

Nancy Russell Overlook at Cape Horn

An Intimate Landscape at the Precipice of the Vast Columbia Gorge

LOCATION: Skamania County, Washington

DATE: Completed in 2011

TEAM MEMBERS: Walker Macy, Landscape Architect

CLIENT: Friends of the Columbia Gorge

Nancy Russell, activist and founder of Friends of the Columbia Gorge, devoted her life to the preservation of the Columbia River Gorge. Her advocacy to address impacts of human encroachment in this stunning natural landscape began in 1979; in 1986, Congress passed legislation designating the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area as a place for habitat preservation and restoration, historic and cultural interpretation, and public experiences. Through Friends of the Columbia Gorge and other community organizations and intergovernmental partners, Russell remained a dedicated advocate for public spaces and nature in the National Scenic Area until her death in 2008.

Land acquisition for public benefit was a strategic focus for Russell and Friends of the Gorge. The Nancy Russell Overlook project illustrates the transformation of a formerly impacted, privatized Gorge site to one that welcomes community access and experiences. Located at Cape Horn, in Skamania County in Southwest Washington, the site had been occupied by a subdivision of McMansions, which were acquired by Russell through coordination with Trust for Public Land. These were demolished so that the site could be restored to public access focused on the site's stunning views into the heart of the Gorge. Walker Macy, the Landscape Architect, assisted with Russell's advocacy work in the 1980s, which led to the collaborative design process for the Overlook.

The Overlook is the key milestone on an 8-mile soft surface loop trail. With the Gorge itself being the focal point of public experiences, it was essential that the Overlook have a humble, deferential presence; it blends into—and heals—the cliff's edge. Restored Gorge bluff meadows and understory surround the Overlook. The handcrafted basalt walls, quarried near Cape Horn and crafted by stonemasons from Southwest Washington, makes the human design intervention seamless with the Gorge's geology and character. The human scale and elemental simplicity of the selected option, the circular design, is universally accessible and beckons people to linger and contemplate humanity's small, momentary place in the Columbia Gorge's grandeur and epic storyline.