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MRLD

Landscape Architecture + Urbanism

The concept design for the amphitheatre / council ring is based on our research in the following of areas:

1. The site opportunities
2. The needs of the various ministries
3. The spatial / emotional relationship between people in regards to design "proxemics"
4. Louis Kahn's design intentions for the Church
5. Jens Jensen's philosophy regarding council rings and landscape design
6. The potential to create a unique design accommodating a range functions while referencing the historic and cultural significance of Kahn and Jensen



1. Site Opportunities

The proposed location (prior page) for the council ring is a woodland setting with the terrain hugging the backside of the site, creating the feeling of a natural amphitheatre. The trees create a loose semi-circle on the hillside, reinforcing the idea of a council ring set into the curving topography

The site is located approximately 25' from an existing path, providing enough separation between the different functions. The path begins at a clearing behind the Church and passes by the proposed site to another clearing. Jens Jenson often placed council rings at the edge of meadows, contrasting the shade of the woodland with the light of the meadow (very similar to the image on the previous page as you are leaving the woodland walk to the labyrinth clearing). The play of light and shadow is also central to the work of Kahn. The Church is a strong example of his interest in juxtaposing light and shadow.



2. Ministries

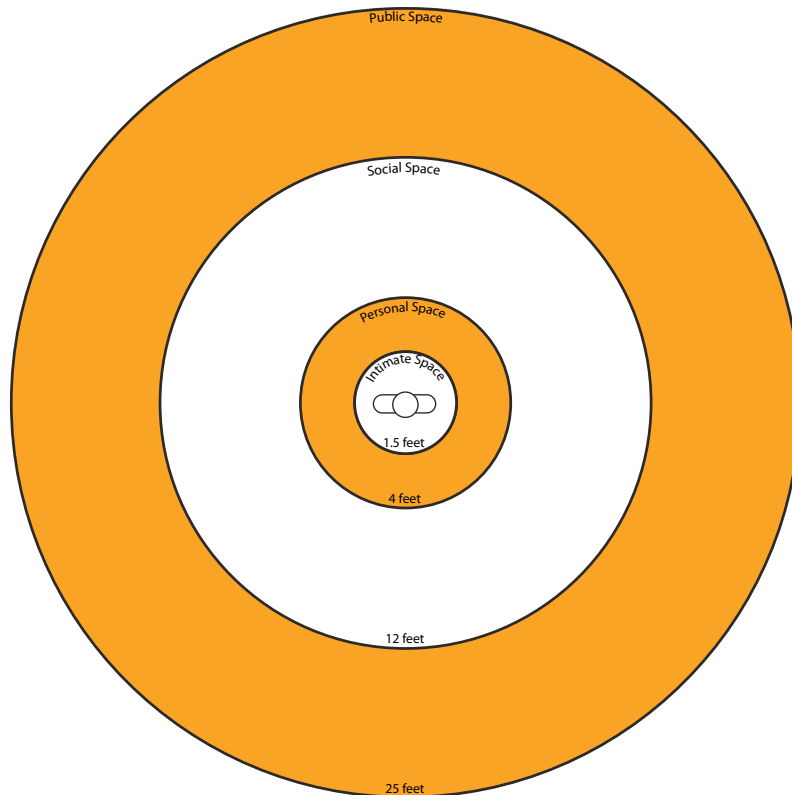
The council ring can fulfill the needs of the many ministries provided by the Church including worship, spiritual development, children and youth education, caring, the arts, leadership and of course buildings and grounds.

It is important to note that the proposed concept design is not one perfect circle with a focal point that resolves the space. The design deliberately engages the terrain, trees and places two circles offcenter from one another to encourage communication—a space where people can open their feelings to others and also look within. As noted in the Church's website, services are about "shaping" (celebrating, wrestling with, integrating, arguing with) "things of worth." The proposed design is part of the landscape, but more importantly symbolizes the UU belief in celebrating questions and diversity.

3. Emotional / Spatial Proximities

In researching the both the art and practicalities of a council ring, we asked Scott about the function of the existing council ring. We learned that during group meetings, people sometimes felt they were too far apart from each other to communicate (literally and emotionally) and we also noted that the existing council ring is made of straight segments, creating “corners” where members of the group can break off into their own conversation isolating the rest of the group. A council ring, if carefully designed, can have the flexibility to create intimate “corners” as well as a more circular democratic space as demonstrated in the concept design.

There are numerous studies on the emotional meaning of spatial relationships between people. One of the most recognized is a theory called “proxemics” developed by Edward Hall in the 1960’s. His findings are very relevant to architects, landscape architects and others who need to understand the implication of the size of spaces. The proxemics diagram redrawn by MRLD appears to reinforce Scott’s experience with the existing council ring and helped shape the concept plan in terms of its physical and emotional “form”.



