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## The Gibbs House: Visual Storytelling through Brand Identity and Placemaking

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**Gibbs House: Visual Storytelling Through Brand Identity and Placemaking**

**Elizabeth Tran**

**Graphic Design BFA Thesis**

**Spring 2022**

**Committee**

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### **Thesis Statement**

The Gibbs House, managed by WMU's Office for Sustainability (OfS), is a historic two-acre plot that emboldens students to exercise both practical and sustainable living through a hands-on learning environment. As a functioning university urban farm since the late 60s, the site has amassed a devout community of passionate volunteers and workers who are committed to the maintenance and preservation of the land. However, for unfamiliar visitors, many leave the site uninformed and unaware due to the absence of identity presence and visual signage. Through the use of visual storytelling, my project explores the ways in which brand identity and placemaking can bring more attention to this under-appreciated educational space on campus.

### **Background Information**

Founded by John Gibbs in 1853, the Gibbs House property comprises a historic farmhouse and a plot of land for farming. The site went through several series of ownership throughout the years

including the Lee Baker Family in the 60's when the university urban farm took root and a community began to flourish. Primarily student-run, the maintenance of the area is kept by student land stewards as well as the hundreds of people who have volunteered their time. The Gibbs House serves as a living laboratory and experimentation site where students are able to implement and learn about sustainable practices like regenerative agriculture or composting. Since 2010, the site has been managed by Western Michigan's Office for Sustainability. The site is now known as the Gibbs Permaculture Research and Demonstration Site. The Gibbs House has previously hosted the Gibbs Fellowship Program which granted fellowships to WMU students who can live in the house and exercise sustainable living.



Front facing view of the farmhouse.



From left to right: entrance to the East Field, interior of the hoop house, and the Food Forest.

### **Personal Connection**

My relationship with the Gibbs House began when I started working as the graphic designer for the Office for Sustainability back in 2020. That’s when I started to hear more about the different types of initiatives happening at Gibbs, the funny stories of student fellows who once lived there, and all the cool people who came to really love the site. It wasn’t until this past summer where I was able to form a bond with the land itself. My boss Bri, offered me an invitation to work part-time as a land steward over the summer and I took the opportunity with full speed. Through the short period of time, I was able to experience the land for what it was. After a hot summer day of picking thistle and planting tomatoes on the newly formed beds, there was so much reward in looking back on what was accomplished and feeling good about being in the open air. Being able to laugh with friends, eat fresh raspberries straight off the bush, and develop an immaculate farmer’s tan is something I’ll always cherish. What made Gibbs so good and so special was that rich sense of community and a type of welcomeness that could make anyone feel comfortable. It’s the people who’ve been there, who worked on the site, and stuck around for a while that made Gibbs *Gibbs*.

