Transcending the Settled Ground

Mapping Obligations of Settler Architects in Canada

by
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A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Architecture

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2025
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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This research begins with the recognition that architecture, as both a discipline and a practice, has never been neutral. The design process has long been entangled with histories of colonization, where land was surveyed and transformed into property. In Canada, these processes were instrumental in establishing a settler-colonial relationship to land, one that privileges extraction and productivity over reciprocity and care. This study asks how the architectural design process reproduces these colonial structures and how settler architects might begin to take responsibility for the histories that shape their work.

In the outskirts of Sarnia, Ontario, an area known as Chemical Valley sits on the traditional territory of the Chippewa, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples, collectively known as the Anishinaabeg. It is home to the Aamjiwnaang First Nations reserve and a dense concentration of petrochemical refineries. The term “Chemical Valley” dates back to 1947 as a symbol of national progress, but is now used by Aamjiwnaang First Nations and activists to draw attention to the negative impacts of this industrial corridor. The proximity between the two landscapes exposes how colonial systems of land use and resource extraction persist in shaping environmental and social conditions today. By tracing the evolution of architectural and planning tools, from early land surveys to contemporary zoning and professional standards, this research uncovers how these systems continue to define who has access to land and who bears the burden of its consequences.

Through archival analysis and an examination of city planning and architectural practice, this work delineates how the design process itself has been used to legitimize and justify land dispossession. Acts of measuring and drawing are political gestures that determine what is seen, valued, and remembered. Confronting this legacy requires a reorientation of architectural practice, one that shifts toward methods grounded in care and reciprocity, prioritizing relationships with the land.

Acknowledgements

The University of Waterloo School of Architecture in Cambridge, Ontario, is situated on the Haldimand Tract, a stretch of land extending 10 kilometers on either side of the Grand River in Ontario. This 950,000-acre tract was promised to the Six Nations of the Grand River for their alliance with the British during the American Revolution. It is home to the six member nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onandaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora, and was granted to them with the assurance that it was land "which Them and Their Posterity are to enjoy forever" (Six Nations n.d., 5).

In 1791, the Crown surveyed the tract in a way that ignored the river's natural curves, reshaping its boundaries and diminishing the land that they promised to the Six Nations. The area where Cambridge sits forms part of Block One, one of four blocks the Six Nations mortgaged to the Crown for 999 years in 1796, with the expectation that the funds would support their community. Instead, this money was diverted to build the foundations of the province of Ontario and to finance the War of 1812, advancing the growth of the settler state (Monture 2022, 50).

The impacts of these actions are not confined to the past. Across Turtle Island, Indigenous communities continue to confront the consequences of land dispossession. The Six Nations' land claim, filed in 1995 to address these violations, moves slowly through the legal system, with a trial anticipated in 2026 (Dow 2025). The history of the Haldimand Tract is part of a much larger pattern that continues to shape the landscapes we inhabit.

As a settler and a designer, I hold responsibility for acknowledging these histories and understanding how my profession has played a role in processes of settlement and the reshaping of land. This responsibility guides this thesis as a commitment to recognize and learn the land's history and to consider how architectural practice can contribute to meaningful forms of reconciliation.

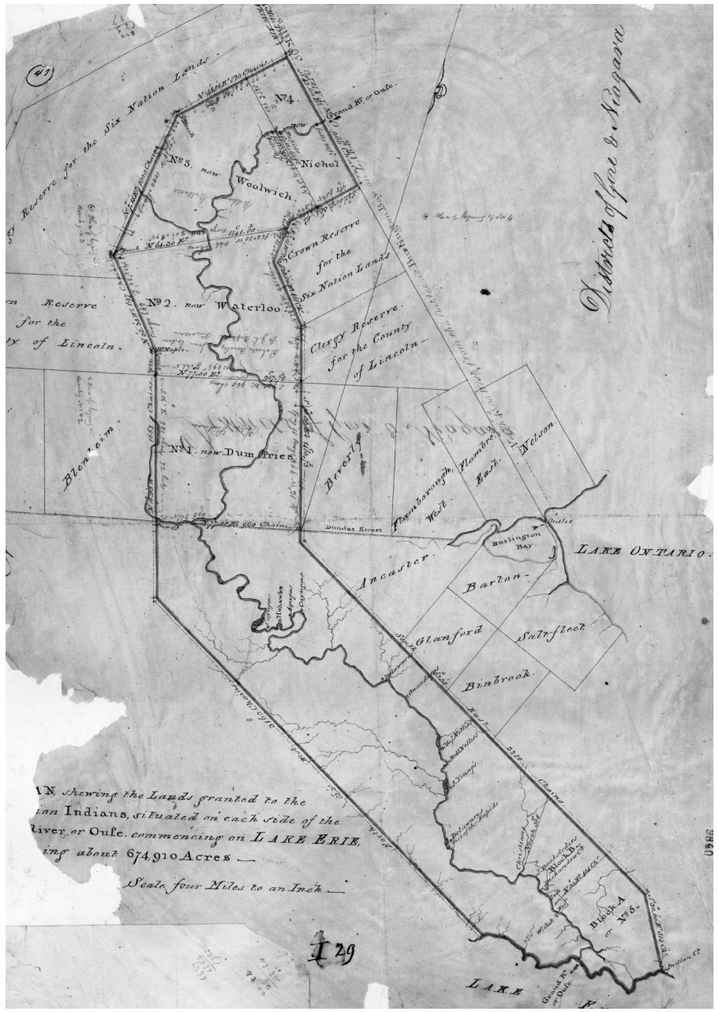


FIG 0.1
A survey of the Haldimand Tract completed in 1921 by Thomas Ridout. The record for the original 1791 survey was lost.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have studied at the School of Architecture over the past seven years. This journey has been shaped not only by the ideas I have encountered but also by the people and the land that define this community.

I owe immense gratitude to David Fortin, my supervisor, for your guidance and steady support throughout this process, for helping me navigate the complexities of this topic, and for creating space for this work to grow in ways that have shaped not only my thesis but the way I understand my responsibilities as a designer and researcher. To Jane Mah Hutton, my committee member, for supporting this work from the very beginning and for sowing the seeds that have helped me approach this work with curiosity and care. Lastly, to Shelagh McCartney for your time and thoughtful questions at my defence, which contributed meaningfully to this work.

To Nadine, Catherine, and Ricardo, for being constants in this shared journey. For the conversations, feedback, and laughter that have sustained me amid the intensity of studio and research. Your friendship has been a steady presence, a reminder that this work is not done alone.

To my family, thank you for providing me with the opportunities that have allowed me to pursue this path, for welcoming me home so many times in Vancouver over the past years, and for reminding me always of the importance of support and belonging.

I write these words in the Elder Lodge, in the office of the late Elder William Woodworth. This space has offered a quiet space of reflection and writing throughout my thesis. I was fortunate to take his course during my undergraduate studies, and his teachings continue to guide the way I approach this work.

I carry a part of this place with me as I move forward. This thesis is as much a product of everyone's generosity, guidance, and presence as it is of my own work, for which I am truly thankful.

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Tracing Relations

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FIG 0.2 The Site Plan Review checklist for the City of Sarnia's Site Plan Control application. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2025. *Site Plan Approval Policy Guidelines and Standards*. https://canadacommons.ca/artifacts/23630174/city-of-sarnia-site-plan-approval-policy-and-guidelines/24530054/view/?page=1.

FIG 0.3 Drawing of Chemical Valley, depicting the top 3 national and international industries in the proximity by annual revenue. Base layers retrieved from Scholars GeoPortal, https://geo2.scholarsportal.info/. *Source:* Statista, https://www.statista.com. Pollution data, MacDonald, Elaine, and Sarah Rang. 2007. *Exposing Canada's Chemical Valley.* Ecojustice. https://ecojustice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2007-Exposing-Canadas-Chemial-Valley.pdf. Drawn by author.

FIG 0.4 Map of the industrial infrastructure in Chemical Valley, showing well locations scaled by depth and the network of above-ground and underground pipelines. The extent of ground disturbance highlights how subsurface disruption accelerates erosion across the designated flood zone. *Source:* Scholars GeoPortal, https://geo2.scholarsportal.info/. Ontario Oil Gas & Salt Resources Library. "Oil & Gas Pools & Pipelines of Southern Ontario." 2013. https://www.ogsrlibrary.com/downloads/Pools-007a.pdf. Drawn by author.

FIG 0.5 Section cut of subsurface and surface disruptions in Chemical Valley, illustrating above-ground and underground pipelines. Petroleum deposits are located approximately 304-850m below ground. The diagram also shows waste-injection wells, tailing ponds, and incineration sites that contribute ground, water, and air contamination. *Source:* Google Maps. "Streetview of pipeline." Accessed October 6, 2024. Google Maps. "Streetview of wellhead." Accessed October 6, 2024. Google Maps. "Streetview of Tailing Pond in Sarnia." Accessed October 6, 2024. https://maps.app.goo.gl/o8m78wbaVZVPPgep9. Google Maps. "Streetview of flare." Accessed October 6, 2024. https://maps.app.goo.gl/VDZqLWUewnNprwT4A. Sanford, B. V., and W. B. Brady. "Columnar sections of wells from Malden Township, Essex County, to Sarnia Township, Lambton County, Southwestern Ontario." Photograph. *In Paleozoic Geology of the Windsor–Sarnia Area, Ontario*, Vol. 278. Ottawa: Canada Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1955. Drawn by author.

FIG 0.6 Still from "The Forgotten Origin of Big Oil" documentary, 2025. *Source:* Elytra Collective. 2025. *OIL SPRINGS – The Forgotten Origin of Big Oil & Canada's Chemical Valley.* YouTube video, June 12, 2025. https://youtu.be/jJLj_4KrXWo. Used with permission.

FIG 0.7 Petrochemical Refineries in Chemical Valley. Taken by Michael Toledano, 2013. *Source:* Toledano, Michael. 2013. "A Toxic Tour of Canada's Chemical Valley." *VICE,* March 23. https://www.vice.com/en/article/a-toxic-tour-of-canadas-chemical-valley/. Used with permission.

FIG 0.8 This timeline traces the growth of Chemical Valley from the perspective of the public, situating key industrial expansions alongside the political views that enabled them as well as the emergence of key players in environmental and health activism. *Source:* Google News. n.d. "Chemical Valley, Sarnia." Accessed 2024. https://news.google.com/newspapers.

The Writing is on the Ground

FIG 1.1 A portion of the map and purchase of the Sombra Township Treaty (No. 7) in 1795. Likely tens of thousands of acres were ceded for a one-time payment of £800 worth of goods. *Source:* Great Britain: Indian Affairs. 1795. *Purchase of Land from Chippewa Nation*. Archives/Collections and Fonds, 4138480. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=4138480&ecopy=e011184497.

FIG 1.2 The McKee Purchase (No. 2) signed on 1790. Below the map are 16 totem signatures. This purchase was likely over 1 million acres of most of current southwestern Ontario for a one-time payment of £1,200 in currency at 5 shillings per Spanish dollar, to be shared among the Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Huron Nations. *Source:* Alexander McKee. n.d. *Map of Land Purchased from the Chippewas*. Archives/Collections and Fonds, 3931609. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=3931609&ecopy=e010835269-v8.

FIG 1.3 1836 map showing a portion of the Huron Tract Treaty, one of the largest land transfers in Upper Canada. Of the 2,182,049 acres ceded, 17,951 acres were reserved for the First Nations. In exchange, the Anishinabek would receive "£1,100 annually in goods (forever, but subject to reductions if population declined)". That amount remains unchanged to this day. *Source:* McDonald, D. 1836. *Map of the Huron Tract*. Archives/Collections and Fonds, 4128146. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=3931609&ecopy=e010835269-v8.

FIG 1.4 Breakdown of Treaties that dispossessed Aamjiwnaang First Nations land, detailing the nations affected, lands ceded, Treaty compensations, and their status today, highlighting the ongoing impacts of historical land dispossession. *Source:* The Trillium. 2024. "$10B Robinson Huron Treaty Settlement Paid in Full — and Accruing $1.3M in Daily Interest." March 28. https://www.thetrillium.ca/news/indigenous-rural-and-northern-affairs/10b-robinson-huron-treaty-settlement-paid-in-full-and-accruing-13m-in-daily-interest-8522886. Canada, Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs. 2013b. "Treaty Texts - Upper Canada Land Surrenders." Reference material; resource list. https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1370372152585/1581293792285.

FIG 1.5 A partial interpretation of the written Huron Tract Treaty (No. 29), in red, on top of a cropped map of Upper Canada in 1818 describing all the settlements and towns. *Source:* Canada, Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs. 2013b. "Treaty Texts - Upper Canada Land Surrenders." Reference material; resource list. https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1370372152585/1581293792285.

FIG 1.6 Treaty text overlaid on a map of Ontario in 1845, to match the borders of the districts as defined in the agreements. *Source:* Canada, Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs. 2013b. "Treaty Texts - Upper Canada Land Surrenders." Reference material; resource list. https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1370372152585/1581293792285.

FIG 1.7 Map of Enniskillen Township in 1880, depicting the 14 concessions and 448 lots that Eliakim Malcolm surveyed. Highlighted is the settler interpretation of oil speculation. *Source:* Burr, Christina. 2005. "'Oil Mania': Colonial Land Policy, Land Speculation, and Settlement in Enniskillen Township, 1830s-1860s." *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 38 (76): 267–306. https://hssh.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/hssh/article/view/4250. The Canadian County Atlas Digital Project. 1818. "Town of Enniskillen Map." https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/searchmapframes.php.

FIG 1.8 Photograph taken in 1923 by W.J. Bolton of the oil fields near Oil Springs. Oil here was exhausted quickly and pipelines were built to transport the remaining minerals to Petrolia. *Source:* Bolton, W.J. 1923. *Oil Fields - near Oil Springs, Ont.* Archives/Collections and Fonds, 3376767. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=3376767&ecopy=a031112.

FIG 1.9 Photograph of an oil field in Petrolia, taken by an unknown photographer of an unknown date. These wells often released poisonous hydrogen sulfide gas into the air and were at risk of collapsing. *Source:* Unknown. n.d. Petrolia Oil Field, Petrolia, Ont. Archives/Collections and Fonds, 3375737. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=3375737&ecopy=a015239-v8.

FIG 1.10 Tables from Lambton County's Soil Survey Report No.22 in 1957, by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, classify soils according to their characteristics and agricultural productivity, reflecting the approaches to evaluating land primarily for its economic potential, translating complex ecological systems into measures of efficiency. *Source:* Matthews, B.C., and N.R. Richards. n.d. *Soil Survey of Lambton County.* No. 22. Ontario Agricultural College. Source: "Patent for the N.1/2 of Lot 10, Con.9, Enniskillen Township." 1889. 2082027. Archives/Collections and Fonds. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=2082027&q_type_1=q&q_1=patent%20enniskillen&ecopy=e006222435.

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FIG 1.12 Overview of drainage conditions in Lambton County. Nearly half of the soils are poorly drained, requiring "drainage improvement before they can be utilized for production of cultivated crops," with approximately 60 percent of the county needing artificial drainage. *Source:* Matthews, B.C., and N.R. Richards. n.d. *Soil Survey of Lambton County.* No. 22. Ontario Agricultural College.

FIG 1.13 1877 Crown Patent granting William Anderson Lot 10, Concession 9, Enniskillen Township. *Source:* "Patent for the N.1/2 of Lot 10, Con.9, Enniskillen Township." 1889. 2082027. Archives/Collections and Fonds. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=2082027&q_type_1=q&q_1=patent%20enniskillen&ecopy=e006222435.

FIG 1.14 1957 Soils of Lambton County Survey with a legend describing whether drainage was "excessive, good, imperfect, poor, to very poor." *Source:* Matthews, B.C. 1957. "Soil Survey Map." https://sis.agr.gc.ca/cansis/publications/surveys/on/on22/index.html.

FIG 1.15 Geological Survey of Lambton County in 1954, by the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys Canada, depicting subsurface geology, illustrating the distribution of mineral deposits, translating the natural environment into a technical resource. The knowledge of this subsurface was used to justify extraction and transformation of the landscape.

FIG 1.16 Geological Survey of Lambton County in 1954, by the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys Canada, an accompaniment to fig. The map delineates topographic contours, oil and gas field boundaries, and the locations of existing and dry wells. The wells in Petrolia and Oil Springs are so dense that they can't be represented here. This map reveals how industrial boundaries were inscribed onto the landscape, defining the land through extraction. These delineations persist today as both physical and environmental legacies.

FIG 1.17 A newspaper clipping from The Windsor Daily Star on October 17, 1950, where member of parliament J.W. Murphy asks Sarnia to "reclaim" 4,000 acres of the Aamjiwnaang reserve for $20 million in industrial expansion. The article describes the land as "of great value as industrial sites," and that "only about 300 acres are being filled." The language here reveals how development was justified through the rhetoric of improvement, masking the dispossession of Indigenous land and the transformation into an industrial landscape. *Source:* Wetherup, Norman. 1950. *The Windsor Daily Star*. October 17.

FIG 1.18 In 1919, the DIA sent a letter to the Inspector of Indian Agencies noted that "as there were only seven at Kettle and Stoney Points who were in favor of the surrender it was useless to go there for a vote," dismissing the community's opposition. Instead, the DIA held additional votes farther from the affected communities to secure the outcome they wanted. *Source:* "Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve." 1903. Library and Archives Canada. RG10, Volume number: 1931, Microfilm reel number: C-11113, File number: 3368-3. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2073541&ecopy=e002530377.

FIG 1.19 Photograph taken in 1923 by W.J. Bolton of the Imperial Oil Co. Plant in Sarnia. *Source:* Bolton, W.J. 1923. *Imperial Oil Co., Plant, Sarnia.* Archives/Collections and Fonds, 3320144. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=3320144&ecopy=a031089.

FIG 1.20 A postcard of an aerial view of the Imperial Oil Refinery in Sarnia in 1950, sitting across the street from the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. *Source:* Photogelatine Engraving Co. Ltd. 1950. *Aerial View of Imperial Oil Refinery, Sarnia, Ontario, Canada.* Mike Skreptak Collection, Box 1. https://swoda.uwindsor.ca/node/2357.

FIG 1.21 A newspaper article from 1918 discussing the use of Amendment 49a to support Sarnia's growing industrial ambitions. It frames Indigenous land and its people as standing in the way of the city's future, as an "obstacle" to be cleared for progress. The federal government would enact the War Measures Act a month later, which would ultimately lead to the land surrender. *Source:* "Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve." 1903. Library and Archives Canada. RG10, Volume number: 1931, Microfilm reel number: C-11113, File number: 3368-3. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2073541&ecopy=e002530377.

FIG 1.22 1907 map showing the subdivision of Aamjiwnaang First Nation land that the city of Sarnia wanted to acquire. The map was redrawn before its surrender, revealing how the land was surveyed and divided prior to obtaining consent. *Source:* "Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve." 1903. Library and Archives Canada. RG10, Volume number: 1931, Microfilm reel number: C-11113, File number: 3368-3. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2073541&ecopy=e002530377.

FIG 1.23 Excerpt from the St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R. case, highlighting a key legal precedent cited in the decision. *Source:* St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R. (1887). https://canlii.ca/t/1ttxl.

FIG 1.24 Excerpt from the St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R. case, illustrating the court's reasoning on the Crown's underlying title and the limited nature of Indigenous occupancy rights. *Source:* St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R. (1887). https://canlii.ca/t/1ttxl.

The Act of Permitting

FIG 2.1 Diagram showing all development permit application types in Sarnia, Ontario, identifying which municipality governs each process and the provincial Acts that regulate them. It outlines the requirements for each application and indicates where architects participate within the approval process. Together, these procedures form a closed loop in which regulatory authority reinforces itself. *Source:* City of Sarnia. n.d. "Development Applications." City of Sarnia. Accessed November 20, 2025. https://www.sarnia.ca/business-planning-and-development/planning-permits-and-applications-landing-page/. Drawn by author.

FIG 2.2 Recreation of the "Sphere of Jurisdiction" table from the Ontario Municipal Act, outlining the areas of authority assigned to municipalities under provincial legislation. *Source:* Municipal Act, § 2001 (2001). https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/01m25#BK208.

FIG 2.3 Recent news articles on land-use disagreements between City of Sarnia and Lambton County. *Source:* Kula, Tyler. 2024. "Sarnia and Lambton Again Clash over City Planning." The Observer, July 14. https://www.theobserver.ca/news/local-news/sarnia-and-lambton-again-clash-over-city-planning. Kula, Tyler. 2024. "Sarnia Dropping Appeal of Bright's Grove Urban Boundary Decision." The Observer, June 7. https://www.theobserver.ca/news/local-news/sarnia-dropping-land-tribunal-appeal-on-brights-grove-urban-boundary.

FIG 2.4 County of Lambton Official Plan (2020). *Source:* County of Lambton. 2020. "County of Lambton Official Plan." October 1. https://www.lambtononline.ca/en/business-and-development/resources/Documents/PlanningandDevelopment/OfficialPlan/Lambton-County-Official-Plan---In-force---Oct.-2020.pdf.

FIG 2.5 City of Sarnia Official Plan 2022 consolidated in 2025. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2025. "City of Sarnia Official Plan." May 5. https://www.sarnia.ca/app/uploads/2025/05/Sarnia-Official-Plan-Consolidated-May-2025.pdf.

FIG 2.6 Ontario Provincial Planning Statement (2024). *Source:* Province of Ontario. 2024. *Provincial Planning Statement*. Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing Ontario. https://www.ontario.ca/files/2024-10/mmah-provincial-planning-statement-en-2024-10-23.pdf.

FIG 2.7 Site Plan. *Source:* DMTI Spatial Inc. 2014. "Building Footprints (BFR)." Scholars GeoPortal. https://geo1.scholarsportal.info/#r/details/_uri@=3649884742. DMTI Spatial Inc. 2023. "Railway Line." Scholars GeoPortal. https://geo.scholarsportal.info/#r/details/_uri@=57501268. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. 2007. "Tank." Scholars GeoPortal. https://geo1.scholarsportal.info/#r/details/_uri@=498165567. Drawn by author.

FIG 2.8 A statement from Robert Kirby, a retail grocer: "It is my opinion that the entire Indian Reserve should be taken over by the City of Sarnia and the land held for industrial and building sites. At the present time Sarnia has no inducements to offer industries who would be glad to come here. The roads on the Reserve are very poor and the land is non-productive owing to the indolence of the indians. Even the best are not producing within seventy-five per cent of what is possible. By no produce from the indians and do not know of any of them taking produce to the market. I do know that they do most of their trading on the other side of the river. I would like to see the land sold to individuals who would be apt to make it a matter of speculation. I think that the city should take over the entire Reserve." *Source:* "Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve." 1903. Library and Archives Canada. RG10, Volume number: 1931, Microfilm reel number: C-11113, File number: 3368-3. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2073541&ecopy=e002530377.

FIG 2.9 A statement from Dr. Coulter, a dentist: "I consider that the Sarnia Indian Reserve should be opened up for the white occupation in view of the fact that it is at the present time occupied by only a few people who are making no effort towards having the land produce as it should. Some of these indians work in the city and others are incapable of farming... Sarnia is badly handicapped at the present time for want of industrial sites, water frontage and room for general growth. It would not be practical to look for expansion to the eastward as all land lying to the east of the city is taken up being utilized for farms and market gardens. These lands are very productive at the present time nothing would be gained by taking them for industrial sites... The greater part of the Reserve is a desolation of weeds and undergrowth." *Source:* "Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve." 1903. Library and Archives Canada. RG10, Volume number: 1931, Microfilm reel number: C-11113, File number: 3368-3. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2073541&ecopy=e002530377.

FIG 2.10 A cropped map from the 1925 Surrender files, overlaid on a satellite image from Google Earth. While the original documents include no precise location of what was being surrendered, letters written referred often waterfront lots for industry (highlighted in bold red). The dotted red line traces the boundary of the current Aamjiwnaang reserve in relation to its 1925 extent, revealing the scale of land lost. *Source:* "Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve." 1903. Library and Archives Canada. RG10, Volume number: 1931, Microfilm reel number: C-11113, File number: 3368-3. https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Home/Record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2073541&ecopy=e002530377.

FIG 2.11 A cropped map from 1922 showing the conditions prior to the 1925 land surrender. Buildings are visible along the waterfront within the reserve, illustrating the use of the land before industrial expansion. *Source:* Survey Division, Department of Militia and Defence. 1922. "Sarnia, Ontario. 1:63,360. Map Sheet 040j16, [Ed.2], 1922." Scholars GeoPortal. https://geo2.scholarsportal.info/#r/details/_uri@=HTDP63360K040J16_1922TIFF&_add:true.

FIG 2.12 A cropped map from 1936 after the 1925 land surrender. Imperial Oil begins to encroach down the waterfront, and buildings that used to be in that area have been demolished and moved further south. Although no official record of additional surrenders was found, the map shows Imperial Oil extending west, into land that should still have been part of the reserve. *Source:* Survey Division, Department of Militia and Defence. 1936. "Sarnia, Ontario. 1:63,360. Map Sheet 040J16 [Ed.4], Gridded, 1936." Scholars GeoPortal. https://geo2.scholarsportal.info/#r/details/_uri@=HTDP63360K040J16_1936_UTMTIFF&_add:true.

FIG 2.13 A cropped map from 1965, where the encroachment has hit the border and maybe even past north of the reserve. There is no public documentation of land surrenders after 1925, but these refineries expanding west suggests that another transfer must have occurred between the 1930s and 1960s. *Source:* Survey Division, Department of Militia and Defence. 1965. "Sarnia, Ontario. 1:25,000. Map Sheet 040J16E, Ed.1, 1965." Scholars GeoPortal. https://geo1.scholarsportal.info/#r/details/_uri@=HTDP25K040J16e_1965TIFF&_add:true.

FIG 2.14 Flowchart of the Official Plan Amendment process for 500 Kenny Street, mapped together with the governing documents and regulatory frameworks that structure and authorize each stage of approval. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2025. *City of Sarnia Approval Policy Guidelines and Standards*. https://canadacommons.ca/artifacts/23630174/city-of-sarnia-site-plan-approval-policy-and-guidelines/24530054/view/?page=1. City of Sarnia. 2025. *By-Law Number 37 of 2025 of the City of Sarnia*. Official Plan Amendment. Sarnia, Ontario. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/155240. Dillon Consulting. 2025a. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Environmental Impact Study*. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153638. Dillon Consulting. 2025b. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Planning Justification Report*. Planning Justification Report. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153637. Drawn by author.

FIG 2.15 The Official Plan Amendment signed and approved. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2025. *By-Law Number 37 of 2025 of the City of Sarnia*. Official Plan Amendment. Sarnia, Ontario. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/155240.

FIG 2.16 The Official Plan Amendment signed and approved. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2025. *By-Law Number 37 of 2025 of the City of Sarnia*. Official Plan Amendment. Sarnia, Ontario. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/155240.

FIG 2.17 The Official Plan Amendment signed and approved. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2025. *By-Law Number 37 of 2025 of the City of Sarnia*. Official Plan Amendment. Sarnia, Ontario. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/155240.

FIG 2.18 Partial recreation of Map 1 Growth Strategy, from Lambton County Official Plan. *Source:* County of Lambton. n.d. "Map 1 - Growth Strategy." https://www.lambtononline.ca/en/business-and-development/resources/Documents/PlanningandDevelopment/OfficialPlan/Map-1-Lambton-County-Official-Plan---Growth-Strategy-Map-1.pdf.

FIG 2.19 Partial recreation of Schedule 1 City Structure Plan and Schedule 2 Land Use Plan by City of Sarnia Official Plan. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2014. "Map 1 - City Structure Plan." 1. https://www.sarnia.ca/app/uploads/2019/06/City_of_Sarnia_Official_Plan_-_Maps_and_Schedules.pdf. City of Sarnia. 2014. "Map 7 - Land Use Plan." 7. https://www.sarnia.ca/app/uploads/2019/06/City_of_Sarnia_Official_Plan_-_Maps_and_Schedules.pdf.

FIG 2.20 Recreation of the table summarizing the multiple land-use designations governing the site. *Source:* Dillon Consulting. 2025b. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Planning Justification Report*. Planning Justification Report. 2. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153637.

FIG 2.21 Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating its alignment with the Provincial Planning Statement and outlining how the proposed development meets provincial policy requirements. *Source:* Dillon Consulting. 2025b. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Planning Justification Report. Planning Justification Report*. B-2-B-5. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153637.

FIG 2.22 Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating its alignment with the City and outlining how the proposed development meets Lambton County and City of Sarnia policy requirements. *Source:* Dillon Consulting. 2025b. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Planning Justification Report. Planning Justification Report*. B-6-B-10. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153637.

FIG 2.23 Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating the EIS' alignment with the Provincial Planning Statement and outlining how the proposed development meets provincial policy requirements. *Source:* Dillon Consulting. 2025b. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Planning Justification Report*. Planning Justification Report. B-4-B-5. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153637.

FIG 2.24 Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating the EIS' alignment with the Lambton County's and City of Sarnia's Official Plan. *Source:* Dillon Consulting. 2025b. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Planning Justification Report*. Planning Justification Report. B-8-B-12. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153637.

FIG 2.25 Graph reproduced from the Canada West Foundation. The number of federal projects needing an Environmental Assessment Report approved vs. rejected vs. the project being terminated before a decision has been made. *Source:* Orenstein, Marla. 2018. "What Now? The Fate of Projects: A Review of Outcomes from the Federal EA Approvals Process." Canada West Foundation, November. https://cwf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-11-07-1-CWF_WhatNow_PolicyBrief_ProjectFate_WEB.pdf.

FIG 2.26 Recreation of Dillon Consulting plan of the species at risk in and around the development site, mapping the habitats and wildlife present. Despite clear evidence of environmental sensitivity, the City approved the plan amendment, effectively overlooking the impacts on vulnerable species. *Source:* Dillon Consulting. 2025a. *East Rail Yard Expansion: Environmental Impact Study.* Figure 3. https://www.speakupsarnia.ca/48571/widgets/205359/documents/153638. Drawn by author.

Drawing the Line

FIG 3.1 Architectural regulation in Canada is provincial, with the OAA governing practice in Ontario. The OAA played a key role in creating the national ExAC exam, which references CHOP as a required document for the exam, but CHOP itself along with the RAIC do not regulate or govern architects. *Source:* Architects Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. A.26 (1990). https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90a26#BK25. Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. 2021. *Canadian Handbook of Practice for Architects*. Third ed. RAIC. https://chop.raic.ca. Regulatory Organizations of Architecture in Canada. n.d. "Examination (ExAC)." Accessed November 17, 2025. https://roac.ca/become-an-architect/examination-exac/. Ontario Association of Architects. 2025. "Ontario Association of Architects." https://oaa.on.ca/. Drawn by author.

FIG 3.2 OAA Code of Ethics. *Source:* Ontario Association of Architects. 2014. "Code of Ethics." Ontario Association of Architects, December. https://oaa.on.ca/protecting-the-public/code-of-ethics.

FIG 3.3 OAA's additional responsibilities that extend beyond serving the public interest. *Source:* Ontario Association of Architects. n.d. "Regulatory Accountability." Ontario Association of Architects. Accessed October 21, 2025. https://www.oaa.on.ca/protecting-the-public/oaa-regulatory-role.

FIG 3.4 Recreation of chart of what is typically included in an architect's basic services. *Source:* Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. 2021. "Predesign." In *Canadian Handbook of Practice for Architects*, Third ed. RAIC. https://chop.raic.ca. Drawn by author.

FIG 3.5 Section drawn by Adolphe Alphand between 1867-1873, a French landscape-architect and civil engineer, of sections of what looks like to be a power generator. This drawing is part of a larger set of urban planning in Paris, all done by Alphand, showcasing the interdisciplinary nature of practice in the 19th century. *Source:* Alphand, Adolphe. 1867. *Les Promenades de Paris: Histoire, Description Des Embellissements, Dépenses de Création et d'entretien Des Bois de Boulogne et de Vincennes, Champs-Elysées, Parcs, Squares, Boulevards, Places Plantées, Études Sur l'art Des Jardins et Arboretum.* 500. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6276852z/f500.item.textelmage.

FIG 3.6 Plans and sections drawn by Adolphe Alphand between 1867-1873, of landscaping of Parisian streets and the design of the city's underground sewer network. *Source:* Alphand, Adolphe. 1867. *Les Promenades de Paris: Histoire, Description Des Embellissements, Dépenses de Création et d'entretien Des Bois de Boulogne et de Vincennes, Champs-Elysées, Parcs, Squares, Boulevards, Places Plantées, Études Sur l'art Des Jardins et Arboretum.* 556. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6276852z/f500.item.textelmage.

FIG 3.7 Plan and sections drawn by Adolphe Alphand between 1867-1873, a French landscape-architect and civil engineer, illustrating the deep interconnection between disciplines that shaped 19th-century urban design. On the left is a section of the geological makeup and on the right is a section of a well to provide a freshwater source for Paris. Together, these drawings demonstrate how the boundaries between technical systems and ecological understanding were seen as inseparable aspects of design. *Source:* Alphand, Adolphe. 1867. L*es Promenades de Paris: Histoire, Description Des Embellissements, Dépenses de Création et d'entretien Des Bois de Boulogne et de Vincennes, Champs-Elysées, Parcs, Squares, Boulevards, Places Plantées, Études Sur l'art Des Jardins et Arboretum*. 457. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6276852z/f500.item.textelmage.

FIG 3.8 County of Lambton Map 2 - Natural Heritage System. The green indicate the primary natural corridors, yet they stop at the boundary of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve, illustrating how political borders are imposed on landscapes, even though natural systems ignore these human-made lines. *Source:* County of Lambton. n.d. "Map 2 - Natural Heritage System." https://www.lambtononline.ca/en/business-and-development/resources/Documents/PlanningandDevelopment/OfficialPlan/Map-2-Lambton-County-Official-Plan---Natural-Heritage-System-Map-2.pdf.

FIG 3.9 Official Plan from the City of Sarnia - Schedule '3' Natural Heritage System, Similar to the County of Lambton plan, this map shows the Environmental Protection zone abruptly ending at the boundary of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. This abstraction mirroring what Carlisle, Pevzner, and Corner described as rendering aspects of the land invisible within systems of planning and control. *Source:* City of Sarnia. 2025. "City of Sarnia Official Plan." 152. https://www.sarnia.ca/app/uploads/2025/05/Sarnia-Official-Plan-Consolidated-May-2025.pdf.

FIG 3.10 Radio Free Alcatraz: Territories. 2014. By Chris Cornelius, of all the different layers of the land, combining human and non-human elements to starts showing the history of the site. *Source:* Cornelius, Chris. 2014. "Radio Free Alcatraz: Territories." The Museum of Modern Art. https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/298/4735. Used with permission.

FIG 3.11 Radio Free Alcatraz: Trajectories. 2014. By Chris Cornelius, of all the paths that cross through the site, such as the ferry routes, air flight paths, ways understanding data beyond numbers and graphs. *Source:* Cornelius, Chris. 2014. "Radio Free Alcatraz: Trajectories." The Museum of Modern Art. https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/298/4641. Used with permission.

FIG 4.1 Recreation from the AIA Handbook that outlines recommendations for ensuring a project responds ethically to community, social, and broader public obligations. *Source:* American Institute of Architects. 2014. *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*. Fifteenth. John Wiley & Sons. 125. Used with permission.

FIG 4.2 Recreation from the AIA Handbook that outlines recommendations for the effects that design decisions have on human and more-than-human communities. *Source:* American Institute of Architects. 2014. *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*. Fifteenth. John Wiley & Sons. 117-119. Used with permission.

FIG 4.3 2022 News Release from the First Nations Leadership Council in support of the UNDRIP Task Force and a call for all municipalities in BC to follow by example. *Source:* First Nations Leadership Council. 2022. *City of Vancouver UNDRIP News Release*. October 19. https://fns.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2022_10_19_FNLC_PR-Vancouver-UNDRIP-Task-Force_FINAL.pdf. Used with permission.

FIG 4.4 Review of the City of Vancouver's UNDRIP strategies that seek to address environmental impacts, pollution, and the protection of the environment in alignment with Indigenous Rights. *Source:* UNDRIP Task Force Intergovernmental Table. 2024. *City of Vancouver UNDRIP Action Plan 2024-2028*. 26-29. https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/undrip-action-plan-2024-2028.pdf.

FIG 4.5 Proposal of a formal context plan checklist. Drawn by author.

FIG 4.6 This layer represents surface water in shared watersheds, green spaces, and habitats for species at risk. Incorporating helps reduce risk when approving development in hazard zones, aligns with Conservation Authority regulations, and supports climate resilience planning. Drawn by author.

FIG 4.7 This layer shows publicly available treaty and documented land surrenders, to acknowledge and respect Indigenous histories, and helping the city plan in a way that is historically informed and socially responsible. Understanding the land's history aligns with the TRC's Call to Action 92. Drawn by author.

FIG 4.8 This layer provides the foundations of the city's built environment. Layered on top of the rest of the layers, we can start making more informed decisions and anticipated impacts on both natural and social systems. Drawn by author.

FIG 4.9 This layer provides insight into the city's industrial footprint, helping departments to understand ongoing hazards, manage land use safely, and anticipate risks associated with future development. Drawn by author.

FIG 4.10 This layer helps the city identify and recognize areas of potential health and safety concern, guide development away from high-risk zones, and support planning that prioritizes environmental protection and community resilience. Drawn by author.

FIG 4.11 Where I propose the Context Plan be integrated in the development application process, alongside an Action Framework created by First Nations communities to establish priorities and govern what should be included in the Context Plan, before being sent to an Indigenous Review Council for review. This way, collaborating and engagement starts from the very beginning of the development process, and breaks the closed loop where state interests reinforces themselves.Drawn by author.

FIG 4.12 Stills from "The Forgotten Origin of Big Oil" documentary. 2025. *Source:* Elytra Collective. 2025. *OIL SPRINGS – The Forgotten Origin of Big Oil & Canada's Chemical Valley*. YouTube video, June 12, 2025. https://youtu.be/jJLj_4KrXWo. Used with permission.

Site Plan Review Checklist (Sarnia 2025, s.3.A)

a. *Key map*
b. *Municipal street address*
c. *North arrow*
d. *Drawing scale (metric preferred)*
e. *All driveways, sidewalks, curbing and ground cover to be labeled (e.g. sod, asphalt, paving stones)*
f. *All proposed building setbacks and sidewalk, parking space and driveway width dimensions*
g. *Existing site features including trees, rocks, watercourses, utilities, buildings*
h. *Existing and proposed walls, fences and berms with details*
i. *The location and screening of outdoor garbage and recycling facilities or utility facilities (e.g. air conditioning unit, hydro vaults, etc.)*
j. *Proposed use of all buildings on site*
k. *Uses of adjacent lands and buildings*
l. *Parking layout including parking for the handicapped*
m. *Location of access ramps for the handicapped*
n. *Retaining walls, fences and screens with details*
o. *Patios and recreational facilities*
p. *All trees on municipal property (boulevards) abutting site*
q. *Location of exterior lighting fixtures and standards (shown to be directed onto the site and not onto adjacent properties or streets)*
r. *Existing vegetation with instructions for removal, preservation or treatment*
s. *Proposed locations of trees, shrubs and ground cover clearly labeled and cross-references to a plant schedule*
t. *Applicable planting details and schedules*
u. *Sub-surface drainage methods for tree pits and planting areas in impermeable soil*
v. *A site data chart which includes:*
    i. *total site area*
    ii. *building coverage as a percentage of site area*
    iii. *gross building floor area*
    iv. *numbers of floors in building*
    v. *total number of units (if a multiple family development)*
    vi. *building height*
    vii. *total landscaped area as a percentage of site area*
    viii. *required parking calculations*
    ix. *parking provided*
    x. *any other figures to show compliance with the Zoning By-Law*
w. *Property dimensions*
x. *Benchmark location(s) and elevation*
y. *Adjoining street(s) labeled*
z. *All site details including service connections to City mains, curb and road cuts and restorations*
aa. *Existing grades including those on adjoining properties and streets*
bb. *Proposed grades in the form of spot elevations and drainage patterns at critical locations*
cc. *Key elevations of all site features (i.e. top or bottom of retaining walls, etc.)*
dd. *Building dimensions including grade elevations at all corners*
ee. *First floor elevations of all building on site*
ff. *Location of hydro and utility poles and hydrants on or adjacent to the site*
gg. *Existing and proposed roads, driveways and parking areas with dimensions and details. All proposed curb cuts or road cuts including details for restoration*
hh. *Existing and proposed curbs, sidewalks and walkways with dimensions and details*
ii. *Dedicated road widening or servicing easement*
jj. *All culverts and swales showing direction of flow and percent slopes*
kk. *Existing and proposed underground services and connections showing pipe sizes, invert elevations, materials and grades. All parking lot catch basins (1 per each 5,000 sf. - 465m) including flow restrictor details and calculations, where applicable. Stormwater management, including quality and quantity control, is required. Calculations should be based on Appendix "E," Design Guidelines for Stormwater Management.*
ll. *Locations, details and sections of wells, pumping stations, septic system, garbage storage/ pick-up enclosures, oil interceptors, etc.*
mm. *Engineer's, Architect's or Landscape Architect's stamp and signature certifying the plan*
nn. *All buffer strips required by the Zoning By-law*
oo. *Location and size of any free-standing signs*
pp. *Type of building construction (e.g. combustible, non-combustible, sprinklered)*
qq. *Appropriate general notes*
rr. *Site impact study for traffic and detail drawings showing intersection improvements, turning lanes, widenings, etc. as may be required*
Note: A site impact study for traffic may be required for developments, at the discretion of the City Engineer.
ss. *Acknowledgment of any survey information relied upon*
tt. *A double backflow preventer is required on all sprinkler systems and a backflow preventer is required on domestic water systems*

PROLOGUE

The Site Plan

Before the shovel breaks ground, the city, the architect, and the client must first agree that the land has the right to be realized.

