ARC 48-706

Urban Design Studio II: Urban Systems

Source: Smoke Control Lantern Slide Collection, ca. 1940s-1950s, University of Pittsburgh

Optimistic assessments about Pittsburgh's livability stand in stark contrast to the region's consistently low position in national air quality rankings and mask complicated socio-political realities. Despite the city's reputation as a "post-industrial" city, sources of air pollution remain distinctively industrial, with the coal, steel, and petrochemical industries as the biggest contributors. This studio considers the built environment and environmental justice through the lens of Pittsburgh's air. Specifically it asks how urban design (and architecture and planning) might engage with and help mitigate the causes and effects of contaminated air, with attention to how the effects of toxic atmospheres on frontline communities have been shaped by the uneven development and systemic racism. Urban air configures a challenge that spans scales, and defies design frameworks. Rather than focus on air quality as a stand-alone issue, students will be asked to think about how urban air is constituted within the matrix of socio-environmental concerns in the region and will use multi-scalar interpretive and propositional exercises to consider the historical, cultural, political, material, and ecological significance of urban air. The studio's collective thinking is also shaped by the policy framework of the Green New Deal, which argues for systemic, rather than individual and piecemeal, transformations, and foregrounds social equity as a key "lever for decarbonizing" (Aronoff et al., 2019). Student projects will explore a range of urban environmental and social interventions—including green infrastructure, renewable energy, food access, housing, mobility justice, and job creation—to think broadly about what a post-industrial regional economy might start to look like.