

Protecting the Sky – Star Park in the Zselic

In 2009, the *Zselic Landscape Protection Area* was the first in Europe – along with the Galloway Park in Scotland - to be acknowledged as an **International Dark Sky Park**. Beautiful and rare starry nights can be experienced free of light pollution here. The idea of building in a Landscape Protection area in order to protect it may seem odd at first. However, the Park will help educate the public on the importance of protecting such locations for future generations, while at the same time also preserving the local eco- and biosystem.

Designing the plans of the Star Park, which is now being built, was a complex and exciting team project. Initially, we were inspired by the wondrous terrain of the Zselic, unknown by even many Hungarians. However, the architectural challenge was even more inspiring: designing the frames and infrastructural background for activities such as **observing the stars, informing the public on the effects of light pollution and how to protect their environment, while being immersed in the vast forest and its wildlife**. Thus the main goals of the project are **education, raising awareness, and regional touristic development**. The plans include an observatory, a viewpoint tower, and 5 wooden pavilions.

The site of the observatory is on a peak point and a westward hillside, where there is a clearing in the forest. We placed the building 35 meters down from the road on the slightly sloping grounds, stretching across the site, following the lines of the terrain, slimming into the horizon. Thus, as you arrive up here along the banks of steep loess slopes, the unfolding panorama is not disturbed, yet you can discover and identify the contours of the institution. The long and narrow one-storey block contains the foyer, a gift shop, exhibition and service areas, offices, an auditorium/conference room, and a classroom. The observatory dome can be found on top of this base while the cylinder-shaped planetarium projects out of it. The double-layered vertical facade cladding of larch wood boards in alternating widths not only makes the surface dynamic and sculptural, it is reminiscent of the barcode-like rhythm of the forest trees. To reach the entry, which is where this mostly sealed front facade opens up, one must walk through the park along logs carefully placed to outline famous constellations, a „living” sundial and two wooden passageways. The outside observatory deck is accessible for the disabled from the foyer across the long terrace looking down to the valley. The establishment is almost totally self-sufficient and environment friendly, especially focusing on setting an example for emitting no disturbing light to the sky or its surroundings.

Once you enter the building, the interior designers made sure you feel like you have discovered a different world, much like when you look through the eyepiece of a telescope. The surfaces, materials, colors and lights used – indirect artificial, controlled and filtered natural – create the dark and mystical milieu of a foreign planet somewhere else in space. These features help the visitors to take in more intensely the information and the experiences they gather in the movies of the planetarium or the tableaux and models of the exhibition, leading up to the much-anticipated moment of examining the sky through the telescope in the dome. The end wall of the exhibition space is covered with a wall-sized photo of the Earth from space, with special glass mounted disc-shaped pedestals in front of it for the meteorite display, thereby enhancing the feeling of levitation and infinity.

The viewpoint tower stands close by, on top of the hill, in the middle of a young forest. The top floor of the five-storey structure is 25 meters above ground, granting you a full-round panorama view. The material used is oak; the main structural pillars are debarked and turned long cylindrical logs, making the tower look like a denser cluster of trees. There are two sets of pillars, along one inner circle and one outer circle, with the previous leaning slightly outward and the latter inward. This creates a gradually tightening room in between for the spiral staircase. The experience of getting drawn upwards in this space and emerging above the canopy of the trees is exhilarating.

The wooden pavilions, so called information points along the road in the forest, are also massive wooden structures. Three of them are similar, with simple and cube-shaped open frames, where daytime tourists, night-sky watchers and school groups can stop, rest or learn about the surroundings. The frames of the structures were planned to act as actual frames of viewpoints to the lake, the sky and the woods. The strict form of the outer structural shell is eased by the flowing of the wavy benches inside. Children can find them more fun than regular school seating and they are also practical for star gazing. When lying upon these lifted billowy benches, you feel like you are levitating in the forest. The layout of the fourth pavilion is based upon a vernacular housing unit, with the floor plan following the traditions, but the structural elements left visible. The raw wicker screens are a beautiful, colorful and light-filtering feature. The fifth pavilion is the daytime stargazing dome, where the visitor can see the constellations of the winter night-sky, as the sun shines through the small holes of the dome.

Thousands of stars shine in the Zselic sky; the beautiful sight is available for anyone who comes here. Walk along the star trail or attend a night sky tour and visit the new Park to take home even more of this experience. **The starry sky is part of our cultural heritage**; it should be cherished for the future generations.