

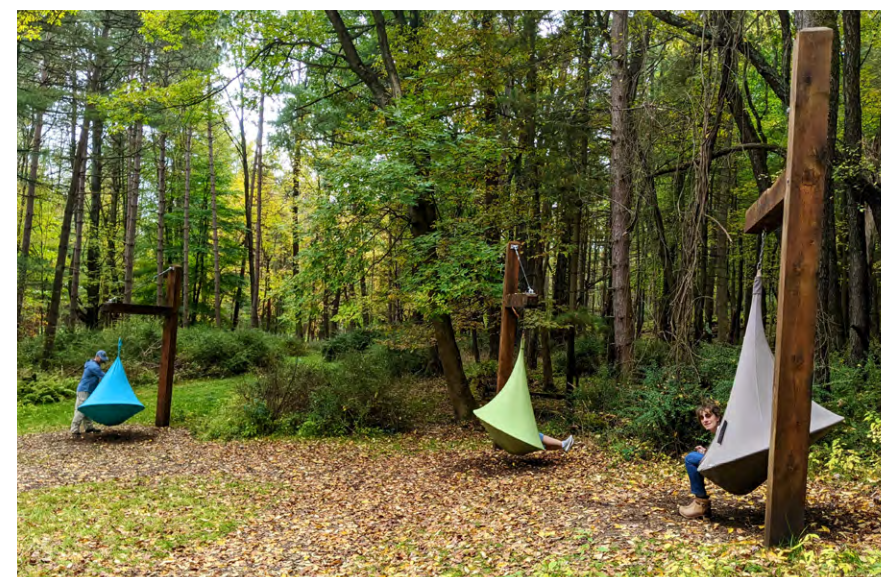
A photograph of a modern outdoor structure in a snowy forest. The structure features a prominent wooden A-frame roof supported by stone pillars. The ground is covered in snow, and the background is filled with tall evergreen and deciduous trees. The scene is captured in bright daylight.

Design doesn't stop at a building's threshold.

In America's first Autism Nature Trail,
it's all about thresholds.



We translated autism consultants' advice into built form along this mile-long trail.





