

Raritan River Studio – Fall 2012

A Regenerative Approach to the River Road
Corridor in Raritan Township, New Jersey



Course: 34:970:510:07
Schedule: Thursdays 1:10 to 3:50 PM
Room: EJB 243
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Introduction

This studio will focus on a regenerative vision planning approach for an underutilized and difficult to access portion of waterfront along the South Branch of the Raritan River in Raritan Township (Hunterdon County). Relevant implementation mechanisms will also be explored. Relevant implementation mechanisms will also be explored.

River Road in Raritan Township connects US Route 202, its southern terminus, with Old Clinton Road, its northern terminus. It runs for almost 3.5 miles roughly parallel to the South Branch of the Raritan River, located to the east.

The South Branch of the Raritan River constitutes the boundary with adjacent Readington Township. The river is about 70 feet wide in this area and usually has enough water to permit kayaking, although existing dams may pose challenges to less experienced kayakers. According to the January 2012 New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's 2010 NJ Integrated Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Report, the water quality shows "medium to high impairment due to an excess of total suspended solids, phosphorus, arsenic or pH.



The land between River Road and the river is variable in width, and quite narrow at times.

The right-of-way for the former Lehigh Valley railroad also runs roughly parallel to the river in this area. To the south, the railroad is in Readington Township, and runs parallel to Pennsylvania Avenue. It crosses the river in the State-designated Raritan-Readington South Branch Historic District and then continues north, again roughly parallel to the river. The line is inactive but privately-owned.

The River Road corridor includes both private and publicly-owned properties. There is a significant amount of state-, county- and municipally-owned and permanently preserved open space along both sides of the river but these parcels are not continuous and there are considerable gaps. Public access to the river is either non-existent or awkward and there is a complete absence of adequate public access facilities and signage / wayfinding directing people to the river.

There are a number of historic properties in the area, some publicly-owned and some private, but they do not convey a sense of historic district.

As might be expected, a substantial portion of the area is designated within the 100-year and 500-year floodplain, and therefore subject to strict regulatory restrictions with respect to any type of permanent new construction that displaces flood storage capacity.

Vehicular circulation is very challenging. River Road has been adopted by commuters and long distance trucks as a de facto alternative for traffic travelling west on Route 202 and heading north to Route 31, thereby avoiding the congested Flemington circle. This bypass traffic on a narrow cartway poses further challenges in terms of providing public access to the river and with respect to any long-term plans for a continuous bicycle/pedestrian trail along the river.

The land use pattern is complex, and includes single-family residential along with a variety of industrial uses.

Finally, the zoning framework is equally complex. From south to north, the area includes lands zoned O-2 (Business Office, 3 acre minimum), I-1 (Restricted Industrial, 8-acre minimum), I-2 (Major Industrial, 5-acre minimum), R-2 (Rural Residential, Conservation Density, 75,000 sq ft minimum), OR (Outdoor Recreation Overlay), GH (Group Home Overlay) and P (Public).

The studio's assignment is to develop a conceptual design framework that will seek to provide greater coherence and a thematic identity to the corridor, at the local, inter-municipal and county levels; unify public open space and historic resources; enhance public access to the riverfront at appropriate locations, for recreational, educational and eco-tourism purposes; identify options for developing a waterfront trail linked to major destinations; and study the local and county road system for recommendations to improve safety and multi-modal functions. This framework will seek to correct or mitigate past land use mistakes, remedy current problems and create opportunities for future improvements.

Scope

The studio will focus on creating a coherent planning, conceptual design and place-making framework for the area. It will look closely at the existing land use pattern and local zoning; the performance of the circulation network, both vehicular and bicycle, and how to improve it; state regulatory requirements associated with waterfront development and flood hazard mitigation; and public access to the waterfront and ancillary public facilities. It may also touch on areas such as historic preservation; eco-tourism; local economic development strategies; branding; and marketing.

The objective is to develop a visionary framework for transformation of the corridor and surrounding areas that is also pragmatic and implementable. This may involve phased approaches or interim solutions, but it will reflect and respect the current fiscal realities without compromising future opportunities and high quality outcomes.

The studio will examine options for turning the riverfront corridor into a unifying and connecting link within the “greater Flemington” community. Access to it from the large residential neighborhood to the south, perhaps by way of Barley Sheaf Road or Case Boulevard, will be evaluated. Similarly, links to Flemington Borough and to the large, nearby hospital complex and various commercial sports facilities will be examined.

