

Reimagining the Alaska Atlas

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CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Alaska has always existed with a ghosted veil of polar romanticism where eternal sunsets and magical aurora bring life to untouched landscapes locked within the grip of deep freeze. These landscapes are greatly embedded with histories of habitation and of seasonal movements of people and wildlife in a vast nomadic range. They are layered with traces of the intimate relationships held with these histories, as their inherent ecologies do not distinguish what is human and what is not. A deep understanding of the behavioral intricacies of these systems exists as a function of this interdependence for Native peoples. In Alaska, this finds expression in an elaborate vocabulary about the formation and type of ice, for example, but one which also describes its sentience and its agency – the same principle being applied to animals – so as to be completely in tune with what is both seen and hidden. These relationships are subject to harsh realities, however, with the insurgence of climate change. In addition to the continued grappling with the effects of colonization and modernization, their subsistence lifestyle that defines their culture – their relationships, philosophy, spirituality, healthcare, artistic expression, education, economy, and more – is being severely threatened.

PEDAGOGY AND PLACE

This research and design studio activated a new mapping approach that informed a more holistic Alaska atlas through the analysis of ephemeral geographies – the collection of agents, systems, ecologies, economies, and histories that are perpetually in flux – to allow for these geographies to become the primary lens by which the complex ecosystems and subsistence landscapes of Alaska’s Native peoples are viewed and understood against a backdrop of drastic environmental change. The analysis and modeling within this approach evaluated the proposed Alaska Long Trail and the geographies, both physical and ephemeral, it is tethered to as it will serve a secondary function as an index

for measuring seasonal change. The proposed multi-modal and multi-season trail will connect Seward to Fairbanks as it traverses cross sections of variegated geographies and ecologies and the cultures intertwined within them. Given the inextricable link between the trail geographies and those of numerous Alaska Native tribes, students were challenged to generate a narrative-driven platform for community advocacy.

Students traveled to Alaska for site research and presented this work at a regional symposium where they also participated in a workshop designed to engage practitioners and Native community members and representatives in the development of projects. Following these events, place-specific architectural interventions were then designed to address realities assembled from existing conditions and the community engagement process. One of the greatest learning outcomes was focused on students becoming intimately familiar with the relationships between the layers of data within their mapping and what those relationships ultimately communicated about the worldviews of the people and geographies being mapped. Through the rigorous implementation of this method, students were able to confidently advocate for them in really knowledgeable and nuanced ways, a skillset that is critically necessary in the current landscapes of inequity and urgency.

