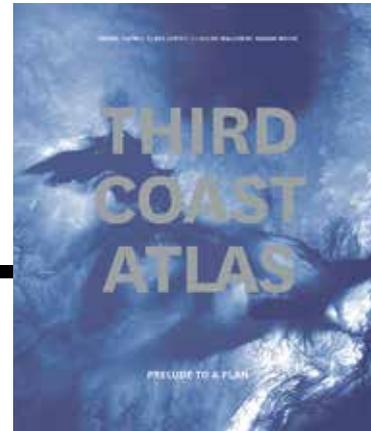


TAKES ON LAKES

THIRD COAST ATLAS: PRELUDE TO A PLAN

**BY DANIEL IBAÑEZ, CLARE LYSTER, CHARLES WALDHEIM,
AND MASON WHITE; NEW YORK AND BARCELONA:
ACTAR PUBLISHERS, 2017; 344 PAGES, \$90.**

REVIEWED BY SARAH COWLES



In the past four years, a spectrum of environmental crises erupted in the Great Lakes Basin. In 2013, a unit train of Bakken crude oil derailed and exploded in Lac-Mégantic in southeastern Quebec. The fire blackened downtown and killed 47 people, and the oil contaminated the Chaudière River, a tributary of the Saint Lawrence River. In 2014, toxic green algae bloomed in Lake Erie at the mouth of the Maumee River in Toledo, Ohio. City officials issued a “Do Not Drink” advisory for city water customers. In 2014, corrosive orange water flowed from the taps of Flint, Michigan. The water leached lead from pipes; months later, government officials recognized the massive public health crisis and declared a state of emergency. And in 2016, the shores of the U.S. Great Lakes turned red: Five of the eight American states bordering the Great Lakes (including the previously blue states of Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania) sent their electoral votes to Donald Trump, who promised to “Make America Great Again” and roll back environmental regulations and international partnerships.

Environmental and ecological crises punctuate the history of the Great Lakes. The crises have resulted from industrial accidents, from engineered attempts to link the freshwater bodies to global markets, and from well-meaning scientists who introduced new species to the waters. In the late 20th century, these crises radicalized citizens—and legislators—to

demand regulation of the nation’s air, water, and land. In the Great Lakes watershed, two major crises of unregulated waste management—the Cuyahoga River fire and the Love Canal contamination—effected substantial acts of environmental legislation: the Clean Water Act (1972), regulating point source pollution by industries and municipalities, and Superfund (1980), which identifies and funds the cleanup of toxic sites of bankrupt owner-operators.

Yet the environmental crises of today barely trouble the regulatory landscape. Unit trains of volatile Bakken crude still snake through neighborhoods destined for coastal refineries. In the Maumee valley, scientists and city officials model and predict annual algae blooms. Minor regulatory changes are in place: Ohio farmers are prohibited from spreading fertilizer, both manure and pelleted, during frozen or saturated periods, but because the phosphorus-laden runoff is defined as “nonpoint source” pollution, it is exempt from the regulations of the Clean Water Act.

Landing in this context is the 7.5-pound *Third Coast Atlas*, edited by Daniel Ibañez; Clare Lyster; Charles Waldheim, Honorary ASLA; and Mason White. Subtitled “Prelude to a Plan,” its editors claim “a detailing of ecological and economic contexts for urbanization with the intent to provide the preparatory ideation for future urban work.” They define the Third



ABOVE
The Great Lakes watershed encompasses parts of both the United States and Canada.

BOTTOM
Robert Burley's Great Lakes Project's compositions blur distinctions between the meetings of geology, infrastructure, and water.

Coast as an “autochthonous toponym for the urbanized rim of the Great Lakes Basin...the liminal edge between land and not-land as a field of urbanization.”

The volume compiles several years of academic design research and speculation on the future of the Great Lakes and is divided into sections. “Projections” catalogs geographic data on each lake; “Potentials” includes design and research projects by practitioners, academics, and students on topics such as road salt and waste management; “Profiles” collects land-use maps of coastal cities; “Prospects” condenses histories of coastal cities and inventories of future ambitions; and “Plans” includes a catalog of speculative and built work situated on the Third Coast.

