Calumet is a region south of Chicago that is well-known for its factories and former steel mills, as well as its patchwork of green areas and wetlands that have become home to diverse wildlife, including migratory birds. The Ford Calumet Environmental Center will be an educational facility that highlights both parts of this dual heritage—industrial and ecological—and the unique ways in which they coexist. It will provide an operational base for ecological research and restoration, volunteer stewardship, and green job training.

Like a bird’s nest, which is made from found, locally-abundant materials, the building is constructed with salvage from nearby industrial sites. By deploying a variety of reclaimed materials in imaginatively new ways, the building showcases the critical environmental principle of re-use.

Column clusters made from salvaged steel sections are bundled together like twigs—in lieu of melting and reshaping them in a more energy-intensive process—to provide structure and lateral stability for the building. Slag, a by-product of the steelmaking process, is infused into the terrazzo floors. Reclaimed steel rebar and rods create a mesh that encloses an expansive porch on the building’s south side, protecting migratory birds from colliding with glass they cannot see while creating a protected space for people to enjoy. The building also employs many environmental systems (see diagram at left) that work together like an organism to create a new model for environmentally-sustainable buildings in the region.