



*(dis)Mantle: A Place for Reflection*

Jill Downen

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Table of Contents

Proposal	5
Exterior	6
Drawings	16
Interior	20
Backstory	34
About/Contact	42



# Proposal

As an artist, I share a deep understanding of phenomenology, space, light and materiality in common with the field of architecture. My practice is focused on site-specific installations that explore the symbiotic relationship between the human body and architecture. The work seeks to heighten the viewer's awareness of their relationship to the built environment, where the exchanging forces within construction, deterioration, and restoration emerge as thematic possibilities.

My current work re-envisions my temporal Guggenheim Fellowship project from 2010, titled *(dis)Mantle*, as a permanent outdoor structure and place for reflection. *(dis)Mantle* merges art and architecture to provide audiences with a place to contemplate truth in a post-truth culture. The beginning of understanding first requires an acknowledgement that your own perceptions might be inaccurate or misinformed. The process of reflection, which leads to new perspectives, is not easily learned in contemporary culture. A population full of conflict and anxiety needs places to slow down to reflect. The significance of *(dis)Mantle* is its ability to provide a place that reveals the deception of vision and the mind's compensation for what appears true in relation to physical reality. The project engages culture with silence, stillness, and a context to alter perception and return to the speed of life with measured focus.

The permanent installation will be made of concrete and feature a horizontal line of lapis lazuli stone inlay and a façade with irregular curves. Viewers approach the entrance and cross through the doorway which acts as a thin threshold between exterior and interior. Once inside, visitors adjust to a naturally lit interior of hand-shaped plaster surfaces with slightly skewed angles where nothing is square. Light from the north windows and an oculus on the façade illuminates the space with a diffuse glow that changes throughout the day. A bronze plumb bob hangs from the vaulted ceiling to anchor the space with one true vertical element. The blue plumb line, subtle asymmetry, and quality of natural light and shadow come together to heighten the senses. The longer one stays in the space, the potential for optical illusion increases. Untrue corners and edges of walls seem to be true in relation to a plumb line which can appear canted; a physical impossibility. Perception is altered. The installation affords the public a place for turning inward, to re-situate them in the physicality of the body and senses, so they may see and think anew.