Throughout the book, “Portfolios” feature maps and high-quality satellite, aerial, and site photos. In the preface, the editors claim that the range of expository, visual, and speculative texts proffers a “thick description” of the geography and its potentials. Yet there is an unintended thickness to the volume, the result of the unedited academic language encrusting the texts throughout like colonies of zebra mussels.

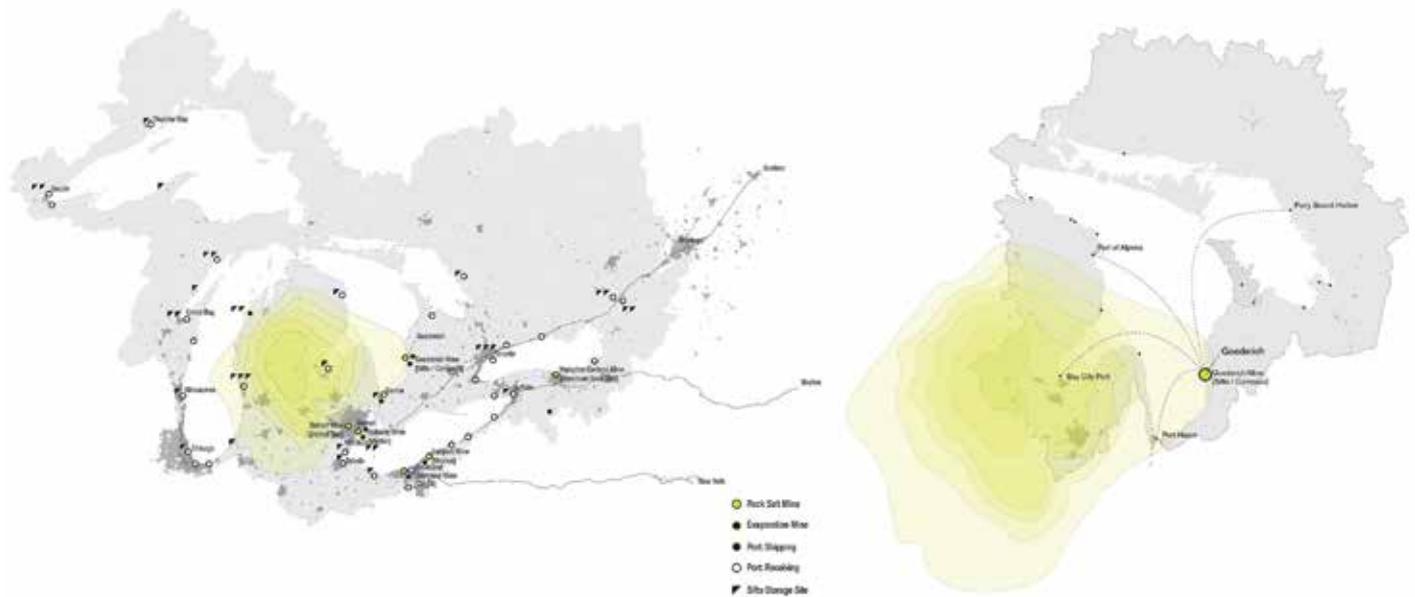


The volume is bound by the rhetoric and projects of early landscape urbanism, a rhetoric that advocates for a productive mix of artfully designed ecological systems that productively mitigate the spatial conflicts among “nature” and “industry” and “urbanism.” In the preface, the editors state that the “*Third Coast Atlas* is motivated by the desire for specifically grounded cases of urban description, with sites and subjects specific to the ecologies and economies they contain.” But the potential of *Third Coast Atlas* evaporates in this neutral pairing of *ecologies* (a neologism that denotes local material, biological, and energetic subsystems defined by their ecological relationships) with *economies* (perhaps the sum of local capital, government subsidy, real estate, resources, and labor). Love Canal, Flint, and other crises in the past century illustrate that the *and* of “ecology and economy” is not the *and* of harmony; it is the *and* of conflict, a conflict historically brokered by politics.