In Sarnia, every proposal begins with a checklist: a site plan approval application that acknowledges the land is "good enough" to be built upon. The checklist demarcates the earth into something measurable, a performance of control that underlies every act of building. Each line determines what counts as knowledge, which lines count as boundaries, and which limits design is bound to.

Under *By-Law No. 45 of 2023*, all land within the borders of the City of Sarnia falls under *Site Plan Control*, an act of permission written in the name of "good planning". Each act of approval abstracts the land into something less recognizable than the next, flattening its layered histories into a legible surface.

I begin with this document because it exposes the conditions that precede design. Before anything, the systems of governance have decided what is allowed to be recognized and what remains unspoken in the white space of a site plan. It is both evidence and erasure of a quiet violence that severs relations and translates land into a commodity.

In Sarnia, where the first oil well in North America infringes on the Aamjiwnaang First Nations, these translations carry a weighted history. The act of interacting with land is not neutral. It is administrative, extractive, and ongoing. The site plan, then, is a diagram of authority, a map of how land is made legible to the state.

FIG 0.2 *(Opposite)*
The Site Plan Review checklist for the City of Sarnia's Site Plan Control application. Recreated by Author.

00

Tracing Relations

Our era of human destruction has trained our eyes only on the immediate promises of power and profits. This refusal of the past, and even the present, will condemn us to continue fouling our own nests. How can we get back to the pasts we need to see the present more clearly?...Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life. (Tsing et al. 2017, G2)

Locating the Ground

Architectural drawings are a continuing abstraction of land. They produce the framework for the reality that will later be built. This is evident in Sarnia's Site Plan Approval process, where land is reshaped to meet the municipality's conditions, regardless of whether these priorities align with the architect's intentions. The idea of "approval" reveals the purpose of a site through predetermined abstractions before design begins, where the reality of the drawing is partially written by law and policy. Within this framework, architects operate in a space bounded by regulation, yet one that also holds potential for intervention. What forms of agency remain when these systems define the possibilities of design? How might architects act responsibly within them?

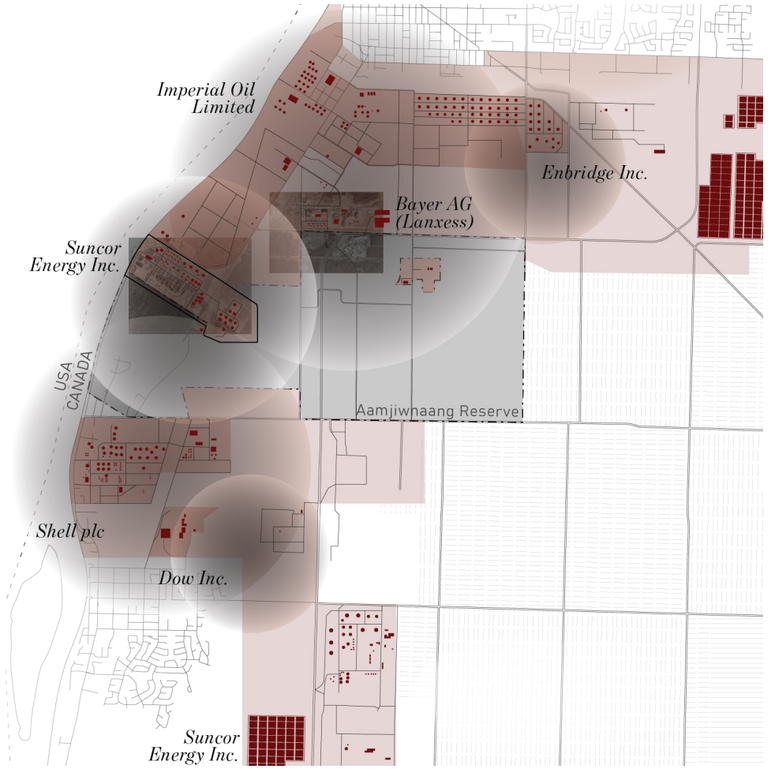
The question of agency begins with the histories embedded in the land itself. Viewing the site as something we must intervene upon ignores the complex layers of human and more-than-human forces that have shaped it. What does it mean, then, to practice architecture responsibly in a context where the land carries a weighted history? Nicola Coldstream reminds us that "you cannot take the past out of architecture, even if a building is being created in front of your eyes" (2003, 220). Architecture carries histories long before a project reaches construction, and it accumulates new layers of meaning even as it rises, and leaves behind layers of erasure and demolition long after. To attend to architecture without attending to these histories is to leave its absences—and its violences—unacknowledged.

These violences include the foundational conditions of settler colonialism. As Cole Harris describes in *A Bounded Land*, the Crown carved Canada into "bounded patches of land that stretched discontinuously across the continent," where settlers established control, displacing Indigenous Peoples (Harris 2020, 9). The settler's assumption of entitlement to land, Treaties, legal systems, and cadastral surveys are tools that enabled

dispossession, establishing frameworks that continue to shape present-day planning and design processes. Official planning documents, bylaws, and statutes determine what land should look like in a settler state, often leaving little room for change, even when the health or safety of communities is at risk. These are the same systems that allowed Chemical Valley to take shape and continue operating despite its detrimental environmental and human impacts.

Architecture, in its role of transforming land into property lines, was and remains complicit in this. We design through surveys, rely on planning documents, bylaws, and inherit legal frameworks whose origins are entangled with the colonial management of land. It reflects on the obligations of architects and challenges us to resist the tendency to treat these tools as merely technical instruments while recognizing that the *Canadian Handbook of Practice* (CHOP), the *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada's* (RAIC), and the *Ontario Association of Architects* (OAA) cannot be separated from these structures of authority and regulation. These frameworks shape what architects can do and also what they should do within a legal and ethical system that is itself entangled with colonial histories. When our tools reproduce colonial frameworks, what possibilities remain for architectural agency? What obligations arise? How might we reorient our work within these structures?

This thesis explores these questions in Sarnia, Ontario, where systems of law, industry, and architecture intersect. The city's industrial landscape, shaped by more than a century of petrochemical development, surrounds the Aamjiwnaang First Nation on three sides. Treaties and cadastral surveys enabled the drilling of the first commercial oil well in North America nearby in Oil Springs, Lambton County (Burr 2005, 271). This act opened the ground and set in motion a global petrochemical economy that has continued to shape land and life. Inscribed onto



Enbridge Inc.
#1 Oil Transportation in Canada
$53,473,000,000 CAD
#32 Pollutant Air Release in Sarnia
>600 Pollutant in Ontario
18,233 kg released

Suncor Energy Inc.
#2 Oil Company in Canada
$54,880,000,000 CAD
#4 Pollutant Air Release in Sarnia
#15 in Ontario
10,214,295 kg released

Imperial Oil Limited
#3 Oil Company in Canada
$5,136,000,000 CAD
#2 Pollutant Air Release in Sarnia
#6 in Ontario
31,818,167 kg released

Dow Inc.
#3 Oil Company globally
$42,964,000,000,000 USD
#2 Pollutant Air Release in Sarnia
#6 in Ontario
150,790 kg released

Shell plc
#24 Oil Company globally
$28,431,000,000,000 USD
#3 Pollutant Air Release in Sarnia
#10 in Ontario
14,079,525 kg released

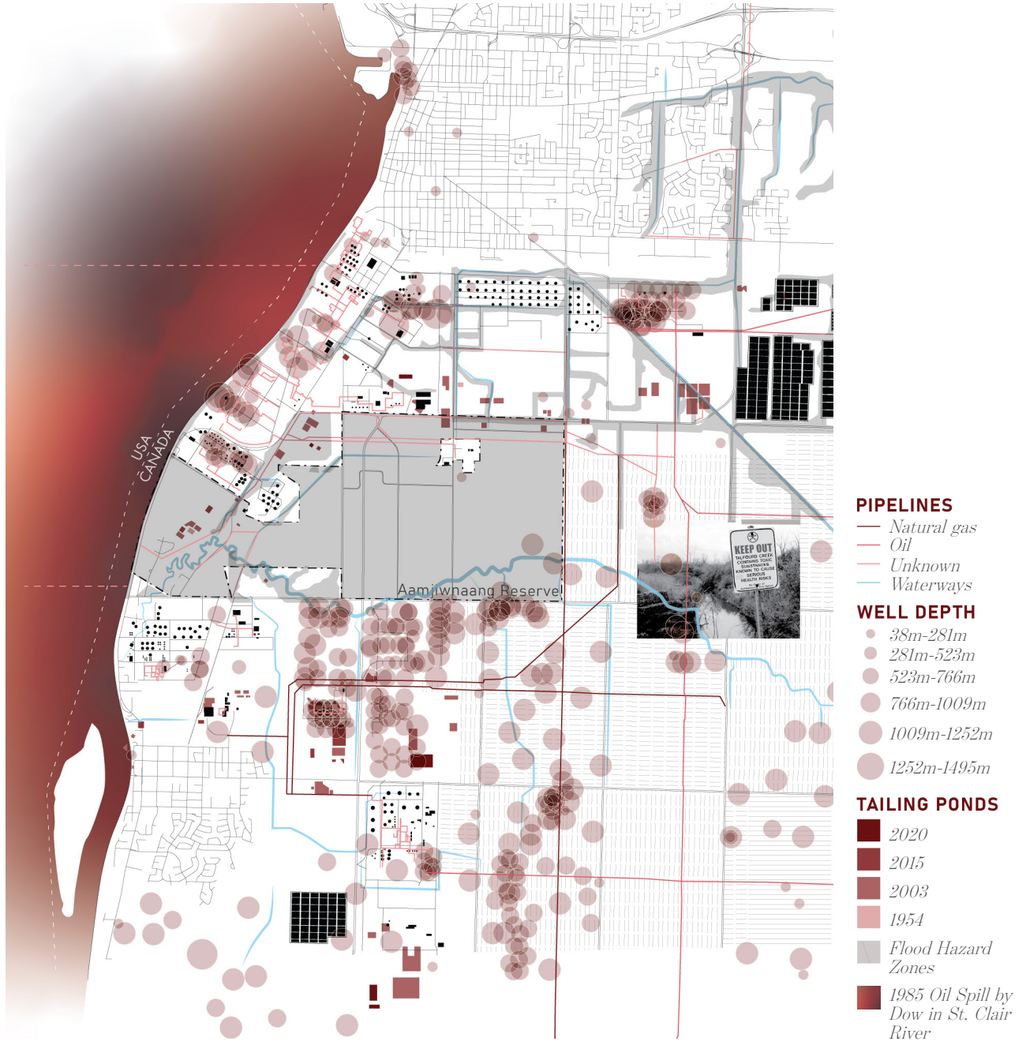
Bayer AG (Lanxess)
#34 Oil Company globally
€2,259,000,000
#39 Pollutant Air Release in Sarnia
>600 in Ontario
766 kg released

FIG 0.3
Drawing of Chemical Valley, depicting the top 3 national and international industries in the proximity by annual revenue.

the land are histories of land theft, toxic exposure, and regulatory neglect, revealing how design, planning, and extraction operate together to sustain colonial relations. Accounting for 40% of the country's total operations, the industry in Sarnia has reshaped the land and the lives of those who live there, leaving behind a toxic legacy of environmental degradation and social inequity despite its national growth (MacDonald and Rang 2007, 8).

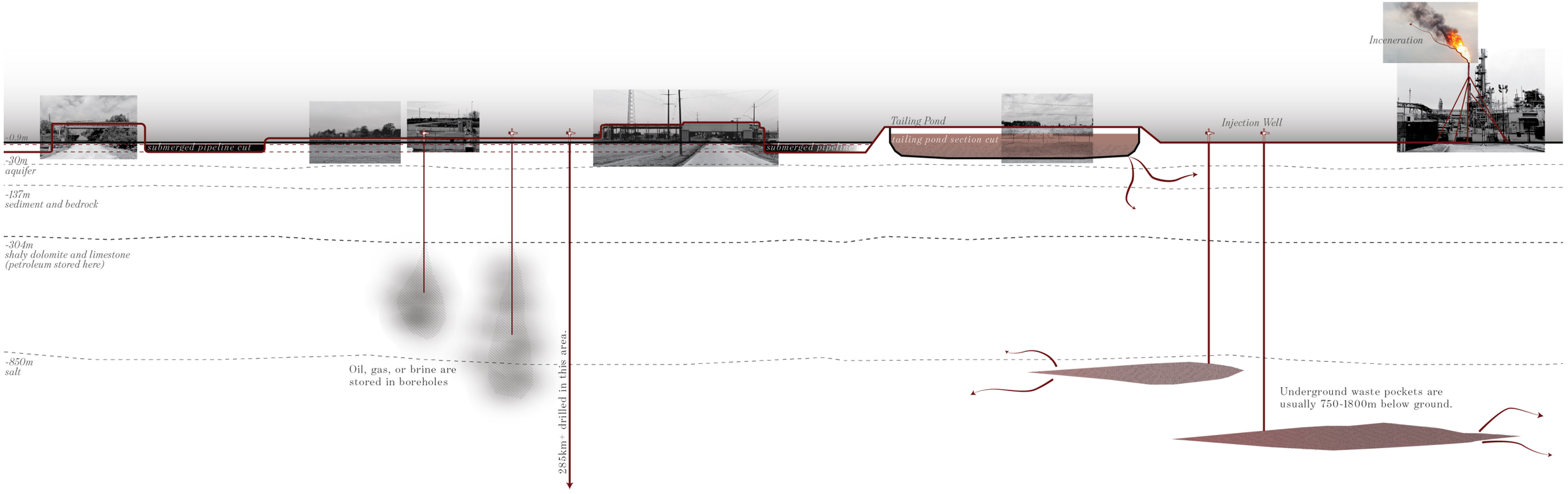
Within this landscape, the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve stands as both witness and consequence. Once spanning more than 10,000 acres, the Crown set in place the systems that would reduce their land to just 3,100 acres, through Treaties and land surrenders (Plain 2017). Today, only 800 of Aamjiwnaang's 2,500 members live on the reserve (Aamjiwnaang First Nation 2025). The United Nations has designated the land as a *sacrifice zone*, a term used to describe communities disproportionately burdened by pollution in the name of economic gain (Human Rights Council 2022, 10-11). The damage is written into the air, in the soil, in the waters of the St. Clair River, and into the health, daily life, and futures of its residents.

Sarnia reflects the broader conditions of architectural practice in settler-colonial contexts. Designing on land that does not belong to us—land that, in Canada, is largely unceded—requires more than technical skill. Polluted and contaminated sites such as Chemical Valley make visible the colonial and industrial logics that architecture has long participated in. They bring into view what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) describe in *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor* as a "profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence," for settler colonialism is not "temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but reasserted each day of occupation" (2012, 5). To design among these histories requires what Katherine Kovalcik calls engagement with the "deeply important web of relationships entangled in the land with which [the architect] builds" (2018, 30).



(Opposite) **FIG 0.4** *Map of the industrial infrastructure in Chemical Valley, showing well locations scaled by depth and the network of above-ground and underground pipelines. The extent of ground disturbance highlights how subsurface disruption accelerates erosion across the designated flood zone.*

FIG 0.5
Section cut of subsurface and surface disruptions in Chemical Valley, illustrating above-ground and underground pipelines. Petroleum deposits are located approximately 304-850m below ground. The diagram also shows waste-injection wells, tailing ponds, and incineration sites that contribute ground, water, and air contamination.



This web is "a thick fabric of layered relations, associations, and chains of actions between material things, large environments, individuals, and collective action" (Weizman 2014, 27). It includes the landscape where we design, its Treaty and land-surrender histories, planning regulations, and the practices and standards upheld by architectural governing bodies such as the OAA and the *Architects Act*, a dense network of relations that shapes how land is experienced and governed. Treaties, mapping, permits, and industrial infrastructures are active instruments of dispossession and environmental injustice. To work within it requires moving carefully, refusing extraction, and considering what accountability might look like when the very instruments of practice are themselves colonial.

This thesis examines architecture as both a tool and a responsibility. How might agency be enacted in a practice bound by regulations and inherited frameworks? What are our obligations to the land, and to the people and communities whose relations are etched into its legacies? How might architectural practice be reoriented to repair and respond to these entangled histories while shaping the built environment?

Grounding the Method

I approach this thesis through a forensic and relational lens as a mode of analysis and as a way of paying attention to those layers. Forensic architecture, as Eyal Weizman describes, moves between the micro and the macro, beginning with fragments and asking what larger structures they reveal, where the "detail becomes an entry-point" (Weizman 2014, 18-19). A fence line can reveal a century of land theft; a leak can point to structures of regulatory neglect. On the edge of Sarnia and the Aamjiwnaang reserve, these traces are everywhere, from the smoke to the lingering chemical smell in the air, revealing systems of zoning, permitting, and regulation; a Treaty boundary overlaying what Lambton County calls "petrochemical industrial land".

I trace how colonial authority became spatialized in Southern Ontario, specifically within Lambton County. The archives of maps, permits, and documents, such as *The Royal Proclamation* (1763), *The Indian Act* (1876), and Treaties that I analyze, are instrumental in the transformation of land into property and ownership. I treat the act of archival research as a relational process, following Kirsch and Rohan in *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*. They write that "the process of research itself creates new knowledge…researchers change and change others when they engage and make meaning of data, as they encounter people and places, and as they interpret and make meaning from archival data" (2008, 6). I work through Canadian archives of Treaties and land surrenders, as well as historical plans and maps, while reading alongside the work of Indigenous scholars such as David D. Plain, Aimée Craft, and Max Liboiron, whose writings reframe these same materials through Indigenous Law and governance, listening to the retelling of these histories through a different lens in an attempt to unsettle the authority of the colonial archive by placing it in dialogue with Indigenous Knowledge systems. Methodologically, I read these traces as evidence and situate them within the frameworks that govern architectural practice.

Design decisions are predetermined by planning regulations, zoning bylaws, building codes, and the client, each operating within broader frameworks of Crown law and capitalist development. Peggy Deamer writes that "[architects] all wish for more social relevance and enhanced bargaining power in shaping our built environment" (2020, 2). This agency is limited before design begins. These professional guidelines are extensions of power that determine whose knowledge counts and whose land can be transformed. By reading these frameworks alongside Sarnia and the Aamjiwnaang First Nations, I ask how architectural practice participates in present-day colonial governance and how it might be reoriented.

At the same time, Weizman emphasizes that forensic practice is never only about reconstructing the past; it also holds a responsibility to the future. These fragments are simultaneously evidence of what has already happened and starting points for imagining and assembling new possibilities (Weizman 2014, 20). Carrying that responsibility forward requires care without reproducing extractive dynamics in my research. I choose not to interview members of Indigenous communities. This is a conscious decision, where it is not my place—as a researcher and settler—to request time, knowledge, or stories from communities who already carry the weight of colonial dispossession and environmental harm. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang caution, settler researchers often research "extractively," seeking what is practical or useful for their own purposes, "putting all the onus of responsibility on Indigenous people to make the future more coherent and palatable to white settler readers" (2019, 15). Instead, I work with texts and articles that Indigenous scholars have already shared, and I try to form my own relations with these texts to avoid extractive reading throughout this thesis. I centre Indigenous voices on their own terms and approach my work with an awareness of the limits of my authority.

This refusal aligns with Audra Simpson's argument that protecting the integrity of Indigenous knowledge often means telling "the story of their constraint" rather than extracting "the internal story of their struggle" (2016, 328). It also follows Max Liboiron who quotes Eve Tuck, to avoid "'damage-centered research…that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury to achieve reparation' and instead work to put 'the context of racism and colonization' at the center…looking upstream to see structures of violence rather than effects and harm" (Liboiron 2021, 34; Tuck 2009, 413-415). To look upstream in this thesis is to ask, what laws and Treaties permitted the industrial zone in Sarnia? What zoning and permitting processes normalized its expansion? And how have architectural practices, often guided by professional standards that leave reconciliation unnamed, sustained these systems?



FIG 0.6
Still from "The Forgotten Origin of Big Oil" documentary, 2025.



FIG 0.7
Petrochemical Refineries in Chemical Valley. Taken by Michael Toledano, 2013.

Positionality & Research Limitations

As a designer and settler, I recognize both the privilege and the responsibility of understanding the landscapes of Sarnia and the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. While this research is grounded in a specific place, the questions I ask about land and responsibility extend beyond it, reaching every site where architectural practice unfolds. I came to Turtle Island (North America) from Singapore with my family when I was one, and we settled in Burnaby, on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Kwikwetlem peoples. My education as a designer began at the University of Waterloo School of Architecture, located on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples, alongside a minor in Legal Studies.

For much of my life and education, I moved through these contexts without recognizing the histories beneath them. I benefited from the privileges and structures of settlement, but I did so unthinkingly, as if my experiences were not intertwined and established from contested and ongoing processes of colonialism. The tools I was taught were themselves products of colonial frameworks. Methods such as mapping and site analysis trained me to see and represent land as a resource, serving development, regulation, and property, while erasing its histories of dispossession and resistance. Only near the end of my undergraduate studies, in a class with Elder Bill Woodworth, did I begin to confront the depth of responsibilities tied to practicing architecture on contested land. It unsettled the assumptions that architecture was technical and procedural. It showed instead how deeply entangled design is with colonial systems, and it has shaped how I see myself as a Treaty person, even now, as I work to question and unsettle them.

Architecture is not neutral. It has long legitimized and reproduced colonial systems through its drawings, codes, and regulatory frameworks. I cannot ignore that my own education

and work experience were also steeped in these histories. This research examines how the discipline's tools and frameworks have been aligned with settler-colonial interests, reinforcing systems of property, extraction, and control. At the same time, I ask how these tools might be unsettled and redirected toward repairing relationships with land, material, and community.

Architecture is an ethical practice, not just a technical one, a discipline that shapes—and is shaped by—the lives, histories, and futures of the places it touches. As a designer, I am both a participant and a witness. Participant in the systems and assumptions that structure the profession, and witness to the damage they have caused. To reconcile those roles, I must be honest about the ways I have been complicit, and about the ways I continue to learn and unlearn how I practice.

Canada's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's* (TRC) *Calls to Action* (2015) challenge us to reflect on what reconciliation means in our own lives, our professions, and within society. For architects, this means grappling with the fact that our work is always situated on contested land, shaped by colonial frameworks of property and authority. It requires us to take seriously our responsibilities as Treaty people and to recognize the ways our practices have served colonial interests, while also imagining how they might instead support accountability, reciprocity, and care.

This research, then, is both an acknowledgement of my responsibilities and an attempt to act within them. It interrogates the legal, procedural, and ethical systems through which we work, recognizing how they have enabled dispossession while asking how they might be unsettled. It is also an ongoing process of self-reflection; a commitment to remaining accountable to the histories and futures embedded in the landscapes I study, and to the work of continuous learning and unlearning. The question

this thesis carries forward is how we, as architects, might design responsibility within such conditions and work toward more accountable, relational, and ethical futures in our practice.

I do not approach this research as an expert in environmental science or the petrochemical industry, but as someone who works through spatial narratives, material traces, and the relations to land. My role is not to impose knowledge but to learn, to question, and to gain a deeper understanding of my own responsibilities as a designer within these relations, as someone accountable to the histories and futures embedded in the landscapes I study. This inherently comes with limitations. My perspective is partial, situated, and shaped by my positionality as a settler and a researcher. I cannot speak on behalf of those directly impacted by these conditions, nor can I claim to represent their knowledge systems. Instead, I ground my work in the writings of Indigenous researchers and thinkers who have long articulated these struggles and responsibilities. I am conscious of my positionality and the way it shapes how I engage with knowledge.

I often reference Max Liboiron throughout my thesis, as they have helped me understand and articulate my perspective. As a researcher, I recognize that I do not have automatic access to land or the authority to speak on behalf of those who inhabit it (Liboiron 2021, 10). They remind us that we do "not have to talk about Land, Indigenous peoples, or even justice to practice dominant science with anticolonial elements...'to be subject to anti-Indian technologies does not require you to be an Indigenous person.' Colonialism and its pollution affect a wide range of peoples. So, too, can a wide range of peoples engage with anticolonial" (Liboiron 2021, 133). As a settler, I need to define what reconciliation means for myself and within my profession, rather than placing that responsibility on Indigenous Peoples. My obligations lie in acknowledging these histories and

committing to ongoing learning and unlearning. I cannot undo the structures of colonialism, but I can recognize my duty to approach research and how I position myself within it. This thesis is my way of taking responsibility for the education and tools I have inherited. It is my way of asking how architecture might act differently, how it might witness and respond to histories of harm without repeating them. It is my way of holding myself accountable to the lands and communities that my work touches, and of practicing with care.

Framework

This thesis unfolds through four chapters, each examining a distinct set of acts that have shaped how land is understood, regulated, and transformed through tools that architects use and continue to use to shape colonial geographies.

Chapter One traces how the Crown spatialized colonial authority through the legal and territorial frameworks that continue to shape land today. The *Doctrine of Discovery*, *Royal Proclamation* and the *Indian Act* established the Crown's power to define, claim, and manage Indigenous Territories. These documents justified the negotiation and enforcement of Treaties that displaced the Anishinabek. The Treaties, in turn, became the legal foundations for the maps, surveys, and permits that architects and planners use today. This chapter follows the encroachment into Sarnia and Enniskillen Township and examines how the *St. Catharine's Milling Case* (1887) set a precedent for interpreting Indigenous land rights within Canadian law. Together, these histories reveal how law, extraction, and design are deeply intertwined, situating architecture within the colonial processes that determine what is permissible on land.

Chapter Two examines how these systems continue to shape and control land use today. The permit is considered here as a colonial instrument that regulates development and the possibilities of architectural intervention. This chapter explores provincial and municipal frameworks, including planning documents. It focuses on a development application in Sarnia that demonstrates how land use decisions are often made before the architect becomes involved. It highlights the pre-scripted conditions of architectural practice and shows how the limits of architectural agency are linked to the broader colonial and legal systems that authorize practice itself.

Chapter Three examines how professional governance shapes architectural practice, focusing on Ontario's *Architects Act*, the

OAA, the *RAIC's CHOP*, and the *American Institute of Architects* (AIA) *Handbook of Professional Practice*. It considers the responsibilities the profession articulates and those left open to interpretation, asking what it means to practice ethically and relationally within these frameworks. While CHOP places predesign outside and architects' basic services, this phase shapes many critical land use decisions, as seen in Chapter Two. By treating predesign as a place for reflection, architects can create a space to exercise agency by using mapping to acknowledge the obligations embedded in the land.

The final chapter explores how professional practice might be redefined through an anticolonial lens, emphasizing holding space between Western frameworks and Indigenous Knowledge rather than framing the work as decolonization. I highlight early initiatives of Indigenous reconciliation and propose further steps for the RAIC, CHOP, and OAA. I end this chapter by examining how Vancouver formally recognizes and adopts the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) as an example of a way forward. The chapter argues that design must be understood as more than a technical service, and that practice that once structured dispossession can be reimagined as tools for accountability and care. It outlines strategies for professional practice and land-based practices that move toward reconciliation, not as a fixed goal but as an ongoing responsibility.

This thesis culminates in a context plan that demonstrates how acknowledging these histories enables settler architects to approach both drawing and design with care. Proposing a context plan alongside site plans for approval can bring awareness to the relationships that will be affected, supporting more ethical and responsible decisions when designing on contested land.

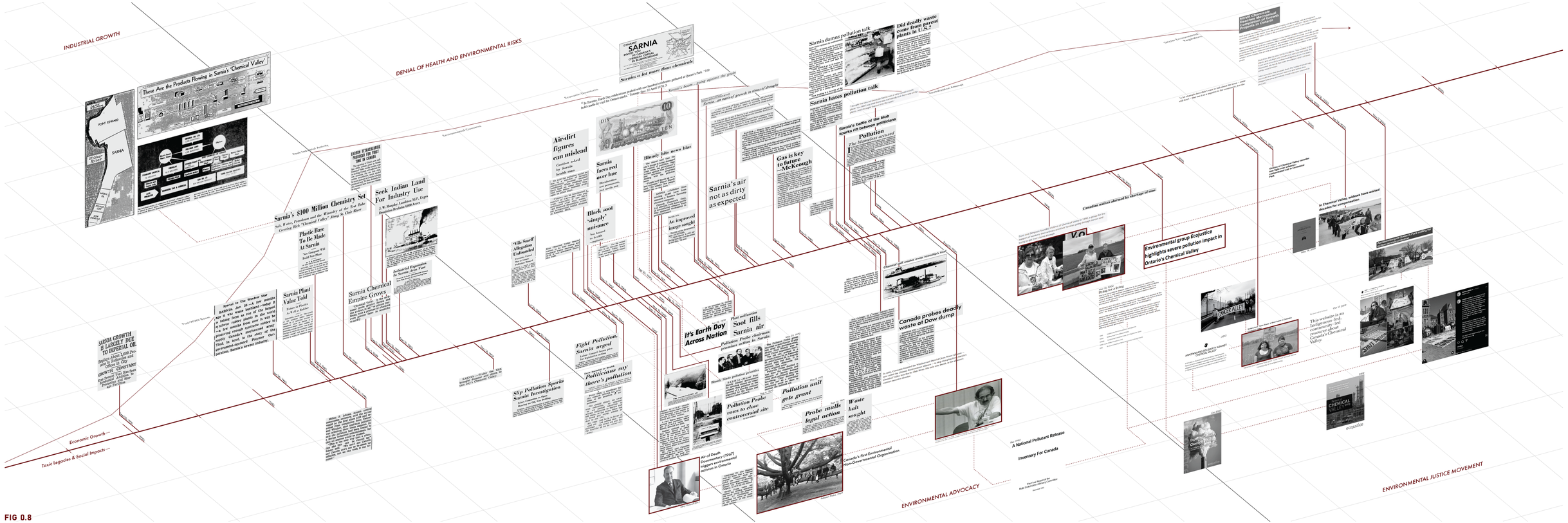


FIG 0.8

This timeline traces the growth of Chemical Valley from the perspective of the public, situating key industrial expansions alongside the political views that enabled them as well as the emergence of key players in environmental and health activism.

Framing the Language

Language carries power. It shapes how we understand, relate to, and represent the world (Styres 2019, 25). Reflecting on Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* (2018), I aim to approach vocabulary in this thesis with care and intention, recognizing, that the words I choose participate in structures of power that have historically and often erased Indigenous presence and knowledge, I aim to use language that centres Indigenous Peoples, while remaining transparent about my positionality and the limitations of my work. Gregory Younging emphasizes that this requires acknowledging the limits of my authority as a researcher over language and being deliberate in explaining the choices that guide the words I use throughout my work. I preserve original quotations as they appear in their sources to maintain historical accuracy, intent, and the perspectives of the original author, recognizing, for example, that Indigenous writers may use different capitalizations and vocabulary to express their own relationships to language. Even when the terminology reflects outdated language, such instances are included not to reproduce harm but to acknowledge how vocabularies and the power relations they reveal have evolved.

Before Canada imposed Treaties and began carving away at Indigenous lands through systemic dispossession, the territory of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation stretched across both shores of Lake Huron, as part of the broader Anishinabek Nation. Their presence shaped the landscape through generations of relationships, stewardship, and knowledge. In the early chapters of this thesis, I will draw on David D. Plain's *Plains of Aamjiwnaang* (2007), along with Aimee Craft's *Breathing Life into the Stone Fort Treaty* (2013), as not only works that illuminate the lived experience and governance of the Aamjiwnaang Nation, but also guide a closer analysis of the systems that would later redefine their relationship to the land. These accounts remind architects what land meant before surveys and property lines existed. While early European settlers referred to the people of this nation as Ojibwa or Chippewa, David Plain states that they have always identified themselves as *Anishinabek* (Plain 2007, xvi). Throughout this work, I will use the term *Anishinabek* to refer to members of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation.

01

The Writing is on the Ground

To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land…Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory. (Said 1994, 78)

The Foundations of Control

To understand how architecture in Canada operates within inherited systems of land governance, we must return to the documents that first defined these relationships. The *Doctrine of Discovery* (1493) set in motion the Royal Proclamation, the Crown's Treaties, and surveys that would justify land dispossession. Formulated between the 15th and 16th centuries, the Doctrine granted Europeans immediate authority over newly "discovered" territories, provided the land was occupied by peoples they considered "uncivilized". This logic was codified in legal frameworks as *terra nullius*, casting the land as idle and unused, waiting to be put to productive use (Augustine 2021, 26).

The *Royal Proclamation of 1763* emerged from this ideology, aiming to regulate relations among Indigenous Nations, the Crown, and incoming settlers. It marks one of the earliest moments when land in what is now Canada was translated into a framework of ownership and control and is often described as the foundation of Treaty-making in Canada. It introduced a system that formalized relations between Indigenous Nations and the Crown, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for dispossession through legal and spatial abstraction (Craft 2013, 32).

This document stipulated that "no private Person do presume to make any Purchase from the said Indians of any Lands reserved to the said Indians," and that all transfers of land must occur only through the Crown (Canada 2013a). This provision was a safeguard, meant to prevent what the Crown described as the "great Frauds and Abuses [that] have been committed in purchasing Lands of the Indians" (Canada 2013a).

This safeguard also established a triangular structure of authority; the First Nations and the Crown established a formal relationship with each other, but "the British never attempted

The Royal Proclamation

"...within those Parts of Our Colonies where We have thought proper to allow Settlement; but that if, at any Time, any of the said Indians should be inclined to dispose of the said Lands, that same shall be purchased only for Us, in Our Name, at some publick Meeting or Assembly of the said Indians to be held for that Purpose by the Governor or Commander in Chief of Our Colonies respectively, within which they shall lie: and in case they shall lie within the Limits of any Proprietary Government, they shall be purchased only for the Use and in the Name of such Proprietaries, conformable to such Directions and Instructions as We or they shall think proper to give for that Purpose...the Trade with the said Indians shall be free and open to all our Subjects whatever; provided that every Person, who may incline to trade with the said Indians, do take out a Licence for carrying on such Trade..."

to educate their own population or build a consensus for mutual co-existence with Indigenous people" (Freeman, 2013).

> *It is just and reasonable and essential to our Interest, and the Security of our Colonies, that the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected, and who live under our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the Possession of such parts of our Dominions and Territories as not having been ceded to or purchased by Us, are reserved to them, or any of them, as their Hunting Grounds…any Lands whatever, which, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us as aforesaid, are reserved to the said Indians, or any of them. (Canada 2013a, Royal Proclamation)*

The paradox of the Proclamation is that it simultaneously recognized Indigenous sovereignty and narrowed its scope. By centralizing its negotiations, the Crown presented itself as both protector and trustee. This consolidation of authority allowed future governments to reinterpret their role from one of protection to one of administration, converting obligations into permissions. The very system designed to protect Indigenous nations became the instrument through which the Crown could gradually erode their autonomy.

The Royal Proclamation was an early act of rendering land legible to imperial systems. It set the stage for the surveying and cataloguing of territory that would follow. The surveys, site plans, and permits we deal with are rooted in this framework. This document, which both recognized and undermined Indigenous sovereignty, shaped the very foundations of settlement.

Paper Territories

The Treaties emerged as the instruments through which the Crown converted Indigenous relationships to land into the language of property and control. Rooted in the logic of the Royal Proclamation and later cemented in the *Indian Act of 1876*, they extended a colonial framework that formalized the Crown's authority over Indigenous peoples, defining who could hold land and under what terms (1980, 11). Rather than uphold Treaty promises, the Act worked to manage, contain, and assimilate Indigenous Peoples into a framework of federal law that positioned Canada as the ultimate authority.

The traditional territory of the Aamjiwnaang Nation stretched "from Catfish Creek to the Thames River to Goderich. It included southeast Michigan and northwest Ohio" (Plain 2019). This was not a lived and relational landscape, marked by seasonal movement and enduring ties. As David Plain writes, in the early 1800s, the Anishinabek "used two reservations between St. Clair and Michigan in the spring and summer as fishing camps. Despite the ceding of our lands in Michigan territory we still roamed throughout our territory wintering in our hunting

The Indian Act (1876)
s. 25–44
Details the order and execution of land surrenders.
s. 26(3)
"...nothing herein contained shall be construed to prevent the Superintendent-General from issuing a license to any person or Indian to cut and remove trees, wood, timber and hay, or to quarry and remove stone and gravel on and from the reserve..."
s. 41
"Whenever by reason of false survey or error in the books or plans in the Indian Branch of the Department of the Interior, any grant, sale, or appropriation of land is found to be deficient, or any parcel of land contains less than the quantity of land mentioned in the patent therefor, the Superintendent-General may order the purchase money of so much land as is deficient..."

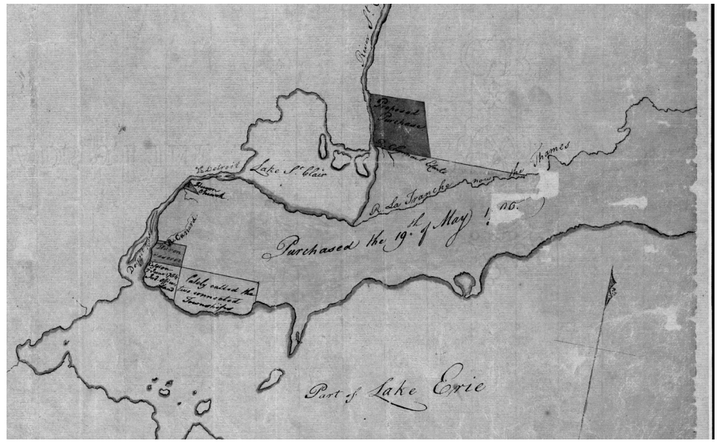


FIG 1.1
A portion of the map and purchase of the Sombra Township Treaty (No. 7) in 1795. Likely tens of thousands of acres were ceded for a one-time payment of £800 worth of goods.

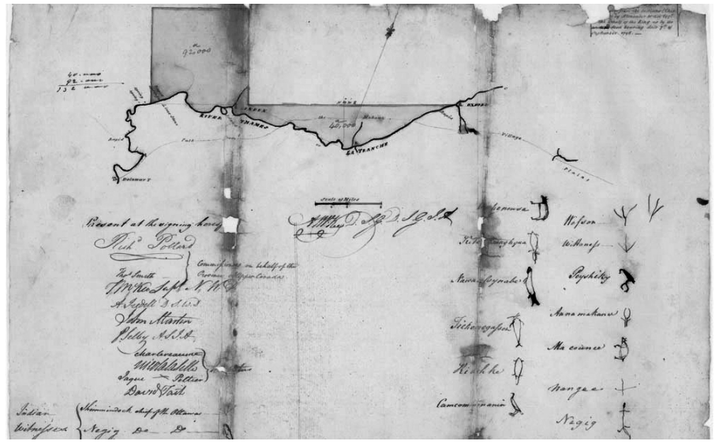


FIG 1.2
The McKee Purchase (No. 2) signed on 1790. Below the map are 16 totem signatures. This purchase was likely over 1 million acres of most of current southwestern Ontario for a one-time payment of £1,200 in currency at 5 shillings per Spanish dollar, to be shared among the Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Huron Nations.

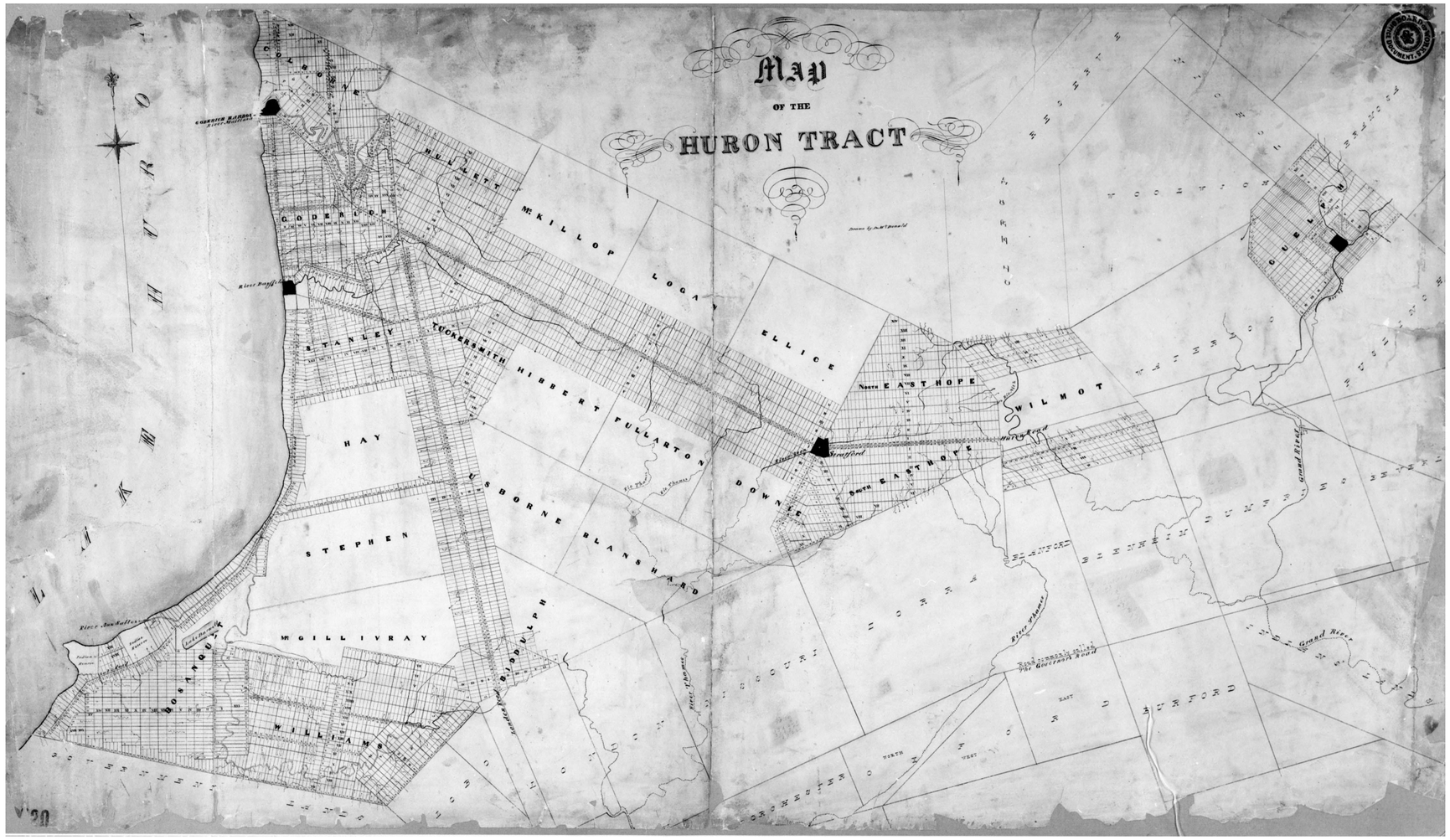


FIG 1.3
1836 map showing a portion of the Huron Tract Treaty, one of the largest land transfers in Upper Canada. Of the 2,182,049 acres ceded, 17,951 acres were reserved for the First Nations. In exchange, the Anishinabek would receive "£1,100 annually in goods (forever, but subject to reductions if population declined)". That amount remains unchanged to this day.

camps and visiting our sugar bushes. But this wasn't to last for long…settlers arriving…made it impossible to continue with our traditional way of life" (Plain 2007, 101).

