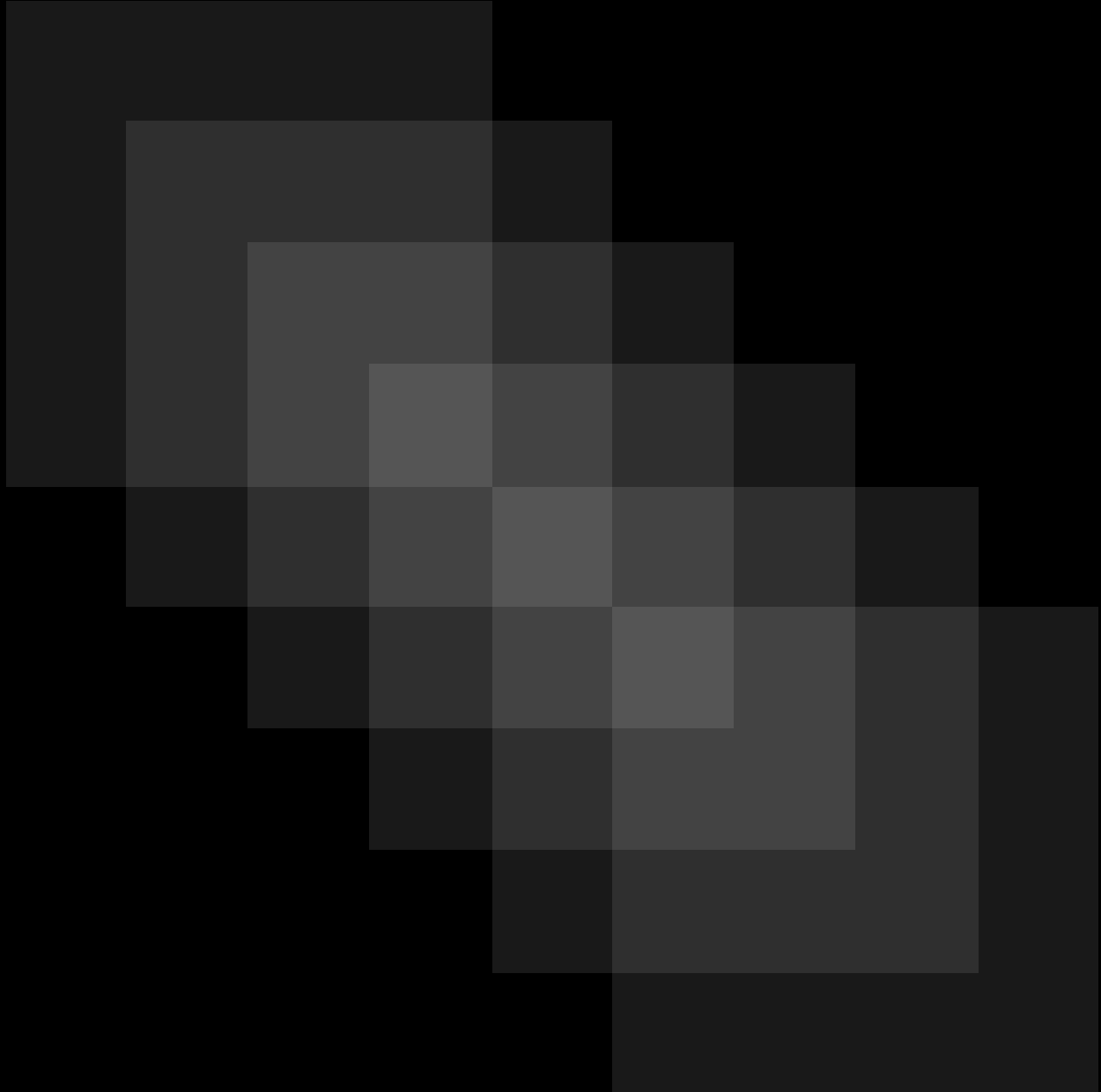


Iterations:

On Navigating Uncertainty



Emma Hwang

Laidlaw Research Reflection

Iterations:

For an urban geography student, I get lost very often.