The editors claim the work is “*radicalized* [italics added] around the potential to problematize contemporary urbanism through readings of landscape and infrastructure, ecology and economy.” But where is the evidence of this radical turn? The editors continue, “This collection argues that design no longer follows, but rather precedes planning.” The [future planning] “strategies must lead, rather than follow, in how future processes of urbanization will configure new territorial flows and urban formats as the region negotiates the transition to post-Fordist production regimes and the development of cleaner processes of production.” But if the recent response of political leadership to recent environmental crises runs the gamut from radio silence to acts of outright malfeasance, is it realistic to assume a future where the region is defined by clean manufacturing clusters, high-speed rail links, and super-ruderal dredge-spoil littoral wonderlands?

There are imaginative yet far from radical design studies represented in this volume. In the context of regional planning, landscape urbanism may pose a radical alternative to form-based urbanism, but its champions

DANIEL IBÁÑEZ, CLARE LYSTER, CHARLES WALDHEIM, MASON WHITE, TOP: ROBERT BURLEY, BOTTOM



ABOVE
A vast saline landscape of paradox resides below the freshwater Great Lakes. This salt is mined and refined for de-icing regional roads.

BELOW
Uranium tailings in Elliot Lake, Ontario.



cannot imagine, nor reconcile the risks of, evolving the radical politics necessary to manifest their manifesto. Planning can precede design, design can precede planning—*whatever, it doesn't matter*—because in the current political and economic climate, neither is valued. We are left with the question: If crisis no longer precipitates politically enacted ecological regulation and progress, can we design and manifest a politics that will?

In “Potentials,” Martin Felsen’s “Fresh Water Planning” outlines one political method: a free trade zone (FTZ), focused on a new industrial landscape of water-intensive manufacturing embedded within industrial wastelands of southern Lake Michigan’s shores. His proposal banks on the dubious neoliberal politics of FTZs to arrange a marriage of ecology and economy. FTZs are formed to evade environmental, labor, and trade regulations, and reduce tax burdens to their host nations. Felsen’s proposed “Free Water Zone” project provides a global economic hub for developing goods and services centered on freshwater related technologies and innovations.... The main rule to follow is that every factory must ultimately return all non-embedded water that

is used in production and manufacturing processes back to the Great Lakes.” But with the implied environmental deregulation, would this “rule” be possible? And in what condition would the water be returned to the lakes?

Felsen’s misapprehension of Keller Easterling’s sly takes on the *Extrastatecraft* (Verso, 2016) may be the result of Easter-

ling’s deadpan delivery of neoliberal critique (*wait—or is it a critique?*); nevertheless, it is revealing that the vacuum of political discourse may suck in and digest some dubious ideas. Why not barter civics for realization? What designer hasn’t looked longingly at the massive-scaled “green” projects in the Middle East and China, manifest by autocratic regimes? The lack of coherent, alternative, and imaginative politics makes an exclusionary, antisocial, loophole-seeking urban-zombie form seductive; the FTZ provides a credible framework of autocracy and stability to adapt magical thinking to reality.

Several chapters grapple with the massive scale and rich history of the Great Lakes. Rosetta S. Elkin’s essay, “The Great Salt Deposit,” details the immense strata of salt looming underneath the freshwater Great Lakes and its role in maintaining transportation liquidity. Sean Burkholder and Karen Lutsky’s “Reclaiming the Littoral” details the expansion and potential of newfound coastal lands owing to shrinking lake volumes. Scientists believe this shrinking is caused by both evaporation and the scouring of the Saint Clair river channel south of Detroit. In “The Longest Undefended Border,” Mark Hogan and Tim Maly outline the history and evolution of piracy and smuggling in the Great Lakes from 1807 to today’s cigarette tax arbitrage among First Nations, the United States, and Canada.

The editors’ ambition to unite maps, photos, and essays for cross-referencing and hybrid readings is admirable. But the book itself is too small for its maps and too large for its essays.

