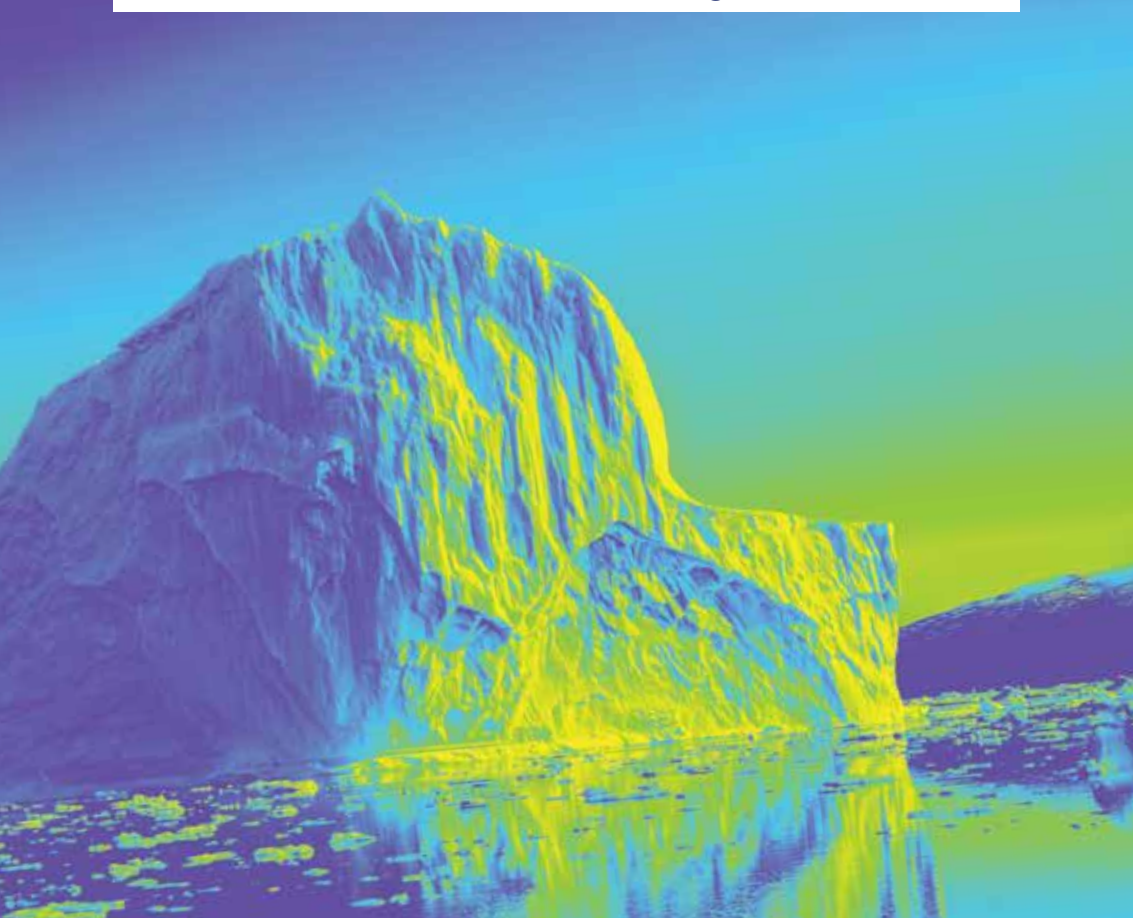


DESIGN FOR ADAPTATION

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Detroit 2022



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DESIGN FOR ADAPTATION

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TWO INSTITUTIONS, THREE TREES, TWELVE MAKERS: CURRICULUM CO-DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY, CLIMATE JUSTICE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MATERIAL CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the process and outcomes of an experimental woodworking studio arising from a collaboration between a museum of African American history and an art and design college. Three dying Zelkova trees on the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History's campus, destined for mulching, were reclaimed for a project exploring climate change, climate justice, and African American material culture through the creation of cultural artifacts.

The city of Detroit removes between 10,000 to 20,000 trees each year (Helm, 2016; Howrani Heeres, Detroit's Director of Sustainability, personal communication, 2022). When the trees at the museum were identified, the museum's Chief Sustainability Officer connected with the neighboring College for Creative Studies. Together, over the course of nearly two years, they developed a curriculum informed by extensive consultation and research amidst the city's designers, makers, artists, curators, activists, arborists, and planners.

