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The Museum and the City: Reimagining the Oakland Museum of California and its Neighborhoods | Spring 2016 Studio Course

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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE 203 /
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THE MUSEUM AND THE CITY: REIMAGINING THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA AND ITS NEIGHBORHOODS

**GLOBAL URBAN HUMANITIES
INTERDISCIPLINARY
GRADUATE RESEARCH STUDIO
CASE STUDY**



WHY READ THIS CASE STUDY?

Museums are among the most important urban institutions – repositories of art, culture, and history; educational opportunities; spaces of community dialogue; and hubs of community life. Many graduate students are alert to the role of museums, seek to learn more, and are eager to work with – and learn from – museums, as partners in their explorations.

In this graduate research studio, **Museum and the City**, led by landscape architects Walter Hood and Marcus Owens, students from a variety of disciplines including architecture, landscape architecture, city planning, art practice, and performance studies, worked with the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) on engaging the community in the life of the museum.

Students studied the origins of OMCA, rooted in Oakland's Black Power movement and civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and its physical manifestation on the shores of the city's Lake Merritt. With dedicated studio space, student teams explored OMCA's Brutalist

architecture and modernist landscape, studied historical maps, and used visualization – formal design exercises, photography, community mapping, exhibit design – to understand the museum's relation to the city and adjacent neighborhoods. This studio-based pedagogy, unfamiliar to some of the students, exposed them to a learning model based on teamwork, frequent iteration of ideas and interim work products, and continuous feedback from instructors, fellow students, and OMCA partners. They used new-found design and presentation skills to fabricate interactive installations exhibited on-site at the museum's popular Friday Night at OMCA.

Keywords:

Oakland Museum of California, neighborhood analysis and mapping, landscape analysis, community-engaged design, fabrication techniques, exhibit design

This case study is part of an archive of the UC Berkeley Global Urban Humanities Initiative and its Future Histories Lab, supported by the Mellon Foundation. The entire archive, including course case studies, faculty and student reflections, digital projects, symposia, exhibitions, and publications, is available at https://escholarship.org/uc/ucb_guh_fhl.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION



THE MUSEUM AND THE CITY: REIMAGINING THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA AND ITS NEIGHBORHOODS

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH STUDIO

Landscape Architecture 203, City Planning 243,

Spring 2016, 5 Units

Instructor: Walter Hood (Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning)

Graduate Student Instructor: Marcus Owens (Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning)

This graduate-level studio course provided an opportunity for students from the arts and humanities, the environmental design disciplines, and other divisions and schools across campus to work together to investigate the relationship of a major cultural institution with its urban surroundings, and to propose physical and programmatic changes to those relationships.

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) is a downtown institution with deep local roots, a diverse patronage, and a mission to serve as a place for community dialogue, knowledge and education. It sits on the edge of Lake Merritt, close to Oakland's Civic Center, and is surrounded by ethnically diverse, rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods. Districts near the museum include Chinatown, Lakeside, Downtown, and Uptown. Although the museum was established in response to progressive political movements of the 1960s, its physically fortress-like relationship to its surroundings is at odds with its mission.

Working with OMCA as well as the City of Oakland, Laney College, and SPUR Oakland, students created art and design interventions for the neighborhoods near the museum. The purpose of these interventions was to support cultural expression that does not promote displacement but rather celebrates the history and current creative resources of these areas and empowers local residents by involving them directly in museum programs.

These interventions were designed and prototyped by the research studio in collaboration with local organizations and residents, and included diverse forms: material, narrative, visual, and poetic. At the conclusion of the research studio, OMCA mounted a 'prototyping festival' to allow residents to interact

and react to the intervention ideas developed by the studio.

Students from all departments were welcomed, and assignments were designed to allow participants with different backgrounds to use skills in writing, interviewing, drawing, analyzing, photographing, designing, building, etc. to create collaborative work products.

The course was taught by Walter Hood, Professor of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning, and Graduate Student Instructor Marcus Owens, a Landscape Architecture doctoral candidate, with participation by faculty from the Arts & Humanities Division as well as by creative leaders in the community.