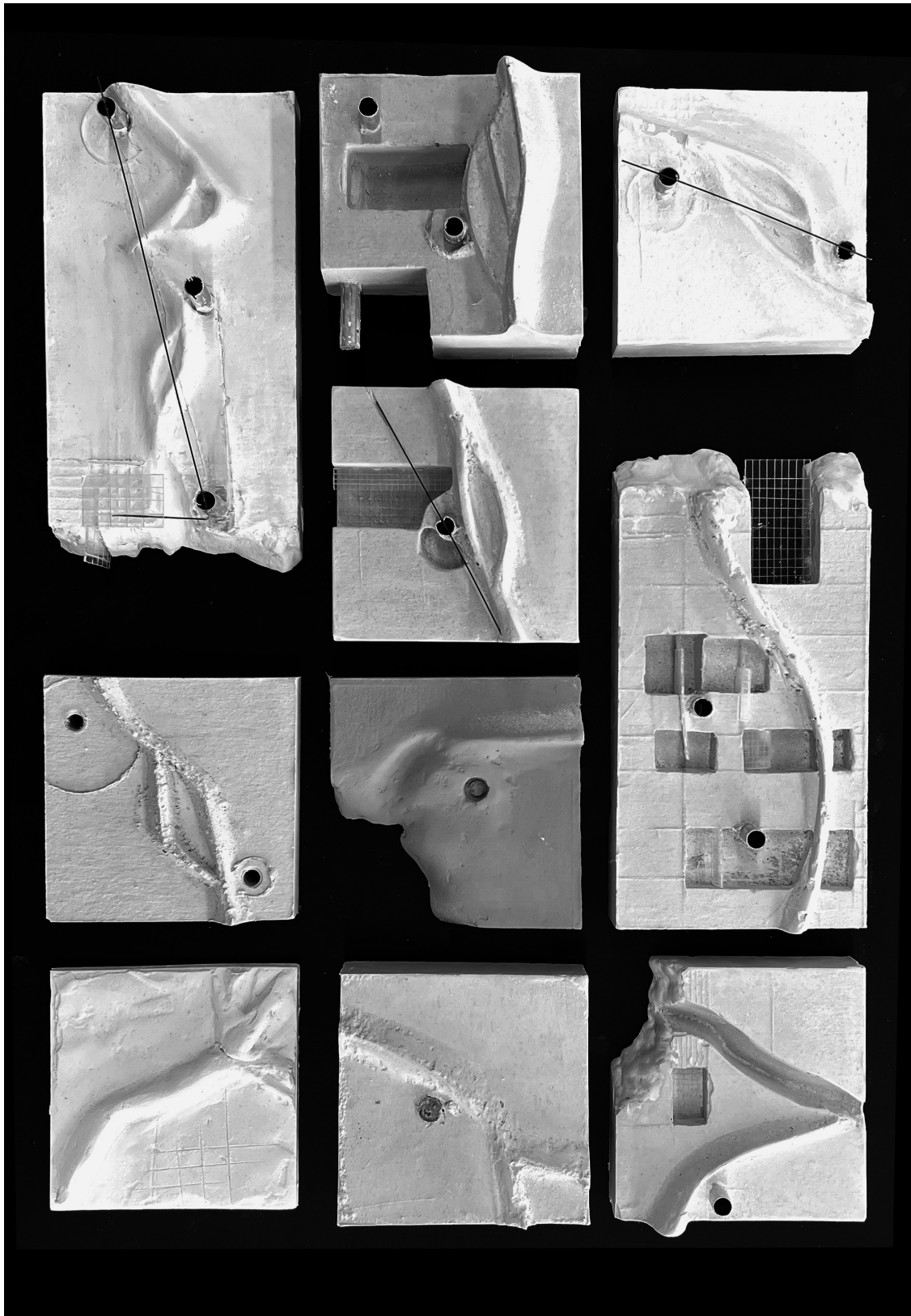


Figure 1. Mapping model and material studies. Image credit: Alex Lara.

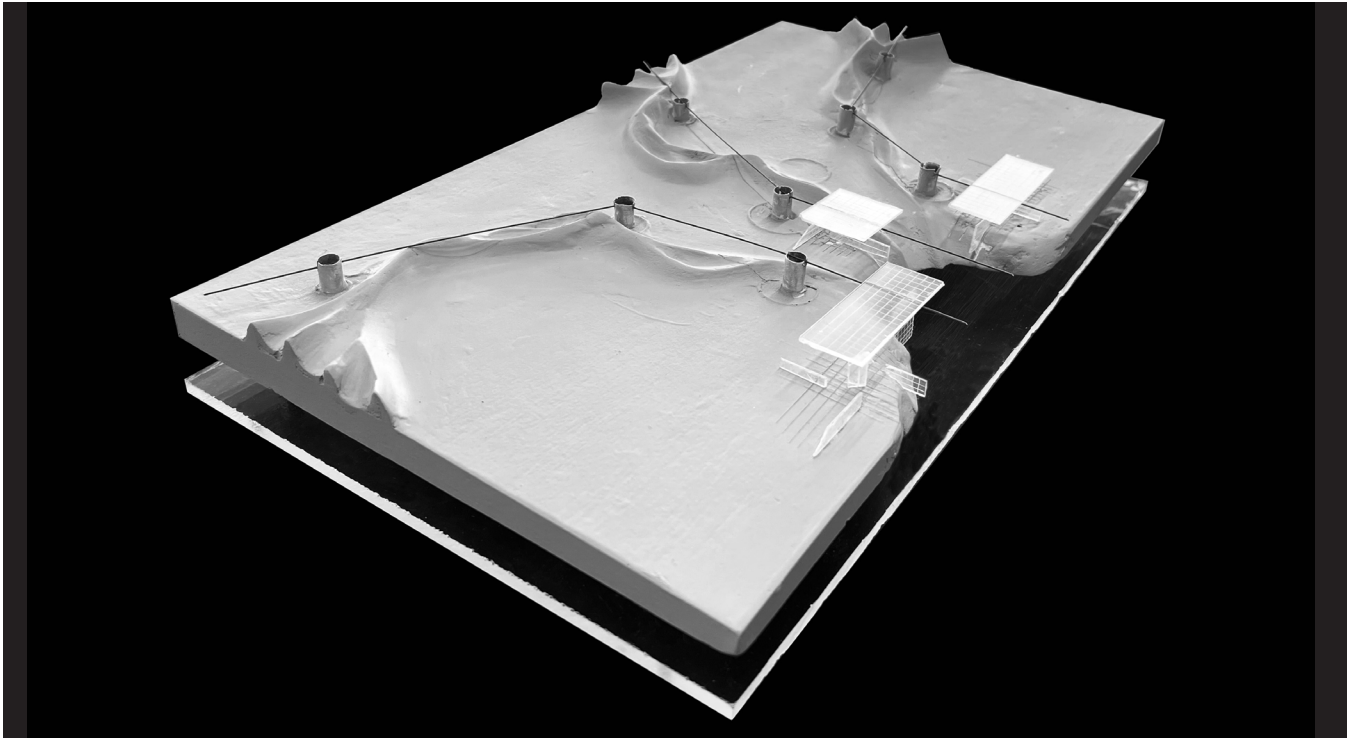


Figure 2. Mapping model showing layers of historical spirituality and its influence on tribal migrations. Image credit: Alex Lara.