Intimate distance for embracing, touching or whispering

Close – less than 6 inches

Far – 6 to 18 inches

Personal distance for interactions among good friends or family members

Close – 1.5 to 2.5 feet

Far – 2.5 to 4 feet

Social distance for interactions among acquaintances

Close – 4 to 7 feet

Far – 7 to 12 feet

Public distance used for public speaking

Close – 12 to 25 feet

Far – 25 feet or more

Because the concept design has two offset circles, breaks in the circles as well as amphitheatre like steps in the hillside, there are a wide variety of sitting arrangements to meet the above noted distances, which also relate to the potential ministerial uses of the council ring. These variations are depicted in the computer illustrations of the concept design.

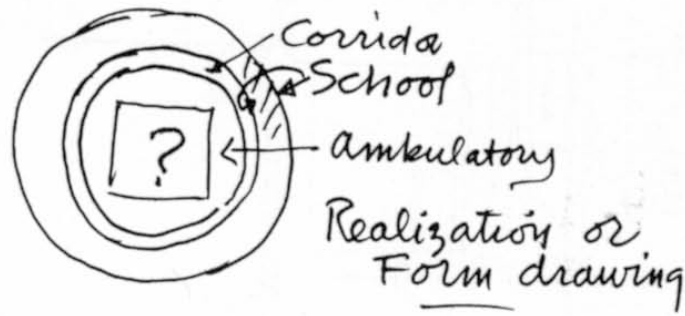
4. Louis Kahn’s design intentions for the Church

The Church represents Kahn’s general beliefs regarding architecture such as timelessness, the authenticity of materials and the play between light and shadow. But as with all projects, the Church had specific

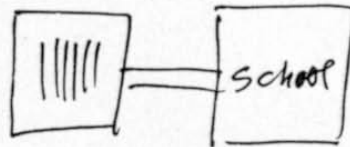
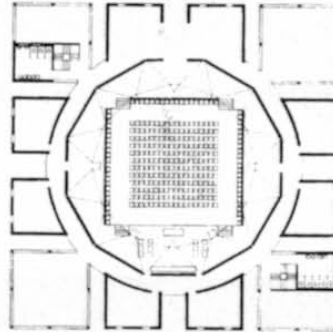


programmatically issues—ministries if you will—that directly influenced the design and his understanding of Unitarianism. We are fortunate to have diagram sketches from this time as well as interviews where Kahn speaks directly to his experience with designing the Church. Kahn developed the following form diagram, which the Church initially opposed because they wanted the school and the sanctuary to be separate. Kahn knew that the sanctuary had to be embedded within the ambulatory and classrooms for spiritual / intellectual and programmatic reasons, which led to the unique layout of the Church. After first meeting with the minister, Kahn knew instinctively what was right and over time proved his solution was correct. He

writes, “having heard the minister give a sense of the Unitarian aspirations, it occurred to me that the sanctuary is merely the center of questions and that the school—which was constantly emphasized—was that which raises the questions...and I felt that that which raised the question and that which was the sense of the question—the spirit of the question were inseparable. And so, when I spoke before the congregation...I drew this diagram (above).

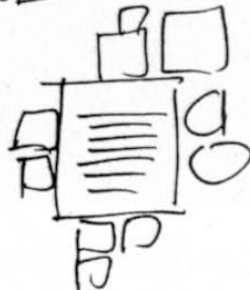
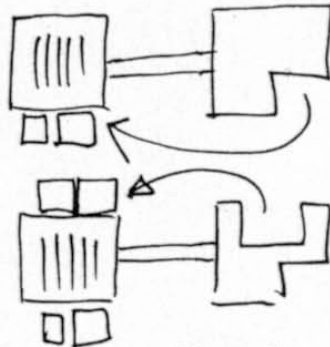


FIRST DESIGN
close translation
of realization in
Form



No!

Test of the
Validity of
Form



Design resulting
from circumstantial
demands

The upper form diagram and first programmatic design depict the formal and philosophical relationship between the sanctuary in the center, then the ambulatory and then the school and other programs on the outside. The lower three diagrams are his emphatic rejection that the school and the sanctuary should be separate—as they are in traditional church spatial programming.

Kahn’s dissolution of the polar absolutes of the school and the sanctuary inspired the idea that the council ring should have an open / unresolved feeling, to not have a central focus like an altar, but to leave the space empty like a question mark. It is meant to be unresolved. It is meant to be an arena for communicating, questioning, commiserating and even disagreeing. Establishing a resolved focal point and creating a perfectly resolved ring does not allow for a dynamic space and misses the opportunity to truly tap into the ministries of the Church.

