



All Clear

SWA Group's permanent Sandy Hook memorial in Connecticut, *The Clearing*, will break ground this August

By [Matt Hickman](#) • June 7, 2021 • [East](#), [Landscape Architecture](#), [News](#)



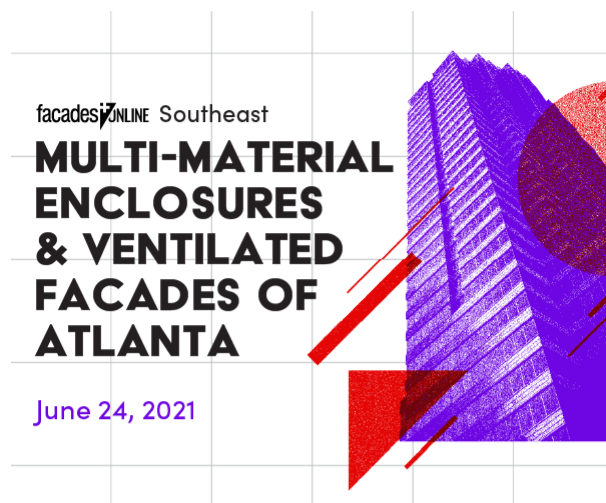
Following the (somewhat narrow) passage of funding to build the memorial by local voters, work on *The Clearing* will commence this summer. (Courtesy SWA Group)

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The Clearing, a meditative memorial site in which to mourn, honor, and remember the 26 lives lost at Sandy Hook Elementary School on the morning of December 14, 2012, was recently approved by voters in Newtown, Connecticut. With this crucial project milestone now in the rearview, construction on the \$3.75 million landscape can kick off. A formal groundbreaking at a

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so much yet so little has changed in the United States.



Coming in at just under 2 acres, *The Clearing*, designed by Daniel Affleck and Ben Aldo of SWA Group's San Francisco studio, was selected unanimously by the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission in August 2018 from a pool of 189 international design proposals. As previously detailed by AN, other top contenders alongside *The Clearing* included *The Sandy Hook Memorial Garden*, a proposal from Justin Arleo of Arizona-based Arleo Design Studio LLC), and *Earth Hold Us + Heal Us*, a design conceived by Joan MacLeod of Damon Farber Landscape Architects, Teri Kwant of RSP Architects, and Julia McFadden of Svigals + Partners.

(In related news, later this week, on June 12, the New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence will be formally dedicated in a ceremony led by New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker. The Svigals + Partners-designed garden, located less than 30 miles from Newtown in New Haven's West Rock neighborhood, is the result of a coalition comprised of the City of New Haven, the Yale University-based Urban Resources Initiative, and the parents of gun violence victims.)

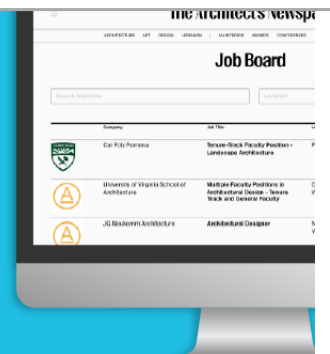


A view of the meadow from the west. (Courtesy SWA Group)

