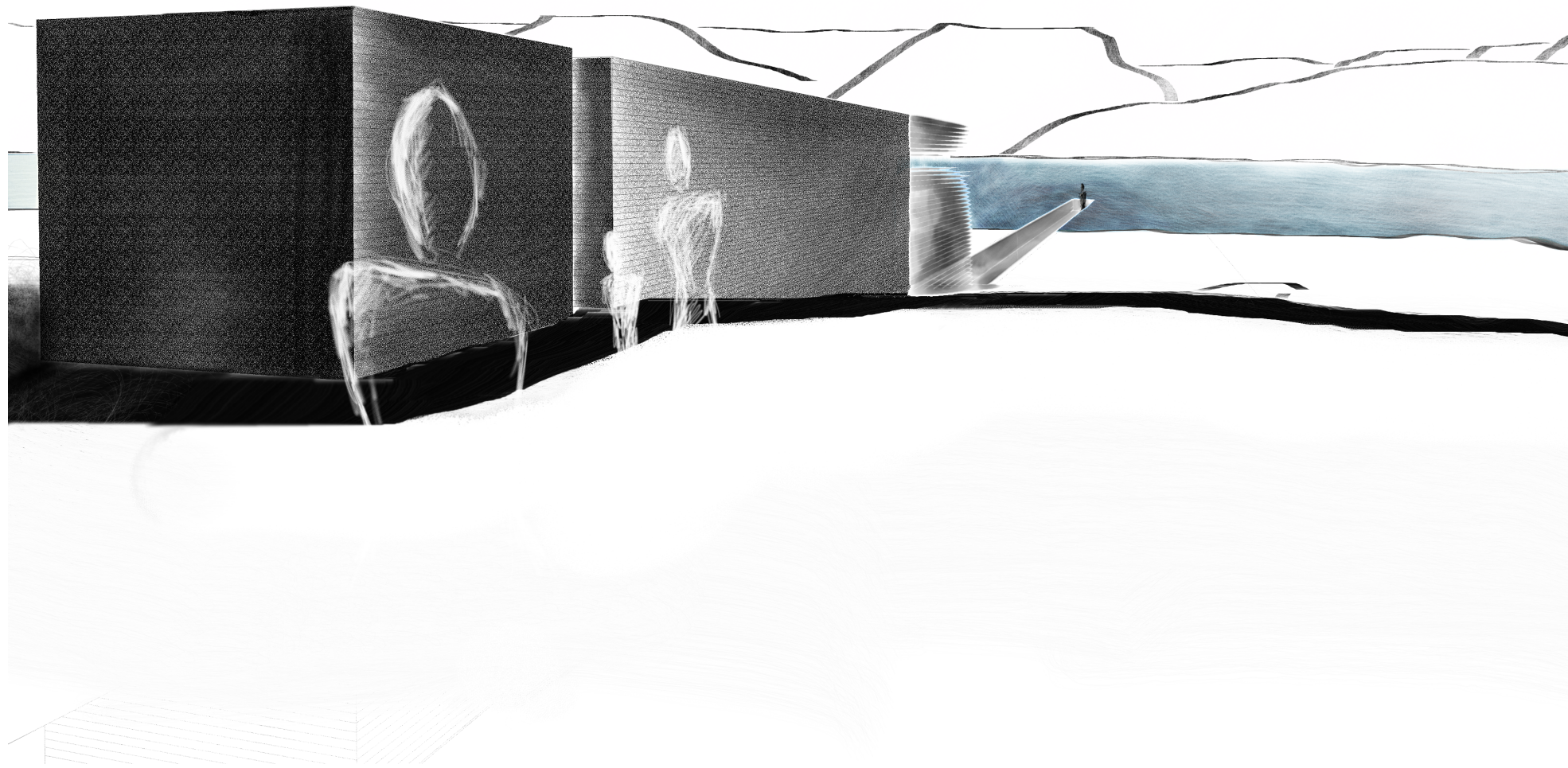
Haukadalur

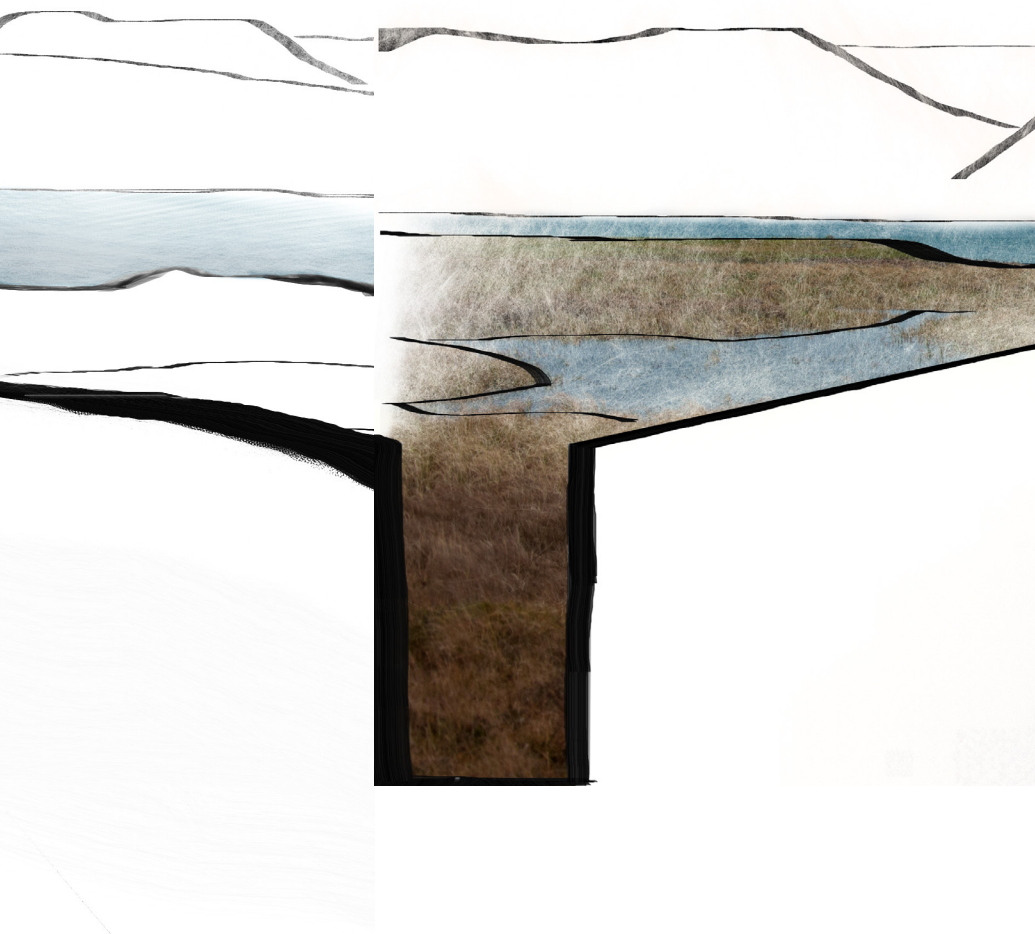
valley
SITE C

Site where the saga begins and where much of the action of the story occurs.

