

Conservation Legacy Center

Project Case Study



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The Conservation Legacy Center Is an Ode to Forest Products

It started with a cabin in the woods.

In 1988, a Montana state forester realized that among the many mandates of the U.S. Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including actively managing Federal Forest land to promote healthy ecosystems that can support recreation, timber harvest, wildlife habitat, and clean water, among others—there was no provision to preserve the history of the Forest Service itself. In fact, all that history—dating back to the Service's founding in 1905—was being discarded to make way for new.

Enter a disused historic ranger cabin that had housed rangers' families for decades in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. "Districts were being consolidated and the Forest Service didn't need it, so they were going to burn it.

But the state forester and his crew heard about that and said: 'Hey, we're starting this museum for this very reason. Could we have that building?' And they said yes," says Tom Petersen, Director of Development for the National Museum of Forest Service History. "The organization was founded with that very literal physical piece of history that was going to be gone."

A 501(c)(3) that is independent of (and not funded by) the federal government, the museum has grown in size and scope over the years and now boasts more than 55,000 artifacts detailing the history of forest conservation in America—including that original cabin, which was moved to 31-acre site in Missoula, Montana, that the organization occupies under a special use permit from the Forest Service. What they didn't have, until now, was a building to showcase that collection.



A Building for Storytelling

By the time Executive Director Lisa Tate joined the museum, a design for a dedicated building had been commissioned: Designed in 2008, it was more office than exhibit and would have used heavy timber—a sort of commercial version of the cabin that started it all. But fundraising had lagged, and the project had never really gotten off the ground.

When a new cornerstone donation brought the idea of a museum building back to life, Tate realized that there was an opportunity to change course, and to pursue a different, more contemporary building design that showcased the myriad innovative wood products that result from sustainable forest stewardship. “It seemed like a pretty easy decision because there were so many benefits to innovative wood products in the story that we’re telling in this building—not just about the Forest Service, but also conservation,” Tate says, as well as the long history of forest products development within the Forest Service.

For the design of the new Conservation Legacy Center, which is currently under construction, Tate and her team turned to Leers Weinzapfel Associates, a Boston-based architecture firm, and specifically to one of its Principals: Tom Chung. Chung is one of the nation’s foremost design

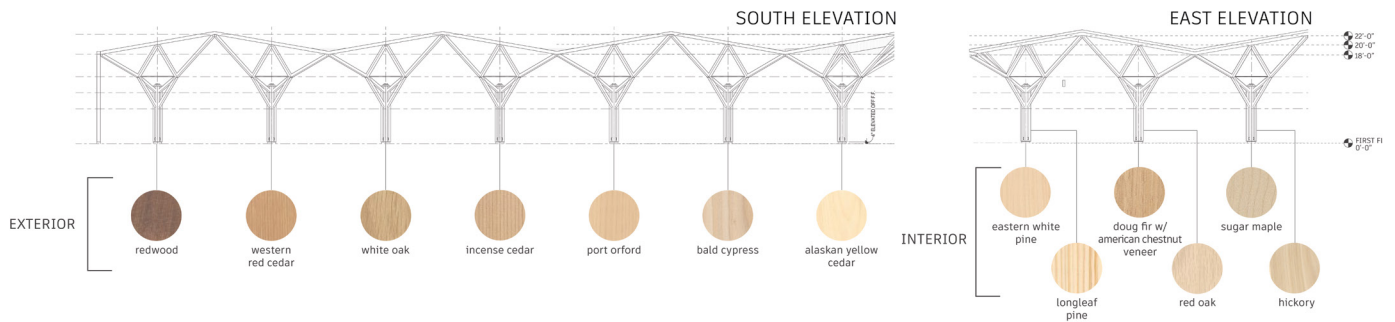
voices in the use of mass timber—the suite of structural wood products that adhere multiple layers of wood together to give it the added strength and stability that make it a lower-carbon alternative to concrete and steel—and was eager to take on the challenge. The new design was supported by funds from the Forest Service’s Wood Innovations Program grants, which support innovative and replicable wood buildings as a means of growing markets for wood products.

“Of course, it had to be a wood building—not just mass timber, but an encyclopedia of how wood has served our country well as a resource in building,” Chung says.

