

## TEMPORAL COMMONS

MIT ARCHITECTURE  
ARCH 4.183  
SPRING 2026  
T 1:00 – 4:00  
RM 5-231  
3-0-6 G / 3-0-9 G

# Workshop Syllabus

## INSTRUCTORS

**Brandon Clifford** – [bcliffor@mit.edu](mailto:bcliffor@mit.edu)  
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## OVERVIEW

The *Temporal Commons* is a multi-year research project that aims to bridge two millennia—one behind us & one to come—by integrating speculative futures with historical foundations. In doing so, it challenges the immediacy that dominates architectural discourse and the instinctive temporal narrowing of modernism's legacy of presentism, proposing instead a pedagogy and practice grounded in the *longue durée*: an expanded historical horizon attentive to cycles of continuity, transformation, and stewardship.

This year's workshop will examine the shape and potentials of architectural thinking situated in the friction between nature and law. The workshop will explore the physical aspects and the human experience of montane forest and riverine systems while also learning about and interpreting the legal frameworks that have sought to regulate the social, cultural, and economic manifestations of those systems. Using the paradigm of *longue durée* history—history of the long term—the workshop will aim to decipher how human attempts to control the present accumulate over time, posing ever more substantial obstacles for architecture's attempts to imagine and design futures. Pursuing historical research in parallel to contemporary design thinking, the workshop will have conjunctures with the FLOOD studio but will itself be oriented around a broad inquiry into the concept of the *commons*.

## METHOD

The workshop will meet weekly and will include discussions of readings and case studies, guest speakers, and student presentations. Readings will draw from architectural history, law and legal theory, political science, climate science, and philosophy; case studies will include buildings, rivers, legislation, cultural techniques, materials, and artifacts. Students will contribute to the workshop from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including building technology, design, history, material science, environmental science, computation, etc.

The specific focus of the workshop will be to pursue historical and theoretical investigations into topics that, through historical research and theorization, can be elaborated as dimensions of potential commons, as temporal agents, and as social configurations into which architecture is bound. Representative topics include property law, riparian law, theories of public trust, forest governance, cultural practices of riverine settlements, timber economies, and hydraulic science. During the workshop, each student will develop a research thread, independently or as a pair or group, that leads to an original research contribution; the final format of the work by semester's end will depend on the type of research undertaken.

## Schedule

### Week 01

2/3      Intro + Preview Event

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## Week 02

### 2/10     **Commons, Property, Law**

#### *Readings:*

- Stone, Christopher D. "Should Trees Have Standing--Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects." *Southern California Law Review*, vol. 45, no. 2, Spring, pp. 450-501.
- Hardin, Garrett. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science*, vol. 162, no. 3859, 1968, pp. 1243–48.
- Rose, Carol M. "Thinking about the Commons." *International Journal of the Commons*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, pp. 557–66.

#### *Resources:*

- Peter Linebaugh. "Enclosures from the Bottom Up." *Radical History Review* 1 October 2010; 2010 (108): 11–27.
- Berlant, Lauren. "The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times\*." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(3), 2016: 393-419.
- Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. (Minor Compositions, 2013).
- Rose, C. (1986). "The Comedy of the Commons: Custom, Commerce, and Inherently Public Property." *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 53(3), 711–781.

## Week 03

### 2/17     HOLIDAY – President's Day

## Week 04

### 2/24     **Rivers and Bridges**

#### *Readings:*

- Leopold, Luna B. "Landscape Esthetics." *Ekistics* 29, no. 173 (1970): 271–77.
- "Robert MacFarlane on Embracing Flow and Letting Rivers Heal Us." *Atmos Podcast*, November 4 2025. <https://atmos.earth/podcast/robert-macfarlane-on-embracing-flow-and-letting-rivers-heal-us/>
- Thomas Harrison. *Of Bridges: A Poetic and Philosophical Account*. The University of Chicago Press, 2021. [excerpts]
- *Flood Safety Act* (Act 121, VT State Legislature, 2024)
- *Laws of the State of Vermont Revised and Passed by the Legislature* (1797). [excerpts]

## Week 05

### 3/3     **Longue Durée History**

#### *Readings:*

- Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). [excerpts]
- Caitlin de Silvey. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). [excerpts]
- Thomas Harrison. *Of Bridges: A Poetic and Philosophical Account*. (The University of Chicago Press, 2021). [excerpts]
- Withington, John. *Flood*. (Reaktion Books, 2013). [excerpts]

## Week 06

### 3/10     **Governance and Care**

#### *Readings:*

- Lily Tsai. "Taking Responsibility for Tomorrow: Remaking Collective Governance as Political Ancestors." *Daedalus*. 152, no. 1 (2023): 258–64.
- Kiel Moe. *Forest-Building* (2026)
- Peter Linebaugh. "Enclosures from the Bottom Up." *Radical History Review* 1 October 2010; 2010 (108): 11–27.

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## Week 07

3/17 ***Nature and Representation***

*Readings:*

- Caroline E. Murphy. "Drawing the Disordered River in Late-Renaissance Tuscany." *Grey Room* 100 (2025): 7-34.
- Walter B Langbein and Luna B. Leopold. "River Meanders; Theory of Minimum Variance." *U.S. Geological Survey Professional Papers*, 1966, H1–15.

## Week 08

3/24 Spring Break

3/26 Spring Break

## Week 09

3/31 Workshop

## Week 10

4/7 Workshop

## Week 11

4/14 Workshop

## Week 12

4/21 Workshop

## Week 13

4/28 Workshop

## Week 14

5/5 Workshop

## Week 15

5/12 Workshop (conclusions & final presentations)