

# Studio Problématique: Teaching and learning optimism in landscape architecture studios across Canada

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It was hard to remain optimistic when COVID-19 temporarily restricted access to much-needed urban green spaces. It was even harder to hope for reconciliation when national news headlines confirmed that former residential school sites across the country hold hundreds of unmarked graves. It is hard to accept a future where sea-level rise causes coastline erosion beyond repair, rising temperatures cause glacial melt and damage downstream communities, and unpredictable storm surges cause flooding in urban and rural areas. It is hard to face up to a time when aging Canadian infrastructure fails to support communities or when communities across the country lack access to affordable, fresh, nutritious food. These seemingly impossible challenges, and more, can diminish hope for a better future. However, landscape architecture students across Canada addressed them with vigour in 2022 in a joint studio experiment in search of inspiring solutions for a just and flourishing future. The following essays describe how professors approached their teaching with an optimistic lens to bring a fresh attitude to design in landscape architecture.

The idea of a joint studio that responds to a central research question or problématique has been a point of discussion among a few colleagues in landscape architecture since about 2015. We would cross paths at our annual professional congress meetings and, by 2017, seven of us formed the Land|Terre Design Research Network (<https://www.landterre.com/>), a platform for exchanging ideas on teaching and research in Canada. We each taught at one of the seven accredited or candidacy programs in landscape architecture; however, we found that we had little insight into each others' research and teaching or the inner workings of other institutions. After holding an initial colloquium on the state of research in landscape architecture in Canada in 2018, we turned our attention to teaching; we wanted to understand better where teaching and learning around a common theme intersect at different schools and how teaching influences our research or vice versa. In early 2019, the research group organized a joint studio experiment centred around a relatively open theme of abandoned space. However, the complete shutdown brought on by COVID-19 jarred the project. While we "abandoned" the research component, the teaching and learning experience was reported to be very positive by instructors and students alike—they wanted a window into other classrooms.

The call to disseminate studio—and even academic and professional—projects in Canadian landscape architecture is not new.<sup>1</sup> However, to our knowledge, no group in landscape architecture in Canada has held a joint studio since the professional schools began granting degrees in 1964. I invited one representative from each institution to attend a planning meeting and develop the *problématique*. Each person on the Zoom call took a minute or two to name their studio-teaching assignments for the winter of 2022 and one or two key topics they intended to explore or stakeholders they hoped to engage. With a long list of discouraging themes we planned to attack, we quickly agreed that the students would benefit from a message centred around the re-emergence of an optimistic view of the world. Instead of a theme, Enrica Dall’ara, associate professor with the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at the University of Calgary, proposed we use the lens of optimism to guide our studios. We spent the remainder of the meeting outlining the brief, developing potential questions, brainstorming a reading list, and deciding on deliverables. Over the next month or so, Marcella Eaton, a professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Manitoba, Nicole Valois, a professor in the School of Urbanism and Landscape Architecture at the University of Montreal, Karen Landman, a professor at the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph, and myself formalized the brief that would guide the experiment.

Nine professors at seven institutions agreed to participate in the experiment.<sup>2</sup> Given that we wanted to run the studio experiment in the winter of 2022, we had to consider that the students would be at different stages of their learning process. In other words, the guidelines had to be general. The Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board (LAAB) and the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA) encourage each school to build a unique program that aligns with the profession’s general values and, as a result, each school has a sequence for learning basic, intermediate, and advanced skills. Otherwise stated, learning objectives and outcomes are significantly different in our classrooms. Studios often, but not always, begin with the ABCs (learning a site’s abiotic, biotic, and cultural elements) and drawing in plan, section, and elevation to help students build a design vocabulary before advancing with construction detailing, drainage, and planting plans. | **fig. 1** | We often teach intermediate and advanced studios alongside digital support courses like AutoCAD, GIS, and 3D modelling, like Rhino. The studios can also be co-taught with professionals or plant designers to hone specific skills, like flying drones. I counted approximately ten experts and classroom assistants supporting the studios.<sup>3</sup>

Landscape architecture studios also typically move up in scale, from pocket parks or small urban spaces to neighbourhood scales, finally addressing challenges at the scale of a watershed or other regional boundary. Considering that the classrooms ranged from introductory undergrad studio to advanced master’s classes, we acknowledged that our deliverables would be significantly different. We agreed to have students, whether they worked

1. Douglas D. Paterson, “Landscape Architecture Research in Canada: Developing a Certain Future in Uncertain Times,” *Landscape Review* 1, no. 0 (1995): 6–28; Robert D. Brown and Robert C. Corry, “Evidence-Based Landscape Architecture: The Maturing of a Profession,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 100, no. 4 (April 30, 2011): 327–29, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2011.01.017>.