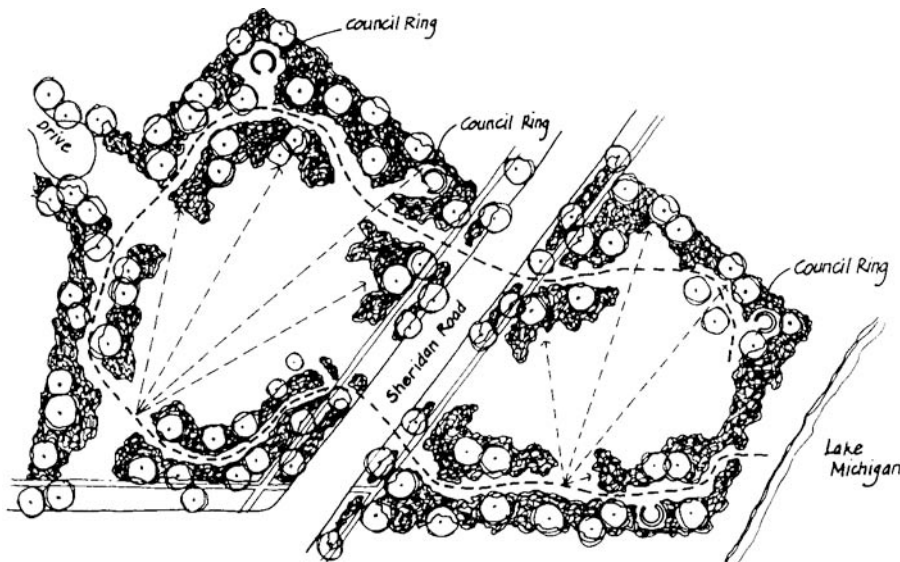
The council ring within a council ring was directly inspired by proxemics—the necessity of different emotional / spatial situations—and the needs of the various ministries and as Kahn writes, “the ambulatory (in our case the space between the rings) I felt necessary because the Unitarian Church is made up of people who have had previous beliefs but they’re simply beliefs of a different kind...so I drew the ambulatory to respect the fact that what is being said or what is felt in a sanctuary was not something you necessarily participate in. And so you could walk and feel free to walk away from what is being said.”

5. Jens Jensen’s philosophy regarding Council rings and landscape design

In general, Jensen and Kahn could not be considered more dissimilar. Kahn is known for his modernist buildings that continue to challenge us. Jensen was a landscape designer who did not like form or modernity. Jensen was a champion of natural plantings, primitive landscapes. This put him at odds with the concept that parks needed to be manicured and formal, but it also aligned him with such Prairie School Modernists as Frank Lloyd Wright.

In developing the council ring concept, several design philosophies of Kahn and Jensen overlap, providing an interesting conceptual underpinning to the project. Both Kahn and Jensen thought that their works might be seen as ancient, timeless monuments. Jensen found this in the form of a circle, which reminded him of an Indian or Viking ruin. The rings are made of stone, but were often composed of a series of stone columns supporting a spanning circle for seating. After studying in Rome, Kahn returned home and saw that his architecture could also have a timeless and monumental quality similar to that of the Roman

ruins. The deep shadows in his buildings are reminiscent of the deep shadows of the Roman aqueducts or the coliseum. Jensen was also intrigued with light and shadow and often had an “ambulatory” path around what he called a “sun opening”. The adjacent park plan by Jensen shows the council rings, path and sun openings. It is reminiscent of Kahn’s circular diagram for the sanctuary and school.



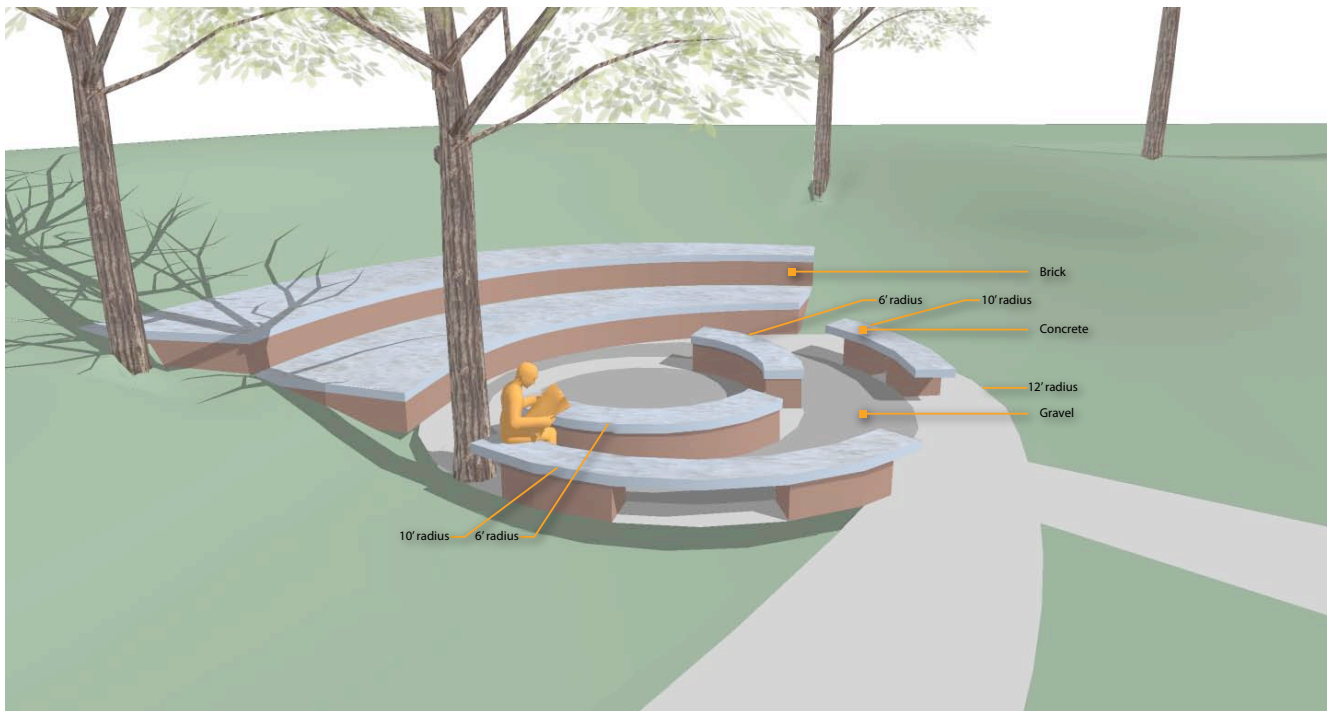
This play with light and dark and the common orientation of the opening in the council rings towards a sun opening not only added to the sense of mystery and timelessness in Jensen's work, but also played with the scale of the landscape. Going from dark to light impacts one's sense of depth perception, one's sense of the outer limits of the site. Kahn also explored these ideas with the deep recesses of his windows and the four light towers that illuminate the sanctuary.



