To speak of architecture as the creation of environmental objects means to expand the meaning of contextualism, a need which has been made necessary by the dissolution of the compact city into the complex carpet of diffuse urbanities. With the end of nature, and therefore also the end of the separation between natural and artificial, architecture has lost its neutral backdrop and nature has stepped into the foreground, claiming itself to be also the result of human authorship, agency and care (or lack thereof). This foregrounding of nature has left a gap in the relationship between humans and their surroundings, in which our old ideas of place and context—fundamental values in the adaptation of project to site—have been called into question, and even at times declared to be dead.

laba’s working method aims to expand the field of architecture’s ability to respond to the extreme complexity and artificiality of today’s postmodern urban territories. Seen as an environmental object, architecture expands its role to embrace not only the design of autonomous objects, but also to give form to its relevant environmental surroundings. Objects and systems, buildings and landscapes, sculptures and junkspaces, can thus be integrated within the larger ecology of spatial creation. This would result in a kind of contextualism that is not about familiarity but rather about revealing unconscious qualities of the site and rendering them visible; an ecological phenomenology that welcomes the strange and disrupts the figure-ground relationship [the hierarchy between positive figure and passive ground]; an architecture that weaves the territory at different scales and attunes to climate, geological strata, landscape systems, and other non-human worlds. Architecture as environmental object is an exercise on the principle of contextualism (Lt. contextere, from com- “together” + textere “to weave”), where architecture is seen as a weaving of connections and revelations, a creator of uncanny fabrics or textures.

In this spirit, laba is currently working on a research series entitled *Industrial Earth*, which aims to pinpoint the fundamental aesthetic characteristics of environments shaped by Western industrial capitalism, the driving force behind the advent of the Great Acceleration, the Anthropocene, and the total artificialization of planet Earth. The current studio—Industrial Nostalgia—is a part of this research and it takes the city of Venice as a pretext to look at how the industrialization of culture has expanded the typology of the museum beyond its institutional boundaries, into urban forms.
URBAN NATURE / INDUSTRIAL EARTH PROJECT, LABA 2014/18

(through heritage preservation) and people’s way of life, through mass entertainment and tourism. The studio will focus on the Venetian Lagoon and its immediate hinterland with the aim of reevaluating the city’s relationship to cultural heritage, its inner local livelihood, and its perimeter hinterland. The goal of this studio will be to question the paradoxical role of preservation and our society’s relationship to monuments, museumification, and the commodification of culture. We will reflect on the historical debate on Venetian style, experiment with ways of responding to the condition/aesthetic of artificiality and simulation, and investigate how the insertion of specific programs into the city might bring “reality” back to the islands.

labà method

labà’s teaching method is structured in two major segments—the territorial scale in the first semester and the architectural scale in the second—and its approach is simultaneously specific and universal: it is both contextual, as it departs from the analysis of site-specific forms of a particular place, and generalist, as it promotes the critical assessment of a set of dialectical contradictions which address the studio’s research on industrial aesthetics, such as abstraction/representation, place/event, landscape/object, system/form.

By expanding the field of architectural design into territorial studies, laba aims to claim the urban system as part of the architectural object, the territory [or the landscape] into the site. Architecture has the obligation to engage with the “big picture”, the “large scale”, of both abstract thinking and spatial construction.
1) territorial project

The fall semester is structured around 5 assignments: My Urban Region, Archive Compilation, Selective Reading, Integrated Form, and Feasibility Study I. Apart from the first and last assignments, all are carried out in teams, with each student being assigned a role in two different types of groups: the specialist group, which concentrates on collecting, compiling and interpreting information (Archives Compilation and Selective Reading) and, afterwards, the design group which builds up an integrated urban project (Integrated Form). The Feasibility Study closes the semester with the students proposing a site and program for an architectural project. As such, it may be carried out individually or in pairs. It should be noted that this semester will be backed up by the parallel unité d’enseignement Cartography (U.E.–U), which will provide extra support on graphical techniques and urban/landscape literacy in terms of how to read and identify large scale spatial structures. As a synthesis of the first semester, a Territorial Constitution is developed and carried out by the laba staff, during the inter-semester period, in collaboration with appointed student assistants.

MY URBAN REGION

Students are asked to interpret and represent their initial reading towards the selected urban region in an intuitive and highly personal way, through the presentation of a conceptual sketch. What this sketch actually is, and which medium is used to execute it, is each student’s choice, and the sole requisite is that it be self-explanatory—the message, its significant content, must speak for itself, for the author will not be allowed to present it through language.

ARCHIVE COMPILATION

This exercise consists in collecting, compiling and comparing data, facts and figures about the studio’s appointed case-study. The class is divided into 5 specialist teams and each is assigned its own relevant (and site-specific) research topic. In the current academic year, for instance, under Industrial Nostalgia, the themes will be: Terraferma, Marshland, Imago, Industry and Infrastructure. The goal is that each team understands the historical and cultural context of its theme and gains a sense of what role it plays within the territory and, for that, it is demanded that this research be framed along the following preestablished topics: history, economy, settlement, governance and culture. The submittal medium of this assignment is a reference
SELECTIVE READING

The goal of this exercise is to obtain a geographical understanding of the 5 significant themes, in correlation with the physical morphology of the appointed region. Each group will be asked to understand and explain where and why each of these themes is located, describing their surrounding landscape and territorial requirements and, therefore, this exercise will have a strong emphasis on cartography. One needs to understand the present context in order to then speculate about its future developments.