2. Thank you to Daniel Roehr, Enrica Dall’Ara, Tawab Hlimi, Marcella Eaton, Frits van Loon, Nicole Valois, Zannah Matson, Alissa North, and Ed Versteeg for their participation.

3. These studios would not have been possible without the support of Stephanie Braconnier, Karin England, Gordon Skilling, Tanya Goertzen, Marie Claude Masicotte, Todd Douglas, Rui Felix, Jamie Reford, Rick leBrasseur, and employees from the City of Toronto and Toronto Regional Conservation Authority.

individually or in groups, prepare two A0 boards for their final project that we would post on our web page. We also took into account that students would complete their field research, concepts, and final designs at different points in the term and that the probability of a big group presentation at the end of the term would be challenging to coordinate (never mind time zones!). However, the staggered mid-term reviews meant that a professor teaching at one institution could join reviews at another through Zoom or Teams. Almost all lead professors reported engaging with another classroom at one point in the term. In practice, coordinating our studios meant anything from engaging in a series of relatively open questions to sitting in on reviews at another institution or posting student work to the web page.

We also compiled a list of potential readings on optimism, which reduced each instructor's workload (a bit) and provided a common thread. One reading that stands out is environmental historian Graeme Wynn's 2020 paper, "Framing an Ecology of Hope."<sup>4</sup> Wynn found similarities between the early twentieth-century challenges—the Great Depression, the rise of consumer society in post-war America, and the civil unrest of the 1960s—and contemporary challenges—COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, the Truth and Reconciliation Act, and climate change. To put perspective on the present, Wynn reflects on the careers and contributions of two twentieth-century Canadian critical thinkers, ecologist Pierre Dansereau and political theorist C. B. Macpherson, who both emphasize that balance between the natural and social sciences—which are foundational to understanding and designing space in landscape architecture—is much needed. On the ecological science side, Dansereau was interested in the interconnectedness of ecological systems to understand how different plant communities work together. On the social science side, MacPherson critiqued the 'possessive individualism' that capitalist relations impose within human communities. While landscape ecology is traditionally taught through readings, labs, and case studies or site visits, learning about human communities is often, but not always, experienced first-hand through landscape architecture studio projects. Notably, when I went through Wynn's article, underlined all the words that I found to be "optimistic," and compared the list with the text of the course syllabi, "community" is the word that repeats itself the most. | fig. 2 |

Designing with a community means showing its members the possibilities of a future they may not have imagined on their own. It also means learning in situ and adapting quickly as opportunities and constraints arise. For many students participating in the Studio Problématique, the winter 2022 term was their first "in-person" studio and, by extension, the first time many met/engaged with their "communities" directly. With this particular group of students, we must also consider that they were discovering a landscape "community" for the first time, learning to work in groups in the studio setting a studio after two years of online learning, and facing in-person critiques. For some groups the learning curve was steep as students struggled with the awkwardness of group power dynamics and had to learn

4. Graeme Wynn, "Framing an Ecology of Hope," *Environmental History* 25, no. 1 (January 2020): 2–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emzo82>.

quickly to listen and respond to feedback in real time. Therefore, understanding and fostering community also means developing team-building and critical thinking skills.

My review of the site descriptions found that all the nine studios dedicated themselves to exploring public space for the public good without discriminating among user groups. Landscape architecture students are modelling what cultural critic Henry Giroux calls “educated hope,” in his book *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*, by valorizing public space over private, public good over commercial goods, and questioning existing structures.<sup>5</sup> Most syllabi and student projects demonstrate that landscape architects question existing spatial organizations and are open to unlearning longstanding land use patterns and colonial structures—and they are addressing these issues at a range of scales. In total, the ninety-five participating students prepared designs for twenty-one different sites that range in scale from 9,000 square metres to something like fifty-four square kilometres (in the case of Churchill, Manitoba).