The studio recruited half of its participants from the College's student body, and half from the community of Detroit, Hamtramck, and Highland Park, greatly enhancing the diversity of lived experiences within the group. Operating as an atelier, the students were asked at the outset to leave behind any preconceived ideas, where the thinking is completed before the making begins (Dunnigan, 2013, p. 98; Ingold, 2013, p. 21-22), and instead be led by both the material qualities of the wood and, with lectures from external experts, the contextual situatedness of the brief. This is akin to Ingold's (2013) morphogenetic mode "making in anticipation of what might emerge" (p. 21-22), but also respectful of design decolonization's advancement of different ways of knowing (Schultz et al., 2018, p. 4; Ansari, 2018) – or "[...] different kinds of knowledges [sic]" (Mbembe, 2015, in Campbell, 2016, p. 2) in the emergence of creative practice as a form of research. There were no boundaries to modes of thought and reflection.

In terms of the diversion of waste streams, the overall contribution to carbon sequestration is negligible. It is in the narrative that there is evidence of impact. The artist statements

exhibited alongside the artifacts provoked as much of a response as the artifacts themselves. Outcomes spoke powerfully to decolonization, land injustice, African American history, ancestry, place, and diaspora.

Humans have been designing things since before there was a word for design, (Cross, 1999, p. 25; Friedman, 2000, p. 5), and so too with storytelling. In the twenty-first century, designers routinely bring shape and form to narratives, which in turn shape and form the way humans experience the world. The story of this project, arising from two important cultural institutions in Detroit, has provoked and stimulated thinking amidst the city's community and is beginning to ripple into policy making.

Author Keywords

Climate justice; social justice; African American history; making; trees; sustainability.

Introduction

In 2018, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (The Wright Museum) discovered three dying Zelkova trees on their campus. These trees were marked for removal and destined to be mulched for compost. However, in 2019, as part of its mission to be a zero waste institution, the museum formed a collaboration with the College for Creative Studies (CCS) to instead harvest the timber for use in a creative endeavor.

The initial question arose as to how can two neighbors, a museum and a college of art and design, set a precedent for creative practice towards climate justice in the community? Wider questions that emerged are outlined later, but in seeking answers, research methodologies unfolded as action research, practice-as-research, community consultation, focus groups, interviews, and a *Treeposium*. All of this activity was extensively documented as diagrams, notes, plans, photographs, and films collated in a labyrinthine intranet site.

From all of this, a project emerged as a pilot for more ambitious levels of community and artistic engagement. The City of Detroit removes some 10,000 to 20,000 trees each year for various largely necessary reasons (Helm, 2016; Howrani Heeres, City of Detroit's Director of Sustainability, personal communication, 2022). The timber is typically mulched, while wood from larger trees can be utilized for creative and practical endeavors. Against this impactful backdrop, the Wright Museum and CCS combined their respective institutional expertise to intentionally design a woodshop class – the **d.Tree Studio** – that framed an understanding of African material culture in the context of sustainability and tree experiences in Detroit.

The **d.Tree Studio** project examined the socio-cultural and political history of Detroit through time, place, and space, and sought to connect and elevate voices of the African American experience throughout the diaspora. The creative outcomes and their intended narratives are discussed later in the paper (see Figures 1 to 5).

The foundational themes of the **d.Tree Studio** are:

- Respecting people, place, and history
- Objects are not neutral: All objects mediate, they have meaning and spirit in time and place

- Learning from the trees: The trees have witnessed changes in relationships in communities over time
- Sustainability

This is by no means the first time felled trees have been diverted for an artistic endeavor: notable examples include the *Witness Tree Project* out of the Rhode Island School of Design (2009 to 2018)¹ and the *Wych Elm Project* at Edinburgh's Royal Botanical Gardens in Scotland (*Wych Elm*, 2009). However, the unique perspective of this project is in its speaking to specific themes around African American history and culture and sustainability in a city in the midst of an extraordinary revival.

Through meaningful dialog on numerous perspectives and experiences and in-depth critical inquiry, this project offers a playbook for other institutions to collaborate and undertake work towards similar objectives, along with providing a foundation for its own continuing endeavor into new phases of the project.

The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic needs to be acknowledged. The Zelkova wood was milled in January 2020 and moved to the basement of the College for storage. The studio was originally scheduled to start in September 2020. The pandemic pushed subsequent planning meetings online and delayed the start of the studio by twelve months. In hindsight, this proved advantageous for planning and allowed for greater depth in detailing the project's aims and themes.