Site Conditions

accessibility: access directly by road
current conditions: gravel parking
concrete salt house in disrepair (currently used as a lamb smoke house)

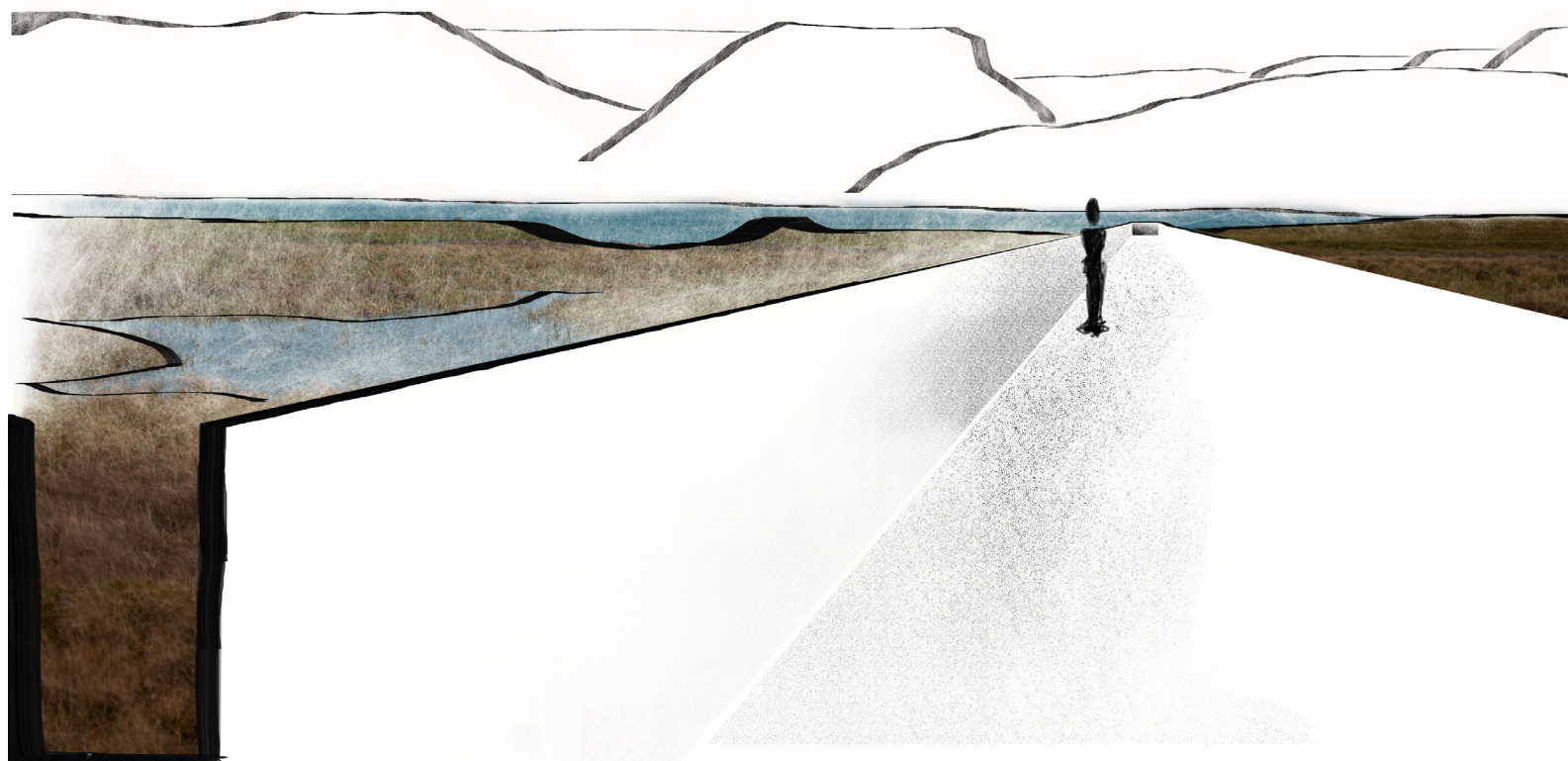


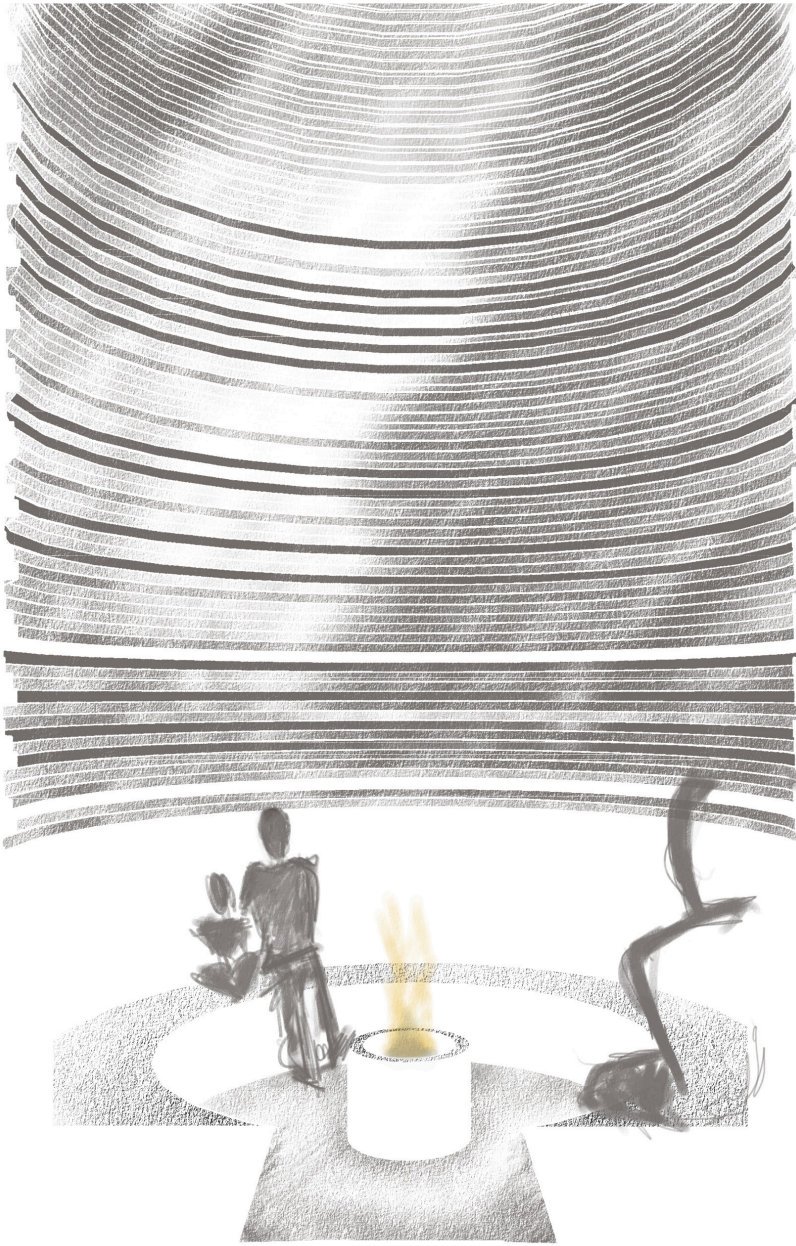


WATER BECOMES WALL

What appears to be the entirety of the wall is seen on the approach. A solid, impenetrable masonry cube flanks the threshold. It is at this moment, for the first time, that you step into the wall. Initially open to the sky, the walls fold in above you and the space becomes darker. Carved into the center of the floor, running the length of the procession is a runnel. Meant to shuttle the rainfall from the entry, this runnel, silently implies that now you are the water. From this darkened masonry threshold you step onto a light-filled steel landing. Plate of steel, the aspirant, the one who aspires, has become the wall. As the soles of your shoes strike each tread, they create not a tinny, metallic clang, but a deep tone emanates. It carries. The steel wall, the quasi stair, carries you down into the landscape. Three steel plates surround you, and escort you, through the field of rushes, and out into the fjord.