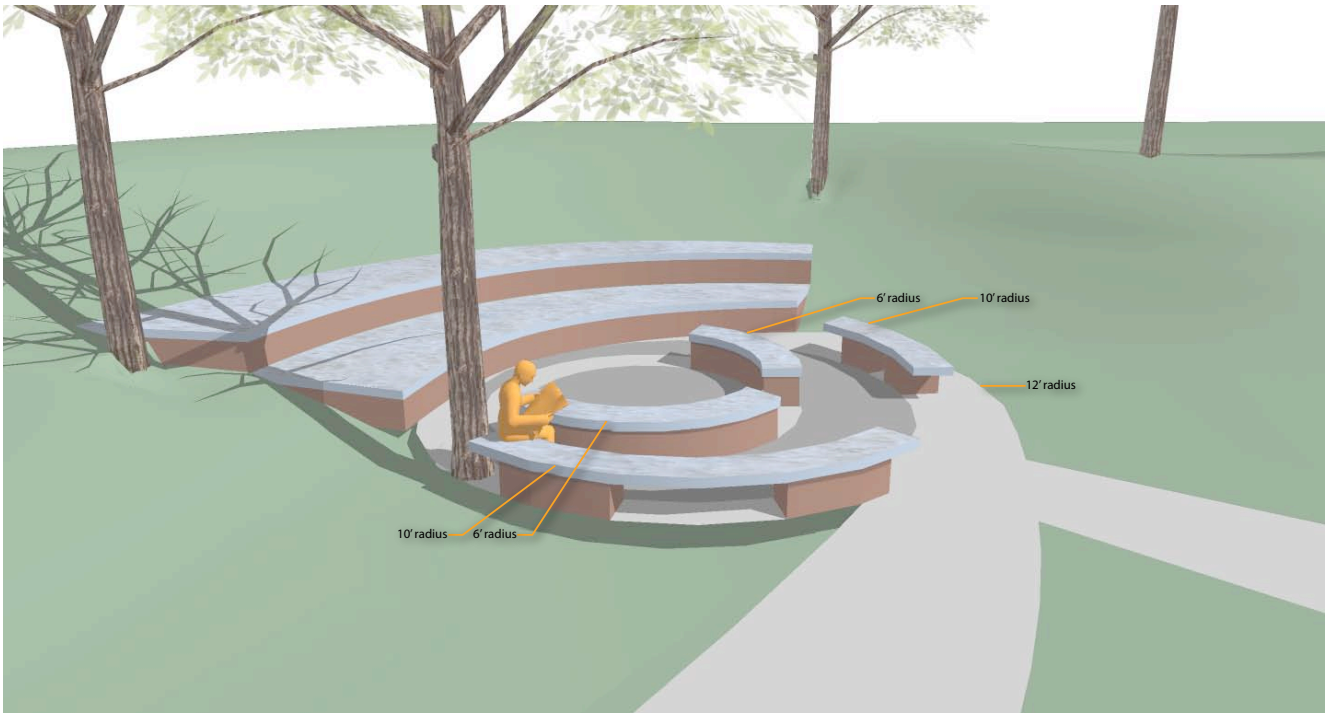
Note the weight of the stone columns supporting the ring (like the columns in the sanctuary light wells supporting the cruciform shape) and the resulting cast shadows.

- 6. The potential to create a unique design accommodating a range functions while referencing the historic and cultural significance of Kahn and Jensen

Following are illustrations of the concept council ring. The different views are consistent, but the number of people using the council ring changes, reflecting the flexibility of the concept.