Gateway



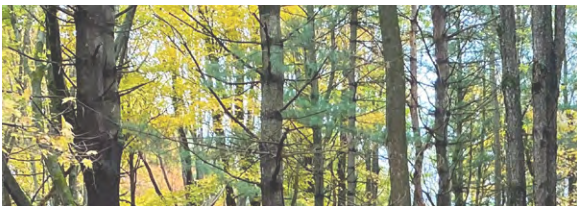
Boundary



Marker



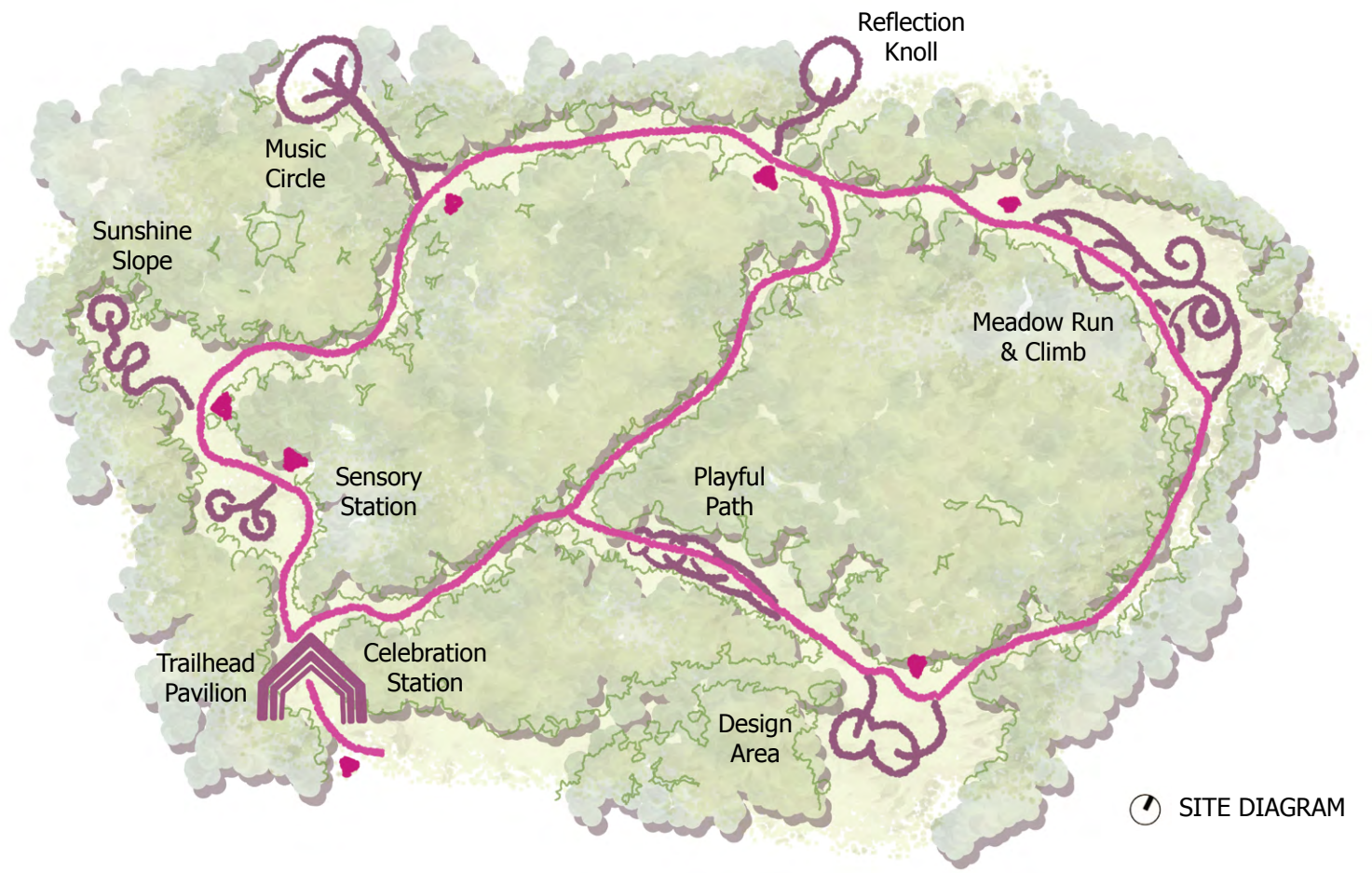
Frame



Room



Path

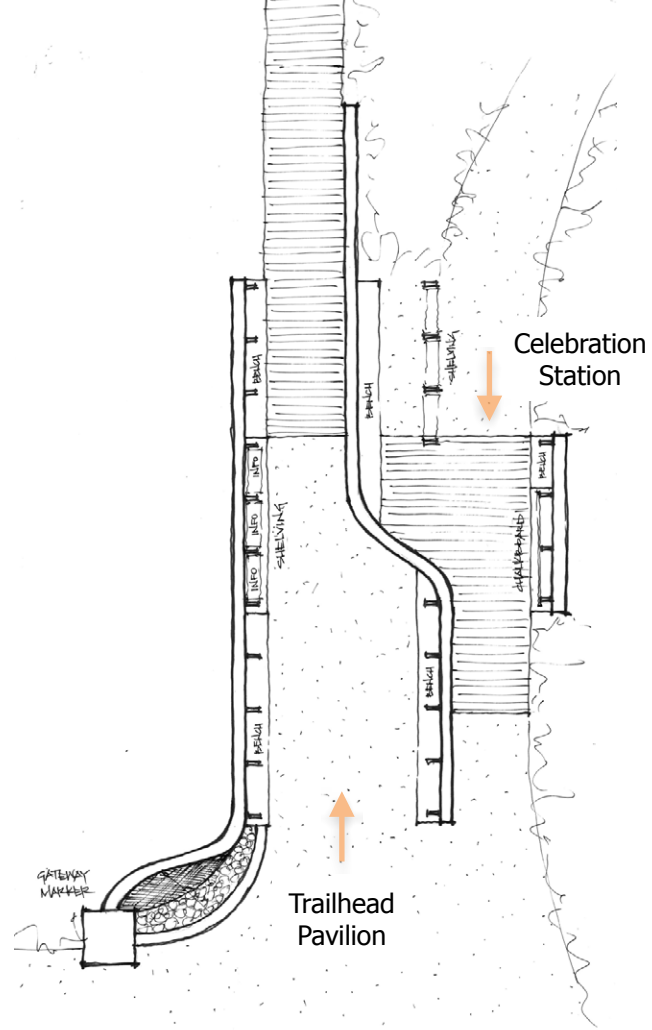


These elements aid those on the spectrum in experiencing the forest.



Gateways.

The trail is a gateway to nature appreciation, beginning at the Trailhead Pavilion.



This literal portal's familiar gable-roofed form signals welcome. Its stone, wood and steel palette anticipates the interventions to come. It may be the farthest some first-time visitors get.

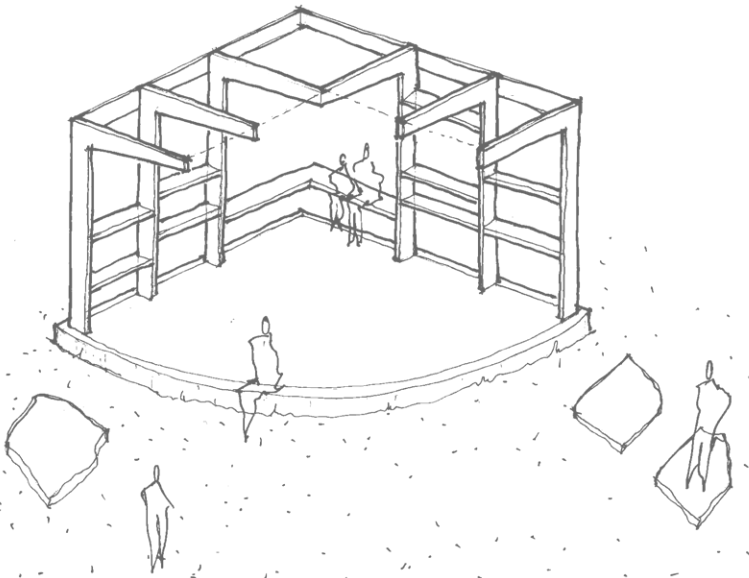


Boundaries.

Proceeding to a station is a choice.

Visitors with autism can choose to cross the threshold onto the forest floor — or not.





Frames.

Each station amplifies its place.

The Sensory Station's two L-shaped pavilions bracket a forest floor peppered with nuts, cones, sticks, stones, blooms, and bones.

Their sheltered shelving dynamically displays found objects, framing and echoing the irregular branching of surrounding evergreens.



Markers.

Stone piers describe what lies beyond each station's "exit ramp." Predictable and tactile, they echo chimney ruins elsewhere in the park.



Rooms.

Several stations are naturally enclosed by the forest.





Rooms.