Plate of steel takes you to the moment, to where the saga began, where the family's ship first landed. It provides a space surrounded by the sky, the sea and your own reflection.





The return journey reveals another route. One passes through the light-filled steel threshold and re-enters the masonry wall. The runnel that had been underfoot, now above, allows a sliver of light to guide your path. At the final threshold, at the darkest moment, you step over a gap and onto the earth.

You are in the heart of the wall.

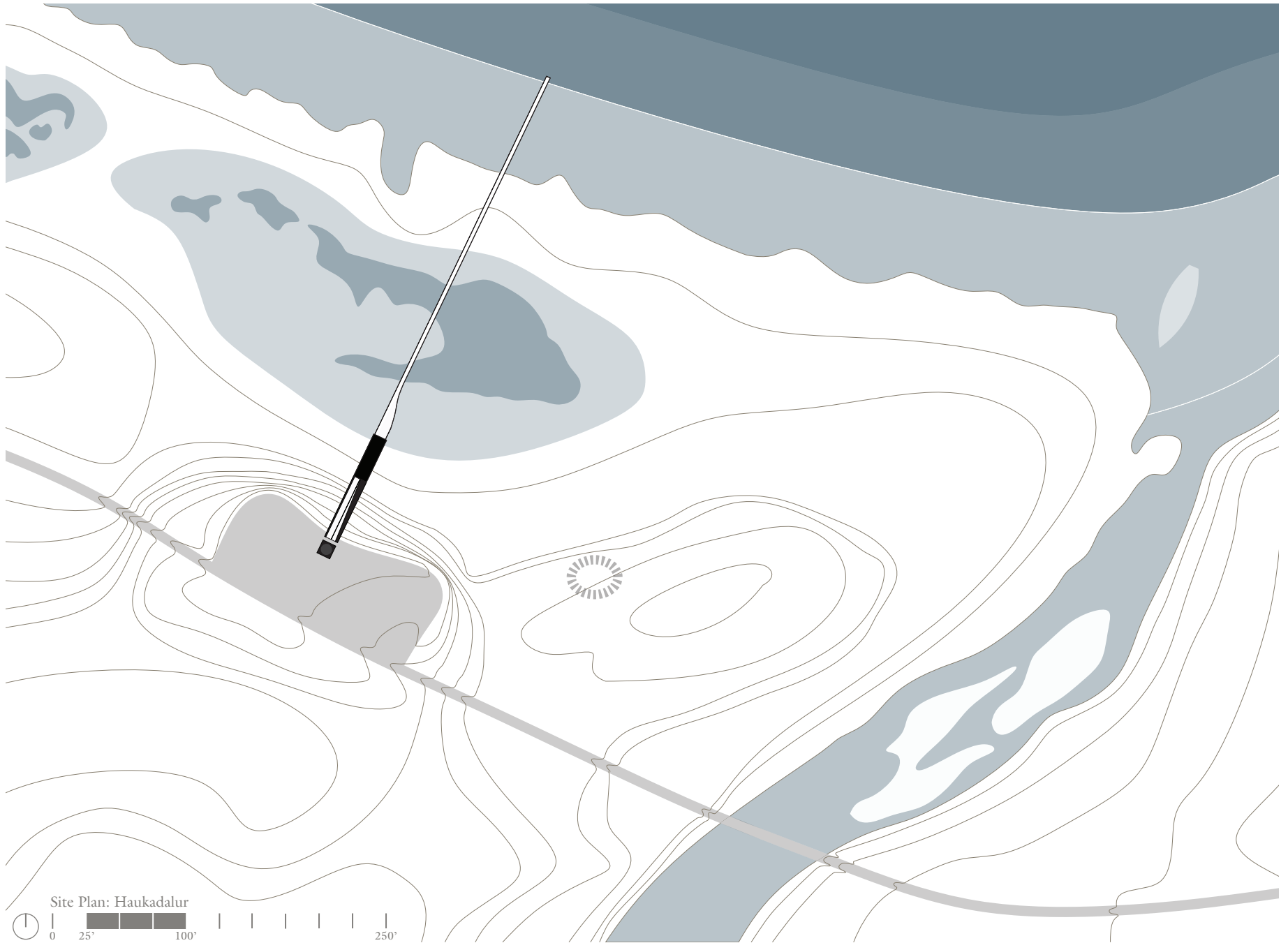
You are in the landscape.

It is a cylindrical space, open to the earth and open to the sky. It had been concealed within the impenetrable masonry cube above. It is here for the first time that you see the concrete.

It surrounds you.

