

## **Common Waters: *Architects acting on collective concerns***

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On a warm June evening in 2019, a group gathered in a gallery in Cambridge, a small riverside city in Ontario, Canada. Local Mohawk teacher Christine Lefebvre led a discussion on the centrality of water in our lives, bringing together a circle of children, architecture students, community members, and local politicians. The pieces hanging in the space addressed the conversation in different ways; highlighting the non-human communities sharing our waters, pollution produced by humans, and the labour involved in environmentally damaging industries.

Eventually, the group left the gallery, crossed a bridge over the Grand River, and walked down the street to a storefront on Main Street. Inside, a student group had reorganized the roughly finished interior into an evolving response to the gallery: undergraduate studio projects on the local river sat beside in-progress master's theses on spatio-political elements of water from the South China Sea to Somalia. A 20-foot long scale model of the local watershed occupied the center of the space, helping to locate the audience in a broader context. The storefront was soon filled with the sounds of a student band and lively conversation spilled onto the street. This was the opening of *Common Waters*, a collective exhibition on community and the environment organized by BRIDGE Centre for Architecture and Design, a student collective at the University of Waterloo School of Architecture, in collaboration with Cambridge Art Galleries, a municipal institution.<sup>1</sup>

*Common Waters* was a single unique experiment that empowered environmental conversations, brought different communities together, and demonstrated the possibilities of architects acting as facilitators. Using water as a medium and a guiding theme, *Common Waters* was designed as a platform to learn, collaborate, and discuss with the public the ways in which we affect each other and the environment that supports us. The project ran from June - September of 2019, and took the form of exhibitions, walks, workshops, performances, gatherings and symposia. A number of channels were constantly being updated and informed by visitors of the project, such as the website, which the *Common Waters* team routinely updated with written reflections, as well as the *Archive Wall*, a modular exhibition wall that developed through the summer with photos and artifacts from events.

While *Common Waters* addressed a wide range of global issues, it was crucial to the organizing team that there was a local focus, where ecosystems, relationships, and the colonial history and present of Cambridge were emphasized. It was especially important to bring this knowledge to the community at the School of Architecture for two reasons: The first is that we have only begun to understand the inherent colonial nature of architectural practice in Canada, something we need to commit to educating

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Kogan et al., "Common Waters: Designing Frameworks for Collective Exhibitions on the Environment," *Exhibition* 39, no. 1 (May, 2020), 71-83.

ourselves about. The second reason was the existing sentiment within the school that as a satellite campus, the school is an “island” that is socially disconnected from the community. The nature of the university’s co-op program means that every four months the undergraduate body shifts, as classes leave for work terms and are replaced by others. Through the focus of the design curriculum, the school often feels socially grounded in Toronto, which is an hour and a half away by car. The disconnect is also ingrained in other ways. The architecture campus, along with the rest of the University of Waterloo, is a guest on a complex landscape. Our design studies take place on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. This is a place where the traditional relationships of these peoples to the land continues to be disturbed, and sometimes severed, through colonial policies and broken treaties. This school falls within the Haldimand tract, six miles on either side of the Grand River promised to the Six Nations in 1784.

*Common Waters* provided opportunities to reflect on these relationships and the work of Indigenous leaders and communities in restoring their ties to this land. Many of these moments were made possible through the existing relationships that Cambridge Art Galleries had fostered for years in Cambridge. The opening and closing events of *Common Waters* were led by Indigenous leaders from the community, as well as walks and workshops that took place. One of our closing events, called the “Harvest Ceremony,” took place at *rare* Charitable Reserve, a nature conservation area in Cambridge, and we were joined by participants from multiple communities in Cambridge. The event celebrated the growth of the plants of *Minjimendan*<sup>2</sup>, an Indigenous food garden at *rare* cultivated by Dr. Andrew Judge, an Anishinaabe professor of Indigenous Studies and community leader.

As facilitators of *Common Waters*, we understand that there is much more work that needs to be done towards environmental justice. However, our experience reveals the importance of this knowledge being at the forefront of architectural education, as well as the ways in which architects can learn from communities outside of an institutional context.

