

Space, Agency, Narrative: The Neighborhoods of Livernois-McNichols

Physical Planning and Design Workshop - URP 551 / ARCH 506, Winter 2026

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Class times: Fri, 1:00 - 4:00pm
Location: 2210, A&AB
Credits: 3

Course Overview

This studio-based course introduces core disciplinary competencies in physical planning and design and engages in the spatialization of socio-environmental and culturally rooted processes in the built environment. This Winter 2026, we will situate our inquiry in Detroit, a city that embodies narratives of urban decline and revitalization in the U.S. Over the past decade, Detroit's much-touted "comeback" has been centered on the redevelopment of Downtown and Midtown. Yet growing attention from public, private, philanthropic, and civic actors has shifted toward outer neighborhoods such as those along the Livernois–McNichols corridors. In 2020, a major streetscape redesign transformed Livernois Avenue, and this year the Kresge Foundation—instrumental in reopening Marygrove College—announced a \$180 million investment in Northwest Detroit, including plans to relocate its headquarters there. For communities that have endured decades of disinvestment and racist urban policies, the stakes of such interventions could not be higher. How these investments unfold, and the kinds of community partnerships they require, will be central to our analysis.

This course engages students in exploring, documenting, and analyzing complex urban conditions to propose interventions that are both historically informed and attentive to multiple scales. Students will study contemporary conditions alongside the layered history of the Livernois–McNichols corridor through two guiding questions: *What is happening here?* and *For whom is this place designed?* In the second half of the course, students will develop spatial proposals informed by their analyses and community input. asking: *What future planning and design interventions might we imagine?* and *What does it mean to intervene?* Students' workflows will be guided by the creation of thick maps—temporally layered, multimodal representations that integrate qualitative and quantitative data to reveal new sociospatial relationships, histories, and future possibilities. For our purposes, thick mapping functions as both method and process, encouraging reflection on three critical dimensions of physical planning and design: space, agency, and narrative.

Course Outcomes

Using the design studio pedagogy as a platform for learning, experimentation, critique, and exchange of ideas, the course advances skills and design research methods, digital literacy, the exploration of students' interests in the field, and conversations with scholars, practitioners and local groups to situate our agency in the built environment.

At the completion of the course, students are expected to:

- Compile, synthesize, and assess multiple forms of data reflecting the social, political, cultural, environmental, multi-scalar and multi-temporal dimensions of urban space.
- Translate analyses of a complex urban condition into a physical planning and urban design strategy.
- Present and document design work effectively through verbal, written, and visual communication.



Course Requirements

This course is open to MArch, MLA, MUD, and MURP students. Class time will include lecture/seminar sessions, desk crits, lab/studio sessions, and on-site fieldwork. Research will involve desk research, including online, database, and library, but will emphasize knowledge building in the field. For this reason, multiple class meetings will take place in Detroit. The primary deliverable is an collaboratively produced urban design strategy, comprising a physical planning proposal, and guidelines to inform institutional and policy implementation.