

Witness Tree Project, Australia

Memory, Place and Cultural Ecology

STUDIO SYLLABUS

Instructors

Daniel Cavicchi, Department of History, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences. RISD

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Peter Walker, Program Director: Master of Design School of Art, Architecture & Design, UniSA.

Course Dates

January 9 – January 31

General Project Description

The Witness Tree Project is an ongoing curricular initiative at Rhode Island School of Design, in which students, in a joint history seminar and furniture studio, work with trees that have “witnessed” key events, trends, and people in history. In addition to classroom study and studio work, the Project variously involves field trips, guest lectures, exhibitions of students’ objects, and other events that highlight the significance of material culture and design in learning about history, place, and public memory. After ten years of focusing on witness trees in the United States, in conjunction with the National Park Service, the Witness Tree Project will now explore possibilities of applying the framework internationally, starting with Australia.

Course Description

When European colonizers arrived in the area that is now Adelaide, Australia, home to the Kurna people, they brought with them ideas about the environment that literally altered the landscape and deeply affected indigenous life and culture. In this joint studio and seminar, students will engage in scholarly investigation, field work, and making artifacts to create insight about changing indigenous and settler conceptions of the environment, historical dialogues about land, and competing ideologies of place, borders, roots, and movement. In particular, the course will focus on selected trees of South Australia, which stand as historical witnesses to these changes, from the ancient red gum used by indigenous Australians for canoes, bowls, medicine, and marking to the English oak and other non-native species introduced by settlers to shape the controlled aesthetic of Adelaide’s many parks and gardens.

Adelaide Botanic Gardens, which is in walking distance to student accommodations, will serve as an epicenter for the course. The Gardens have a number of special collections, to which the public do not usually have access, that can enhance the students’ study, including the Living Collection, the State Herbarium, and the Seed Centre. The Botanic Gardens will also be the site for the course’s final exhibition of student work. Finally, the joint RISD studio and seminar will include collaborative opportunities presented by a simultaneous studio course offered by Professor Peter Walker, of University of South Australia. Shared fieldwork trips and critiques will provide various ways for students from RISD and UniSA to learn together.

Credits

Students will receive 6 credits, 3 in History, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences and 3 in Furniture Design

Course Learning Outcomes

- In the Witness Tree Project, students will:
- Understand changing and conflicting nature-culture relationships and their effects in Southern Australia.
- Learn about cultures and histories of indigenous Australians, settlers, and other migrants in Oceania, past and present.
- Develop familiarity with the practices of observational, experiential, and scholarly research.
- Explore how historical research might animate and shape art and design.
- Learn new studio practices, utilizing found materials from the landscape of South Australia,
- In particular working with materials from the many holdings of the Adelaide Botanical Gardens.
- Gain confidence in navigating a new environment, including the flexibility and openness to unexpected types of learning.
- Practice the interpersonal skills necessary for gracious group travel and cross-cultural engagement.

Course Requirements and Grading

As in all studio courses you are expected to attend all classes. If you miss a studio class you are expected to make up the work and have it ready for the following day. Missing 3 classes (unexcused) means an automatic F. Studio hours are limited and there will be demand for the machines and tools, which means effective use of your time in the studio will serve you well. You are not to use any Studio machinery until you have permission of the instructor(s) for its usage. You are bound by the Studio Rules and Guidelines and must follow them. Not doing so may result in your time in the studio being restricted.

Students are required to keep a sketch book/design journal and bring it to class daily. This book should contain all handouts, careful notes from demos and be a register of your thoughts and ideas from both the seminar and studio components of this collaborative class. This sketch book will be referred to frequently when discussing your ideas so always bring it to class.

Your grade will depend on your attendance, class participation, demonstration of technical knowledge and completion of the 3 studio assignments. Grading is done on the A-F scale with everyone starting the semester with a C. Please understand that a "C" grade is given for average work, (you did what was asked of you and on time), "B" is for above average work and an "A": is for demonstrated excellence in

all areas of which you are graded in the studio. Since this is a collaborative class, all of your instructors will be determining the studio grade.

STUDIO ASSIGNMENTS

1st Assignment: “Mapping an Altered Landscape”

Aboriginal People’s presence in South Australia has been dated back some 30,000 plus years. White Europeans arrived on the continent 231 years ago. In those short 231 years, the landscape of South Australia (the Adelaide area in particular) has been profoundly altered. Through a narrative of your choosing, identify an aspect of this change and explore the impact on the local environment. Your narrative can be expressed in many ways. It can be by means of photography, video, writing, drawing or a created object; it is up to you.

Critique: 1/21.

2nd Assignment: “Perspective”

Historically, the Concepts of Land, Boundaries, Community and even Time vary greatly between the different cultures in Australia. Create an artefact that explores one of these concepts within a given group. Your work in Seminar will be formative in understanding these concepts and the cultural differences within a historic context. Consider these ideas in conjunction with your understanding of the Witness Trees encountered during the course, as the foundation for the creation of your artefact.

Critique: 1/29