Materials: (view towards hillside and labyrinth "sun opening")



Dimensions: (view towards hillside and labyrinth "sun opening")

It is suggested that the materials for the council ring echo the building materials. The columns and risers could be made of a similar brick and the seating can be made of a similar concrete.

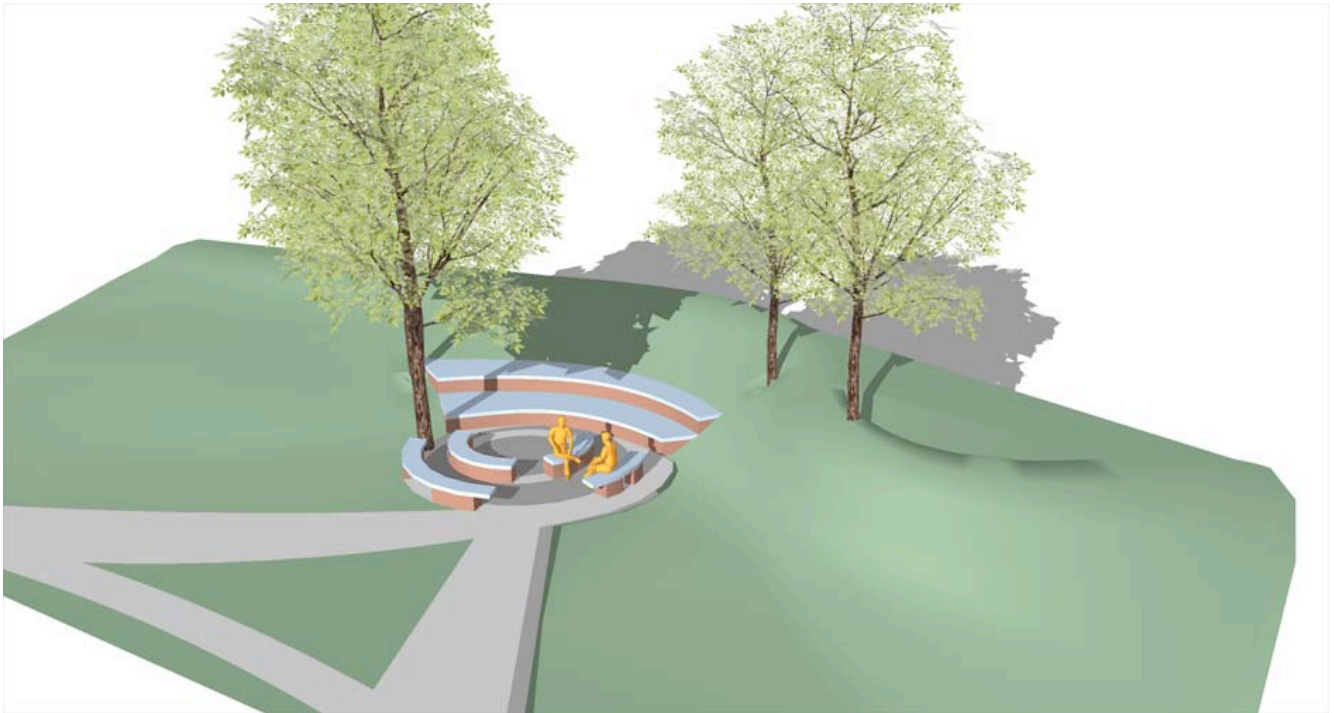


Plan View: Two people in a group discussion



Above: Two people - view towards church

Below: Two people - view towards hillside and labyrinth