Atlases are oversized publications, designed and drawn for poring over, readings of adjacencies, concentrations, and dispersals of geographic information; with legible keys, labels,



ABOVE
This 1837 "Map of Upper Canada: Shewing [sic] the Proposed Routes of Rail Roads for the purpose of extending the Trade of the Province" marks the arrival of hybrid transportation systems of rail and water. The Erie Canal's connection between Buffalo and the Hudson River is clearly delineated.

and the cartographic conventions detailed in Jill Desimini and Charles Waldheim's recent *Cartographic Grounds* (see "Go There," *LAM*, August 2017). Yet the maps accompanying the essays in the "Potentials" section, especially "Shed Cartographies," and later in the visually poignant "Portfolio" titled "U.S. Lake Survey, 1849–1879," are illegible to the point of irritation.

Although a bound collection of illustrated essays might be larger than a novel, the 24-odd essays in the publication are inset on the volume's expansive pages, surrounded by a deep blue margin, hosting footnotes but forcing awkward placements of illustrations. Fair enough that the editors expect their reader to find a suitable prop to support the volume for extended reading periods, but this reader lost all patience with the conceit midway through the "Prospects" section, a catalog of hyperbolic essays on major cities in the Great Lakes watershed. Unfortunately, several essays in "Prospects" retain artifacts of their start as grant abstracts, or "creative city" pitches—reflective of the unfocused editing of the volume.

Each essay in "Prospects" is paired with a full-page illustration featuring a timeline and population graphs. Historic images are collaged and cropped within the poché of the graph. The graphs, depicting the long growth, falloff, and rebound, are unfortunately punctuated with less-than-woke labels of "riots," "urban renewal," and "white flight" that diminish the import

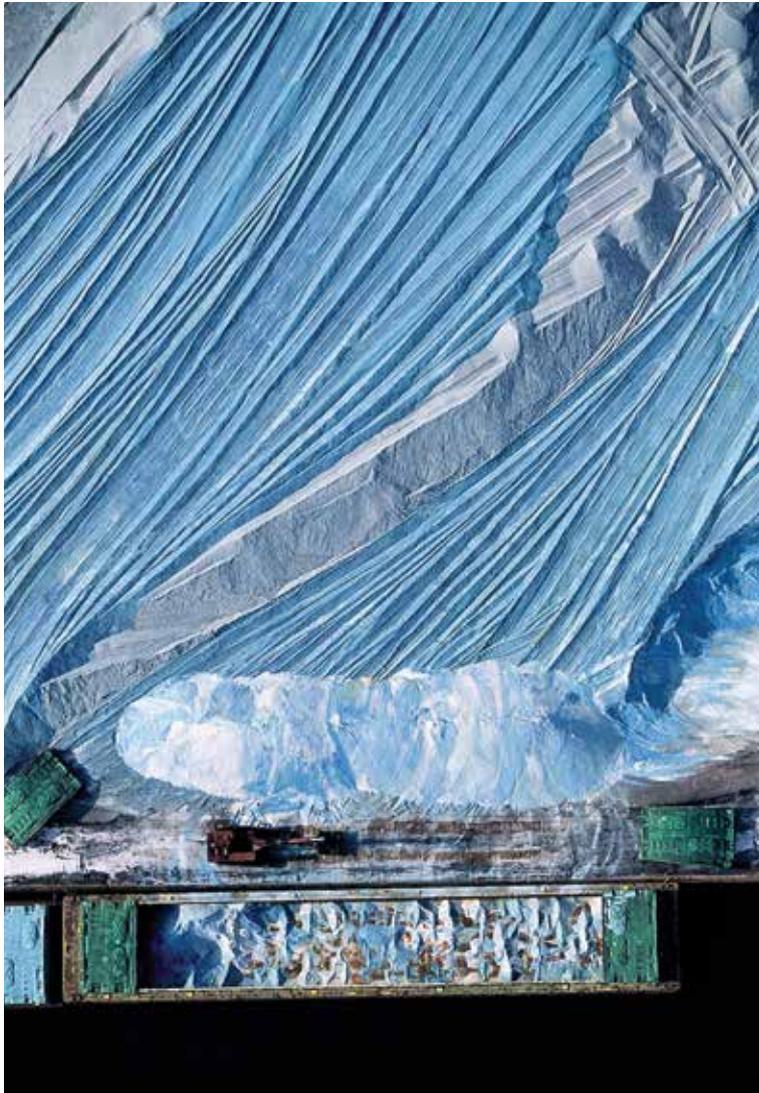
of these social and economic crises and their long-term effects. "Prospects" is redeemed by two essays: "Good's Gone, Fine's Just Perfect" by Richard Sommer, the dean of the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto, and "Repositioning the Inner Harbor," by James Wasley, Affiliate ASLA, a professor and the director of the Institute for Ecological Design at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Sommer's "Good's Gone" plies candid humor in outlining the fraught intersection of humans, geography, and politics in the second Second City of Toronto. He points out the number of high-profile comedians from Toronto, and notes that the late