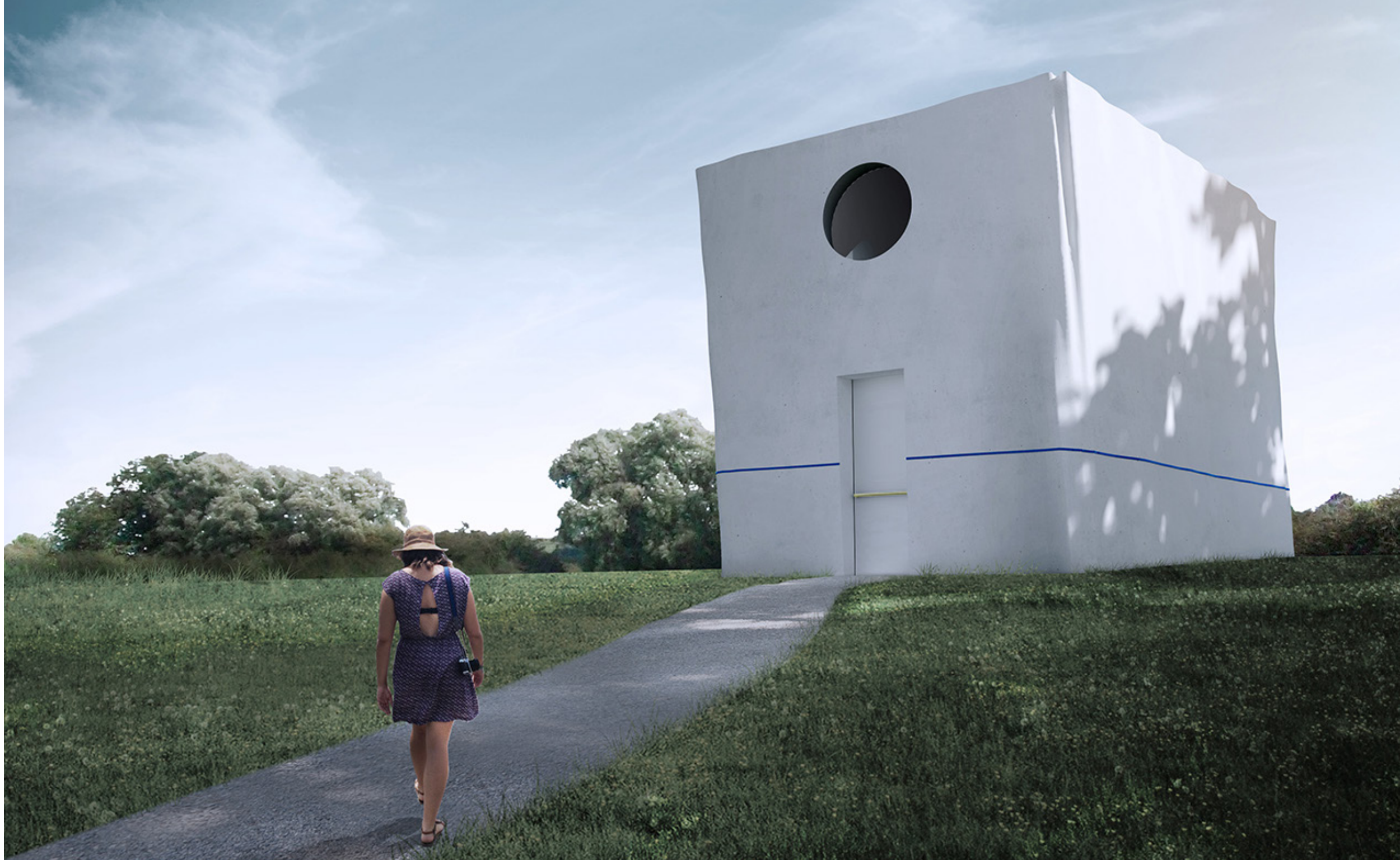
I seek to identify a site/institution and funding to realize this project. Together, let's face challenges and fulfill an urgent need; to make a place for reflection present within public space.



