

## *The American Sublime*

*The National Park Service Museum and Retreat*

*By conflating the man-made and the natural, [it is suggested] that the technological sublime is identical with the natural sublime. Here is that typical American amalgamation of natural, technological, classical, and religious elements into a single aesthetic. In it, natural wonders, such as Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, Niagra Falls, and Yellowstone, became emblems of divinity comparable to the wonders of the ancient world and the greatest architectural achievements of modern times.*

- David Nye



Thomas Moran, *Chasm of the Colorado*, 1873

Spanning 84 million acres across 390 sites in 49 states, the National Park Service (NPS) is the steward of America's natural treasures. Brought into official operation as a federal agency under Woodrow Wilson's administration in 1916, the NPS has grown to be the largest organization of its kind today. With a multifaceted mission of stewardship, education, and research distributed over a vast landscape, the NPS plays a central role in presenting an identity imbricated in the narrative of a sublime American frontier. In contrast to the concept of the natural resource, the "units" of the NPS are presented as objects outside the domain of economic consumption—they are treasures to be fixed and preserved. In this context, the most striking aspect of this agency is that it acquires its power as a collection—a collection of the most important events in America's natural history, making it perhaps the largest museum in the world.

This studio will examine this collection of national treasures and investigate design solutions attuned to the NPS's astonishing mission. The proposed program combines a public museum with a private retreat for researchers studying the future of America's natural history. It is a consolidated presentation of the NPS's mission and a contemplative setting for planning its future. The challenge of the program is twofold. First, the museum needs to effectively "miniaturize" the vast terrains of the NPS and present as viscerally as possible a collection that could easily take a lifetime to explore. Second, the retreat needs to deliver to its guest researchers those sensations conducive to a deep contemplation of geological time—designers will need to reconcile the powers of architecture with the powers of nature.

In the context of this studio's design problem the origins of the NPS are provocative and hold important insights. In the early explorations of the American West by the photographer-explorer William Henry Jackson and the painter Thomas Moran, images capturing the sublime affects of the American west (in particular, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon) were instrumental in moving Congress towards withdrawing the auctioning of these lands from the market, sanctioning the first national parks. In these sensations of a vast unknowable frontier were bundled a complex amalgam of politics, culture, philosophy, and spirituality perpetually in conflict with the exigencies of economic expansion. This conflict of interests persists to this day and marks the boundaries of this architecture.