

Reviews | Programs/Pedagogy

studiEAUX Wetland Workshop

Place

The 110-mile-long Chênière Plain lies where southern Louisiana meets the Gulf of Mexico. The plain, named after the French *chêne*, or oak, describes a chief characteristic of this place comprised of wetland and thin barrier islands of sculpted ridges. The oaks form receding bands across the islands that provide the wetland's only protection from the dynamic conditions of the Gulf. Chênière au Tigre, the eastern most barrier island of the plain is unique from the other islands in that it has been inhabited in some form or another since the nineteenth century. On this land, a community grew that, at its height, hosted seventy-five families whose homes and infrastructure not only followed western cultural conventions of construction but also responded to the observed conditions of the environment. Assuming the island-provided conditions required for permanence, the community established a post office, school, and graveyard. Ranching and a resort provided a sustained livelihood.

In 1957, having already endured several previous storms, Hurricane Audrey transformed the island for its full-time residents, and the loss of their homes and community structures necessitated their relocation to higher, protected ground to the north. Today, Chênière au Tigre is a primitive landscape with a few family encampments and abandoned subdivided beach lots stretching into the ocean. Cattle roam the grassy environs of the Oak alleys along with the marsh deer, and the seven-mile-long beach is spread with sun-bleached seashells and our cultural discards that wash up on the shore.

Chênière au Tigre's conditions, past and present, serve as the catalyst and inspiration for the environmental and sociocultural studies of *studiEAUX*, developed in 2008 by Professor Onézieme Mouton of the School of Architecture at University of Louisiana Lafayette (ULL). Mouton has been teaching *studiEAUX* for the past three years; and in the spring of 2010, he was joined by

Professor Michael McClure. *studiEAUX* provides three elective credits for undergraduate or graduate students, and may be taken more than once. The program is a semester-long investigation that engages students in the exploration of the relationships between a specific landscape and people. The course's long-term intention is to enable students through the *studiEAUX* experience to interpret such relationships in expanded environmental and cultural contexts. The interdisciplinary nature of *studiEAUX* is distinct from the majority of architecture courses that more typically follow the discipline-specific structure of Beaux Arts pedagogy.

Preparation

studiEAUX begins on the ULL campus with a discussion of the course intentions. Mouton explains to his students that deep knowledge of a landscape cannot be gained through abstractions or summaries of qualities. We cannot *know* a landscape through reading a map or analyzing data. Instead, he points out, we get to know a landscape or place the same way we come to know a person, through immersive engagement, slowing down and becoming intimate. Such intimacy results in a deep relationship of understanding of place, landscape, and people. Mouton's belief is that from these deep understandings come sensitivities of perception that help students draw connections between thoughts and actions that connect the built with the natural landscape. *studiEAUX* engages the students in these lessons through the pedagogical format of "Immersive Experience."

Immersive experience programs are not new to architectural education. The most familiar application is the "semester abroad" that provides students the opportunity to acquire substantive knowledge of a place and culture through first-hand experiences. These immersive experiences not only educate students about the place they visit, but they also serve as an active and vibrant counter to their existing assumptions and knowledge base.

Such contrasts serve to sensitize a student, inspiring new, richer understandings, and interpretations of their own communities. Ultimately, immersion programs provide a basis from which students gain transforming experiences that encourage a deep engagement with the world.

New incarnations of immersion programs are currently developing in the U.S. that take as their focus the relationships that exist between culture and landscape. *studiEAUX*'s program of immersion learning, like Chris Taylor's Land Arts of the American West program, casts a broad net, gathering within it interconnected disciplines of thought and action. *studiEAUX* is part cultural analysis and interpretation, part naturalist investigation, part self-reflection and expression, and part self-empowerment gained through the act of creation.

Different from Land Arts, which is a roaming studio primarily centered in the American West, *studiEAUX* is a program embedded in a singular landscape from which the wetland culture of southern Louisiana has evolved. Specifically, *studiEAUX*'s exploration of the Chênière Plain aids a student's awareness and understanding of how the natural world and our cultural activities are bound together. The program's origins and structure draw from Mouton's personal reflections upon his rich childhood experiences in this part of Louisiana that intimately wove cultural practices and family rituals together with the natural world. Mouton's continued deep ties with this place provide him the privileged ability to teach, guide and share the landscape with his students from an intimate perspective.

The Chênière Plain serves the students as a hands-on "case study" environment from which to understand the extensive and intertwined relationship between a landscape and culture, especially one that is threatened and vanishing due to the combination of human-made and natural changes to this environment in the last century. The political situation of this place is similar to most



1. "SHELLS," project by Abigale Comeau. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)



2. Reclaiming airplane tires buried in sand for "Tire" project; Ravelle Reed, Jon Mount, and Kim Scexnayder. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)

landscapes in the United States; it is neither pristine nor protected. It is primarily viewed as a resource. It has been highly modified and used with little objection by the people who live in this place and in the nation as a whole.

