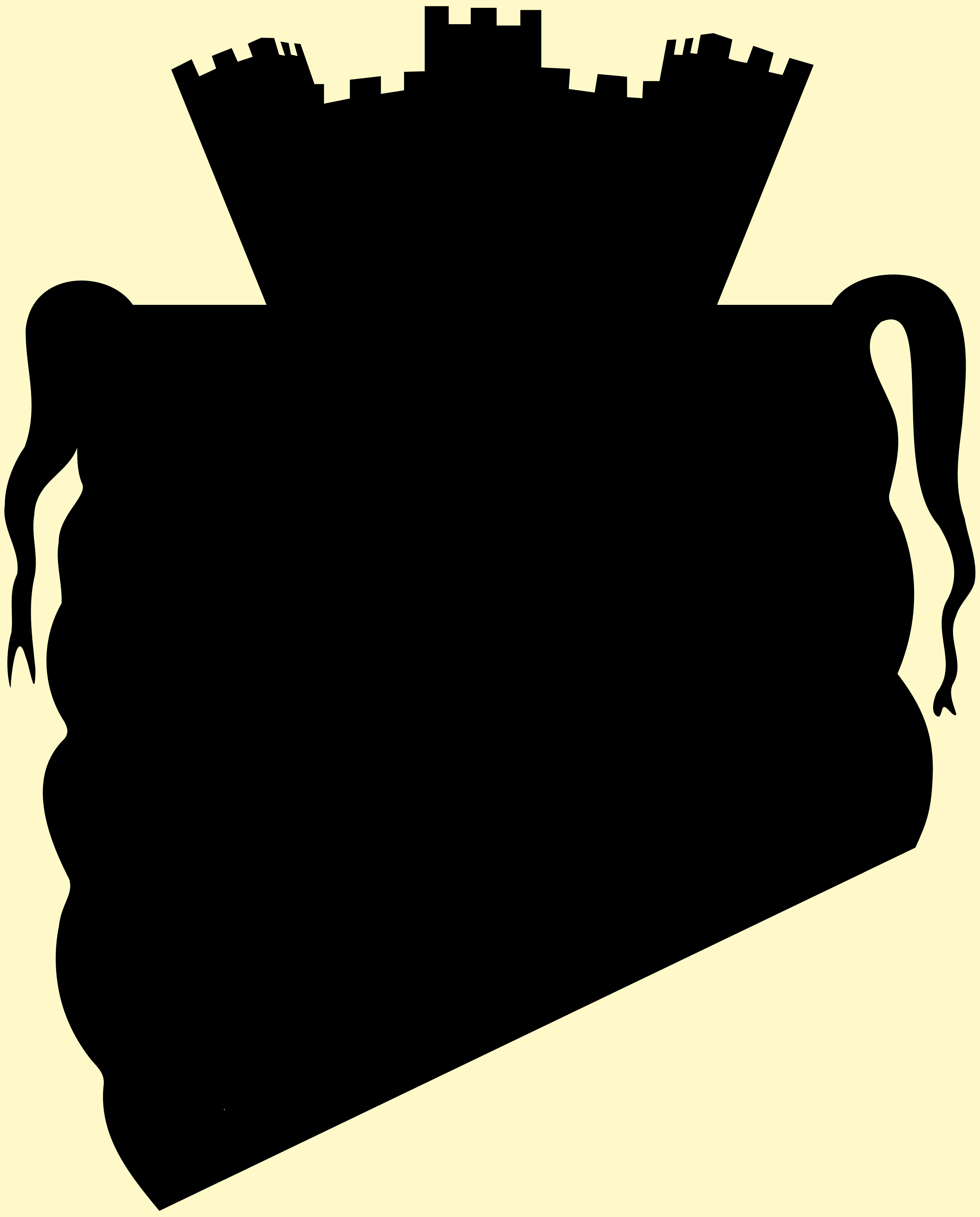
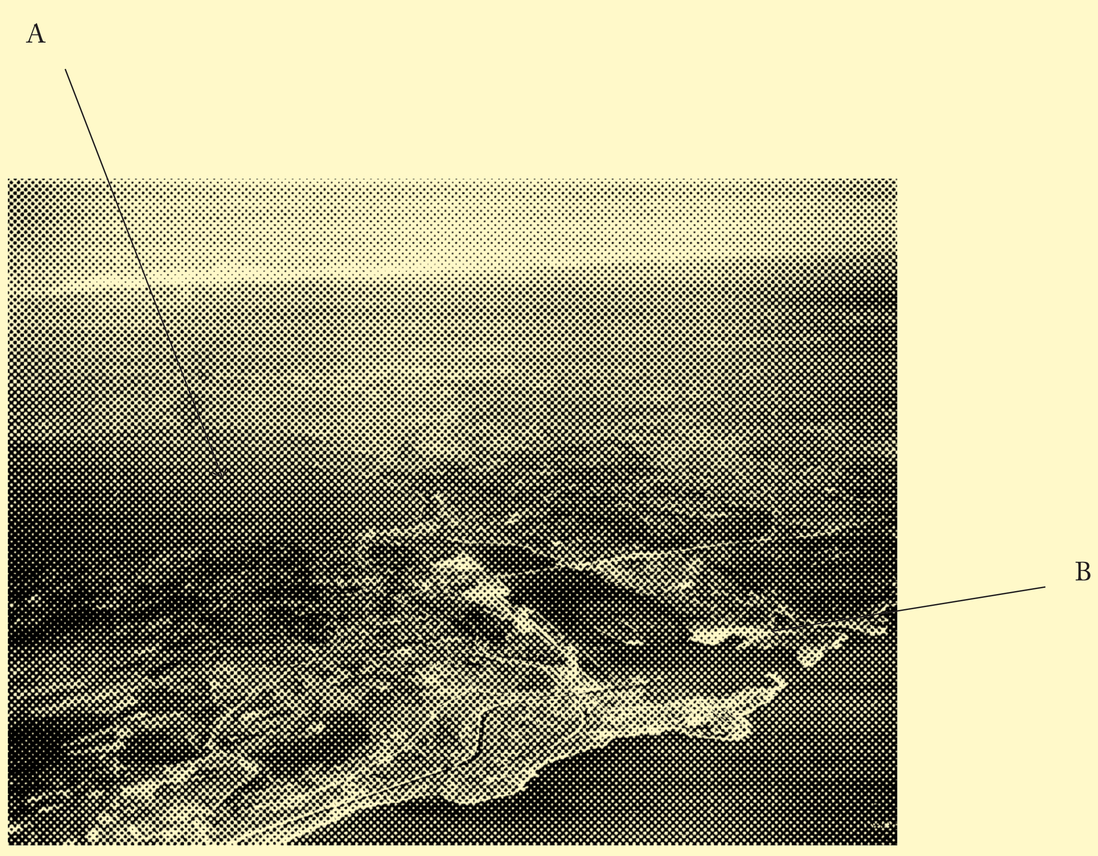