The Treaties of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involving the Anishinabek peoples of the Aamjiwnaang Nation included Treaty No. 2, No. 6, No. 7, the Treaty of Detroit, No. 25, and No. 29 (Canada 2013b; U.S. Government 1807). These Treaties systematically recast this territory as land to be divided and extracted. The *Huron Tract Treaty of 1827* (No.29) was especially consequential. It transferred over two million acres of land to the Crown while creating four small reserves, facilitating the process of narrowing Indigenous jurisdiction and remaking relationships to the land into property relations (Plain 2019). As Rhonda Telford explains in her thesis *A History of Aboriginal Mineral Resources in Ontario*, "in Ontario all of the major Treaties occurred because of conflict over Aboriginal

minerals…it is central to the Treaty-making process in Ontario after 1849" (Telford 1996, 5). The Treaties extended beyond the need for settlement and were about securing access to the resources beneath the ground. This shift from surface to subsurface rights reinterpreted Treaties as instruments to unlock industrial potential.

The language of Treaties in southwestern Ontario carried a particular cadence, one that echoed the legal traditions of Britain rather than the oral practices of the Anishinabek. They often read like surveyors' terriers, documents in Britain that described estates, boundaries, and obligations, instructing heirs on how to manage them, providing "valuable" records of ownership and duty (Scott 1998, 45). Similarly, the Huron Tract Treaty exhibits the same language of direction and natural markers, designed to fix land into a written and transferable form:

Treaty Breakdown	First Nations Affected	Payments	Status Today	Estimate Land Lost (Canada)
No. 2 McKee Treaty *1790, British Crown*	*Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Huron Nations*	*£1,200 in currency at 5 shillings per Spanish dollar (one-time payment).*		*Likely over 1 million acres lost in southwestern Ontario, including parts of Essex and Kent counties.*
No. 6 London Township Treaty *1796, British Crown*	*Chippewa Nation*	*£1,200 in goods (one-time payment).*		*Likely several hundred thousand acres were lost in the land north of the Thames river, where London, Ontario is now.*
No. 7 Sombra Township Treaty *1796, British Crown*	*Chippewa Nation*	*£800 worth of goods (one-time payment).*		*Likely tens of thousands of acres were lost near the St. Clair river area in Ontario.*
Treaty of Detroit *1807, U.S. Government*	*Ottawa, Chippewa, Wyandotte, and Potawatomi Nations*	*$10,000 lump sum + $2,400 annuity forever, plus blacksmith services for 10 years.*	*$2,400 annually for all groups combined.*	*An estimated 2.5 million acres were lost in Michigan and Ohio near Lake Erie, Detroit River, and Maumee River.*
No. 25 Long Woods Treaty *1822, British Crown*	*Chippewa Nation*	*Annually: 2 pounds 10 shillings per person in merchandise (limited to 240 people).*	*$4 per person per year.*	*580,000 acres lost on the north side of the Thames river in the London and Western Districts.*
No. 29 Huron Tract Treaty *1827, British Crown*	*Chippewa Nation*	*£1,100 annually in goods (forever, but subject to reductions if population declined).*	*Still £1,100 annually.*	*2,182,049 acres lost, excluding 17,951 acres that were reserved. This is the largest tract in present-day Ontario, including parts of the Western and London Districts.*

FIG 1.4
Breakdown of Treaties that dispossessed Aamjiwnaang First Nations land, detailing the nations affected, lands ceded, Treaty compensations, and their status today, highlighting the ongoing impacts of historical land dispossession.

> *commencing in the division line between the Home District and the District of London…then on a course about north eighty-four degrees west…to Lake Huron; then southerly along the shores of Lake Huron, crossing the mouth of the said river, and following the several turning and windings of the said lake along the water's edge to the river St. Clair… (Crown—Canada Treaty No. 29, 1827)*

The language here also functioned as a tool of dispossession. For the Anishinabek, the word *dowa* was used during negotiations, and it carried the meaning of 'to share'. For the Crown, it translated to mean 'sell' in English (Plain 2019). To the Anishinabek, the Treaty affirmed a relationship of sharing, but to the Crown, it confirmed a transfer of ownership. The Crown reinforced this misunderstanding when they confirmed that the Anishinabek would "still be free to hunt…but when lands are needed to be tilled or occupied, you must not go on them any more" (Craft 2013, 51). The Treaty language only allowed Indigenous use until the survey grid demanded otherwise.

The Treaty transformed these living landscapes into coordinates, line by line, fixing land within a system legible to the Crown. Cadastral descriptions were not just about territory but about creating "a fiscal map" through which states could tax, lease, and govern resources (Scott 1998, 46). Cadastral mapping and Treaty text created the system that the Crown claimed to record. They actively redefined how land could be divided and sold. First Nations understood land through ongoing responsibilities and relationships. Crown officials, however, saw land as territory to be surveyed and sold. As one official stated, "the Indians seem to have false ideas of the meaning of a reserve…I wished to correct this idea at the outset" (Craft 2013, 55).

The consequences of this were immediate. As David Plain writes, "our brothers had spiralled into a cycle of poverty, selling

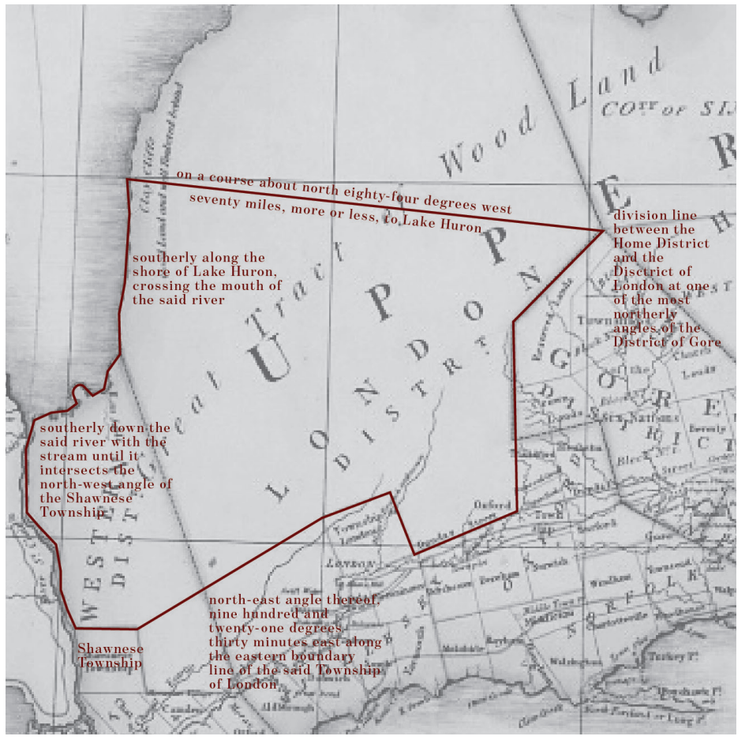


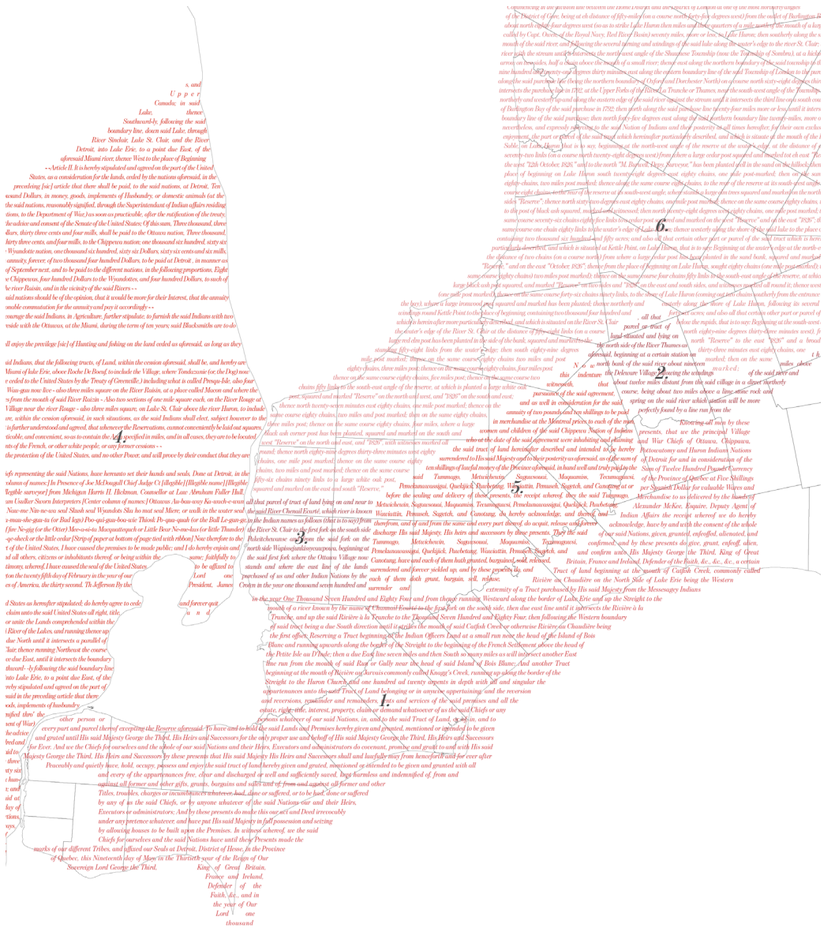
FIG 1.5
A partial interpretation of the written Huron Tract Treaty (No. 29), in red, on top of a cropped map of Upper Canada in 1818 describing all the settlements and towns.

off their land for a pittance, which only led to more poverty… Land speculators were greedy for profit" (Plain 2007, 72). The combination of Treaties and survey maps transformed the land into a commodity that could be divided into concessions and lots, legible for purchase and settlement. Scott calls this the violence of simplification, where "these state simplifications… were rather like abridged maps. They did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice… that interested the official observer" (Scott 1998, 3). For the Crown, that "slice" was agricultural productivity and extractive potential. Everything else was written out of the record.

This abstraction of land was enacted through surveying and mapping, turning living landscapes into parcels for settlers to own and extract. James Corner observes that "the map always precedes the territory, in that space only becomes territory through acts of bounding and making visible" (2011, 93). Mapping did not merely describe land; it made it property. Through this act, landscapes that the First Nations had once understood through care were redrawn as grids and boundaries, made legible for ownership and control (Craft 2013, 99).

> *Before the oil boom of the 1960s, however, land had been acquired from the Native peoples by the Crown and surveyed. In keeping with ideals of settler colonialism imagined by colonial officials, family farms were built on the prime agricultural lands during the 1850s. (Burr 2005, 273)*

The Treaty and its maps turned land into a resource, something to be exploited. Conventions such as site plans and permit drawings descend directly from the surveyor's chain and the Treaties. These drawings presume that land had already been settled, and the discipline continues to reproduce the same system that once made dispossession legible through the act of drawing.



LEGEND

1. *McKee Treaty No. 2*
2. *London Township Treaty No. 6*
3. *Sombra Township Treaty No. 7*
4. *1807 Treaty of Detroit*
5. *Long Woods Treaty No. 25*
6. *Huron Tract Treaty No. 29*

FIG 1.6
Treaty text overlaid on a map of Ontario in 1845, to match the borders of the districts as defined in the agreements.

Surveying and Extraction

The Treaties had already redefined land as a resource, and Enniskillen Township became the ground on which that logic would unfold for oil extraction. Early colonial settlers avoided the swampy and dense landscapes, regarding the land as unfit for farming; however, through the lens of science, it was seen as a site of untapped wealth. Beneath the surface lay the sticky, black substance that the First Nations had long known and used for medicine, but by the mid-nineteenth century, such knowledge was stripped of its context and translated into evidence of geological promise (Telford 1996, 5).

Christina Burr writes that "the first step in the colonization of Enniskillen Township was the alienation of Aboriginal claims by the Crown" (2005, 273). Through the Treaties of 1822 and 1827, the Anishinabek ceded the two northern concessions but, they "never relinquished ownership of sub-surface or submarine rights…thus the Crown never had title to the sub-surface or any of its resources, and still does not, even though most of the oil resources of Enniskillen Township have now been extracted" (Burr 2005, 273). Despite this, the Crown resold land originally promised as reserves for the Aamjiwnaang Nation. The tension between surface cessions and unresolved subsurface claims continues today, resurfacing in ongoing court cases where Aamjiwnaang, Kettle and Stony Point, and Walpole Island First Nations argue that the Crown wrongfully resold land it held in trust during the height of the oil boom (Ellis 2023).

The cadastral survey was a central component of this process. In 1832, Eliakim Malcolm divided Enniskillen Township into 14 concessions, mapped into 448 lots. Though surveyors never completed the full survey, the swampy nature of the land made it too difficult to measure the eighth concession with accuracy. Nevertheless, the township was rendered a grid of property, with parcels categorized as "'good' land for settlement and agriculture and 'poor' or 'desert' land based on an evaluation

of tree species and vegetation" (Burr 2005, 274-275). As Scott observes, "the cadastral survey was but one technique in the growing armory of the utilitarian modern state" (1998, 51). To draw boundaries of chains and records was to give land a new kind of reality, an inventory of commodities.

It was here, in the quiet, waterlogged fields in Enniskillen Township, that the first North American commercial oil well was drilled in 1858 on lot 16, Concession 2, which would become Oil Springs. The expansion of over 1,000 wells and 10 refineries by 1862 was only possible because the survey grid had already prepared the ground.

> *The speculation in oil lands in Enniskillen Township was limited to an area of approximately two and a half square miles: lots 15 through 20 inclusive, on the first, second, and third concessions, where thick deposits of oil had seeped to the surface to form what were known locally as the 'gum beds', and the area along Bear Creek on concession 10 around which the town of Petrolia or "Petrolea" was beginning to be built in the early 1860s. (Burr 2005, 273)*

What settlers had dismissed as "poor" land was revalued as an industrial landscape, parcelled out in leases and concessions. Half of the Township's lots were converted into marketable property.

> *The Crown opened Enniskillen Township for settlement in 1835, thereby continuing the practice of absentee patenting. A patent, a grant of privilege and property made by the Crown, was issued after the fulfillment of settlement duties and the payment of fees; it signified legal title to the land, the right to mineral and timber resources; and manhood suffrage. Enniskillen was a fresh, new township, and within the first three years after land became available on the market fully*

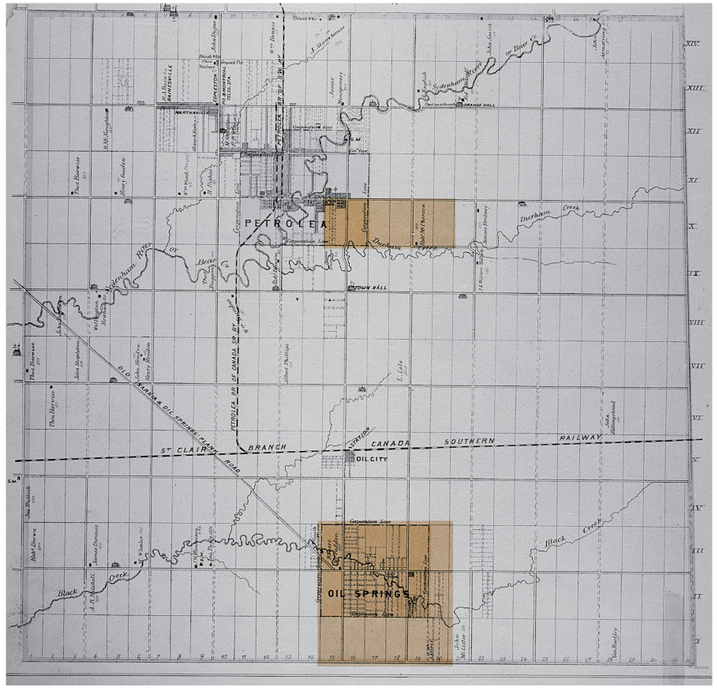


FIG 1.7
Map of Enniskillen Township in 1880, depicting the 14 concessions and 448 lots that Eliakim Malcolm surveyed. Highlighted is the settler interpretation of oil speculation.

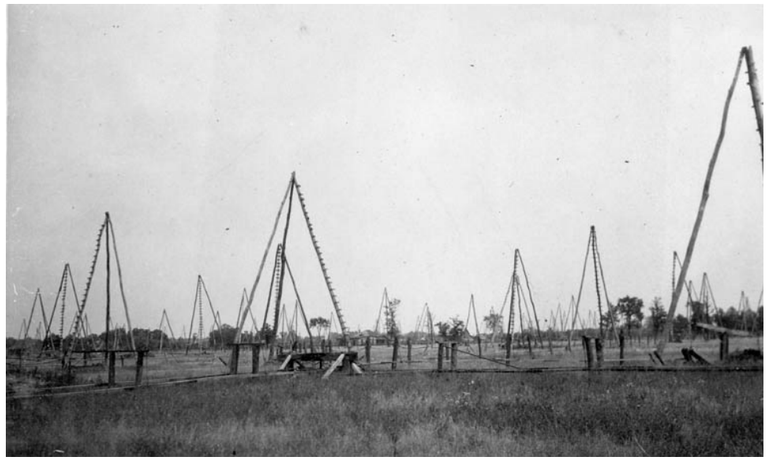


FIG 1.8
Photograph taken in 1923 by W.J. Bolton of the oil fields near Oil Springs. Oil here was exhausted quickly and pipelines were built to transport the remaining minerals to Petrolia.



FIG 1.9
Photograph of an oil field in Petrolia, taken by an unknown photographer of an unknown date. These wells often released poisonous hydrogen sulfide gas into the air and were at risk of collapsing.

one-half of the lots were patented…from 1835 to 1839…a total of 578 patents were issued. (Burr 2005, 275)

This is what Suzanne Elizabeth Zeller (1987) calls the "doctrine of utilitarianism" in her book *Inventing Canada: early Victorian science and the idea of a transcontinental nation*. Victorian science "reflected and reinforced the criterion of practical value or usefulness" (1987, 5). The worth of land was judged by what could be extracted from beneath it and not by the relationships that sustained it, where "the need for the increasingly bureaucratic state to organize itself and control its resources gave an impulse to the collection of vital and other statistics; to forestry and rational agriculture; to surveying and exact cartography" (Scott 1998, 52). Inventory science is part of what Scott describes as the state's broader effort to render landscapes legible.

In 1849, Thomas Sterry Hunt of the *Geological Survey of Canada* (GSC) catalogued these gum beds on behalf of the Crown, as part of a growing project to identify and classify resources with commercial potential (Taylor 2019, 22-24). As Zeller explains, "science in the utilitarian sense was a tool, not merely to locate sources of material wealth but also to construct an ordered society. Victorians saw science emerge from a peripheral leisure-class activity to become the fundamental basis of industrial society" (1987, 6). Oil, in this sense, was made legible through the techniques of survey, geology, and classification.

The Geological Survey of Canada and institutions such as the *Royal Canadian Institute* (RCI), founded in 1849 by architects, surveyors, and engineers, played key roles in transforming land into measurable, exploitable resources (Royal Canadian Institute n.d.). By the mid-nineteenth century, "the idea of a geological survey, a systematic inventory of the earth's structure and mineral resources, had gained currency" across Europe and North America (Zeller 1987, 13-14). The surveys and geological

Parent Material	Texture of Surface Soil	Drainage				
		Excessive	Good	Imperfect	Poor	Very Poor
Outwash sand Outwash sand over clay	Sand, sandy loam Sand, sandy loam	Plainfield Eastport	Fox	Brady Berrien	Granby	
Outwash medium gravel Shaley gravel Loamy till	Loam Loam Loam		Burford Shashawandah Guelph	Brisbane	Gilford	
Clay till	Clay loam, clay		Huron	Perth Caistor	Brookston	
Lacustrine fine sand	Fine sandy loam				Colwood	
Silt and clay	Clay, clay loam Loam, silt loam			Toledo Lambton	Clyde	
Recent alluvium Organic	Clay				Blackwell	Muck Peat

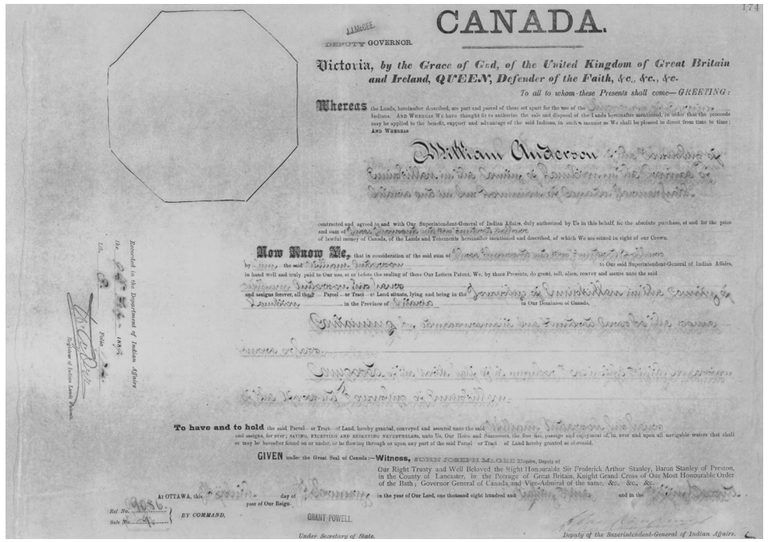
Parent Material	Great Soil Group					
	Grey Brown	Podzolic	Dark Grey Gleisolic	Bog	Alluvial	Regosol
	Well drained	Imperfectly drained	Poorly drained	Very Poorly drained	Poorly drained	Well drained
Glacial till loamy calcareous water modified clay till shaley clay till	Guelph Huron	Perth Caistor	Brookston			
Outwash materials sand gravels sand over clay till	Fox Burford	Brady Brisbane Berrien	Granby Gilford			Plainfield Shashawandah
Lacustrine material fine sandy loam and silt silt and clay silt and clay (grass vegetation) silt over clay till		Lambton	Colwood Toledo Clyde			
Recent Alluvium					Blackwell	
Organic deposits well decomposed poorly decomposed				Muck Marsh Peat		

Drainage Class	Soil Series	Acreage	% of Total
Well Drained	Guelph	500	—
	Huron	19,100	2.8
	Fox	4,700	.6
	Burford	8,000	1.1
Total		32,300	4.5
Imperfectly drained	Perth	139,300	19.3
	Caistor	71,000	9.9
	Brady	23,300	3.2
	Brisbane	13,600	1.9
	Berrien	7,200	1.0
	Lambton	11,400	1.6
Total		265,800	36.9
Poorly drained	Brookston	313,000	43.5
	Granby	1,800	.3
	Gilford	100	—
	Colwood	15,300	2.2
	Toledo	1,500	.2
	Clyde	1,900	.3
Total		332,600	46.5
Very Poorly drained	Blackwell	8,600	1.2
	Muck	4,500	.6
	Marsh	16,500	2.3
	Peat	900	.1
Total		30,500	4.2

(Above) **FIG 1.10**
(Below) **FIG 1.11**
Tables from Lambton County's Soil Survey Report No.22 in 1957, by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, classify soils according to their characteristics and agricultural productivity, reflecting the approaches to evaluating land primarily for its economic potential, translating complex ecological systems into measures of efficiency.

FIG 1.12
Overview of drainage conditions in Lambton County. Nearly half of the soils are poorly drained, requiring "drainage improvement before they can be utilized for production of cultivated crops," with approximately 60 percent of the county needing artificial drainage.

reports were political instruments that legitimized the transfer of Indigenous land into settler property and the settler industry. The oil boom revealed how colonial frameworks were able to reframe land as a resource, its value measured not through relationships of care but through its capacity to generate profit. In this worldview, what settlers saw as "unused" land became wasted potential, waiting to be transformed. This logic extended beyond Enniskillen, driving the expansion of the oil industry into Sarnia and up to the very borders of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. The same tools of surveying, mapping, and colonial law made this expansion inevitable. Because this redefined land by its industrial potential, every subsequent design decision in Sarnia, such as the placement of refineries or the layout of neighbourhoods, could be rationalized as progress. As I will return to in Chapter Three, this pattern of justification continues to shape the city's growth today, and it raises questions about the ethical obligations of architects, planners, and engineers who design within these lands.



CANADA.

DEPUTY GOVERNOR.

Victoria, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, QUEEN, Defender of the Faith, &c., &c., &c.

To all to whom these Presents shall come—GREETING:

Whereas the Lands, hereinafter described, are part and parcel of those set apart for the use of the Indians. AND WHEREAS We have thought fit to authorize the sale and disposal of the Lands hereinafter mentioned, in order that the proceeds may be applied to the benefit, support and advantage of the said Indians, in such manner as We shall be pleased to direct from time to time: AND WHEREAS

William Anderson

Now Know Ye, that in consideration of the said sum of

by the said

and assigns, forever, all that Parcel or Tract of Land situate, lying and being in the

in the Province of

To have and to hold the said Parcel or Tract of Land, hereby granted, conveyed and assured unto the said

and assigns, for ever; SAVING, EXCEPTING AND RESERVING NEVERTHELESS, unto Us, Our Heirs and Successors, the free use, passage and enjoyment of in, over and upon all navigable waters that shall or may be hereafter found on or under, or be flowing through or upon any part of the said Parcel or Tract of Land hereby granted as aforesaid.

GIVEN under the Great Seal of Canada.—Witness, ROBERT JOHN POLLETT McCORD Esquire, Deputy of Our Right Trusty and Well Beloved the Right Honourable Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley, Baron Stanley of Preston, in the County of Lancaster, in the Peerage of Great Britain, Knight Grand Cross of Our Most Honourable Order of the Bath, Governor General of Canada, and Vice-Admiral of the same, &c., &c., &c.

At OTTAWA, this day of in the year of Our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and and in the year of Our Reign.

Ref. No. 4656
Sale No. 254

BY COMMAND.

GRANT POWELL,

Under Secretary of State.

Deputy of the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs.

FIG 1.13
1877 Crown Patent granting William Anderson Lot 10, Concession 9, Enniskillen Township.

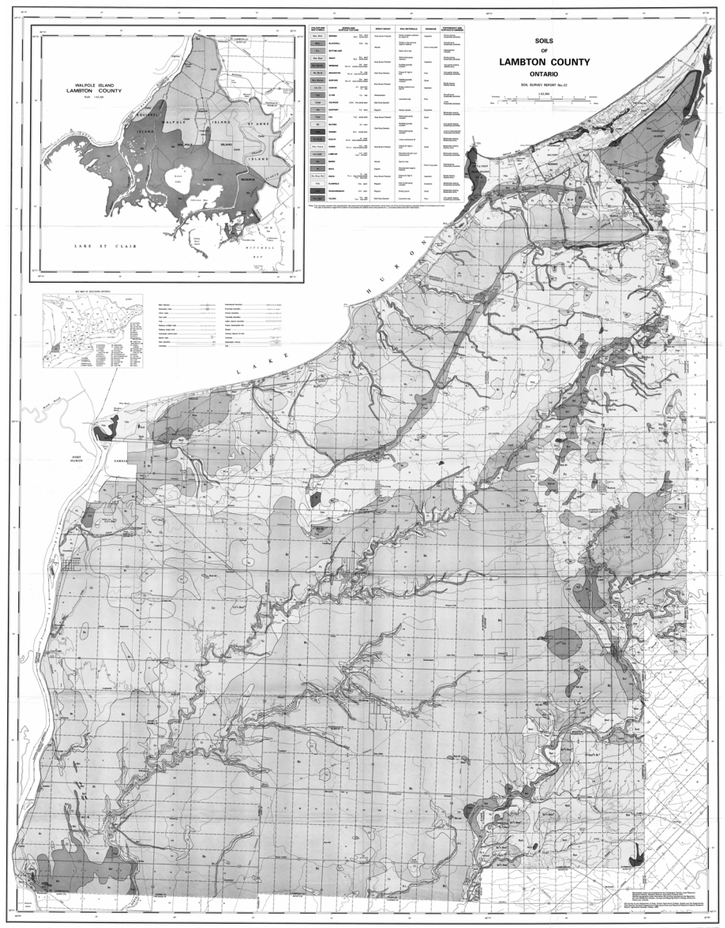


FIG 1.14

1957 Soils of Lambton County Survey with a legend describing whether drainage was "excessive, good, imperfect, poor, to very poor."

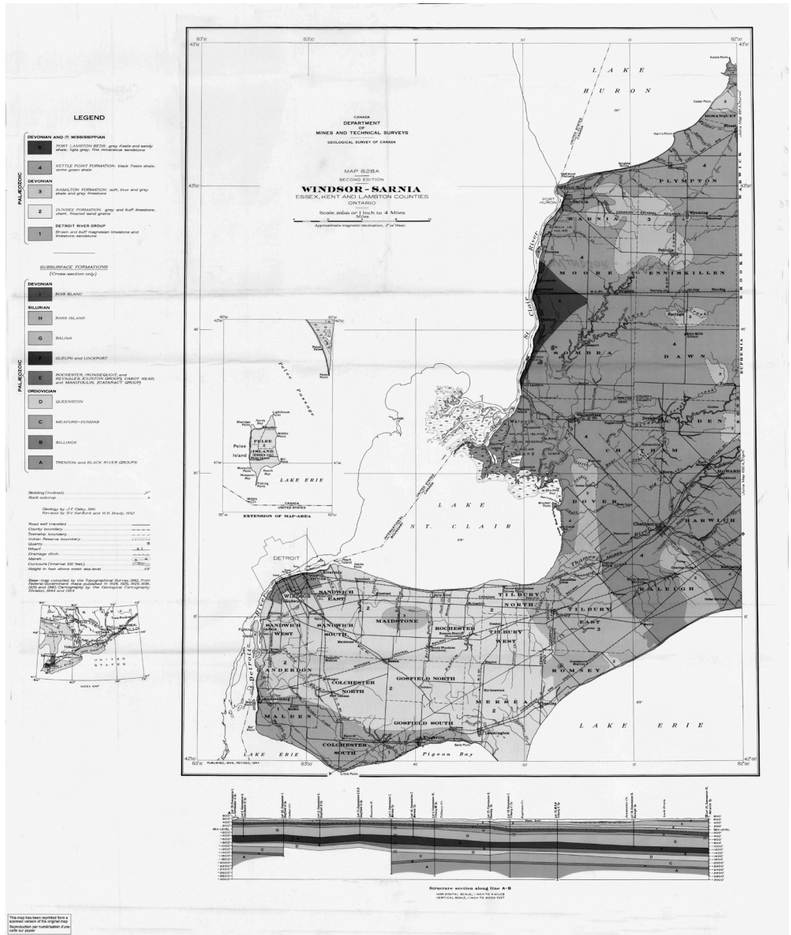


FIG 1.15

Geological Survey of Lambton County in 1954, by the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys Canada, depicting subsurface geology, illustrating the distribution of mineral deposits, translating the natural environment into a technical resource. The knowledge of this subsurface was used to justify extraction and transformation of the landscape.

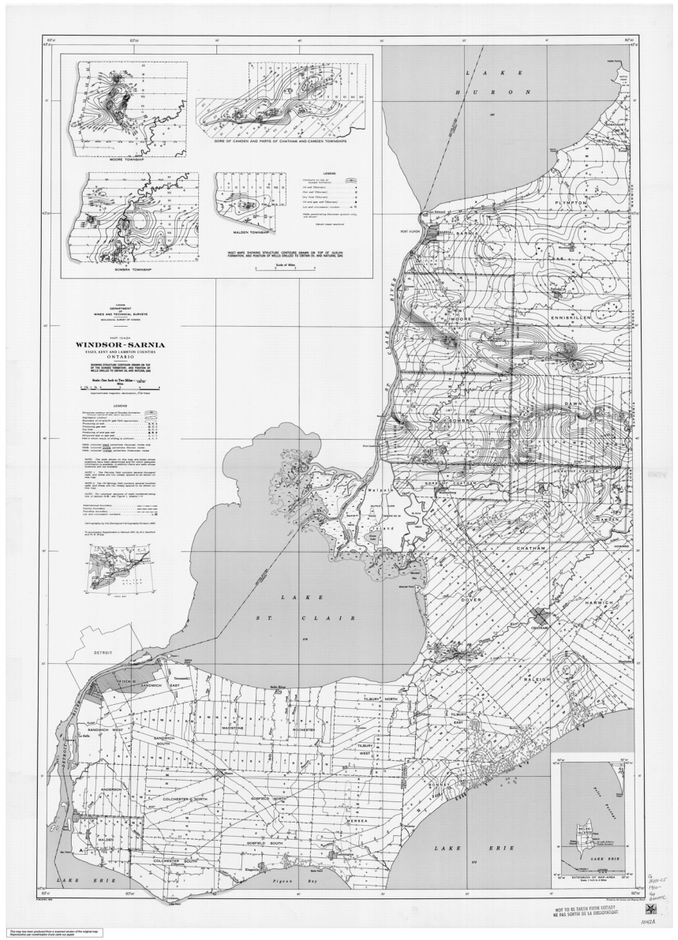


FIG 1.16

Geological Survey of Lambton County in 1954, by the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys Canada, an accompaniment to fig. The map delineates topographic contours, oil and gas field boundaries, and the locations of existing and dry wells. The wells in Petrolia and Oil Springs are so dense that they can't be represented here. This map reveals how industrial boundaries were inscribed onto the landscape, defining the land through extraction. These delineations persist today as both physical and environmental legacies.



THE WINDSOR DAILY STAR, WINDSOR,

Seek Indian Land For Industry Use

J. W. Murphy, Lambton M.P., Urges Dominion Reclaim 4,000 Acres

By NORMAN WETHERUP
Of The Star's Sarnia Bureau

SARNIA—Reclaiming some 4,000 acres in Sarnia Indian Reserve for future industrial expansion projects estimated at around $20 million, was advocated here today by J. W. Murphy, M.P. for West Lambton.

TRANSFER INDIANS

Mr Murphy requested the Hon. W. E. Harris, minister of immigration, at Ottawa, to have the federal government take over the reserve along the river front at least, and re-establish or rehabilitate the Indians elsewhere.

In this connection he suggested that the Indians be given something more than the mere value of the land under its present status.

"In view of the recent important announcements of expansions, this property with some 8,000 feet of river frontage should be made available," Mr. Murphy stated.

"At present there are some 80 families with around 400 persons living on the reserve. Some work in United States. Only about 300 acres are being tilled.

LURE MORE FIRMS

"I feel this land would be of great value as industrial sites, and might easily attract more industries to this area. The Indians, if this project is carried out, should be given more consideration than at present by the government."

The Sarnia Chamber of Commerce and city and township councils are being asked to support the project.

Mr. Murphy spoke at Forest last evening on atomic energy, and at the same time mentioned his efforts to have the reserve river frontage made available for industrial purposes.

It has been known that there are still a number of industries which would fit well into the expansion of the petrochemical industry in this area. It is also understood that in the not too distant future there will be disclosures of that nature.

FIG 1.17
A newspaper clipping from The Windsor Daily Star on October 17, 1950, where member of parliament JW. Murphy asks Sarnia to "reclaim" 4,000 acres of the Aamjiwnaang reserve for $20 million in industrial expansion. The article describes the land as "of great value as industrial sites," and that "only about 300 acres are being filled." The language here reveals how development was justified through the rhetoric of improvement, masking the dispossession of Indigenous land and the transformation into an industrial landscape.

The Encroachment of Sarnia

The transformation of Sarnia into one of North America's most industrialized petrochemical corridors unfolded through a deliberate entanglement of federal law, corporate interest, and settler expansion. At every step, the tools of governance that enabled this growth were built on the erosion of Indigenous land rights. The Royal Proclamation, Treaties, and the Indian Act created the legal framework that justified the dispossession of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. Their lands were subdivided and sold without their consent, always under the guise of permits and patents that legitimized the process.

By the end of the 19th century, these systems had already prepared the ground for industry. When Imperial Oil relocated its refinery from Petrolia to Sarnia in 1898, the company gained access to a site along the St. Clair River that offered easy access to shipping and U.S. markets (Burr 2003, 56). The land it occupied was unceded territory, made legible for corporate entities through survey grids and legal transfers.

The Indian Act became the central tool that facilitated this conversion of land. Amendment 49(a), or the *Oliver Act* (1911) in particular, empowered municipalities and companies to expropriate reserve land without formal surrender, and authorized judges to relocate entire reserves for "public works" such as roads, railways, or utilities (Plain 2017, 1; Meyrick 2024, 54). It allowed judges to relocate an entire reserve if such a move was deemed expedient, thus legalizing expropriation. Dispossession was carried out through the tools that resemble today's professional instruments of planning and regulation.

The Crown applied these tools directly to the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. In 1905, they surrendered a portion of their oil and gas rights on the reserve. By 1906, the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) authorized leases for extraction. Under the lease, only one-tenth of any royalties would be entitled to the Anishinabek.

The Oliver Act (1911) s. 49(a)

"In the case of an Indian Reserve which adjoins or is situated wholly or partly within an incorporated town or city having a population of not less than eight thousand, and which reserve has not been released or surrendered by the Indians, the Governor in Council may, upon the recommendation of the Superintendent General, refer to the judge of the Exchequer Court of Canada for inquiry and report the question as to whether it is expedient, having regard to the interest of the public and of the Indians of the band for whose use the reserve is held, that the Indians should be removed from the reserve or any part of it."

Amendments to the Indian Act that allowed for the forced removal of urban reserves reshaped how reserve surrenders occurred, especially with the removal of the "consent to surrender" requirement. Frank Oliver, who was the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs from 1905 to 1911, was the creator of the Oliver Act. The Act itself is ambiguously worded and open to interpretation.

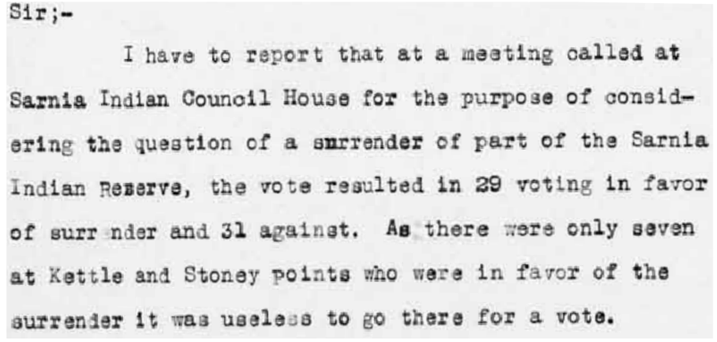
Because information about this amendment is limited, this discussion draws on Judith Frances Meyrick's (2024) master's thesis which examines the Oliver Act in detail.

By 1910 and 1911, settlers extracted 61 barrels of oil, producing a total revenue of $106.75—of which the community received just $10.68 (Telford 1996, 474–75). Attempts to terminate the lease were delayed until 1915, long after extraction had taken place. When Imperial Oil wanted to drill new wells on the Aamjiwnaang reserve in 1918, the DIA manipulated the votes by repeating them 30 miles away from the reserve to secure the desired outcome (Telford 1996, 474-77).

Behind the scenes, there was immense pressure to push for the complete surrender of Aamjiwnaang 's oil and gas resources. In a letter to Charles McGrath, Canada's Fuel Controller, the strategy was laid bare:

> *The claim has been made by the companies – who are interested… -- that the oil and gas are required in the prosecution of work connected with war activities. It may be that you will consider it essential at the present time to develop the fuel resources in that part of the country. If you can assure me of that fact, I will submit to the Hon. The Superintendent General, whether we should not, under the War Measures Act, permit prospecting and development of these reserves. (Scott to Charles McGrath, quoted in Telford 1996, 481–82)*

War became an excuse to override Indigenous opposition and force through the expropriation of vital resources. Even as German troops retreated on the Western Front in September 1918, the Canadian government continued its efforts. On September 19, 1918, under the War Measures Act, an Order-in-Council authorized the DIA to dispose of the oil and gas on Aamjiwnaang and Walpole Island reserves without consent (Telford 1996, 483–84). The war would officially end on November 11, 1918. Still, the country never revoked the War Measures Act to continue the extraction because of "the necessity of oil and



Sir;-

I have to report that at a meeting called at Sarnia Indian Council House for the purpose of considering the question of a surrender of part of the Sarnia Indian Reserve, the vote resulted in 29 voting in favor of surrender and 31 against. As there were only seven at Kettle and Stoney points who were in favor of the surrender it was useless to go there for a vote.