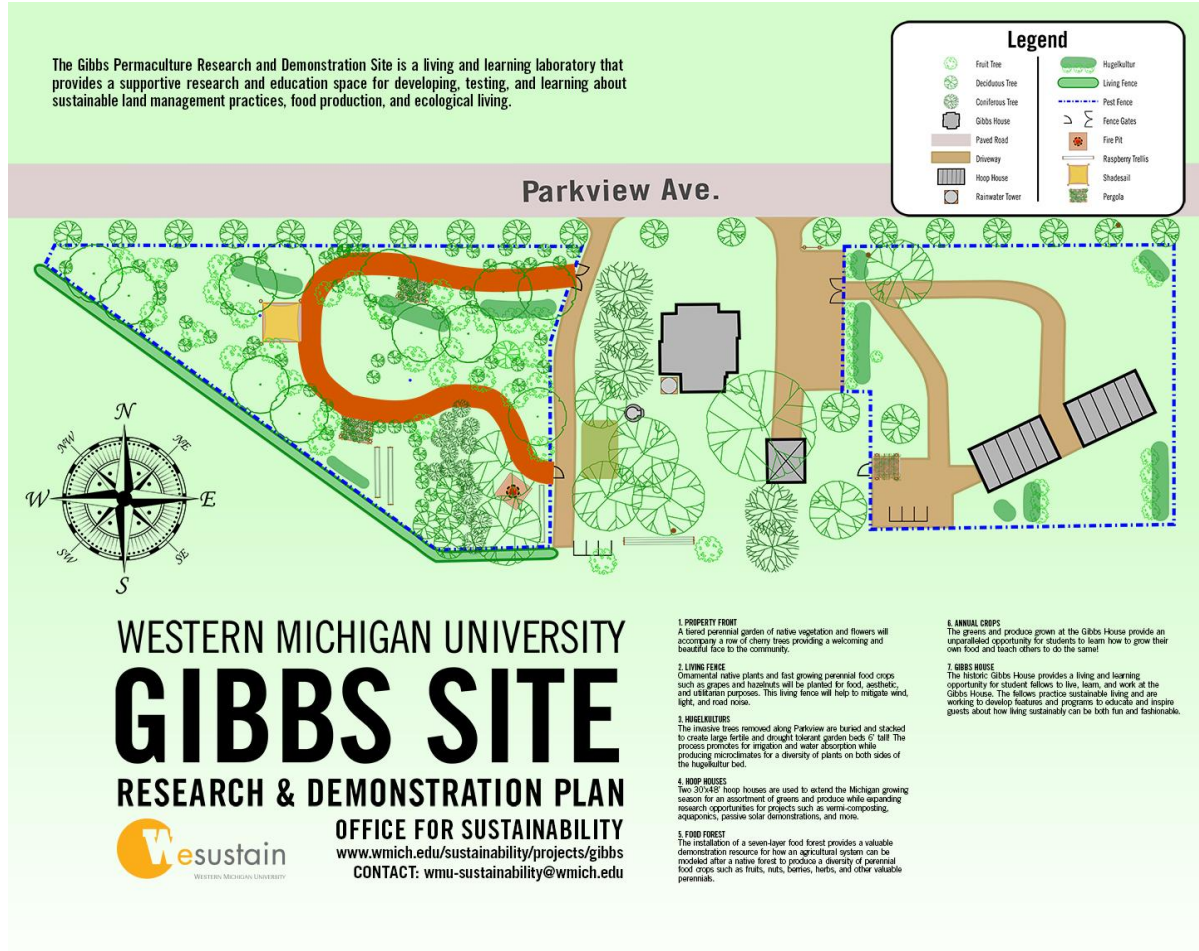
### **Identifying the Problem**

With a year under my belt at the OfS, I developed a deeper understanding and a greater sense of confidence about what goes on behind the scenes, the rich history, and the office’s community impact. Additionally, working directly at the Gibbs House allowed me to experience first-hand how things were being run and the current needs of the site. With these opportunities, I was able to identify key internal problems that could use further visual improvement — one being the current Gibbs Site map. The map, designed years ago, contained information that no longer

reflected the current landscape and function of the Gibbs House. Much of the features as mentioned in the key, like the rainwater tower and fire pit, were no longer present. Furthermore, the symbols lacked visual legibility, especially for the common viewer. With the help of my supervisors, Jeff Spoelstra and Bri McCann, this redesign proposal led to an offspring of different ideas such as an interactive tour guide and interpretive signage. The objective was to bolster the presence and educational value at the Gibbs House. In the fall of 2021, I devised a Student Sustainability Grant (SSG) proposal to fund the project; this was a program that supported student research, projects, and other activities that have the potential to advance our campus culture of sustainability. With the help of my co-author, Samantha Atkins, the WeSustain internship coordinator at the time, we were able to receive \$6,999.99 in grant money. The original proposal included funds towards a large map sign as well as six additional interpretive signage. However, upon re-strategizing on what is most both economically viable and sustainable, we proceeded to design and erect one large map instead.

### **Creating a Thesis**

Entering into my last semester in the graphic design program, I needed to narrow down on a senior thesis idea. With plans to already redesign the Gibbs map and move forward with the SSG, I used my thesis as an opportunity to explore, develop, and advance this project further. This allowed me to cultivate more nuanced and pragmatic solutions that spoke to the heart of the issue directly. In developing a map and considering the visitor experience, the project included a hypothetical brand identity and system to give the map more structure.