This pan-Canadian experiment underscores the critical challenges landscape architects address through design. It demonstrates that instructors are looking for a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to address climate concerns, move the economy toward renewable, zero-carbon production, invest in infrastructure and social programs, reduce or redirect consumption, and to recalibrate social values ascribed to material possessions. For example, students at the University of British Columbia designed a sensory park in response to concerns over mental health during the pandemic. One studio at the University of Calgary aimed to preserve and reinforce the sense of belonging by seizing new opportunities for positive changes while designing for seasonal flooding, the adaptive reuse of transportation corridors, and other underused spaces. A second group of Calgary students needed to incorporate a flood protection plan and address the “selective memory” of Memorial Drive, which primarily pays homage to the fallen soldiers of WWI, by addressing colonialism (and the discovery of hundreds of unmarked Indigenous children’s graves) head-on. At the University of Manitoba, one group addressed water scarcity in the province while another proposed projects that considered the emergent future of a place—Churchill, Manitoba—facing imminent disruptions due to climate change, failing rural infrastructure, and ongoing traces of colonialism. Students at the University of Guelph tackled the adaptive reuse of a former quarry to achieve the following objectives: returning Indigenous land and supporting the Land Back Movement, mitigating the impacts of climate change at a local scale, developing material re-use and non-extractive building practices, and strengthening and diversifying local economies. Students at the University of Toronto worked with members of the Toronto Region Conservation Authority and the City of Toronto staff to recommend natural infrastructure as flood mitigation and programmatic elements for an urban park. At the University of Montreal, students reflected on what historical traces are “important” in understanding a disturbed site and what is neglected in

5. Henry A. Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 62–63.

popular narratives as they prepared proposals for a small urban park in one of the city's most rapidly changing neighbourhoods. Dalhousie University students tackled Nova Scotia's sudden rural population boom (resulting from urbanites in other parts of the country flocking to the province during the pandemic), tidal erosion due to climate change, and broken food-supply chains in their proposals. Thus, this experiment provides a partial view into classrooms across the country and a cross-section of landscape challenges faced across urban and rural communities. | fig. 3 |

I can't reiterate enough that this polemic is a *partial* reflection on teaching and learning in landscape architecture, representing a small amount of the work it takes to complete a studio project. Design is an iterative process that is more than the sum of the final drawings. To design is knowing and practicing the process of design. It is learning theories and testing them, mixing and matching them, defending your position in conversations with profs, other students, and guests, and showcasing your interpretation of the theories on paper or the screen. It is about building case studies. We can feel vulnerable presenting our ideas about subjects we are learning about—and we all should, as instructors, learn alongside the students. We must remember that process can be emotional, and students (and instructors) face setbacks and disappointments. We also have breakthroughs. Furthermore, with our community, we can propose designs that will lead to change.

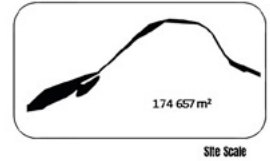
Nearing the end of the term, I invited each course instructor to sit with me and reflect on the experiment. Everyone agreed that landscape architecture is about seeing things anew and that we are inherently designing for a better future. Instructors reported that the experiment allowed them to engage with landscape, and each other, in ways that some had never done before. In many cases, classrooms were still in hybrid mode, and it was feasible to invite students and guest reviewers virtually into their classrooms. In a sense, we built a window into our classrooms through the experiment. We overcame perceived geographical and time barriers through the online teaching tools we gained over the pandemic. | fig. 4 |

My discussion with the studio leaders reminded me that we must return to basics. We must teach students the language of design and the art of critique. Students, like experienced designers (artists or writers), must practice their art with a routine hand-to-paper or hand-to-tablet drawing and writing practice. Students need to move away from their devices and experience sites firsthand. We also need to embrace and integrate new technologies into our classrooms. We need to be less afraid of failing, or at least embrace the idea that we can occasionally flop and recover gracefully.

Overall, I feel that the experiment teaches us that optimism is found in framing perceptions, preparing for the worst yet hoping for the best, experiencing space with all five senses, finding great precedents, dreaming big, believing in partnerships, asking for help, demonstrating humility, and practicing what we preach. The following papers invite a selection of instructors to reflect on their experiences and approaches to integrating optimism into their classrooms. ¶

# Lesson 9. Humility

## Memorial Drive, Calgary, AB



MLA, Landscape Architecture Studio I: Vy Vu's project  
Led by Tawab Hlimi and Tanya Goertzen at the University of Calgary

Figure 1. Tawab Hlimi, *Iterative Process – Final presentations: Vy Vu, LAND 604*, Master of Landscape Architecture Studio I, University of Calgary, Winter/Hiver 2022.