# Exterior

*(dis)Mantle: A Place for Reflection*

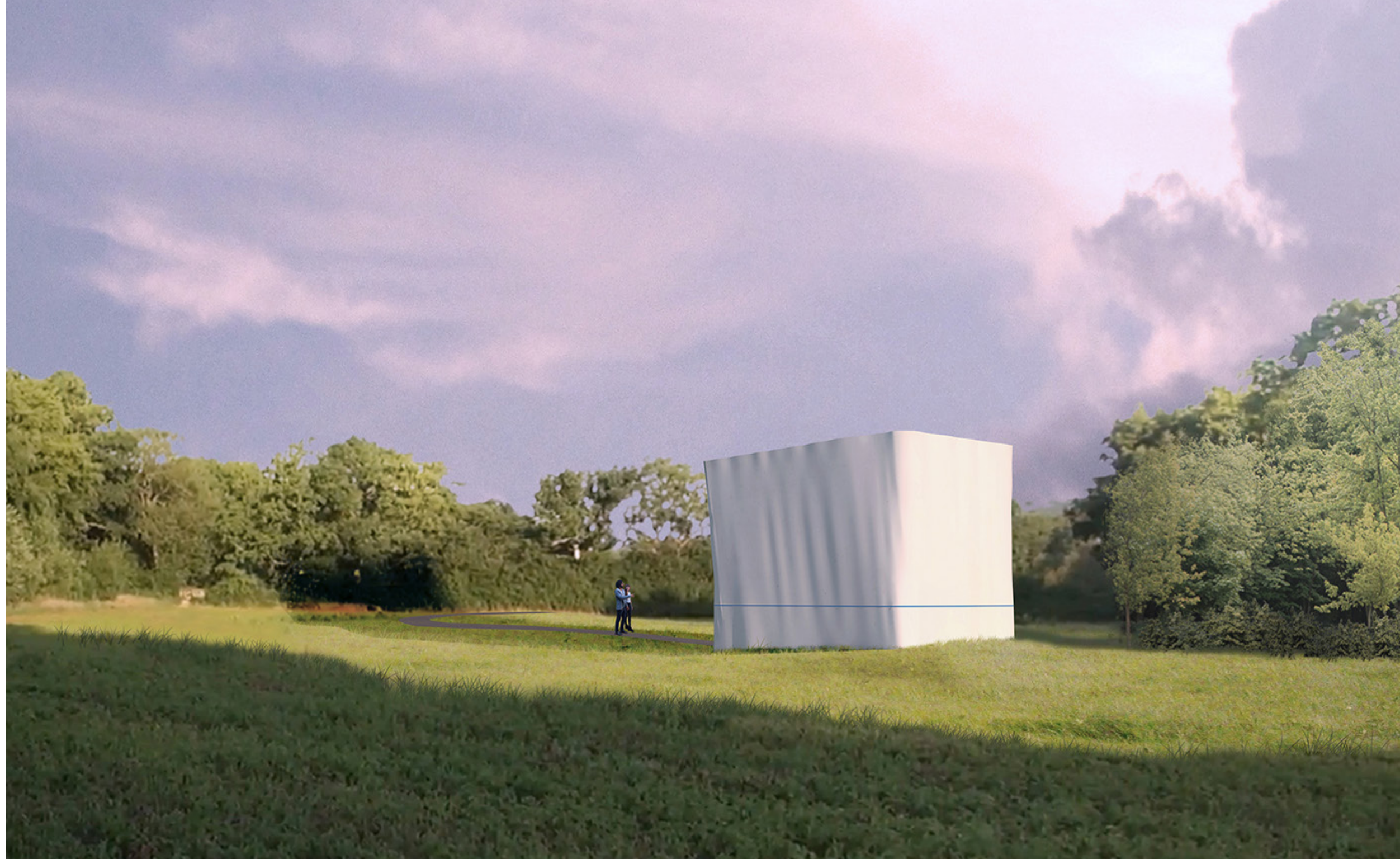
Building dimensions 20 feet high x 17 feet wide x 30 feet deep  
(Digital rendering of hypothetical site)





