

CASE STUDY

Project:

Welcome and
Discovery Center

Location:

Lovers Key State Park,
Florida

Project Size:

4,000 sq. ft. plus
a 2,500 sq. ft.
covered deck

Architect:

John Bryant,
AIA, LEED AP

Sweet Sparkman
Architecture and
Interiors

Contractor:

Owen-Ames-Kimball

LOVERS KEY WELCOME AND DISCOVERY CENTER: BUILDING FOR COASTAL RESILIENCY

Lovers Key State Park is a popular and iconic site in Fort Myers Beach, Florida. Originally scheduled to be dredged for a golf course community, the property was acquired by the state in 1983 and since has been actively supported by the non-profit Friends of Lovers Key, or FOLKS.

Working together to preserve the property, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection - Division of Recreation and Parks and FOLKS also joined forces to fund a welcome center. The new structure would pay homage to, and educate visitors about, the area's diverse coastal ecosystems and opportunities for outdoor activities that extend beyond the beach. In 2021, their dream was realized with the opening of the Lovers Key Welcome and Discovery Center.

For Sweet Sparkman Architecture & Interiors, the challenge was familiar: designing a beautiful, functional, resilient structure that complements the coastal environment while standing up to high winds, rising waters, and other elements and weather events.

Thus, the Center's design, said Sweet Sparkman partner and architect John Bryant, was driven by both appreciation and respect for the site's environment.

For instance, he explained, knowing the building would have to be elevated to accommodate coastal flooding, he and his team wanted to do it in a way that made it special. "We didn't want to put it on stilts and call it a day," he added. The result is a structure, sited within an existing opening in the vegetation, that is built on columns that mirror the rugged mangrove root systems that protect the barrier island. Some columns extend to the roof's full height to give the impression of a building nestled within roots, he added, and those in the courtyard provide nooks for visitors.



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“One of the poetic drivers on the project was looking at the coastal mangrove trees and studying how the building can be informed by them.”

— John Bryant
AIA, LEED AP

A graceful access ramp, which winds around a central courtyard provides 360-degree views of the park as visitors travel its length, and elevating the structure even higher than required added usable space – and shade from the Florida sun.

The building’s main floor includes a 2,000 sq. ft. environmental exhibit center, a 1,000 sq. ft. multi-purpose room, and a large, covered deck providing outdoor classroom space for environmental education programs. The interior “discovery” area, for which FOLKS is raising \$1.5 million in an ongoing campaign, incorporates hands-on exhibits that showcase the park’s bounty of flora and fauna, as well as its history.

Among its sustainable features are well-shaded glass walls made to withstand a Category 4 hurricane and a roof with natural cypress cladding on its underside to enhance the building’s organic feel. The building is solar-ready to accommodate a future installation of a photovoltaic system.

“This was a long-term dream for FOLKS,” Bryant said, “and they were committed to making the Center a destination for locals and out-of-town visitors every day and on special occasions.”

“Their dedication to telling the story of the ecosystems of Lovers Key was inspiring,” he concluded, “and led us to create something we believe will slow visitors’ dash to the beach and help them understand and enjoy this special environment and the wider range of opportunities the park has to offer.”