

On Design for Rural Communities

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Being hopeful and confident about the future in a northern town like Churchill, Manitoba, is hard. It has a long colonial history that is spatially evident in the designed physical environment. Much infrastructure is outdated, reflecting outdated needs. The Town's small population struggles with issues that many small Canadian towns face, including changing industries, resulting in unemployment, inadequate health care, an ageing population, and a desire to exploit tourism. With climate change, Churchill is at risk of further isolation as the rail line, which brings passengers and supplies in and out, travels over permafrost, which is melting. First-time visitors often suffer from southern and urban bias, making it challenging to find optimism in the Town. Most visitors quickly move on to tourist operations beyond town limits.

This studio focused on the Town of Churchill, Manitoba, through a lens of optimism, with an emphasis placed on the challenges of relevant, equitable environmental and social design in the post-industrial world. Landscape designers act within networks of human and non-human assemblages. We work to enable others to experience and enjoy beauty. And in education, we work to help students see beauty. Is optimism seeing beauty? What is the emergent future for this settlement, following the global pandemic, following years of decline, following all the implications of climate change? Can we understand rural, small-town Canada through the thinking of urban infrastructure? Is Churchill rural, small-town Canada, or is Churchill other? What works and what doesn't work? Should landscape designers consider rural?

Today, our society at large often sees ruralism as a stage prior to urbanism, or as an obsolete or derelict piece of the past. However, rural areas play a vital role in our future and our notions of progress. As designers concerned with sustaining and regenerating the diversity of our cultural and ecological landscapes, we must come to terms with our urban bias and begin to ask ourselves: what is rural landscape architecture and what are its methodologies? What does a rural landscape architecture framework look like and how do we begin to mold, grow, and employ one?¹

—Lindsay Burnette

With a focus on rural communities and infrastructure in northern places, this studio asked: how can optimism guide students of Landscape + Urbanism in an environmental design program to offer hope through well-designed exterior space in this isolated community on the coast of Hudson Bay? Can optimism be found in the land itself? In the community? What

1. Lindsay Burnette, "The New Ruralism," *Ian McBlog*, The McHarg Center, <https://mcharg.upenn.edu/blog/new-ruralism>.



Figure 1. Conrad Jabo, *Churchill Descriptive Mapping, 2022*. Digital collage, 75 x 75 cm.

rural infrastructure needs reinforcement, renewal, or replacement? Is the Town of Churchill always on the brink of catastrophe, or is rural infrastructure often on the brink of catastrophe? What might an optimistic design approach to an emergent future be in 2022?

The pedagogical approach to the studio was threefold: set the tone with lectures/readings and reveal inherent biases about a place, think about the worst that can happen by examining the regional context, and design to meet community needs at multiple scales. Some of the readings were foundational, like McHarg and Corajoud.² Others included Thaler, Morton, and Tough.³ Overall, there was a mix of what every landscape architect needs to know and pieces that help students question our society, issues, and values. I have also developed a series of exercises that help students acknowledge their biases, work at scales and in places that make them feel uncomfortable at the outset, and find beauty in what is before them. Landscape architecture is a contextual discipline. If the significance of context in landscape architecture was further understood and shared, designers could slow the sameness of place that is increasingly common on a global scale. An additional challenge to the students was creating a design for a site they could not visit and they did not know—something that landscape architects are often challenged to do. A visit to a site does not alone reveal the richness of life. Certainly, an immediate read is made easier, but the layers and depth of people

2. See Ian L. McHarg, *Design with Nature* (Garden City, NY: The American Museum of Natural History, Doubleday/Natural History Press, 1969); and Michel Corajoud, "L'Horizon 2004," at <http://corajoudmichel.nerim.net/textes-disponibles.html>.

3. See Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Milton Kenyes: Pelican Books, 2018); Richard H. Thaler, "2017: What Scientific Term or Concept Ought To Be More Widely Known? The Premortem," *Edge*, January 1, 2017, <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27174>; and Frank Tough, "As Their Natural Resources Fail": *Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870–1930* (1996; repr., Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

and place takes much time to read. Understanding the place and value of beauty in life is one aspect of understanding the philosophy of landscape architecture.