The greatest transformation to the wetlands occurred primarily because this landscape was so little understood when the construction of levees, canals, and dredging began in the twentieth century. What we know today is that these practices

have devastating effects on the health of the wetland environment. And, as we have seen over the past several years with hurricanes Rita, Katrina, and Ike, the extensive transformation brought to both the landscape and its people through the power of such storms is often exacerbated by our interventions. The detrimental effects of our actions become exceedingly clear through the recent environmental disaster resulting from the explosion and sinking of the Transocean Deepwater Horizon Oil Rig off the shore of Louisiana.¹ The students participating in *studiEAUX* learn specifically about this complexity of southern Louisiana. They also learn that no conditions of place can or should be taken for granted, and all choices of intervention require multiple levels of consideration before being put into action.

To begin the initial lessons about the Chênière landscape and southern Louisiana students meet on campus one evening a week, spending roughly one-third of their course hours in a typical classroom. During these weekly gatherings, they gain foundational knowledge through readings on topics ranging from the social and political to the ecological and economic, with orientation at the state, regional, and national levels. These readings give students a thorough grounding in the sociocultural context of southern Louisiana. In addition, the literary work of Flannery O'Connor and Annie Dillard provides the inspiration for more personal reflection. They are included alongside conceptually instructive material, from a monograph on architect Bryan MacKay-Lyons to a film on artist Andy Goldsworthy. Taken together, the readings and film inform each student's initial inspirations for a learning process Mouton refers to as "search and re-search." As part of this process, the students produce reflective drawings that further communicate their deeper consideration of the issues and the development of their personal sense of the landscape in which they will immerse themselves through two excursions to the Chênière Plain.



3. "Tire," project by Ravelle Reed, Jon Mount, and Kim Scexnayder. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)

4. "Tides," project by Kristopher Simon. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)



Immersion

The first visit to the Chênière is a day-long excursion occurring early in the semester. The journey is carefully choreographed to remove the students from the "everyday" experiences of Lafayette, slowing down their tempo, allowing them the opportunity to fully focus on their experiences in the landscape. Arriving to campus in the still dark early morning hours they gather and then caravan southward, first to Abbeville for a group breakfast, then on south through a landscape that changes from more developed to less. Arriving at the edge of the Gulf of Mexico they change from car to foot travel, losing that most instrumental connection of modern life, cell-phone coverage. An eight-mile hike along the edge of a fresh water bayou through the beach and wetlands brings them to their destination, Chênière au Tigre. Backpacking gear is dropped in a place selected for camping for the



5. Palmettos Empty, Project by Sarah Young. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)

night, and students spend the day exploring the landscape of the place.

Methods for exploration are discussed with the students prior to arriving on the Chênière that support a more intuitive interpretation of the landscape. They are asked to pay attention to what draws them to particular conditions and places on the island and to investigate the phenomenal

occurrences that captivate them. The students then document their observations through imaginative sketching and photography. These activities build up the prospect for their work that will be developed during the subsequent excursion. The night on the island is spent in discussion during a group dinner. The following day they decamp and return to Lafayette and the conditions of their lives that are

distinctly different from the singularly focused experience on the Chênière.

The second excursion occurs near the end of the semester, giving students the opportunity to further explore, reflect, and contemplate landscape and culture. I am present for this trip in the Spring of 2010, along with Professor McClure, and first-time *studiEAUX* visitor, Professor Emeritus Edward Cazayoux. A similar sequence from the first excursion is followed from Lafayette to the Chênière, except for the final means of arrival to the island. For this last stage, a boat from Pecan Island takes the group through the canals to arrive at the wetland side of Chênière au Tigre. The experience provides another way to know the landscape, deepening the students' understanding of the place. Members of the local community reach the barrier islands this way. Along this route, the activity of the oil refineries is present with the rich population of birds, fish, and alligators who thrive in the wetland. The trip brings into focus the presence of our society's commitment to resource-extractive practices within the currently quiet marshland and its waterways. The experience is both tranquil and jarring.

This excursion extends over two nights allowing the students to settle more deeply into the landscape. Without the need to immediately "understand" the place through rationalizing processes, objectifying documentation, or data collection, the students can intimately come to know the barrier island. This experience, free from external distractions, encourages what educational philosopher James Taylor refers to as "unpremeditated intellectual acts of knowing."² There is a long line of thinkers from Plato and Thomas Aquinas to Henri Bergson and Jacques Maritain who find that this mode of first-hand knowledge, often referred to as poetic knowledge, is critical to learning and understanding the ideals of what is True, Good, and Beautiful.³ From this mode of learning, an intimate relationship is forged with the landscape, and the students simultaneously



6. "Palmetto," project by Sarah Young. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)

gain knowledge and insight about the place and themselves. From outside, the activities may look no different from a casual day on the beach or a weekend of leisurely camping. But assuming that the activities of the excursion are superficial and non-intellectual is to mistake the in-depth and long-lasting knowledge that is gained as the students become engrossed in the place.

