

Digital Commons

What does it mean to build an icon for the 21st century public? How do we engage – or disengage – from public life in a context of ubiquitous digital technology, global pandemic, social distancing, and ever-present telematic connectivity? If public life in the 21st century extends to the digital sphere, how can urban design support equity and access to digital technology?

Digital Commons is a catalytic proposal for San Jose that responds to public life in a digital world. Designed to provide an iconic image from above – for the airplane passerby or the Google Earth flaneur – the proposal consists of three parts. To the east and west are two zones that complexly intertwine nature, culture, and technology, exploring connection and disconnection within urbanity and digital life. Spread across these zones are a distributed *Digital Forest*, in which trees work together with new pavilions to provide free public wifi through a wireless mesh network. Visitors navigate a lushly forested landscape, but enhanced with pervasive digital connectivity. Pavilions throughout sponsor a diversity of physical and online activities, while providing stations to plug in, sit down, and charge up. Nestled within the *Digital Forest* are enclosures called *Reflectories*. These spaces afford the rare opportunity to disconnect. Each *Reflectory* is clad in a mesh enclosure through which cellular signals cannot penetrate. Designed in varying sizes and configurations, individual *Reflectories* afford space for deliberately offline activities ranging from meditation, to conversation, to group discussions. At the center of the proposal is an area called the *Observatory*. Comprising an expansive elevated platform that bridges the Guadalupe River and an immense elevator tower, the *Observatory* explores the various ways that we see and are seen in today's digitally expanded public sphere. The elevator stops at grade to load passengers before travelling 200' into the air to provide dramatic views of the surrounding urban context, and finally lands at platform level. The platform is designed in accordance with the pixel-logic of the digital image. From some altitudes, it appears to blend into the surroundings as a seamless aerial image. While from others, the cellular logic of the platform surface becomes clear – appearing as a low-resolution glitch in a hi-res context. From the platform, occupants are afforded views of the riparian zone below, while one's motion along an energy-harvesting kinetic floor activates dynamic lighting visible from the surroundings, the air, and even digital satellite