“That’s why the design incorporates everything from mass timber to traditional solid heavy timber, traditional timber joinery and craft, to some of the wood products that were developed in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory.”

Over the design process, the project transformed from a typical commission to a real passion project. “That was the real intriguing part for me as an architect,” he says. “Can I design a building that would be an exhibit in itself, telling the story of the Forest Service?” Another theme the design explores is how to demonstrate the connection between growing markets for wood products supports sustainable land management.





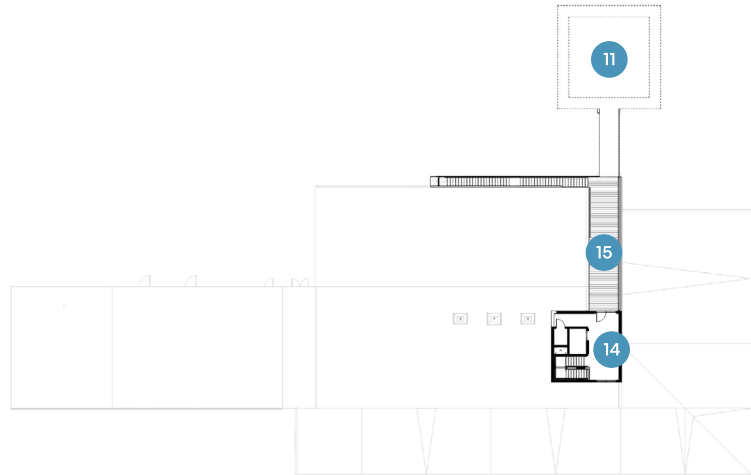
The design is centered on the idea of being in the forest—with heavy timber columns shaped like trees that support a faceted roof both inside the building and out. Designed to be a long shed, the building holds a reception lobby, main exhibit hall, an event space, and gift shop on the first floor, with a library and offices above. A rooftop deck offers both 360-degree views of the surrounding area and accessible entry to a historic fire tower—the kind that Forest Rangers have used for decades to keep watch for wildfires in forests across the country.

The building features at least 10 different types of wood products—all donated by 14 partners in the wood products industry—making it a unique showcase of wood innovation. “The intention was to use as many wood products as possible,” Chung says, “but in a way that made sense—we didn’t want to force it with a product just to show it.”