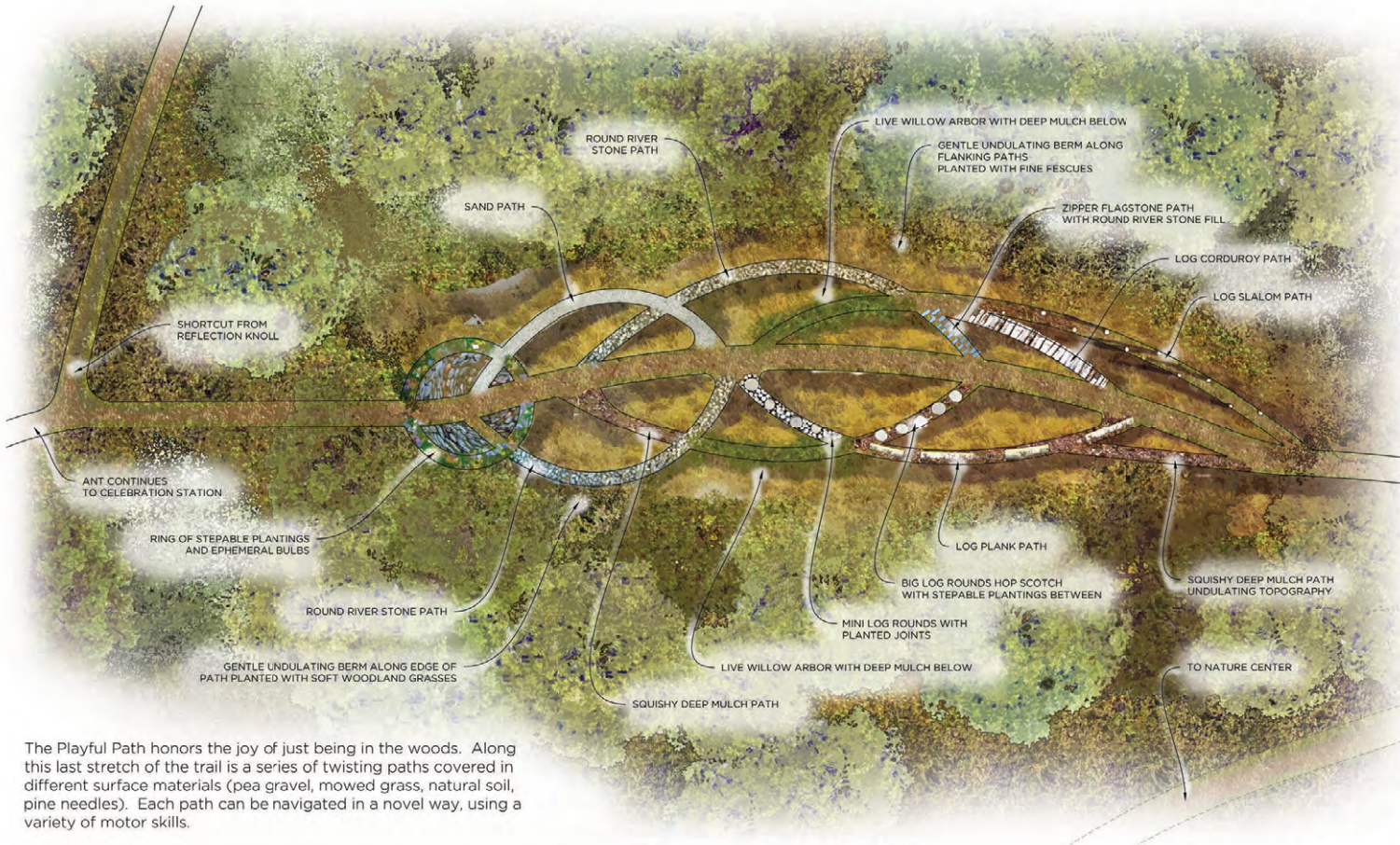
The Design Station — a natural maker-space — is ‘roofed’ by a single evergreen, the ground ‘carpeted’ with pine needles.

The Reflection Knoll is a dark room bounded by stones and branches.

Paths.

Those who make it this far can traverse the Playful Path.

Numerous interweaving natural materials invite visitors to test textures underfoot, while a central lane lets them bypass uncomfortable surfaces.