Architects need to be facilitators of community conversations because our work is innately interdisciplinary and public. Architecture bridges the immaterial of environments and communities and the material spaces we occupy together. It is also a direct manifestation of our societal values. Architecture is part of a complex web of actors, human and non-human, involving materials, policies, ecosystems and communities. Creating opportunities to discuss common issues within our networks, such as our water, can be a way forward to repairing damaged relationships and building a more equitable and just community.

*Referenced in the text:*

Kogan, Tony, Nicholas Frayne, Julia Nakanishi, and Omar Ferwati. “Common Waters: Designing Frameworks for Collective Exhibitions on the Environment.” *Exhibition* 39, no. 1 (May, 2020): 71-83.

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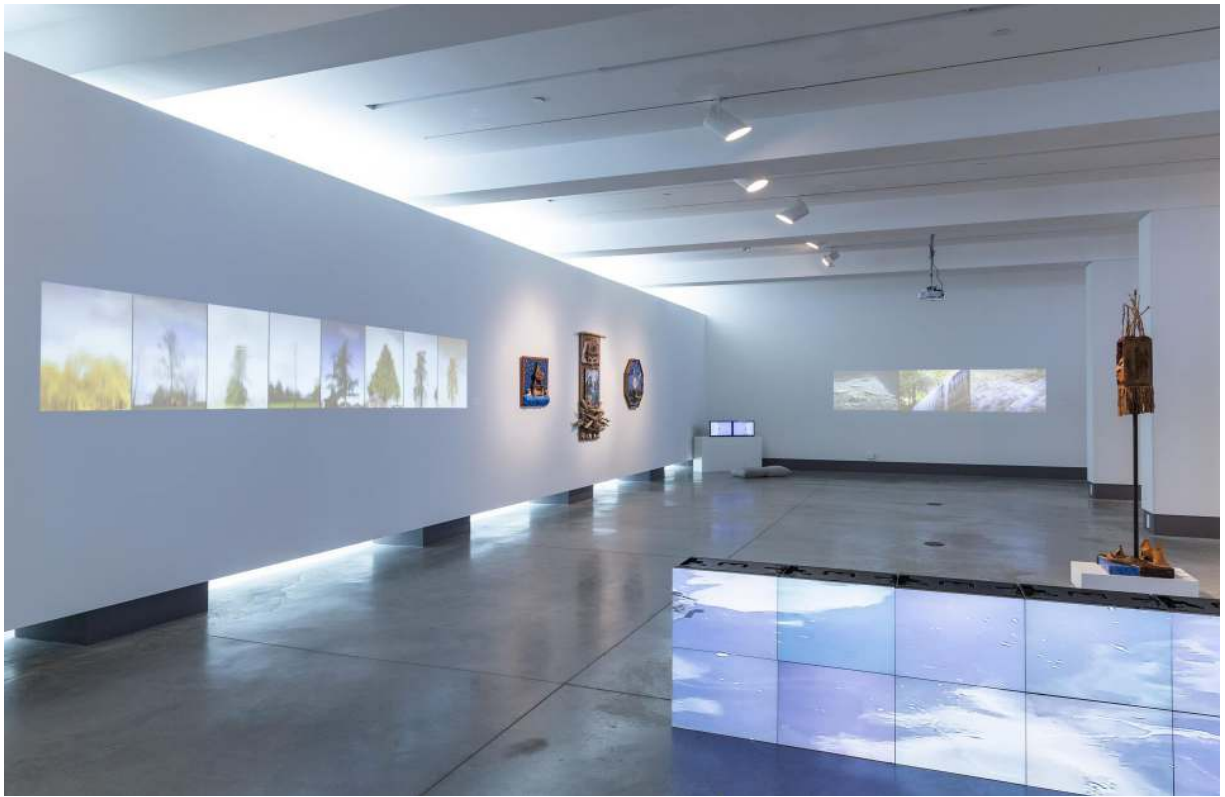
<sup>2</sup> Learn more about Minjimendan: <http://minjimendan.com/>



*Harvest Ceremony, 2019*  
*Photo by Karly Boileau*



*The BRIDGE Storefront, Common Waters Opening Night  
Photo by Karly Boileau*



*Design at Riverside Gallery  
Photo by Scott Lee*



*The Archive Wall*  
*Photo by Nicholas Frayne*



*The BRIDGE Storefront, Common Waters Opening Night  
Photo by Karly Boileau*



*Public Research Desk at Design at Riverside Gallery  
Photo by Nicholas Frayne*