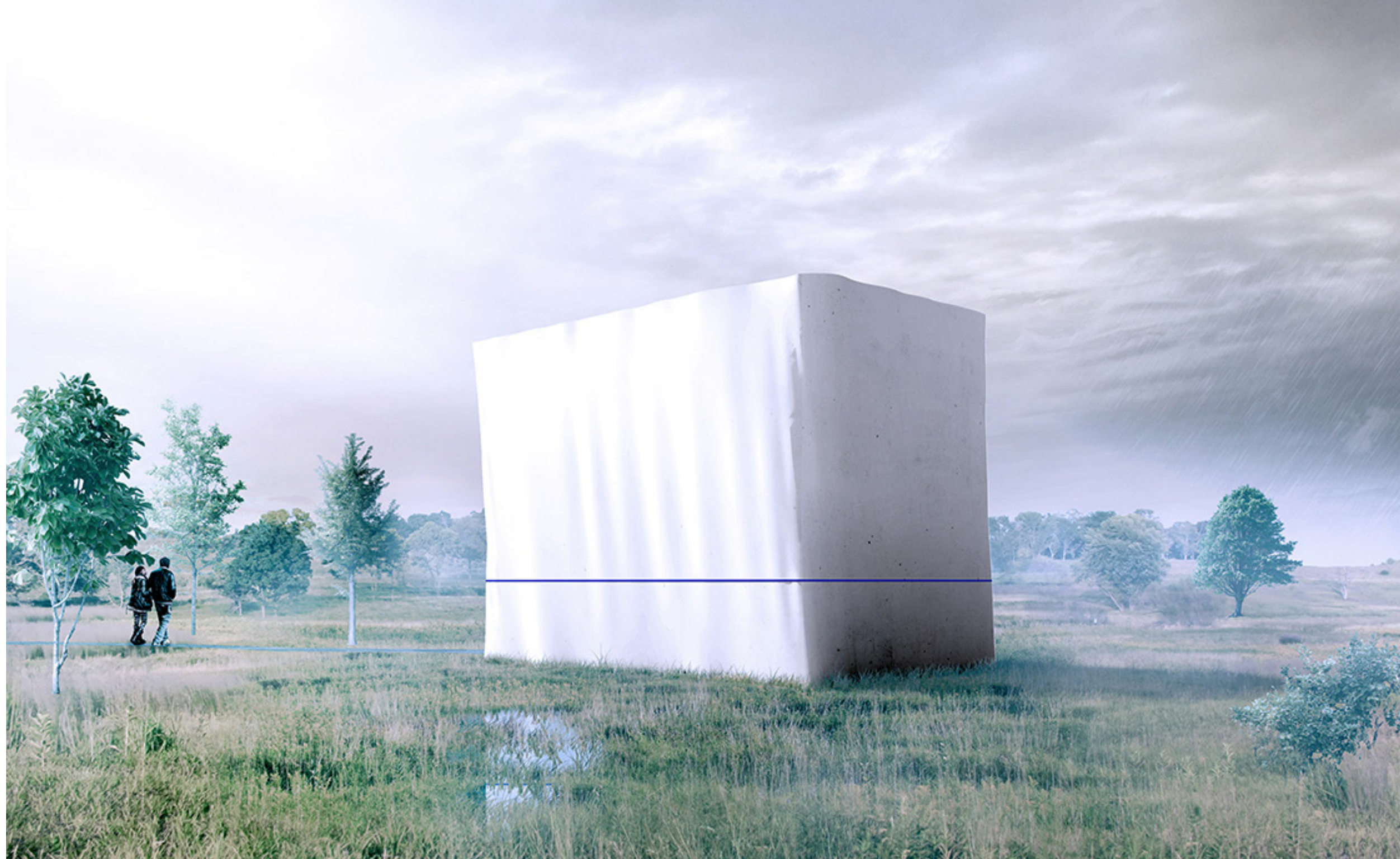
*(dis)Mantle: A Place for Reflection*

Building dimensions 20 feet high x 17 feet wide x 30 feet deep  
(Digital rendering of hypothetical site)





*(dis)Mantle: A Place for Reflection*  
Building dimensions 20 feet high x 17 feet wide x 30 feet deep  
(Digital rendering of hypothetical site)





*(dis)Mantle: A Place for Reflection*  
Detail view of lapis lazuli stone inlay  
(Digital rendering of hypothetical site)





Exterior materials test piece, 2018  
Concrete and lapis lazuli stone inlay  
22 feet high x 18 feet wide x 36 feet deep, 800 lbs  
Fabricated by Wassmer Studios and Jill Downen