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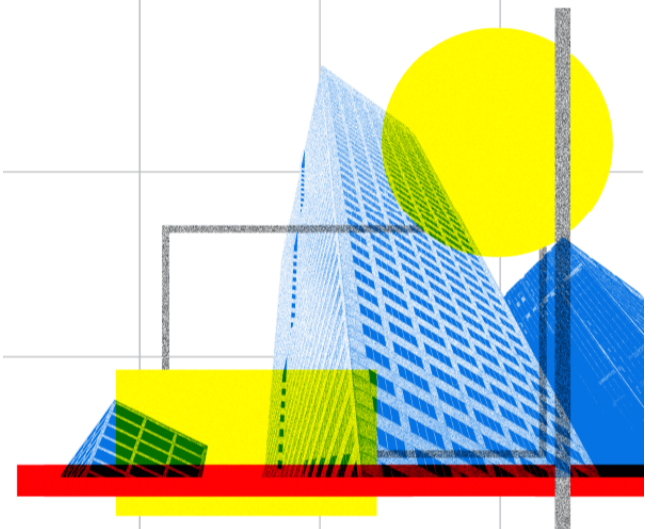
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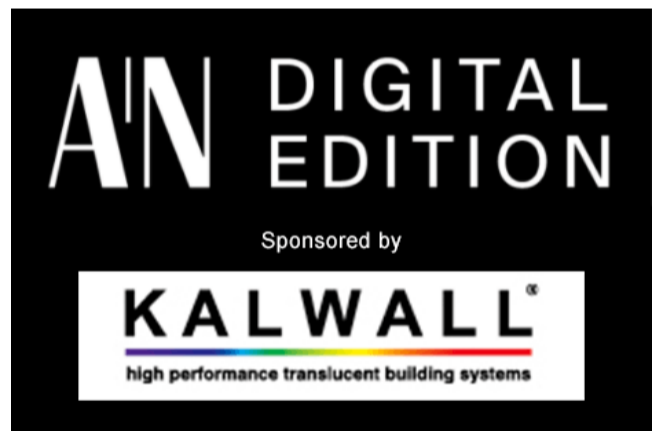
The selection of *The Clearing*, which, per SWA Group, won the “overwhelming support” of those who lost loved ones at Sandy Hook Elementary, comes following a five-year site selection and memorial development process. Alongside the design team from SWA Group, the larger project team included JMC (civil engineering), GNCB (structural engineering), Atelier Ten (lighting), Fluidity (water feature design), and Artemis, a local landscape architecture firm that will focus on construction administration and planting.

Affleck and Waldo’s design is centered around three elements: the circle, the path, and the tree. As detailed by SWA Group in a recent news release, memorial visitors will enter the site via a gently winding network of paths passing through a tranquil landscape of woodland and meadows. The circuitous trails are plotted so that visitors “experience the space in their own way and at their own pace,” per the designers, and converge at an open clearing where the names of those lost in the tragedy are inscribed on the edge of a large circular water feature within a granite basin. A young tree, named the Sacred Sycamore, will be planted at the center of the pool and is meant to symbolize the growth and resilience of the Newtown community following an event that yielded such profound, devastating loss.



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water, which will carry the offering across the space in an act of bridging the deceased and the living.”



Overlook view of the central water feature (Courtesy SWA Group)



Overhead view of the water feature from the east (Courtesy SWA Group)

“We wanted to acknowledge that the healing process does not end, but continues and grows,” elaborated Affleck, who is a Connecticut native. “This finds its expression in both the plantings and reflecting pool, which reflect the seasonality of nature and constant change through the movement of water.”

While the Commission has thrown its full support behind *The Clearing*, local taxpayers demonstrated hesitancy at the polls when it came to funding a permanent memorial to the Sandy Hook victims. As noted by the *New York Times*, less than 9 percent of voters in Newtown, which is home to roughly 29,000 people, turned out in late April to vote on the budget referendum also included a decision on the town's annual budget and other capital projects. In total, 963 residents voted affirmatively to fund the memorial via a \$3.7 million bond authorization, a figure less than the total number of yes votes to fund a new gas boiler and LED lighting at the town's junior high school; 748 Newtown-ers voted not to fund the memorial.



Aerial rendering of *The Clearing*, a sprawling memorial nestled within a 5-acre parcel of donated land. (Courtesy SWA Group)

“We’re disappointed about the numbers of people who turned out, but I don’t think it’s a statement about the tragedy at all,” Francine Wheeler, who along with her husband David lost their son Ben on December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary, told the *Times*. “If you asked every single person who lives in this town individually, you would find more people than not who are like, ‘Of course we remember, of course we never want to forget.’”

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