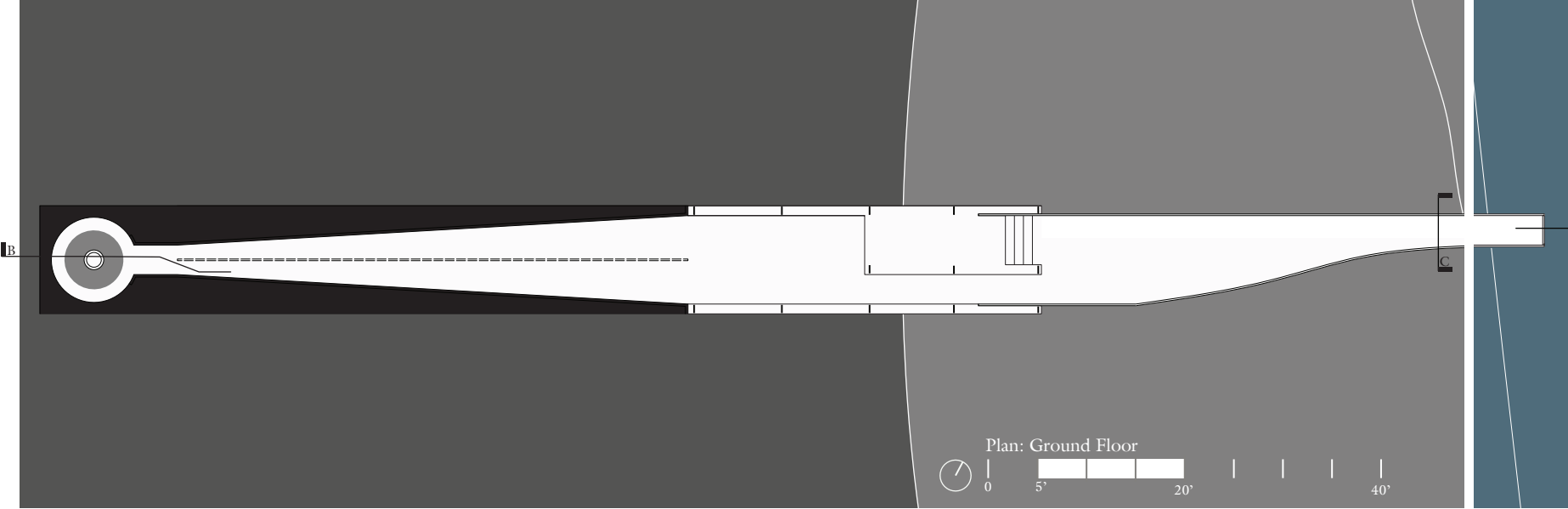
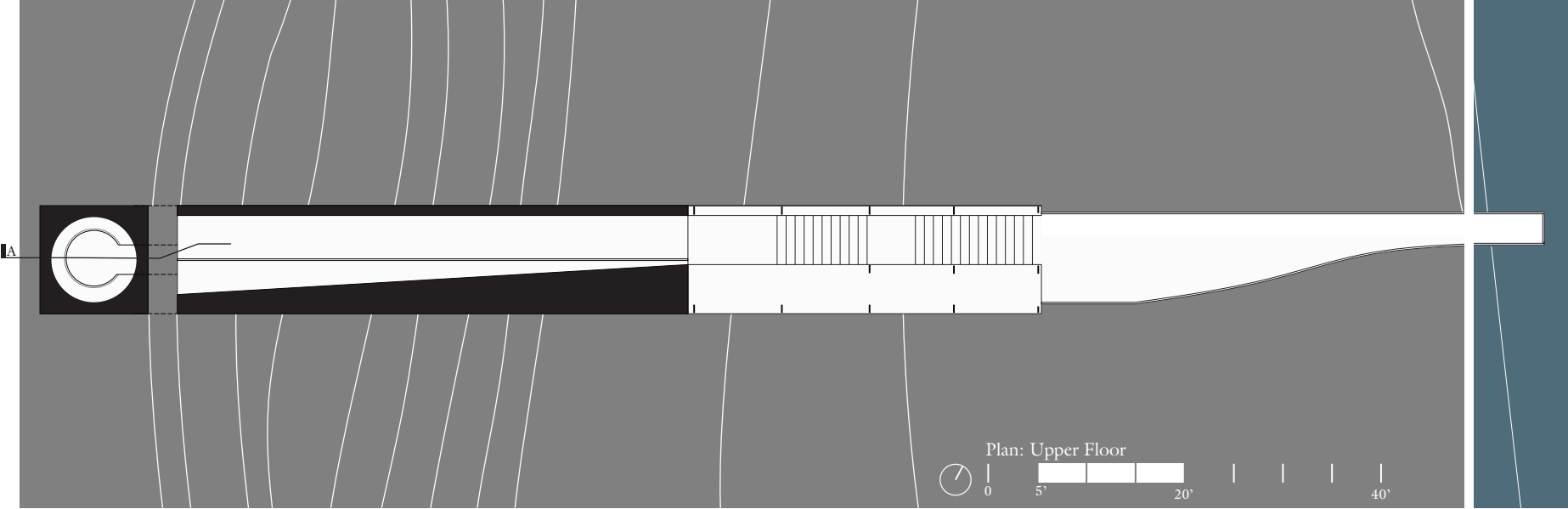
It supports you.

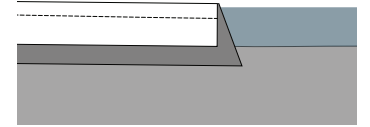
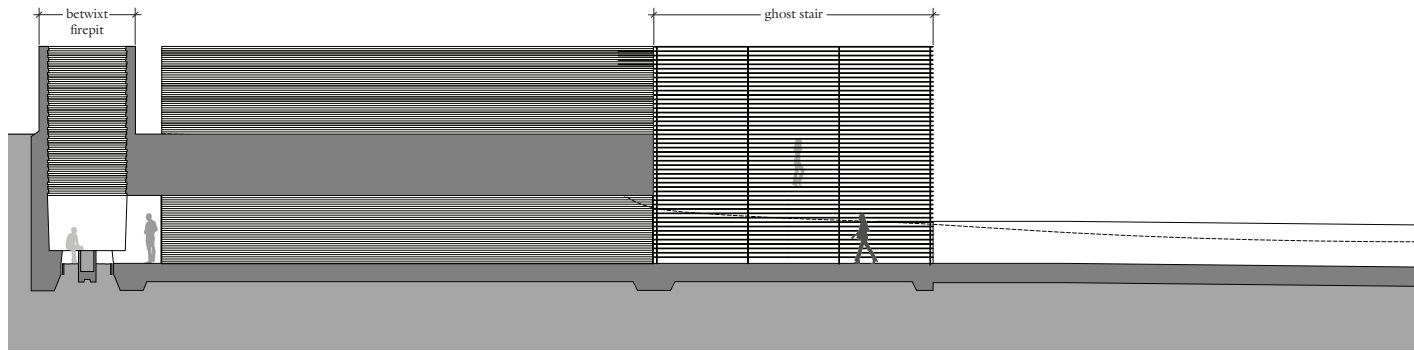
It supports a place where you can finally reach the fire.



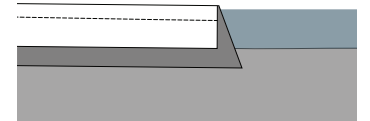
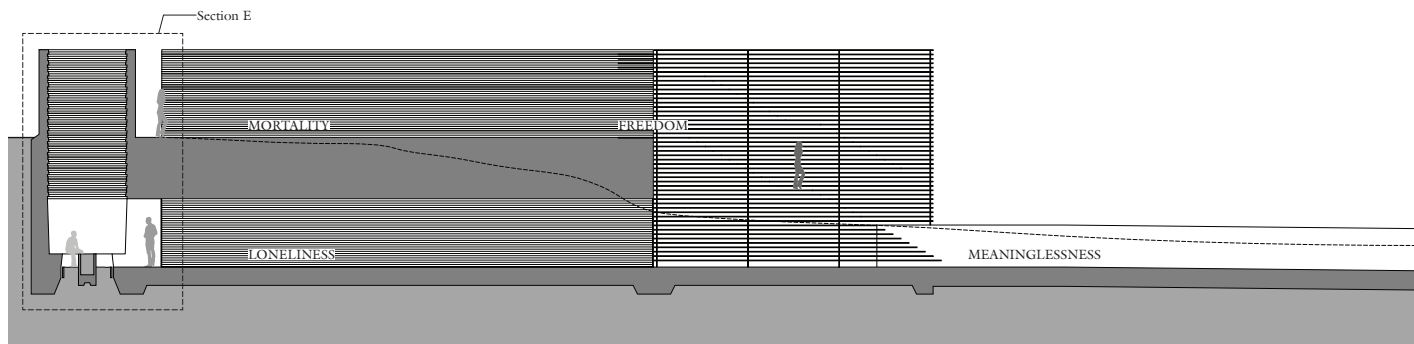
Site Plan: Haukadalur