We perceive. We see. We see with our eyes and we see with our minds. We want to see the truth about life and all of beauty. Both are a great mystery to us.⁴

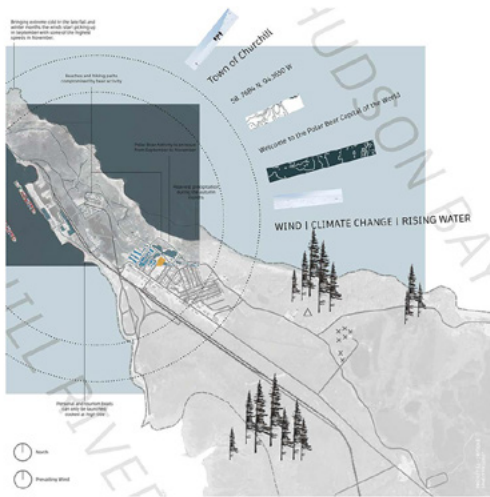
—Agnes Martin

The first assignment, which asked students to construct a collage, was designed to feel awkward for those accustomed to the screen, as it required physical engagement along with the mental act of creativity. The goal was to reveal their knowledge and understanding of Northern Manitoba using manual techniques and to limit the work to black, white, shades of grey, and, if necessary, one additional colour. The collage size was either 75 cm × 75 cm or 75 cm × 100 cm to challenge their skills outside the digital world. They then had to present this work digitally. The exercise—for which many students submitted images of polar bears and vast, “empty” landscapes—revealed a need for more knowledge about how ideas are based on media representation. Students were not aware that Manitoba has a coast. They were unaware that Manitoba Hydro transformed two watersheds for its “green” energy supply at a high cost to the environment and those who live in this region.

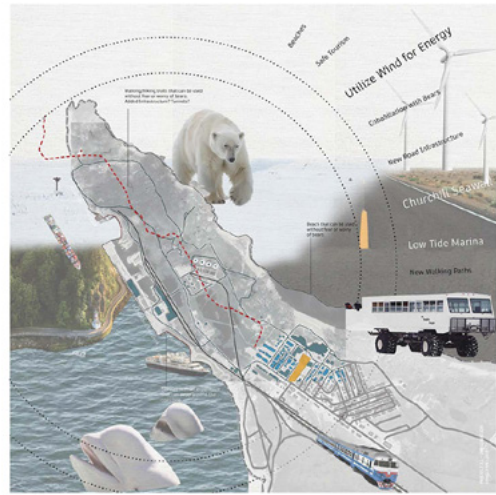
The second block of assignments worked to help students overcome their biases and lack of education around rural and northern communities. An introduction to Geographic Information System (GIS) software allowed them to think at enormous scales, with many questions guiding them. The students continually questioned information while increasing their understanding of places. A GIS Support Instructor and a week of labs helped to ease them into this part of the project. Could students reflect on how we can begin to understand places that are foreign to us without physically visiting them? They realized Churchill was foreign to them, many learning that it provides Canada’s only deep seaport on our northern coast, and that there are no roads to Churchill. The seventy-plus questions accompanying their GIS assignment encouraged them to explore the Town and region beyond geographic content, digitally. Because of COVID-19, it was unlikely that a studio trip to the Town would happen. This situation is similar to the experience that landscape designers in Canada often face due to our vast geography and the cost of travel.

Early in the term, students were introduced to atmospheric conditions, including cloud types, coverage, and air humidity, to think about what it might feel like to be in places we cannot visit yet, where we are designing. How might it feel? How might it look? Was it different from here? How does the extended cold climate on the coast affect the atmosphere and Churchill’s environment? A detailed examination of a site’s physical and ephemeral aspects is crucial for digital design classrooms and works to resist the temptation of Photoshop-style “drop, drag, and plunk” design. During COVID, encouraging students to watch the sky, including cloud type and

4. Agnes Martin, *Writings* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 89.



Descriptor



Imagine

Figure 2. Shaelynn Lukey. *Descriptor + Imagine*, 2022. Digital collages, 75 × 75 cm.

coverage, sunsets, and how to understand the colour shifts, resulted in an engagement that quickly spread to other aspects of understanding places. As a direct contrast to the digital, this engagement asked students to record the beauty around them. All sites offer beauty. It is easy to overlook much ephemeral beauty when stuck inside plans and Photoshop in the design process. Recording these aspects of sites was especially problematic and students were encouraged to experiment.

Landscape architecture is interdisciplinary and designers need to examine history, politics, and economics alongside a study of the physical territory. Students used GIS to delve into aspects of the Town and area that helped increase their knowledge and creatively speculate on the impact of different systems on each other. They also became aware of the political nature of information-gathering and how it relates to the value ascribed to places due to various economic systems placed on the land. GIS information for Northern Manitoba stopped at the Town of Churchill boundaries. This lack of data was unfortunate. It communicated different details on power and interest, business, and government. Once the GIS assignments were complete, with the understanding that the students would undoubtedly shift intentions and revisit data and GIS, they used their maps as an integral layer/part of a new collage exercise. They constructed three new collages digitally that would act first as critique, then as descriptors, and finally as imagination. This deliberate design exploration was trying to close the content-expression divide, reminding students that no matter how dynamic they become, expression never captures the thick richness of place, but works to capture latent identity in process, urging alternative ways of seeing.

