

RIVER CITIES

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The architectural photographer and preservationist Richard Nickel famously said, “Great buildings only have two enemies: water and stupid men.” While human conflict, greed, and changing priorities can continue to threaten the built environment long after its genesis, water is one of the great forces that architects must wrestle with at the outset. Architecture can, in some ways, be understood as an attempt to control water: directing where it goes, how it is shed, where it is allowed to pool, and how, ultimately, it becomes someone else’s problem. This problem of the aqueous in architecture finds its corollary in the Anthropocenic natural environment, which is characterized in part by a man-made condition in which water is either in desperately short supply or in monstrous overabundance, conditions that humans must constantly work to ameliorate but never fully correct.

The body of water that humans have struggled most to control in the modern western world is the Mississippi River. As Boyce Upholt has argued in *The Great River* (2024), the modern history of the Mississippi River (since European colonization and the founding of the United States) can be characterized by massive human effort to tame, contain, and control a natural force of ineffable scale and proportions. Over the past two centuries, the federal government and state agencies have poured billions of dollars, countless man-hours, and thousands of lives into a levee system designed to control the path of the Lower Mississippi River and its cyclical flooding, in an effort to reclaim and secure millions of acres of its alluvial plains for cultivation and human inhabitation.

This studio investigates the intricate relationship between nature, technology, and culture through the study of the Lower Mississippi River Basin. Our inquiry will involve reconsidering the historical role of water as both infrastructure and a designed landscape. The heavy engineering of the Mississippi River means that it bears little relation to its original course. And urban development along the river has long marked its departure from purely rural associations. Projects will examine interactions between current conditions, future forces and thoughtful programmatic possibilities. This fertile, shifting terrain has been the site of encounter between humans and nonhumans for millennia. But what is its future?