Current map of the Gibbs House in need of an update that reflects the property’s present-day needs and function.

### Defining the Problem

Because there is no distinct visual identity of the Gibbs House, it is hard defining what Gibbs truly is. As students come and go, the face of the brand really depends on who is present at the time and the current cohort’s type of culture. As a result, the site has molded, shifted, and transformed over the years leaving behind a confusing and misunderstood presence. Currently, there is no distinctive brand of the Gibbs House but rather what it has been associated with. In a previous effort, a group of students and staff attempted to brand the Gibbs Site as the Outdoor Education Space. Designed to achieve net zero status, the project was planned to be open to the public for community gatherings, student lectures, farm volunteering and workshops, seasonal celebrations, retreats, and many other special events. However, the plan did not move forward.

Furthermore, being run by the Office for Sustainability, it fell under the umbrella of WeSustain. With Western Michigan's new rebrand to universalize all campus logos and WeSustain now retired, the Gibbs House becomes even more lost.



Logos associated with the Gibbs House

On site, much of the signage has weathered down in age. The map sign of the Gibbs House, which served as an educational tool and visual marking for visitors, has since been taken down. From an unfamiliar passerby's point of view, the property looks to be a regular, old farmhouse.





Current signage that is deteriorating with age.

A screenshot of a news article from Western Herald. The article title is "Gibbs House faces an uncertain future, but more than 600 sign petition to save the house's fellowship program". The author is Cameron Braaten, Lead News Reporter, and the date is May 9, 2019. The article text states: "The future of the Gibbs House is uncertain due to concerns over the need for repairs and renovations to the the structure combined with a declining budget for the Office of Sustainability. More than 600 people have signed a petition to address these concerns and save the Gibbs House Fellowship." The article includes social media sharing icons and a "Submit Your News" section with a "Go to form" button. A "Latest News" section lists three items: "WMU women's tennis wins one of two over weekend", "'We are gonna get after it': Dwayne Stephens looks to bring new success to WMU men's basketball", and "President Montgomery addresses faculty pushback at State of the University address".

A 2019 featured article from Western Herald, Western Michigan University's student-run newspaper.

As the historic home withers in age and the office decreases in funding amidst the pandemic and campus politics, the future of the Gibbs House becomes more uncertain than ever before. With a lack of funding, the fellowship program has since been discontinued and the house begins to fall apart. And with that, I asked the question: Through the use of visual storytelling, how could

brand identity and placemaking bring more attention to this under-appreciated educational space on campus?

## Audience

My target audience consisted of college students, volunteers, faculty, and community members in the Kalamazoo area. More specifically, my project was aimed towards student volunteers and visitors who are much more unfamiliar with the site.

## Goals

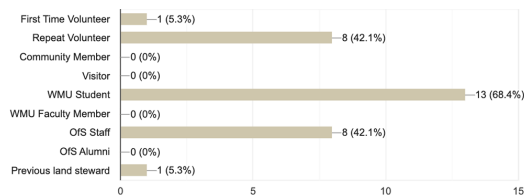
In creating a brand identity and map signage, my goals of this project were to

1. Teach students about the educational value happening on site
2. Promote sustainable living through outdoor and hands-on education
3. Bring more recognition and awareness to the site's value
4. Bolster the Gibbs House's presence

## Research

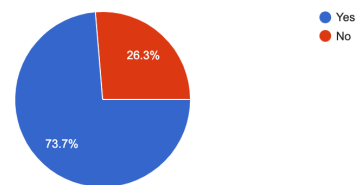
I first began my research by consulting staff members at the OfS in order to gain a better understanding of current vision and needs of the property. I collected information regarding the land make-up, the historical background, as well as archived photos and past projects pertaining to the Gibbs House. I then created a survey for those who have visited Gibbs where I devised questions surrounding their association, relationship, and knowledge with the site.

What is your current association with the Gibbs House? Select all that apply.  
19 responses



[Copy](#)

Do you feel that you have a personal connection to the Gibbs House property?  
19 responses



Much of the survey participants consisted of repeat volunteers, WMU students, and/or OfS staff — the majority answering "yes" to having a personal connection to the Gibbs House property.