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford's election by citizens of the exurbs "is not the only counter-intuitive phenomenon" resulting from Toronto's ravenous incorporation of outlying suburbs.

Wasley's essay describes the present and future of partnerships and physical links between municipal utilities and research facilities situated in Milwaukee's Inner Harbor. Carved from the confluence of the Menomonee, Kinnickinnic, and Milwaukee Rivers in the early 20th century, the Inner Harbor is an exemplary 21st-century urban waterfront, hosting the intersection of several abstract and concrete entities: the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, Milwaukee's Water Council (a trade group), and the UWM School of Freshwater Sciences. In this cluster, teams of researchers from the university and local utilities conduct studies on aquaculture, engineered wetlands, and novel methane and deep-water cooling energy technologies: a proof of concept that intelligence and political will coexist and prosper on the coasts of the Great Lakes.

The book's cover image depicts the eastern third of North America, a gradient in white and blue. This view suggests a porous and permeable terrain, without delineation or boundary. But the ambiguity proffered by the cover image is tamed inside the volume. The eponymous coast is hardened to its binaries of water and land through rote description, diagram, and depiction, especially in the "Projections" section, where



ABOVE
A salt depot and barge in Chicago represent the industrialized shoreline and massive scale of material handling common to the Great Lakes.

an uncredited illustrator obsessively unfurls and annotates the shorelines of each lake—the result is a bit like learning that your small intestine measures 20-odd feet, but it works better bundled up inside you, doing its job.

In a series of drawings by J. H. Colton, titled *Comparative Size of Lakes and Islands*, water bodies of the Western and Eastern Hemispheres are paired with an inverted collection of islands. In the center of the *Lakes of the Western Hemisphere*, Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario are conjoined as one complex body, an interconnected system. Consider water bodies, with river mouths, bodies that drain eastward, through ports and locks of infrastructural continuity and ecological discontinuity. These

bodies are error-prone and vulnerable in their naive freshness, and historically insulated from the tides of global species. Oceans dissipate foulings; bodies concentrate and reconcile them on the shore and accumulate in the depths, in livers and fatty tissue.

The editors are ambivalent in their depictions of the geography of the region. They are careful to depict the binational nature of the Great Lakes region and its ecological, economic interdependencies, yet for all the emphasis on the semantics of a “third coast,” they dedicate a substantial number of pages to portraits of the individual lakes. Each lake has a distinct cultural and qualitative identity—no one would dare confuse the inscrutable and deep Superior (retention time: 173 years) with the shallow and fatigued Erie (retention time: three years), but the radical geographic gesture would be to forgo separating them into constituent bodies.

The volume is deliberately devoid of human bodies (save a mention of the monumental Mayor Ford). The photographic images in “Portfolios” lack representations of humans, but reflect human occupation of the coast. Robert Burley, Edward Burtynsky, and Alex MacLean’s photographs establish a poetics of the Great Lakes; neither scenic nor dystopic, the photographs appear as frames in extended tracking shots, samples of the infinite qualities of the inland seas. In “Profiles,” each coastal metro is depicted with land-use diagrams, but they lack demographic data—habeas corpus, if you will—to ground the reader’s interpretation of contemporary land uses. Are the “industrial” lands productive or fallow? Are the “residential” or “commercial” areas in distress or thriving?

What we need now are not inventories of water volumes and coastlines, but proposals for alternative social and environmental politics that will materialize the potentials of the region as outlined in this volume. Designers can start with a return to the representation of bodies; water bodies flow in and out of ambulatory, amphibious bodies, the bodies of the citizens of Flint and Toledo, the bodies of zebra and quagga mussels, alewives, lamprey, and coho. ●

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ALEX MACLEAN