## Word Cloud

### Optimistic re-emergence

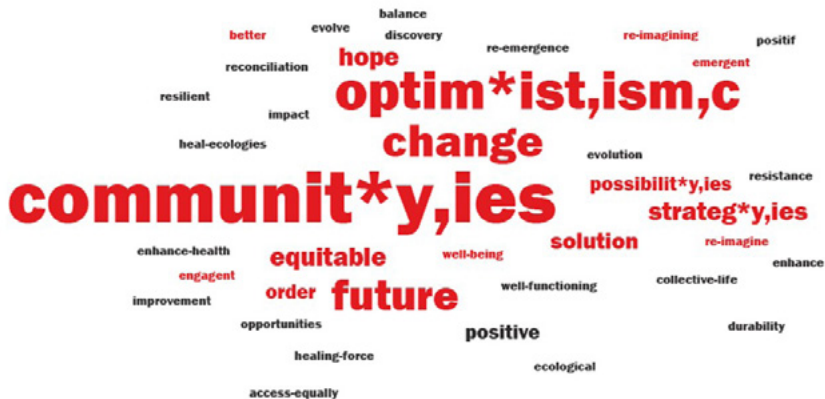


Figure 2. Olivia Duchesne-Raymond and Heather Braiden, Word Cloud, 2022.  
Digital image/image numérique.

# Silhouette of studio sites by scale:

9 studios, 21 sites, 95 students, 17 leaders

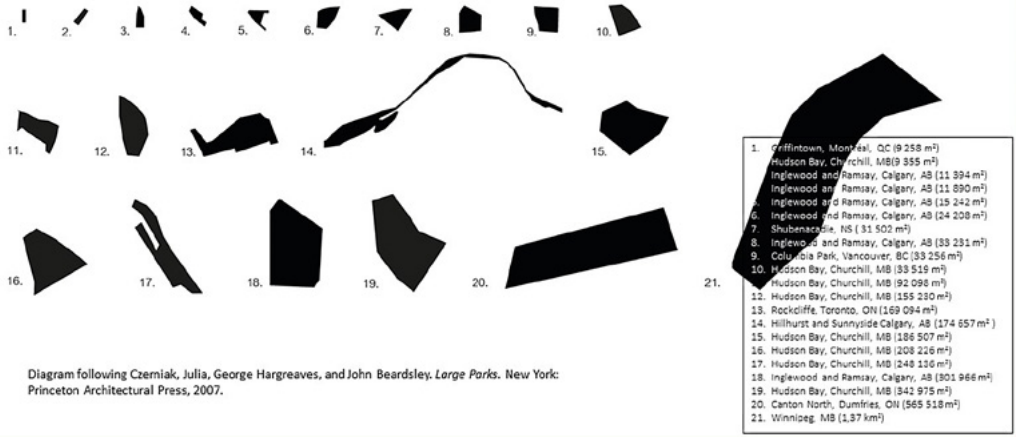


Figure 3. Olivia Duchesne-Raymond et Heather Braiden, *Silhouette of Studio Sites*, 2022. Digital image/image numérique.

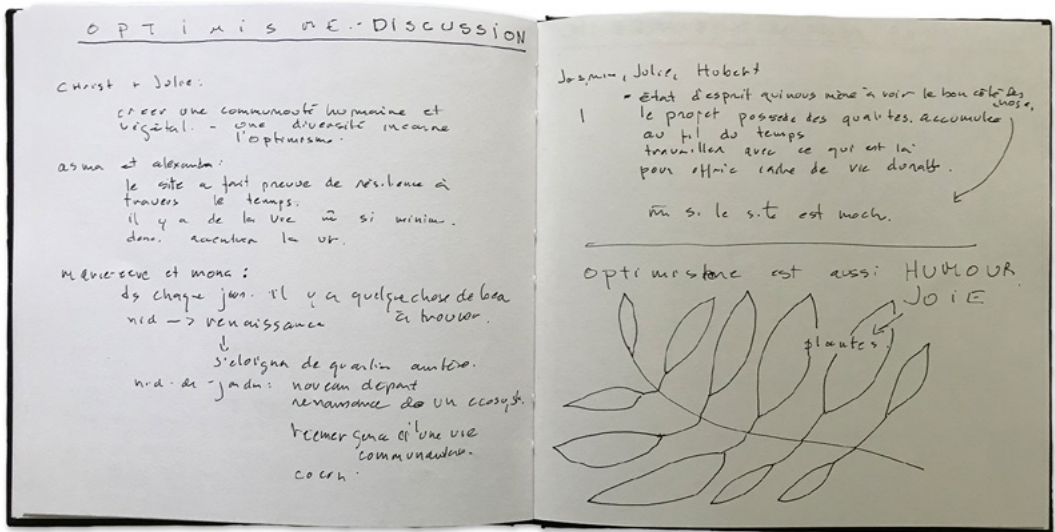


Figure 4. Nicole Valois, *Optimisme, discussion*, 2022. Handwriting and drawing/dessin et écritures à la main.