# Drawings

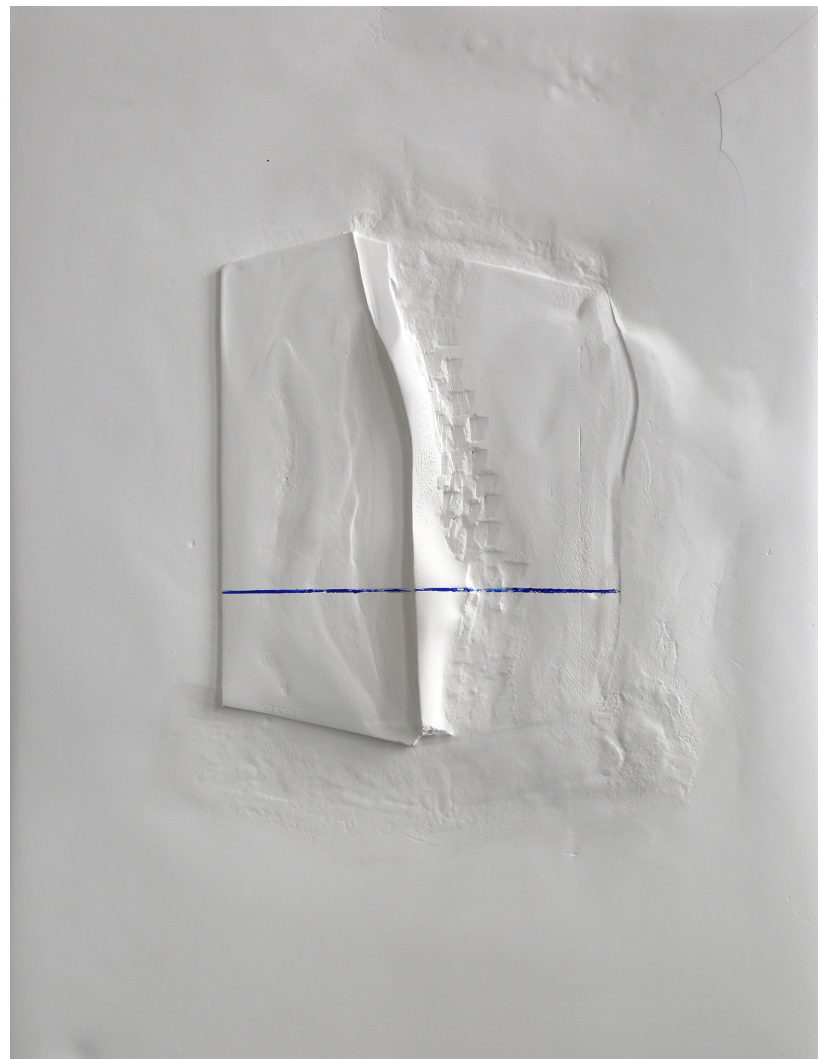
The tradition of drawing, used to develop ideas on a two-dimensional plane, is a process that I engage with unconventional materials and processes. Drawing with plaster and pigment affords potential for varied surfaces and physical dimension. The resulting drawings, or reliefs, depict sculptural forms in diagrammatic space such as frontal view, end view, and oblique view. Drawing, as I re-define it, is a constant discipline that functions in parallel to the development of installations and current projects such as *(dis)Mantle*.

*(dis)Mantle*, 2018  
Exterior Study I and detail  
Plaster relief and acrylic on panel  
24 inches high x 18 inches wide x 2 inches deep





*(dis)Mantle*, 2018  
Exterior Study II and III  
Plaster relief and acrylic on panel  
24 inches high x 18 inches wide x 2 inches deep





# Interior

Written by Ivy Cooper, Ph.D, and first published in *Art in America*, December 2010

With the installation *(dis)Mantle*, St. Louis-based artist Jill Downen transformed a small chapel in the Luminary, a former convent, into a space for the contemplation of sensory perception and spatial experience. Using plaster and other construction materials, Downen made significant changes to the vaulted chapel —concealing doorways and electrical features — as well as more subtle alterations to the architecture: making a central arch asymmetrical and building up both the top of the simple, tablelike altar and the platform below, causing them to gently slope down to the right. Finally, she painted the entire space a matte white, so that the clear light streaming in from the chapel's high windows generated an even, diffuse glow.

Viewers were admitted into the chapel individually, and invited to stay as long as they liked. Thus the space functioned somewhat like an isolation chamber in which one could absorb the interplays of space, mass and light. After several minutes inside, one experienced something akin to arctic whiteout: depth perception was compromised, shadows took on a palpable presence, and voids and masses appeared equally dense. Light and space seemed to assume a physical quality that was not merely seen but felt, and even inhaled (the artist laced the air with subtle notes of frankincense and myrrh).