My sense of direction is easily confused and I find myself walking the same block multiple times before I regain an orientation. For this reason, I'm seldom one to stray from a given path. The few times I do choose to explore, while uncomfortable at times, I discover new places and learn more about the city and my surroundings. This experience of wandering is very similar to the process I undertook this summer as a first-time researcher. Through the Laidlaw program, I've been able to challenge myself to face uncertainty and actively adapt to unexpected—and often unprecedented—situations and obstacles.

The beginning of the summer was marked by doubt and mystification. While I had secured a position within the program (much to my surprise), I had not fully developed my methodology and was still uncertain about the direction of my project. I had initially begun researching technical land uses and foreign trade zones (the original direction of my research) but came to realize that the scope and applications of the project were well beyond my own expertise and far from the conditions I had initially expected. A moment of clarity came after speaking to my advisors about what urban research really entailed.

Through the Laidlaw program, I've been able to challenge myself to face uncertainty and actively adapt to unexpected—and often unprecedented—situations and obstacles.

The topic of *Urbanism* can be nebulous and challenging to grasp. Not only are there multiple definitions and analytical lenses which one might study the city from, but the scale of the urban is intimidating in and of itself. At first, I decided to define the topic from a

On Navigating Uncertainty

philosophical standpoint—reading challenging texts which I only partially understood, and forming my methods based on grand theories. In my conversations with my advisors, I came to realize that the study of the city often entails the ubiquitous experiences of its dwellers. Simple objects, infrastructures, and buildings become the reference points that shape and reflect these everyday rhythms.

In my conversations with my advisors, I came to realize that the study of the city often entails the ubiquitous experiences of its dwellers. Simple objects, infrastructures, and buildings become the reference points that shape and reflect these everyday rhythms.



Throughout the summer, I further developed my love of architectural publication and graphic design. Above are some of the volumes I collected during the course of my research term, both as visual precedence and as literary and methodological precedence.

I was encouraged to pay a visit to the City of Windsor, which I had designated as my area of study. An early morning train ride brought me directly to a main industrial area, where I spent a couple of hours walking along the barren manufacturing landscape, observing the movement of trucks, abandoned fields, and parking lots. The most fascinating aspect of this trip was the massive automobile factories that seemed to dominate and dictate the flow of everything around them. Returning back to Toronto, I felt excited to further examine these gargantuan structures and learn about the everyday patterns of these factories.

While this new direction was the largest iteration in the course of my research, various changes occurred continuously. Where I had initially planned to investigate all twelve factories—past, present, and future—I was required to perpetually scope my project and focus on more detailed and nuanced aspects of each environment. The selection of these sites was a challenging process that occurred over weeks of collecting information, learning about local history, and determining key factors that I would proceed to investigate.

I was required to perpetually scope my project and focus on more detailed and nuanced aspects of each environment.

When I returned to Windsor for my fieldwork, I was excited to make observations on the ground and produce as much work as possible. A few days in, I realized that the trip might not go according to plan. I had set many high expectations that I was not able to achieve and was required to iterate, yet again. I visited less sites than I had hoped (at first), but was able to gain more in-depth learnings and articulate each factory as an individual case study.

As I continued to research, I gained more confidence in the importance of my findings and their applications. One key medium that I referred to throughout my inquiry was a public service announcement from the Ontario government. A colorful (and especially memorable) ad showing multiple city residents with their hair flying, as if electrified by the new provincial



Visiting the industrial landscape was a key turning point over the course of my research. Above is a key gate at the Stellantis-Chrysler assembly plant in Windsor, Ontario. This was a key subject of study throughout the summer and the site that initiated my interest in the urban megafactory as a typology of study.

investments in the automotive sector, I encountered this video almost every day. Whether in the movie theatre, at the train station, or simply as I was browsing through my phone, every time I saw this imagery, I was reminded of the currency of my own project and was able to use this video as a starting point for many conversations during the summer.

I found it especially helpful to pin up my work on a wall and review it with my advisors. A common technique in architecture school, this format allowed me to view the work I had so far, and quickly diagnose areas of strength and weakness. The physicality of the drawings allowed me to assess them from outside the usual working confines of my laptop. Additionally, the rapid cycle of creating new drawings and refining them helped me identify work I liked and others I wanted to further refine.