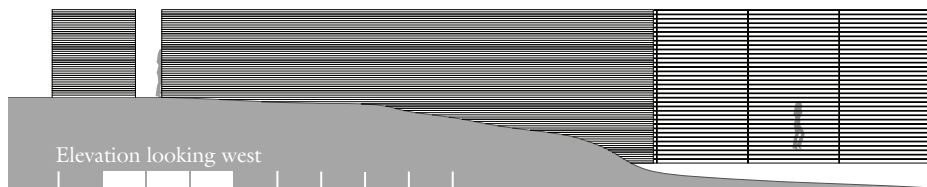




Section B

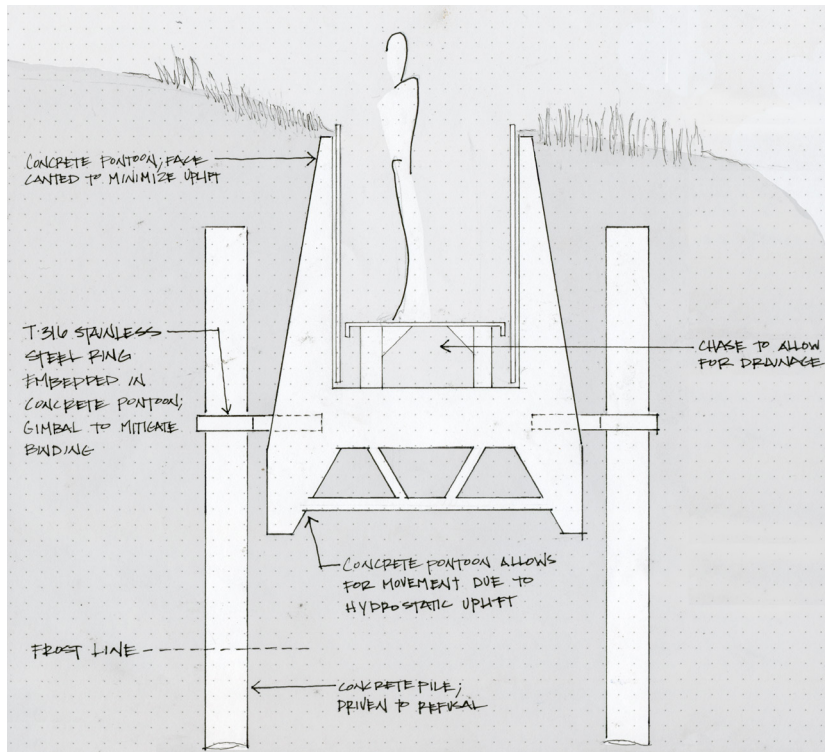


Section A

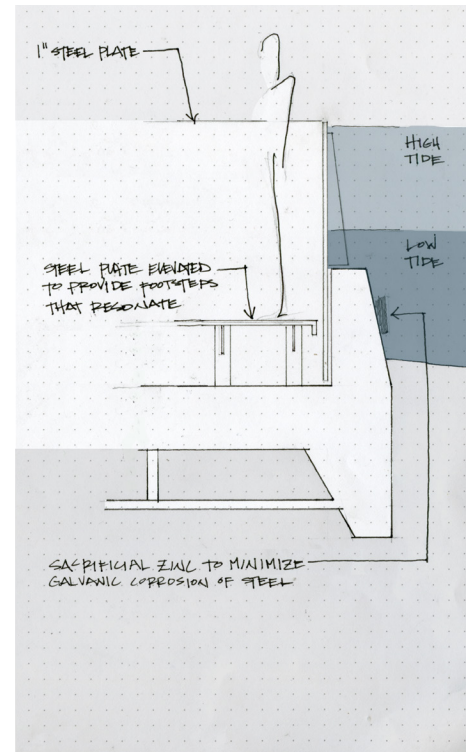


Elevation looking west



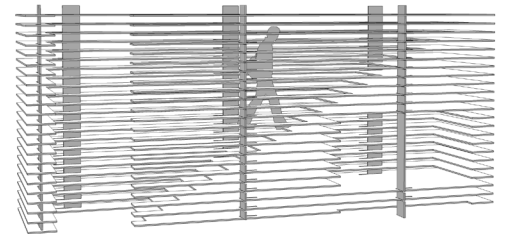
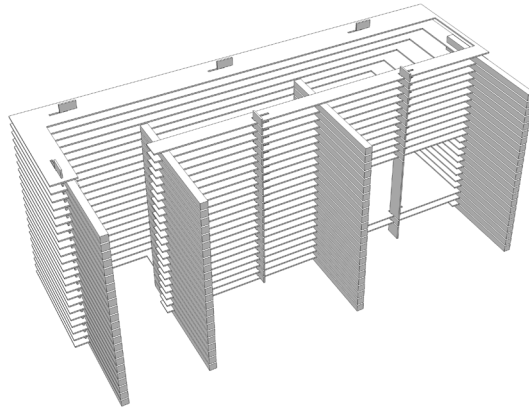
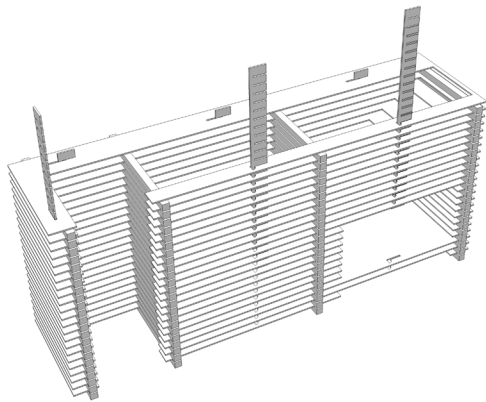
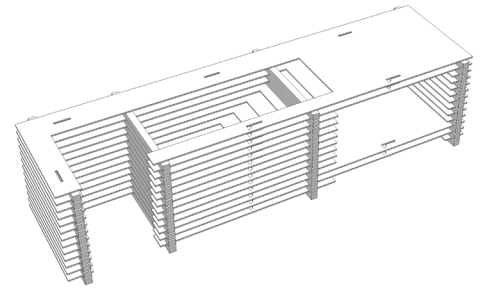
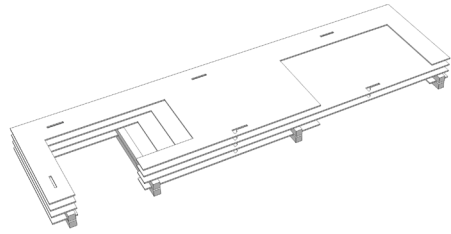
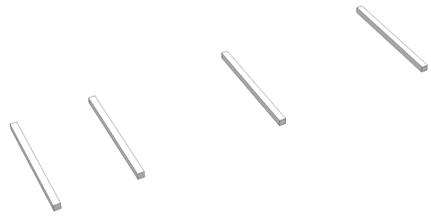


