A Garden for the Blind

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I must admit I take advantage of my senses each and every day. I forget to breath in the fresh air after a nice hard rain. I rarely stop to smell the flowers. I almost never wiggle my toes through the soft spring grass. In designing a Garden for the Blind, I was forced to remember my senses, stop focusing on sight and remember to touch, listen, smell and taste. The design of the garden softens the predominance of sight to let sound, smell, and touch guide the user through the space.

The garden is to be located on the south slopes of Hume Hall at the University of Florida. People with total visual impairment, slight visual impairment and no visual impairment can enjoy the space. According to Lighthouse.org 180 million people worldwide have a visual disability of some kind. Of this, 25% are legally blind and 75% are partially blind.

Therefore, a visually and auditory prominent wayfinding structure will be located within the garden and leading to the garden. Throughout the University of Florida campus, seven-foot cylindrical columns should be placed to help draw pedestrians into the garden. Each column will be brightly colored to allow for persons with sight impairments to easily recognize the form. On top of each cylinder, metal chimes are placed that create a recognizable sound as the wind blows. Within the gardens, the chimes will allow visually impaired persons to wander off the paths and return to the garden by following the sound.

The main entrance of the garden is located at the intersection of the paths from both parking lots. An interactive kiosk uses large font and three-dimensional maps to illustrate the garden layout. The path meanders according to the topography creating a slowly sloping path that is wheelchair accessible. The main path through the site is eight feet wide, accommodating two wheelchairs and accesses the Hume Hall dormitories and adjacent sports field.

The path transforms through three distinct areas: the water garden, woodland garden, and social garden. A wooden boardwalk floats above the small pond south of Hume Hall. A forking path allows pedestrians to walk atop the boardwalk or take a path that slowly slopes to the water level. Along this path, pedestrians can run their hands through the water while listening to the sounds of waterfowl, rustling grasses, and insects.

The path slowly slopes back up to grade and enters the woodland garden. Here, a portion of the path becomes a small rock path with creeping thyme. The contrast of hard and soft surfaces creates interest, while the herb emits a pleasant smell when stepped upon. A handrail, which continues throughout the garden, transforms and allows the users to guide the hands around the tree until the handrail continues on the other side of the tree. Plants within the woodland garden are chosen for their tolerance of shade, as well as their tactile...
and aromatic qualities. An overhead canopy creates an intimate space, with small, quiet nooks for the users to stop and reflect on the space. Sounds of birds, rustling branches, and scavenging squirrels are just a few of the sounds found within the woodland garden.

The tree canopy fades as the path enters a central social space. The space is large enough for small gatherings and educational activities. At the center of the social space is a rain curtain that can be accessed easily by persons on foot or in wheelchairs. The tactile experience of running fingers through the tumbling water is compounded by the soothing sounds of water. Water is pumped from the pond, filtered, and circulated through the rain curtain. Along the outskirts of the social space are vertical planters, wooden structures containing sod and hanging plants. The planters contain edible plants that contain antioxidants, a component of some plants that can help strengthen eyesight. Squash, cucumbers, peppers, and tomatoes are a few plants with healing properties. Filtered water from the rain curtain can be used to water the garden, creating an interactive environment. The edible plants evoke the senses of taste, touch, sound, and sight. Many of the fruits are brightly colored in contrast to the green foliage, and the fruit attracts many insects.

Seating areas are incorporated into the vertical planters, so users can enjoy the space for long durations of time. Additionally, an overhead canopy will be created that allows for users to adjust the light levels within the social space. A wooden blind-like structure can be adjusted to accommodate the differing light sensitivities of users with a wide range of vision impairments.

The path circles around to create a closed loop that allows for users to navigate easily throughout the garden without relying upon their sight. Raised garden beds are filled with plants with contrasting colors, textures, and pleasant smells. Catmint, alyssum, iris, lamb’s ear, and various grasses are just a few of the plants that can be easily felt along the path. The raised planters slowly shift between 24” and 32” to allow easy access to the tactile qualities of both short and tall plants.

The Garden for the Blind is a place for all users, but focuses on creating an environment that reduces the dependency on sight and heightens the users’ awareness of sound, smell, and touch. Plants and physical structures are chosen for their use of contrasting, bright colors, tactile, and aromatic qualities. The garden becomes an extension of the landscape, playing off existing topography and physical site characteristics.

The garden empowers those without sight, by designing with touch, sound, and smell, instead of relying on visual cues. The garden also helps to remind users with full use of their senses to stop and smell the flowers, run the hands through the grass and listen to the sound of falling water.