

EXIST

This studio is concerned with imagining and articulating how urban design, as a discipline, practice, and material reality, can help uphold the Rights of Nature. Exploring the emerging indigenous legal paradigm, which holds that living entities have the inherent right to “exist, flourish, and evolve,” the studio will design concrete manifestations of reciprocity embodied in more-than-human rights. Our site will be the sixty watersheds of ‘Michigan’, whose ecological communities and dynamics will figure as protagonists. We will seek to reinforce indigenous cultures and grapple with environmental institutions, such as land/property and conservation law. Acknowledging Rights of Nature are, at present, written aspirations, our goal will be to develop the spatial dimensions that could support them. The studio will travel to sites across the region at the front of decolonial climate action.

From their mills, muck farms, canals, factories, and town sites, settler-pioneers oversaw the exposure of ‘Michigan’ to the expedient glow of frontier capitalism. Using the rivers and tributaries, they ushered the region’s forests and wetlands through a process of industrial sublimation. Settler infrastructures and commodities emerged through a drastic recasting of ecological and social relations. In ‘Michigan’ and elsewhere, the imperative of growth and settlement enabled the simplification of complex environments to a matter of “resources.” Yet, two centuries of industrial productivity and urbanization have caused such shifts that the notion of stability—and that of nature and culture—are now challenged.

The fallout of colonial-capitalist territoriality in ‘Michigan’ urges designers to consider new approaches that account for the agency of more-than-human entities. The

concept of the Rights of Nature may offer a useful framework for this purpose. The Rights of Nature recognize the entitlement of landscapes, ecosystems, and more-than-human entities to—according to legal phrasing—“exist, flourish, and evolve.” This reflects Native and vernacular practices, and tribes in the region increasingly recognize these rights through legislation. For example, in April 2024, Sault Ste. Marie Tribe adopted *The Rights of More than Human Relatives*, establishing the rights of its “first family” to “thrive,” and in January 2019 White Earth Nation legislated *The Rights of Manoomin*, establishing the rights of wild rice to “exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve.” Such initiatives demand that designers register earthly agencies, indigenous land practices, and contemporary legal-spatial theory. How might urban design thus contribute to the imagining and implementation of reciprocal environmental values and practices?



— GIS mapping showing ‘Michigan’ in relation to treaty territories, watersheds, dams, land cover, and Anishinaabeg place-names.



— Above three photos of wild rice culture by Barbara J. Barton, *Manoomin: The Story of Wild Rice in Michigan* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018)

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