The Center’s building and its immediate environment are the heart of the project. The site design integrates a variety of indoor/outdoor programs in public and private realms. The arrival sequence to the facility has been enhanced with additional driveway plantings to create an allee and uses a prairie mound as a focal point in front of the building’s entrance. The parking and driveway create a new image for the entrance and drop-off area while expanding parking for new uses. A service drive provides access to additional service and staff parking, a bus staging area, a fueling station, service and machine areas of the seed farm, the garage, and the drop-off areas. The plan uses almost all the existing trees and suggests the transplanting of many shrub and sapling tree rows from the site. Next to the building, the south-facing site is reworked into a series of pocket gardens that provide outdoor space to new first floor office, meeting, and conference spaces. Outdoor lawns have been provided for the MCC, office, and staff use.

The courtyard has been redesigned into the new Three Biomes Court. This new court serves as an outdoor gathering, performance, and education space. It has three pocket biome gardens with plant species from the coniferous, deciduous and prairie biomes, terraced plantings at the building’s walls, an outdoor eating space, and a terraced patio around the existing sunroom. The focal point of the courtyard is the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medallie’s amphitheater and stage that serves as a performance space or as a gathering space for orienting groups that are touring the Center’s grounds. An inscription on the terrace seating memorializes the sisters’ reverence and gratitude for their building and landscape. Outdoor tables and chairs in key terrace and pocket garden locations provide places to eat, work, rest, or meet.

Access and Circulation:
Both the terrace patio on the front (south side) of the building and the Three Biomes Courtyard use grade changes to improve the connection between the building’s spaces and the outdoor spaces. The front patios maximize the southern exposure. The back courtyard lowers the grade to provide direct access into the cafe/dining hall and the exhibition space below the former chapel. Both of these spaces have been designed to maximize the connection between the inside and outside, however, both have also been designed so that either could also be built at existing grades. Improved access to the outdoor spaces is important for the new public uses, but the designs could be constructed at existing grades to lower costs. If built at existing grade, access to the interior spaces would need to be provided via stairway access up to the first floor from the front patios and down to the ground floors from the courtyard.

The transition from the Three Biomes Courtyard into the nature preserve begins at the trailhead where an information kiosk begins the interpretive narrative and displays the trail map. A heavy coniferous planting and an aspen forest provide framed views of the Northern Prairie, act as an extension of the pocket gardens, and provide effective microclimatic design by capturing winter solar radiation while providing wind shelters and shaded areas during the summer months. The courtyard design helps with energy conservation and promotes outdoor activity.

Site Design Program Elements

Entrance and Arrival:
Double Lined Allee Driveway, Prairie Mound Focal Point, New Automobile and Pedestrian Circulation, and Expanded Parking with Additional Tree Plantings and Prairie Rain Garden Edges that handle all storm water runoff.

South Side Design:
Three Terrace Patio Spaces, Pocket Gardens, Walkways, Turf Lawns, Existing Trees Preserved, Bus Staging Areas, Service Drive, Fuel Station, Seed Farm Access, Staff and Service Parking, and West side Service Area Access.

West Side Site Design:
Paved Service Area for Trucks, Tractor, and other Maintenance Vehicles, Trail Access with Potential Vehicular access to Canoe Drop-off, Large Expansion Area, LP Gas Storage, Well Access, Garage, Machine Shop, and Drop-off Areas.

East Side Site Design:
Service Access to Elevator, Garage, Long-term Stay Access, Walkway to The Courtyard, Screen Plantings, Access into Seed Farm, and Existing Trees Maintained.

North Side Site Design:
Three Biomes Court; Demonstration Gardens; Outdoor Class Room, Amphitheater, and Stage; Ground Level Access to Dining Hall and Nature Center; Trail head; Rain Gardens; Terraced Patio; Sun Room Entry; and Garage Access,
Visitor's Center Site Plan