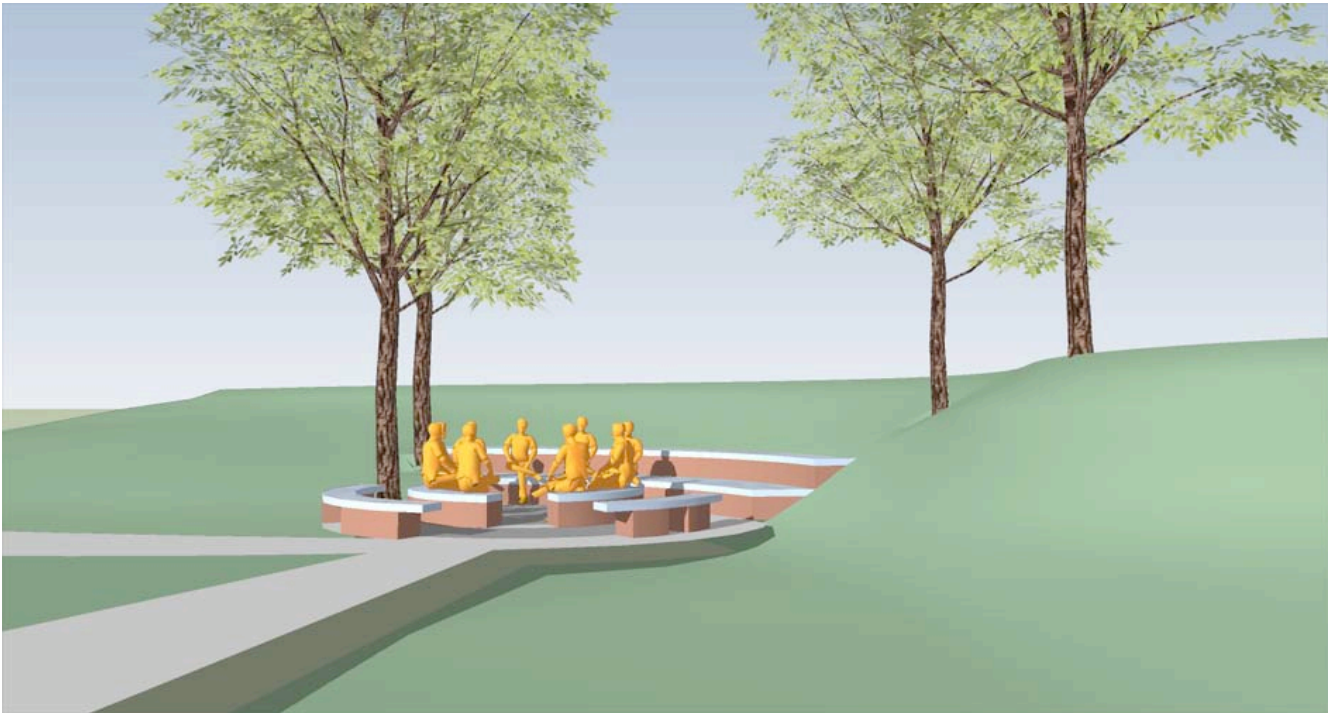


Above: Two people - elevated view towards church

Below: Two people - view down hillside towards woodland trail (amphitheatre steps in foreground)



Plan View: Ten people in a group discussion



Above: Ten people - view towards church

Below: Ten people - view towards hillside and labyrinth

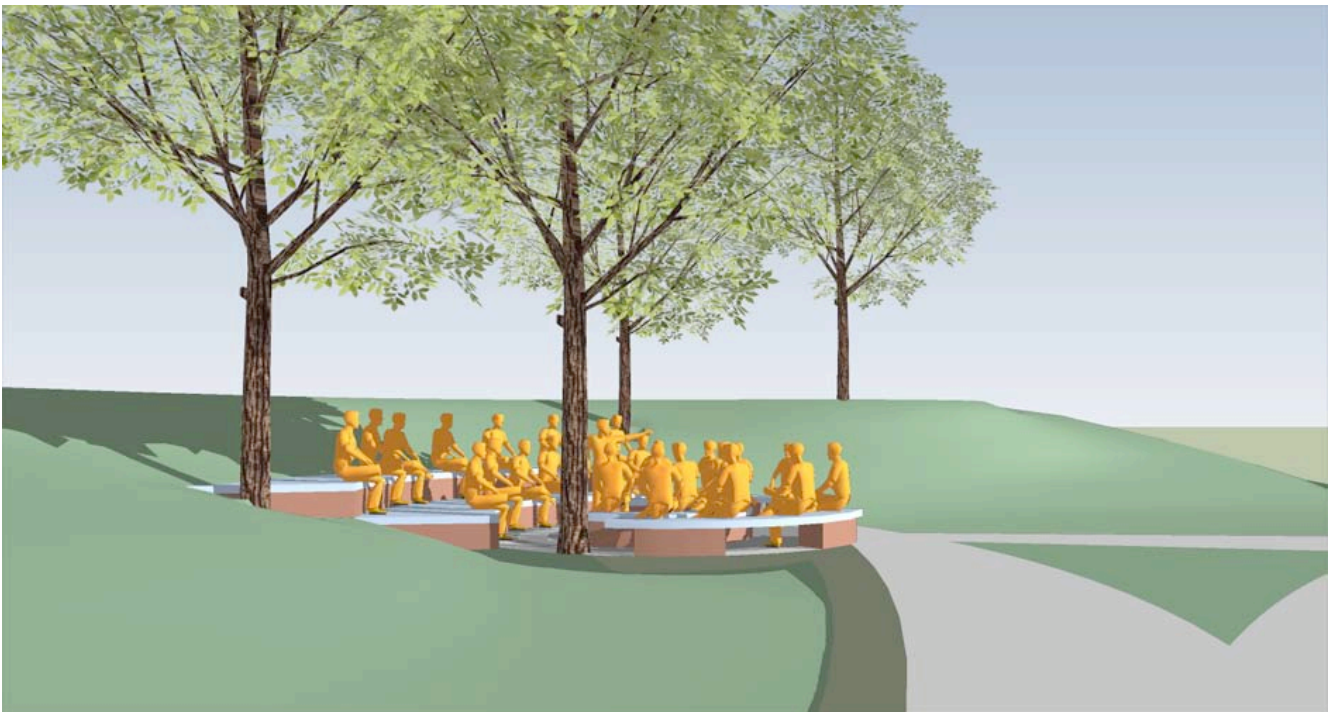


Above: Ten people - elevated view towards church

Below: Ten people - view down hillside towards woodland trail (amphitheatre steps in foreground)

