



Walden Pond Revised

Pilgrims get a much-needed welcoming place built on a vision of simplicity and self-reliance

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM MORGAN • PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHUCK CHOI

The new Walden Pond Visitor Center acknowledges what environmentalists have long known: The lake left by the last ice age and ardently associated with writer Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) is a hallowed landmark in the worldwide conservation movement. Last year, well over a half million people made pilgrimages to the Concord, Massachusetts, site, and a third of them came from outside the United States.

Such popularity, especially in Thoreau’s 200th birth year, is gratifying, but so many visitors made for a logistical nightmare for the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), which owns and operates the Walden reservation.

The park has long attracted hikers, swimmers, birders, and ecologically like-minded people wanting to commune with the spirit of the town’s philosopher and poet, but facilities for visitors were few. Beyond some parking and a reconstruction of the tiny cabin where

Thoreau, in his own words, “pursued a life of simplicity, independence, and self-reflection” from 1845 to 1847, opportunities for educational outreach were limited.

All of this has been addressed by the new welcome facility. “I do really love the new visitor center,” says Christopher Hoffman, the park supervisor, noting that his favorite aspect of the building “is simply how efficient it is.”

Now, as environmentalist, singer/songwriter, and The Eagles’ frontman Don Henley said a year ago at its dedication, the visitor center “will keep Thoreau’s legacy alive for future generations.” Henley founded the Walden Woods Project in 1990, enlisting the help of fellow musicians such as Elton John and Neil Young in raising money to buy and form a trust for endangered land near Walden Pond. “Introduc-

A PERGOLA OF BLACK locust branches and a prominent overhang form a quiet transition from the ramp to the building. Budget limitations precluded a formal vestibule, so this mini forest creates a marked moment of entrance.



THE DECK AND the ramp are seen through the tree-like pergola. The raised platform obscures the road between the pond and the center. Rocking chairs and sailcloths are planned additions for the deck.

tions to Thoreau’s philosophy,” Henley said, “will invite youth to consider what constitutes good citizenship and leading a purposeful life” and “offer avenues to reflect on some of the most compelling issues of our time.”

The almost 6,000-square-foot center, designed by Maryann Thompson Architects of Watertown, Massachusetts, provides a home for worldwide Walden fans. Besides offering a film on Thoreau produced by Ken Burns, a store selling the social reformer’s books, and restrooms, the new building will host exhibits, lectures, book signings, and concerts. As the DCR’s first net-zero-energy structure, the center exemplifies environmental efficiency. The building is powered by a 100kW solar canopy that covers two parking lots and, as architect Maryann Thompson, the firm’s principal, points out, “demonstrates how much of a solar array you need to provide energy for a building of this size.”

The seemingly small \$2.5 million cost of the sustainable project is a tribute to the many thoughtful decisions that make this a visible symbol of Thoreau’s legacy. Wood characterizes much of Thompson’s work (“Wood makes you feel good when you are around it,”

she says). With the exception of some Douglas fir structural beams, all the wood used here was sourced at Walden.

Other sustainable strategies included natural ventilation, triple window glazing, generous roof overhangs, and superinsulation. But the real challenge was siting the building to sit lightly on the land without compromising the facility’s need to handle the increasing influx of visitors. Thompson resisted the temptation to “mimic the narrative form” of Thoreau’s cabin and instead designed a contemporary work of architecture.

Thompson is also trained as a landscape architect, and at Walden Pond she worked with her Harvard mentor, Michael Van Valkenburgh, and his landscape design firm, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York City. “The biggest challenge,” says Chris Matthews, associate principal at Van Valkenburgh, “was to accommodate the huge number of visitors looking for a good time at the beach while respecting those who come for a transcendental experience.”

This involved manipulating the site itself to enhance the connection between preserving



THE TRAPEZOIDAL MAIN ROOM rises up to meet the view toward the pond. The large windows admit natural light, saving on the need for artificial illumination. Operable sliding doors open the room to breezes.

PLACES

SUNKEN TREASURE

Henry David Thoreau famously took to the woods. The descendants of his sylvan neighbors returned the favor: The trees at Walden supplied almost all the wood building materials for the visitor center, and all of it was milled on-site and is Forest Stewardship Council certified. With Massachusetts in the midst of an ash blight, damaged trees were cut down and kiln-dried, creating an unusually dense wood much like that once harvested



from tropical rain forests. Similarly treated maple was used for the walls, while red oak was employed for the information desk and for office furniture. The most intriguing recycling effort was making benches out of century-old timbers that had been harvested for the possible rebuilding of the frigate *USS Constitution* (INSET), the world's oldest commissioned naval vessel afloat. These live oaks were brought from St. Simons Island, Georgia, a century ago and were purposely sunk in the muck of Boston Harbor to preserve them. Once forgotten, these trees have become further examples of the energy of positive philosophy symbolized by the DCR and its Walden Pond Visitor Center.

Constitution, one of the first six frigates of the United States Navy that launched in 1797, floats in the Charlestown Navy Yard. It was put into dry dock in 2015 for restoration and a variety of repairs, including work on the copper sheets, hull planking, gun carriages, rigging and masts, and portions of the cutwater and trailboards on the bow. Nicknamed *Old Ironsides*, the warship came out of dry dock on July 23 this year. It will reopen for public tours in early September, after the final stage of the refurbishment has been completed.

the environment and recreation. For example, the busy road to Concord's bustling center and its historical sites lies between the building and the pond. Keeping a grove of trees and setting the new building up on a platform allow visitors to see the water without the distraction of the passing cars. Yet "the visitor center's second face reacts to the parking lot," says Thompson's project manager, Zac Caldwell. There, an extensive meandering porch and a ramp leading to the entrance integrate the building with its surroundings.

The ramp takes a couple of bends on its 125-foot journey — an "unfolding spatial sequence," as Van Valkenburgh and



THE SOLAR CANOPY in the parking lot to the rear of the visitor center (TOP) supplies the building with all its electrical power, while its design echoes the black locust pergola (ABOVE) around the main entrance.

Thompson describe it — inviting people into the warm embrace of the camp-in-the-woods structure. The free-form edges of the platform are also reflected in the design of the center itself. A 40-foot-by-135-foot rectangular plan bends 50 degrees, forming a trapezoidal shape for the 1,000-square-foot reception room. Areas for park support, staff offices, and the lecture hall are arrayed in a straight line off to the side.

The bend and a sloping roof make for ceiling heights ranging from 12 to 16 feet, which add dynamism to the space. Because of the large wall of windows, this subtly sophisticated design is perceived instinctively, while the overt focus is on the beloved pond. As with Henry David Thoreau's desire to simplify, the designers achieved a contemplative and serene spirit.

The DCR staff is delighted with the new facility. But the best response was observed by Maryann Thompson on opening day, when a visitor entered the space and burst into song. 🎵

📍 **Walden Pond State Reservation**, 915 Walden St., Concord, MA. Hours vary seasonally; for updates, call 978-369-3254 or visit mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/massparks/region-north/walden-pond-state-reservation.html.