Willamette Falls Legacy: Building a Post-Industrial Landscape

The inaugural John Yeon Studio: a comprehensive design studio led by THA Architecture’s Becca Cavell, FAIA and the Yeon Center’s Randy Gragg

Like the ruins found on a Mediterranean coast, the landscape adjacent to Oregon City’s Willamette Falls rises in layers: the newly bankrupt Blue Heron Paper Mill’s cavernous industrial buildings loom atop the foundations of the Willamette Woolen Mills which were first built on a millennia-old salmon and lamprey fishing site—all next a 20,000-cubic-feet-per-second, 42-foot-high cascade that, in North America, is second in size only to Niagara Falls.

Over the last year, Metro and Oregon City created a plan to partition 15 acres of the site for a 100-year flood zone and waterfront park and rezoned six blocks of the old mill for mixed-use development. It is arguably the most stunning redevelopment site in the Northwest, and the Tacoma-based developer MegaRock just bought it. Now the questions are: What new development might be economically viable? What of the old buildings can be saved? What can be built anew? How can the rich history of the site be brought to life for future generations?
Led by THA principal Becca Cavell (joined by other THA architects) and longtime architecture writer and John Yeon Center director Randy Gragg, this comprehensive studio will offer the opportunity to design both new buildings or adaptively reuse existing structures. But it will begin with a 3-credit seminar that will explore the history of the site and the economics of redeveloping it in order to evolve a larger “district plan”—from the urban design plan to communications strategy for launching it. Students will not only evolve their architectural design acumen but their skills in strategic thinking and communication.

**Setting the Stage: Fall, 2014 Seminar—3 credits:**
Students will explore the Willamette Falls/Blue Heron site and learn about other post-industrial redevelopments in the region and beyond. Guest speakers will offer insights into the site’s Native American and Euro-American heritage, the contemporary economic and political challenges, and the technical complexities and opportunities. Interspersed with these speakers will be other guests specializing in political, economic, and communications strategies. Students will collaboratively develop a heritage/urban design plan, development guidelines, and a base model for a “district”—but also an equally important strategy and “story”—that will provide the setting and theme for the individual buildings to follow.

**Investigations: Winter, 2014 Studio:**
In the winter studio’s first half, students will focus on specific sites and development opportunities to create an individual program statement for each of their projects. Consideration of the larger urban context, economic viability, and potential phasing will be expected. Students’ projects can be
involve adaptive reuse of the site’s rich array of existing structures or be entirely new. Projects might include (but not be limited to) a brewery, community college, housing, new industries, a heritage museum, to name only a few, but with expectation that each project will build upon the overall narrative and urban design plan. Students will develop multiple site response options for mid-term debate, and then focus on development of single resultant project. Meetings with landscape design and architectural professionals will inform project development. Students will be coached on verbal, written, and visual communications at each juncture to sharpen their persuasive skills.

**Refinements: Spring, 2014 Studio:**
The second term will focus on the more technical aspects of design development – integrating structural, mechanical and other systems and deepening the students’ focus on materials, detail, and meaningful high-performance and sustainable strategies. This term will include workshops with professionals from a variety of consultants including structural and mechanical engineers, but also public speaking, offering students deeper insights into integrated project development and helping them gain confidence in presenting their ideas to potential clients and the public.

**Final presentations:**
This is the inaugural John Yeon Studio, a new program of A&AA’s John Yeon Center. The Center is inspired by the design thinking of John Yeon, whose 60-year career produced some of the Pacific Northwest’s earliest ecologically sensitive residential architecture and most advanced thinking about conservation and landscape. The John Yeon studio will focus on regionally significant sites in which the students’ work can provide research and inspiration for future decisions. The studio will focus urban design and individual buildings, but with a strong emphasis on strategy and communications to achieve the most inspired outcomes. The studio will result in both the traditional final critique but also an exhibition, public presentation, and a publication to be presented in collaboration with Oregon City and Metro.

**Need more information?**
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