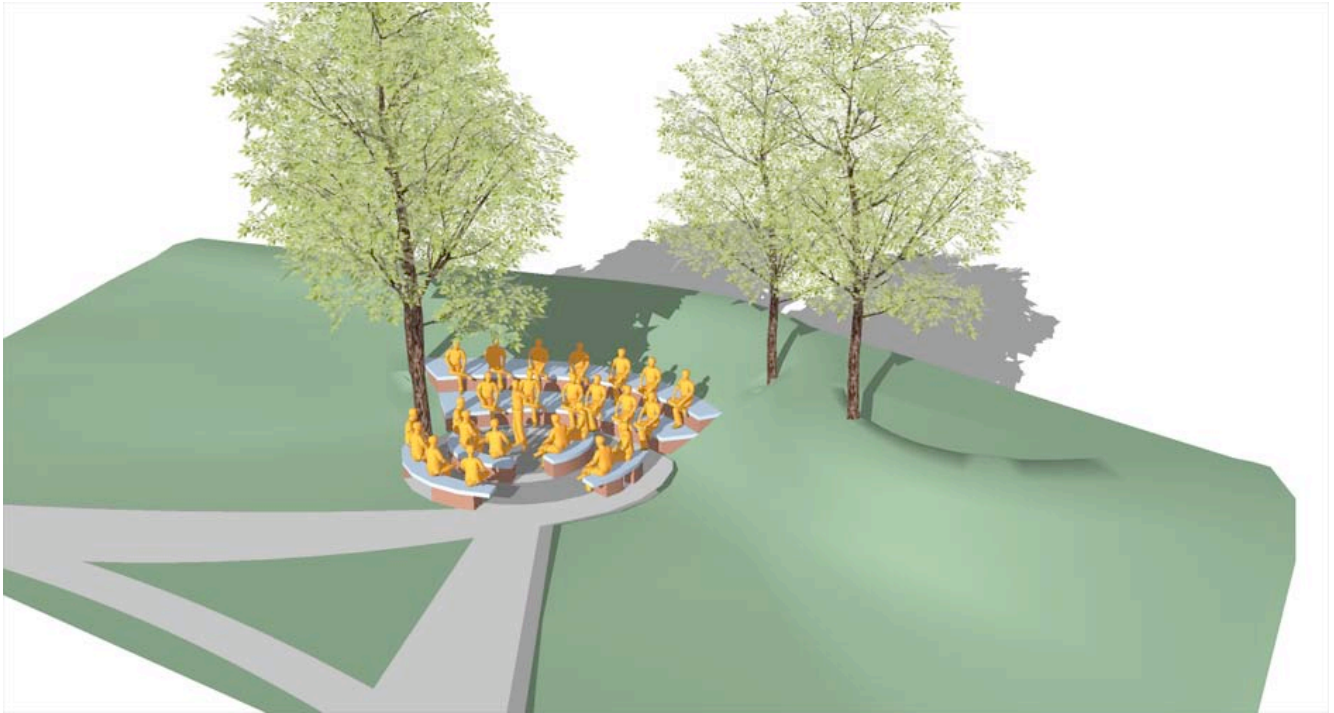


Plan View: Large group event



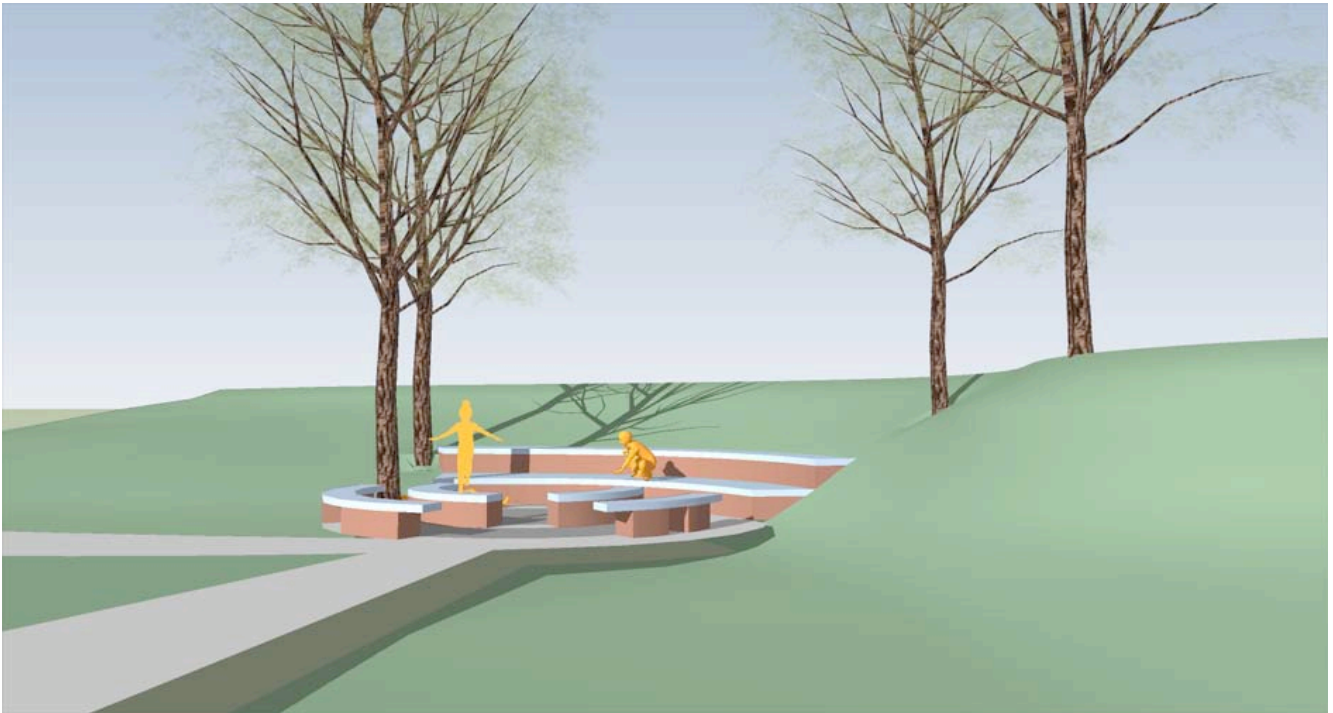
Above: Large group - view towards church