List down 1-3 words you would use to describe the value of the Gibbs House.  
19 responses

Unique, historic, improvable  
community, enthusiastic, fulfilling  
Hard work  
education, growth, community  
Rewarding  
Historic, communal, safespace  
Sustainability and community building.  
sustainability, unique  
Impactful, educational, helpful

Community,  
Eco-friendly, fun, helpful  
Important, green, healthy  
Helpful, generous  
Sustainability  
Love, connection, learning  
The nexus of social, economy, and environment. Food sovereignty. Access to greenspace for college students who are suffering mentally and emotionally under the stressors of a contemporary life that does not honor them as complete human beings.  
Educational, Flourishing, Important

In describing the site's value, words such as "historic, communal, educational, and rewarding" popped up frequently. After collecting various voices who make up Gibbs House, I brainstormed words that encompassed all of these different yet overlapping values. These were the words I carried with me as I began to devise the brand identity.

Sustainable

Community-centered

Learner-centered

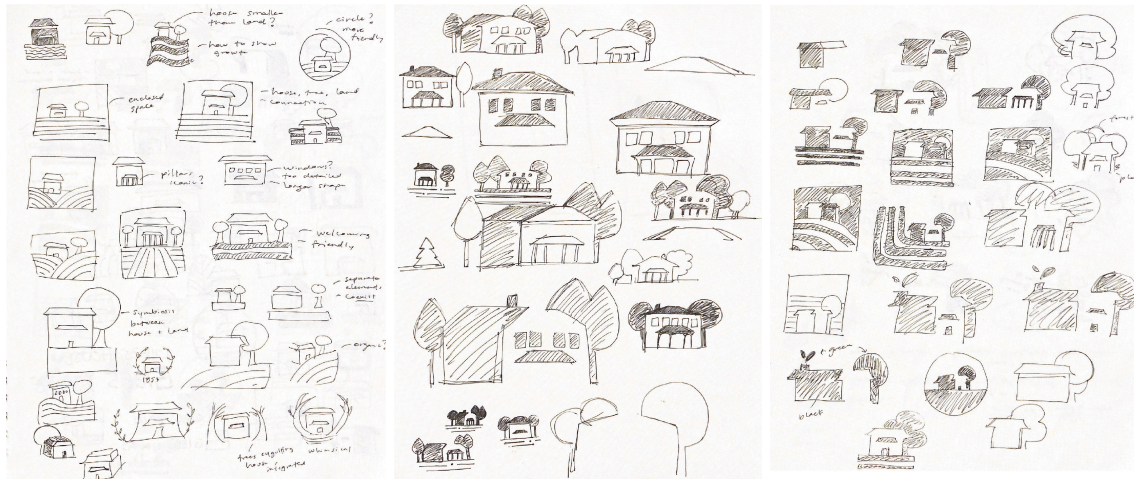
Educational

Historic

Impactful

### **Forming the Brand Identity**

I knew that I needed to have the architecture of the Gibbs House being the focal point of the logo. Doing so, there is a nod to its unique structure and its historical roots. I also knew that I needed to include some sort of symbiosis with the house and the land as neither dominates the other. I sketched a variety of visions that interpreted the land in different ways, utilizing negative space and figuring out how to make the structure as distinctive as it is. Throughout my sketches, I further explored balance and hierarchy, how much room the house or land should take, and what style would accurately convey its character.



Various hand sketching explorations.



Refined digital sketches and digital progress.

### The Chosen Identity

I eventually arrived on a logo that represents the Gibbs House front and center, considering also the land connected to it. The form is not overly ornate, the house does not overwhelm the land nor does the land overwhelm the house, and the typeface is playful — reflecting much of the personality at Gibbs. With the use of negative space, the house is interconnected with the trees and land, showing the balance of relationship and its emphasis on connectedness. Furthermore, I devised a set of values that became paired with a symbolic color in the color palette. This allows for a modular color system that can hopefully be employed onto various application styles.



