

Unit 18

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Heterodox Natures:

Centre for knowledge through research versus Research centre for knowledge

Unit 18 investigates environmental questions from a political, cultural, material understanding in order to generate poetic tectonics. The Unit thesis encourages students to engage with new understandings of nature and urban tissue through digital and physical experimentation. This year Unit 18, or Generational Phantoms, will dive deeper into the threshold between culture and science by designing a Research Centre for *Heterodox Natures*. We will investigate heterogeneous spatial conditions, so to study both the disappearing and the emerging human and natural circumstances occurring in Varanasi - India. How can architecture embed cultural meaning and fulfil needs simultaneously in such context? How do we cultivate and generate space for knowledge in the larger sense of the word? Do scientific labs (research through systematics and deduction) and ritual spaces (knowledge through culture and experiential sharing) have anything in common?

In order to wander into these emerging new conditions we will travel to one of the oldest continuously inhabited and most sacred cities in the World, *Varanasi*. Located in the state of Uttar Pradesh in the northern part of India, the city is one of the largest spiritual hearts of the world. Its origins possibly date from as early as 2000 BCE. Its streets are filled by thousands of Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims such as the Aghori Sadhu monks. Known for their “unorthodox” rituals with the deceased, considered to be an occult and profane tradition in an environment where half of its inhabitants are Muslim. Its historical and modern universities attract thousands of avid students to gain knowledge through research which is in sharp contrast to the also present experiential sharing of knowledge.

Most importantly of all Varanasi is located alongside the river Ganges. Its sacred waters mark the edge of the city in multiple ways. It aggregates a vast amount of cultural and spiritual spaces as Ghats, open air cremation sites, sunken temples – it has staggering environmental figures, such as it being the fifth most polluted river in the world – it operates as a physical border in between urban and agricultural tissue as well as a more symbolic border between this physical world and the hereafter. Varanasi is a city thriving on ancient and contemporary industries and political systems, spiritual and scientific ways of understanding what we are and how we should operate, unsustainable forms of western and local tourism and religious overlaps.

We will research, design and make built environments. Choreographing architectures as buildings, landscapes and narratives. Students will engage in designing a research centre by asking themselves the question: what is knowledge, what type of nature should be researched and why! In this process students at Unit 18 will learn how to think, discuss, design, draw and make in an organic way of learning. As one object, one observation always informs the other. A series of digital modelling workshops will be offered to enable all students to

develop new skills from scratch so to be able to freely express themselves resulting in new formal discoveries, material articulations and representation.

Fourth years will focus on designing the Research Centre experimenting with geometry through structure and material knowledge via installations and physical models. From the beginning on, the research will target a scheme that responds to the DR module in a consistent and creative way.

Fifth Years will focus on design by making. Utilizing geometry and drawing as a way to organize ideas and create evocative atmospheres. Students are encouraged to be driven and engage with ideas and themes that they wish to explore further after graduation.