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Designing a Wellness Centre at Jägala Waterfall, Estonia: A Sanctuary of Reflection, Nature, and Healing

Jasemen Ramadani

Abstract

With this paper, I am representing a wellness retreat centre located at the Jägala Waterfall in Estonia. The name of the project, The Veil of Reflection, is closely tied to its concept, where I have intended to include reflection both as a natural phenomenon that is being represented by the element of water and an inner journey, where the project is designed intentionally as a sanctuary for healing: physically, mentally, and spiritually. Inspired by the surrounding forest and river, the design seeks harmony between the natural and built environment.

Research methods are mainly based on environmental observation, site and climate analysis, traffic, accessibility and utility analysis, vegetation and water flow analysis, material and form experimentation, and references to masters such as Peter Zumthor, Carlos Scarpa, Tadao Ando, and Frank Lloyd Wright. The philosophical aspect lies in the so-called 'sensory architecture', highly inspired by Juhani Pallasmaa's "The Eyes of the Skin" (2005), aiming to design spaces that not only have visual weight but also value feelings, sounds, and scent. The functions of the centre are knitted around four natural elements: earth, water, air, and fire, each corresponding to a specific form of therapy. A crucial part in integrating the authenticity and cultural resonance play the local traditions and ancient healing techniques, such as metseravi (Estonian forest bathing therapy).

With the intention of minimizing the environmental impact, the centre is constructed with local limestone, timber, and concrete, demonstrating how the building itself becomes a natural extension of the surrounding forest by merging into the landscape rather than standing as an incongruous detached object.

Keywords: reflection, wellness centre, sensory architecture, healing, waterfall, organic design.

Introduction

The design of a wellness retreat emerged during my time in Estonia, often visiting the Jägala Juga, being mesmerised by the meditative rhythm of the waterfall itself, and the quiet density of the surrounding forest. My presence there led me to the thought of finding a way to create a space where other people, as well, will have the opportunity to experience this extraordinary feeling of serenity during the four seasons. The idea itself reminded me of Pallasmaa's philosophy, which I considered while designing each little detail of the project.

“Our bodies and movements are in constant interaction with the environment; the world and the self inform and redefine each other constantly. The percept of the body and the image of the world turn into one single continuous existential experience; there is no body separate from its domicile in space, and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self.” (Pallasmaa, 2005).

In this way, the human becomes a part of nature, letting the healing happen naturally without forcing it, through all five senses: listening to the sound of the flowing water, feeling the cold air against the skin, observing how light fractures across the mist, and smelling the pine forest, together with the various types of local herbs and flowers, which are also integrated into the project through aromatherapies.

Project Description

The wellness centre is placed on the bank above the Jägala River, on Estonia's largest natural waterfall. The site itself is an ideal setting for introspection and retreat, veiled with the clear sky and surrounded by the pine forest, which creates such a secluded character. The concept lies in four main zones, each representing a specific element, which embodies a specific healing phase:

The arrival and grounding is represented by the **Earth Zone**, including the entrance and the central area of the retreat, where earth-toned materials are used intentionally, such as stone and oak, creating a sensory balance and inflicting a grounding energy.

Healing by reflection is represented by the **Water Zone**, mainly focusing on the parts closer to the river, containing hydrotherapies, massage rooms, saunas, an outdoor pool, and calm chambers facing the waterfall. The purpose is to use water as a therapeutic element where it becomes a vessel of purification, both in a literal and symbolic aspect.

In addition to these main zones, there is one more zone that represents the revival after the healing process, represented by the Renewal Zone, containing the accommodation rooms that float lightly above the landscape. These bedrooms are purposefully oriented towards the northeast, maintaining privacy and silence, and yet allowing the first morning light to enter, creating a visual connection with the river and the forest.

Concrete is used on the structural elements such as columns, slabs, and walls, meanwhile, the façade consists of local limestone blending in with the site's geology and giving the centre a traditional character. The material palette of the interior design mainly includes wood, glass, travertine, and terrazzo, following the architectural language of a restrained, minimalist yet sophisticated and contemplative aesthetic.