Architecture is one of the many scales of toxicity—from construction materials reliant on oil, homes constructed on polluted lands, or domestic spaces as sites of bodily contamination. In “Service of: Berre” challenges conventional approaches to design by considering pollution as another form of matter, with the toxic territory of the Etang de Berre/Fos as site.

In Service of: Berre

Fall 2025 Design Studio BA5, MA1 (Malterre-Barthes)
More on IS-Academia



Source:

Walter Mittelholzer, [redacted] *Port de Bouc–Martigues–Étang de Berre*, LBS_MH02-05-0081.tif, aerial photograph, 1928, ETH-Bibliothek, ETH Zürich, E-Pics Image Archive, accessed July 21, 2025. [redacted]

[A] The Étang de Berre
[B] Fos-sur-Mer

In Service of: Berre
Fall 2025 Design Studio

Mondays and Tuesdays

Monday: 10:00-12:00, 13:00-18:00
Tuesday: 10:00-12:00, 15:00-18:00

Office Hours as requested

Credits: 12 ECTS

Location: Varies, See Studio Schedule
Studio Space: SG 2211 - Studio Space

This class is taught in English

Teaching Team:
Charlotte Malterre-Barthes (charlotte.malterrebarthes@epfl.ch); Elif Erez-Henderson (elif.erez@epfl.ch); Antoine Iweins (antoine.iweinsdeeckhoutte@epfl.ch)

Student Assistants:
Eva Outstric (eva.oustric@epfl.ch);
Lydia Genecand (lydia.genecand@epfl.ch)

Course Description:

Nota Bene: This studio is part of the “In Service of:…” fall series that seeks to redress uneven access to design and planning literacy for the majority (Previous studios: “In Service of: Marseille”—architectural, “In Service of: le Mirail”—urban, and this one, territorial). The studio series places design as a tool at the service of a place, a population, a territory, a narrative, for the benefit of the common good.