Furthermore, the project was almost derailed by climate change: unseasonably heavy rain led to severe flooding in midtown Detroit. The basements of both institutions were flooded with raw sewage backing up from a failing city sewer system. The milled lumber and tree branches were stored in the College basement and, by chance, in the only section unaffected.

Background

Urban forests and trees have agency in cities. The practical benefits of a healthy urban tree canopy are varied – shade, carbon sequestration, mitigation of air pollution and storm water run-off, noise reduction, and reduced crime (Carmichael, 2017, p. 21).² Equally, trees can provide a “tone and feel,” marking out socio-economic-cultural-ecological spaces of one kind or another (Jones, 2017, p. 111). Furthermore, in cities, trees can delineate areas of uneven distribution of social well-being “... in relation to ethnicity and income” (Jones, 2017, p. 115).

Urban trees require ongoing management and stewardship. As previously mentioned, the City of Detroit removes thousands of trees each year due to disease, storm damage, instability (posing a risk to people or property), or the expansion of civic infrastructure. From the city's point of view, the most cost effective way to deal with the felled trees, regardless of their size, is to mulch them for compost. Paul Hickman (personal communication, 2022) of Urban Ashes, part of the Urban Wood Network,³ explains that the life cycle assessment (LCA) of trees in Detroit is one of planting, trimming, and removal. Costs are in the “tipping” of trees and to optimize the LCA, funding needs to be transferred to maintenance and careful planting. Furthermore, while the decision to remove a tree is not taken lightly,

once a mature tree is removed, it takes many years for replanted trees to make up for the carbon sequestration.

Removing urban trees is altogether different to felling trees in commercial lumber operations, and while the costs are much higher, the timber is equally usable. Other U.S. cities, notably Pittsburgh⁴ and Baltimore,⁵ have successfully implemented urban lumber operations.⁶ The United States-based Urban Wood Network advances the notion of urban lumber as a material resource rather than waste. They emphasize that city trees have their highest value when still alive, but cite the U.S. Forest Service in claiming that “[...] reclaimed wood from all dead and diseased community trees could equal nearly 4 billion board feet or about 30% of annual hardwood consumption in the United States” (Urban Wood Network, 2022). This could amount to a significant reduction in the consumption of hardwood from commercial operations.

From the perspective of political ecology, urban forests have interests that include and favor some, exclude and marginalize others, and typically benefit some groups more than others (Sandberg et al., 2015, p. 6). The replanting of trees in Detroit has its own social challenges. As the city recovers from economic and population decline over the last 50 or more years, the replanting of trees is associated with gentrification and those seeking only to make a profit. Decision makers are seen as political or corporate “elites” with vested interests in maximizing profit and capital accumulation (Carmichael, 2017, p. 31). Furthermore, having had hazardous trees removed, people do not want to be burdened with maintaining new ones where civic services have failed to do so (Funes, 2018). As such, the replanting of trees is often viewed as government imposition. More is needed to engage with and include the range of stakeholders on the importance of trees to cities and their inhabitants. It is not just for civic authorities to take control: “Political ecologists consider urban forests as human constructs that are not the preserve of urban forest professionals but a variety of interest groups including residents, environmentalists, social scientists, and artists” (Sandberg et al., 2015, p. 6).

Also, in foregrounding practical benefits, civic efforts may overlook socio-cultural factors like beauty and cultural heritage (Carmichael, 2017, p. 17; Jones, 2017, p. 114). Here, the narratives arising from arts and cultural perspectives held by an African American history museum and a college of art and design may be more successful in leveraging community control and participation.

Detroit has a history of racial division, social injustices, and social upheaval (Boyd, 2017; Surgue, 1996). Such experiences continue in the present day, as poignantly underlined by the 2021 Summer of Protest in response to the murder of George Floyd. This brought to the fore once again the unavoidable legacy of colonialism and slavery in the United States. African American history and African material culture provide powerful narratives towards decolonization, which has many parallels with sustainability objectives. Rather than making alterations to existing power structures of the global North, both call for a complete deconstruction of these and their failing economic systems (Hickel, 2021), and a rebuilding of entirely new ones that are fit for all humans and the planet.

Methodology

Navigating the complex factors of historical and current social injustices combined with

climate justice and sustainability required in-depth discourse and critical inquiry, and documentation of the subsequent reflective practices and planning. It was essential for the project to be clearly defined with carefully considered aims and objectives based on qualitative research.

