

# Urban Systems

48-706 - Urban Design Studio II

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A Despoliation of Water: From the Housatonic to Monongahela River (1930-2013) by LaToya Ruby Frazier 2013

Optimistic assessments about Pittsburgh’s livability mask a complicated reality where actual prospects for health and well being are starkly differentiated along lines of race, class, and gender.<sup>1</sup> Environmental harms, underpinned by the ongoing [legacies](#) of industrial [production](#), [extraction](#), and [segregative planning](#), create a toxic combination adversely impacting [human health](#), [ecology](#), and [community futures](#).<sup>2</sup> These challenges are significant and wickedly multi-scalar and defy conventional design frameworks. They necessitate multidisciplinary, collaborative, and emancipatory approaches to knowing and engaging the built environment, and particularly community-centered methods in urban design that attend to the local histories, embodied knowledges, and political ecologies of life in toxic systems.

This studio will expand on MUD students’ understanding of neighborhood-scaled urban design gained in their first semester, and introduce urban systems and systemic processes. The studio will focus on the infrastructures and ecologies of toxic systems, and the modes of local action and stewardship to fight them. It will be anchored through an ongoing collaboration with North Braddock Residents For Our Future, a grassroots organization which has [led the opposition to unconventional gas drilling](#) and other forms of environmental injustice in Braddock and North Braddock and surrounding communities. Paying attention to how the toxic systems and their material effects on frontline communities are inseparable from racialized abandonment, dispossession, and accumulation in the urban realm, the studio asks how urban design might engage with the complex histories, power struggles, ecological effects, material residues, social relationships, and desired futures within landscapes of toxicity. Students will engage in dialogue, oral history, ethnographic research, and field based documentation to rethink design methods as forms of environmental justice storytelling<sup>3</sup> and outline collaborative proposals for the built environment which center the “hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, a recent [study](#) of factors including employment and income, health and maternal care, and education by the City of Pittsburgh Gender Equity Commission showed that it is “arguably the most unlivable” city for Black women.

<sup>2</sup> The county ranks among the worst in national assessments of air quality. The American Lung Association’s ["State of the Air"](#) report has for years consistently given Allegheny County a failing grade for ozone and particulate matter.

<sup>3</sup> Houston, Donna, and Pavithra Vasudevan. “Storytelling Environmental Justice: Cultural Studies Approaches.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice*. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Tuck, Eve. “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities.” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (October 6, 2009): 409–28. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n001667566t3n15>.