Drawing from recollected experiences of their first trip, the students explore the landscape, sensitizing themselves to the unique qualities and conditions of the place. Mouton recognizes the student's growing sensitivity to the place in the way the students begin to speak about Chênière au Tigre. Instead of describing the landscape in abstract terms, they speak intimately about places on the island through specific descriptions, such as "where the big oak has been washed over" (Figure 1).

Singularly, or in small groups, they engage in knowing Chênière au Tigre. Knowing the place intimately encourages the students to engage their intuition through poetic knowledge preparing them for the work to come. Through this intellectual operation, Maritain believes that we are led "to the

act of poetry" and, ultimately, the creation of art.⁴ The connection that occurs between immersive experience and poetic inspiration is what Mouton anticipates the students will develop through their work the following day.

On the second day, each student draws from his/her experience of the Chênière, past readings and discussions, and the reflective drawings to create what Mouton calls "temporal installations." No predetermined value is placed on the material palette, and students may use all found materials and the landscape itself, providing that they do not damage the landscape by destroying the fragile plant life (Figures 2 and 3). More emphasis is placed on the opportunity for students to work by hand to gain haptic sensitivity to the materials and place than the craft that could be gained from using more sophisticated methods and tools. This pedagogical interest combined with the constraints of the brief time allowed for production establishes the types of tools used. Students may only bring small hand knives with them for the construction of their installations, although they may also use the shovel, rake, hammer, and hatchet used in setting up camp.

The students consider and collect materials; they test out ideas of expression through assemblages; they modify and try again. Discussions regarding each student's evolving work occur among Mouton, McClure and the student that provide issues for consideration based on the student's stated intentions. As McClure notes, he and Mouton intentionally employ less architectural critique and more open dialogue to allow students to develop their work from a position of full responsibility that enables them to generate the clearest expression of their idea in physical form. Through this process of working back and forth between idea and material expression, students gain the experience of the greatest necessity for creativity: the ability to engage intuitive inspirations alongside the conscious decision-making activity of rationality (Figure 4). Moving back and forth between creative intent and determined material expression is required of all visual art.⁵

The individual installations that result from the students' invested and interactive relationship with the Chênière are as varied as they are. The presence of the work on the landscape ranges from highly recognizable and visible to delicate and barely discernible (Figures 5 and 6). They are sited in the water, in the trees, along the beach, along landscape transitions, and on edges. Some are built simply, others intricately made. The quality of execution is relative to basic skill levels, familiarity with a material, or the available tools. While all of these qualities and conditions physically distinguish or align the work as a whole, or the landscape in which it is situated, it is not these attributes that ultimately make the work successful or valuable. Rather, the value in the work lies in the lessons that students gain from immersing themselves in the landscape, from the path they take from readings to drawings, hikes and slow physical transition from Lafayette to the Chênière Plain, and the accumulation of these experiences that generate the carefully articulated creative expression of an idea that is shared with others. Learning to precisely



7. "SHELLS," detail. Abigale Comeau. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)



8. "Tarp," project by Ravelle Reed. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)

communicate their inspirations through the environmentally responsive artifacts made on Chênière au Tigre marks the gains of creators deeply involved in the material conditions of the place (Figure 7).

Before returning to Lafayette, a sweep from one end of the island to the other occurs in order for the group to discuss and experience each installation in their final yet ephemeral state (Figures 8 and 9). Questions and comments about

the work range from issues of overall intentions and execution, potential for further development, and considerations for documentation and communication of the work when they return to campus. When listening to many of the students explain the intentions of their installations, it appears that the lessons from class-based critical discussions combined with immersive learning aids their understanding of the value of artifacts to an evolving culture. Ideally, the applied lessons carried out on Chênière au Tigre will result in architects who contribute to the fabric of a community rooted in the phenomenal qualities, environmental conditions, and ultimately the ecology of the place.

Documentation

With the completion of the second excursion, the final phase of *studiEAUX* occurs on campus, and provides the opportunity for students to further imagine their installations through communication in drawings and photographs, and in some instances "re-envisioning" ideas in the landscape around Lafayette. During this phase of the course, students are encouraged to combine objective representations of the installations with evolutions of the work through graphic propositions (Figure 10). The interest and outcome of this communication method is different from the typical format where documentation of an idea typically ends the creative process. Instead, Mouton's and McClure's guidance of each student's evolution of their work from built installation to graphic and photographic communications aids the student's understanding that the creative process is continual and that immersion in the Chênière does not end when they leave the island or stop with the end of the course. From this process of first-hand learning of locale, combined with additional related work on campus, students gain an understanding of how in-depth place-based knowledge becomes latent and personal knowledge to continually draw from.