The Playful Path honors the joy of just being in the woods. Along this last stretch of the trail is a series of twisting paths covered in different surface materials (pea gravel, mowed grass, natural soil, pine needles). Each path can be navigated in a novel way, using a variety of motor skills.



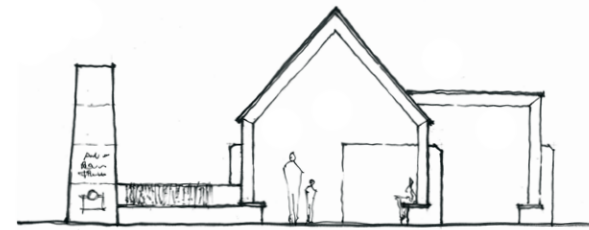
The path begins and ends at the pavilion.



Portal.

The loop concludes at the Celebration Station — the other half of the iconic Trailhead Pavilion.

We welcome walkers back to wait for stragglers, empty their pockets, and mark the chalkboard.





This two-way portal transitions visitors back to pavement, parking and people, with the benefit of nature therapy at their comfort level:

A photograph of a winter forest. The ground is covered in a layer of snow. In the foreground, there are several evergreen trees heavily laden with snow. The middle ground is filled with a dense stand of tall, thin, bare deciduous trees. A few evergreen trees are also visible in the background. The sky is a pale, clear blue. The overall scene is serene and quiet.

ANT as antidote.

Project Description/Narrative

ANTidote: Nature Therapy By Design

Design doesn't stop at a building's threshold. In America's first Autism Nature Trail, it's all **about** thresholds.

We translated autism consultants' advice into built form along this mile-long trail. **Boundary, frame, marker** and **room** aid those on the spectrum in experiencing the forest.

- **Gateways.** The trail is a gateway to nature appreciation, beginning at the Trailhead Pavilion. This literal portal's familiar gable-roofed form signals welcome. Its stone, wood and steel palette anticipates the interventions to come. It may be the farthest some first-time visitors get.
- **Boundaries.** Proceeding to a station is a choice. Visitors with autism can choose to cross the threshold onto the forest floor — or not.
- **Frames.** Each station amplifies its place. The Sensory Station's two L-shaped pavilions bracket a forest floor peppered with nuts, cones, sticks, stones, blooms, and bones. Their sheltered shelving dynamically displays found objects, framing and echoing the irregular branching of surrounding evergreens.
- **Markers.** Stone piers describe what lies beyond each station's "exit ramp." Predictable and tactile, they echo chimney ruins elsewhere in the park.
- **Rooms.** Several stations are naturally enclosed by the forest. The Reflection Knoll is a dark room of stones and branches. The Design Station — a natural maker-space — is 'roofed' by a single evergreen, the ground 'carpeted' with pine needles.
- **Paths.** Those who make it this far can traverse the Playful Path. Numerous interweaving natural materials invite visitors to test textures underfoot, while a central lane lets them bypass uncomfortable surfaces.
- **Portal.** The loop concludes at the Celebration Station — the other half of the iconic Trailhead Pavilion. We welcome walkers back to wait for stragglers, empty their pockets, and mark the chalkboard.

This two-way portal transitions visitors back to pavement, parking and people, with the benefit of nature therapy at their comfort level: ANT as antidote.

AIA's Framework for Design Excellence

1. Design for Ecology: In what ways does the design respond to the ecology of its place?

The Autism Nature Trail is a celebration of local ecology.

By identifying naturally occurring rooms, paths, boundaries, and gateways within the forest setting at Letchworth State Park, we minimize our interventions along the trail and focus on amplifying the natural characteristics of each identified place. The Sensory Station's two L-shaped pavilions bracket a forest floor peppered with nuts, cones, sticks, stones, blooms, and bones. The Reflection Knoll is a dark room of stones and branches. The Design Station — a natural maker-space — is 'roofed' by a single evergreen, the ground 'carpeted' with pine needles. Numerous interweaving natural materials along the Playful Path invite visitors to test textures underfoot, while a central lane lets them bypass uncomfortable surfaces. The loop concludes at the Celebration Station, where walkers are welcomed back invited to empty their pockets of items picked up along the way, encouraging a "take nothing, leaving nothing" mentality.

