Inhabiting the Chicago River’s edge at Bubbly Creek

The selected site is the Chicago River’s “BUBBLY CREEK”, a 1.25 mile stretch of the South Branch located between the Bridgeport and Pilsen neighborhoods. Historically a dumping site for the Chicago Stockyards, the area has been plagued by heavy pollution for decades, its infamous name derived from the bubbles that rise to the surface from decomposing organic waste on the riverbed. Bubbly Creek has been identified in “The Chicago River Agenda” as part of a plan to reinvent the riverfront as Chicago’s “second Shoreline” and in Jeanne Gang’s new book “Reverse Effect” as part of an innovative design plan to restore watersheds as green infrastructures and to reclaim postindustrial underutilized land along the Chicago river for development. In spite of environmental issues, the area surrounding the creek is undergoing a positive transformation, bringing with it a neighborhood of single family homes and turning old warehouses into art galleries, recreation facilities and urban farms, showing a community interest to reengage this previously neglected industrial backwater.

The overall area with its series of channels provides an interesting intersection of the natural and the manmade, of the city and landscape. Thus, the studio is a unique opportunity for students to broaden their understanding of architecture beyond a building to also inform their projects through a landscape and urban design approach. The studio encourages should respond a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary design response to address current environmental challenges. Students will be challenged to re-envision the riverfront as a hybrid fabric, turning the back of the city towards the river and understanding Bubbly Creek as an environmental and economic catalyst, a recreational and natural asset rather than as a service way.

From the larger Bubbly Creek area, we will “zoom-in” to target a specific site. The focus will be on a combination of social/affordable HOUSING, community FACILITIES, and public GREEN SPACE into one cohesive design. The students will have to reflect and consider the landscape identity of the place and the urban consequences of their specific intervention, focusing the design on the relationship between the project and the place, designing the transitions between the home and the public space, between the community and the river. To help articulate this relation, the residential aggregation system will include private and shared open spaces and communal facilities. The proposals will explore dwelling typologies, recognizing different demographic needs to enable diversity, change and flexibility, and to explore creative ways of living at the urban edge and experiencing the landscape. Mixing housing with other activities, students should aim to create a mixed-use environment that generates urban life and provides a connection to the natural, promoting an active healthy lifestyle.

How can we design a better transition between the existing residential fabric and the water? What is the critical density to encourage activity? What type of contemporary, high-quality social housing answers to the identity and needs of the people and the place?

The STUDIO will focus for the first 3 weeks on the urban and landscape conditions of the site and the students—in teams of two—will analyze the site through a personal cartography, to continue designing, until mid-term on the general layout of the intervention. For the rest of the semester, the students will develop the design of a mixed use fabric with housing, public facilities and open space that responds well to the context, reconnects to the river and help activate the community.