INTERCONNECTED

TRANSFORMATIVE

SOCIAL

INCLUSIVE

Final logo identity and color palette with associated values.

### **System Application**

Putting the system to practice, words and colors became joined together to create an even more symbolic and meaningful interpretation. To poster on the left, transformative and interconnected reinforced the ideas of regenerative agriculture. To the right, inclusive and social reinforced the ideas of permaculture. This is a philosophy in which ecosystems grow and flourish self-sufficiently and sustainably.



Promotional posters that advertise regenerative agriculture and permaculture principles at the Gibbs House.

### Establishing Placemaking

Placemaking serves as a strategy on how to strengthen the connection between people and the places. Through designing and erecting signage, people are able to gather around a designated location and form bonds. In my journey to create map signage, I asked: What could help to capture the vernacular quality and interpersonal connection of land, animals, and people found at the Gibbs House?



Image of the Gibbs House captured from Google Earth.

## The Illustrated Map

Designing for a new map, I began my research on how this process would take place trying to pinpoint its approach and stylization. Could it be more painterly to the left or more cheery and symbolic to the right. Or could it be as generalized and illustrative as the Green Map? Perhaps it could also take after Paula Scher's work and bombard my map with symbolic and illusive typography. After understanding how much a map can alter or distort reality depending on its purpose, I really had to understand the problem I was solving.

What story did I want to tell?

What was the objective?

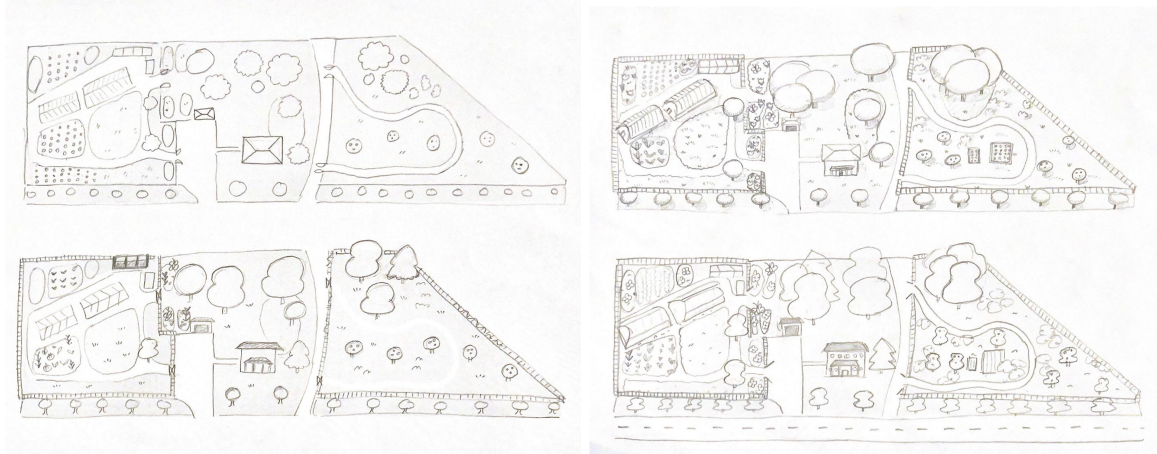
What was the most important information to convey?



Green Map by Masako Kubo, Switzerland Map by Khuan+Ktron, and US Geography and Climate by Paula Scher.

