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Sturgess Architecture

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Glacier Discovery Walk: A heroic design link to nature

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At last, the Canadian West is building a contemporary design that's heroic and heart-stopping. The Glacier Discovery Walk is an audacious promenade that matches, rather than shrinks from, an epic landscape. Located off the Icefields Parkway in Jasper National Park, the soaring steel track and viewing promontory leads visitors on a guided tour along the edge of a cliff, ultimately inviting them to travel about 30 metres beyond land to stand in the sky, the better to absorb the Athabasca Glacier that's receding down the Sunwapta valley.

This is not your typical stroll in the park. Constructed of brutally tough weathering steel, known in the trade as Cor-ten, and a curved catwalk in glass, the structure juts its multifaceted face off the scree cliff. This is architecture that depends on the mountainside to support the trapezoidal steel box girders that allow the gigantic cantilever. The iron oxide of the rocks is the same material that forms on the Cor-ten, causing it to gradually morph from orangey-brown to nearly black. At the same time, the daring walkway floats mid-air, as if it operates independently of the rock, the better to allow us to stand in awe of nature, and possibly despair of its decline over time.

Designed by structural engineer Simon Brown of Read Jones Christoffersen (RJC) with Sturgess Architecture, both of Calgary, the dramatic intervention is the culmination of a 300-metre interpretive trail that leads visitors from the roadway. The project has been short-listed in the Future Projects – Competition Entries category by the World Architecture Festival, which takes place early this November in Barcelona, Spain.

For matching epic nature to epic architecture, the Glacier Discovery Walk has clearly found some of its inspiration in the stunning parkway work by Canadian-Norwegian architect Todd Saunders, particularly his Aurland Lookout, a wooden structure that cantilevers dramatically into the air before bending down through the pine trees toward a fantastic fjord on the western coast of Norway. The structure not to be emulated was the one overlooking the Grand Canyon that architect Jeremy Sturgess describes as “pretty dismal architecturally and clunky structurally.”

In contrast, he says, “what we trying to get the structure to be as elegant as possible. Some kind of man-made outcropping of the landscape rather than something foreign.”

Brewster Travel Canada, a major provider of bus transit and tourism centres throughout Banff and Jasper national parks, commissioned the design and is planning to start construction next year. Though the design has the potential to become an international icon of structural daring, the Glacier Discovery Walk is still subject to a full approval from Parks Canada and a positive environmental assessment. The migratory patterns of mountain goats in Jasper National Park are currently being monitored to check whether the walkway intervention would negatively impact their movement.

The startling shape and thrust of the promenade is meant to seduce tourists out of their cars and onto the land. That's because there's an increasing trend among tourists to simply drive by the icefields, snapping photos from the comfort of their cars, rather than bothering to get out and walk along the barren rock.

What is courageous about this kind of architecture is its potential to convince people to engage seriously with the landscape. Stuck within the confines of their cars, tourists from Canada and visitors from around the world will remain safely entombed from issues of global warming and dangerously receding glaciers.

Currently, a 500-metre-long “pull-out” on the west side of the Icefields Parkway exists with enough room for 60 vehicles to park and some informal view points surrounded by a one-metre high chain-link fence. Those ungainly parking spaces would be eliminated in the new configuration, and that's a welcome cleanup of the roadway.

The plan is to require interested visitors to park their cars at the Glacier Discovery Centre adjacent to the Columbia Icefield and then take a free 6.5-kilometre shuttle bus ride to the discovery trail. Tickets are required to gain access to the Sturgess-designed path and promontory.

Sturgess Architecture is designing a series of interpretive shelters describing the area's ecology, glaciology, aboriginal history and geology in Cor-ten steel. Only Brewster buses will be allowed to stop along the highway next to the Glacier Discovery Walk.

Bad food and middling architecture have long plagued our national parks. At long last, something exhilarating has been designed for Jasper. To me, that's worth abandoning the car, any day, to face reality

and walk up and over the mutating force of nature. You could hover there for a long while.

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