Below: Large group - view towards hillside and labyrinth



Above: Large group - elevated view towards church

Below: Large group - view down hillside towards woodland trail (amphitheatre steps in foreground)



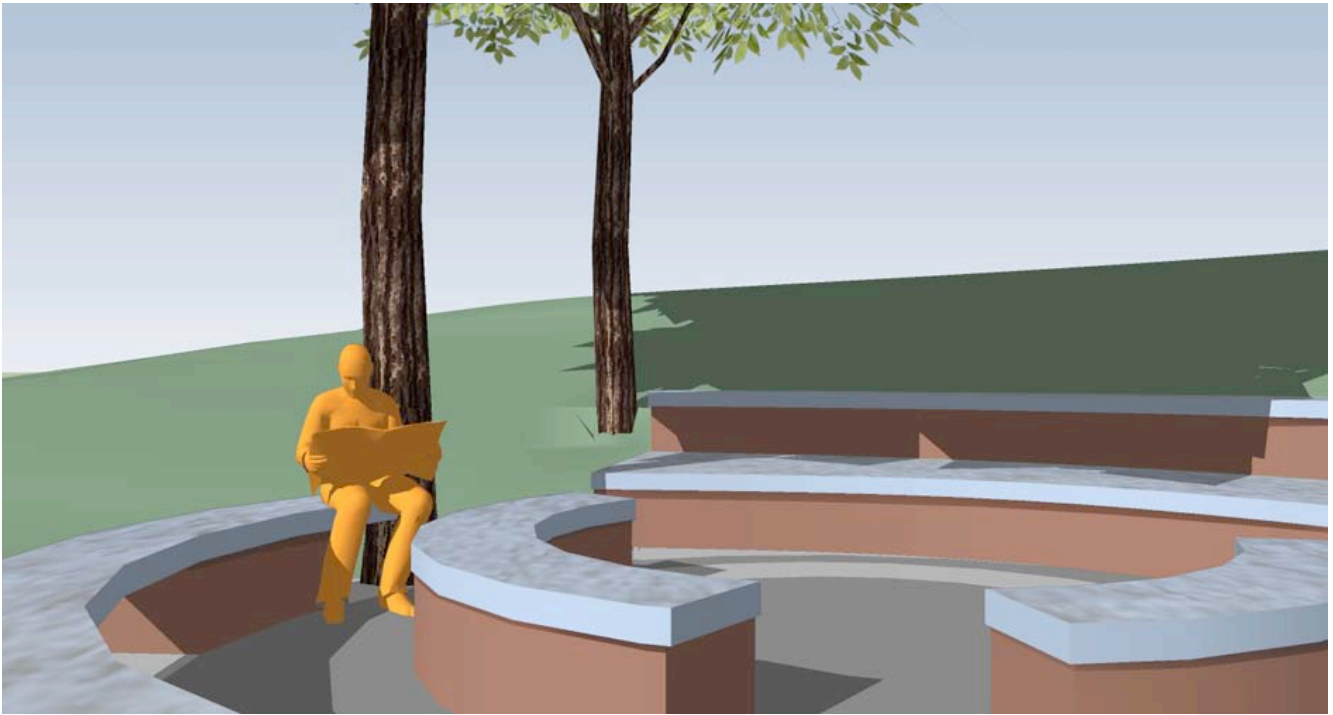
Above: Kids playing - view towards church

Below: Kids playing - view towards hillside and labyrinth



Above: Kids playing - elevated view towards church

Below: Kids playing - view down hillside towards woodland trail (amphitheatre steps in foreground)



View towards church and hillside – person reading alone using the tree as a backrest