9. "Void," project by Donald Bergeron. (Photo courtesy of Onézieme Mouton.)

There are also two valuable outcomes from flipping the representation process for the installations to the end of the exploration. First, this process encourages the students to remain engaged in poetic thinking to develop their ideas through a singular, fluid mindset from inspiration to physical expression responding to a specific landscape. Second, a post-documentation process of built work encourages continual evolution of an idea underscoring that creative processes continually build upon propositions and artifacts, and in some instances result in an altogether new work. This organic process supports the understanding that when one work is completed to a point that provides for its discussion, or a building is built and occupied, for the creator the ideas remain salient and active to embrace and engage when moving on to the next work.

Mouton's pedagogical structure for the final component of the course draws from his background in fine arts, film, photography, and architecture, and ensures that *studiEAUX* is not carried out, or misinterpreted, as a Rousseauian romantic vision. The last weeks of the course that occur on campus focus on a multi-layered documentation process that incorporates the semester-long, web-based interactive blog, his film work, and the student's graphic and photographic presentation of their installations into communications for web-based and print-based artifacts of the full *studiEAUX* experience. This work not only carries forward the iterative creative process through the end of the course, it provides the students with substantive knowledge of present-day communication methods.

Lessons

studiEAUX provides a timely response to the concerns I have recently heard expressed when speaking with individuals at firms such as Jones and Jones Architects or Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson. These professionals state that current graduates are completing a too narrowly focused educational program that overstresses the techniques of production rather than a fluid and broad program that provides a more interdisciplinary base necessary for the practice of architecture. *studiEAUX*'s integration of political, social, environmental, cultural, and economic issues with immersion learning ensures that the students are prepared to enter into a profession that is in need of young architects who have an awareness of the interrelated and complex conditions of architecture.



10. Composite plan and section sketch, clay, water color, gouache, ink, on paper, by Bob Kirby. (Photo courtesy of Bob Kirby.)

The course's integration of the techniques of communication into the creative process demonstrates that they need not be just another skill added to a resume.

The successful structure of *studiEAUX*, combining interdisciplinary academic course work with immersion learning presents a format that could be incorporated into the curriculum of many schools of architecture. However, there are two caveats to consider. The success of the subject matter taught in these courses grows out of the personal interest, interpretation, and mindset of the instructors, making them both unique and difficult to duplicate. In order for such unique programs to be sustained by the instructors who teach them, these heavily coordinated and content-rich courses require additional funding support and integration into the instructor's teaching load. For *studiEAUX*,

both Mouton and McClure teach the course as an overload to their contracted teaching commitments.

Ultimately, *studiEAUX* engages students in the experience of southern Louisiana, where most will likely develop their professional careers. The lessons they learn are not only of their own creative potential, but also about the need to attend to the power and fragility of this wetland landscape. Beyond the specificity of knowledge and understanding of this place, *studiEAUX* teaches students to think deeply, considering multiple issues in a broad context, to be inquisitive, to not ignore the environment in which they find themselves, to understand that what may appear to be one way may actually have quite a different reality, and that things can be changed and modified through natural processes while being adversely or beneficially affected by our actions.

What we cannot know, since *studiEAUX* has only operated for the past three years, is if the experiences the students have on the Chênrière Plain will combine with their more formal coursework to produce architects who are more sensitive, reflective, considerate, passionate, aware, and observant to the world in which they live and practice. However, what I heard while visiting with the students were responses from people who were capable of discussing a place, a community, its politics, environmental history, and choices, along with its evolution and current cultural conditions. Some commented on the fact that they had grown up in this landscape but never knew it as they came to know it during their participation in *studiEAUX*. I witnessed students who were engrossed and engaged in the place of the Chênrière, learning its textures, light, wind, water, and scents, responding to their experiences by creating well-considered work. These observations strongly suggest that Mouton not only succeeds in his intention that the students who participate in *studiEAUX* acquire the ability to gain deep knowledge of the landscape of the Chênrière that is translatable to other places, but also that he and McClure are inspiring them to remain engaged in the world throughout their lives, and consequently throughout their architectural practice.

Notes

1. For further explanation of the environmental, ecological, and cultural conditions of southern Louisiana and the Chênrière, see Onézieme Mouton, "studiEAUX: A Wetland Workshop," *Proceedings of the 98th Annual Meeting of the ACSA*, 2010.
2. James S. Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 65.
3. Ibid., p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 65.
5. See Maritain's writings for an elaboration on the role creative intuition and sympathetic and poetic knowledge play in the creation of art. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).