Action research – reflection in and on one's own practice (Swann, 2002) – arose in the ongoing conversations and planning (practice) that is well-documented in notes, diagrams, and charts. This is also practice-as-research, a multi-modal form of research consisting of a praxis in an iterative process of “doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing” (Nelson, 2013, p. 32).

Semi-structured interviews and personal communication with key artists, creatives, activists, and policy makers from the city helped to frame the objectives of the project. A visit to the workspace of prominent Detroit creative Olayami Dabls (known as Dabls) and a tour of his extensive outdoor works provided examples of a deeply rich narrative on decolonization. Dabls is referred to here as a “creative” because he asserts that in many African cultures there is no word for art. He rejects the terms art and artist as a Western commodification of practice. This is also the reason that the **d**.Tree Studio participants are referred to as makers and not artists in this context.

Focus groups gave rise to rich dialog. Conversations with long-standing city residents and elders provided valuable perspectives and oral histories that helped to set in place the project themes.

The Treeposium

Perhaps the most impactful and insightful event was the *Treeposium*⁷ (tree symposium) led by Leslie Tom of the Wright Museum, with a five-person panel consisting of an award-winning African American creative (see above), an African American architect and urban planner, an Asian American landscape architect and infrastructure planner, a Native American (Anishinaabe) artist, storyteller, and filmmaker, and an African American city elder. The *Treeposium* had over 900 views and started with a four-minute film, voiced by city elder Etta Adams, that succinctly framed the project. The conversations arising from this event provided deep anecdotal insight into the themes of the project.

The accompanying film was made in the months before the *Treeposium*. The writing, storyboarding, and production for this was, in itself, action research in that the practice gave rise to new knowledge and insights. The research data was documented in an extensive intranet site and was vital to informing the practices of the studio.

The **d.Tree Studio**

The two institutions formed the **d**.Tree Studio, an atelier comprising twelve makers. Five were students at the College, and seven – community members – were new and emerging artists with strong links to the city. All were enrolled into the class at the graduate level, and the seven community members were provided with a full scholarship. The class was taught by Ian Lambert with input and support from Leslie Tom, John Rizzo of CCS, and guest speakers.

Studio members learned about socio-cultural research methods (storytelling, listening, and inquiry) and practical woodworking techniques in the pursuit of artistic practice. Participants also explored cultural place-making and narrative development methods.

The **d.**Tree Studio explored connections between design, African American material culture and history, and sustainability. The Studio affirmed that there is a deep connection between story making and object making. It acknowledged that objects are not neutral, pushed back on disposable culture, and challenged the class to reveal the stories embedded within objects that convey belonging, respect, and wisdom.

The wood is from trees with deep roots in Detroit, growing in soil that contains memories of the land, even before Detroit became Detroit. The Zelkova trees were cut and milled from wood to lumber which extended their life cycle (see Figure 1). The trees' new form allows for the exploration of its transition to artifacts examining the past, present, and future of African American experiences in Detroit. An urban tree's place, location, and role as a cultural landmark can be embodied in the artifacts they become.



Figure 1. Zelkova wood planks in the wood shop (2021).

The studio members were briefed that all objects mediate (Dant, 1999, p. 13) and the outcomes could arise as subtle community installations, small pieces of furniture, carvings, craft objects, or artworks along with a narrative that is tested through an iterative community process. This iterative process provided feedback to students on how the object/narrative and message is received and which woodworking methods to hone.

Studio members were advised to avoid starting the class with a concept in mind, where the thinking is complete before the making begins (Dunnigan, 2013, p. 98; Ingold, 2013, p. 21-22). Instead, they were encouraged to be led by both the material qualities of the wood and, with lectures from external experts, the contextual situatedness of the brief. This is akin to Ingold's (2013) morphogenetic mode, "making in anticipation of what might emerge" (p. 21-22), but also respectful of design decolonization's advancement of different ways of knowing (Schultz et al., 2018, p. 4; Ansari, 2018) – or, "[...] different kinds of knowledges [sic]" (Mbembe, 2015, in Campbell, 2016, p. 2) in the emergence of creative practice as a form of research. There were no boundaries to modes of thought and reflection.

Sustainability

The life of a tree can span years, decades, or centuries where they take root. They catalog time, environmental change, social experiences, and the history of the places they are planted. They communicate their experiences through their health, their rings, their leaves, and their roots.