“When crude oil enters our bodies in the form of toxins, it transforms our senses, creating a radically shifted orientation toward the world.”
Mameni, Salar. Terracene: A Crude Aesthetics. Durham: Duke University Press Durham, 2023.

The Étang de Berre (hereafter “Berre,” the “Pond”) is a 155 km^2 brackish water body—a mix of sweet and salt water—surrounded by petrochemical industry. The area of the largest saltwater lake in Europe is heavily polluted—as the water, air, soil, and bodies. Located northwest of Marseille, the Etang de Berre is, since 1863, connected to the Mediterranean Sea by the Caronte canal, and since 1925 to the Port Autonome de Marseille via the Rove river tunnel. [redacted] In 1928, the oil company, Shell, installed a refinery in the village of Berre-l’étang, followed by two others in Lavéra and La Mède. Post-1945, more chemical and petrochemical plants were established. An EDF hydroelectric power station was built in Saint-Chamas in 1966, using water from the Durance River through the Canal de Provence, and rejecting hot water since. Since 1922, Marignane has been an aviation center, now home to Marseille’s airport and many aircraft manufacturing facilities. With the petro-hub of Fos-sur-Mer, established between 1962 and 1968, as the departure point of the South European crude oil pipeline feeding Crissier (Switzerland) and running up to Karlsruhe (Germany), the Étang de Berre/Gulf of Fos forms an indirect territory of extraction, of production, of processing, and consumption—in particular, of crude oil.

Distanced from extractive sites, the Berre area completes the picture of an aggregated ‘Terracene’ territory. The term “Terracene,” articulated by Salar Mameni, narrows down the scientific notion of the Anthropocene to focus specifically on environmental destruction. This is particularly apt as developments around the Étang de Berre/Fos involve all sorts of discharges (chemical and hydrocarbon, energy-based, and domestic waste from the Marseille metropolitan area), resulting in multi-faceted, multi-temporal pollution. [redacted]

Pollution is one of the expected consequences of material extraction, and oil pollution is just one of many issues related to technology, energy, and modernity. In the French context, environmental burdens are marked by environmental classism and lesser so, by environmental racism—working-class and migrant communities on peripheral territories bear disproportionate toxic loads from energy infrastructure that powers urban centers and national industrial production. The communities surrounding the pond of Berre experience the environmental costs of France’s and Europe’s energy modernization—[redacted] but there is resistance.

What does it mean to be in service of a toxic territory?

Rather than approaching the Étang de Berre as a site requiring a [redacted] hypothetic “remediation,” we investigate how design practices might work with the active toxicity of the territory and its derivatives’ material intelligence while centering the voices and needs of affected communities—humans and more-than-humans. We will build on previous works, notably by Bureau des Guides-13.

Architecture is one scale of toxicity—from homes constructed on polluted lands, housing proximity to industrial emissions, and domestic spaces becoming sites of bodily contamination. Crucially, architecture is not merely a victim of toxicity but an active participant in toxic production. The making of architecture is fundamentally reliant on oil, from concrete additives and steel production to plastic components, insulation materials, paints, sealants, and transportation of materials. The petrochemical industry produces the very substances that constitute contemporary building: synthetic polymers, adhesives, waterproofing membranes, and composite materials, to name a few. Thus, every architectural project participates in oil’s supply chains and contributes to these toxic landscapes of extraction and processing.

This studio challenges conventional approaches to design [redacted] by [redacted] engaging with Mameni’s concept of *petrorefusal* as a way to think about pollution as another form of matter. We examine how pollution—petrochemical substances and others—transforms landscapes, bodies, and communities, while acknowledging the agency of both human and more-than-human actors in these territories. As a design studio, we approach contaminated territories as complex material conditions that require and forster different design methodologies—how do we design architectural and spatial strategies and tactics with and through toxicity?

Following Mameni’s critique, we challenge the Anthropocene’s “crude scientific generalization that cannot imagine—and more importantly refuses to see—other ways of being human.” The Étang de Berre exemplifies how environmental destruction is not a new epoch but an ongoing reality for territories bearing the ecological costs of industrial modernity.

RIOT
Research and [redacted] Innovation On [redacted] Territory:
Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, Elif Erez-Henderson, Summer Islam, Antoine Iweins, Kathlyn Kao, Nagy Makhlouf, Nathalie Marj, Saira Mohamed
EPFL Lausanne