FIG 1.18
In 1919, the DIA sent a letter to the Inspector of Indian Agencies noted that "as there were only seven at Kettle and Stoney Points who were in favor of the surrender it was useless to go there for a vote," dismissing the community's opposition. Instead, the DIA held additional votes farther from the affected communities to secure the outcome they wanted.

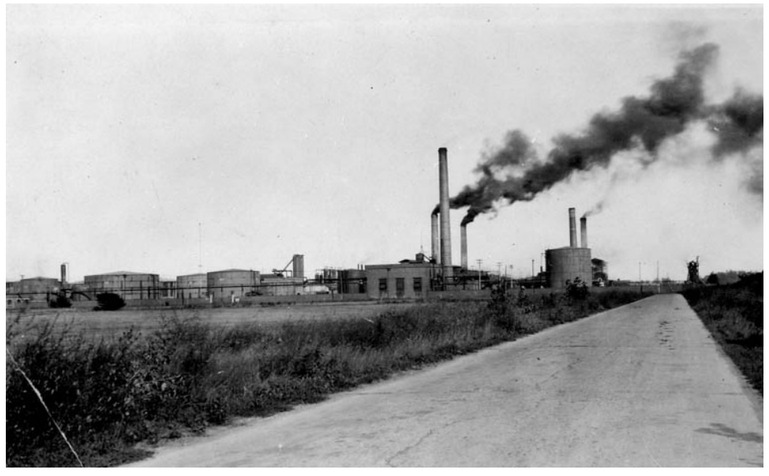


FIG 1.19
Photograph taken in 1923 by W.J. Bolton of the Imperial Oil Co. Plant in Sarnia.



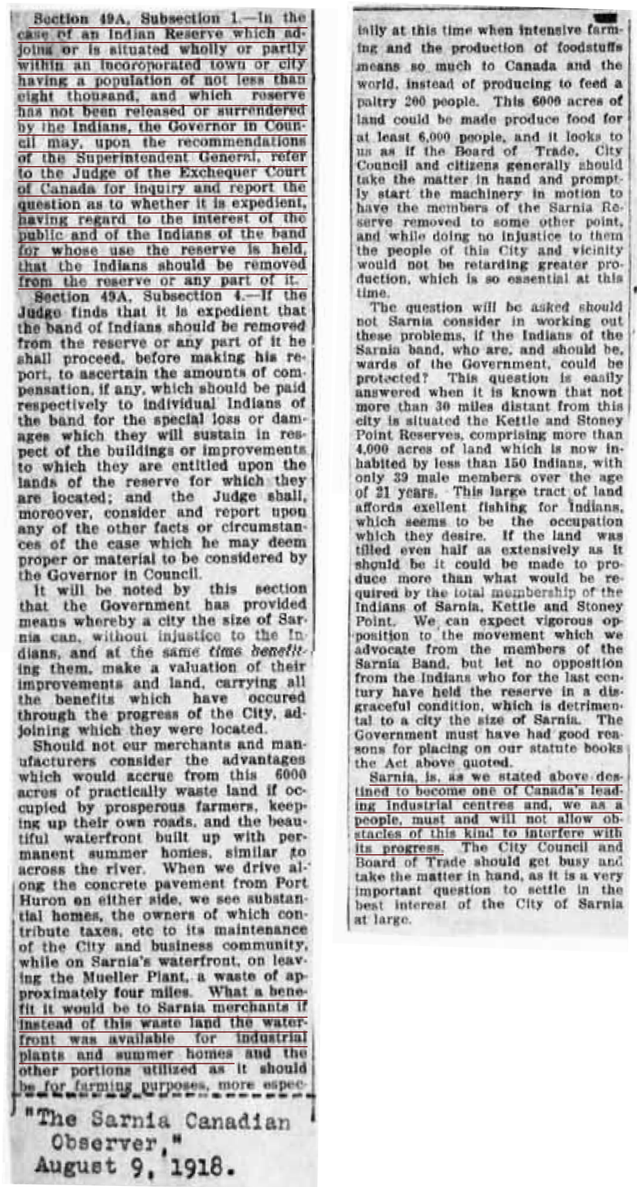
FIG 1.20
A postcard of an aerial view of the Imperial Oil Refinery in Sarnia in 1950, sitting across the street from the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve..

gas development in eastern Canada due to 'considerable scarcity of fuel oil owing to the increasing demands for allied shipping and war industries'" (1918 letter from Deputy Controller to Scott, quoted in Telford 1996, 483).

Meanwhile, Sarnia was lobbying to annex the Aamjiwnaang First Nation's reserve entirely, with the support of the Department of Indian Affairs. In 1919, the City of Sarnia approached the Anishinabek to cede 1,184 acres of reserve land for the construction of a steel plant. When refused, the transfer occurred under the threat of the Oliver Act, with Sarnia threatening to expropriate the whole reserve (Plain 2017).

This framing of extraction as a necessity reveals how colonial and industrial logics became naturalized through policy and infrastructure, justifying it as essential to national survival and progress. Such narratives have continued to authorize industrial encroachment on Indigenous lands long after the war, embedding these logics into the very foundations of planning and architectural practice in Canada. The same reasoning continues to shape how sites like Sarnia are understood and redeveloped today through land-use policies that treat land primarily as a resource rather than as a site of shifting relations.

The rise of Sarnia's industrial landscape was not accidental but a deliberate outcome of the legal and political strategies that subordinated Indigenous rights to the demands of industry. The Indian Act, the War Measures Act, and the Oliver Act all functioned as instruments of authorization, granting companies like Imperial Oil the legal cover to proceed even in the face of community opposition. In this sense, the story of Aamjiwnaang reveals how law itself operated as a permit or a patent, as a mechanism that allowed the transformation of land into sanctioned sites of extraction.



Section 49A, Subsection 1.—In the case of an Indian Reserve which adjoins or is situated wholly or partly within an incoroporated town or city having a population of not less than eight thousand, and which reserve has not been released or surrendered by the Indians, the Governor in Council may, upon the recommendations of the Superintendent General, refer to the Judge of the Exchequer Court of Canada for inquiry and report the question as to whether it is expedient, having regard to the interest of the public and of the Indians of the band for whose use the reserve is held, that the Indians should be removed from the reserve or any part of it.

Section 49A, Subsection 4.—If the Judge finds that it is expedient that the band of Indians should be removed from the reserve or any part of it he shall proceed, before making his report, to ascertain the amounts of compensation, if any, which should be paid respectively to individual Indians of the band for the special loss or damages which they will sustain in respect of the buildings or improvements to which they are entitled upon the lands of the reserve for which they are located; and the Judge shall, moreover, consider and report upon any of the other facts or circumstances of the case which he may deem proper or material to be considered by the Governor in Council.

It will be noted by this section that the Government has provided means whereby a city the size of Sarnia can, without injustice to the Indians, and at the same time benefiting them, make a valuation of their improvements and land, carrying all the benefits which have occured through the progress of the City, adjoining which they were located.

Should not our merchants and manufacturers consider the advantages which would accrue from this 6000 acres of practically waste land if occupied by prosperous farmers, keeping up their own roads, and the beautiful waterfront built up with permanent summer homes, similar to across the river. When we drive along the concrete pavement from Port Huron on either side, we see substantial homes, the owners of which contribute taxes, etc to its maintenance of the City and business community, while on Sarnia's waterfront, on leaving the Mueller Plant, a waste of approximately four miles. What a benefit it would be to Sarnia merchants if instead of this waste land the waterfront was available for industrial plants and summer homes and the other portions utilized as it should be for farming purposes, more especially at this time when intensive farming and the production of foodstuffs means so much to Canada and the world, instead of producing to feed a paltry 200 people. This 6000 acres of land could be made produce food for at least 6,000 people, and it looks to us as if the Board of Trade, City Council and citizens generally should take the matter in hand and promptly start the machinery in motion to have the members of the Sarnia Reserve removed to some other point, and while doing no injustice to them the people of this City and vicinity would not be retarding greater production, which is so essential at this time.

The question will be asked should not Sarnia consider in working out these problems, if the Indians of the Sarnia band, who are, and should be, wards of the Government, could be protected? This question is easily answered when it is known that not more than 30 miles distant from this city is situated the Kettle and Stoney Point Reserves, comprising more than 4,000 acres of land which is now inhabited by less than 150 Indians, with only 39 male members over the age of 21 years. This large tract of land affords exellent fishing for Indians, which seems to be the occupation which they desire. If the land was tilled even half as extensively as it should be it could be made to produce more than what would be required by the total membership of the Indians of Sarnia, Kettle and Stoney Point. We can expect vigorous opposition to the movement which we advocate from the members of the Sarnia Band, but let no opposition from the Indians who for the last century have held the reserve in a disgraceful condition, which is detrimental to a city the size of Sarnia. The Government must have had good reasons for placing on our statute books the Act above quoted.

Sarnia, is, as we stated above destined to become one of Canada's leading Industrial centres and, we as a people, must and will not allow obstacles of this kind to interfere with its progress. The City Council and Board of Trade should get busy and take the matter in hand, as it is a very important question to settle in the best interest of the City of Sarnia at large.

"The Sarnia Canadian Observer," August 9, 1918.

FIG 1.21
A newspaper article from 1918 discussing the use of Amendment 49a to support Sarnia's growing industrial ambitions. It frames Indigenous land and its people as standing in the way of the city's future, as an "obstacle" to be cleared for progress. The federal government would enact the War Measures Act a month later, which would ultimately lead to the land surrender.

This relationship between law, land, and legitimacy is not unique to Sarnia. Just as in Enniskillen Township, where patents converted reserve lands into settler property at the height of the oil boom, and in the St. Catharine's Milling and Lumber Company (1885-88) discussed in the next section, the court's decision made clear that permits were not unbiased tools of governance but of dispossession. For architects, the significance lies in recognizing that every permit and drawing we work with inherits this legal and spatial history.

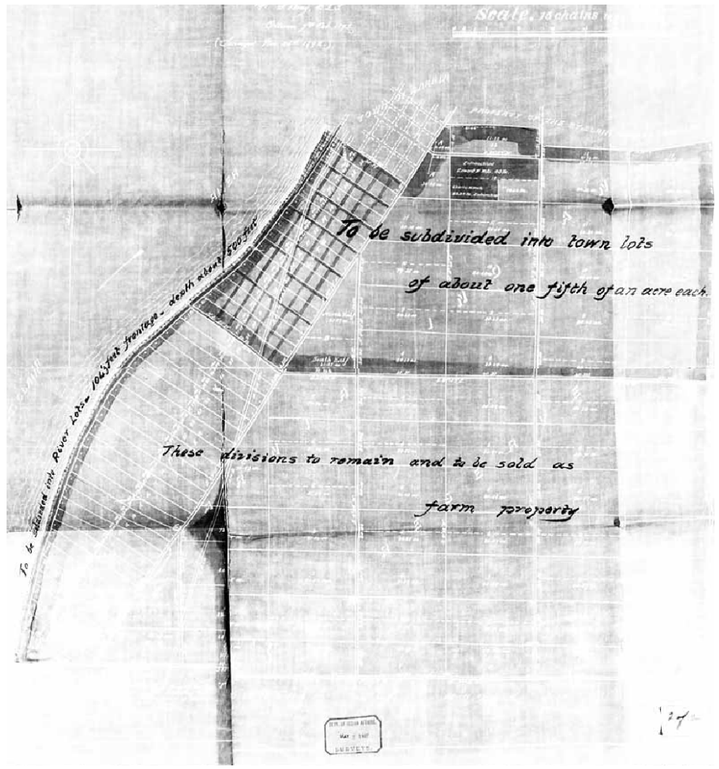


FIG 1.22
1907 map showing the subdivision of Aamjiwnaang First Nation land that the city of Sarnia wanted to acquire. The map was redrawn before its surrender, revealing how the land was surveyed and divided prior to obtaining consent.

Subsurface Ownership

The question of who has the right to the land beneath our feet, especially its minerals and natural resources, was about permits, patents, and the power to authorize extraction. *St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R.* (1887) revealed this when Canada issued a timber license under Treaty No.3, assuming federal authority over "Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians" as outlined in Section 91 of the *British North America Act* (BNA) of 1867, contradicting Section 109, which states that "all lands, mines, minerals, and royalties" belonged to the provinces (Canada 1867).

The dispute began when the federal government granted the St. Catharine's Milling and Lumber Company a permit to harvest timber in what is now Dryden, Ontario, under Treaty No. 3. Acting under the assumption of federal jurisdiction, Canada authorized the license through the Crown's power established under Section 91. However, the province of Ontario launched a lawsuit against the company, arguing that the land and its resources belonged to the province, not the Crown, as stated in Section 109 of the BNA (Telford 1996, 221-222). The court ruled that First Nations held only a "usufructuary title" through the Treaties, a right to use the land but not to own it (Telford 1996, 327; St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R. 1887). Once the land was ceded, the Court declared, the underlying title passed to the Crown, and by extension, to the provinces.

The Royal Proclamation had promised that only the Crown could enter into agreements to cede land. However, these protections were steadily eroded through the systems of permits and patents. The same Secretary of State in the Department of Indian Affairs, who was obligated to protect Indigenous rights, also served as Superintendent General and authorized land transfers, permits, and patents, creating a conflict of interest (Telford 1996, 225). This authority allowed the province of Ontario to issue a "substantial number of mining patents"

s. 91(24)
"It shall be lawful for the Queen...to make Laws for the Peace, Order, and good Government of Canada... the exclusive Legislative Authority of the Parliament of Canada extends to all Matters coming within the... 24. Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians."

s. 109
"All Lands, Mines, Minerals, and Royalties belonging to the several Provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick at the Union, and all Sums then due or payable for such Lands, Mines, Minerals, or Royalties, shall belong to the several Provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick in which the same are situate or arise, subject to any Trusts existing in respect thereof, and to any Interest other than that of the Province in the same."

even before the conclusion of Treaty 3, while simultaneously instructing Canada not to establish reserves on mineral lands. As Telford observes, "Canada argued, on the basis of Treaty No. 3, that it owned a large part of the disputed territory and used this argument to substantiate its claim to mineral ownership" (Telford 1996, 227-29).

The province's legal position rested on the claim that Indigenous nations never possessed full ownership of their lands, only a limited "right of occupancy" (St. Catharines Milling c. R. 1887, 595). This began with the claim that "the Proclamation assumes the title to be in the Crown and not in the Indians" (St. Catharines Milling c. R. 1887, 594). establishing the Crown as having authority over land. Because the Proclamation empowered the Crown to grant lands east of a certain line in Canada, the province said Indigenous nations could not truly own the land. If they did, then the Crown would have had no power to issue grants.

The province also argued that Indigenous rights under the Proclamation could be altered or removed. When Quebec's boundaries expanded in 1774, they argued that the Proclamation no longer applied in the new areas because the Crown allowed it. Indigenous title here existed only "as an act of bounty from the Crown," dependent on the Crown's goodwill. This case also used *Fletcher v. Peck* as a precedent, where the state "held that the title to the soil was in the State, the right existing in the Indians being one merely of occupancy" (St. Catharines Milling c. R. 1887, 590).

Ontario argued that under the same logic, Indigenous title had never been recognized as a legal state capable of challenging the Crown or provincial grants. They continued that the BNA confirmed provincial ownership of all lands not explicitly reserved. Any argument to the contrary would undermine

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the 11th November, 1794. See *Ogden* v. *Lee* (1). The treaty in question is there set out, and so in regard to the other cases relied upon by the appellants.

There are four cases decided by the Supreme Court of the United States which have a direct bearing upon the question in controversy. Nearly all, if not all other cases, are determined upon the particular terms of the various treaties. These four cases decided by the Supreme Court are very applicable to the case in question, and are directly opposed to the contention of the appellant.

The first case, *Fletcher* v. *Peck* (2), is strongly in point. In that case prior to any surrender by the Indians the State had granted a patent. A surrender was obtained from the Indians in favor of the United States. It was contended that at the time of the patent the title was in the Indians, and that no title passed by the patent granted by the State. The court, however, held that the title to the soil was in the State, the right existing in the Indians being one merely of occupancy—that the surrender merely operated as an extinguishment and for the benefit of the legal estate. This case was decided in 1810.

In 1815 the case of *Meigs* v. *McClung* (3) was decided. The facts in this case were a grant by the State prior to surrender and a subsequent grant from the United States, claiming title by virtue of a surrender from the Indians. The court held that the right in the Indians was merely one of occupancy, and that the surrender merely operated as an extinguishment of this right enuring to the benefit of the fee.

Johnson v. *McIntosh* (4) is a leading case in the United States. In this case all the various treaties and statutes are referred to and the question exhaustively dealt with.

(1) 6 Hill (N. Y.) 546.
(2) 6 Cranch 87.
(3) 9 Cranch 11.
(4) 8 Wheaton 574.

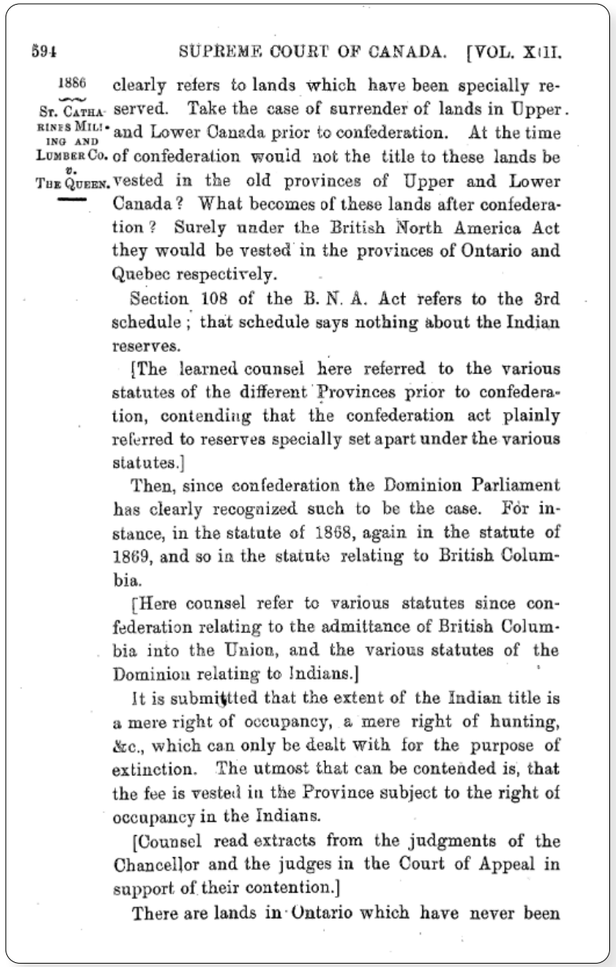
FIG 1.23
Excerpt from the St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R. case, highlighting a key legal precedent cited in the decision.

thousands of land grants and amount to a "fraud on the rights of the province" (St. Catharines Milling c. R. 1887, 595). Ultimately the province's position rested on the claim that Indigenous peoples held only a limited occupancy that existed solely for the purpose of eventual extinction, while "the fee is vested in the province" as the inheritor of the Crown's underlying title (St. Catharines Milling c. R. 1887, 594).

This was a distinctive feature of modern statecraft, the power to reduce complex, lived geographies into simplified, legible systems of ownership and administration (Scott 1998, 3). In this case, the court's language functioned like a patent by transforming minerals into commodities and rights into a temporary "use." The legal categories of Section 109 meant that once land was surveyed and brought into the cadastral grid, the province could claim not only the surface but also "all lands, mines, minerals, and royalties" (Canada 1867).

Permits, in this sense, were mechanisms of dispossession. As Biber and Ruhl explain, "a permit must involve some process and standards for an agency to grant (or deny) permission to a regulated entity to engage in what would otherwise be a statutorily restricted activity" (2014, 144-45). By granting patents and permits, the state authorized itself to override the restrictions it was trying to uphold.

This was the same logic that governed the issuing of hundreds of patents in Enniskillen Township, where land that was originally set aside for reserves was converted into settler property for extraction. Patents there and in St. Catherine's created a legal reality in which Indigenous presence was erased and subsurface rights ignored. Certain "permits allow the agency to extract information about the activities being permitted" (Biber and Ruhl 2014, 187). What was extracted was the authority to write Indigenous nations out of the legal and spatial record.



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clearly refers to lands which have been specially reserved. Take the case of surrender of lands in Upper and Lower Canada prior to confederation. At the time of confederation would not the title to these lands be vested in the old provinces of Upper and Lower Canada? What becomes of these lands after confederation? Surely under the British North America Act they would be vested in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec respectively.

Section 108 of the B. N. A. Act refers to the 3rd schedule; that schedule says nothing about the Indian reserves.

[The learned counsel here referred to the various statutes of the different Provinces prior to confederation, contending that the confederation act plainly referred to reserves specially set apart under the various statutes.]

Then, since confederation the Dominion Parliament has clearly recognized such to be the case. For instance, in the statute of 1868, again in the statute of 1869, and so in the statute relating to British Columbia.

[Here counsel refer to various statutes since confederation relating to the admittance of British Columbia into the Union, and the various statutes of the Dominion relating to Indians.]

It is submitted that the extent of the Indian title is a mere right of occupancy, a mere right of hunting, &c., which can only be dealt with for the purpose of extinction. The utmost that can be contended is, that the fee is vested in the Province subject to the right of occupancy in the Indians.

[Counsel read extracts from the judgments of the Chancellor and the judges in the Court of Appeal in support of their contention.]

There are lands in Ontario which have never been

FIG 1.24
Excerpt from the St. Catharines Milling and Lumber Co. v. R. case, illustrating the court's reasoning on the Crown's underlying title and the limited nature of Indigenous occupancy rights.

The implication for design means that every permit and license inherits this history, part of the same legal and spatial systems that transformed Indigenous territory into provincial assets—the same land on which we design now.

Reflections

The story of Lambton County, much like the rest of Canada, is one of layered dispossession. The Royal Proclamation promised recognition to the First Nations but tied it to Crown authority and embedded control within its language. The Indian Act transformed recognition into assimilation, consolidating state power through governance mechanisms that fragmented land and communities. Treaties and surveys converted relational landscapes into property, in favour of categories that served the settler state. And oil further reframed land, adding another layer, commodifying land through resource extraction and reinforcing dispossession through industrialization.

Together, these systems created the conditions under which Sarnia's Chemical Valley would emerge. Every permit and lease is a political artifact that reproduces the logics of ownership and erasure first inscribed through colonial governance, not just a technical document. What might appear to be a technical boundary is, in fact, the outcome of centuries of erasure and control.

The surveys in this thesis established the conditions for how land could be seen, divided, and built upon. The act of mapping, and by extension, the legal categorization of land, goes beyond describing what is there; it "creates a system through its ability to give its categories the force of law" (Scott 1998, 3). It produces a particular kind of land that can be measured and owned. Through the survey and later the zoning map, land was abstracted from lived experience into a surface of coordinates and lots, becoming a grid of ownership.

To read land as evidence is to recognize that professional tools, such as surveys and site plans, are not neutral acts of measurement, but rather inherit and perpetuate colonial frameworks. The land itself is not a neutral surface, but a living network of relations among humans, nonhumans, and histories. To engage with land today means working to restore these disrupted relations. The challenge for architects is to question the assumptions embedded in our design processes, and to ask what obligations we carry when we design on land where consent was never freely given.

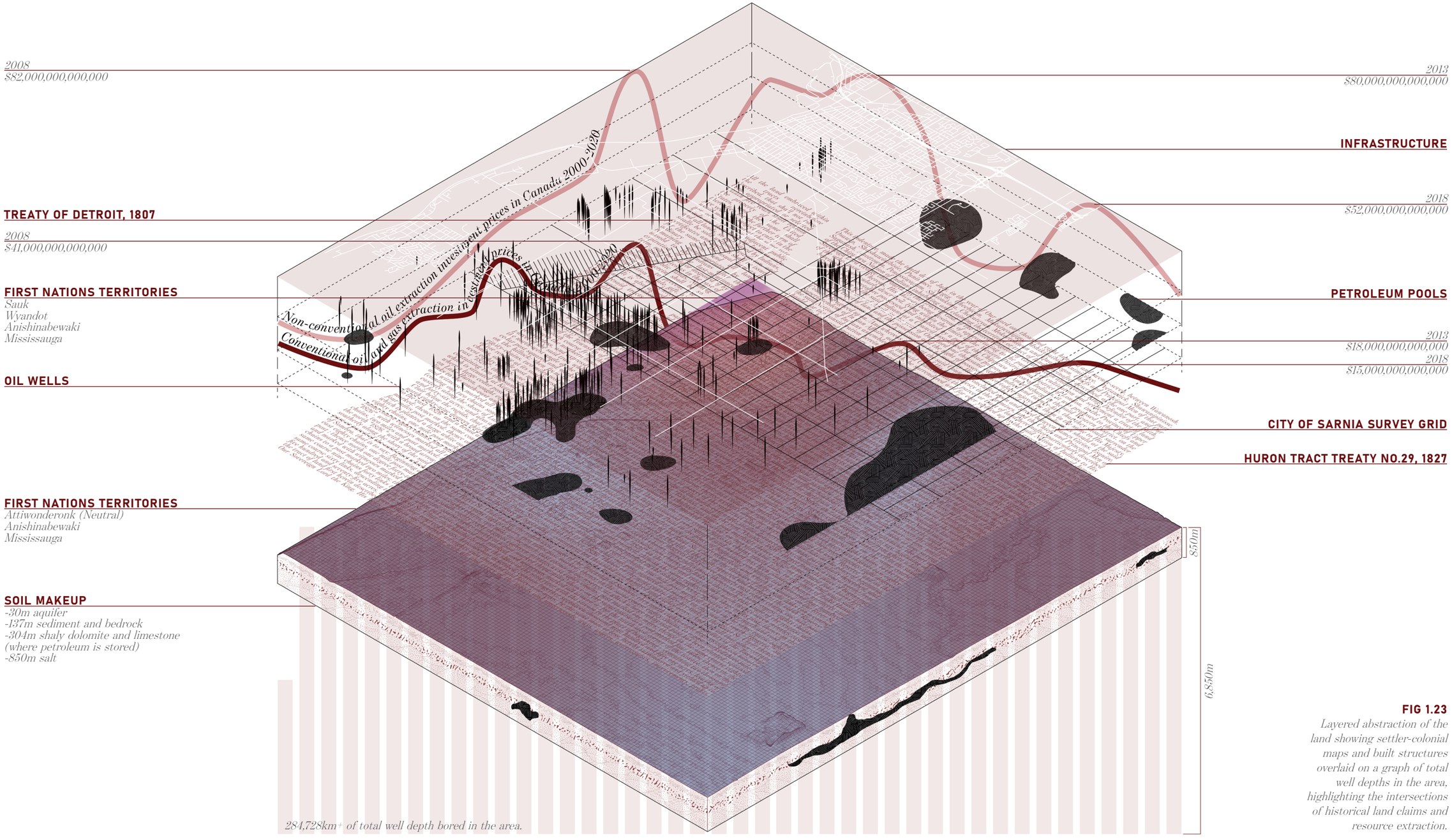


FIG 1.23
Layered abstraction of the land showing settler-colonial maps and built structures overlaid on a graph of total well depths in the area, highlighting the intersections of historical land claims and resource extraction.

02

The Act of Permitting

Planning, as the ordering and management of space, was the early work of colonists 'on arrival'. Consequently, any kind of contemporary planning activity in settler states must be analytically cognisant of, and ethically oriented toward, that history–as–present. (Porter 2016, 151)

Permits as Power

The word permit carries both administrative and ideological weight. To permit something is to allow it to happen. It is a word we often take for granted, buried under the language of everyday rules and approvals, but behind the gesture is a deeper structure of power. As a noun, a permit is "a written warrant or license granted by one having authority" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). As a verb, to permit means to give consent, to let something move forward, to make something possible (Merriam-Webster n.d.). It is a word that assumes someone holds the authority to decide. When it comes to land and architecture, permits are more than just pieces of paper; they are tools that shape what the city builds, what is allowed, and whose vision of the land is made a reality. However, this understanding is not always whole for architects. We often treat permits as technical hurdles in the design process rather than as political instruments that reproduce structures of power.

The term itself carries weight beyond bureaucratic function; it reflects a political structure in which authority is centralized and conditional. Legal theorist Richard Epstein (1995) warned of what he called the "permit power," which he described as a reversal of "the classical American view… that all is not prohibited is permitted, which sets the initial presumption in favor of liberty—not in favor of government action" (Epstein 1995, 407). To permit is to wield power—to decide who may act, who must wait, and under what conditions access is granted or denied. In the context of land use, the permit system enables administrative bodies to promulgate "elaborate sets of administrative procedures, imposing onerous conditions for the granting of a permit, manufacture excuses for delay, retain the power to revise or terminate permits virtually at will," and adopt "amorphous substantive standards that justify any outcome the agency prefers" (Biber and Ruhl 2014, 138). Such authority may appear impartial but often functions ideologically. Epstein refers to this as "specialized bodies which often have a

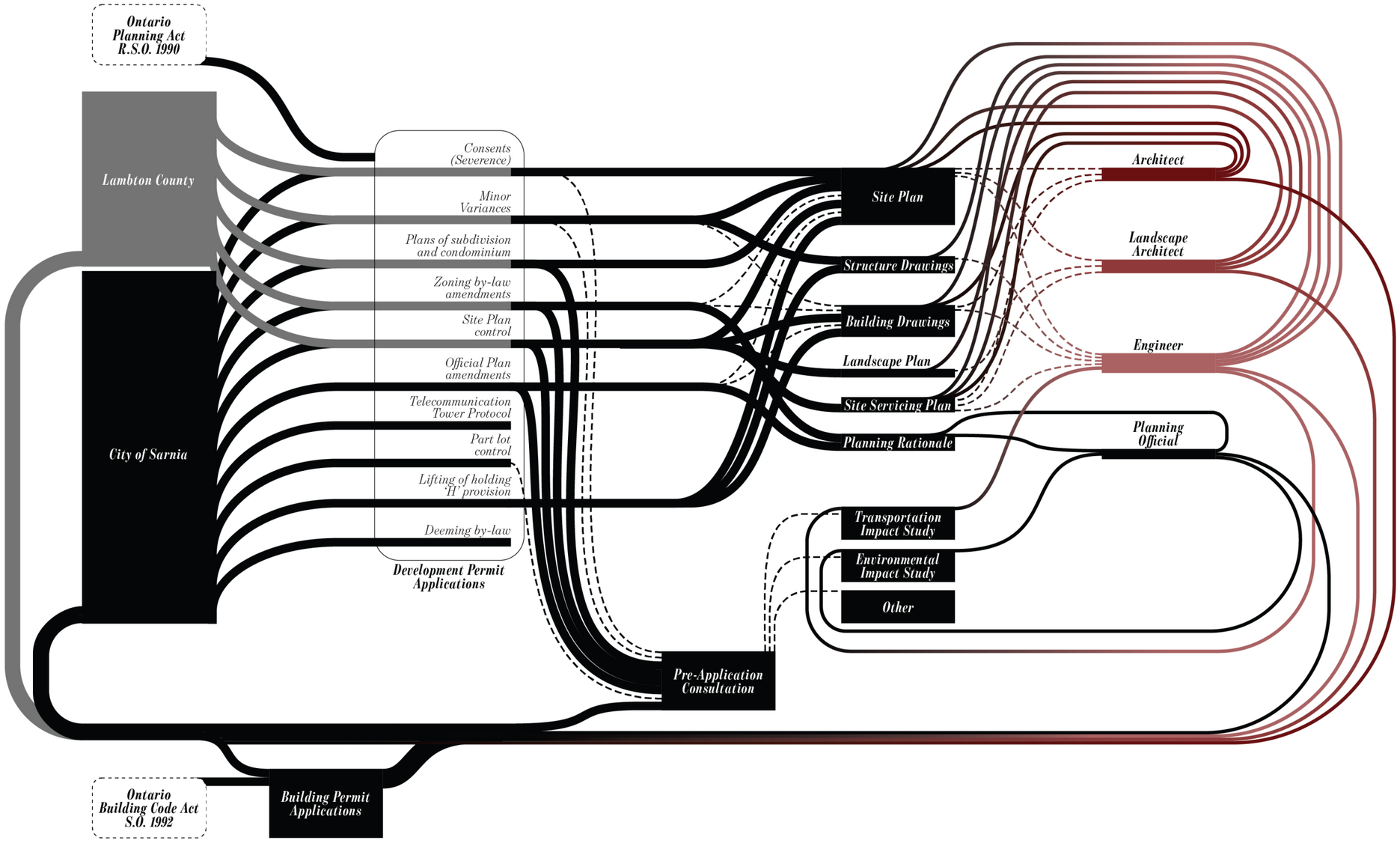
strong ideological position on the issues that come before them time after time"(Epstein 1995, 413). In other words, permitting institutions always operate within a framework that reflects specific worldviews and priorities in land governance.

This structure of conditional consent mirrors the broader settler-colonial framework in which land use and governance depend on denying Indigenous sovereignty. The bureaucratic process of permitting reproduces colonial authority by placing the state as the sole determiner of what forms of land use are legitimate and under what circumstances. The issue is as epistemological as it is legal. Permitting assumes that the state's frameworks of ownership, zoning, and regulations are the only valid ones for ordering land. It is also relational, where permitting justifies land to be viewed as a resource to be allocated, rather than a living relation bound up in histories, responsibilities, and reciprocal care. This framing is recast as secondary to state authority.

Furthermore, it is essential to examine not just its legal function but also the moral assumptions the word permit, carries. Hallie Liberto's (2022) theory of permissive consent helps clarify how the power to grant permission always carries with it an assumption of control. In *Green Light Ethics*, she argues that permissive consent presupposes a sense of entitlement. When taken into the context of settler governance, this logic reveals how the authority to issue permits for development rests on a prior claim to ownership that is itself contested. By removing the inherent rights of First Nations and enabling decision-making power in state institutions like the DIA, the settler state positions itself as the only entity capable of authorizing land use. Within this framework, the permit is not just an administrative device but a political one. It is the mechanism by which the settler state asserts itself as the sole authority of land use. As Liberto notes, "authority serves the one who holds it," and in this case, the permit also becomes a tool not only of control but also of erasure (Hallie 2022, 23).

This played out visibly in Sarnia, where, as discussed in a previous chapter, the city coerced the Aamjiwnaang First Nation into surrendering 1,184 acres of their land in 1919 under the threat that they would enact the Oliver Act, which would have allowed the city to expropriate the entire reserve (Plain 2017). For Indigenous communities, the government has often structured consent to development as a means of forced compliance in the face of threats to land and livelihood.

The deeper problem is that when the settler state alone holds the authority to authorize land use, it remakes land relations in its own image. Land becomes a regulated resource, abstracted into zoning categories and property lines, stripped of its prior histories of governance. It is a reordering of land relations around state authority and industrial development in practice. From an architectural perspective, these implications mean that architects work within permitting systems that silently naturalize these colonial relations, shaping what is possible to design and build. The profession must grapple with how permitting structures land relations and ask what it would mean to practice otherwise.



LEGEND

Statutes

Not required unless stated otherwise

FIG 2.1

Diagram showing all development permit application types in Sarnia, Ontario, identifying which municipality governs each process and the provincial Acts that regulate them. It outlines the requirements for each application and indicates where architects participate within the approval process. Together, these procedures form a closed loop in which regulatory authority reinforces itself.

Governing the Ground

Understanding who has the authority over land use decisions requires clarifying the relationships between counties, municipalities, and other local jurisdictions. These relationships cannot be understood apart from the broader histories of jurisdiction, land division, and dispossession that shaped them. *The Ontario Municipal Act* (2025) defines a municipality as "a geographic area whose inhabitants are incorporated" (Municipal Act 2025, s.1(1)). Within this framework, the province structures municipalities as single-tier, lower-tier, or upper-tier. Counties and regions both function as upper-tier municipalities, such as Lambton County. The City of Sarnia is a lower-tier municipality within Lambton County.

Sphere of Jurisdiction	**(Ontario 2025, s.11)**
1. Highways, including parking and traffic on highways:	
Whole sphere	*All upper-tier municipalities (non-exclusive)*
2. Transportation systems, other than highways:	
a. Airports	*All upper-tier municipalities (non-exclusive)*
b. Ferries	*All upper-tier municipalities (non-exclusive)*
3. Waste Management:	*Durham, Halton, Lambton, Oxford, Peel,*
Whole sphere, except waste collection	*Waterloo, York (Exclusive)*
4. Public Utilities:	*All counties, Niagara, Waterloo, York*
a. Sewage treatment	*(Non-exclusive)*
.	
.	
.	
5. Culture, parks, recreation and heritage	*All upper-tier municipalities (non-exclusive)*
6. Drainage and flood control, except storm sewers	*All upper-tier municipalities (non-exclusive)*
8. Parking, except on highways:	
Municipal parking lots and structures	*All upper-tier municipalities (non-exclusive)*
10d. Economic development services:	
Acquisition, development and disposal of sites for industrial, commercial and institutional uses	***Halton, Lambton, Oxford, Waterloo (non-exclusive)***

FIG 2.2
Recreation of the "Sphere of Jurisdiction" table from the Ontario Municipal Act, outlining the areas of authority assigned to municipalities under provincial legislation.

Sarnia's Official Plan governs land use at the local scale, determining zoning, site plans, and some development applications, but it must conform to the County's Official Plan, which provides the broader policy direction for growth and land management.

Each tier has its sphere of jurisdiction. The Act notes that Lambton County is responsible for:

> *The acquisition, development and disposal of sites for industrial, commercial and institutional uses (Municipal Act 2025, s.11)*

This means that Sarnia is the initiating and implementing authority, but Lambton County has the final say on anything that changes the overarching land use designation. This layered structure allows responsibility to circulate between levels of government and enable the incremental transformations of land use that often privileges industrial growth and diffuses accountability.

In practice, this means that some development approvals often move back and forth. This played out in 2024 when the *Sarnia Observer* reported that the City of Sarnia and Lambton County were again at odds over a proposed land use change. Sarnia sought to rezone a site from light industrial to general employment, which would have allowed "heavy industrial operations and 'noxious' emissions, including odours." Lambton County rejected the proposal, prompting the City to appeal, illustrating how responsibility circulates between these tiers of government, with decisions depending on the interests of each authority (Kula 2024).

What emerges, then, is a planning structure that enforces a specific politics of land. Permits and approvals are instruments

Sarnia and Lambton again clash over city planning

Tyler Kula

Published Jul 14, 2024 • Last updated Jul 15, 2024 • 4 minute read

Sarnia dropping appeal of Bright's Grove urban boundary decision

Sarnia is dropping a land tribunal appeal against Lambton County, making way for Bright's Grove landowners to seek a boundary expansion

Tyler Kula

Published Jun 07, 2024 • Last updated Jun 07, 2024 • 2 minute read

FIG 2.3
Recent news articles on land-use disagreements between City of Sarnia and Lambton County.

that position municipalities and counties as in their own interests. It reveals how even the most mundane aspects of municipal governance are entangled with the broader settler-colonial frameworks, where the authority to permit development masks deeper questions of land relations. This multi-tiered system defines the conditions of practice: before any drawing or design can occur, the site itself must first be categorized and made legible within this colonial framework. Understanding these frameworks becomes essential to rethinking the architects' role in these systems.

Regional Planning Frameworks

The County of Lambton has been shaping land use across its eleven municipalities since the creation of the Lambton County Planning Area in 1978, with its first Official Plan adopted in 1981. These county-wide policies were designed to provide a framework for development and offer local municipalities guidance on creating their own, more detailed plans (County of Lambton 2020, 1-1-1-3). Today, the County Council retains the authority to approve local plans and amendments, determining how land is used, divided, and redeveloped across the region.

The current Official Plan openly acknowledges the difficulties created by industrial legacies, noting that abandoned and contaminated sites pose challenges for both the environment and the economy. It stresses that "the identification, management, decommissioning, and redevelopment of contaminated industrial and commercial sites is important for the social, economic, and environmental health of Lambton's communities, promotes compact built form, makes more efficient use of existing infrastructure, and promotes sustainable communities" (County of Lambton 2020, 3-3). At the same time, it reaffirms petrochemical development as a defining feature of the County's future. The Plan calls to protect industrial lands for "major petrochemical companies that require sites with locational and other advantages" (County of Lambton 2020, 3-13), and encourages municipalities to "permit other manufacturing, industrial, research and development uses" (County of Lambton 2020, 5-1). This dual positioning of recognizing environmental harm even as it reinforces petrochemical expansion captures the tension of land use.

The *City of Sarnia's 2022 Official Plan* situates itself within this county framework while also reflecting the local realities of being home to nearly 40% of Canada's petrochemical industry. It describes itself as the "primary tool for implementing long-range…land use policy," to make Sarnia "a desirable place to

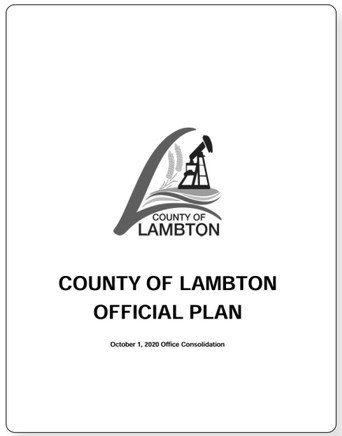


FIG 2.4
County of Lambton Official Plan (2020).