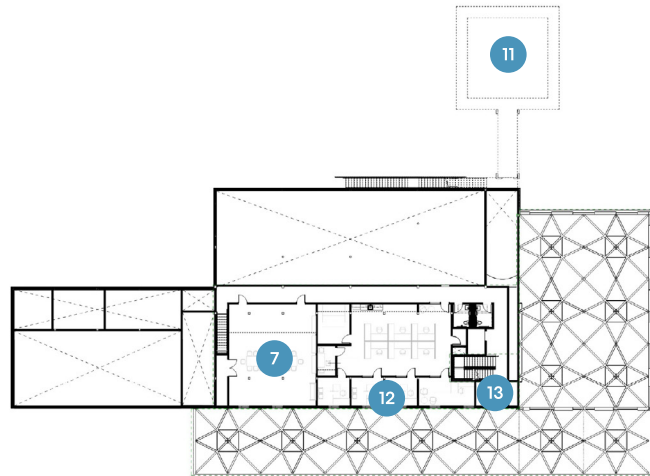


Conservation Legacy Center

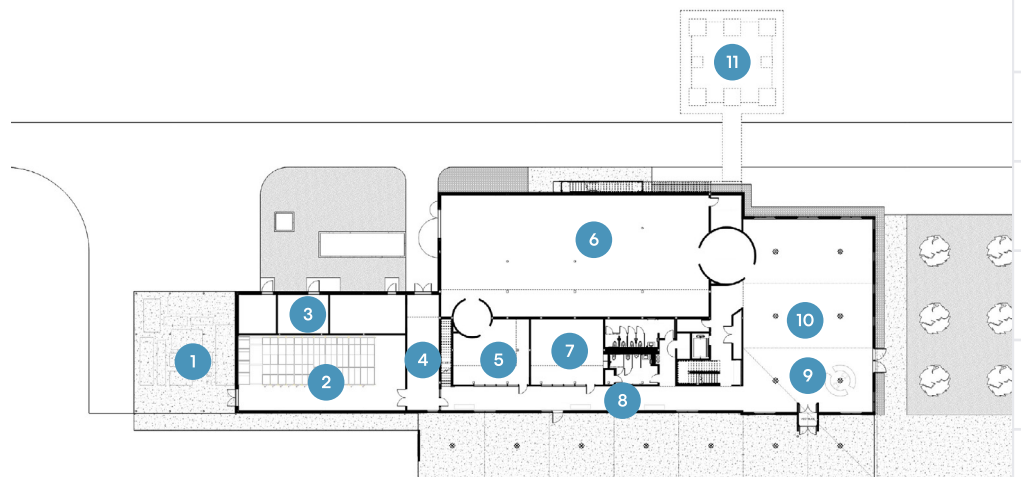
- 1 Outdoor Equipment Storage
- 2 Repository
- 3 Utilites
- 4 Receiving/Processing
- 5 Gift Shop
- 6 Main Gallery
- 7 Multipurpose Room
- 8 South Gallery
- 9 Entry
- 10 Gallery/Lobby
- 11 Lookout Tower
- 12 Office
- 13 Storage
- 14 Roof Lobby
- 15 Roof Deck



Roof Plan



Mezzanine Plan



First-Floor Plan



Showcasing the Potential for Wood Building Systems

From the tree-like columns custom-designed in 13 different wood species to represent national forests in every region of the country, to the exposed glulam and cross-laminated timber structure, to the mass plywood panels that form the folded roof, the building is a love letter to wood products—and an incredible tool to showcase the impact that wood systems can have on the built environment.

“I would say 80% of all of the mass timber in the building is exposed,” Chung says, “for all the good biophilic reasons as well as for the economy of not using another finished material for all of those surfaces.”

Leaving the structure exposed also plays a teaching role, says Tate: “Even things like the mass ply panels, which are used for the roof—we’re going to point to those and say: ‘Look up. We didn’t forget to finish it. This is what you’re seeing, why it’s important, and how it’s so unique.’”

Signage around the building will identify the visible wood products, describing to visitors how they are used and made—and how they are tied to sustainable forestry.

This expression of the wood structure is a fitting backdrop for the museum’s heart: the main exhibition hall, which will feature learning stations and multimedia displays that share more than 350 stories about forest conservation. Designed to have something for all ages, these displays—which were developed in partnership with Art Processors—touch on everything from wildfire prevention to habitat restoration, the connection between sustainable forestry and clean water, and even how creating markets for wood products can help serve forest conservation.



Teaching the Lessons of Conservation

Tate and team know all too well that they will have a very broad series of audiences as visitors to the museum, so “we were particularly careful to make sure that our exhibits spoke to all ages—we didn’t want the parents or the grandparents to be traveling around with kids who would be bored,” Tate says. So, there will be exhibits that speak to casual visitors and those that speak to conservation enthusiasts, tactile exhibits, and ones that make use of the 20-foot-by-60-foot digital display that will run along one gallery wall.

But one theme is consistent across all of them: a focus on storytelling that humanizes conservation activities and decision making, and that connects the dots for people about how all conservation activities relate to one another.

“There aren’t a lot of members of the general public who really understand the complexities of forest management and all of the different components that go into responsible land management,” Tate says. “It’s not just our national forest, it’s our state, private, and tribal

forests as well, and we’re really careful to share that. We have an overarching message that we want people to leave the exhibition with: Conservation takes all of us. It’s no one entity, no one group of people: Many people need to come together to manage and care for our lands.”

This focus on a broader view of conservation also helps draw connections for visitors between the work of the Forest Service and the various industries that operate in the forest ecosystem, including examples of conservation through public private partnerships and conservation through science. “We did it that way on purpose because they all overlap,” she says.

In addition to the showcase of mass timber materials through the building itself, the exhibit space also features stories about how mass timber is a vehicle to use some of the smaller diameter trees that—if left unchecked in forests, public or private—can become fuel and increase the risk of fire.





Encouraging Wood Construction as a Means of Conservation

The center's exhibits also draw attention to the Forest Service's effort to grow commercial markets for wood products as a means of enabling forest conservation.