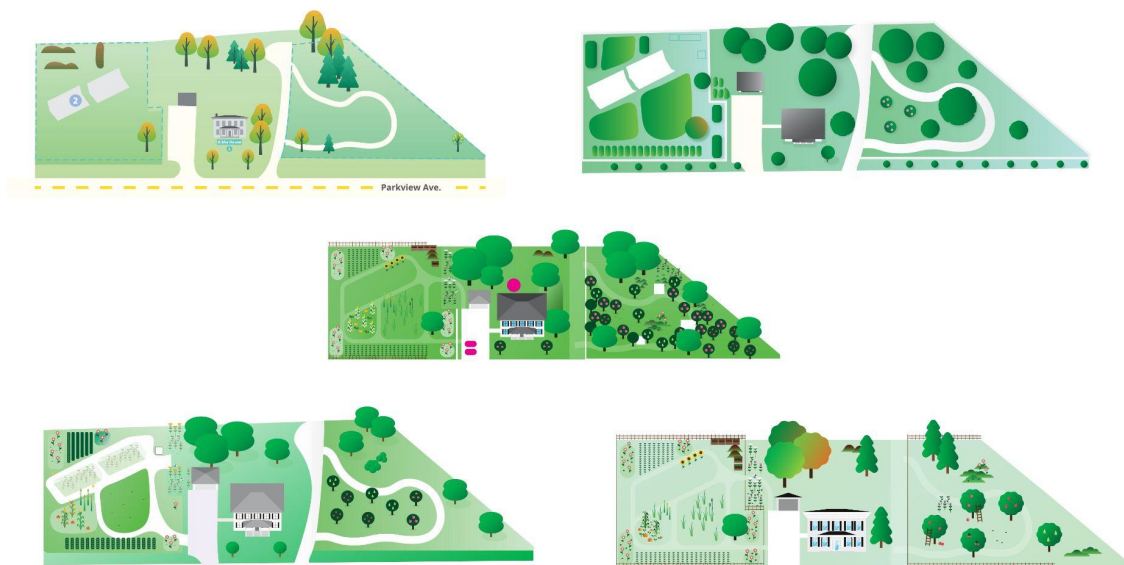
## Design Process Case Study

In shining a light on the beauty and impact of the Gibbs House, I felt that an illustrated map best celebrated and showed off the property's playful spirit and educational value. In my question before, it was about bringing prominence to that vernacularity and the symbiosis that goes on with the land and people. In my hand sketching explorations, I played around with different viewpoints in order to understand strengths and weaknesses for each one. Each perspective carried on a different narrative that changed the overall aesthetic and visual interpretation.



Initial map sketches that play with a variety of perspectives

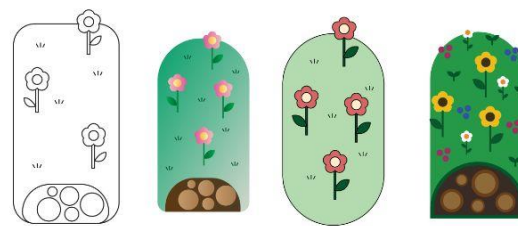
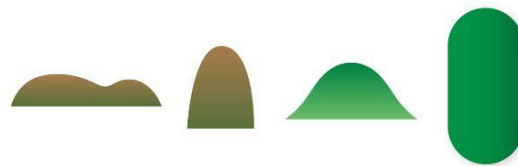
Taking it to the next step, I turned those sketches into digital renderings to depict my visions more clearly. Doing so, I felt the top down view to be a little too unlively and a little bit redundant. It was hard nailing down a slight perspective as it involved a lot of correct precision in perspective and that became too realistic to me. I kept tugging around with the slight and flat, as the flat perspective made it difficult to render certain features.



*Digital map exploration styles*



A prime example are the hügelkulturs, a large mound that consists of decomposed wooden trunks underneath, a layer of healthy topsoil, and native plants such as rhubarb and golgi berries that grow on top. Some forms were hard to interpret in different positions and much of the stylization depends on the perspective. I ultimately landed on the flat as it gave me the most flexibility in characterizing. I was able to show off the variety of plants, the layers underneath, and decomposed wood – making the hügelkultur most recognizable and distinct.