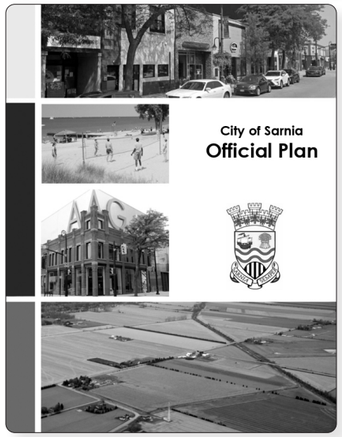


FIG 2.5
City of Sarnia Official Plan 2022 consolidated in 2025.

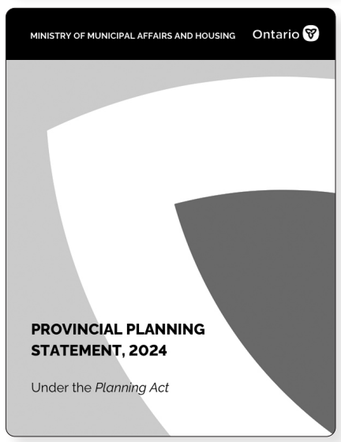


FIG 2.6
Ontario Provincial Planning Statement (2024).

live, work, play, and to invest in" (City of Sarnia 2025, 1). Like the County of Lambton Plan, it acknowledges the history of the industry, but its treatment of Indigenous jurisdiction makes clear the uneven geography of planning authority. The city Plan specifies that "none of the provisions of this Plan shall apply to Lands that are part of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, as specifically identified on the Schedules to this Plan" (City of Sarnia 2025, 2).

This provision formally recognizes the Aamjiwnaang First Nation's authority to administer its own lands under the *First Nations Land Management* (FNLM) and the *Reserve Land and Environment Management Program* (RLEMA). In practice, this separation enables the City to plan around the reserve without taking responsibility for cumulative impacts. Industrial expansions can proceed just outside the boundaries, without any requirement to account for how emissions, risks, or infrastructure decisions affect the reserve. Its exposure to environmental hazards is inseparable from industrial and planning decisions. Municipal and provincial land-use planning rarely involves Indigenous communities in ways that are meaningful, perpetuating patterns of dispossession, environmental exclusion, and planning without consent. Acknowledging Indigenous jurisdiction and the interconnectedness of shared systems is fundamental to equitable regional planning.

In 2024, the Province of Ontario released an updated *Provincial Planning Statement* (PPS) emphasizing "the unique role Indigenous communities have in land use planning and development," and calling for "meaningful early engagement" and "constructive, cooperative relationship-building" between municipalities and Indigenous communities (Province of Ontario 2024, 1). On paper, these commitments suggest a shift toward more inclusive planning processes. However, the language remains vague, and

Lands Management
The Aamjiwnaang First Nations are able to manage "reserve lands, environments and resources, including pipelines" under these programs.

In 2020, the community have begun developing a Land Use Plan.

First Nations Land Management
"enables First Nations to transition away from the application of the 44 sections of the Indian Act relating to land and environmental management. First Nations can then develop their own laws about land use, the environment and natural resources, and take advantage of cultural and economic development opportunities with their new land management authorities."

Reserve Land and Environment Management Program
"a land management capacity building program that provides First Nations with the tools, skills, and knowledge required to manage their reserve lands, resources and environment and undertake Indian Act land management activities on behalf of the Minister of Indigenous Services."

there are few mechanisms to hold municipalities accountable for how and whether they implement these principles.

Additionally, under Section 3.5 *Land Use Compatibility*, 3.5.1. states that planning for major facilities should be designed to prevent harmful impacts while also preserving the economic interests of these facilities. The following subsection, 3.5.2., further addresses:

> *Where avoidance is not possible in accordance with policy 3.5.1, planning authorities shall protect the long-term viability of existing or planned industrial, manufacturing or other major facilities that are vulnerable to encroachment by ensuring that the planning and development of proposed adjacent sensitive land uses is only permitted if potential adverse affects to the proposed sensitive land use are minimized and mitigated, and potential impacts to industrial, manufacturing or other major facilities are minimized and mitigated in accordance with provincial guidelines, standards, and procedures. (Province of Ontario 2024, 18)*

This policy is designed to prioritize industrial operations over nearby sensitive uses. When this use cannot be fully separated from the surrounding infrastructure, the policy allows them to endure impacts up to a certain limit. Liboiron calls this the "threshold theory of pollution…that allows some amount of pollution to occur and its accompanying entitlement to Land to assimilate that pollution" (Liboiron 2021, 5). Anything under that threshold becomes a kind of *sacrifice zone* (Liboiron 2021, 57). This means that communities are expected to live with a measured level of pollution so that major facilities can continue to operate efficiently over the everyday health of communities nearby.

Together, these plans reveal how land use is framed through the language of sustainability and engagement while still privileging petrochemical development and settler institutions of authority. Permits, zoning, and policy frameworks are technical documents, but they are also instruments that legitimize industrial expansion and bypass Indigenous sovereignty. As this chapter argues, the politics of permitting are inseparable from the broader colonial history traced in the last chapter, and these policies leave architects to design within a system that dictates where and how development can occur, leaving them with little agency outside of this governance.

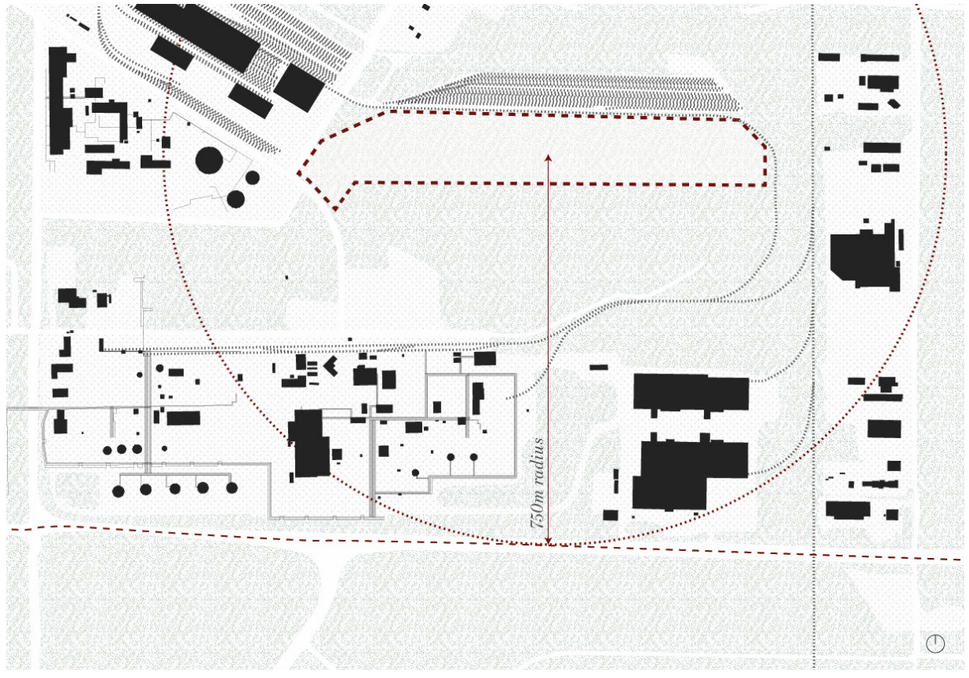


FIG 2.7
Site Plan.

LEGEND
Site (500 Kenny Street)
Border of Aamjiwnaang Reserve
Railway Tracks

Permit Practices in Sarnia

500 Kenny Street
Sarnia, Ontario
N7T 7J2

(750m to edge of Aamjiwnaang Reserve)
Application Type: *Official Plan Amendment*
File Number(s): *OPA no.12*
Owner: *Arlanxeo Canada Inc.*
Application: *VIP Rail ULC*
Agent: *Dillon Consulting Ltd.*

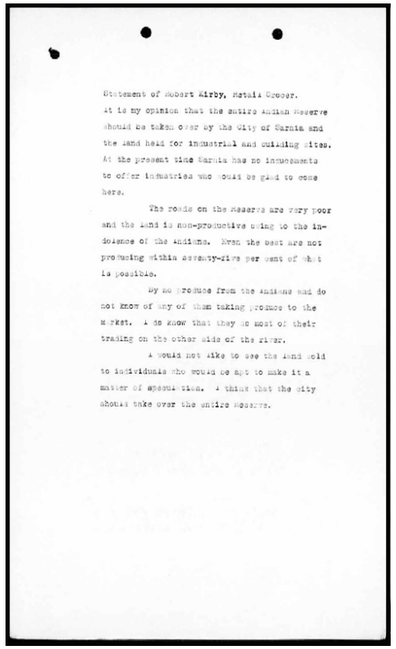
In 2025, a proposed expansion by VIP Rail ULC near the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve entered the formal planning process through a request for an *Official Plan Amendment* (OPA) in the city of Sarnia (By-Law Number 37 2025), seeking to change the land use designation from Environmental Protection to General Employment. Like many development proposals in Ontario, this process was shaped by a set of standard planning protocols, including pre-application consultation, submission of a site plan, a formal Planning Rationale, letters of authorization, and any supporting documents deemed necessary by municipal planning staff (Speak up Sarnia n.d.). These procedures appear outwardly neutral and technical, but, as this case study reveals, they operate within a deeper structure of land authority, one shaped by histories of dispossession and the conditional forms of consent that continue to define settler governance. The OPA is a step in a long-term, cumulative process through which land is reoriented toward futures that align with the interests of the settler state.

Along with the OPA, the Planning Rationale for this project was submitted on April 28, 2025, followed by *Environmental Impact Studies* (EIS) on May 19, 2025. Dougan Ecology completed a peer review on June 6, 2025, and Sarnia's City Council approved the project on June 23. Final approval now rests with the County of Lambton, which holds jurisdiction over Official Plan Amendments in this region (Speak up Sarnia n.d.). This case study examines these planning documents as traces of decision-making power, showing what is stated, what is assumed, and what is left unsaid about the relationship between land, authority,

and consent, where these moments of decision occur before the architect enters the process. By the time an architect encounters this land, permission has already been shaped through permits, revealing how systems of governance and permission already predetermine the conditions of design.

The site at 500 Kenny Street carries a contested history that exemplifies the dynamics of this thesis: the politics of permitting as a tool of both control and erasure. This land was once part of a much larger Aamjiwnaang Nation reserve, which they surrendered under coercion in 1925 following more than two decades of pressure from the City of Sarnia and Indian Affairs officials. Surrender documents justify this taking with claims of underuse, blaming "the indolence of the Indians" for the land's perceived failure to generate value ("Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve", Library and Archives Canada 1871-1907, 105). Members of the community believed that "Sarnia is badly handicapped at the present time from want of industrial sites" (Dr. Coulter, quoted in "Surrender of the Sarnia Reserve", Library and Archives Canada 1871-1907, 115). The city saw this surrender as necessary for its economic survival, and it used the promise of industrial growth to justify the dispossession of First Nations' land to pave the way for its transformation into an industrial landscape.

Examining the history of Kenny Street reveals how industrial necessities and colonial authority have shaped land relations in this area. South Sarnia Properties Ltd. initially envisioned this area as a residential subdivision in 1925, but the expansion of heavy industry quickly overshadowed the plan. (Evans and Amand 2021, 242–43). Surrounded by major rail lines and adjacent to petrochemical operations, Sarnia's industrial geography quickly absorbed Kenny Street. Today, under the ownership of Arlanxeo Canada Inc. (formerly LANXESS and a joint venture of Saudi Aramco), the site sits at the intersection



Statement of Robert Kirby, Retail Grocer.
It is my opinion that the entire Indian Reserve should be taken over by the City of Sarnia and the land held for industrial and building sites. At the present time Sarnia has no inducements to offer industries who would be glad to come here.

The roads on the Reserve are very poor and the land is non-productive owing to the indolence of the Indians. Even the best are not producing within seventy-five per cent of what is possible.

By no produce from the Indians and do not know of any of them taking produce to the market. I do know that they do most of their trading on the other side of the river.

I would not like to see the land sold to individuals who would be apt to make it a matter of speculation. I think that the city should take over the entire Reserve.

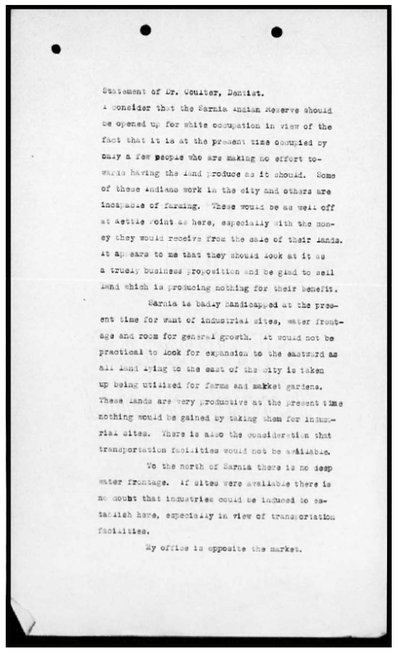
FIG 2.8
A statement from Robert Kirby, a retail grocer:

"It is my opinion that the entire Indian Reserve should be taken over by the City of Sarnia and the land held for industrial and building sites. At the present time Sarnia has no inducements to offer industries who would be glad to come here.

The roads on the Reserve are very poor and the land is non-productive owing to the indolence of the indians. Even the best are not producing within seventy-five per cent of what is possible.

By no produce from the indians and do not know of any of them taking produce to the market. I do know that they do most of their trading on the other side of the river.

I would like to see the land sold to individuals who would be apt to make it a matter of speculation. I think that the city should take over the entire Reserve."



Statement of Dr. Coulter, Dentist.
I consider that the Sarnia Indian Reserve should be opened up for white occupation in view of the fact that it is at the present time occupied by only a few people who are making no effort towards having the land produce as it should. Some of these indians work in the city and others are incapable of farming. These would be as well off at Aetlis point as here, especially with the money they would receive from the sale of their lands. It appears to me that they should look at it as a truely business proposition and be glad to sell land which is producing nothing for their benefit.

Sarnia is badly handicapped at the present time for want of industrial sites, water frontage and room for general growth. It would not be practical to look for expansion to the eastward as all land lying to the east of the city is taken up being utilized for farms and market gardens. These lands are very productive at the present time nothing would be gained by taking them for industrial sites. There is also the consideration that transportation facilities would not be available.

To the north of Sarnia there is no deep water frontage. If sites were available there is no doubt that industries could be induced to establish here, especially in view of transportation facilities.

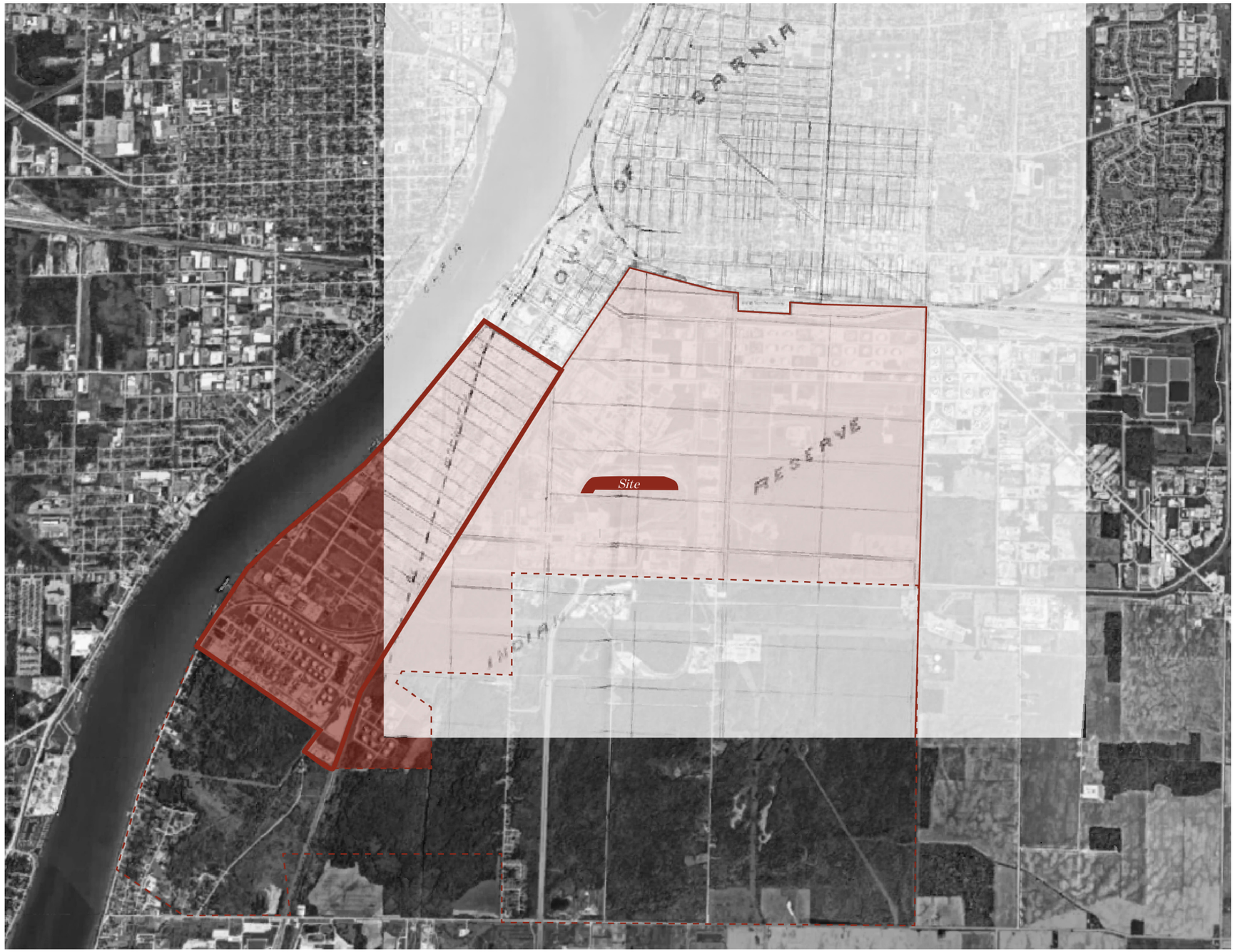
My office is opposite the market.

FIG 2.9
A statement from Dr. Coulter, a dentist:

"I consider that the Sarnia Indian Reserve should be opened up for the white occupation in view of the fact that it is at the present time occupied by only a few people who are making no effort towards having the land produce as it should. Some of these indians work in the city and others are incapable of farming...

Sarnia is badly handicapped at the present time for want of industrial sites, water frontage and room for general growth. It would not be practical to look for expansion to the eastward as all land lying to the east of the city is taken up being utilized for farms and market gardens. These lands are very productive at the present time nothing would be gained by taking them for industrial sites...

The greater part of the Reserve is a desolation of weeds and undergrowth."



LEGEND

- *Current Aamjiwnaang Reserve*
- *1925 Boundaries of the Reserve*
- *1925 Land surrender boundary*

FIG 2.10

A cropped map from the 1925 Surrender files, overlaid on a satellite image from Google Earth. While the original documents include no precise location of what was being surrendered, letters written referred often waterfront lots for industry (highlighted in bold red). The dotted red line traces the boundary of the current Aamjiwnaang reserve in relation to its 1925 extent, revealing the scale of land lost.

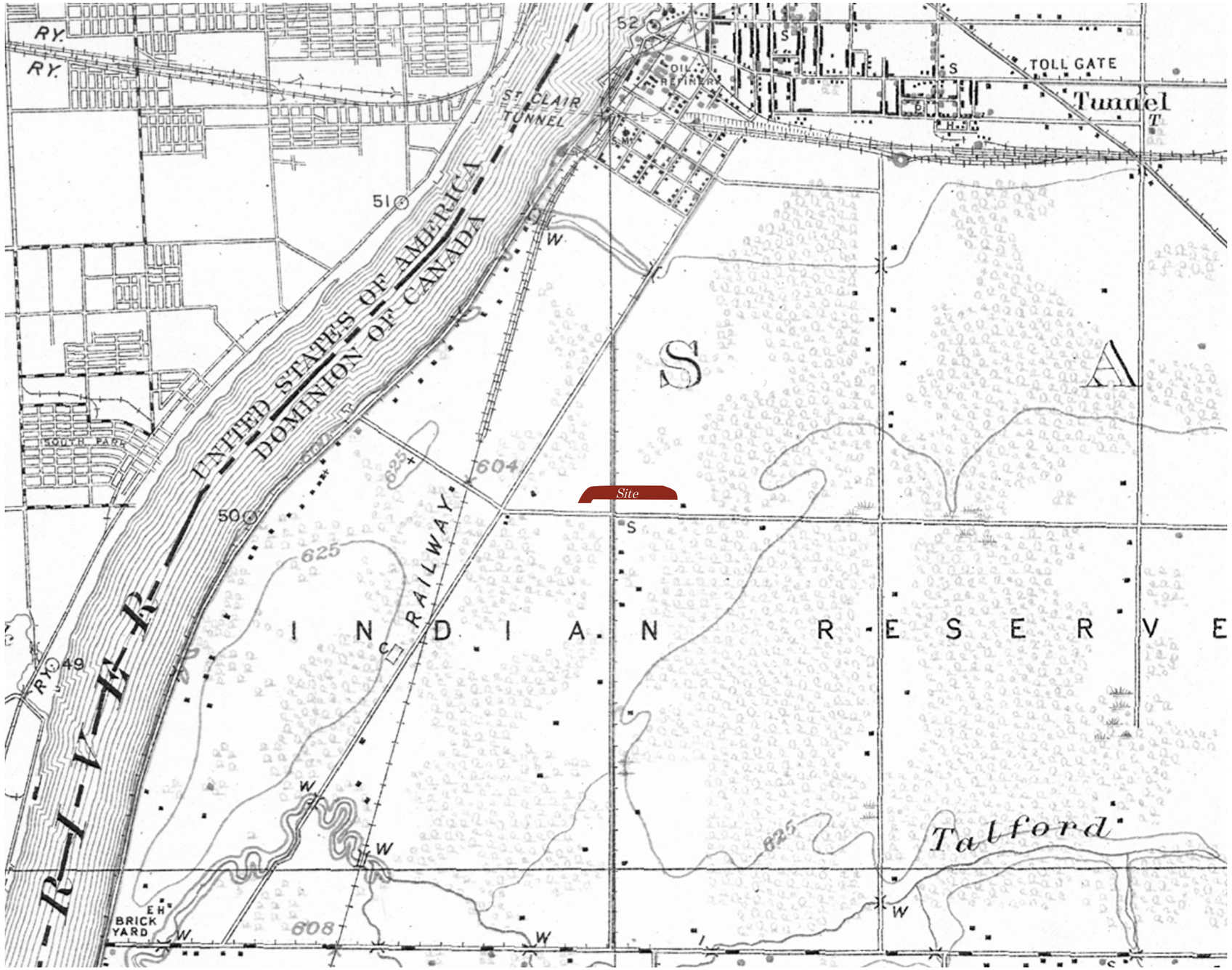


FIG 2.11
A cropped map from 1922 showing the conditions prior to the 1925 land surrender. Buildings are visible along the waterfront within the reserve, illustrating the use of the land before industrial expansion.



FIG 2.12
A cropped map from 1936 after the 1925 land surrender. Imperial Oil begins to encroach down the waterfront, and buildings that used to be in that area have been demolished and moved further south. Although no official record of additional surrenders was found, the map shows Imperial Oil extending west, into land that should still have been part of the reserve.

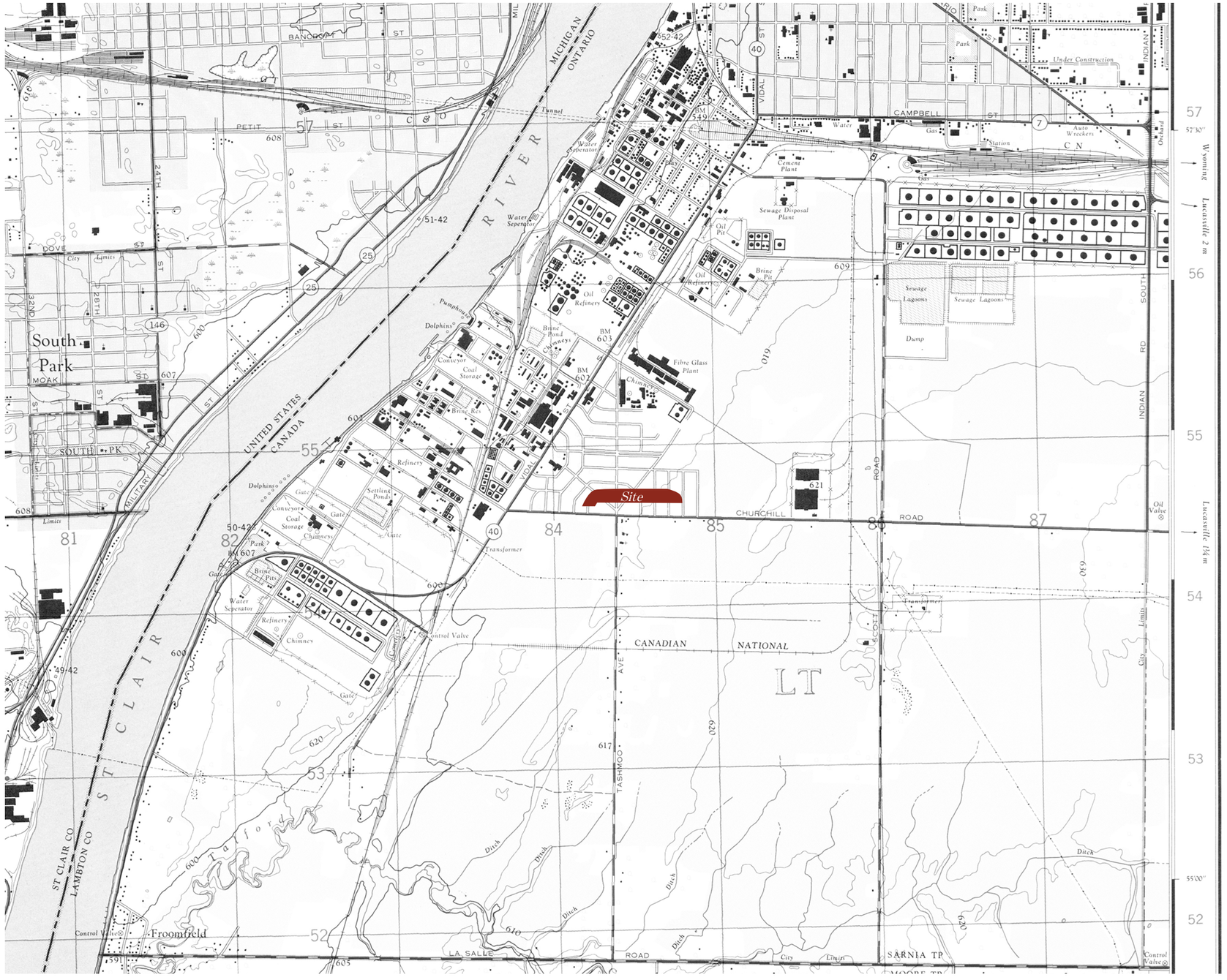


FIG 2.13
A cropped map from 1965, where the encroachment has hit the border and maybe even past north of the reserve. There is no public documentation of land surrenders after 1925, but these refineries expanding west suggests that another transfer must have occurred between the 1930s and 1960s.

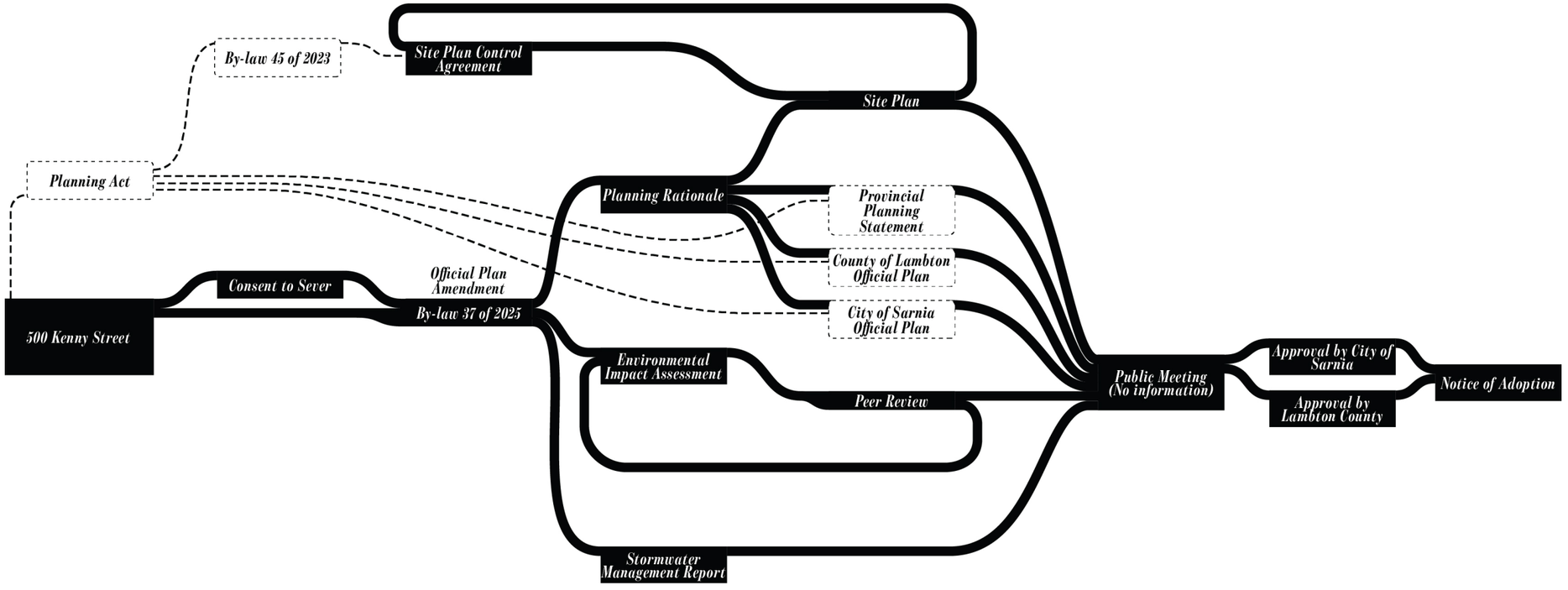
of corporate and colonial claims to land (Lanxess 2018; Arlanxeo 2020) Up until 2018, most of Arlanxeo's records were held under LANXESS. For this case study, I treat Arlanxeo and LANXESS interchangeably. The proposed expansion is an extension of a century-long process in which land has been reclassified and repurposed under the authority of state and corporate actors.

This case study illustrates how permitting functions as both a procedural requirement and a mechanism that structures land and futures. The Kenny Street proposal sits within a system where land-use decisions are governed by municipal bylaws and, more significantly, by long histories of dispossession and the ideological power of "permission." As earlier chapters show, permitting is rooted in a settler-colonial framework that treats land as something to be granted and regulated by the state, rather than as part of a relation grounded in sovereignty and stewardship. The Kenny Street case exemplifies how these structures continue to operate. Land surrendered under coercion is now reopened to industrial expansion through an amendment process shaped by the priorities of the County and City, not by the rights of those most affected. These approvals smooth the path for future industrial encroachment by establishing new baselines of what is permissible.

This development also reveals that we cannot separate design from the permits that shape architectural practice. The architect often enters a project after planning authorities have interpreted and categorized the land in the interest of the state. Robin Evans writes, "drawing in architecture is not done after nature, but prior to construction; it…produce[s] a reality that will end up outside the drawing" (Evans 1986, 165). In other words, drawings generate the conditions that will materialize. Because these drawings must conform to zoning, bylaws, and technical standards, regulation shapes the act of drawing before the architect even begins. Architects rarely work directly on land or freely within the drawing space. Drawings become political instruments, translating governing systems into lines and forms that align with predetermined policies. The space between drawing and building is a structural condition in which governing systems ultimately determine what is buildable, where, and for whom.

The Kenny Street proposal exposes how architecture and any development application, through the language of plans and permits, become complicit in reproducing colonial land relations. It reveals that design extends beyond creating space. It works within and reinforces systems of control that determine whose vision of land is made possible. This decision perpetuates a logic in which the politics of permitting are a continuation of colonial land relations. Consent and regulation are linked inextricably to histories of dispossession and the erasure of broader relations to the land. Permits authorize political changes, along with physical ones, shifting the meaning of a site through incremental acts that accumulate into structural transformation.

By examining this development application, we can see how permits are not neutral acts of governance, but that structure the conditions in which architects can operate, constraining design decisions within a contested history of land in Sarnia and the ongoing struggle to enact good relations with the land, inseparable from Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice. To rethink architecture requires recognizing these constraints and asking how design might navigate or resist these politics, especially when architectural work begins only after significant land-use decisions have been made.

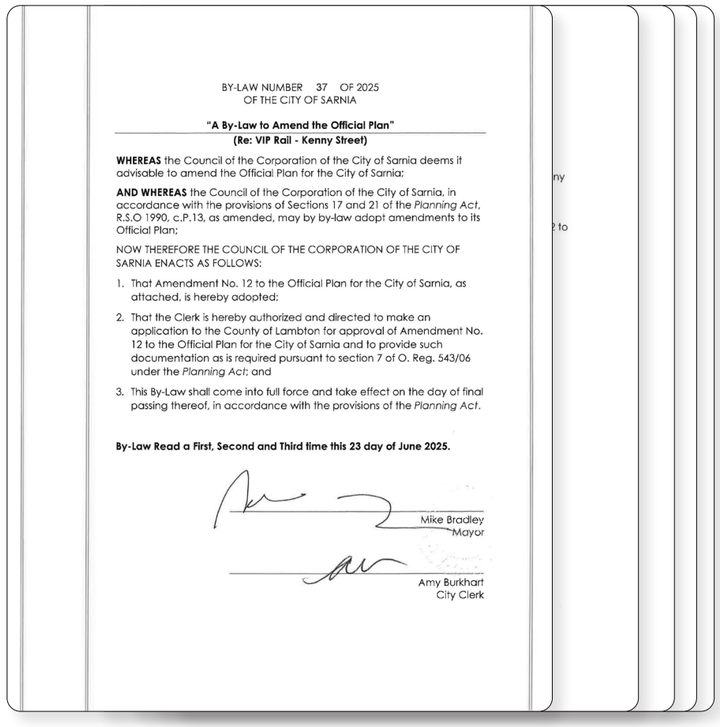


LEGEND

Governing Documents

FIG 2.14

Flowchart of the Official Plan Amendment process for 500 Kenny Street, mapped together with the governing documents and regulatory frameworks that structure and authorize each stage of approval



BY-LAW NUMBER 37 OF 2025
OF THE CITY OF SARNIA

"A By-Law to Amend the Official Plan"
(Re: VIP Rail - Kenny Street)

WHEREAS the Council of the Corporation of the City of Sarnia deems it advisable to amend the Official Plan for the City of Sarnia;

AND WHEREAS the Council of the Corporation of the City of Sarnia, in accordance with the provisions of Sections 17 and 21 of the *Planning Act*, R.S.O 1990, c.P.13, as amended, may by by-law adopt amendments to its Official Plan;

NOW THEREFORE THE COUNCIL OF THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF SARNIA ENACTS AS FOLLOWS:

1. That Amendment No. 12 to the Official Plan for the City of Sarnia, as attached, is hereby adopted;
2. That the Clerk is hereby authorized and directed to make an application to the County of Lambton for approval of Amendment No. 12 to the Official Plan for the City of Sarnia and to provide such documentation as is required pursuant to section 7 of O. Reg. 543/06 under the *Planning Act*; and
3. This By-Law shall come into full force and take effect on the day of final passing thereof, in accordance with the provisions of the *Planning Act*.

By-Law Read a First, Second and Third time this 23 day of June 2025.

Mike Bradley
Mayor

Amy Burkhart
City Clerk

FIG 2.15
(Opposite) **FIG 2.16**
(Opposite) **FIG 2.17**
The Official Plan Amendment signed and approved.

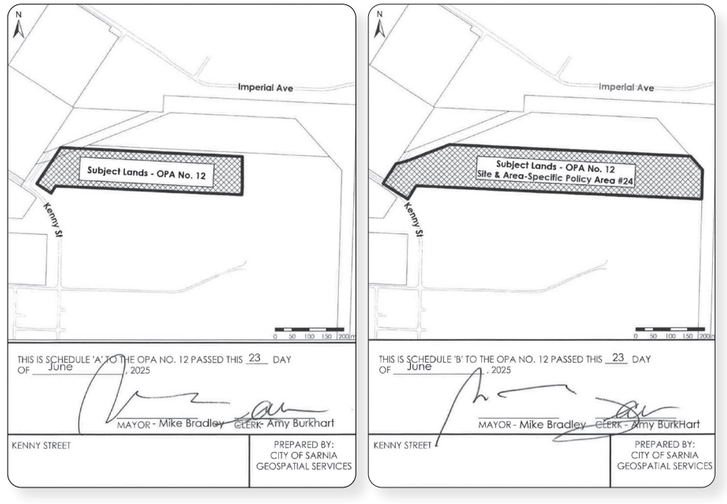
OFFICIAL PLAN AMENDMENTS

This amendment reveals how planning language and bureaucratic procedures contribute to shaping land relations. The technical adjustments of rezoning or redrawing a boundary reveal a deeper system of authorization that redefines what counts as developable or protected.

The proposed amendments, *The Official Plan Amendment, "By-Law number 37 of 2025 of the City of Sarnia"* reads:

1) *Amend Schedule 1, City Structure Plan by changing the designation of the subject lands, as shown in Schedule 'A', from '**The Greenlands System**' to '**Existing Employment Area**'.*

This first amendment signifies how environmental protection is never absolute but conditional. The Greenlands System is a space "where development shall be restricted" (City of Sarnia 2025, 81), but it has been revoked due to conflicts with industrial growth. The map becomes a living document of shifting priorities, where ecological and cultural values exist only as they align with economic expansion.



s.5.6 The Greenlands System
City of Sarnia Official Plan
s.5.6.1 Intent and General Policies

"a) The intent of the Greenlands System is to provide a comprehensive and connected system of parks, open space and natural features that are protected, maintained, and enhanced to support cultural identity, a high quality of life, and environmental sustainability in Sarnia.

b) The Greenlands System identified on Schedule 2 is comprised of two designations:
i. The Parks and Open Space Designation identifies all of their City's existing public parks; and,
ii. The Environmental Protection Designation, which comprises the defined natural heritage features that the City shall protect, and the natural hazard lands where development shall be restricted;

c) Schedule 3 identifies the Natural Heritage System which is comprised of the Environmental Protection Designation and the Adjacent Lands Overlay. The Adjacent Lands Overlay is based on an approximate 120-metre setback from the boundary of the Environmental Protection Designation..."

s.3.1 Policies for a Sustainable/Resilient City City of Sarnia Official Plan
s.3.1e Environmental Protection

The City aims to protect and improve the St. Clair River, the Lake Huron shoreline, and all related waterways and natural environments so that their ecological roles, character, cultural importance, and recreational value can be enjoyed by people today and in the future.

Protecting these natural systems is an essential part of responding to climate change. The City will therefore work to maintain and strengthen important natural areas and the ecological functions that depend on them, following the direction set out in this Plan.

2) *Amend Schedule 2, Land Use Plan by changing the designation of the subject lands, as shown in Schedule 'A', from '**Environmental Protection**' to '**General Employment**'.*

Within the same logic, the amendment reframes the Environmental Protection zone as a technical obstacle, rather than "a key element of mitigating the impacts of climate change" (City of Sarnia 2025, 8). This is a familiar pattern in colonial land governance, where environmental stewardship is acknowledged only to be administratively contained.

3) *Amend Schedule 3, Natural Heritage System by removing the subject lands, as shown in Schedule 'A', from the 'Environmental Protection' designation and amend the 'Natural Heritage Overlay' accordingly.*

4) *Amend Appendix 1, Map 2 – Natural Heritage Features by removing the subject lands, as shown in Schedule 'A', from **Natural Heritage Features** ' Type B'.*

Natural Heritage Features Type B areas are designated to ensure that "the integrity of the feature and its ecological functions are protected from development and site alteration." These features are further governed through zoning regulations that establish "building restrictions, building envelopes, and setbacks to natural features" (City of Sarnia 2025, 100). The removal of this designation eliminates the requirement for site-specific regulations that aim to protect biodiversity and ecosystem function.

5) *Amend Section 5.7 Site and Area-Specific Policies to add a new Site and Area-Specific Policy Area #24 for the lands municipally known as 500 Kenny Street, City of Sarnia, and shown in Schedule 'B' as follows:*

24. *Kenny Street*

a. *For any Site Plan Control Application for the development of the lands, the following conditions shall apply:*

i. *Satisfy the five (5) Conditions of Approval relating to Species at Risk and Significant Wildlife Habitat outlined in the Environmental Impact Study Peer Review, prepared by Dougan Ecology, dated June 6, 2025.*

ii. *The June 6, 2025, Dougan Ecology Peer Review assessed the November 2024 and May 2025 Environmental Impact Studies prepared by Dillon Consulting Limited.*

6) *Amend Schedule 4 – Site and Area-Specific Policy Areas to illustrate the new Site and Area-Specific Policy Area #24 as shown on Schedule 'B'.*

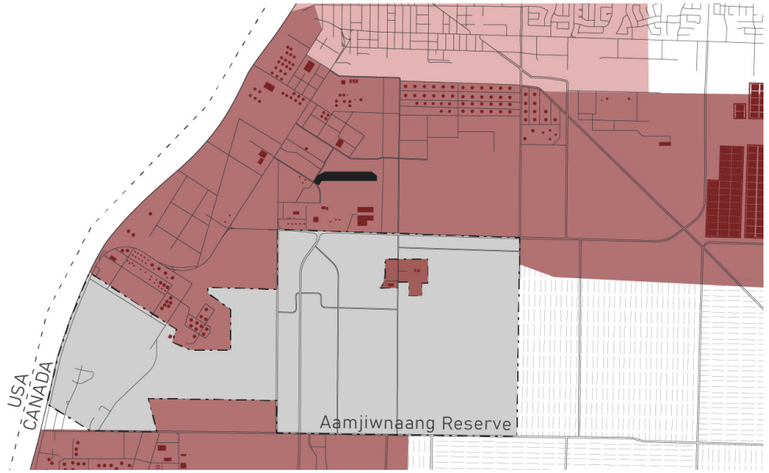
These amendments rewrite the site's identity. What was once part of a protected system is now designated as employment land. For architects, this raises difficult questions about complicity and agency. Even if architects are not the ones drafting these amendments, the built environment that follows is designed and legitimized through their work. Permitting and planning decisions form the ground conditions upon which architectural practice develops. To engage critically with these systems is to recognize that design begins with how land is defined and authorized for use.