TEACHING TEAM



Walter Hood

Walter Hood, Professor of Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning and Urban Design and Woo Chair for Design Excellence (2012-2022). Hood is an award-winning artist, designer and educator. He is the creative director of Hood Design Studio in Oakland, Ca. Professor Hood's research interests include the critical examination and development of specific urban landscape typologies for the American city. Together they reflect and reinforce specific cultural, environmental, and physical complexities of the city and neighborhood landscape. Through his teaching, writing, and practice, Hood advocates the art of improvisation as a design process for making urban landscapes and architecture. Since 1992, his firm has reflected a fundamental desire to design for communities where landscape architecture is essential, though often neglected. Hood's work focuses on creating environments for people to live, work, and play through engagement with a community and its history. His practice encompasses both the traditional parameters of landscape architecture and embraces urban design, community, architecture, environmental art, and research.



Marcus Owens

Marcus Owens, Graduate Student Instructor. Marcus completed a PhD in Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning from the UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design in 2018 and is currently an assistant professor of Landscape Architecture at Washington State University. His research concerns the social, political and ecological history of urban public parks, the use of drones in landscape architecture research and practice, and human-animal studies. He co-founded the design practice CAMO Studio in 2015, whose projects focus on community-engaged design.

SEMESTER MAP

ARC OF THE SEMESTER

The studio was a project-based setting and aimed to build upon and expand student skills and pedagogical approaches to landscape, art and architecture. The studio was structured as a series of investigatory projects, culminating with a final project where students were expected to merge and expand upon previous design explorations.

WEEK 1-	COURSE INTRODUCTION / STUDIO SET UP
WEEK 2-	MUSEUM TOUR & SITE SELECTION
WEEK 3-	SKETCH PROBLEM #1
WEEK 4-	MUSEUM/CITY: 3D MAPPING
WEEK 5-	MUSEUM/CITY: PIN UPS
WEEK 6-	FABRICATION
WEEK 7-	SKETCH PROBLEM # 2 / LECTURE: URBAN VOIDS & FAKE ESTATES
WEEK 8-	LECTURE & STUDIO TIME
WEEK 9-	OMCA'S EXPANDED FIELD
WEEK 10-	MUSEUM/CITY: LECTURE & DESK CRITS
WEEK 11-	MOCK-UP #1
WEEK 12-	LECTURE/DESK CRIT
WEEK 13-	MOCK-UP #2
WEEK 14-	LECTURE/DESK CRITS
WEEK 15-	FINAL STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT #1

A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites: Robert Smithson

“By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a ‘logical two dimensional picture.’ A ‘logical picture’ differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor - A is Z.

The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork)* is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site, which does not resemble it - this The Non-Site. To understand this language of sites is to appreciate the metaphor between the syntactical construct and the complex of ideas, letting the former function as a three-dimensional picture, which doesn’t look like a picture. ‘Expressive art’ avoids the problem of logic; therefore it is not truly abstract. A logical intuition can develop in an entirely “new sense of metaphor” free of natural or realistic expressive content. Between the actual site in the Pine Barrens and The Non-Site itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that “travel” in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions. Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of the Non-Site. The ‘trip’ becomes invented, devised, and artificial; therefore, one might call it a non-trip to a site from a Non-site. Once one arrives at the ‘airfield.’ one discovers that it is man-made in the shape of a hexagon, and that I mapped this site in terms of esthetic boundaries rather than political or economic boundaries (31 sub-division-see map).

This little theory is tentative and could be abandoned at any time. Theories like things are also abandoned. That theories are eternal is doubtful. Vanished theories compose the strata of many forgotten books.”

*Non-Site #1.

Smithson changed the title for this text, which was initially “Some Notes on Non-Sites.” It has been partially excerpted by Lawrence Alloway in “Introductions 1: Options, Milwaukee Art Center, 1979, p. 6

Source: Unpublished Writings in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam. University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2nd Edition 1996.

The City and the Museum

Non-Sites:

The Lake, the Estuary and Brooklyn

During our first session at the Oakland Museum each student will peruse the collection and select at least three OMCA exhibits/installations (permanent/temporary) that are of personal interest. Utilizing the OMCA visitor map, photo images, sketches, collected objects (store) and writing, document what is of interest to you for presentation back to the group. This will begin the analytical phase of the projects.

You will be utilizing Smithson’s concept of the non-site as a springboard to study the relationships between museum and city. The 3 Petals suggested form the HDS study and would serve as the structure for experiencing the city and museum. Each walk should measure 3.2 miles.

Each group should select a total of 10 sites that are **marked, constructed, axiomatic structures, or purely sculpture**. For each site select a minimum of three analytical research topics to investigate.