One of the most important determinants of place is that it cannot be created; place is derived from what is already there and what was there before. The task of design is to disclose place and make it expressive in order to be perceived. The elusive concept of genius loci is so difficult to grasp because it is a “ghost,” present but invisible, and

might even become harder to perceive, because it easily gets buried under generic metropolitan developments.

—Saskia de Wit⁵

The nature/culture dichotomy often discussed in landscape architectural theory is explicit in Churchill—polar bears roam the streets. As a site for a landscape architecture studio, Churchill was ideal for many reasons, but it is also extraordinarily challenging—for many reasons, but especially due to these polar bears. These magnificent creatures reside in Town as much as in the surrounding environments. They are deadly, though highly desired by tourist operators and their clients. Churchill is one of the top tourist sites in Canada for international travellers. Safety for town residents and tourists is central to all, and all must be reminded that humans cannot outrun polar bears. How does one design with this in mind? How does one design for everyday residents of all ages and all mobility? How does one design while thinking about the polar bears and the impact climate change has on food sources and habitats on land?

Writing is a learned skill often undervalued in landscape architecture education. Design studio exercises require visual and written responses at each stage of the project development. Writing cues in the form of questions are in all briefs. They help students develop research skills by citing sources and compiling a bibliography at the end of each presentation. Students identified a site in the Town of Churchill and wrote a description of the issues/scenarios they discovered in their investigations. They described their chosen site to focus their work. Students were asked to consider what paradise is in the twenty-first century, and what a public paradise might be. Optimism was encouraged. They were asked to think about public gardens as infrastructure and to think of them as “gardens of paradise.” Questions of what constitutes a garden were included. There are many disciplinary discussions about green infrastructure but rarely does this include terms like “infrastructural gardens” or “gardens of paradise.” Yet that is what many public places are, or could be. Does our perception of places change when we talk differently about them? What might a sub-arctic public paradise infrastructural garden be? They were encouraged to question how they understood life before COVID and life since. Manitoba was in a transitional phase known as “Code Red,” which prohibited travel to the North, though the lockdown was over. Students were then to state their intentions as to how they would respond to the scenario, keeping optimism firmly in focus. They completed a detailed site analysis and moved forward with spatial design. Throughout the process, they were encouraged to question data, reports (who produced it and for what), and decision-making that followed. This critical perspective helped them to understand more of the nuances involved in making changes to the environment. Their studio briefs were collections of relevant quotes, questions, and attempts to spark their curiosity while having fun. They were asked not to “plunk” as an approach to design but to act with deliberation, knowing why things might change or not. They were asked to think of what was needed in this community.

5. Saskia de Wit, *Hidden Landscapes: The Metropolitan Garden as a Multi-sensory Expression of Place* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 2018), 389.