Section C



Section D







Ghost Stair

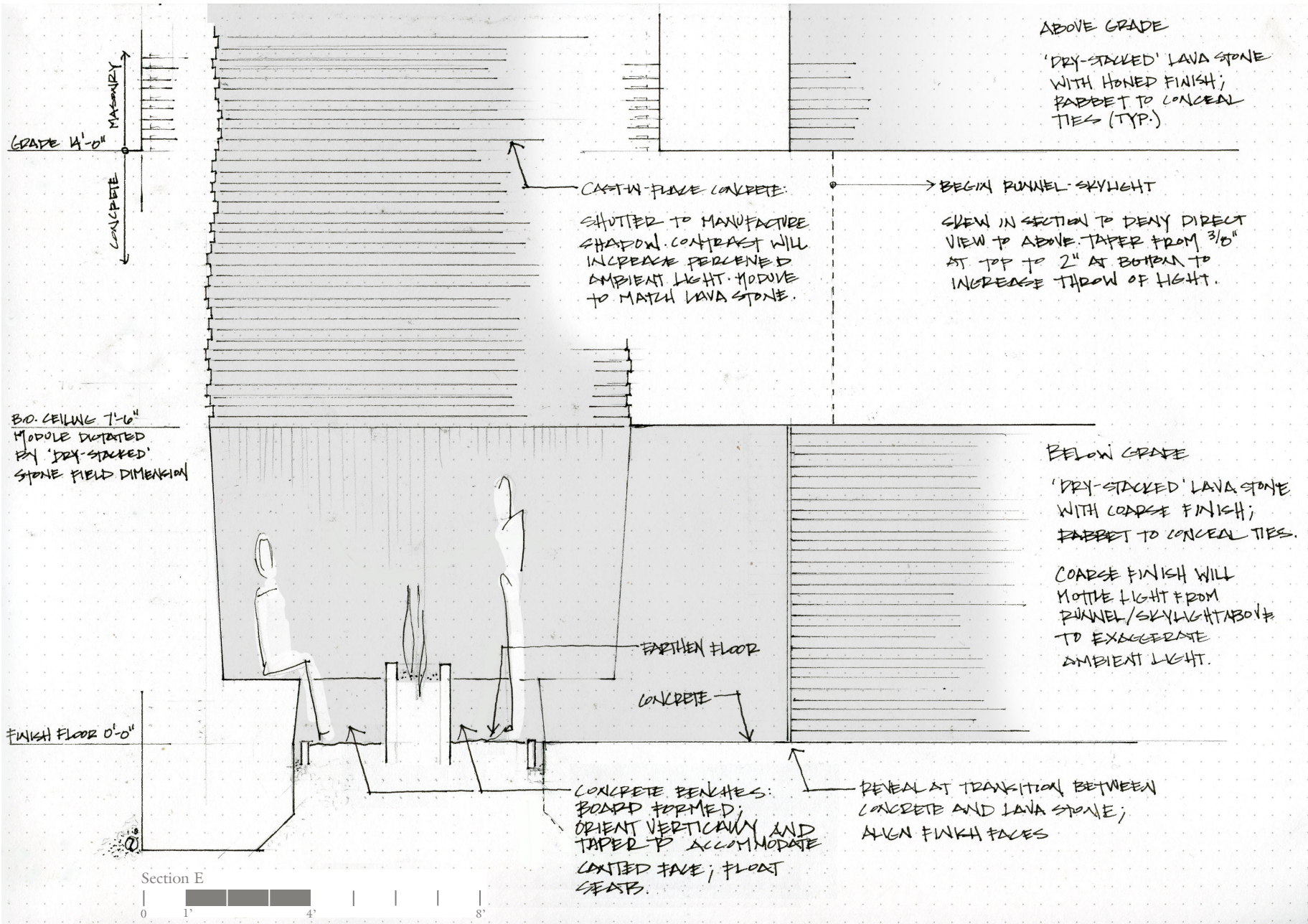
The $\frac{3}{8}$ " steel plate would be laser cut offsite. Installation would consist of layering temporary blocking between each layer of steel. Assembly would require shoring (not shown) during installation. Once the layers of steel are in place, plumb and level, the vertical plates would be dropped in to the precut slots. The vertical plates are cut as 'combs' and slide 6" horizontally. This helps to lock the assembly. Field welding would complete the assembly. The steel would be left unfinished. The site has both brackish and saltwater. Maintenance would be required.

Figure 92. [Opposite]

Proposed construction sequence for steel stair fabricated from layers of $\frac{3}{8}$ " plate steel.

Figure 93. [Above]

Study models exploring qualities of steel 'Ghost Stair' as visitor moves relative to horizontal planes of steel.



ABOVE GRADE

'DRY-STACKED' LAVA STONE WITH HONED FINISH; RABBET TO CONCEAL TIES (TYP.)

CAST-IN PLACE CONCRETE:

SHUTTER TO MANUFACTURE SHADOW. CONTRACT WILL INCREASE PERCENTAGE AMBIENT LIGHT. MODURE TO MATCH LAVA STONE.

BEGIN FUNNEL SKYLIGHT

SKWEN IN SECTION TO DENY DIRECT VIEW TO ABOVE. TAPER FROM 3/8" AT TOP TO 2" AT BOTTOM TO INCREASE THROW OF LIGHT.

GRADE 4'-0"

MASONRY

CONCRETE

B.O. CEILING 7'-6"
MODULE DICTATED BY 'DRY-STACKED' STONE FIELD DIMENSION

BELOW GRADE

'DRY-STACKED' LAVA STONE WITH COARSE FINISH; RABBET TO CONCEAL TIES.

COARSE FINISH WILL MOTTE LIGHT FROM FUNNEL/SKYLIGHT ABOVE TO EXAGGERATE AMBIENT LIGHT.

EARTHEN FLOOR

CONCRETE

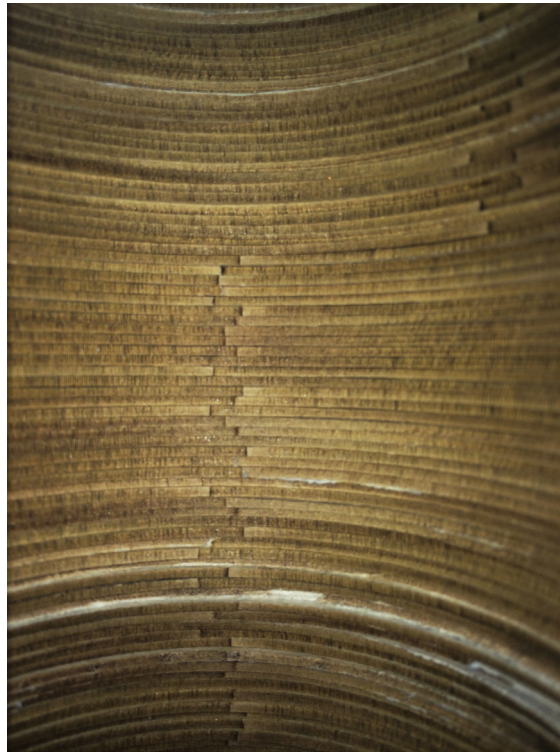
FINISH FLOOR 0'-0"

CONCRETE BENCHES: BOARD FORMED; ORIENT VERTICALLY AND TAPER TO ACCOMMODATE COATED FACE; FLOAT SEATS.

REVEAL AT TRANSITION BETWEEN CONCRETE AND LAVA STONE; ALIGN FINISH FACES

Section E





Bewixt Firepit

The cylindrical space is exterior, but it reduces the visual landscape to two planes: the ground below and the sky above. The intention is that by the suppression of the visual experience of the landscape, the other senses may heighten.

