ARCH 5525 – The architecture of the great connector
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Water has always been our greatest connector. It connects our continents. It links glaciers to vast deserts. All living beings need it. We travel through it and are mostly made of it. Ultimately, water is sacred to all life.

Historically, water was also the most efficient means of transport between people. Indigenous trade routes established kinships and exchanges, both material and immaterial. Stories formed important linkages. The water supported these journeys.

Related to this, the Akikodjiwan Falls (Chaudière Falls) in present-day Ottawa was a sacred site for many Indigenous Peoples. Artifacts in the area tell us it was a gathering place for thousands of years, connecting people from as far away as South America, through trade. They would travel along various waterways to the Mississippi River, which extends south to the Gulf of Mexico in a series of exchanged goods, ideas, and stories.

In 2019, Métis birchbark canoe builder Marcel Labelle received a vision for a convoy of three canoes that would retrace this journey. One of the canoes will be built as part of this studio over six weeks. The canoe has remained a powerful teaching tool in our program and this studio will allow students who did not have the opportunity to work with Marcel previously, to receive the teachings in a smaller group setting. Surrounding these teachings, this studio will work with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Carriers to re-map these trade routes, and consider the power of the water, and its teachings, to re-connect people throughout Turtle Island (North America).

The final design project will be an interpretive centre – either at Akikodjiwan Falls or at the end of the Mississippi, near New Orleans. Students will have field trips to both sites and engage with people like Douglas Cardinal and Elder Jane Chartrand in Ottawa. We will connect with groups in Louisiana and contribute to Marcel's vision through mapping, design, and making. The architecture of the studio will re-emphasize the role of design not as object-making but as connecting through space and time with teachings that will encourage us to reconnect with the great connector in meaningful ways.

(note: this studio remains in development stages and could change by September, however, the above description captures its aspirations!)

Top image – Map of prominent Indigenous trade routes in Turtle Island (North America)
Bottom image – McEwen School of Architecture students build a birchbark canoe in 2014