Fields of vision

Hudson Square

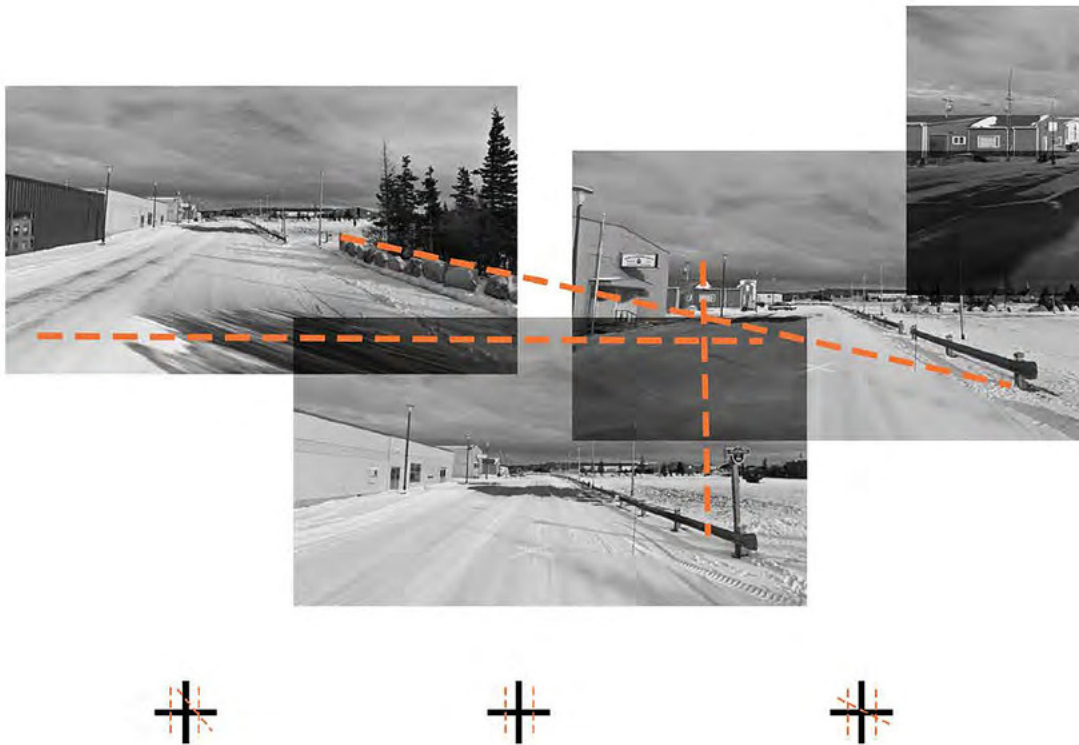
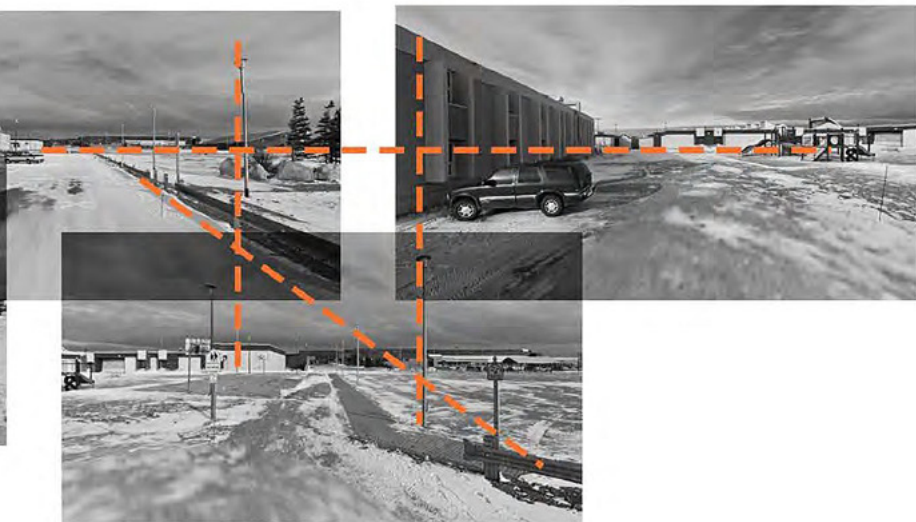


Figure 3. Aynur Omar, *Fields of Vision Churchill, MB*, 2022.
Perspectival montage, digital, 100 × 100 cm.



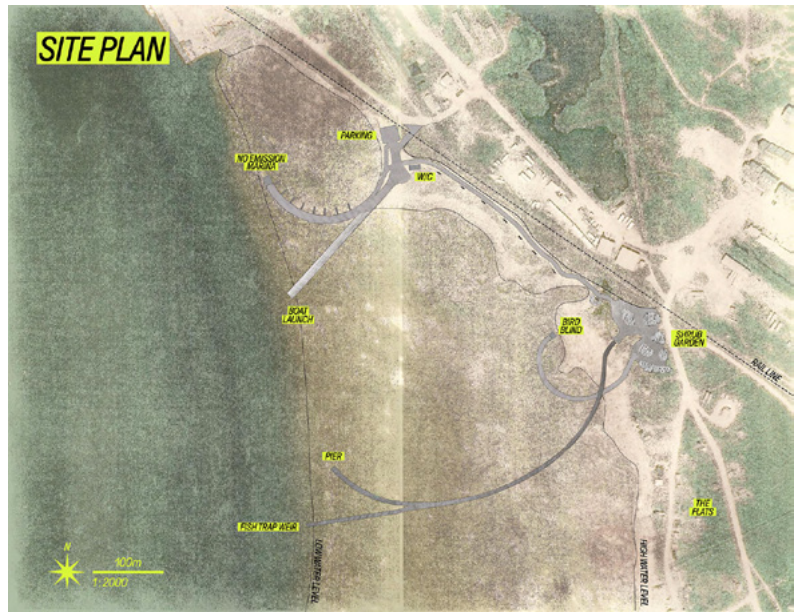


Figure 4. Owen Swendrowski-Yerex, *Transfer Site Plan*, 2022. Analog and digital collage, 46 × 61 cm.