From this perspective, the Kenny Street amendment is more than a bureaucratic process; it is a spatial act, one that reshapes how land is perceived and utilized. We see that permitting is not a neutral step in governance; it is a continuation of colonial governance and industrial expansion. Architects, even indirectly, are part of this system, and we must rethink our role and responsibility within it.

Key Concerns Peer Review by Dougan Ecology

The five conditions outline concerns regarding species at risk within the project area. The Peer Review highlights the significant negative impacts on the site, particularly on Riddell's Goldenrod, noting that "with only approximately 25 remaining populations of this species in the province, any loss that cannot be successfully mitigated would be considered a negative impact" (Dougan Ecology 2025, 3).

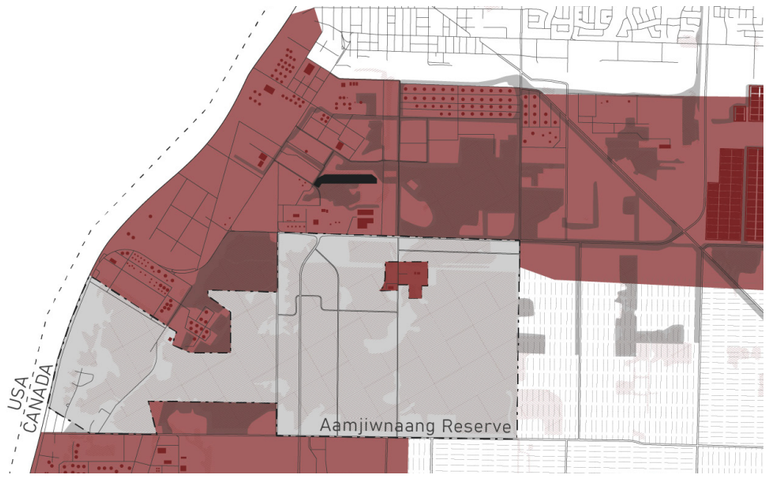
The review further concludes that "the proposed plan would result in the removal of am lost all natural habitats within the Project Location," and it states that this constitutes "a significant change to the area mapped as Environmental Protection on Schedule 3 of the Official Plan, and is not a minor adjustment to the Environmental Protection Boundary."



LEGEND

Site (500 Kenny Street)
Urban Centre
Petrochemical Industrial Lands

FIG 2.18
Partial recreation of Map 1 Growth Strategy, from Lambton County Official Plan.



LEGEND

Site (500 Kenny Street)
Environmental Protection
Natural Features & Areas
General Employment

FIG 2.19
Partial recreation of Schedule 1 City Structure Plan and Schedule 2 Land Use Plan by City of Sarnia Official Plan.

Property Information	(Dillon Consulting 2025, 2)
County of Lambton Official Plan	
Map 1 - Growth Strategy	*Petrochemical Industrial Land*
City of Sarnia Official Plan	
Schedule "1" City Structure Plan	*The Built Boundary (Lands within the Built Boundary)* *Existing Employment Area* *The Greenlands System (Natural Features & Areas)*
Schedule "2" Land Use Plan	*General Employment* *Environmental Protection*
City of Sarnia Zoning By-law 85 of 2002	
Zoning Map Part 75	*Heavy Industrial 1 Zone (HI1)*

FIG 2.20
Recreation of the table summarizing the multiple land-use designations governing the site.

PLANNING JUSTIFICATION REPORT

According to Dillon Consulting's *Planning Justification Report*, the proposed amendment "seeks to expand the existing rail yard to the north" by redesigning 9.49 hectares of land from Environmental Protection to General Employment (Dillon Consulting 2025b, 5). The report acknowledges that the site is a Natural Heritage feature consisting of "6.68 hectares of cultural thicket [and] 2.81 hectares of cultural meadow, both of which are confirmed Significant Wildlife Habitat (SWH) and confirmed Species at Risk (SAR) habitat" (Dillon Consulting 2025b, 5). The application then justifies the removal of these protections by emphasizing that the development will add "25 new railway tracks, increasing the storage capacity…by up to

Provincial Planning Statement (2024)	(Dillon Consulting 2025b, B-2-B-5)
s.2.3.1.1 *"Settlement areas shall be the focus of growth and development. Within settlement areas, growth should be focused in, where applicable, strategic growth areas, including major transit station areas."*	**Justification** *This proposal extends the rail yard that threads through the industrial lands south of Sarnia, where tracks, factories, and storage yards are at the city's industrial edge. The expansion builds upon what already exists, reinforcing the freight that sustains the area's economy. The trains carry the weight of the region's production and sustains the industrial landscape that continues to define Sarnia's souther horizon.*
s.2.3.1.2 *"Land use patterns within settlement areas should be based on densities and a mix of land uses which:* *a) efficiently use land and resources* *b) optimize existing and planned infrastructure and public service facilities* *e) are freight-supportive."*	
s.2.8.2.1 *"Planning authorities shall plan for, protect and plan for all employment areas for current and future uses and ensure that the necessary infrastructure is provided to support current and projected needs."*	**Justification** *The rail yard expansion reinforces the economy of the employment lands that sit in this area, anticipating both present and future demands, shaping a network of movement that keeps goods circulating, preserving the city's infrastructure that keeps production and exchange in motion.*
s.2.8.2.3 *"Planning authorities shall designate, protect and plan for all employment areas in settlement areas by:* *a) planning for employment area uses over the long-term that require those locations including manufacturing, research and development in connection with manufacturing, warehousing and goods movement, and associated retail and office uses and ancillary facilities."*	

FIG 2.21
Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating its alignment with the Provincial Planning Statement and outlining how the proposed development meets provincial policy requirements.

752 additional cars" (Dillon Consulting 2025b, 6). The rationale relies on existing planning frameworks to construct legitimacy for the erasure of Environmental Protection lands.

The Provincial Policy Statement (2024 PPS) frames industry as an infrastructural necessity. The report frames the rail yard expansion as integral to economic stability, stating it is "designed to support the growth and development of the employment area" and is "freight-supportive, promoting the long-term operation and the economic role of the industrial area" (Dillon Consulting 2025, B-2-B-3). This alignment is fundamental, as it roots the project in provincial priorities for infrastructure and economic competitiveness. It is a foundational justification, where environmental protection is secondary.

The County of Lambton Official Plan (2020) normalizes petrochemical demand and folds it into the County's vision of industrial development. The report presents the Petrochemical Industrial Lands policy, which aims to "accommodate existing and future large-scale industrial uses that are inappropriate elsewhere" (Dillon Consulting 2025b, 9). The Kenny Street amendment is anticipated by county policy, illustrating how the county plan facilitates the reclassification of land from natural to industrial use, reinforcing that permitting becomes a means of reordering land relations to favour state and corporate priorities.

Lastly, the *City of Sarnia Official Plan* (2022) frames the development as reinforcing Sarnia's identity and purpose. It aims to "reinforce Sarnia as a trade and employment center for Lambton County" (Dillon Consulting 2025, B-11). Because the city's Official Plan is the instrument that enacts local land use, connecting the proposal to the municipal vision transforms it from a technical rezoning into a legitimate extension of Sarnia's planning goals. The municipal alignment serves as the local anchor that bridges provincial and County visions.

Lambton County Official Plan (2020) (Dillon Consulting 2025, B-6-B-10)

Goal *"To accommodate the demand for industrial land by major petrochemical companies that require sites with locational and other advantages, in keeping with the overall economic development strategy of the County."*

s.3.7.3 *"The main function of the petrochemical industrial lands is to accommodate existing and future large scale industrial uses that are inappropriate elsewhere."*

s.3.7.4 *"Local municipalities are encouraged to permit other manufacturing, industrial, research and development uses, and office development associated or compatible with these uses. Local municipalities should provide policies that identify the type and locational criteria for permitted uses."*

s.3.7.6 *"Development in the petrochemical industrial lands should be integrated with the County natural heritage corridors or the local municipal natural heritage system, where feasible."*

Justification *The proposed expansion is a response to the growing industrial demands of the client, and extending the existing infrastructure will shape efficiency and strengthen the operations already in place.*

With the Environmental Impact Study, the project will ensure that development remains in dialogue with the city's natural systems, despite the natural feature zoning that extends through the site.

FIG 2.22
Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating its alignment with the City and outlining how the proposed development meets Lambton County and City of Sarnia policy requirements.

City of Sarnia Official Plan (2022) (Dillon Consulting 2025, B-11-B-12)

s.5.4 *"Promote the continued development of Sarnia as the employment, trade, social and institutional centre for Lambton County."*

Justification *This expansion aligns with Sarnia's Official Plan which positions the city as the centre of trade and employment within Lambton County.*

s.6.3b) *"Preserving and protecting the rail system and supportive transportation and employment land uses is essential to the City's economic competitiveness and the efficient movement of goods and people on local, regional, and international scales."*

Justification *This project strengthens the capacity of the industrial corridor, and continues the city's long-standing narrative of industry and exchange, reinforcing Sarnia's role as a point of connection within this region.*

The project is justified through the planning frameworks while authorizing erasure. Natural heritage features are acknowledged only to be reclassified, folded into the logic of employment lands and industrial necessity. These shifts reveal how planning frameworks are structured to privilege economic development over ecological or cultural relations to land.

For architects, the significance lies in how these alignments establish the conditions of practice. They are not the ones drafting these amendments, but their work unfolds inside the permissions these policies produce. A site that moves from "Environmental Protection" to "General Employment" redraws the boundaries of what can be imagined and built. Permits and zoning dictate the scope of architectural agency, leaving a designer's work to materialize in the reordering of land defined by others. To rethink architecture is to ask how design might challenge rather than reproduce the politics of permitting and how it can resist the presumption that development is inevitable once the policy frameworks declare it permissible.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STUDY & PEER REVIEW

The *Environmental Impact Study* (EIS), prepared by Dillon Consulting, was a requirement for the application to expand the rail yard. Its justification rested on the presence of natural heritage designations within the study area, which required an assessment of ecological conditions before development could proceed. The purpose of the study was to "document existing conditions of the natural environment, evaluate the potential for environmental impacts associated with the proposed activities, and recommend mitigation, restoration, enhancement measures, and/or compensation measures" (Dillon Consulting 2025a, 1), much like the surveys examined in Chapter One. The EIS framed development as acceptable if it accompanied the technical adjustments that promised they would mitigate risk. It turns ecological protection into an administrative exercise that manages harm rather than prevents it, and where the act of documentation itself becomes a means of justifying further transformation of the land.

To achieve this, Dillon Consulting divided the land into categories recognizable to planners and ecologists. The land consisted of "Transportation and Utilities (CVI), Cultural Thicket (CUT1), Cultural Meadow (CUM), and Deciduous Forest (FOD)" (Dillon Consulting 2025, 20). Through this act of classification, the report translated the land into a set of manageable zones that they could organize, evaluate, and ultimately govern within the planning framework. In rendering the land legible to policy, much

Provincial Planning Statement (2024)

s.4.1.8 *"Development and site alteration shall not be permitted on adjacent lands to the natural heritage features and areas identified in policies 4.1.4, 4.1.5, and 4.1.6, unless the ecological function of the adjacent lands has been evaluated and it has been demonstrated that there will be no negative impacts on the natural features or on their ecological functions."*

(Dillon Consulting 2025, B-4-B-5)

Justification *The EIS devotes considerable attention to Mitigation and Overall Benefit Measures, with steps such as an Erosion and Sediment Control Plan, a Wildlife Impact Mitigation Plan, and the establishment of habitat for Species at Risk. Among these measures, the EIS calls for the creation of more than 9.4 hectares of off-site SAR habitat, that has been agreed upon by the MECP and will be secured as a condition of the final permit.*

FIG 2.23
Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating the EIS' alignment with the Provincial Planning Statement and outlining how the proposed development meets provincial policy requirements.

of its history disappeared. It did not refer to the site's deeper past as part of Aamjiwnaang territory, nor to the layered histories of extraction that have shaped it. While the City's Official Plan identified the project location as part of the "Greenlands System" and "Environmental Protection" areas (Schedule 1, Schedule 2), the EIS emphasized that the zoning designation of Heavy Industrial zoning took precedence (Dillon Consulting 2025a, 1). The report framed environmental protections not as limits but as conditions that they must navigate around in the service of expansion.

The EIS reveals how architects, planners, and consultants frequently operate within frameworks that view land as an object that stakeholders can manage. The language of classification reduces the complexity of place into administrative codes. This kind of translation grants professional practice to an administrative agency, where we can design and plan within the system. However, it removes relational agency and the ability to act ethically in relation to the land and its histories.

The EIS also incorporated field surveys conducted by AtkinsRealis and was updated by Dillon in 2024. These studies confirmed the presence of thicket and meadow habitats but noted the absence of provincially significant wetlands or Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) on provincial mapping (MNRF 2023). The report acknowledged that the proposed expansion would displace existing habitat. However, it justified the impact through the creation of 10.82ha for "SAR-created habitat to show an overall benefit for the impact species" (Dillon Consulting 2025, 48). The peer review by Dougan Ecology (2025) made this erasure explicit: "the proposed plan would result in the removal of almost all the natural habitats within the Project Location," including "a swath of land -600m wide and over 120m deep designated Environmental Protection," calling this "a significant change to the area mapped as Environmental

Lambton County Official Plan (2020)	(Dillon Consulting 2025, B-8-B-10)
s.8.1.1, s.8.1.4, s.8.1.9, s.8.8.3, & s.8.1.10 *"To identify, map, protect, protect, restore, and improve natural heritage systems within the County. To promote and protect the biodiversity of species found within the ecosystems in the County. To promote education and stewardship of the natural heritage system. To ensure development results in no negative impacts to significant natural features or their ecological functions."*	**Justification** *Although the County's mapping does not indicate any natural heritage features on the Subject Site, the City's Official Plan identifies one, and the property lies near additional features, including a Type B and Type C area shown on Lambton County's Map 2. The EIS is expected to avoid negative impacts on existing natural features, while providing a benefit to affected species.*

FIG 2.24
Recreation of the Planning Justification Report, demonstrating the EIS' alignment with the Lambton County's and City of Sarnia's Official Plan.

City of Sarnia Official Plan (2022)	(Dillon Consulting 2025, B-11-B-12)
s.5.6.3.4a *"No buildings or structures, nor the removal or placing of fill of any kind whether originating on the site or elsewhere, may be permitted within the Environmental Protection Designation, except with the approval of the City, in consultation with the Conservation Authority and any other agency having jurisdiction. Wherever possible and practical, areas designated Environmental Protection shall generally not form part of any new lots to be created for the purposes of development."*	**Justification** *The Environmental Impact Studies covers the Environmental Protection Designation that exists on the site.*
s.5.6.3.4c *"Where development, redevelopment and/or site alteration is necessary within the Environmental Protection Designation, and a negative impact is unavoidable as identified on an Environmental Impact Study, then the City, in consultation with the Conservation Authority and any agency having jurisdiction, may accept a compensatory mitigation approach. Where a compensatory mitigation is proposed, it must be demonstrated on an Environmental Impact Study that the mitigation results in a net gain of the natural heritage features and/or their support ecological and hydrological functions."*	**Justification** *The EIS devotes considerable attention to Mitigation and Overall Benefit Measures, with steps such as an Erosion and Sediment Control Plan, a Wildlife Impact Mitigation Plan, and the establishment of habitat for Species at Risk. Among these measures, the EIS calls for the creation of more than 9.4 hectares of off-site SAR habitat, that has been agreed upon by the MECP and will be secured as a condition of the final permit.*
s.6.3.4i *"Significant changes to the Environmental Protection Designation as identified on Schedule 3 may be considered on an Environmental Impact Study and/or other studies as deemed appropriate by the City in consultation with the Conservation Authority and any other agency having jurisdiction, without the need to amend this Plan. Where a minor adjustment to the boundary of the Environmental Protection Designation is approved by the City, in consultation with the Conservation Authority and any other agency having jurisdiction, the abutting land use designation as identified on Schedule 2, shall apply."*	**Justification** *The Environmental Impact Studies covers the Environmental Protection Designation that exists on the site.*

Protection boundary" (Dougan Ecology 2025, 4). Despite recognizing the severity of the loss, the review nonetheless concluded that these impacts could be addressed through conditions of approval. "Even though most of the concerns were addressed either partially or completely, some key concerns remain… we recommend the proposed actions be considered as Conditions of Approval" (Dougan Ecology 2025, 1).

Rather than serving as a safeguard against ecological loss, the EIS functioned to rationalize it. Categorizing and mitigating the land translated it into a series of quantifiable impacts. It was administratively legible, but relationally, the land was diminished. Within this system of permitting, acknowledging the risks becomes the first step toward legitimizing development. For example, under the federal approval process, projects that required an environmental assessment (EA) had a 95% approval rate from 2012 to 2018. Even when the projects exhibited "significant potential adverse effects", 73% were still approved (Orenstein 2018, 1).

Adverse Effects

"Of 11 projects where significant potential adverse effects were found, eight (73%) were still approved, as the Governor-in-Council determined that the adverse effects were 'justified in the circumstances.'

The issues that comprised significant adverse effects included water quality; greenhouse gas emissions; effects on birds, fish and caribou; use of land and resources for traditional purposes; and Aboriginal rights and culture."

Within these frameworks, architectural practice is fundamentally constrained. Architects operate as intermediaries, aligning design with requirements. Their work is subjugated to policy and market imperatives, leaving little capacity to intervene meaningfully. Design becomes a procedural process.

In understanding the stakes of architectural practice, the tools and languages of design are deeply entangled with settler-colonial structures that define land in terms of ownership and productivity, but they present themselves as objective. Reclaiming architectural agency requires shifting professional practice toward relational accountability.

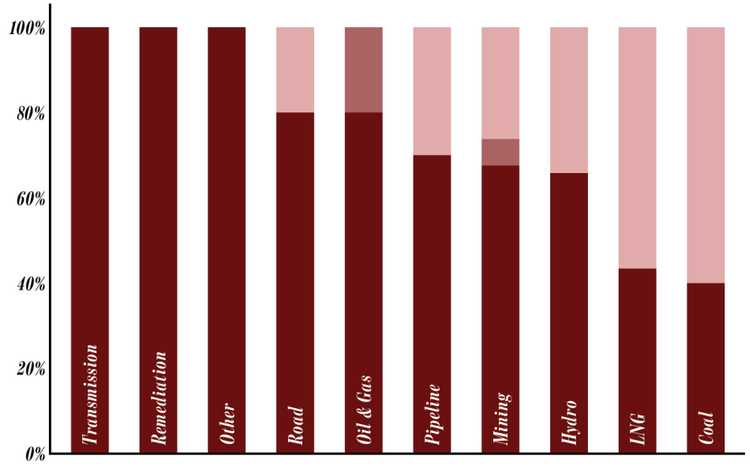
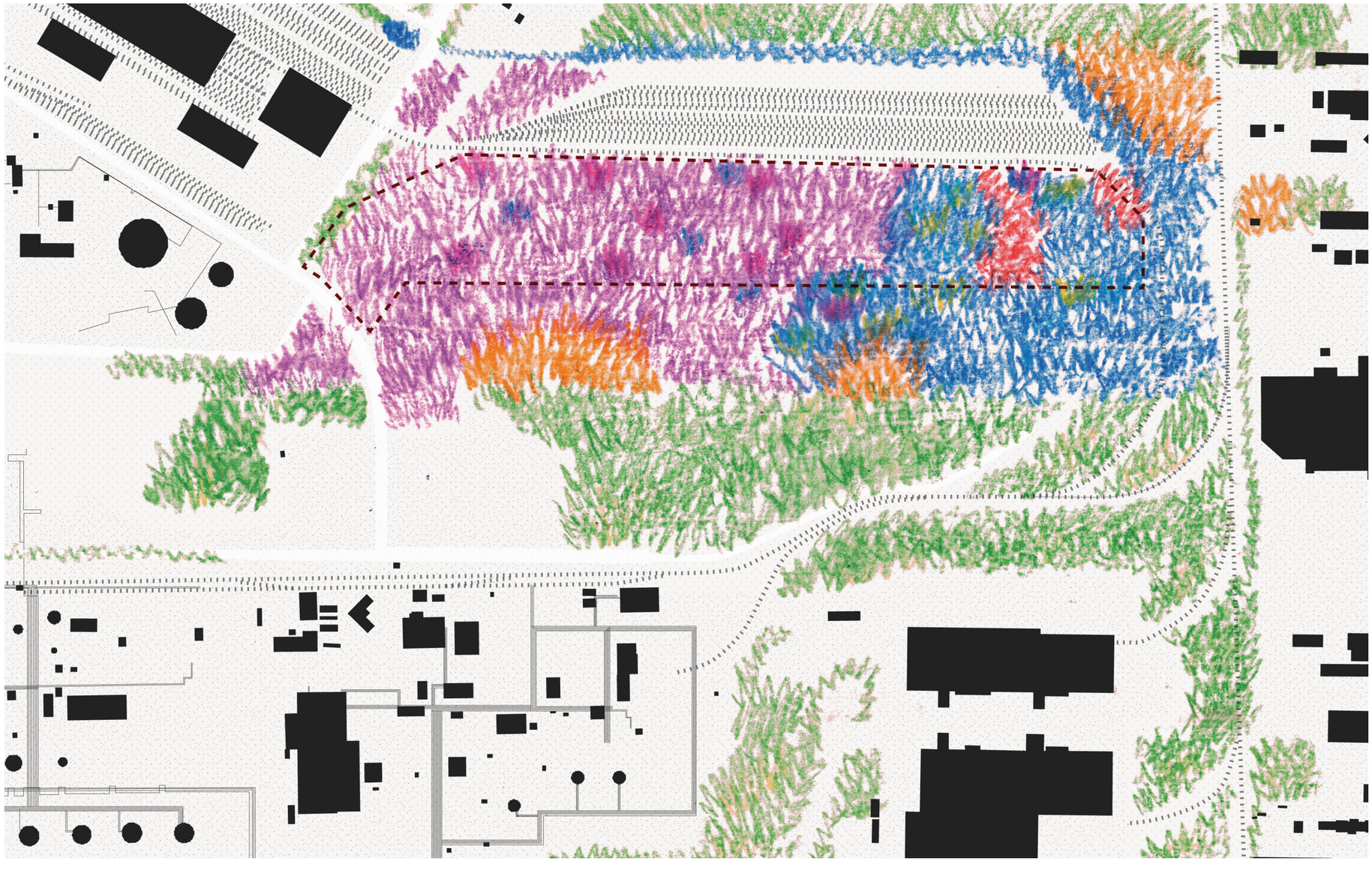


FIG 2.25

Graph reproduced from the Canada West Foundation. The number of federal projects needing an Environmental Assessment Report approved vs. rejected vs. the project being terminated before a decision has been made.



SPECIES AT RISK

- *Terrestrial Crayfish Habitat*
- *Butler's Gartersnake Habitat*
- *Bat Roosting Habitat*
- *European Common Reed*
- *Crayfish Chimney*
- *Riddell's Goldenrod*
- *Butler's Gartersnake*

FIG 2.26

Recreation of Dillon Consulting plan of the species at risk in and around the development site, mapping the habitats and wildlife present. Despite clear evidence of environmental sensitivity, the City approved the plan amendment, effectively overlooking the impacts on vulnerable species.

Reflections

The approval of the 500 Kenny Street development application illustrates how planning and permitting shape how land is perceived and valued, rather than how it is used. Each approval carries a set of assumptions about what kinds of land use are legitimate and whose interests those uses serve. The permit functions as a quiet act that reconfigures relationships between people and land, authorizing certain futures while obscuring others. These administrative acts define the conditions in which architecture takes place. They determine where building can occur, what is deemed appropriate, and how land is classified and controlled. In the same project discussed under the Planning and Control section, Sarnia's mayor, Mike Bradley, justified why they sought to appeal the County's decision:

> *I don't think there's any intention…to look at heavy industrial…But we wanted to have the freedom to operate that way. (Kula 2024)*

Each application sets a precedent for the next, creating an accumulative process of justification that distances responsibility from those who act within it. Every rezoning decision broadens what is permissible and normalizes industrial encroachment over time.

If permitting is an act that determines what is possible on land, then where within this process does the architect appear? In Sarnia, not all development applications require an architect. Some do, but even then, a landscape architect or engineer is often sufficient. Architecture here becomes a discipline that arrives after the client and city have already made critical decisions about the land. Yet, it is in these preliminary processes, before anything is built, that an architect's ethical and political responsibilities emerge most clearly.

Understanding architecture as a relational practice establishes the ethical terrain within which architects practice. It means recognizing that these acts of planning and permitting are not separate from design and that they go beyond simply establishing the physical site, where "the negotiation of spaces—their constant practice and hence reproduction—means that social and spatial practices are in a dynamic relationship" (Williams 2013, 17). To practice architecture today requires entering that dynamic critically, to see the permit, the plan, and the drawing as opportunities for responsibility. Reorienting practice toward accountability means attending to what is made invisible in the process of authorization. The question for architects is not simply how to design within the limits of policy, but how to work against its erasures and make visible the relations that have been systematically obscured.

Boundaries, whether drawn through zoning or design, organize relations between people and ecologies. As Hayward writes, they function "more democratically when they are amenable to change by those they affect," but "less democratically when they define relations of privilege and deprivation, power and powerlessness" (Hayward 2003, 509). When planning boundaries are redrawn to remove protections, they reinforce hierarchies between industrial authority and community well-being, erasing relations to place and history. Architecture's role is not limited to responding to what is permitted but to questioning how those permissions came to be.

These reflections point toward the next chapter, which examines what it means to be an architect in the face of these conditions and the systems that govern us, and how drawing, mapping, and other forms of representation can operate not only as tools of documentation but as acts of witnessing, questioning, and reimagining our relations to land.

03

Drawing the Line

Architecture has a responsibility that goes far beyond the coordination of specialized techniques for the efficient production of commodities. This deeper responsibility will not be brought about by forcing the minimum requirements of building or ethics codes, nor legislated by instilling the fear of lawsuits…the ethical praxis of architecture lies in its poetic and critical ability to address culturally specific questions crucial for humanity. (Pérez-Gómez 2007, 123)

The Systems of Governance

The very mechanisms of regulation that structure municipal development, through permits, checklists, and approvals, are mirrored within architecture's own systems of governance. Before an architect practices, they must first enter a framework that defines what design is permitted. Canada structures professional practice through a web of institutions and legal codes that govern the licensing and training of architects. They define the conditions under which architectural work can occur, in addition to protecting the public and determining where an architect's responsibility begins.

The *Canadian Handbook of Practice* (CHOP), published by the *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* (RAIC), articulates this through four principles: expertise, autonomy, commitment to the public good, and accountability (RAIC 2021, ch. 1.2). These principles attempt to define the scope of professional responsibility while also highlighting its limits. To serve "the public good," is to rely on a particular understanding of the public, one informed by the systems that structure ownership and regulation. While CHOP provides guidance, it is not a governing instrument. Its principles gain practical weight through the *Examination for Architects in Canada* (ExAC) that's delivered by the *Regulatory Organizations of Architecture in Canada* (ROAC), a minimum competency exam established in collaboration with other provincial governing bodies and the *Ontario Association of Architects* (OAA). Passing this exam is a prerequisite for licensure, and it embeds CHOP's principles as a required reference document into the assessment of professional readiness as it translates into the practical obligations of licensed architects (ExAC 2025).

The OAA then functions as the regulatory body that operationalizes these standards in everyday practice. Its stated purpose is "to regulate the practice of architecture in order that the public interest may be served and protected" (OAA

n.d., "Regulatory Accountability"). Under the *Architects Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. A.26*, the OAA derives its authority from the government of Ontario, which grants its legal power to license and discipline practitioners. The Act defines the Association's (OAA) objective:

> *to regulate the practice of architecture and to govern its members...in order that the public interest may be served and protected. (Ontario 1990, s.2(2))*

While the term "public" is not explicitly defined, it is generally understood to include both the population and the clients that architects serve. By regulating practice in Ontario, it ensures that architects under the OAA create safe, accessible, and functional buildings that meet qualification standards. The architect is legally constituted through this regulation. It is a form of permission that authorizes practice within the boundaries of the public interest as defined by the state. As we saw in Sarnia, this "public interest" can be interpreted to prioritize industrial development over local health, environmental, or Indigenous concerns. It reveals how regulatory frameworks shape both what is permissible and what is valued.

This framework positions architecture as a regulated service rather than a cultural or spatial practice. Systems such as CHOP, ExAC, and OAA translate the profession into procedural phases and deliverables, emphasizing coordination and risk management (RAIC 2021, Parts 3-6). Architects inherit projects already framed by regulation, and their work is constrained to what can be approved, leaving little room to critically engage with the ethical and historical dimensions of land and community. Peggy Deamer identifies this condition as a contradiction within the profession. Architecture's autonomy depends on the very systems that limit it. She writes that "client appeasement doesn't equal architectural advocacy" (Deamer 2020, 99). Professional

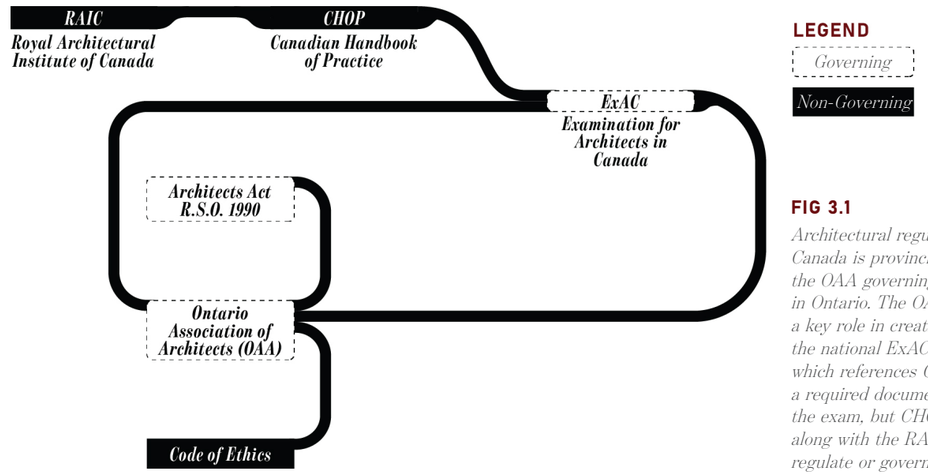


FIG 3.1

Architectural regulation in Canada is provincial, with the OAA governing practice in Ontario. The OAA played a key role in creating the national ExAC exam, which references CHOP as a required document for the exam, but CHOP itself along with the RAIC do not regulate or govern architects.

leadership should "move beyond the most basic definition of architects' responsibilities as administrators of building health and safety and advocate for social justice" (Deamer 2020, 100). For Deamer, professional organizations, whether the *American Institute of Architects* (AIA), OAA, RAIC, or others, have "demonstrated neither the will nor the incentive to address fundamental tensions in the profession or deal with structural impediments" (2020, 101). It defines architectural responsibility in procedural rather than relational terms, making it easier to fulfill obligations to clients than to place and history.

The RAIC *2025-2027 Strategic Plan* attempts to extend responsibilities beyond procedural compliance, committing to "meaningful advocacy" (RAIC 2025) as one of its key priorities. Like CHOP, it cannot enforce these objectives. The power to regulate practice remains with governing institutions. Recognizing this is not to dismiss the profession, but to situate it within its context or a larger regulatory and cultural framework. We practice architecture through systems of regulation and authorization, and it is these systems that define the boundaries of professional agency. They also offer a starting point for rethinking what that agency could mean if architects are to engage with questions of the land and its histories, starting with confronting the conditions that define what we are permitted to see and do.

Defining the Architect

To ask what it means to be an architect under these systems is to consider the profession's responsibilities and limitations within broader structures of governance. *Merriam-Webster* defines an architect as "a person who designs buildings and advises in their construction" or "a person who designs and guides a plan or undertaking" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). While clear, this definition flattens the complexity. Alberto Péréz-Gómez describes architecture as "infinitely complex, both shifting with history and culture," yet always confronting enduring human questions of morality and belonging (Péréz-Gómez 2007, 119). If architecture carries these moral and cultural dimensions, then the role of the architect extends beyond the role of designer or consultant, participating in a wider network of relations that shape both the built and social environment.

Professional frameworks attempt to articulate these responsibilities in specific ways. Under *Professional Responsibility*, CHOP states that an architect's duty "extends beyond the client to fellow professionals, the profession, and society in general," acknowledging that the architect's work "has a major impact on human activity and the planet" (RAIC 2021, ch. 1.1). In *Emerging Trends*, CHOP further acknowledges that "the concepts of health and safety are expanding to encompass the sustainability of the global environment and accessibility for all persons" (RAIC 2021, ch. 1.3). These statements frame architects as participants with ethical obligations that reach beyond individual projects. However, they also position the architect's agency in terms of the architect's ability to persuade clients, framing sustainability and social responsibility as dependent on client approval rather than as an obligation. The handbook casts it as the architect's "reasonable efforts" to guide clients toward sustainable options. The implication is that the architect can recognize the entanglement of design with social, cultural, and ecological systems, but acting on it relies on a client's approval.

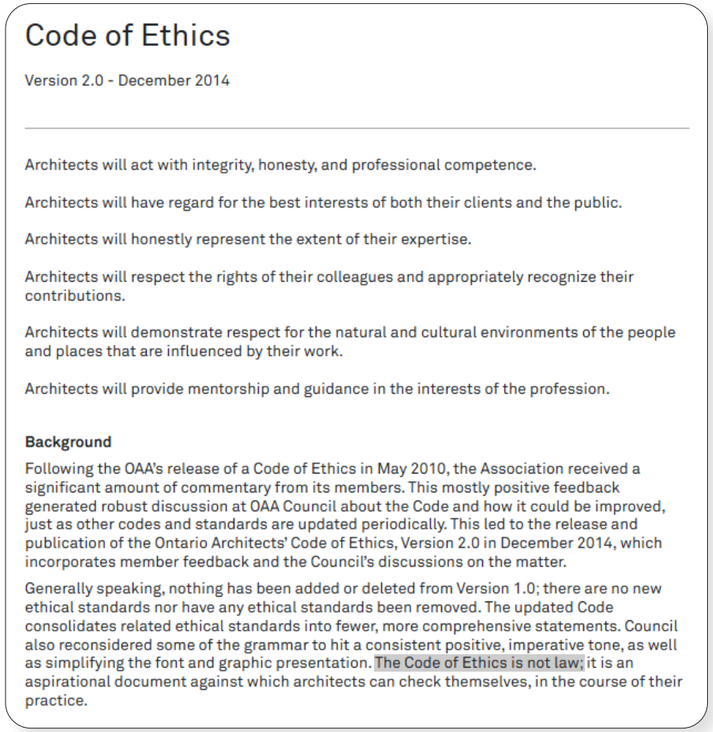
The *OAA Code of Ethics* (2014), similarly calls on architects to act "with integrity, honesty, and professional competence," and to "have regard for the best interests of both their clients and the public." They must "demonstrate respect for the natural and cultural environments of the people and places that are influenced by their work" (OAA 2014). These guiding principles promote an awareness of context and care, though they remain open to interpretation and lack specificity. It leaves room for architects to interpret this responsibility within the circumstances of each project. Although the OAA identifies "maintaining standards of…professional ethics among its members" (OAA n.d.) as part of its mandate and references this responsibility in Section 2(3.3) of the Architects Act, the Code itself is not a governing instrument. As a result, ethical practice is interpretive within development that is frequently constrained by municipal governing systems.

Similarly, the *AIA Handbook of Professional Practice* (2014) is non-binding, but it approaches ethics in a broader philosophical standpoint, situating professional duty in relation to:

> *Past generations (via preservation), to other species (via sustainability), and to underserved communities (via public interest design). What distinguishes professions from ordinary businesses is the obligation, embedded in professional licensure, of using disinterested judgment to do the right thing, regardless of the biases of particular interest groups. (AIA 2014, 14)*

Where the OAA provides principles like integrity and respect for natural and cultural environments, the AIA situates professional duty within a relational context, offering architects pathways to consider impacts beyond the immediate project. Both frameworks, though non-governing, shape how architects understand and exercise agency in practice.

To build is always to intervene and to inscribe new relations into the land. Within professional frameworks, land typically appears as property, an asset to be managed and developed. CHOP sees an architect's responsibility to "add value to the built environment" (RAIC 2021, ch. 1.1), and it begs the question: value for whom, and at whose expense? It defines value in terms of productivity, where the architect has a responsibility to "maximize the value of the site for [the client]" (RAIC 2021, ch. 6.1). This abstraction perpetuates a colonial logic, where surveying and permitting continue the erasures that first structured settlement. There is a lingering assumption that the ground is settled and ready for use.



Code of Ethics

Version 2.0 - December 2014

Architects will act with integrity, honesty, and professional competence.

Architects will have regard for the best interests of both their clients and the public.

Architects will honestly represent the extent of their expertise.

Architects will respect the rights of their colleagues and appropriately recognize their contributions.

Architects will demonstrate respect for the natural and cultural environments of the people and places that are influenced by their work.

Architects will provide mentorship and guidance in the interests of the profession.

Background

Following the OAA's release of a Code of Ethics in May 2010, the Association received a significant amount of commentary from its members. This mostly positive feedback generated robust discussion at OAA Council about the Code and how it could be improved, just as other codes and standards are updated periodically. This led to the release and publication of the Ontario Architects' Code of Ethics, Version 2.0 in December 2014, which incorporates member feedback and the Council's discussions on the matter.

Generally speaking, nothing has been added or deleted from Version 1.0; there are no new ethical standards nor have any ethical standards been removed. The updated Code consolidates related ethical standards into fewer, more comprehensive statements. Council also reconsidered some of the grammar to hit a consistent positive, imperative tone, as well as simplifying the font and graphic presentation. The Code of Ethics is not law; it is an aspirational document against which architects can check themselves, in the course of their practice.

FIG 3.2
OAA Code of Ethics

In environments such as Chemical Valley, these questions hold a particular weight. Architects working near or within such landscapes often operate under frameworks that authorize development without acknowledging Indigenous land rights or the potential for environmental harm. Even when architects are not directly involved in industrial construction, their professional tools participate in maintaining the conditions of colonialism. These are systemic outcomes of how professional agency is defined and delimited. Peggy Deamer argues that "an ethical architecture profession, in other words, cannot avoid taking political conditions" (2020, 101). Ethical practice, then, is not separate from these systems but embedded within them.

Being an architect under these systems is a balancing act of moral recognition and procedural restraint, between the acknowledgement that architecture can mediate relations among people, land, and history, and the reality that regulatory structures can make it challenging to do so. If architects owe duties to the profession, to clients, and to the public , then, what is missing here, perhaps, is the acknowledgement that the land is central to architectural practice, and that it is as much a subject of responsibility as it is a duty that we act upon (RAIC 2021, ch. 1.3). Within CHOP, one of the first instances of interpreting the land and feasibility occurs during predesign, where the handbook describes it as "the foundation of design." However, they exclude it from the architect's "basic services" (RAIC 2021, ch. 6.1). The very phase in which ethical and spatial questions begin to emerge is also where the limits of architectural responsibility start to unfold.

As a self-regulated professional organization, the OAA is authorized by the Government of Ontario, under Provincial statute to establish, monitor, and enforce standards of practice and performance for its members and practices. For the purpose of carrying out its principal mandate, the Association has the additional responsibilities that include:

- establishing, maintaining, and developing standards of knowledge, skill, and professional ethics among its members;
- establishing and enforcing standards for registration and licensure with the OAA;
- requiring and administering mandatory continuing professional education;
- providing Practice Advisory Services for OAA members as well as clients and the public;
- investigating complaints about OAA members and practices;
- enforcing the competency, ethical, and other professional standards expected of those regulated by the OAA;
- addressing and enforcing against illegal or unauthorized practice; and
- assisting in the establishment and maintenance of classes, schools, exhibitions, or lectures in, and to promote public appreciation of, the profession of architecture.

FIG 3.3
OAA's additional responsibilities that extend beyond serving the public interest.

The Threshold of Agency

During the design process, architects rely on checklists, diagrams, and surveys—tools intended to standardize the industry and bring order to uncertainty. These tools promise clarity, but they also define what can be revealed and what is considered legitimate. What cannot be measured often falls outside the frame of design. Michael Jenson reminds us that "representation does not allow an encounter with the world as it truly presents itself, in its essential state of temporality and Becoming. Its interpretive structures constitute restrictive forms of thought and action in accordance with fixed and normative values" (2008, 172). Representation, therefore, is never neutral. To translate a site into diagrams is to shape the conditions through which we understand it, rather than just record information. Representation can be both an exercise of agency and an act of erasure. It produces knowledge while determining which realities we exclude from view.