All design elements aim to frame the local ecology, literally and figuratively. The resulting design provides a threshold to nature for those on the spectrum - allowing all to make discoveries about the elements that make up this place's natural and archeological legacy.

2. Design for Economy: How does the project efficiently meet the program and design challenges and provide "more with less"?

The ANT is an immersive experience, that showcases nature through framing rather than explaining. We design pavilions with sparse compositions that amplify rather than supplant the inherent beauty of each natural place. Interventions are minimal by design. The forest has the starring role. Through our design, we aim to learn from nature's Economy.

With minimal built elements, the Sensory Station's two pavilions extend their influence by creatively bracketing a section of forest floor, providing a space for touch, discovery, and display of found objects. The Meditation Knoll lets the deepest, darkest place in the forest take the lead - the built intervention is limited to the inscription of a circle of stones to concentrate the focus of what already exists. The Design Zone begins as an existing outdoor "room" defined by pine boughs above and the pine needle carpeted forest floor below. Other stations like the Sunshine Slope, Music Circle, Meadow Run and Climb, and Playful Path harness site while expanding opportunities for gross motor skill activities and sensory engagement.

The Trailhead Pavilion itself - the portal to the entire ANT - performs the ultimate act of Economy. Its other half acts as the final, Celebration Station for returning trail-goers. This ultimate act of orientation - hello! goodbye! - is also the double-functioning element: on one side, orienting you as you commence your walk. On the other, celebrating the journey and leaving your mark.

3. Design for Wellness: How does the design promote the health of the occupants?

For us, this was the rare opportunity - Wellness is not peripheral to the program. Rather, it is the whole point: Nature Therapy, by design!

The founders envisioned a nature experience that fully accommodates and anticipates the interests, anxieties, pace, and unique sensory perception of a neurodiverse intended user. As a result, the design succeeds in connecting children with autism to nature.

Autism consultants guided design decisions. Group and "Alone zones," repeated orientation motifs, multiple degrees of immersion, and a variety of sensory experiences provide opportunities for each visitor to find their happy place in nature.

The design and architectural elements serve as a welcoming "front door" to nature. Through these thresholds, the ANT helps all visitors to break away from the confines of indoor and screen-based pastimes - an antidote. A park like Letchworth has many miles of trails. The ANT is also a gateway to nature in that sense - by successfully introducing nature to a neurodiverse user, we open up a world of exploration.

AIA Rochester Community Impact Award

Three communities are deeply affected as a result of this first-in-the-country Autism Nature Trail.

1. TAILORED TO OUR TARGET. The Rochester/Buffalo region's autism community

As a member of the region's autism community, step through the Trailhead Pavilion and you immediately recognize an experience tailored to your needs and ways of experiencing nature. This is true universal design, accessibility in which the design's strength comes from its responsiveness to the challenges and sensitivity unique to people on the spectrum. As such it has been a game-changer and destination for thousands in the region's autism community - their families, regional autism support organizations like Rochester-based Camp Puzzle Peace, and school field trips.

2. PROTOTYPE FOR THE NATION. The national community of people with autism

The Autism Nature Trail has received national attention. Sierra Club, Lonely Planet, Travel & Leisure, the New York Times and beyond. The resulting publicity has meant regular inquiries - and visits - from municipalities, parks and organizations across the country, seeking to replicate the successful marriage of nature and design with neurodiversity in mind.

3. EDUCATION FOR ALL. The broader neurotypical community

The ANT promotes understanding and awareness of neurodiversity. As co-founder Loren Penman likes to say, "while other entities are making public places accessible, we're making an accessible place public." As a result of its popularity among all park visitors, the ANT fosters an empathetic and supportive environment.