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Rio Grande Nature Center [The Inhabited Landscape: An Exhibition]

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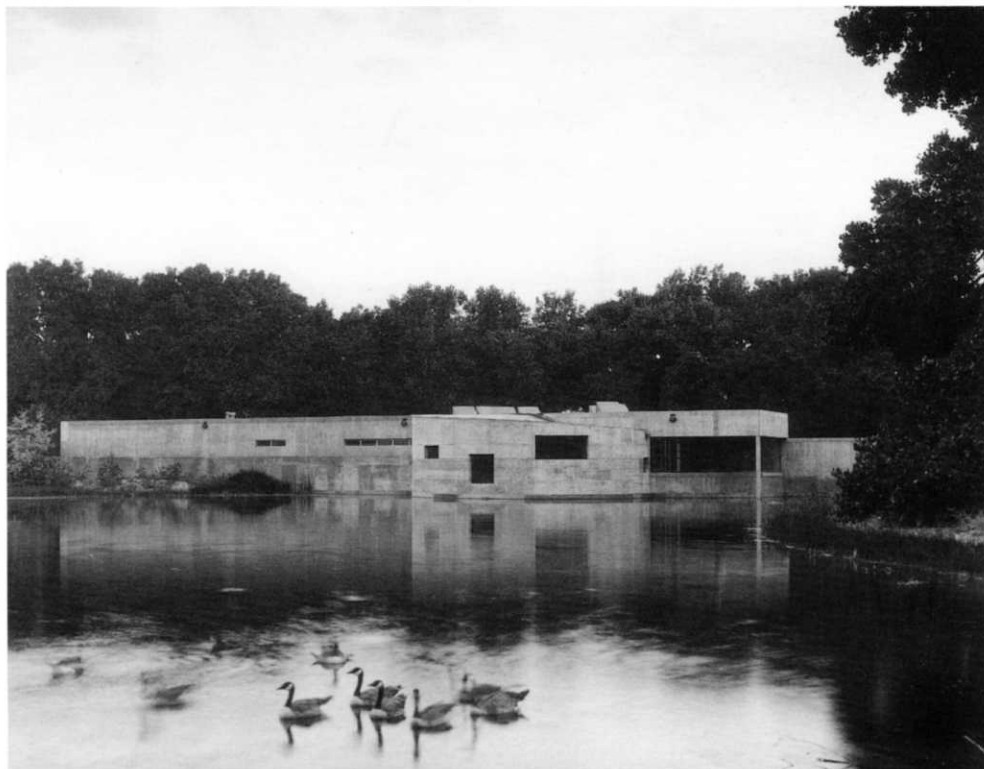
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Peer reviewed

Rio Grande Nature Center

Jury Comments

The bare concrete building forms of the Rio Grande Nature Center are set into a natural preserve in ways that are meant to limit their impact on the surroundings and contain the disruptive bustle of observation and instruction. The center has been carefully sited on one of the larger ponds and engages the water's edge, yet its occupants do not become part of the scene. The building boldly contrasts with the site, yet it also enfronts it. Plan and fenestration are structured to provide a sequestered series of views of the wetlands landscape.



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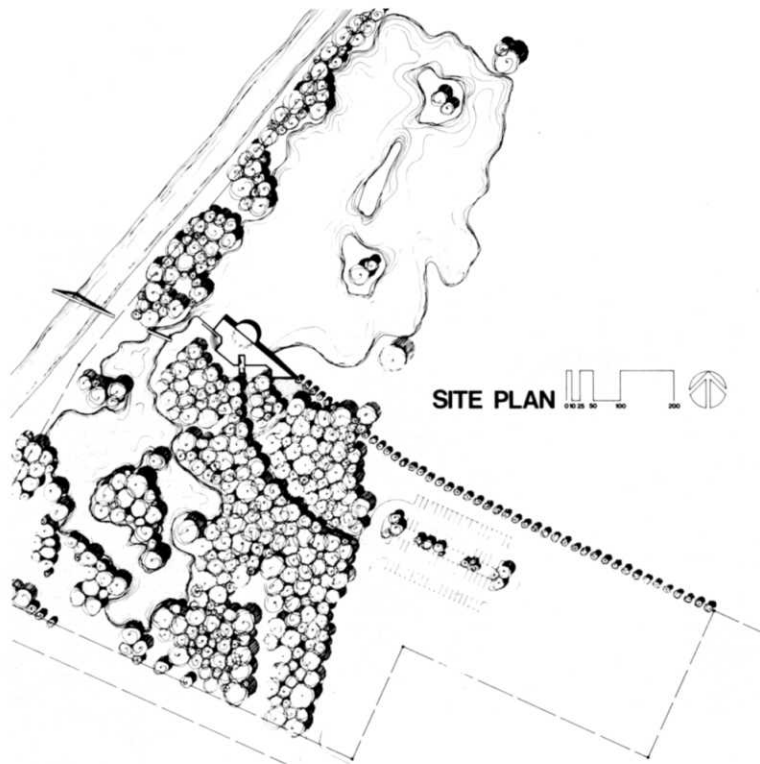
Architect's Statement

The Rio Grande Nature Center site is a symbol of a profoundly important, but rapidly diminishing, New Mexico ecosystem. Despoiled sections of the Rio Grande attest to the fact that in many ways we have turned our backs on this prime resource. The open fields are a mere vestige of a once beautiful pastoral setting stretching the length of the city. Water is an all pervasive resource that, traditionally, has shaped life in the Rio Grande valley. The meandering canals, with

their engineering roots in Andalusia, create complex and interesting paths for people and irrigation. The natural wetlands ecosystem harbors a diverse set of processes that contrast magnificently with the upland semi-arid mesas. The state of New Mexico land acquisition contained in the site represents a large scale potential for holding on to these connections with the river and its symbiotic agriculture. Since the 170-acre site is on the Rio Grande flyway for migratory wildfowl, it is a natural preserve location. Expansions

of native wetlands have been constructed with contiguous forage crop areas for birds. The forage areas will be sharecropped by local farmers, leaving a pre-determined percentage of the crop for the birds with the remainder to the farmer as a cash crop, thus contributing to the local economy.

The Nature Center Building acts as a "blind" affording visitors panoramic views over these wildfowl areas without intrusion. Children's groups will be major users of the facility, so the building has a playful, yet educational



B

emphasis. Elements drawn from a “river-bottom vernacular” are used such as an 8-foot diameter corrugated drainage culvert used as a tunnel entry to the building. The perimeter structure is bunker-like using rough formed concrete, and on the opposite side the wetlands pond laps against the structure. Views of the preserve are not revealed until the visitor emerges from the culvert entry tunnel. Then, symbolically, a ramp descends through view layers: the vast forage areas, the close range marshland views, a reverse periscope

underwater view of aquatic systems and finally, at the bottom of the ramp one can operate an old-fashioned hand-pump. At each stage along the descending ramp, interpretive displays augment the actual views. Vertical 8-foot-high water-filled plastic tubes circle the sunken, ramped exhibit/view area. Light shimmers through these tubes from skylights to create an underwater effect. On exiting, the flow is past an A/V area, through a small orientation amphitheater and then on to the interpretive trails of the refuge.

Local farmers are retained to grow feed crops for migratory birds, thereby reinforcing local agricultural economy. Schoolchildren are attracted to the facility to engage in hands-on experiences in displays, classroom experiments and nature trails.

A Rio Grande Nature Center
Photograph by Tim Hursely

B Rio Grande Nature Center,
site plan