The selective reading is an academic exercise that is not passive nor neutral—a reading is already an interpretation and therefore, it is a personal construction that implies choice. Because this reading is monofunctional (specialized on one of the research topics), it does not pretend to be a realistic approach to an actual urban project. Nevertheless, it is valuable precisely because of its categorical radicalism, which allows for a certain freedom, where concepts can be tested to their fullest before later being modified and adapted in coexistence with the matrix of the 4 remaining topics. Each group is asked to submit a map of their reading and a conceptual image/collage.

INTEGRATED FORM

At this point students shift from the "specialist" frame to multidisciplinary design teams that includes one specialist from each of the previous 5 themes. Each team is now asked to develop an urban project—a territorial form—that addresses the short, medium and long term issues and needs of the region, in an integrated way that mediates between the 5 specialist themes previously researched. The emphasis on group work in this first semester is understood to be an important component of laba’s academic structure because it teaches students to negotiate and be productive members of a larger entity. Deliverables consist of a map of the territorial form and its explanation in the form of a presentation and a text.
2) field work

FIELD TRIP + FEASIBILITY STUDY I

The Feasibility Study is crucially articulated with the Field Trip and is, in fact, produced in situ, during the course of a workshop and symposium which takes place in collaboration with a local partner institution. During the course of the field trip students will be asked to confront the research developed so far with possible locations for a specific site of intervention where they will propose an architectural design project during the second semester. This is the final assignment of the first semester and so the field trip will end with a final reviews day, where students present their future project proposals.

TERRITORIAL CONSTITUTION

The constitution is carried out between semesters as collaboration between the laba staff and appointed student assistants. Its result should be a collective synthesis of the 5 maps produced in the previous assignment of the Integrated Form, and it also include the projects proposed in the Feasibility Study, articulated together in a hypothetical masterplan.

GOALS OF SEMESTER 1

- Critically assess one’s own cultural background and its influence on the perception and understanding of a new site;
- Gather, compile and select information, transforming it into active knowledge;
- Identify landscape systems and represent them through maps;
- Filter relevant information and use comparative references;
- Identify territorial forms that reflect cultural issues of history, governance, economy and landscape;
- Understand the long-term phasing and timing of urban planning;
- Learn about team-work and become familiarized with public presentations;
- Learn how to articulate urbanism, landscape and architecture.
3) Architectural project

In the Spring semester laba students must develop an architectural project based on the masterplan carried out in the first semester. Each student is asked to revise and repose the feasibility study, and then the project design unfolds in a sequence similar to the official phases: Feasibility Study II, Schematic Design, Design Development, and Presentation Documentats. Lectures on the subjects of structure, façade, building services, and fit-out provide inputs to each phase accordingly. Students may work individually or in pairs. They learn to elaborate a project on their own—from the raising of a fundamental question and the definition of a program, to the development a corresponding architectural form—and therefore this semester can be considered a ‘rehearsal’ for the upcoming EPFL SAR master thesis project.

Feasibility Study II

This short assignment works as a consolidation of the previous workshop presentation. It consists of a preliminary study that outlines the physical, infrastructural and legal conditions of a site proposed by the student, while assessing its compatibility with a hypothetical program. A rough massing should be set forth. Deliverables include a slide presentation, diagrams, a conceptual model, and a program brief.

Schematic Design

The initial descriptions of the feasibility study should now be transformed into a functional, logical, thematic and aesthetic architectural standpoint, a design concept. Within this phase, contextual issues of the site are addressed and solutions for basic issues such as circulation, structure, materials, overall aesthetics and volumetric relationships should be discussed. The essential character of the project is formulated. Deliverable consist of a full set of drawings printed on A1 (site plan at 1:500 or 1:1000, plans and sections down to 1:200), a structural model, and a project description text.

Design Development

This phase serves to strengthen the concept by designing appropriate and specific details that guide the decision process, regarding techniques and technologies to be employed for construction. Set of
deliverable remains equal to the previous pin-up, with the addition of a materiality model. A member of the laba replaces the student in presenting the project to the guest critics.

PRESENTATION DOCUMENTS

The final assignment of the year consists of a critical assemblage and presentation of documents that represent the entire project, From Feasibility study to detailing. Deliverables include a presentation of a condensed Feasibility Study narrative, presentation panels with full set of drawings printed on A0, all models and presentation models explaining all aspects of the project, and text description.

GOALS OF SEMESTER 2

- Conduct research of a site;
- Formulate a narrative that addresses a specific urban problematic reflected into a site and program of the student’s own choosing;
- Initiate, develop and detail a project consistently;
- Communicate and represent ideas and designs through drawings, models, texts and presentations.

4) publication

laba is committed to publishing and promoting the research and design results of each academic year. The synthesis is compiled in a book, which publishes the student work as well as interviews or discussions with experts and complimentary essays. The three-part structure of the book reflects laba’s methodology: part one presents a detailed, inter-disciplinary analysis of the region under the appointed 5 research themes, and resulting in a territorial constitution; part two documents the field trip; and part three presents the architectural projects as a formal expression of the knowledge and experience gained. laba’s publications are made in collaboration with Park Books and Ludovic Balland. The 2011/12 edition, Barents Lessons, was awarded two prizes: The Most Beautiful Swiss Books 2012, awarded by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (BAK), and The Most Beautiful German Books 2013, by The Book Art Foundation (Stiftung Buchkunst).