THIS IS POUGHKEEPSIE’S FALL KILL
OVERVIEW

The City of Poughkeepsie originated as an industrial mill town, fueled by a winding estuary that eventually spills into the mighty Hudson River. In a series of decisions since, it has been canalized and culverted, converting this life source into a toxic spillway and dumping ground. Significant storm runoff events such as Hurricane Irene (2011) flooded the adjacent neighborhoods, emphasizing the need for a concerted look at the creek and the aggregation of debris within. However, it is often overlooked that the Fall Kill remains a peaceful ecological oasis. Cleanup efforts, often led by local youth organizations have provided the groundwork for community involvement to revitalize this shared asset.

To study the creek and its adjacent context, a summer workshop has been founded by Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation and Planning that has been hosted by MASS Design Group’s Hudson Valley Design Lab in Poughkeepsie from August 1-18, 2017. In partnership with Scenic Hudson, and alongside students from Nubian Directions, five Columbia students have teamed up with lab staff to help learn the stories of this incredible creek and its immediate neighbors. This is not a static view of the Fall Kill, but a beginning of an ongoing story that documents historical evolution, learns from personal experiences, and empowers residents to shape the creek’s future.
HISTORY

Legend has it that the name Poughkeepsie comes from the Native American term for the falls near the mouth of the Fall Kill Creek, “Pooghkepesingh,” meaning “where the water breaks.” The Dutch, the first settlers of the Hudson Valley, adopted the term for the name of the new settlement and referred to the creek as the Val-kil (“Fall Creek” in Dutch).

The creek powered Poughkeepsie’s early industry. Jon Smeedes and other Dutch settlers constructed the first mills in the last quarter of the 17th century near the mouth of the creek, harnessing the power of the falls to saw lumber and grind wheat. The first mill pond, Red Mill Pond and later known as Winnikee Pond, was created in what is now the Middle Main area. Bartholomew Crannell owned the first dam, located roughly where present-day North Hamilton Street crosses the creek and perhaps created as early as 1730. George Booth built the first large storage reservoir just above the falls in 1803 on the site of a small natural pool, using the water to power a factory for carding wool. Water-powered industry proliferated along the creek until the late 1800s. The 19th century saw the rise of many industries along the creek, extant remains of which include the Pelton Mill Lofts, Piano Factory, Underwear Factory, and Cigar Factory. Industrial use required the construction, adaption, and demolition of many structures along the creek as well as diverting, damming, pooling, and rerouting the creek to create adequate water power. The last mill pond, George Booth’s pond, then known as Pelton Pond, was un-dammed and filled in in 1899.

By the 20th century, the creek had been channelized to pass through the city of Poughkeepsie efficiently. Turn of the century photographs reveal that property owners narrowed passages and directed waterflow with wooden and stone rubble walls. A New Deal project in the 1930s addressing channelization involved the construction of many of the stone and cement walls currently lining the creek path.

Even though water no longer powered industry, land use patterns along the creek have remained predominantly industrial or commercial due to city zoning ordinances. The commercial uses directly and indirectly contributed to significant water quality and safety issues in the last quarter of the 20th century--some of which persist today. Residents, conservationists, and local elected officials became aware of contamination from oil, sewage, chemicals, and debris in the 1970s. Elevated debris levels exacerbated natural flooding, the most devastating and recent of which occurred in August 2011 in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene. More recently, Nubian Directions has employed local residents--particularly youths--in clean-up efforts since 2012.

This is not the first time that suggestions have been made to reclaim access to the Fall Kill. In 2012, Clearwater and Columbia University explored the feasibility of a Fall Kill Trail. The history of the Fall Kill Creek--and even the experience of walking the creek--reveals the heavy hand with which humans have shaped and reshaped the creek over time.
City’s Fuel Seeping into Creek, Cleanup begun
Apr 11, 1988
Newspaper Article by Tom Topousis for the Poughkeepsie Journal

He’s up to his knees in problems
Mar 5, 1979
Article by Pamela Golinski
Photograph by Morna Moore

Youths Scour Fall Kill Creek
Jul 22, 1977
Newspaper Article by Eric Trilling
Photograph by Morna Moore
Incorporated village of Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County, State of New York
Ink on paper 1834
Map created by Henry Whinfield (Poughkeepsie)
City of Poughkeepsie, Plan
1867 Engraving
Atlas map showing property ownership
A Map of Poughkeepsie
1931 Drawing
Map of Speakeasies and Landmarks
Map by T. Barrett
CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

- John Bartelstone Gallery Images
- Mapping the Fall Kill
- Fall Kill Section Cuts
- Images of the Fall Kill
We have had the great fortune to be accompanied by an architectural photographer from New York City with a keen aesthetic eye. He has wholeheartedly immersed himself in the experience of the creek, tromping through the water with all of his equipment on multiple occasions. He has become mesmerized, as we have, with the beauty and intrigue still present within this largely forgotten and neglected local resource.
A new map has been developed to focus on the Fall Kill, including historic mill pond underlays, current zoning designations, locations of accessibility, and an emphasis on the parcels adjoining the creek.

Photos and drawings directly following the map correspond to key locations along the creek of particular interest. They recall a detailed look edge conditions, accessibility issues, flood remnants, infrastructure, materials, and outflows.
PROCESS

Out of House
Walking the Fall Kill
Neighborhood survey

In House
Lectures
Workshops
Gallery renovation and curation
Out of House

Walking the Fall Kill
Neighborhood survey

Not only did we have the amazing opportunity to walk through the Fall Kill, but we walked the creek's edges, chatting with local residents about their relationship to and opinions on the creek. Although this process is on-going, it set the foundation for future conversations with community members that are and will continue to be affected by decisions made regarding the Fall Kill.
In House

Lectures
Workshops
Gallery Renovation and Curation

An intense three weeks of exploring in and around the Fall Kill Creek was supplemented by a long list of guest lectures and workshops on Academy Street in Poughkeepsie.

An important component of the workshop was having the opportunity to hear and learn from experts and those with prior experience in Poughkeepsie and cities like it. The diversity of personal accounts, accounts from community members, and information and background from professionals enabled a more richly informed interpretation of the Fall Kill.
PRODUCTION

Exhibition Contents

- Interactive Map
- History
- Map with Photos and Sections
- Community Comments and Drawings
- John Bartelstone Gallery
- Video
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Support From:
Columbia Urban Design
MASS Design Group
Scenic Hudson, Inc.
Nubian Directions II, Inc.
The Dyson Foundation
NEA Art Works
Poughkeepsie Journal

Special Thanks:
Kate Orff
Jennifer Drake
Josh Simons
Sarah Brennan
Bradford Jefferson
Fred Krajewski
Brooke Vaillancourt
Paul Hesse
Paul Calogerakis