Parti Pris Diagrams

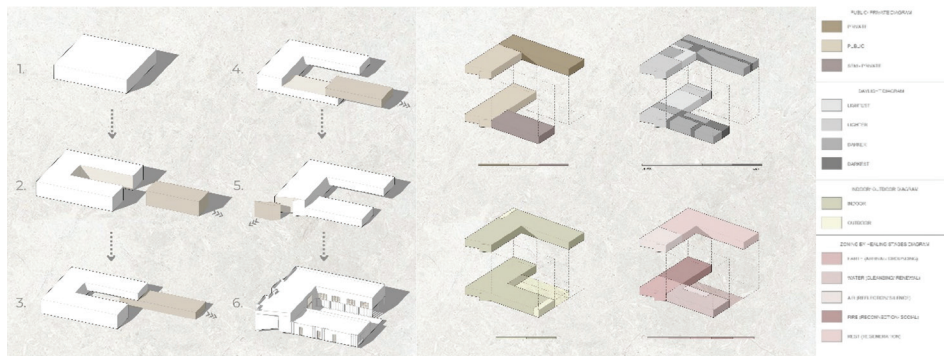


Figure 2

Ground Floor Function Diagram

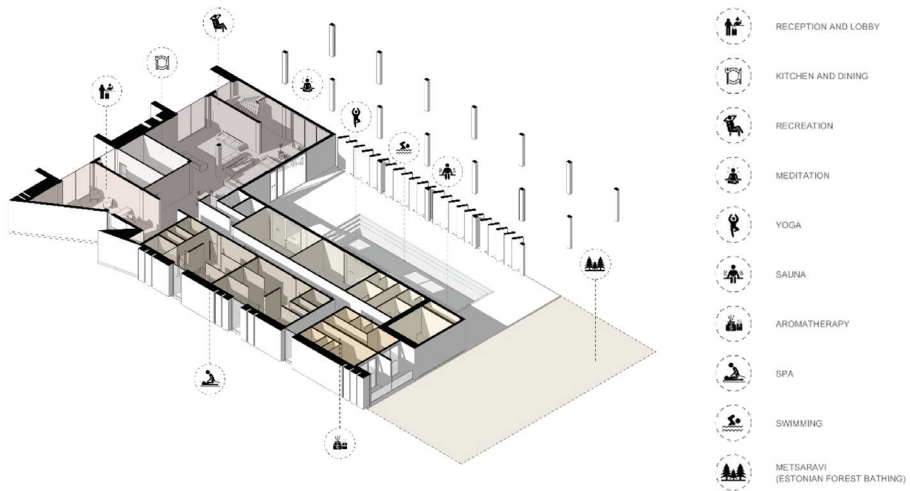


Figure 3

First Floor Function Diagram

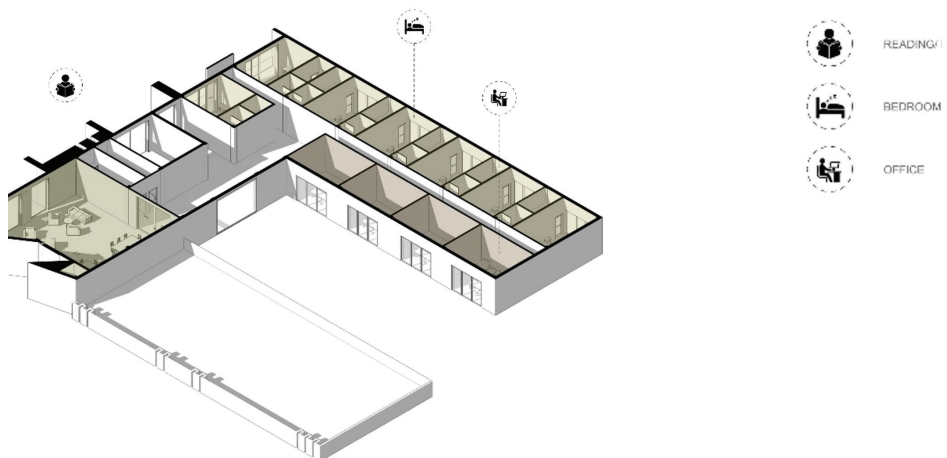


Figure 4
Horizontal and Vertical Communication Diagrams



Figure 5
Latitudinal Section

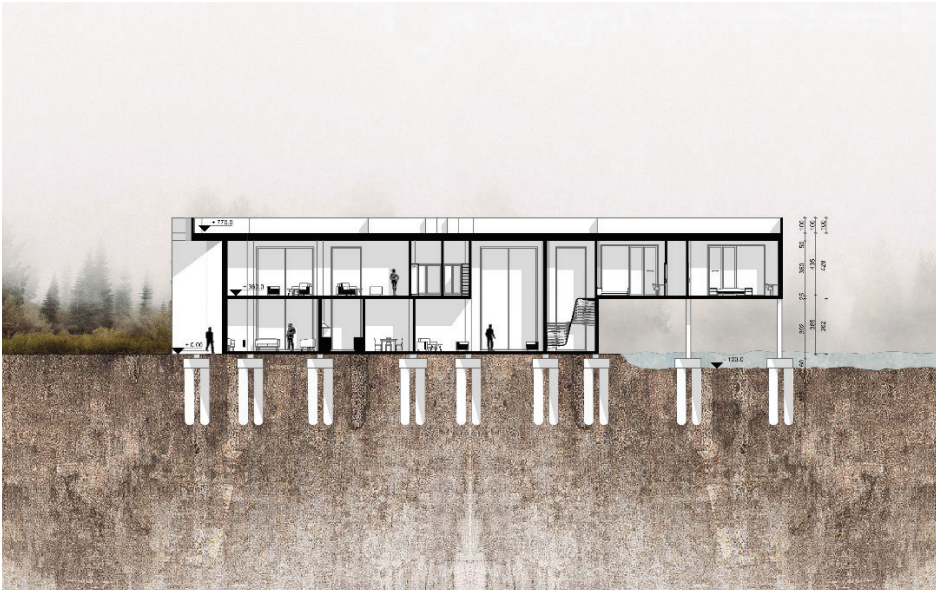


Figure 6

Longitudinal Section

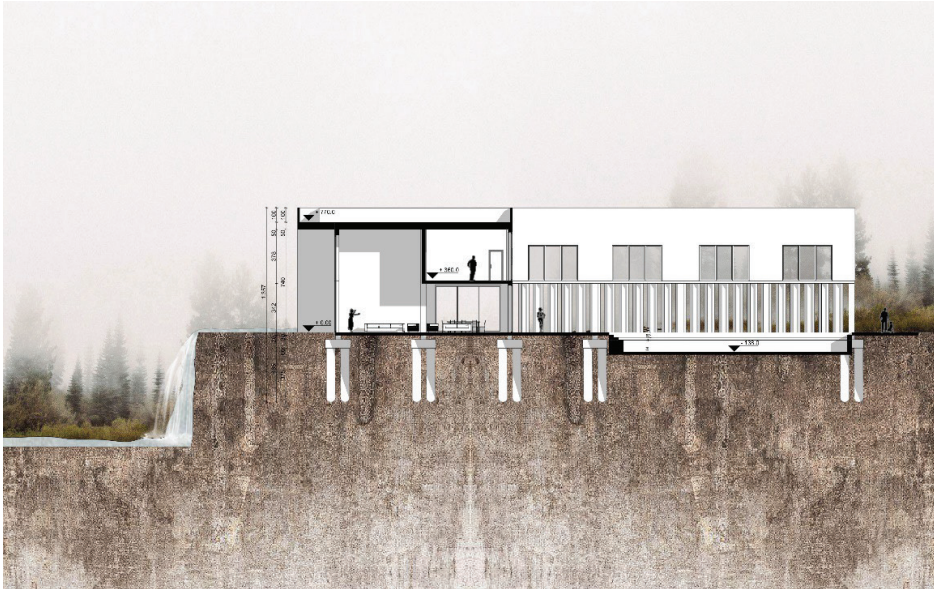


Figure 7

Axonometric Site View

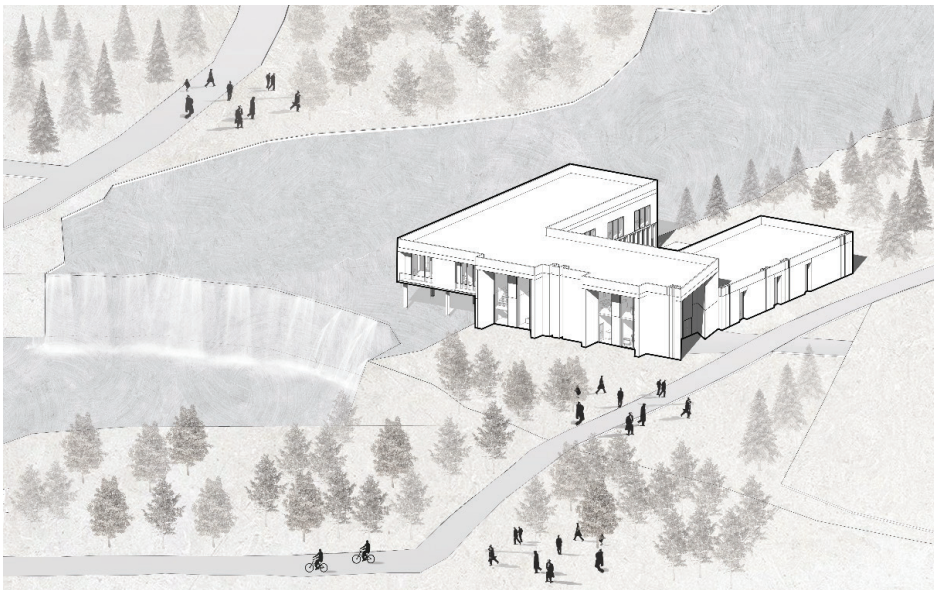


Figure 8

Exterior Render



Figure 9

Exterior Render: Outdoor Pool



Figure 10

Exterior Render: Entrance



Figure 11

Interior Render: Reception and Lobby

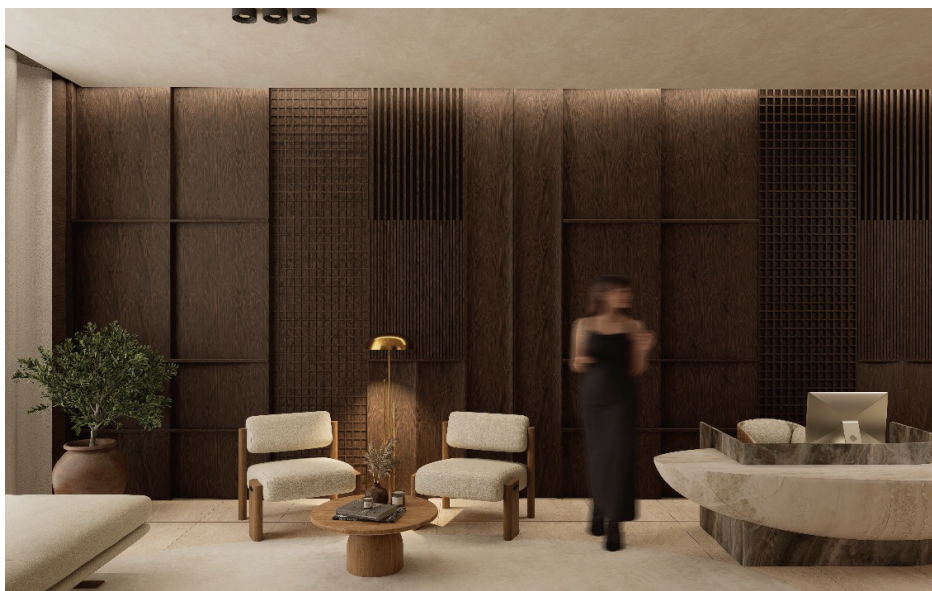


Figure 12

Interior Render: Reception and Lobby



Figure 13

Interior Render: Spa Room



Figure 14

Interior Render: Spa room, with a Sauna



Figure 15

Interior Render: Living and Dining Area, with a view towards the river and the outdoor pool



Figure 16

Interior Render: Living and Dining Area



Figure 17

Interior Render: Staircase



Figure 17

Interior Render: Glass Partition Wall, Living and Dining Area



Methodology

The methodology included in the research consists of visual observation, material experimentation, and mostly qualitative analysis.