Studios run during COVID prove that it is possible to design without visiting sites. However, the student projects are much richer when they were able to experience the region and release their biases. In March 2022, the Government of Manitoba moved away from “Code Red” and the studio group travelled to Churchill by train. The journey from Winnipeg to Churchill moves west across the prairies just into Saskatchewan, then north-east into the Shield running above the big lakes, and then north up to the sub-Arctic landscape of Churchill on the coast of Hudson Bay. The journey takes approximately forty-eight hours and covers 1,697 kilometres. Though late in the studio schedule, the trip was beneficial, as they already had a more profound knowledge and curiosity about the place. We stayed two nights at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre and enjoyed various talks and tours by scientists, Parks Canada, Polar Bear International, as well as stories shared by locals. This trip was a success in helping students understand how their work could positively impact everyday people, reinforcing their optimism.

Students decided on the focus and sites of their projects in the Town of Churchill. They chose the site and the design program based on their individual research, GIS investigations, and design interests. At every stage, they were confronted with many questions, including, “how will this benefit the community?” Lingering biases dissipated, and students began to understand the specific needs of rural communities, especially in the north. They exhibited optimism about their design work and the role that landscape design can have.

As landscape architecture educators, we prepare students for professional practice. Therefore, I take a critical approach to my studio assignments to align with the values of the International Federation of Landscape



Figure 5. Owen Swendrowski-Yerex, *Marina Winter Perspective*, 2022. Digital collage on acetone transfer, 28 × 43 cm.

Architects (IFLA), Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA), and Manitoba Association of Landscape Architects (MALA).⁶ Meaning in landscape architecture is closely tied to individual self-consciousness, and that meaning derives from an interpretation of how people relate to each other, to the community, to society, to the land, and to the universe. A conscious reflection on these issues is an essential basis for understanding, including within the discipline of landscape architecture. These questions have much to do with aesthetics and ethics and, in this studio, students were encouraged to reflect continually on them throughout the term.

If the practice of education is cultural and political, it then follows that landscape architectural educators must take responsibility for the cultural and political consequences for their actions. To understand education in cultural and political terms enables teachers to investigate pedagogy in relation to larger society and to develop practices that advance democracy and work toward alternative visions about how life might be organized.⁷ A critical pedagogy might begin to capture the spirit of the Constitutional mandate of the International Federation of Landscape Architects (1948): “to establish the profession of landscape architecture in its continuing role as an instrument of aesthetic achievement and social change for public welfare.”⁸ There is a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between the attitudes and values of formal political practice and those formed by other institutions, like the family, educational institutions, professional associations, and mass media. However, an approach that strives to make transparent these hidden views of students, educators,

6. See “Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (website),” <https://www.csla-aapc.ca/csla-aapc/>; “Who We Are,” International Federation of Landscape Architects, <https://www.iflworld.com/who-we-are/>; and “Manitoba Association of Landscape Architects (website),” <https://www.mala.net>.

7. Thomas A. Dutton, “Introduction: Architectural Education, Postmodernism, and Critical Pedagogy,” in *Voices in Architectural Education, Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*, ed. Thomas A. Dutton (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991), xvi.

8. See “Our Constitution,” International Federation of Landscape Architects, <https://www.iflworld.com/who-we-are>.

practitioners, societies, and institutions may help to sustain and enrich a democratic education.

Thomas Dutton believes that “a teacher must be fully cognizant of the political nature of his/her practice and assume responsibility for this rather than denying it.”⁹ Paolo Freire completes this notion by expressing that “not only should we understand education in consciously political terms, but also that education itself—the investigation of knowledge, the curriculum, the social, cultural, racial and gender relations, the teaching practices—tend to reproduce dominant ideologies and so serve the hegemonic status quo.”¹⁰ Education should encourage students to recognize the privilege and responsibility they accept to practice in the discipline of landscape architecture—because education is not a neutral field, a critical pedagogy serves us well. These are political and ethical issues. Indeed, the students began to understand the complexity of issues impacting Northern Manitoba and how their work could begin to offer alternatives for the residents of Churchill. All landscape architecture is but a search for truth, beauty and optimism. ¶

9. Dutton, “Introduction,” xiv.

10. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1979; repr., New York: Continuum, 1994)