(Experience your site through multiple modes if possible incl. bicycle, bus, trains automobile/parking)

History: (Sanborn and historic mapping, at least three phases)

Ecological: Geomorphological, topographical, and nautical

Built: Figure ground

Natural Systems:

Vegetation/Wildlife: ¼ min. Mile radius

Hydrology/drainage/tidal

Climate/microclimate

Social/Cultural:

Demographics

Patterns of use

Behavior traces

Urban context:

Land use and site capacity

Circulation infrastructure: vehicular/pedestrian/transit/ marine

Way finding infrastructure

Local vs. regional attractions

Public Art locations: ½ mile radius

Smithson's argument that a two dimensional logical picture is different from what is really experienced is key to understanding the non-site. The same can be said for a three dimensional logical picture as well...it is this fictitious/abstract relationship between the museum and the city that is of interest...that provides the conceptual ground for you to analyze the city.

Utilizing your initial presentation from the museum collection, develop a set of non-sites that take us on a fictitious journey to your sites. The three-dimensional picture will emerge from the museum collection, your 10 sites, and the analytical investigations.

The analysis will be presented as a non-site. The number of three-dimensional pictures will depend upon on your experience and interpretation of the your ten sites. This will be further discussed in studio over the coming weeks. The final presentation of the non-sites will be presented in the museum context. So it is important to think about the conceptual link between the museum, the collection and your sites.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT #2



Urban Voids

Now that you have developed and articulated this mythical journey to understand/document your sites, we will now consider their political and geographical content and strategies for illuminating their potentiality within the public sphere. The public realm is our “site” and it is important that we document and understand this context. Each group has suggested a set of sites that tell a particular story of a particular place and time. We will now document and catalogue the public sites that will allow the public to experience and engage with the site proposals.

The Petals

The Petals represent a way to marry the arts and environmental design, through a strong social art and design framework. Hood draws Lake Merritt shaped as a heart in the center, and draws petals around the lake to signify the different regions around it. There are four petals that bring together arts and environmental design, there is a business district, Lake Merritt district, the East Oakland Brooklyn Basin, and the Waterfront and Estuary. Through this course, students will decide what principles would define the edge of the petal. We

will think about what is included or excluded from these boundaries. Some possible principles to explore are sea level rise or ecology.

Modeling the Petals

Each group should complete their section of the studio model. Each group is expected to develop their petal through the lens of their investigation. Craft is still a critical concern as the legibility of each petal is paramount to understanding particular relationships. Utilize this moment to suggest a clear morphology (structure/organization) for your petal.

Begin with at least two sets of studies before deciding on a final construction.

Mapping your sites:

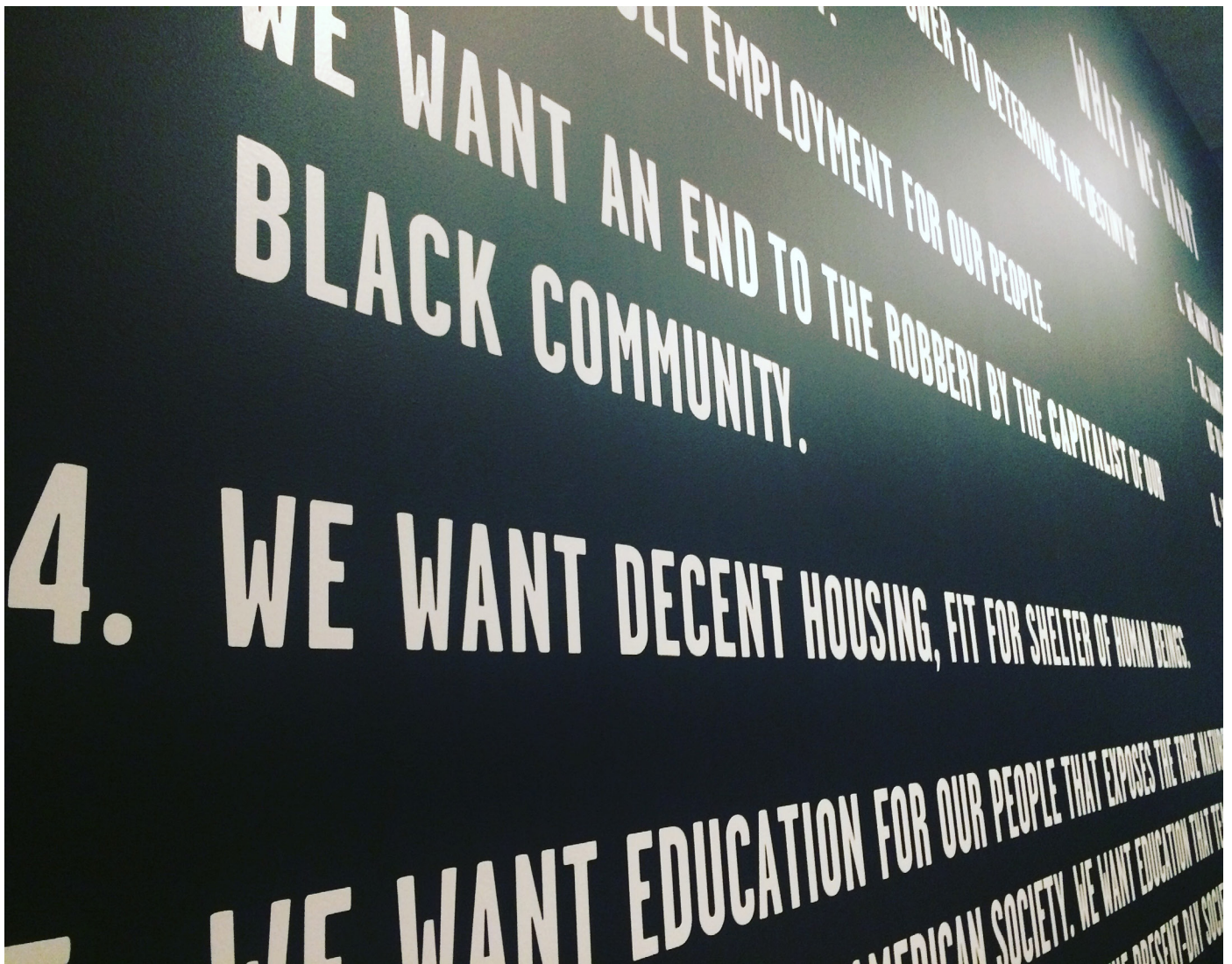
Each group should create a set of site maps for your sites. I would encourage you to choose scales and drawing type carefully to reinforce your interest. Sanborn maps, legal deed maps, public work maps, etc. should be reviewed. The map is a 2D representation of your geography so it should empower you to think differently. Photo document your sites and map them to create the setting for your future proposals. Develop all ten sites utilizing the same graphic format.

As you are researching the sites and mapping you should choose at least three of the sites that you would like to develop site-specific work for. If possible each group should divide them accordingly so all sites are conceptually developed.



Studio space at the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) provided a venue for presentation of in-progress work, as well as an on-site location to process site analyses and conduct collective research. Here, students present images and observations from landscapes surrounding Lake Merritt.

COURSE PROCESS & STUDENT WORK



“Oakland Ark,” exercise one, corresponded to the opening of the Black Panther Party exhibition at Oakland Museum of California.



Class Exercise One, "Oakland Ark."

Students mounted fabric icons and matching buttons depicting Oakland community assets on a chain link fence.

The installation evoked ongoing construction around Lake Meritt and socio-cultural change in Oakland more broadly. Passers-by were solicited to "vote" for preferred assets to preserve in the "Oakland Ark" by selecting a corresponding button featuring an Oakland icon.



In class exercise two, "Fruitvale," students aimed to highlight the Bay Area's agricultural past and present.

Students solicited attendees of OMCA's Friday community event series to participate in the creation of lanterns, evocative of bags of oranges. Presenting tables of oranges to be squeezed into fresh juice, students encouraged attendees to inflate balloons which were inserted into meshwork, along with an LED light, creating lanterns that were hung in nearby oak trees.





Conceptual installation in an AC Transit bus stop by Tonika Sealy-Thompson, part of "Fruitvale" exercise.



Mid-term critique in an outdoor atrium at the Oakland Museum of California.



Student work at mid-term critique exploring the cultural and physical geography of Lake Meritt.



Students moved from site research and analysis to design concept to massing models. Here, under Walter Hood's guidance, the students build a site model of OMCA and its surroundings.



At the studio's final review, a student presents concept for social practice intervention at the Kaiser Convention Center adjacent to the Oakland Museum of California.