Not only were my frequent exchanges with my advisors helpful and encouraging, but other conversations with practitioners and researchers greatly supplemented my later research. I had the

fantastic opportunity to speak with two academics and three city planners during the course of the last weeks of my term. Many of these learnings helped shape my conclusions. Although much of the insight provided by these experts confirmed my initial thoughts, some challenged them, requiring me to reevaluate and restate many of my arguments.

Although much of the insight provided by these experts confirmed my initial thoughts, some challenged them, requiring me to reevaluate and restate many of my arguments.

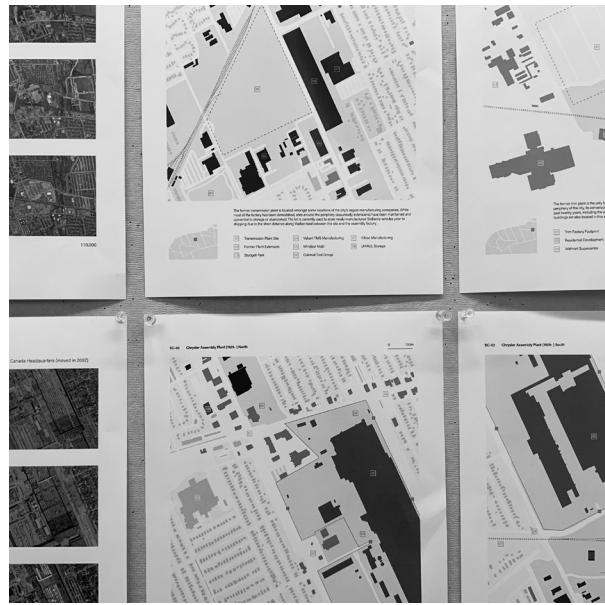
I was also extremely grateful for the feedback of my colleagues and friends. Through this project, I was able to find peers that were also passionate about research and inquiry, and share our enthusiasm alongside ideas and support.

Overall, this project was an excellent opportunity, not only to develop my own research interests, but to step outside the comfort of the structured education system and find new ways to learn and inquire. While I have always loved learning, this summer's rewarding experience opened my eyes to the colossal impact of systemic restructuring in the current transition away from fossil fuels, and allowed me to consider a future in research around this area.

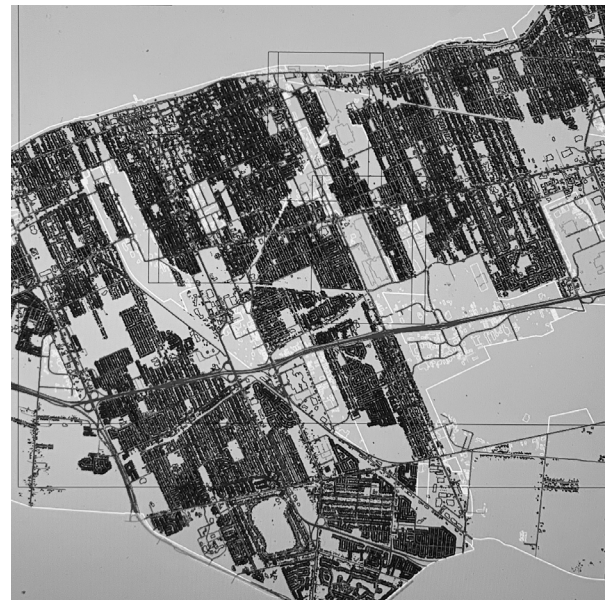
This summer's rewarding experience opened my eyes to the colossal impact of systemic restructuring in the current transition away from fossil fuels, and allowed me to consider a future in research around this area.

2023-08-30

Emma Hwang
emma.hwang@mail.utoronto.ca



Weekly and biweekly pin-ups were a helpful way to stay on top of work and deliver drawings (even if they weren't completely finished). While more common in studio-based courses, I found this method helpful for the visually-based portions of my research.



At times, the sheer scale of the city intimidated me. Above are the CAD geometry for the building's footprints and street boundaries. Working with large files at the size of the full city was a new and challenging experience