Wood is an important resource in many local industries as well as in artistic creation, and the project aimed to bring attention to urban lumber as a resource within the community. Without intervention, these trees would add to landfills and increase carbon emissions. By making wood objects, studio members were practicing carbon sequestration. The studio framed the use of urban lumber as a sustainable design medium to push back against a disposable culture.

Selection of Makers

Community members applied following an open call across the city through various channels. Student members applied following a call across the College; they could hail from any discipline, but needed to be at the sophomore level or above at the start of the class. Candidates did not need to be expert makers, but were required to have basic (foundation level) experience working in machine shops.

The **d.Tree** Studio sought candidates that:

- Had a diversity of backgrounds and ideas
- Had a connection to Detroit or neighboring Hamtramck or Highland Park
- Were curious and open to the process of learning from the trees
- Understood the possibilities and opportunities of the project
- Were able to be reflective throughout the experience
- Understand stories they were drawn to
- Could offer a critical lens of analysis to the process of storytelling and making

Applications were sought that:

- Demonstrated curiosity and openness to the introspective, iterative, inquiry-focused learning process
- Were insightful, critical, and persuasive

Schedule

Members undertook preliminary reading/viewing/listening during the summer months. The class was structured into three phases:

Phase 1: Research and Preparation

The first four weeks of the class allowed participants to explore the d.Tree Studio context in greater depth, become familiar with the materials and processes, and undertake some introductory tasks, including a quick self-portrait in wood.

Objectives: Explore the context in-depth, gain familiarity with the materials, and explore artistic concepts.

Phase 2: Create Proposal

In the second four weeks, participants collated exploratory contextual and creative findings, and devised a proposal in direct response to the brief. Continuing a process of material inquiry, models and maquettes were used to explore narratives and plan the execution of the final outcome. This phase concluded with a critique by external artists and designers.

Objectives: Develop ideas and make models and maquettes.

Phase 3: Make and Finesse Artwork

The final six weeks of the class was devoted to the making and completion of the final creative outcome. This phase ended with the exhibition in early 2022.

Objectives: Make an artifact and prepare for the exhibition.

Funding

The costs of the project were equally met by both institutions, with an additional \$10,010 of funding at the latter stage awarded by the Michigan Council for Artistic and Cultural Affairs.

The Work and Exhibition

The work was shown in a public exhibition in March 2022, held at one of the College's galleries in a building that, by coincidence, once housed the Wright Museum. The opening night included guests from both institutions' leadership and key figures from Detroit's policy makers, activists, makers, and artists. The exhibition was covered in the media and there were over 100 public visitors. Each of the makers was asked to prepare an exhibition statement on their work (cited below).⁸

The studio outcomes were varied in approach and scale, ranging from free-standing sculptures to performance props and backdrops, wall hangings, and a record player playing Duke Ellington. Five pieces are foregrounded below, with a brief overview of the other seven.

Among the most talked about pieces was a decolonized chess set (see Figure 2) made by a sophomore illustration student, herself a one-time state age-group chess champion.

The piece explores the notion that colonization is so deeply rooted in society that it goes unrecognized. She deconstructed the traditional European influence of chess to address imbalanced power dynamics and created rules based on a collaborative process that revolves around community, liberation, and humility as opposed to dividing, conquering, and dominating. The chessboard here is circular to reflect the African drum and dance circles. The pawn, which traditionally is the weakest and smallest piece, is recast as the largest to show its potential and importance within the community (Faith Serio, maker statement, 2022).



Figure 2. Faith Serio (2021), *Decolonized Chess Set* [sculpture: Zelkova wood].

The artist was asked to speak at the exhibition opening and detailed how she grew up in a small farm town in up-state Michigan, oblivious to the ingrained colonization more visible in the city:

This project propelled me to research and learn about African material culture and decolonization. My creative outlook has shifted and allowed me to realize the power in community and how the art that I create has the ability to inspire positive change. (Faith Serio, maker statement, 2022)

Figure 3 shows *Rooted*, a hair pick for African hair, scaled up in size, that speaks to intergenerational connectivity between mothers and daughters and honors the wisdom, creativity, and knowledge of Black women. This piece by Kristian Varano (2022), a photographer and Detroit community member, is dedicated to her daughter: "May your hair grow strong in the roots of Mother Africa."