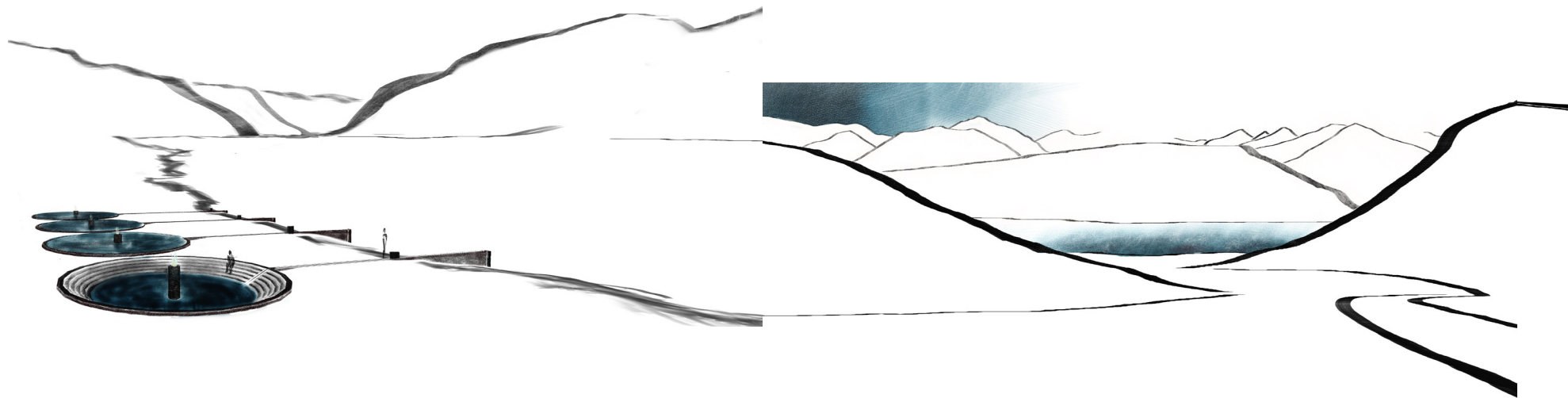
The masonry is shuttered for several reasons. The modularity allows the visitor to gauge the height of the space. The shuttering implies that one may be able to climb out. Though one will not physically be able to do so, the sensation will persist. The manufacture of shadow will increase the perceived ambient light of the space. This is particularly important in the winter. The space will be dim at times, but in dimness the imagination has room to roam. This is where I would reread *Gísla saga Súrsónar*.

Figure 94. [Opposite]

Material study at firepit. Transitions between materials, construction methods, haptic qualities and light & shadow considered. During the winter, the region has very little daylight. (Figure 38) Consideration was given to examine methods of increasing the perceived ambient daylight.

Figure 95. [Above]

Study models of shuttered masonry construction. Degree of shutter explored with emphasis on light and shadow.



My thesis is that the culture that is embedded within the landscape can be made legible with the well-organized absence of information. The intention of the absence was to provide room for participation.

What I have come to realize over the journey of this thesis is that what I design, whatever materiality and shape it takes, it is merely an armature. I cannot design the absence; I should not design the absence. The absence is brought to the site within each visitor.

The danger is trying to choreograph the experience. That is something I struggled with all quarter. I've realized, that really, all I can do, is try to imagine what people may need to address what is pressing in their lives.

And if I carve a slice into the earth and extend it to the sea, all I can do is wonder, what will people feel there? What will people do there?

Will they attempt to take the same axially aligned photo that they saw online?

Will they run?

Will they skip?

Will they leave anything?

Will they pause?

Will they yell?

Will they be overwhelmed when they realize that they are exactly where they are supposed to be, on the globe, at that very moment?

And if so, will they do, what I would do?

Will they sing?

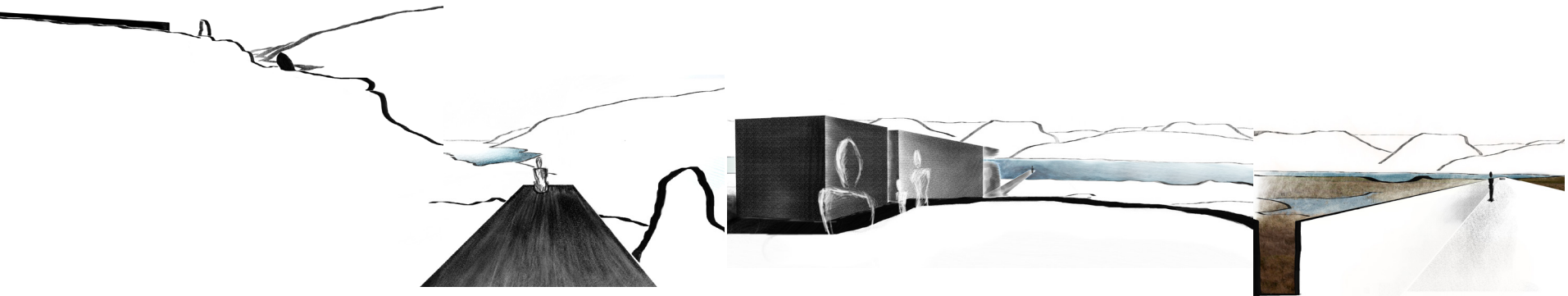


Figure 96. [Spread]

Rendering of vestiges as experienced as a route.



Search for Meaning

the stories are the walls

After Gísli's murder, the remaining family members left Haukadalur. Vésteinn's two sons avenged his murder by killing Gísli's brother Þorkell. They fled to Norway. Upon making landfall, one of them was killed by the third brother, the one who never left Norway, in an act of counter-vengeance. The other fled to Greenland where he lived out his days prosperously. Auð, Gísli's wife, went on a pilgrimage to Rome. She never returned to Iceland. Gísli's sister, Þórdís divorced her husband. She and her son, Snorri the Goði, moved south across Breidafjörður to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. He was raised there and he grew in prominence in the region. He became a powerful chieftain.

There is a story written about his life that is still known today.

It is called the Eyrbyggja saga, the Saga of the People of Eyri.

...to be continued...

Figure 97. [Opposite]

Snæfellsnes Peninsula, Iceland
Berserkjahraun (Berserker's lava field)