Similarly, options for addressing the river’s water quality challenges will be investigated. Opportunities for integrating creative stormwater management techniques and water quality best management practices into the landscape will be investigated along with the possibility of a “rails with trails” option for the former Lehigh Valley railroad right-of-way.

A word of caution. This project is not for the faint of heart or for those inclined to favor pre-digested approaches. It is not amenable to tidy, off-the-shelf applications of new urbanist or similar approaches to retrofitting the suburbs. It will require hard, creative thinking that is pragmatic but also seeks to confront the shortcomings of decades of Euclidean zoning and of master planning that was never anchored in the values of traditional urbanism or place-making.

Students with varied backgrounds are encouraged to apply. Given the scale of the assignment, the studio would greatly benefit from a few students competent in GIS as well as with graphic skills. Substantive areas of inquiry will include visioning, multi-modal transportation, natural resource and habitat restoration, historic preservation, real estate due diligence and development, design guidelines, zoning and perhaps others not yet identified.

Students will work as a team. The final work product will be the result of your collective work. The studio may elect to pursue more than one solution, but each scenario developed by the studio will benefit from everyone’s contributions, and will be presented collectively. However, the general approach will also be to tailor, to some extent, the final scope of the studio’s work to each student’s strengths, skills and interests. As such, we may have more polished and detailed deliverables in certain areas and less so in others. The final scope and list of deliverables will depend on both the results of the discovery process and on the individual preferences and capabilities expressed by the students.

Steering Committee

The studio will engage Raritan Township, and to the extent possible Readington Township, Hunterdon County, land trusts, recreational groups, property-owners, neighbors, local businesses and other stakeholders in discussions regarding the future of the corridor. A mini-steering committee comprising the municipal planner and appropriate stakeholders will work closely with the studio. Several meetings with all or part of the steering committee are expected. A mid-course correction / evaluation with members of the advisory committee is anticipated, as is a final presentation to Raritan Township officials.



Deliverables

The anticipated deliverables will include a conceptual design strategy for the corridor, showing future uses (buildings, parking, public spaces and open spaces), as well as a proposed vehicular circulation framework, along with bicycle and pedestrian links, recreational and educational facilities, and water quality management strategies; and may include a draft Master Plan amendment explaining the rationale for the proposals, and possibly proposed amendments to the Borough's zoning and land development regulations. The deliverables will to some extent be tailored to the skills and interests of the students taking the studio.

Course Schedule

September 6	Introductions; studio objectives; scoping; initial assignments
September 13	Site visit to Raritan Township study area
September 20	Debrief from site visit; refined scoping; task assignments
September 27	Visioning: alternative scenario(s) – discussion
October 4	Visioning: preferred scenario(s) – discussion
October 11	Concept plan development
October 18	Concept plan development
October 25	Progress review and mid-course evaluation / correction
November 1	Plan production / Deliverables
November 8	Plan production / Deliverables
November 15	Draft final presentation
November 20	Draft presentation
November 29	Final presentation – review and rehearsal
December 6	Final presentation – outside review
December ??	Final presentation – Raritan Township -- TBD

Evaluation

Grades are based on overall attendance, level of participation and engagement, and individual contributions towards the deliverables (75%) as well as on the final presentation (25%).

Academic Integrity Policy

All members of our community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain advantage not given to all students is dishonest, whether or not the effort is successful. A violation of academic honesty is a breach of trust, and will result in penalties, including possible suspension or expulsion. When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, please consult the course instructor or go to: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/students.shtml>.

All sources of photos, websites and other references must be discreetly but legibly cited in all work including PowerPoint presentations, reports and other written and / or graphic deliverables.

Readings

There are no required textbooks for this studio. However, we will be reading relevant selections from the following publications:

- Bound Brook Downtown Urban Design Plan, available at <http://www.rpa.org/pdf/BB-Urban-Design-Plan.pdf>
- Designing New Jersey, available at <http://www.state.nj.us/state/planning/docs/designingnj060100.pdf>
- Douglas Farr – Sustainable Urbanism: Urban Design With Nature, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken 2008.
- Daniel Palazzo and Frederick Steiner – Urban Ecological Design: A Process for Regenerative Places, Island Press 2011
- Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson – Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken 2009

The publications not available on-line are expensive. Students are not expected to purchase them. We will find ways of sharing relevant information. Other readings will include reference documents, such as the current Municipal Master Plan, Zoning / Land Development Regulations and other relevant background documents. Most readings will be posted on Sakai throughout the semester, along with other relevant materials. Discussions of readings will take place as appropriate.

Students are also expected to conduct research and read widely on topics relevant to the deliverables as the need may arise and as the studio progresses.