Rooted was inspired by the wooden combs of Africa which are used in the rich tradition of hair styling and adornment. This same sentiment is echoed in the rich hair culture of Detroit.

The **d**.Tree Studio experience allowed me to be seen and heard as I communicated with other aspects of my life that are valuable and vulnerable at the same time. I was successful in utilizing my voice as a Black creator and woman in this work. (Kristian Varano, maker statement, 2022)

When presented at the final critique, Varano was six months pregnant and as she sat and spoke, she unknowingly cradled the work in her arms, as one might cradle a baby. When this was pointed out, it elevated the poignancy of narrative for the audience.



Figure 3. Kristian Varano (2021), *Rooted* [sculpture: Zelkova wood].

The aquatic-like forms of *The Shaping* (Figure 4) are intended create a resemblance to the transatlantic slave trade and Detroit's commerce. Jasmine Brown (2022), a second-year MFA Color and Materials Design student, experimented with the language of tension, weaving with the bark to explore the practice of "healing through the spiritual movement of spoken word and poetic performance of the material." The piece explores how humans emerge from a complex series of historical events shaping language.

In a world filled with gifts, the Zelkova tree was given to me by The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History to create a

relationship between the material, the spiritual, and the living world. I came to listen to the Zelkova tree; we do not share a common tongue [...] With my newfound knowledge of the trees as our ancestors, I grew closer to the material, listening to the snap and crackle of the Zelkova, knowing the tree upheld its divinity because it was entrusted to me. (Jasmine Brown, maker statement, 2022)



Figure 4. Jasmine Brown (2021), *The Shaping* [sculpture: Zelkova wood and bark].

Community member and metalworker Lily Kline's untitled piece (Figure 5) explores the significance of entities that are specific to the region:

... fractured bits of a home, perfectly broken infrastructure pulled from the Detroit River, natural materials such as wool yarn, leaves foraged around Belle Isle, and jute, a plant-based fiber that allows the entirety of the plant to be used for food, a form of fuel, and building material. The fragments of what was once a working system demonstrate how capitalism is now failing and the vulnerability of homes, communities, and natural resources. The materials and fragments are intended to demonstrate their power and energy as almost sacred elements. By weaving them together as a form of textile art provides a device for storytelling and historical documenting, and aspects of the natural environment. (Lily Kline, maker statement, 2022)



Figure 5. Lily Kline (2021), *Untitled* [mixed media sculpture: Zelkova wood, reclaimed windows, jute, bronze, leaves].

Other works included *Cosmogram/Tesseract* by community member and artist Reuben Telushkin. It is a rumination on nonlinear narrative: the syncopation of repeated layers of the same shape until a critical mass of redundancy of layers is achieved, creating "...a viewing experience wherein there is no front or back, no beginning or end, no natural point for the eye to rest" (Telushkin, 2022). What is seen depends on the point of view:

Because trees are nonlinear storytellers and timekeepers, they assert a circular cosmology of time: death followed by rebirth, endings as beginnings, and output as input. This work was rooted in history and guided by knowledge of what came before: the Sankofa principle—turning back to go forward, closing the loop, the completion of the cycle, handing down the story, and life feeding back into itself. A circular concept of life and time. (Reuben Telushkin, maker statement, 2022)

Time is Cyclical by senior illustration student Kelsey Bailey is a woodblock print using a seven-foot plank from one of the tree trunks with a carved narrative of Detroit's social history. "I was able to connect with the feeling and notion of the ancestors being within the trees, literally carving figures into the wood..." (Bailey, 2022).

Trees Grow on Money by community member and designer DaTrice Clark addresses land injustices in the city using turned wooden vases holding paper flowers made from *Monopoly* money presented on a serving tray:

My work exhibits how the harvesting of trees disrupts communities, displaces people, and reroutes resources, all for the sake of capitalism. In short, what nature provides for free, man puts a price on and serves it back to us for a fee, hence the serving tray. (DaTrice Clark, maker statement, 2022)

Tree Crankie, created by community member and performance artist Zach Kolodziej, is a tree-shaped *crankie* theater created for a staged public performance at Detroit Cantastoria Fest – *Sing! Of a Tree in Detroit* – recorded for the exhibition. The piece seeks to uplift trees as the site of storytelling and storytellers in their own right. This project is informed by the African indigenous knowledge that the tree is the original historian: “They are the ancestors from which our lives originated, the keepers of sacred knowledge” (Zach Kolodziej, maker statement, 2022).