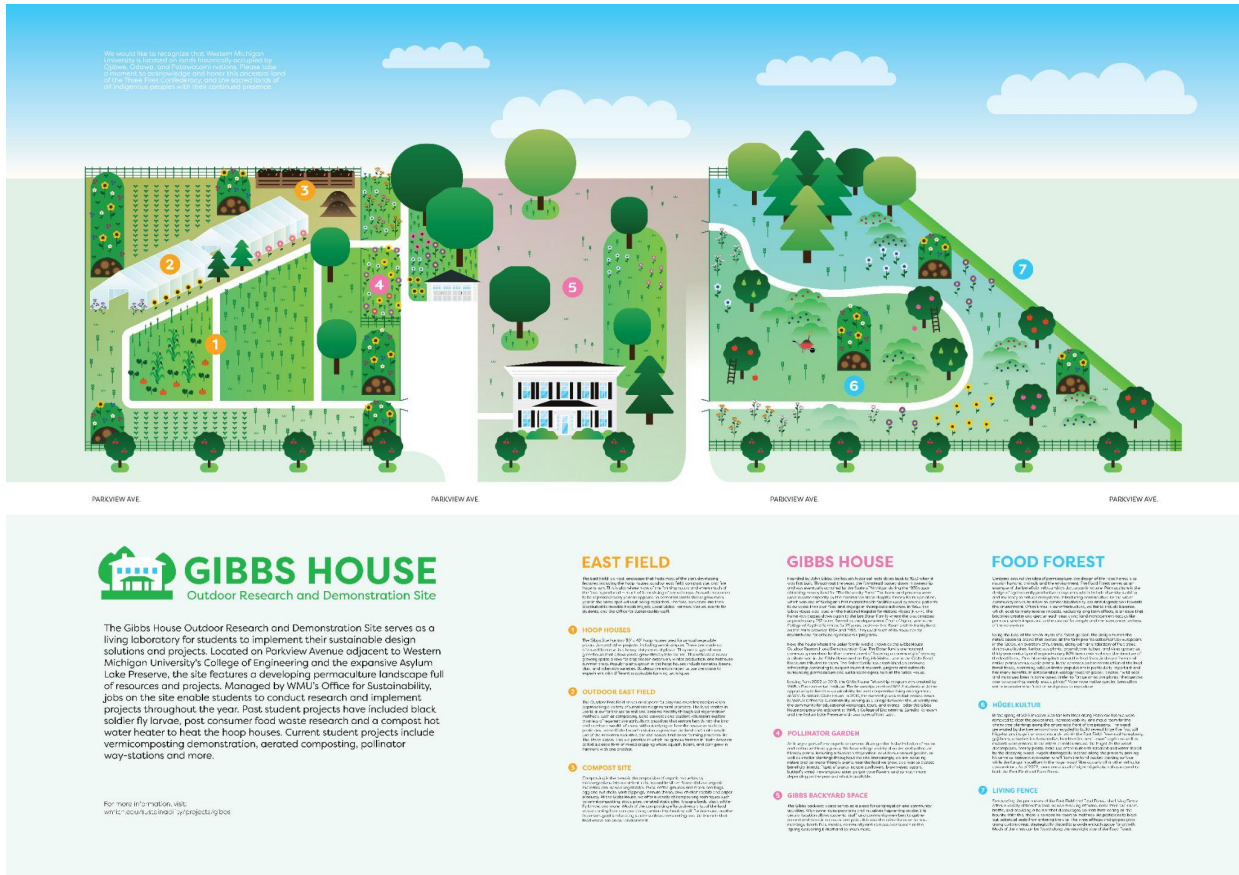
Hügelkultur case study



The visual component of the illustrated map

I then applied this approach to the rest of my illustration and came up with the final solution above. Illustrations are placed symbolically rather than literally, representing the overall purpose. Doing so, more importance is placed onto the functions of each site location in order to educate visitors the purpose of each location. Therefore, less attention is paid to the specific amount of trees placed in one area making room for changes in the landscape. I decided to divide the illustrated map into 3 sections with 7 distinct features designated to its appropriate section. Lastly, text was added to explain and educate visitors of what these features mean and its importance. From left to right, these sections comprise the East Field, the Gibbs House, and the Food Forest. The numbers are named accordingly as:

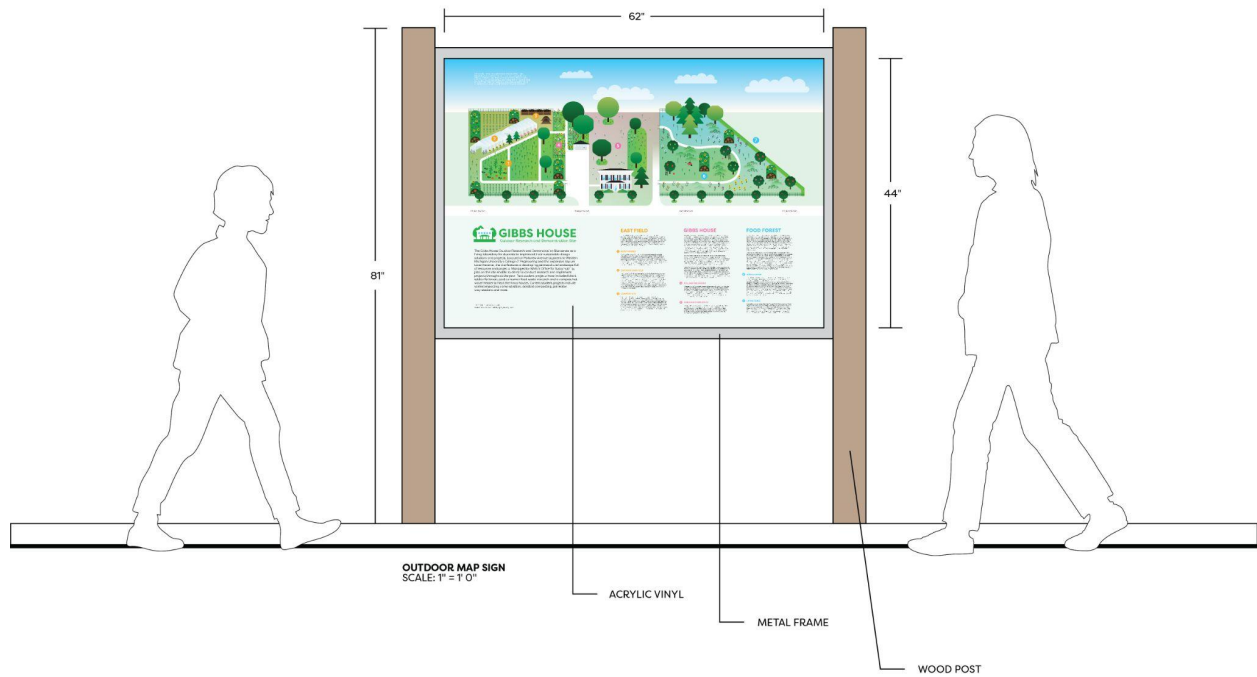
- 1) Outdoor East Field
- 2) Hoop Houses
- 3) Compost Site
- 4) Pollinator Garden
- 5) Gibbs Backyard
- 6) Hügelkultur
- 7) Living Fence



The final design of the illustrated map.

**Final Deliverables**

I did some research on the fabrication aspect of the project — figuring what type of material this sign should be, what’s the most sustainable option, and how big and tall it should be. In defining a centralized location and creating a sense of placemaking, I took note of how most often times where students volunteer and meet takes place in front of the back porch area. It made even more practical sense to place the map sign there. In expanding this project further, I created a welcome sign to highlight the brand of the Gibbs House clear for street view. A teaser was made for what potential wayfinding signs could look like or if this could be extended to making interpretive signs for each individual site feature.



Fabrication considerations in regard to material research and appropriate sizing.



*Illustrated Gibbs House Map placed at the central point of gathering.*



The Gibbs House welcome sign and wayfinding signage that points to feature locations.



Posters

that serve to promote the sustainable practices and values espoused at Gibbs House.

**Project Reflection**

Throughout this entire process, I discovered that there is no such thing as linear success. I also gained a better understanding of how to scale a long-term project, define measurable outcomes, and construct something tangible. My project twisted and turned in unexpected directions.

Starting off, while it made sense to establish a brand and voice first, it took me until making the map to realize a system was needed for concrete support. Along the way, I was often met with failures that initially felt like major stepbacks. However, it was due to these failures that helped to better inform my design process. Reflecting on my process, I learned and am still learning on how to best:

- 1) Strategize on which solution best solves the problem at hand.
- 2) Develop a richer understanding of system thinking and application.
- 3) Design for longevity and modularity.
- 4) Uncover the why's for each design decision and how it makes sense.

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