Professional frameworks reinforce this logic. In *RAIC Document 6*, predesign—the phase in which a site is most open to interpretation—is excluded from the architect's "basic services"

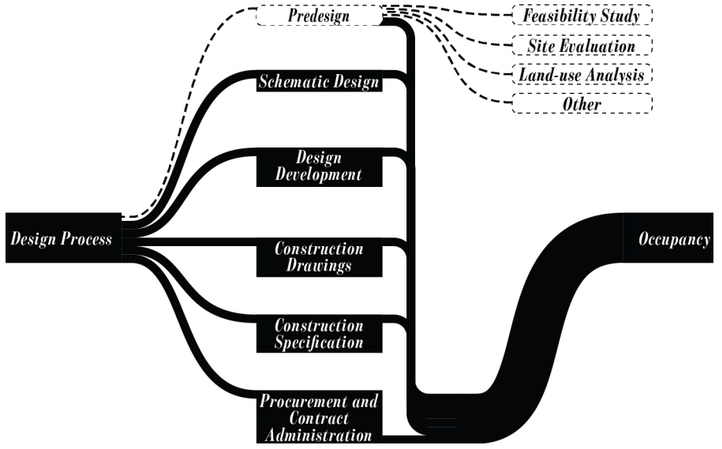


FIG 3.4
Recreation of chart of what is typically included in an architect's basic services.

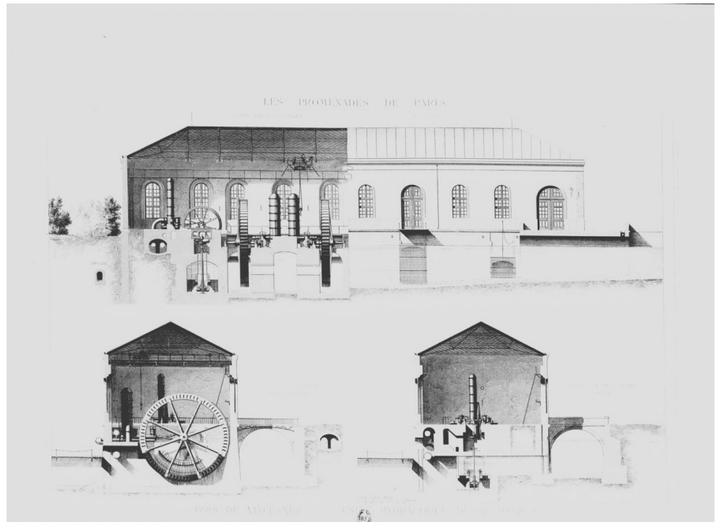


FIG 3.5
Section drawn by Adolphe Alphand between 1867-1873, a French landscape-architect and civil engineer, of sections of what looks like to be a power generator. This drawing is part of a larger set of urban planning in Paris, all done by Alphand, showcasing the interdisciplinary nature of practice in the 19th century.

(RAIC 2021, ch. 6.1). The act of interpreting the ground is often delegated to clients or external consultants, shaping the knowledge that structures all subsequent design decisions before the architect even enters the process. This threshold exposes the instability of architectural agency. Clients ask architects to respond to the conditions of a site while they are simultaneously excluded from defining the frameworks through which those conditions are understood. Predesign marks the moment when we first translate land into the language of architecture. To diagram and survey a site is to determine what counts as knowledge. Within this phase, the power to define a site's possibilities lies beyond the architect's ethical horizon unless consciously reclaimed.

CHOP further exemplifies this abstraction. Architects are instructed to assess a site's "suitability and 'highest and best use'" (RAIC 2021, ch. 6.1), treating land as a surface to be optimized for productivity. This framing erases the complex entanglements of histories and relations that shape every site. Land is abstracted from its relations and translated into the language of regulation. Within this framework, the architect's responsibility is narrowed.

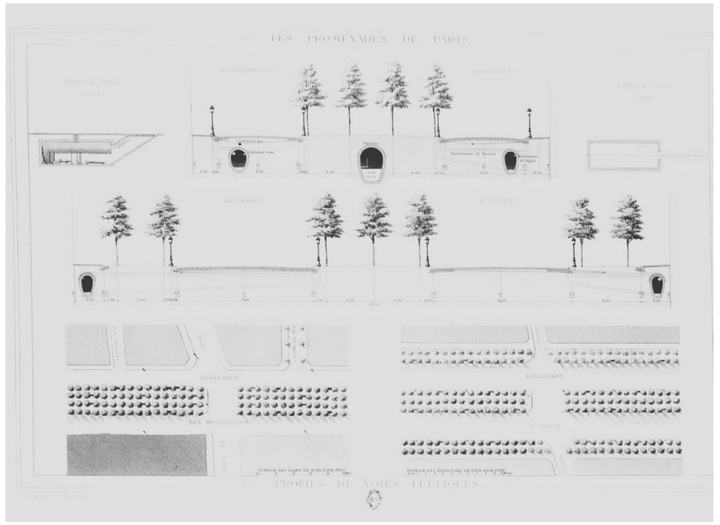


FIG 3.6
Plans and sections drawn by Adolphe Alphand between 1867-1873, of landscaping of Parisian streets and the design of the city's underground sewer network.

This emerges from a historical trajectory in which the architect's responsibilities and agencies have steadily decreased, shifting away from broader relations with land and community and toward the administration of projects. Carlisle and Pevzner recall how nineteenth-century designers drew street sections that collapsed distinctions between engineering, landscape, and architecture. As professional boundaries hardened in the twentieth century, this integrated understanding began to erode. The "below-grade infrastructure moved out of architects' purview," and architectural drawings were relegated to the "white emptiness of poché" (Carlisle and Pevzner 2012). Similarly, maps are "abstracted and emptied of [their] social content, so better and easier to subject to control" (Awan, Schneider, and Till 2011, 29), flattening the layered ground into a form that can be owned and contested. Within this abstraction, the white spaces of architectural drawings stand in for the erasures that allow settlers to manage land. Each act of mapping participates in the conscious decision of "what is selected and prioritized in the map [and] what is subsequently left aside or ignored" (Corner 2011, 91). In Sarnia, the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve is rendered invisible, as a blank spot on some municipal and county maps.

Yet predesign is not only a site of limitation, it is also a space of potential agency. By understanding drawing as an ethical and interpretive act, architects can reclaim the power to represent the site's relations and histories through counter-mapping. Predesign becomes a threshold where inherited logics of "highest and best use" can be unsettled and replaced with an understanding of land as living and relational, shaped by histories of dispossession that persist beneath the surface.

Drawing, then, becomes a form of stewardship. It becomes a way of dwelling with the site before intervening upon it. Pérez-Gómez writes that modernity's technological worldview has often treated nature "as a collection of resources to be exploited" (2007, 127), severing our relation to the more-than-human world. Through "historical recollection" and "our future orientation," he suggests, architecture retains the poetic potential "to disclose and celebrate the original mystery as it appears" (Pérez-Gómez 2007, 128). To draw is to participate in a dialogue with a site's temporal and ethical dimensions. To listen, to interpret, and to reveal what cannot be reduced to data.

Predesign becomes a threshold where architects can decide whether to reproduce inherited frames of ownership and productivity, or to open the possibility of different relations; to treat land not only as property, but as a relation, as a layered history. Within this threshold, drawing reclaims its agency as an act of care, a way of thinking with land rather than about it.

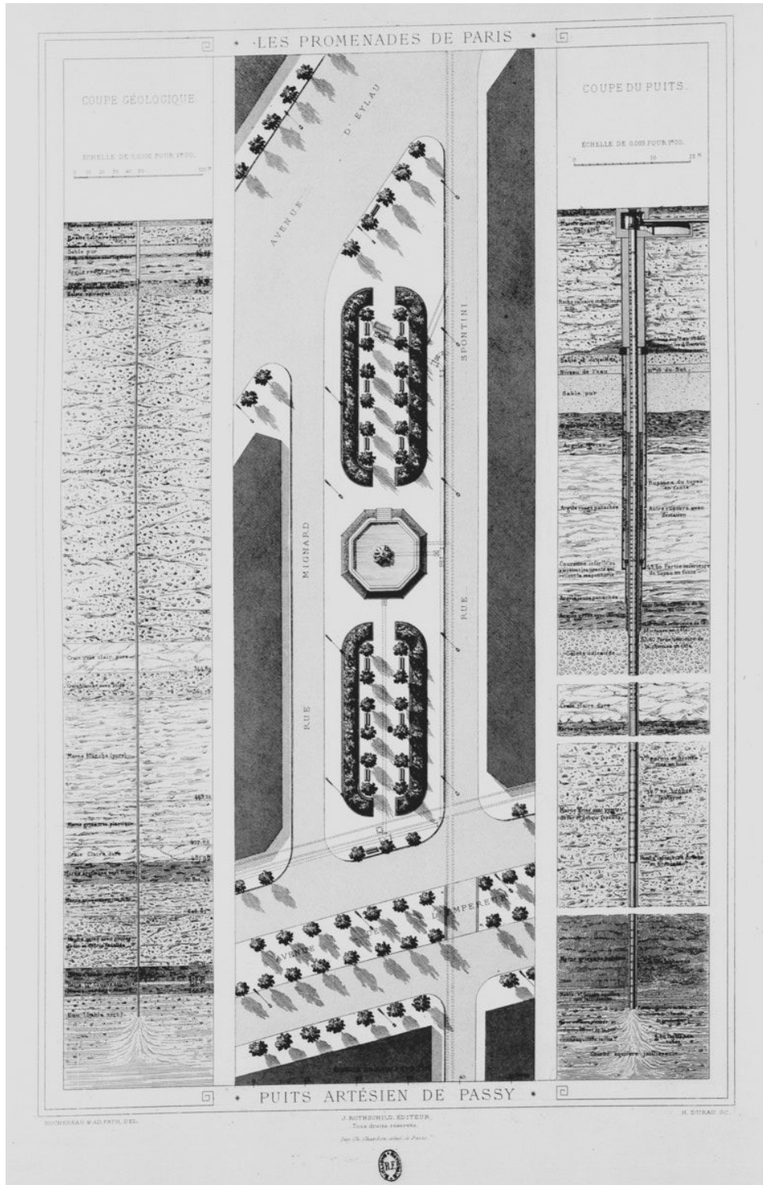


FIG 3.7
Plan and sections drawn by Adolphe Alphand between 1867-1873, a French landscape-architect and civil engineer, illustrating the deep interconnection between disciplines that shaped 19th-century urban design. On the left is a section of the geological makeup and on the right is a section of a well to provide a freshwater source for Paris. Together, these drawings demonstrate how the boundaries between technical systems and ecological understanding were seen as inseparable aspects of design.

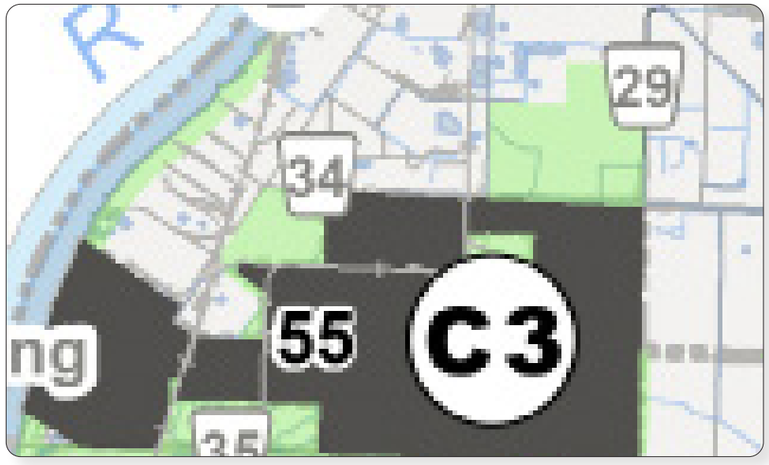


FIG 3.8

County of Lambton Map 2 - Natural Heritage System. The green indicate the primary natural corridors, yet they stop at the boundary of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve, illustrating how political borders are imposed on landscapes, even though natural systems ignore these human-made lines.

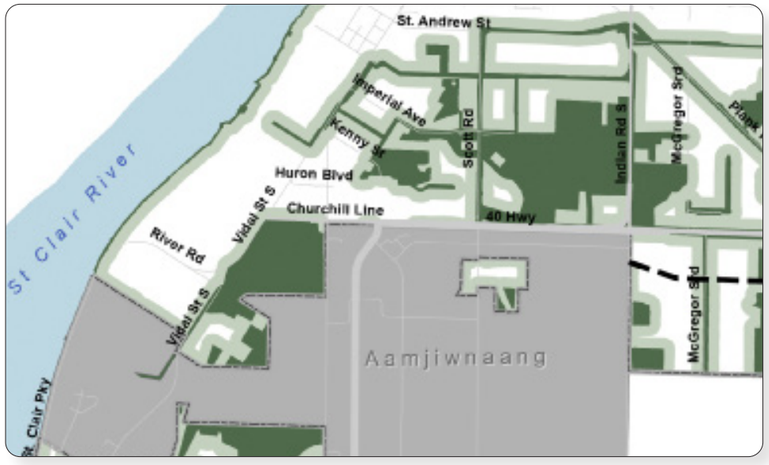


FIG 3.9

Official Plan from the City of Sarnia - Schedule '3' Natural Heritage System, Similar to the County of Lambton plan, this map shows the Environmental Protection zone abruptly ending at the boundary of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. This abstraction mirroring what Carlisle, Pevzner, and Corner described as rendering aspects of the land invisible within systems of planning and control.

Mapping as Witness

Before any proposal reaches the stage of approval, we must survey and translate the site into a measurable form, a process that culminates in the creation of a site plan. The site plan functions as a bureaucratic map, reducing the complexity of land into boundaries and setbacks that conform to regulatory categories of use and ownership. Within municipal systems of governance, this drawing serves as both a technical and legal document, establishing what is visible to authority and, by extension, what can be acted upon. It transforms the ground into an administrative object. Mapping marks one of the first acts through which land becomes legible.

This translation is rarely impartial. Edward T. White describes "contextual analysis" as "a predesign research activity" (1983, 6), emphasizing how such representations are instrumental, meant to prepare the ground for design rather than question the assumptions embedded in that preparation. Mapping, in this context, becomes an act of ordering rather than understanding. It is a way to render land legible to authority rather than relational to its context and histories.

> *Every line on an architectural drawing should be sensed as the anticipation of a future social relationship, and not merely as a harbinger of aesthetics or as an instruction to a contractor. (Awan, Schneider, and Till 2011, 30)*

Yet, within current systems, those relationships are redefined in terms of both law and economics. The line becomes a property boundary rather than an expression of relation. The act of drawing should be a means of interpretation and revelation, rather than a gesture of compliance and justification.

James Corner, in *The Agency of Mapping*, exposes how these abstractions actively shape the realm of architectural possibility. A map's selective representations are "virtual abstractions that

possess great force in terms of how people see and act" (Corner 2011, 90). They shape the very imagination of what architecture can be. "The very basis upon which projects are imagined and realised derives precisely from how maps are made" (Corner 2011, 91). Under Sarnia's *Site Plan Approval Policy*, checklists define which aspects of a site the city recognizes as legitimate. Elements that do not conform to these categories—histories of contamination, Indigenous land relations, or ecological systems—remain invisible to the design process. The result is a narrowing of architectural agency, in which the architect's role is to comply with a predefined order rather than question it. While these tools are useful for administration, they reinforce a static and partial understanding of the site.

Mapping also holds potential for resistance. It can reveal what systems choose not to see by exposing the conditions of legibility that structure our representations of land. Helen D. Hazen and Leila M. Harris (2006) "understand counter-mapping as any effort that fundamentally questions the assumptions of biases of cartographic conventions, that challenges predominant power effects of mapping" (115). *Countercartography*, then, is a way to undo colonial mapping, transforming the map away from a tool of control, and to expose the invisible layers that conventional site plans leave out.

A counter-cartographic context plan, even while remaining a drawing, restores some of the relations that were stripped away. It does not collapse the gap between drawing and building, but it aligns them more ethically. It allows the abstractions that guide planning and architecture to register the realities that have been excluded, making the drawing less violent and, potentially, more accountable.

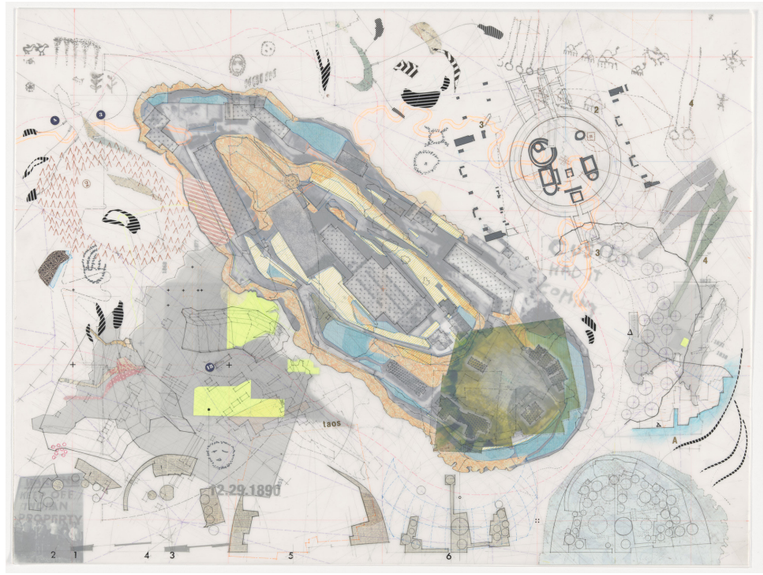


FIG 3.10
Radio Free Alcatraz: Territories. 2014. By Chris Cornelius, of all the different layers of the land, combining human and more-than-human elements to starts showing the history of the site.

Indigenous architects such as Chris Cornelius have demonstrated how mapping can become an ethical act of acknowledgment rather than control. In his project, *Radio Free Alcatraz* (2014), Cornelius reimagines the map as a living document, layering narratives of geology, the environment, and the human to resist the colonial flattening of land (Cornelius 2014). Incorporating layers of relation is what James Corner describes as the most neutral map, "without centre, hierarchy or single organizing principle" (Corner 2011, 96), making space for the stories that persist beneath its surface.

To witness through mapping can reposition the architect as an interpreter of relation, responsible for mediating between systems of governance and the ground's lived realities. White reminds us that "it is not the design or the building itself which is our ultimate responsibility as designers but the prediction and delivery of a set of consequences or effects that have been deemed positive and possible" (1983, 9). In places like Chemical Valley, this responsibility is heightened. The maps that once legitimized industrial encroachment on Aamjiwnaang First Nations territory continue to dictate what is permissible.

To map consciously and to witness are, therefore, acts of accountability. It means understanding that every representation is a decision about what we recognize and what we ignore. By approaching mapping as a form of ethical practice, architects can begin to reclaim agency within the systems that govern them. The drawing becomes a means of revealing the intertwined social, political, and environmental conditions that architecture must address. Architecture, Chris Cornelius writes, "is how we reconcile ourselves with the earth" (2014).

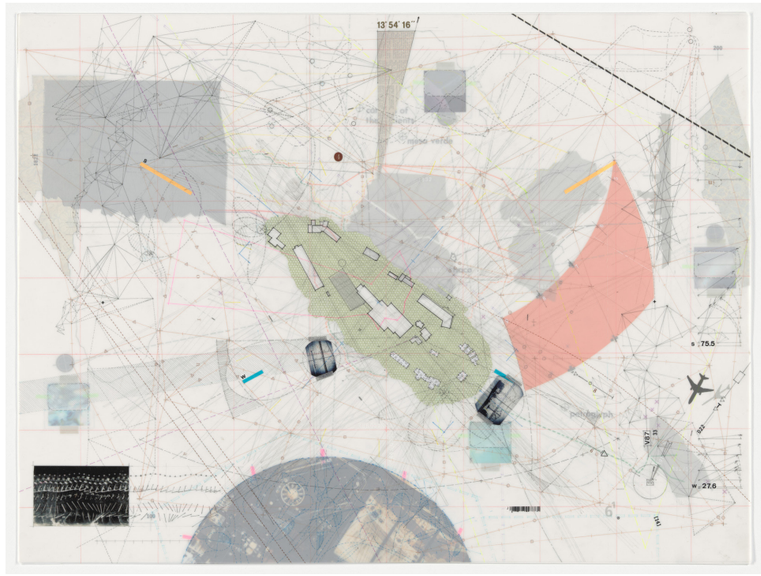


FIG 3.11
Radio Free Alcatraz: Trajectories. 2014. By Chris Cornelius, of all the paths that cross through the site, such as the ferry routes, air flight paths, ways understanding data beyond numbers and graphs.

Reflections

Current models of practice, as Lola Sheppard notes in *Beyond Patronage: Reconsidering Models of Practice*, "start with a client finding a site, establishing the stakeholders, the program, and then selecting an architect to give shape and form" (Sheppard 2015, 140). Here, the architect's agency is reactive rather than generative, positioned to materialize decisions that have already been made. Organizations such as the RAIC and the OAA leave little space to ask how practice might be regrounded to account for remediating relations with the land and history. If these regulatory systems structure the profession, then the question becomes how to act within them critically, and how to design with the awareness of the conditions that permit design itself.

In this sense, "agency and structure should be understood as a duality, two linked but separately identifiable conditions" (Awan, Schneider, and Till 2011, 31). To navigate this duality, the architect must recognize that practice is shaped by these systems but not wholly defined by them. Awareness of these dynamics is a form of agency, an acknowledgment that every decision, however constrained, participates in shaping the world.

Rethinking practice involves "questioning and repositioning the role of the architect within our physical and cultural environment" and learning "to understand a much broader set of spatial, temporal, and human relationships" (Sheppard 2015, 127). This requires attention not only to the visible surface of a site but to what lies above and below it, acknowledging that "the idea that the site is three-dimensional, that it has a thickness above and below ground. These systems have variable boundaries: where species migrate may be entirely different from the boundary of human occupation" (Sheppard 2015, 144). To design within such conditions is to acknowledge that every site extends beyond property lines, and that regulatory maps cannot contain its life.

Agency, therefore, emerges through engaging the layered systems rather than through control. Peggy Deamer, in *Architecture and Labor*, reminds us that "this means an embrace of, as opposed to an indifference to, the non-architectural agents with whom we necessarily interact" (Deamer 2020, 155). To act is to listen to the forces that continually shape the systems we design within. Rethinking an architect's responsibility is about cultivating

sensitivity to these interdependencies and acknowledging that design is always entangled within larger systems of labour and governance.

Within this entanglement, drawing becomes the first gesture of relation. To reclaim predesign as part of architectural practice is to reclaim the possibility of seeing differently, and to understand drawing as a critical and interpretive act. Each line drawn defines what is seen and what is possible. Architects can begin to make visible the systems that shape the land and the bodies that occupy it. Mapping becomes a form of witnessing, a way of tracing relations rather than just describing their conditions. Predesign can become a place of resistance and responsibility, where representation can transform from a technical service into an ethical practice.

Dr. David T. Fortin describes this approach as *critical relationalism*, a way of asking "what relations matter" and "what relations have we lost through colonization, through our disconnect with the places where we live" (Fortin 2023). For Fortin, "architecture and the living world" requires recognizing that our relations with the more-than-human world are not peripheral but fundamental, urging us to "prioritize the more-than-human world in our design process in very meaningful ways" (Fortin 2023).

To draw is to participate in an ethical practice of attention. It is to see architecture as both product and process and as structure and agency. It is a way of situating oneself within the living systems we inevitably alter. When we draw, it is not only a representation of the world. We are actively shaping the conditions through which it can be known. To practice with this awareness is to transform design from an act of compliance into an act of care.

In Sarnia, this means engaging directly with the contradictions embedded in professional ethics, recognizing that the systems that grant legitimacy to architecture are the same ones that enable extraction and erasure. Regrounding practice means witnessing the colonial histories of its regulatory forms and asking what it would mean to design otherwise.

04

Between Land & Governance

'The world [is] traversed with intersecting lines'. Along such intersecting lines are ideas, categories or tensions that often connect each other in different ways... Intersections can be conceptualized not only as intersecting lines but also as spaces that are created at the points where intersecting lines meet. Spaces created by intersecting ideas, tendencies or issues are sites of struggle that offer possibilities for people to resist. (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 201-202)

The Ethics of Design

As I reflect on the possibilities for architectural practice, I see design and planning as places where accountability can begin to take form. Embedding land histories into material and spatial decisions means more than just acknowledging them; it also involves understanding their significance and implications. Architecture is entangled in power, and every project reflects choices about whose histories we allow to guide the design process.

At the scale of professional planning, this imbalance becomes especially visible. In Chapter One, I outlined how overlapping histories of dispossession, settlement, and extraction have shaped land in Canada. The systems of zoning, permitting, and approvals I examined in Chapter Two are extensions of those same histories. These mechanisms determine who has access to land, whose voices matter in decision-making, and which futures are made possible. They can erase as easily as they can protect, as seen in the justification for removing environmental protections from a parcel of land.

When I first began to explore the obligations architects have in understanding the land on which we design, and the implications of practicing professionally, I turned toward the idea of decolonization. In architectural discourse, decolonization is a topic we often discuss. Readings such as *Learning decolonization, unlearning architecture* (Herscher and León 2021), and *Colonialism as a Continuous Process Architecture as a Spatial Apparatus* (Lambert 2017) examine how the discipline has been built on colonial foundations, how "colonial architecture" has been reduced to a stylistic classification, and how architectural history often frames colonialism as a "historical period rather than a system of domination" (Lambert 2017). These conversations are important, but I question what decolonization could mean in practice for me, a settler working within the profession of architecture.

The Anticolonial Space

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write that "decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice" (2012, 21). For Tuck and Yang, decolonization cannot be reduced to reconciliation, diversity, or inclusion initiatives that allow settlers to feel reprieved while leaving the structure of occupation intact. They call these gestures "settler moves to innocence." Acts that ease settler guilt without addressing the dispossession of land itself (Tuck and Yang 2012, 21). This framing made it clear that decolonization is not something I can claim or enact within my profession as a settler; it is a process that must materially involve the return of land and life to Indigenous peoples.

That is why I turn instead to anticolonial practice as the framework that better fits this thesis. If decolonization is about land back, then anticolonial work, as Max Liboiron argues, is about refusing to "reproduce settler and colonial entitlement to land, Indigenous cultures, concepts, knowledges, and life" (Liboiron 2021, 132). Anticolonial practices foreground accountability in the way questions are asked and decisions are made.

Mary O'Brien, quoted by Liboiron, reminds us that every research or design question is a political choice because choosing one question necessarily forecloses others. There is a strong parallel here with zoning and planning. Deciding to designate land for industry rather than conservation, or to prioritize development over ecological repair, are decisions that assume whose needs matter most and whose harms are acceptable. O'Brien resists treating land as a toxic landfill in her scientific research, and architects must resist understanding land as an empty resource waiting to be parcelled or extracted (Liboiron 2021, 132).

How do we implement this in practice? I circle what Willie Ermine (2007) calls the "ethical space of engagement." Ermine describes this as "an analogy of a space between two entities, as a space between the Indigenous and Western thought worlds" (Ermine 2007, 194). This is not a neutral zone but a meeting ground where "human-to-human dialogue can occur" (Ermine 2007, 202). For architects, our work often takes place in this in-between space. Between land and regulation, between client and community, between existing conditions and imagined futures. To consider design as an "ethical space" reframes practice as an ongoing act of negotiating these relations, with the awareness that colonial systems already structure them unequally.

Zoe Todd, however, speaks of a similar "space between" (2023, 166) that is not only an ethical possibility but also an unavoidable condition of working within settler-colonial systems and what Denzel et al. call the "colonizer-indigene hyphen" (Denzin et al. 2008, 5-7). As Liboiron notes, Todd and other Indigenous scholars work across two different frameworks: between Western ideologies that treat land as ownership and knowledge as a commodity, and Indigenous legal orders that locate people within "living and ongoing relationships to one another, to land, [and] to the more-than-human" (Liboiron 2021, 136). These Indigenous legal orders, Todd argues, "fundamentally challenge the authority of Euro-Western academies which operate within unceded, unsurrendered and sentient lands and Indigenous territories in North America" (Todd 2023, 166). The central question then becomes: how do we conduct research, or design, in this in-between space? As Liboiron emphasizes, "the answer will play out differently for settlers, and for different kinds of settlers and non-Indigenous people that aren't settlers, than for Indigenous scientists" (2021, 136).

To incorporate Ermine's idea is to recognize that ethical space requires stepping outside of allegiances, such as the comfort

of disciplinary traditions or settler assumptions, and to meet others in ways that are not pre-scripted by dominant systems. This resonates with Liboiron's insistence that "obligations do not exist and are not enacted in atomized and individualized one-on-one relationships but in a diversity of relationships where some relations matter more than others" (Liboiron 2021, 137). Read together, their work reframes architecture as a practice entangled in multiple, uneven relationships. In architectural terms, this means that we cannot reduce practice to a contract between the client and the architect. It must account for a broader set of relations: with land, with communities who are affected, and with systems of governance that hold the power to either reproduce or disrupt colonial entitlements.

These relations are also not ones we get to choose. Liboiron describes how "choosing your kin instead of being invited in and chosen by kin (which is a sign of Whiteness according to Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Darryl Leroux), excluding undesirable kin while simultaneously extending the definition of kin" reflects a tendency to avoid "unwelcome" relations. Extending kinship to non-humans, they write, "almost never mean plastics" (Liboiron 2021, 106). We cannot escape the reality that some relations—such as the petrochemicals in Sarnia or the infrastructure that sustains settler economies—are entangled with our lives. Buildings rely on concrete, steel, glass, and plastics; materials from extractive industries that many of us would reject if we could. However, these materials support life in society, heating our homes and filling the walls of the schools, hospitals, and housing we design. Ignoring these ties would mean overlooking the realities that shape architectural practice itself.

It is an antithesis to act anticolonially while living on dispossessed land, benefiting from the very economies that extraction has made possible. We must confront the colonial systems we are always entangled in, and any attempt to undo them is necessarily partial and imperfect. Perhaps this is another kind of between space, not unlike Ermine's ethical space, where action and accountability remain suspended between practice and action. The challenge is for architects to remain within it and to work from its contradictions without pretending we can erase them.

As Liboiron writes, "doing anticolonial science within a dominant scientific context is simultaneously a commitment to dominant science and a divestment from it, which makes it uniquely compromised" (Liboiron 2021, 134). The same could be said of architecture. Practicing within professional standards, such as those established by CHOP, and within zoning or permitting systems inevitably commits architects to frameworks shaped by colonial histories. Refusal to reproduce settler entitlement is still possible through the kinds of questions we choose to ask and the procedures we adopt in design. Compromise is the condition of practicing ethically in a field structured by unequal power relations (Liboiron 2021, 134; Denzin et al. 2008, 6).

And as what anticolonial practice could mean for architecture, I return to Liboiron's reminder that altering colonial land relations depends on specificity (Liboiron 2021, 13). It requires refusing broad substitutions, such as treating environmentalism as equivalent to decolonization, and instead grounding professional practice in the histories and obligations tied to the land on which I am working. To work with this specificity is to ask how zoning has historically displaced communities, or how planning decisions have prioritized some lives over others.

This is why Liboiron frames anticolonialism not only as a theory but as a set of practices and tools that allow alternative relations with land to take form (Liboiron 2021, 121). This becomes an invitation for architecture to mend how we approach design and planning, so that they begin not with the assumption of land as a resource, but with the recognition of land as relation.

From Ethics to Obligation

Such a shift calls for a rethinking of how architecture as a profession defines its responsibilities. If "relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality," then practice itself is constituted by relations, with land, and with colonial settlements that continue to structure Canadian cities. The question is not whether architects should be held accountable, but how their practice can recognize and sustain obligations that come from being in relation (Styers and Zinga 2013, 292).

The idea of inclusivity already appears in CHOP, drawing on the OCAD Inclusive Design Research Centre's definition of inclusive design as:

> *Design that considers the full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age and other forms of human difference. (OCAD University in RAIC 2021, ch. 1.1)*

It describes the architect as "an ambassador for inclusive design so that the specific needs, values and concerns of a diverse society are reflected and integrated in its buildings" (RAIC 2021, ch. 1.1). While CHOP has primarily applied this focus to accessibility, we can understand inclusivity as a relational obligation, a recognition that design is never separate from cultural difference or the layered histories embedded in the land.

The RAIC has taken steps toward this reorientation. The *Indigenous Task Force* (ITF), launched in 2016 with the goal "to foster and promote Indigenous design and architecture in Canada, in rural, Métis, and Northern Communities, First Nations and urban spaces, and to advocate with and on behalf of Indigenous communities" (RAIC n.d.). The *Truth and Reconciliation Task Force* of the RAIC was established in 2020 to similarly, "provide leadership on how the organization can advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples" and to "facilitate sustainable actions

that will foster reconciliation within the profession" (RAIC n.d.). These initiatives mark important progress, but the representation of Indigenous architects is small. In 2017, there were only seventeen registered architects (Stewart and Fortin 2017). This gap indicates that reconciliation cannot rely solely on Indigenous architects.

At the beginning of 2025, the RAIC released an updated *2025-2027 Strategic Plan*, and it is here that we can begin to see the outcomes of these organizations. The RAIC identifies six values: integrity, agility, design excellence, social equity, reconciliation, and environmental responsibility, with responsibilities extending to the architectural community, educators and students, allied design professionals, the public, and "the planet and all living things" (RAIC 2025, 9-10).

These values are essential to the reconciliation process, and their inclusion in CHOP could strengthen the document's alignment with the RAIC's broader commitments. The RAIC Strategic Plan offers a strong foundation for what an expanded *Emerging Trends* section might look like. Incorporating these principles directly into *Chapter 1.3: Professional Conduct and Ethics* would make the profession's commitments to reconciliation more visible and actionable. A useful precedent here is *Part 1, Chapter 4: Public Interest Design* in the AIA Handbook, which clearly outlines how architects can simultaneously function under systems of governance but can find agency in the form of social responsibility, grounded in physical case studies that translate ethical principles into practice (AIA 2014, 117-131). Integrating such specifics within CHOP would ensure that architects understand relational and environmental obligations are integral to professional ethics.

Further, Chapter 1.6 of CHOP, *Organization of the Profession in Canada*, already provides a brief history of the profession's

The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice (AIA 2014, 125)

Best Practices to a Socially Responsible Project:

"To practice socially responsible design, an architect doesn't have to change jobs, request a new project, or get knee-deep in a pro bono project. Instead, one can offer a different approach or adjust participation within the context of current work.

Establish a team mission:	*Inquire with engineers, consultants, and vendors as to their social responsibility practices.*
Facilitate a participatory design process:	*Identify all relevant stakeholders. Be inclusive and solicit feedback from all stakeholders, starting early in the design process and integrating it into the work.*
Establish a project vision and measurable goals:	*Collectively create goals that reflect the values of the stakeholders and develop ways to measure the success and results. Dig deep in the needs and risk assessment to uncover potential opportunities and challenges for the duration of the life of the building.*
Utilize design research:	*Consult publications and media for case studies, research, materials, and technologies.*
Design to actively promote the health and well-being of occupants:	*Incorporate design elements that reduce sensory stress, encourage movement and interaction, provide access to natural light and the outdoors, and contribute to thermal comfort, good indoor air quality, and sound control for all occupants.*
Incorporate and forward sustainable design principles:	*Address the deeper needs of the environment, the community, and the occupants through your design process.*
Perform life cycle analysis:	*For all the investment in creating the building, consider what happens after the project is complete. Assess the viability of meeting long-term goals and structure's durability, adaptability, and re-usability. Discuss the building's end of life and how it may be disassembled.*
Engage in the execution of the design:	*Create a plan with the owner to have the design administered responsibly during construction to ensure design intent and safety standards are met.*
Evaluate the completed project:	*While measuring success can be difficult, particularly of an individual design element, interviews with clients, users, and public feedback can be illuminating. Create case studies to evaluate whether specific goals have been met.*

FIG 4.1

Recreation from the AIA Handbook that outlines recommendations for ensuring a project responds ethically to community, social, and broader public obligations.

The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice (AIA 2014, 117–119)

The Social Impact of Design

"Architects, through their involvement in design and construction, have direct and indirect impacts on people, the economy, and the environment, and are well positioned to engage in socially responsible activities.

Socially responsible design aims to address social, environmental, economic, and political issues through design and design thinking.

Equity and justice:	*Advocating with those who have a limited voice in public life.*
Diversity:	*Promoting social equality through discourse that reflects a range of values and social identities.*
Participatory decision making:	*Building structures for inclusion that engage stakeholders and allow communities to make decisions.*
Quality of life:	*Advancing the right of every person to live in a socially, economically, and environmentally healthy community.*
Integrative approach:	*Creating strategies that reach beyond the design of the built environment.*
Place-based solutions:	*Generating ideas that grow from place and build local capacity.*
Design excellence:	*Promoting the highest standards of quality in the design and construction of the built environment.*

FIG 4.2

Recreation from the AIA Handbook that outlines recommendations for the effects that design decisions have on human and more-than-human communities.

This collaborative process is a shift from designing for people to designing with people, ensuring the vision is one the community will continue to invest in over time. As a form of problem-seeking, participatory design elicits different ideas, interests, and values that inform the final design and ultimately add richness, variety, and character to a community environment. People who find it hard to break through a complex, formal governing system find their voices in an open visioning process, achieving greater equity and social justice through design."

establishment. A parallel section could be developed to foreground Indigenous stewardship, colonial settlement, and the histories of dispossession that make practicing architecture possible. Including such a section, alongside the adoption of formal land acknowledgements, would ensure that all architects, regardless of training or origin, begin practice with a shared understanding of the relations that shape their work. The RAIC has already committed to *TRC Call to Action 92* and to UNDRIP as a framework for reconciliation, and embedding this into CHOP would help reframe architecture as a practice of obligations (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

The OAA has also taken meaningful steps toward reconciliation, such as introducing *The Path: Your Journey Through Indigenous Canada* in 2022, a continuing education course on Indigenous histories and governance, and maintains nearly 400 items in its database referencing First Nations (OAA 2022). Much like the RAIC, the OAA can make this information more visible and accessible to all members who visit the site. Much like CHOP, developing a public positionality on reconciliation would make these obligations explicit, ensuring that the profession's commitments are embedded in the frameworks that regulate architectural practice rather than just available to architects who seek them out.

Chapter 1.5: Admission to the Profession already emphasizes the duty to "regulate members of their respective professions for the protection of the public" (RAIC 2021, ch. 1.5), with multiple pathways to licensure, including accredited degrees, RAIC's Syllabus Program, or certification of international qualifications. However, not all architects entering the profession may carry the knowledge of the histories that shape Canadian land. *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Call to Action 92-94* makes clear that this knowledge of Indigenous peoples, Treaties, and the residential school system is essential for newcomers and, by

extension, for architects who work on these lands (Government of Canada 2018). Incorporating this awareness into CHOP and provincial frameworks would ground professional responsibility in obligations to land and relation.

This goes back to specificity, where our obligations and responsibilities cannot remain abstract, recognizing that settler colonialism is not only an ideology but also a "set of technologies" (Liboiron 2021, 121) that sustain and simplify the ground into a standing reserve for settler use. If colonialism is maintained through such mechanisms, then anticolonial practice must be understood as a practice that sustains relations rather than reducing them to resources. This means beginning not with abstract accountability to a universal public in architecture, but with the obligations that emerge from being in relation to land, communities, and histories. From this perspective, accountability can be seen as the ongoing practice of good relations.

Towards Good Relations

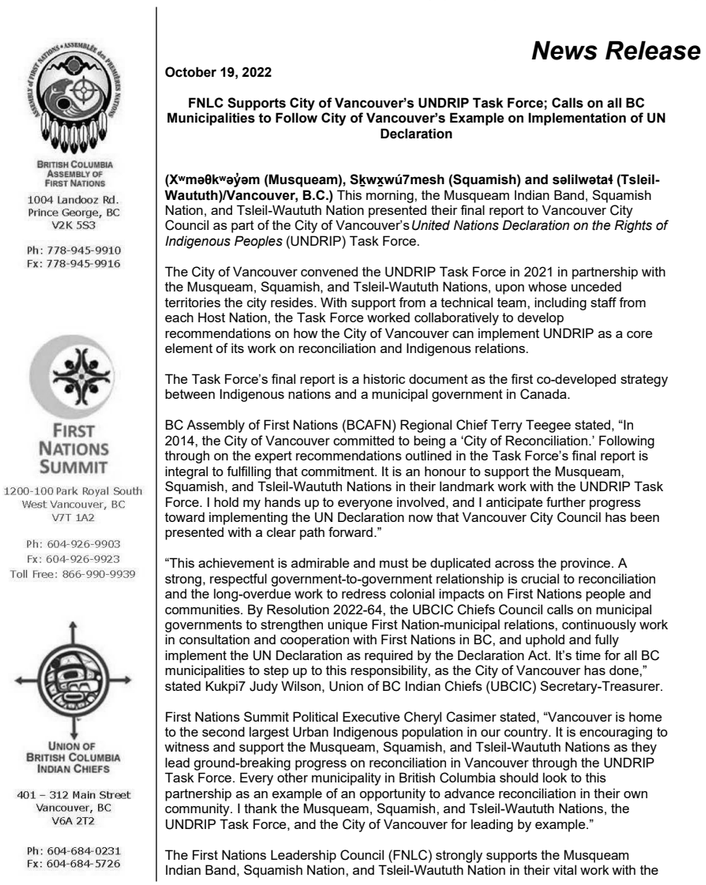
If specificity is the foundation of anticolonialism, I look to how we can also enact these obligations in the systems that govern planning practice. In 2018, the City of Sarnia formed a *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) working group, marking the beginning of a shift and recognizing that the city is inseparable from the lands and lives of nearby Indigenous communities. With weekly meetings beginning in 2019, this culminated in a summit in May 2025 to develop an implementation plan (City of Sarnia 2019; City of Sarnia 2025). The City Council representative, Bryan White, acknowledged that:

> *A lot of the decisions that the city makes does have an impact on neighbouring communities, as well as Indigenous members with the community. It's important for us to understand how the city's decisions and the way that we conduct our business impact those folks. (Chavez 2025)*

White's words reveal an emerging awareness that municipal governance, such as planning and permitting, is an ongoing negotiation over land and power.