While many assume that conservation means leaving things untouched, modern forest management is much more nuanced. As Julie Kies, a Forest Service Regional Program Lead for Wood and Biomass Utilization explains: "Natural fires did a good job of keeping the forest less dense and in a healthier, more resilient state. But the forests have gotten too dense, and now they're at risk of catastrophic wildfires that present a real danger to our lands and communities," she says. "If we're going to keep suppressing those fires and not allow fire to naturally do its thing because it can barely do it in a safe way anymore, we need to go in and mechanically remove trees."

To ensure that the wood from those removed trees gets used—and to generate additional funding for more land management from the sale of them—there needs to be a market for them in the commercial construction sector. That's a key factor in why the Forest Service has created and invested in programs that encourage diverse wood product markets.

One such program is the [Wood Innovations Program](#)—a series of grant programs that fund innovative uses of wood as examples to the broader construction industry and also funds industry infrastructure to create more capacity to turn raw trees into wood products, creating rural jobs in the process. Kies, the regional administrator of

Wood Innovations Program grants in Montana, says that "the funding can help give a little bit of a nudge to somebody to do something a little less conventional than they might've been looking at before because they get that little financial incentive. We also look for projects that can be replicated—where we think that there's a high likelihood of success and that they can share their model that others can look to and mimic."

The Conservation Legacy Center is a recipient of two such grants—one to contribute towards the mass timber building design, and one to help develop exhibits that drive home the connection between wood products and forest management for visitors. "People visiting the Conservation Legacy Center are already going to be in this mindset of thinking about the evolution of land management and conservation in our national forests and other lands," Kies says. "They'll be nudged through these interpretive displays and the biophilic feeling of the wood and space, and experience that one of the many benefits of that management that they're learning about is wood as a renewable building product."

As for those in the building industry, Chung says that the influence of the Forest Service's Wood Innovations Program of broadening the adoption of mass timber building systems in the United States cannot be understated. "If the Wood Innovation Grants did not exist, we would not have this momentum," he says. "It has been the single most influential program to contribute the last 10 years of real momentum in mass timber."

Understanding the Past to Lead to a Better Tomorrow

As visitors cross from the exhibit gallery at the Conservation Legacy Center and back into the mass-timber lobby, they will be presented with a wall emblazoned with the heading: "It's about all of us." Underneath, they'll be able to pin notecards where they write their responses to prompts about what they learned about conservation and what stories stood out to them the most.

Among the 350-plus stories in the exhibits are ones intended to provide connection to visitors from every level of engagement with the conservation world, and from every corner of the country. "I think it's very powerful, for example, for people nowadays to know that the Eastern forests were at one time heavily deforested—and look what we were able to do, bring them back into these beautiful, lush forests through management," Tate says. "That is the mission: To share these stories and to educate people on this history because history isn't just 100 years ago, it's also last year. There's history being made every day and people need to have a better understanding of conservation practices to make more informed decisions."

And despite the fact that the museum memorializes the history of conservation efforts by the Forest Service, Tate says that the message they want to convey to visitors is that forest conservation writ large is not just a government responsibility. "We want people to understand that they play a role because we're talking about public land—these lands are there for us and they are owned not by the government, but by all of us."

The museum is currently under construction and will open for visitors in the summer of 2026.

Project Details

Project Name: National Museum of Forest Service History Conservation Legacy Center

Location: Missoula, MT

Owner: [National Museum of Forest Service History](#)

Architect: [Leers Weinzapfel Associates](#)

Structural Engineer: [SGH](#) (structural engineer of record); [SYNL](#) (connections engineer for tree columns and roof); [KPFE](#) (delegated design engineer), [Fearless Engineers](#) (wood-to-wood connections at tree columns; structural engineer of record for fire tower and bridge)

General Contractor: [Dick Anderson Construction](#)

Exhibit Designer: [Art Processors](#)

Materials Donors: [Idaho Forest Group](#); [Malheur Lumber Company](#); [Pyramid Mountain Lumber, Inc.](#); [F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co.](#); [Sun Mountain Lumber](#); [Vaagen Brothers Lumber](#); [Freres Engineered Wood](#); [Neiman Enterprises](#); [PotlachDeltic Corp.](#) (now Rayonier); [RY Timber](#); [Trinity River Lumber Co.](#); [Sierra Forest Products](#); [Green River Lumber](#)

Size: 20,220 square feet

Photo, Drawing, Rendering Credit: [Leers Weinzapfel Associates](#)

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