In the haze of these effects, the alterations to the chapel's architecture might have gone unnoticed were it not for a

plumb line suspended from the center of the ceiling, the bob poised at the level of the average viewer's heart. The true verticality of the plumb line allowed one to perceive the impurities of the chapel's geometry. Yet it also revealed the power of our perceptual faculties to compensate for gaps in logic, for there were viewpoints from which the chapel's skewed design looked perfectly correct, while the plumb line appeared canted — a physical impossibility.

The experience of *(dis)Mantle* recalled a host of artworks that invite meditative focus and engage perception, from the spare, icy frescoes of Fra Angelico to James Turrell's contemplative natural-light installations to the mesmerizing white paintings of Robert Ryman. And like these works, Downen's installation possessed clear spiritual overtones, particularly in its employment of light as a transformative medium, and in the tension generated when what we sensed to be true conflicted with empirical evidence.

Downen, a 2010 Guggenheim Fellow, has made a career of exploring the intersection of bodies and architecture. In previous installations she has created floors that are cracked like weathered skin, walls that are bloated and sagging, and anthropomorphic forms rendered in white plaster and supported by two-by-four frameworks. *(dis)Mantle* signals a new direction, the artist venturing beyond "body-building" to engage in the phenomenology of architecture and perceptual experience.















Photographer Richard Sprengeler documented the changing light conditions in October 2010 at the Luminary in St. Louis. The images record the time before dusk at 4:15, 5:15, 5:30, 5:45, and 6:00. As the sun set the visual effects of the room's lighting shifted between cool and warm.









Previous spread: Rendering from digital animation of sunlight movement by Luke Downen. Available for view at [jilldownen.com](http://jilldownen.com)

## Backstory

As an installation artist, I respond to architectural space. I was invited to create an installation at the Luminary in St. Louis in 2010, a non for profit art space located in a former Catholic school. I chose a private chapel with the building, due to its proportions in relation to the human body and the quality of natural light that entered the room through a circle window in the west façade. After making models and drawings, I began to transform the space by slightly changing the angles of walls and contours of the space.

The artificial lighting elements were removed to allow only natural light to enter. Three doorways were seamlessly concealed. The marble altar and raised floor were reshaped with irregular angles. A single plumb bob and a blue plumb line hung from the ceiling. This line functioned as the only

true perpendicular referent within the architectural space. A dusting of plaster coated the altar and provided a subtle pallet for light and shadow. The air was scented with frankincense and myrrh.

One visitor was invited to enter the installation at a time to stay as long as desired. The opening reception began at 10 am and ended at 8 pm, allowing viewers to perceive light changes throughout the day.

The project, *(dis)Mantle*, was funded by the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship award in 2010. *Art in America* published a review on the exhibition in December 2010 written by Ivy Cooper. Since the artwork was de-installed, my desire has been to recreate *(dis)Mantle* as a permanent artwork.

















## About the Artist

Jill Downen's art envisions a place of interdependent relation between the human body and architecture, where the exchanging forces and tensions of construction, destruction, and restoration emerge as thematic possibilities. Downen is the recipient of numerous awards including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, the Stone and DeGuire Contemporary Art Award, the Charlotte Street Foundation Visual Artists Award and a Santo Foundation Grant. She has created site specific installations for Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, The Oklahoma City Museum of Art, American University Museum at the Katzen Center in Washington D.C. and for Open Spaces: The

Exhibition, Kansas City. Her residencies include MASS MoCA, the MacDowell Colony National Endowment for the Arts residency, Cité International des Arts residency in Paris. Downen has been invited to lecture about her work extensively, including the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. and the Luce Irigaray Circle Philosophy Conference in New York. She holds a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA as a Danforth Scholar from Washington University in St. Louis. Jill Downen is currently the chair of sculpture at the Kansas City Art Institute. She maintains her studio practice in Kansas City, Kansas and is represented by Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis.



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