In Sarnia, where the first commercial oil well in North America meets the lands of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, the history of colonialism weighs heavily. Systems that privilege extraction over care have long shaped the city's industrial landscape. The result has been decades of contamination, a slow violence of accumulating petrochemical lands that have transformed both bodies and landscapes.

The establishment of UNDRIP in Sarnia demonstrates a step toward reconciliation. It marks a moment where governance begins to acknowledge its entanglements in these histories. It is an opening to the possibility of an administrative framework that recognizes Indigenous histories as parallel to municipal



FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

News Release

October 19, 2022

FNLC Supports City of Vancouver's UNDRIP Task Force; Calls on all BC Municipalities to Follow City of Vancouver's Example on Implementation of UN Declaration

(Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh)/Vancouver, B.C.) This morning, the Musqueam Indian Band, Squamish Nation, and Tsleil-Waututh Nation presented their final report to Vancouver City Council as part of the City of Vancouver's *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) Task Force.

The City of Vancouver convened the UNDRIP Task Force in 2021 in partnership with the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, upon whose unceded territories the city resides. With support from a technical team, including staff from each Host Nation, the Task Force worked collaboratively to develop recommendations on how the City of Vancouver can implement UNDRIP as a core element of its work on reconciliation and Indigenous relations.

The Task Force's final report is a historic document as the first co-developed strategy between Indigenous nations and a municipal government in Canada.

BC Assembly of First Nations (BCAFN) Regional Chief Terry Teegee stated, "In 2014, the City of Vancouver committed to being a 'City of Reconciliation.' Following through on the expert recommendations outlined in the Task Force's final report is integral to fulfilling that commitment. It is an honour to support the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations in their landmark work with the UNDRIP Task Force. I hold my hands up to everyone involved, and I anticipate further progress toward implementing the UN Declaration now that Vancouver City Council has been presented with a clear path forward."

"This achievement is admirable and must be duplicated across the province. A strong, respectful government-to-government relationship is crucial to reconciliation and the long-overdue work to redress colonial impacts on First Nations people and communities. By Resolution 2022-64, the UBCIC Chiefs Council calls on municipal governments to strengthen unique First Nation-municipal relations, continuously work in consultation and cooperation with First Nations in BC, and uphold and fully implement the UN Declaration as required by the Declaration Act. It's time for all BC municipalities to step up to this responsibility, as the City of Vancouver has done," stated Kukpi7 Judy Wilson, Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) Secretary-Treasurer.

First Nations Summit Political Executive Cheryl Casimer stated, "Vancouver is home to the second largest Urban Indigenous population in our country. It is encouraging to witness and support the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations as they lead ground-breaking progress on reconciliation in Vancouver through the UNDRIP Task Force. Every other municipality in British Columbia should look to this partnership as an example of an opportunity to advance reconciliation in their own community. I thank the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, the UNDRIP Task Force, and the City of Vancouver for leading by example."

The First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC) strongly supports the Musqueam Indian Band, Squamish Nation, and Tsleil-Waututh Nation in their vital work with the City of Vancouver's UNDRIP Task Force. We applaud the Host Nations for this historic partnership and urge every municipality in BC to replicate this initiative.

-30-

The FNLC is comprised of the political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

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FIG 4.3

2022 News Release from the First Nations Leadership Council in support of the UNDRIP Task Force and a call for all municipalities in BC to follow by example.

authority. This gestures toward what an anticolonial practice of planning might look like, creating a path into the space between settler-colonial and Indigenous Knowledge systems.

The City of Vancouver's UNDRIP Action Plan (2024-2028) is an important precedent that demonstrates how the City has enacted anticolonial frameworks through its policies and collaborations. The Action Plan outlines 88 deliverables across 18 action groups, outlining topics such as redress, housing, cultural access, public accountability, and environmental justice. What made this plan significant is that it was "entirely co-developed by the intergovernmental UNDRIP Task Force together with colleagues at the staff and Council level from Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and the City of Vancouver" (UNDRIP 2024, 6). It was also shaped through "initial engagements with diverse urban Indigenous community members," with the intention of continuing these engagements to ensure that priorities remained embedded throughout implementation. In its first six months, Vancouver incorporated all 18 action groups, bringing together staff from the City and the Nations, which they described as "the most comprehensive and reciprocal collaboration in the City's history" (City of Vancouver 2025).

The UNDRIP Action Plan lists specific issues and solutions and identifies relevant stakeholders. It is unambiguous, so that departments such as "Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation" or "Engineering Services" can reference this report, cross-reference the clear Action Groups applicable to them, and see whether they are meeting the goals set out (UNDRIP 2024, 27).

This process reframes planning as a relational practice. The 18 action groups met to create detailed Action Charters and develop a five-stage framework to track progress from early planning through to delivery. Action Group 14, which addresses environmental racism, and *Action Group 15: Infrastructure and*

Environment, are particularly relevant here. Group 14 works with the Nations to co-define what environmental racism means, document past and ongoing cases, and develop stewardship policies that reflect Indigenous values, rights, and laws (UNDRIP 2024, 26-29).

Group 15:

> *Acknowledges and addresses past and ongoing harms and actively engages with [First Nations Groups] early in the planning stages of infrastructure initiatives with potential environmental impacts. The City adopts a comprehensive approach in planning, designing, building, and maintaining infrastructure to achieve outcomes that support Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh priorities, rights, and laws. (City of Vancouver 2024, 28)*

Here, the City does not reduce environmental harm to a technical risk, recognizing that we cannot separate environmental justice from colonial histories of land dispossession and contamination. Pathways to reconciliation involve the engagement between First Nations groups and settlers alike, and it is here where we can see a clear example of what that dialogue in the ethical in-between space discussed earlier can look like (Ermine 2007, 196). Both Sarnia and Vancouver remind us that relations are not static; they are constantly being discussed and reconfigured. Whether through policy, design, or everyday practice, we can learn to rewrite the systems steeped in settler-colonial histories.

City of Vancouver UNDRIP Action Plan 2024-2028 (Vancouver 2024, 26-29)

UNDRIP Strategies include (s.2.4-2.5):

Strategies include working closely with the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations to ensure that its environmental initiatives actively confront environmental racism. This involves not only reviewing and repairing infrastructure that may be causing harm but also maintaining an open and ongoing dialogue with the Nations, sharing progress and decisions throughout the process to ensure accountability and collaboration to prevent harm in the future.

Managing Stakeholders

Engineering Services, Real Estate, Environment and Facilities Management, Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, Management Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability

Goals

There are ten deliverables for Action Group 14 and 15 combined, grounded in collaboration with the local First Nations communities. One objective is to develop "a shared definition of environmental racism and cataloguing historic and ongoing examples with the goals to acknowledge truths" (Vancouver 2024, 27) Each goal emphasizes partnership among relevant stakeholders to ensure that actions are informed, accountable, and rooted in mutual understanding.

FIG 4.4

Review of the City of Vancouver's UNDRIP strategies that seek to address environmental impacts, pollution, and the protection of the environment in alignment with Indigenous Rights.

Emerging Questions

For settler architects working with contested land in Canada, obligation begins with recognizing that the design process is never separate from the histories of dispossession that shape the ground we build upon, and that each act of intervention reproduces these same histories. Our obligations go beyond clients or codes and to the lands and communities whose stories persist beneath the surface of every site. They require us to understand that every act of building is an act of deciding what we erase and who we permit to belong.

It calls for a practice of listening before designing, asking that we be conscious of the tools that make design possible and consider how they might be reimagined through reciprocal relations. They invite us to approach planning and design as relational practices, where good architecture is more than just the design, but in the ethics of its foundations.

Reconciliation, for the settler architect, is not an endpoint but an ongoing process of good relations. It means working within systems that shape how land is understood and regulated, while also remaining aware of the histories that those systems carry. To design on contested ground is to navigate this tension, to participate in established frameworks even as we try to imagine new ways of practicing through them.

How can a settler architect ever reconcile their place within the very systems of ownership and regulation that they seek to unsettle?

EPILOGUE

The Context Plan

I return to the checklist as an attempt to unsettle the ground through a context plan. Across the course of this research, mapping has become a practice of witnessing and a means of reclaiming agency, a way of seeing and acknowledging relations that are often rendered invisible. The proposed context plan is an accumulation of everything learned and unlearned throughout the thesis, a tool that moves beyond Sarnia and speaks to the same histories that have shaped Canada.

The context plan reframes the site plan as a relational and ethical document, rather than solely a technical one. What would it mean for development applications to reflect the histories, human, and more-than-human conditions that extend beyond property lines? By making visible the layered historical, infrastructural, social, and ecological relations of a site, it broadens how we understand and evaluate development.

The goal is not to replace the City of Sarnia's formal checklist, nor that of any other municipality, but to establish an additional framework alongside it. The existing list is a form of governance that orders the world through measurement. They are necessary, but also incomplete. The context plan offers space for a parallel framework that reveals what planning and development processes might overlook.

Perhaps this context plan can be included in development applications as a reference for planning staff, as well as other departments and communities, to initiate an ongoing conversation on reconciliation, public health, and environmental care. It offers governments risk mitigation, better long-term

Context Plan Checklist

a.	*Land Acknowledgment and Territorial Context*	i. *Known Treaties, surrenders, and land transactions* ii. *Territories and nations whose lands the site sits upon*
b.	*City Structures*	i. *Current zoning and land-use designations* ii. *Existing buildings and roads* iii. *Survey Grid*
c.	*Community Impacts*	i. *Exposure reports (soil, air, water contamination)* ii. *Pollution sources, active or legacy* iii. *Records of community engagement, concerns, or advocacy* iv. *Environmental risks, such as flood zones, etc.*
d.	*More-than-Human Movements*	i. *Green corridors and waterways* ii. *Ecological communities that are present* iii. *Wind and solar patterns*
e.	*Surface and subsurface infrastructure*	i. *Existing pipelines* ii. *Wells (active, capped, or abandoned)* iii. *Rail lines and other industrial networks*

FIG 4.5
Proposal of a formal context plan checklist.

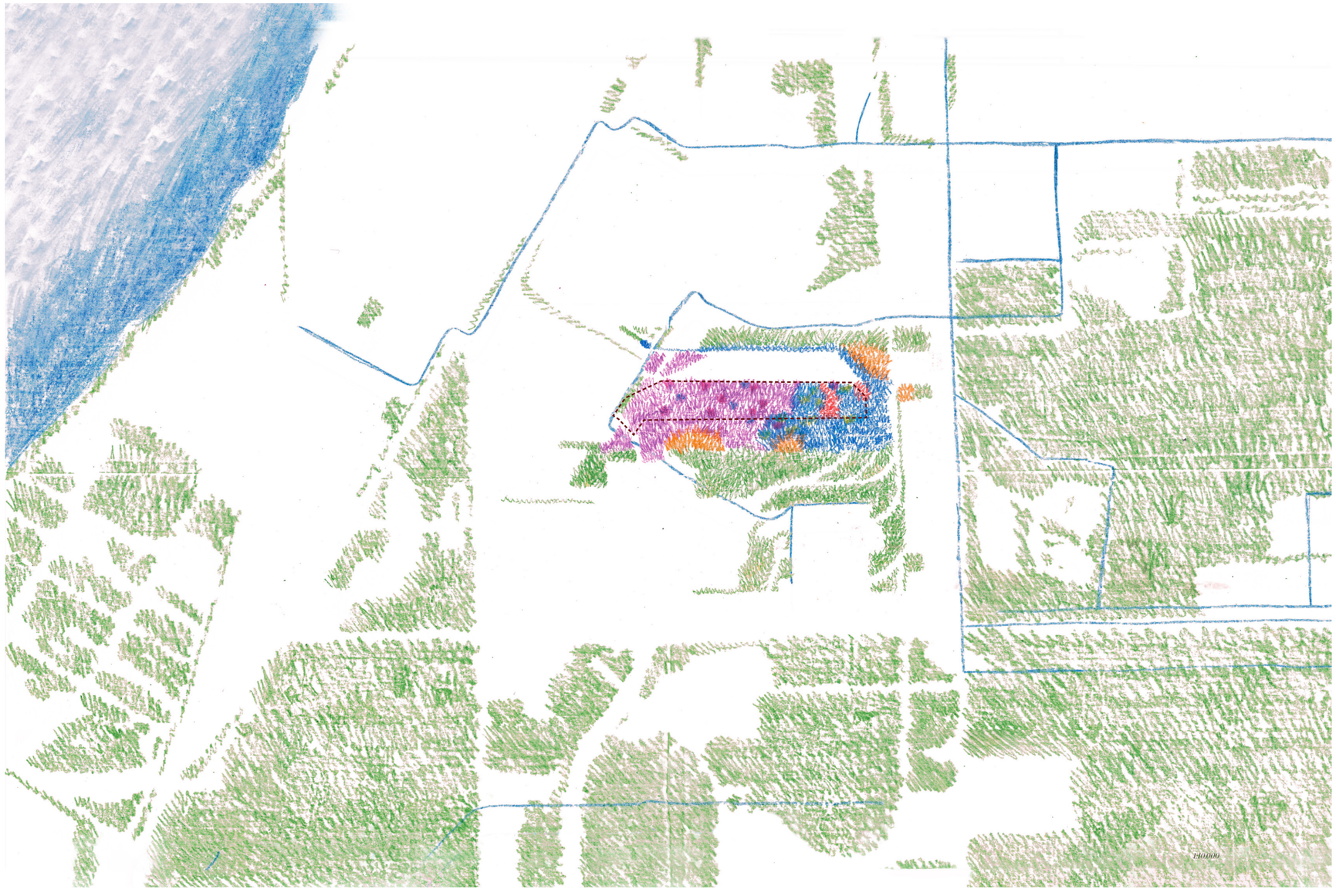
environmental management, alignment with reconciliation commitments, and more trusted decision-making. For communities, it provides transparency and recognizes lived conditions. For the environment, it ensures that more-than-human systems are part of the decision-making process. This context plan also extends the ongoing work of learning and self-reflection on reconciliation. It aligns partially with TRC's *Call to Action 57*, which states, "We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples…" (TRC 2015, 7).

For architects, it shifts how we might operate within governing systems. Bylaws and permits determine what architects are required to draw and, by extension, what can be made visible. The context plan expands this field of responsibility. It offers a way to work within systems while making space to reshape them. It narrows the distance between drawing and ground, reminding us that our professional drawings carry histories and relations that continue to matter.

This shift aligns with the TRC's *Call to Action 92(iii)* for architects and allied professions, to "Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples" (TRC 2015, 10). Integrating this context plan is a way to make learning operational, embedding it directly into everyday design and planning work instead of supplementary training. In doing so, it positions architectural practice as part of a broader movement toward accountability and care.

Call to Action 57
"We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal-Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism."

Call to Action 92(iii)
"Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism."



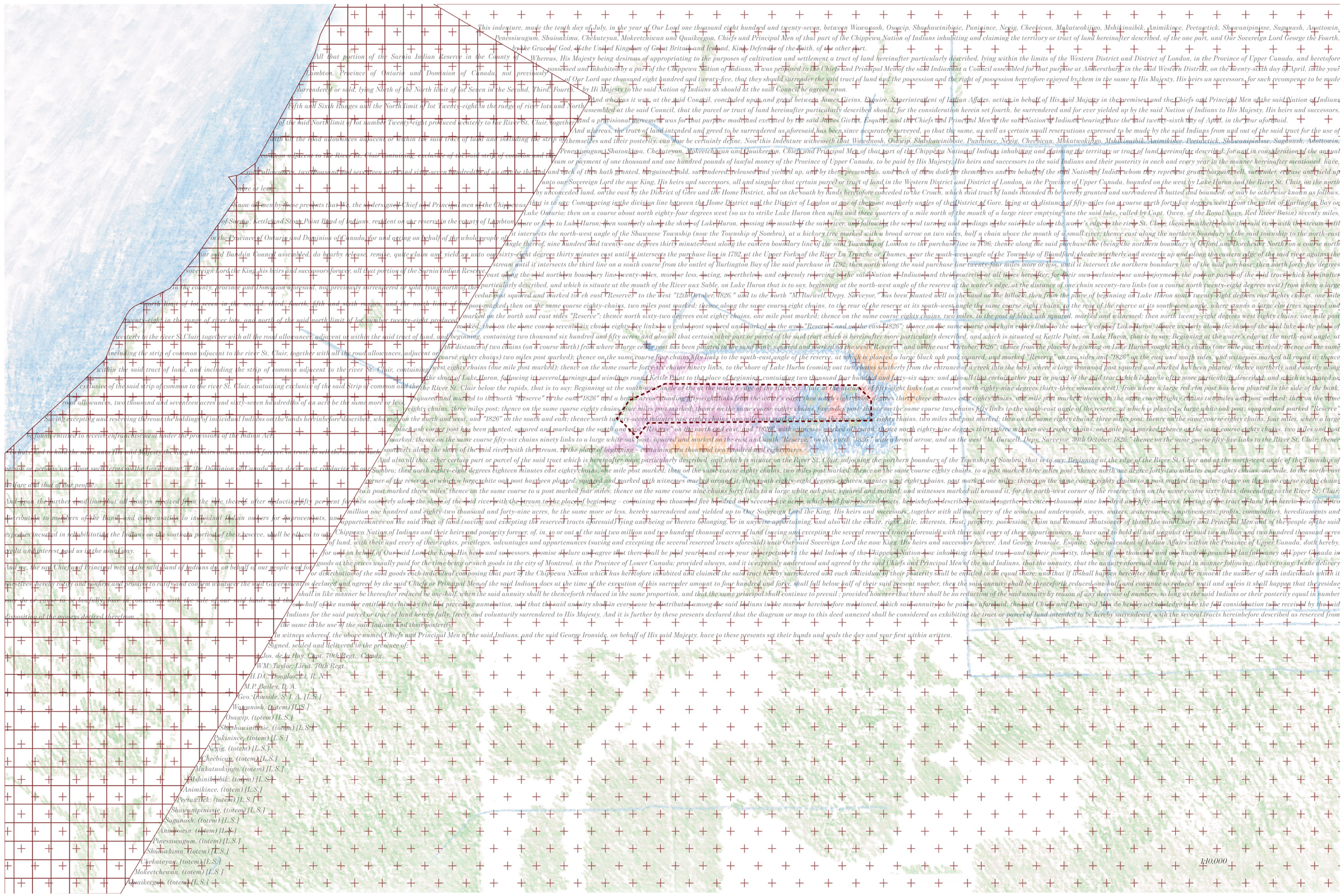
LAYERS

Waterways
Greenspace
Species at Risk Habitat

- Terrestrial Crayfish Habitat
- Butler's Gartersnake Habitat
- Bat Roosting Habitat
- European Common Reed
- Crayfish Chimney
- Riddell's Goldenrod
- Butler's Gartersnake

FIG 4.6

This layer represents surface water in shared watersheds, green spaces, and habitats for species at risk. Incorporating helps reduce risk when approving development in hazard zones, aligns with Conservation Authority regulations, and supports climate resilience planning.



LAYERS

Treaties & Surrenders

1827 Huron Tract Treaty No. 29

1925 Land Surrender

Waterways

Greenspace

Species at Risk Habitat

Terrestrial Crayfish Habitat

Butler's Gartersnake Habitat

Bat Roosting Habitat

European Common Reed

Crayfish Chimney

Riddell's Goldenrod

Butler's Gartersnake

FIG 4.7

This layer shows publicly available treaty and documented land surrenders, to acknowledge and respect Indigenous histories, and helping the city plan in a way that is historically informed and socially responsible. Understanding the land's history aligns with the TRC's Call to Action 92.

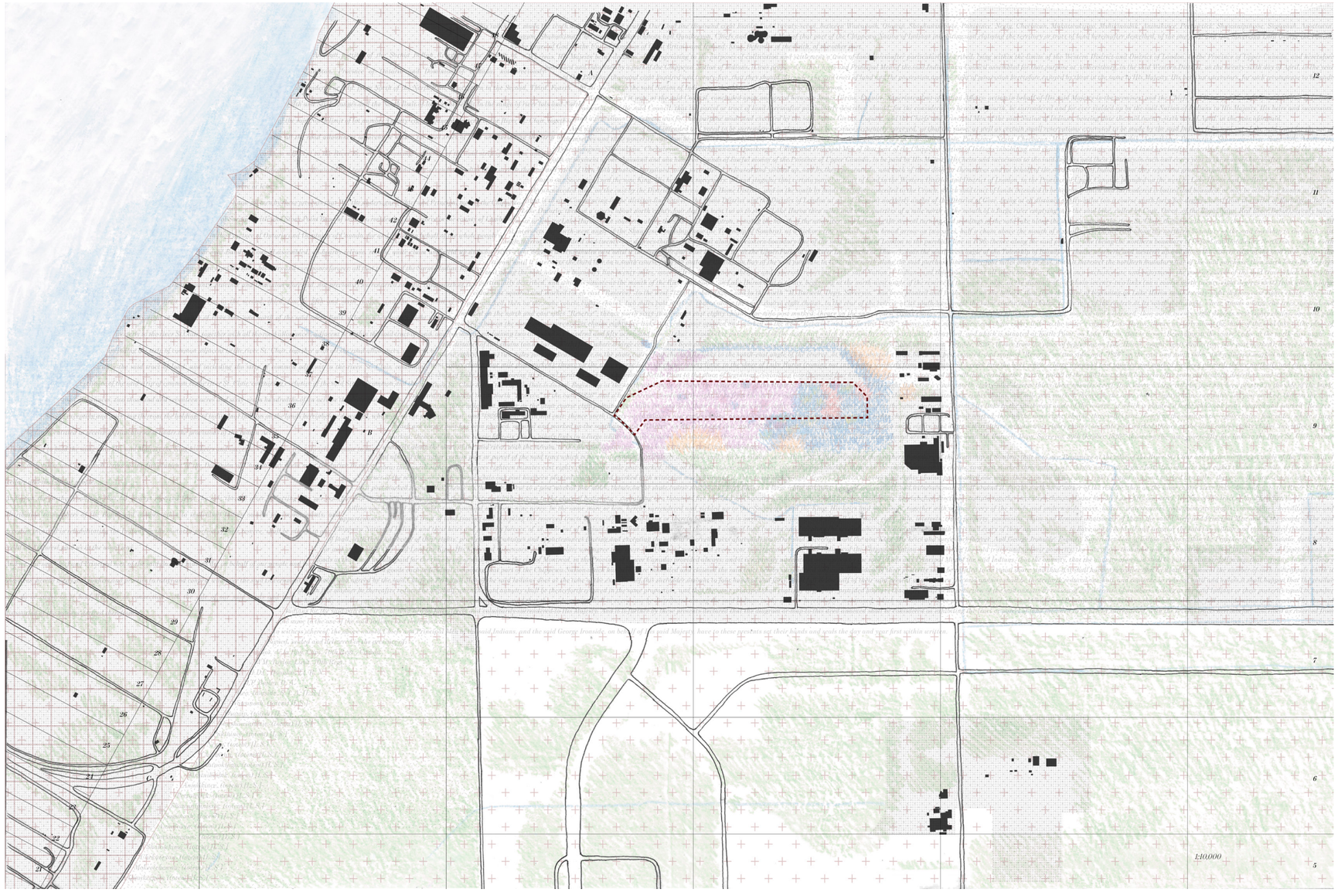


FIG 4.8

This layer provides the foundations of the city's built environment. Layered on top of the rest of the layers, we can start making more informed decisions and anticipate impacts on both natural and social systems.

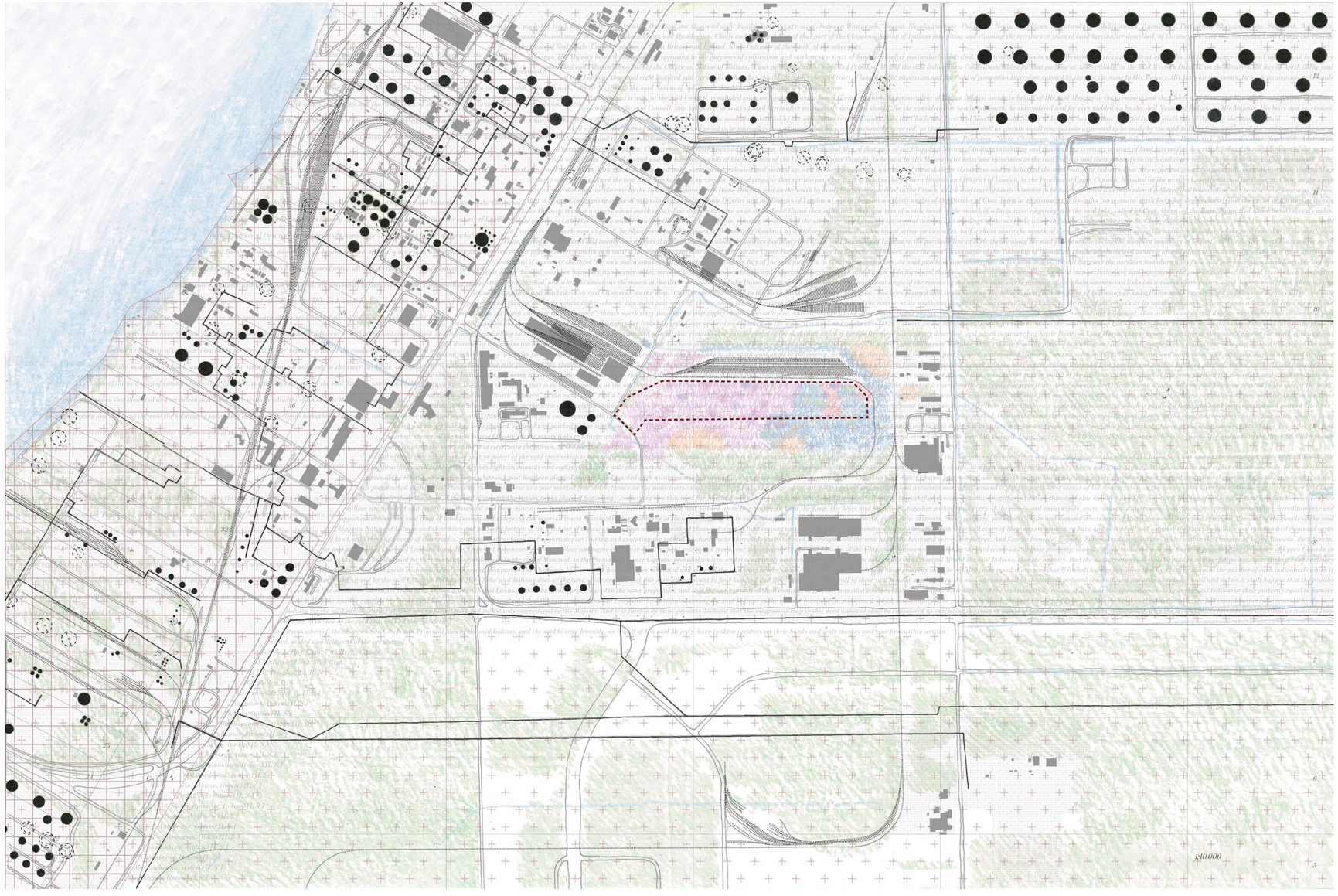


FIG 4.9

This layer provides insight into the city's industrial footprint, helping departments to understand ongoing hazards, manage land use safely, and anticipate risks associated with future development.

LAYERS

Predicted Annual Benzene Concentration

4.5-13 ug/m³

County of Lambton Source Protection Plans

Significant Groundwater Recharge Area

City of Sarnia Natural Hazards

Floodplain

Pipelines

Railways

Storage Tanks

Wells

Active

Abandoned

1880 Survey Grid

County of Lambton Official Plan

Petrochemical Industrial Land

City of Sarnia Land Use Designations

Heavy Industrial, General Employment

Environmental Protection Natural Heritage Overlay

Treaties & Surrenders

1827 Huron Tract Treaty No. 29

1925 Land Surrender

Waterways

Greenspace

Species at Risk Habitat

Terrestrial Crayfish Habitat

Butler's Gartersnake Habitat

Bat Roosting Habitat

European Common Reed

Crayfish Chimney

Riddell's Goldenrod

Butler's Gartersnake

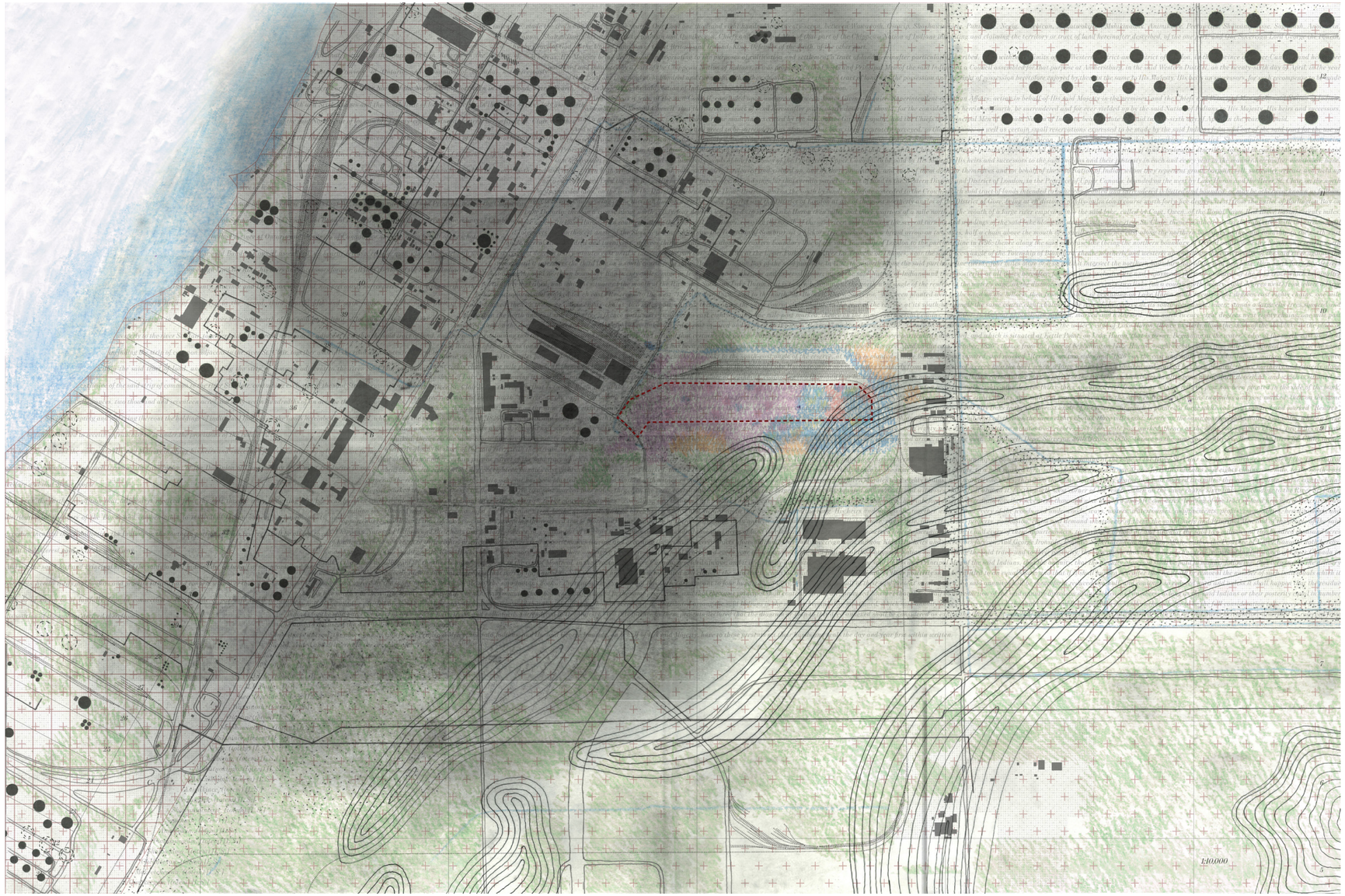


FIG 4.10

This layer helps the city identify and recognize areas of potential health and safety concern, guide development away from high-risk zones, and support planning that prioritizes environmental protection and community resilience.

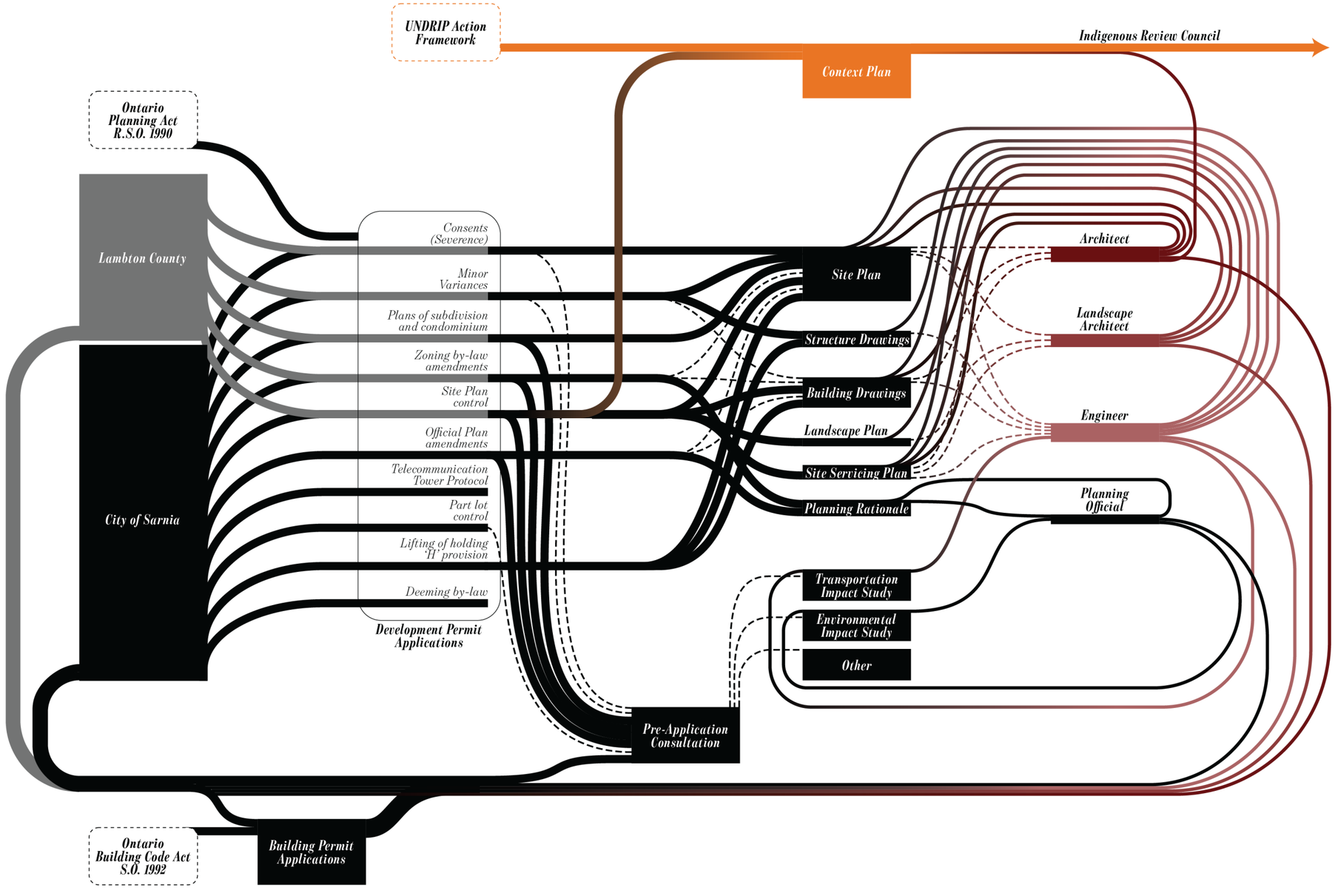


FIG 4.11

Where I propose the Context Plan be integrated in the development application process, alongside an Action Framework created by First Nations communities to establish priorities and govern what should be included in the Context Plan, before being sent to an Indigenous Review Council for review. This way, collaborating and engagement starts from the very beginning of the development process, and breaks the closed loop where state interests reinforces themselves.

AFTERWORD

Reflection

This thesis is written at a moment when the federal government once again places economic growth and extraction ahead of Indigenous consent. Bill C-5, the *One Canadian Economy Act*, passed in June 2025, just two weeks after its introduction. The second legislation under this Bill, the *Building Canada Act*, allows projects declared to be "in the national interest" to bypass environmental impact assessments and proceed without public participation or the consent of Indigenous communities (Harvie et al. 2025). This language persists in the relaxation of environmental regulations and in agreements supporting new pipeline infrastructure, each framed as necessary for the public good even as consent is withheld. In northern British Columbia, protected landscapes are being cleared to make this possible (Prest 2025). The approval of this Bill stresses how closely the national interest has come to stand in for the public good, and how consistently both are mobilized to justify sacrifice.

Throughout much of this research, the language of the public good remains largely implicit. It comes into focus at the end, through the work itself and through the conversations that shaped my defence. In architectural practice, the public good is reduced to compliance with approvals and building codes. What is lost in this translation is the question of who the public is and whose interests are being served. I have come to understand the public good not as a stable or universal condition, but as something relational and contested, produced through ongoing relationships between people, land, more-than-human systems, and future generations. Architecture cannot remain neutral in this process. It directly participates in defining the boundaries of which relationships are protected and which are erased for the sake of progress.

Architecture, I have learned, is inseparable from reconciliation. It is built on land and, in doing so, participates in histories of disruption that long predate any project boundary. Reflecting on this work now, I see the thesis less as a resolution and more as a set of obligations. Practicing with this awareness may require slower timelines, deeper forms of engagement, or a willingness to sit with uncertainty. In a political climate that continues to frame extraction as necessary for the public good, this awareness also requires acknowledging that some forms of development may not be justifiable despite their regulatory approval. In some cases, refusal might be the necessary ethical response.

The Context Plan emerges from this position. Proposed as a shift in how architectural work begins, it would be initiated during the pre-design phase and developed through engagement with First Nations on whose lands and territories the proposed project would affect. Indigenous communities would determine the terms of participation, including how and whether they wish to participate, what knowledge may be shared and represented, and which forms of documentation are appropriate. Participation could include workshops, mapping sessions, oral histories, and iterative feedback. Community-defined priorities, such as land stewardship, Treaty obligations, or health and environmental impacts, would guide what is visible in the Context Plan. The drawings become less a representation of land and more a record of negotiated relationships.

Because the OAA or the Architects Act do not regulate ethics, the Context Plan offers a material form of accountability. It could function as a required pre-design submission within permitting processes, alongside Site Plan Control or Environmental Impact Assessments. Supported by professional bodies such as the OAA or RAIC, through recommended best practices, professional standards, or continuing education requirements, the context plan could then be an expected component of ethical practice instead of an optional one. Its inclusion in the permitting process would reinforce professional obligations and potentially add to the Architect's Act the requirement that firms meaningfully interpret existing research and Indigenous community-defined priorities.

In practice, this would require firms to work carefully with historical research and to document community concerns in ways that are legible, traceable, and open to challenge. In Sarnia, the Context Plan could move forward alongside the Site Plan Control application, entering the same procedural pathway reviewed by the City's Site Plan Review Committee, the Director of Planning and Building, and the County of Lambton. Indigenous engagement would be embedded directly within this process.

One point of entry would be an Action Framework aligned with UNDRIP, authored and maintained by Indigenous communities themselves. This framework would articulate long-term priorities, limits related to land use, Treaty responsibilities, and environmental health. It would not be written in response to a single project, but would instead establish a shared reference that architects and municipal staff are required to engage at the start of any proposal. The Context Plan would then make visible how these priorities have been understood, where they have informed decision-making, and where conflicts remain unresolved.

Alongside this framework, an Indigenous Review Council could be established, composed of community members who have chosen to work with the city on an ongoing basis. Functioning like the City's Site Plan Review Committee, this council would review each Context Plan as it enters the approval process, assessing whether the commitments articulated in the Action Framework are being meaningfully addressed. If a plan

misrepresents community input or omits key impacts, it could trigger further review and delay approvals. Rather than being finalized in isolation, it would move back and forth between institutions and communities.

Although this thesis is grounded in a specific site in Sarnia, the conditions shaping the site extend far beyond its boundaries. Contamination, watershed systems, pollution, and more-than-human systems exceed the limits of property lines. The Context Plan must therefore operate across multiple scales—site, watershed, regional, and temporal—to resist the illusion that impacts are contained. This could include nested drawings that operate simultaneously at the site, watershed, regional, and treaty scales, as well as temporal mappings that register historical and future impacts.

Even then, I recognize the limits of what architecture can do. The Context Plan cannot undo dispossession. It cannot return land, nor can it resolve the contradictions of practicing within colonial systems. What it can do is make those contradictions visible and harder to ignore. It can slow down processes that are designed to move quickly and create space for refusal. Ending this work, I am left with the understanding that every intervention on land carries ethical weight, and that practicing architecture means continually negotiating what I am willing to abstract, refuse, and carry forward. Our obligations, then, begin with a commitment to practice differently, with greater care for the systems and responsibilities that architecture engages with.







FIG 4.12
Stills from "The Forgotten Origin of Big Oil" documentary. 2025.

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