The site's acoustics, light orientation, and seasonal transformation, are provided through first-hand location visits and analysis. Volume experimentation and spatial organization evolved through freehand sketches and various diagrams, where the functional zoning was mainly guided by the four natural elements. Sustainability and structural stability were achieved by the low-impact construction, passive heating, and natural ventilation, while creating a balance between cantilevered components and grounded cores.

The native vegetation was preserved by letting the building blend in naturally, intentionally avoiding artificial greenery and emphasizing the local craftsmanship.

Results and Outcomes

The achieved result aims to create a harmony between atmosphere, intention, and material. The transition begins from the outdoors, continuing with the indoors. The cantilevered section that extends over the river acts as a threshold, both literally and metaphorically, connecting the seen and the unseen. There is a gradual shift from the public to the semi-public and the deeply private area, which acts as a mirror of the internal reflection process of the clients.

Based on the feedback from conceptual evaluations and peer reviews, the project contains the capacity to evoke calmness and introspection. This spatial sequencing that begins from the dense forest, approaches paths and reaches open water views, creating a feeling of catharsis and revitalization. The acoustic elements of the landscape as the waterfall's murmur, the distant wind, the rustling of leaves, define the sensory identity while the light interplay becomes a design element as well.

The material choices contribute to the retreat's tactile storytelling, where the limestone facades represent the graceful aging, wooden elements in the interior radiate warmth, and concrete maintains the stability against the northern climate.

Conclusion

In function, The Veil of Reflection is a wellness retreat, but in its core, it represents an introspective journey through architecture's healing capacity, by incorporating emotion and resonance. By developing the idea around the concept of reflection, one of my purposes was to reflect fragments of myself as the designer, valuing the language of silence and the reverence of nature. It can be seen if looked at carefully at the hidden details, such as the lilies that I used at various parts of the design, flowers known for their symbolism of purification. In this way, I intended to let nature lead instead of trying to dominate it, which affirms the philosophy that architecture can become a spiritual mediator.

As Scarpa once said, "If the architecture is any good, a person who looks and listens will feel its good effects without noticing" (Scarpa, 1979). This retreat seeks to embody that quiet power, architecture that listens, heals, and mirrors the soul.

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