The Reveal, by community member Leslie Tom, an architect and sustainability leader, focuses on how interior traumas, when exposed, express the exterior identity. Traumas continue to be centered around creating a new Detroit or erasing respect for history. It connects to African material culture by observing and respecting the resonant sound of the African drum and improvisations of African dance, which inspired the piece. “I am forever changed by the trees, as I did not realize how nature holds so many ways to create new, beautiful, meaningful objects” (Leslie Tom, maker statement, 2022).

Reflections as Reminders by senior product design student Olivia Holt considers the lessons the trees tell us. The tree rings show us how the trees survived and adapted when necessary, showing us how to grow stronger in self as life passes on, just as our ancestors before us. “Trees are the first of the living. They have been here since the beginning of time, quietly holding on to the secrets of the world. They tower above us, while watching us walk through life...” (Olivia Holt, maker statement, 2022).

The Sonic Experience by sophomore product design student Francis Bazil was created with the power of music and culture in the diaspora in mind. It is a record player housed in Zelkova wood presented as a modern-day *djembe*, an African drum traditionally carved from a single piece of hardwood.

The Sacred Stick by community member and furniture maker Jason Kehdi was created based upon the African belief that trees are to be revered because our ancestors are in the trees. Such beliefs were labeled as superstitious by Europeans enthralled by a scientific epistemology, but:

If a child is only taught scientific facts and finds themselves standing before a field of grass they may stomp through the field without a care because their thought is, “It’s only grass.” However, if a child is taught wondrous stories about spirits and fairies that live amongst the grass, the

child may be apt to tread lightly through said fields with the thought of protecting the spirits and fairies. (Jason Kehdi, maker statement, 2022)

All of the makers' work and accompanying reflective statements give a rich and diverse set of original perspectives on the past, present, and future. They evidence the power of voice in thematic creative practices and outcomes. Such conversations are unlikely to arise in political or logistical discussions alone, but serve to resonate across disciplines in advancing understanding and change.

Conclusion

The **d**.Tree Studio mission was, and still is, to develop artistic outcomes embodying a narrative that serves to advance discourse on social justice in the City of Detroit. The Wright Museum drives a thematically deep and informed approach to the design and making of artifacts. The collaboration between the museum and CCS provides a hub for new artistic talent to design and craft outcomes that use deep and thoughtful narratives drawn from socio-cultural experiences, aligned to the socio-cultural African American experience in the city.

The **d**.Tree Studio asked: How do we create a space to elevate Detroit and African American experiences while creating a context for critical history, culture, and science as a lens for what the Detroit trees have experienced in the past, present, and future?

The project:

- Advanced a narrative of community arts using Detroit urban trees
- Had a strong focus on community narrative aligned to the mission of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
- Worked at the intersection of community arts, education, culture, and history
- Advanced a narrative of sustainability, inclusivity, space, and change
- Respected listening and diverse storytelling
- Advanced artistic expression and practical woodworking techniques
- Foregrounded cultural place-making and adaptation

The trees have witnessed the changing relationships in the community over time and teach us:

- Respect for people, place, and history
- That objects are not neutral: They have meaning and spirit in time and place

The role of the studio in the climate change space is as one of many cultural and artistic enablers, providing tools for communities. As Sandberg et al. (2015, p. 6) say, the arts and humanities have an important role to play in the political ecology of trees, and so it is the case in the advocacy for climate change and social justice.

The **d**.Tree Studio has been impactful in advancing conversations on trees and sustainability through the arts, culture, and history. It has altered perspectives of practice of

the participants (both studio members and its contributors), many of whom have been emboldened to advance their work into new areas.

This work continues today. The **d**.Tree Studio has started planning for a new phase that uses systems thinking and data mapping on trees across the city to inform site-specific narratives and adaptive works made from retrieved urban wood.

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¹ See www.witnesstreeproject.org

² See www.greeningofdetroit.com/

³ See <https://urbanwoodnetwork.org/>

⁴ See <https://pittsburghurbantree.com/>

⁵ See <http://baltimorewoodproject.org/>

⁶ In fact, Detroit had a municipal sawmill on Belle Isle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, where the city's felled trees were taken to be processed into usable lumber. The sawmill currently is under restoration for heritage purposes.

⁷ See www.dtree.me/treeposium

⁸ Artist statements are available for reference on the **d**.Tree Studio website, www.dtree.me