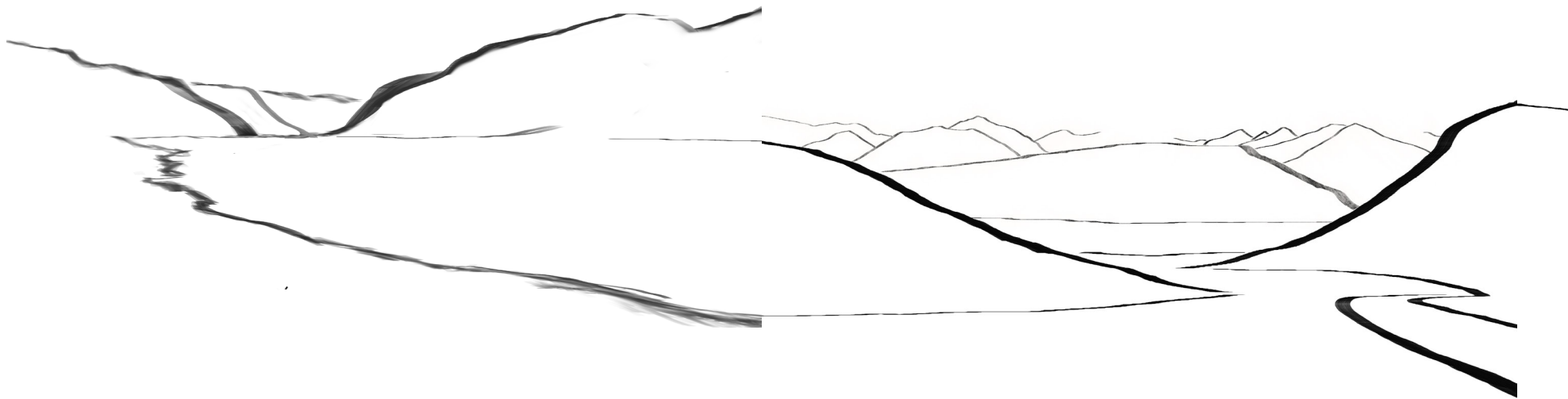
In the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, two Swedish Berserkers, insanely violent characters that could psyche themselves up for battle, are set to an impossible task by a farmer: to clear a passage through a lava field in exchange for the farmer's daughter's hand. Once the Berserkers succeed, the farmer who never intended to give up his daughter, murders the Berserkers by trapping them in a scorching sauna and slays them as they try to escape.

SET ASIDE, BUT NOT ABANDONED

The journey of this thesis began with the possibility of doing anything. The danger with that is that the designer tries to do everything. Or rather, that the designer tries to apply the tools of their trade and their training to the problem. That is what a thesis is; it is a test of one's theory as much as the test of one's tools.

The effort has been made to be reductive. The thinking is that if the message requires layers of complexity, that the message is itself flawed. The layers are artifice meant to camouflage a lacking premise.

This iteration defined a route and punctuated that route with wall, plate of steel, and water.



These vestiges are an exploration, but I do not consider them the answer. They are still too much, too complicated, and too trite. I proposed building at each site as a means of drawing people to those places.

I do not believe yet that there is nothing to be built. I would need to exhaust all possibilities to live with that notion. I do not have the experience yet or the maturity to arrive at that destination without the baggage of failed iterations. Following my public defense of this thesis I could not sleep. Instead, I wrote this:

‘There is nothing at each site, but rather something in between. Something you just catch glimpses of, that runs along side you. It lives in the earth and just occasionally comes up for air. If you notice it, it will lead you to the sites. Then you would need to figure out why this place has been marked.’

Here is the intention of this project. Not of this thesis, but what I envision for this project outside of the academic structure of an architectural thesis.

I want visitors to ask Icelanders about the sagas. My hope is for others to see the light in the eyes of each Icelander as they inquire about their cultural inheritance. My hope is that they realize, when they see that light, that they are seeing each person, *the way that they want to be seen.*

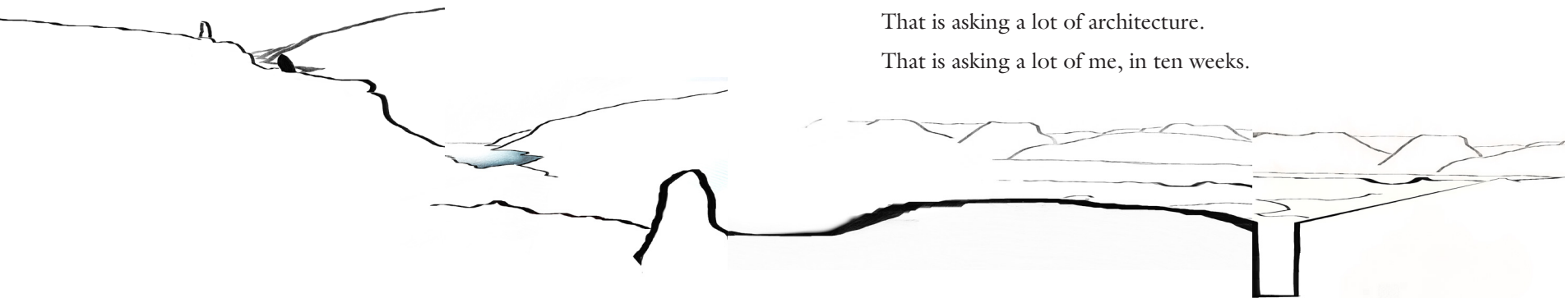
When a visitor moves through Iceland with the sagas as their guide, they move through a different Iceland. You are not a local, but you are closer. It allows one to move in a liminal space, behind the constructs. When you are in the landscape with these stories, you are no longer outside. You are no longer in a country, but rather in the home of all the countrymen.

These stories are the walls.

Most importantly, I want the light and passion that Icelanders feel for the sagas to be protected and nurtured. If that changes, it would be tragic.

That is asking a lot of architecture.

That is asking a lot of me, in ten weeks.





A profession.

I visited the Steilneset Memorial in Vardø, Norway on four occasions. Twice, when alone, I wept. I reflected on the experiences and tried to identify something tangible that I could use in my own work. There were all the elements that worked in concert to build the atmosphere of the building: the history of the place, the procession, the lighting, the materiality, the sensitivity that each victim and their symbolic light had their own power source. Then there was the haunting echo of my footsteps.

As I sat with the memory of the experience, I realized that it really was the sound of my footsteps that sent me over the edge emotionally. There was a loneliness to them, they resonated. I imagined the victims had heard similar footsteps, whether real or imagined, as they approached their deaths. It shattered me. I then learned that the echo of one's footsteps was an intentional design move.

Well-played Peter.

So for me, it was my footsteps that make the Steilneset Memorial architecture. But it wasn't the sound that makes it architecture. Or the intentional employment of sound that makes it architecture.

It was months later, when I realized, that the building *needs me* to make those footsteps. That right now, it exists, on the coast in Northern Norway, and it is a building.

But when I am there, it is architecture.

And when I am not...

I cannot design in a way that causes people to realize that the buildings I design need them. But what I can do, is to design in a way that the spaces, places and constructs that I design are far richer with their presence.

And hopefully, when they are there, it is architecture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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for shepherding me through this thesis and for asking me that first, most pivotal question

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for the rigor and for prompting the conversation that led to wayfinding

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for being my Icelandic guardian angels

Björg Restad & Espen Restad Hanssen

for being my Norwegian guardian angels

Arne O. Moen

for inviting me behind the scenes

Snorri Freyr Hilmarrsson

for discussing the sagas, politics, art, and life all within one fluid conversation

Þórhallur Arason

for your kind spirit, welcoming nature, and allowing me to see your village through your eyes

Þórir Örn Guðmundsson

for leading me through the Westfjords, and back in time, to the sites of Gíslí Saga

Emily Lethbridge

for providing a global perspective to my local quest

Jay Deguchi, Larry Rouch & Andrew van Leeuwen

for walls

Hayley Buckbee

for presence, patience, and brunch

Justin Schwartzhoff

for listening, laughter, and perspective

Carey Moran

for cairns

My Family

for everything

Valle Scholarship and Scandinavian Exchange

for unleashing me on the world and allowing me to explore unfettered, but supported



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SET ASIDE, BUT NOT ABANDONED

sketches & models of explored typologies

*Tradition means passing on the flame, not worshipping the ashes.*¹