STUDIO PROCESS

Each student was assigned a transect along the proposed Alaska Long Trail to research, analyze, and map. For each transect, students identified agents of migration (through both space and time) within the context of cultures and geographies adjacent to each transect. Transects traversed three distinct Alaska Native People groups including the Dena'ina, Ahtna, and Tanana. Through the operations of assemblage, critical interpretation, editing, and distillation, a set of graphic and dimensional rules that began to codify, abstract, and give form to each agent were generated. Students created a drawing, a drawing/relief model hybrid, and a relief model that collated these abstracted agents into a system by imagining their invisibility and temporality becoming visible and permanent upon the landscape. Each drawing and model in the series built upon the previous, with elements being edited at each phase, transitioning from mapping primarily physical geographies to primarily ephemeral geographies. The final models utilized depth, thickness, changes in material, construction method, hybrid media usage, etc. in order to create a spatial palimpsest that mapped and represented agents relative to their interdependence with one another as they existed as part of a greater system.

For students, this mapping series reimagined the landscape as defined by the agents. Known boundaries shifted and blurred, systems and relationships were graphically intertwined and dependent upon one another, and spatial and cultural narratives became clearer through the process. Students were challenged



Figure 3. Mapping model showing the interdependent relationships between birch forests, the river, and place naming as a navigational system. Image credit: Mara Truong.

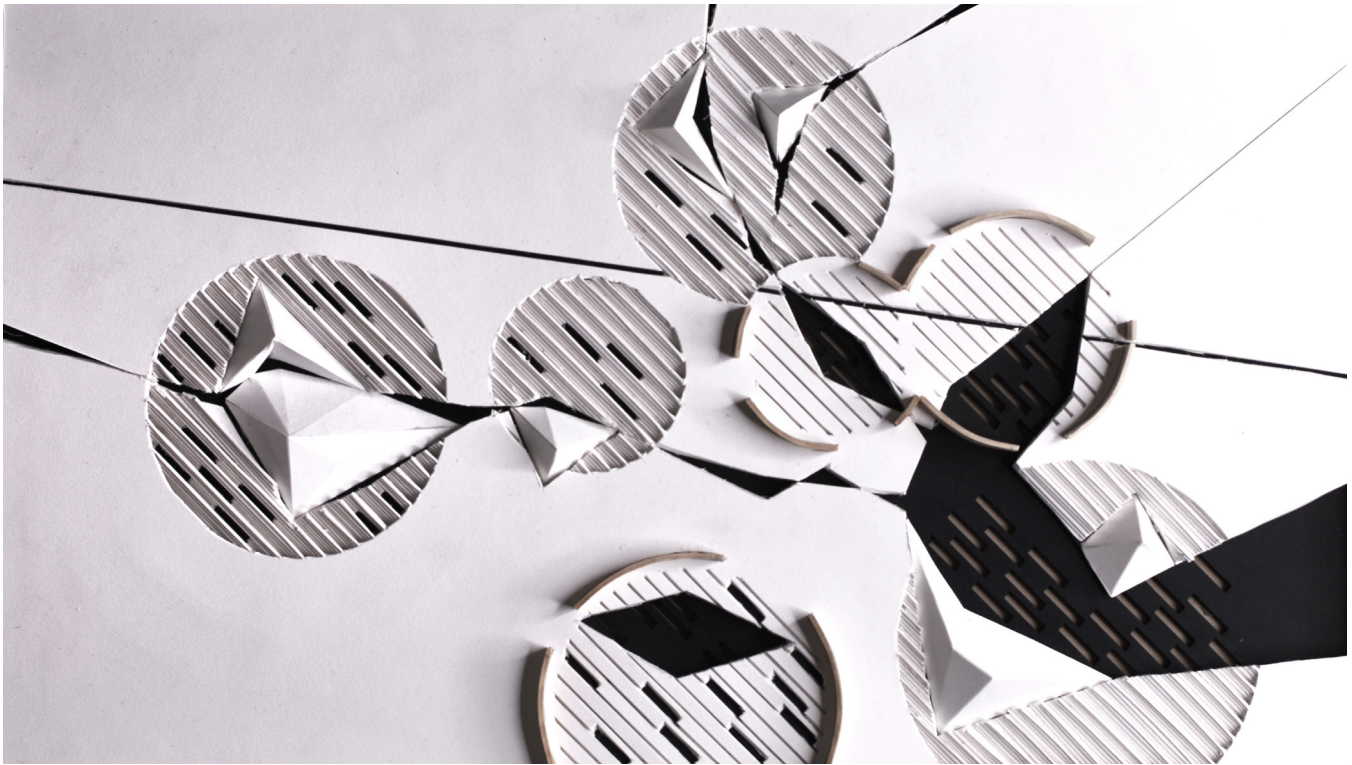


Figure 4. Mapping model showing the impact of storytelling on settlement patterns and practices of making. Image credit: Arte Limani.

to imagine new worlds as ephemeral geographies became materialized within the landscape and merged/negotiated with physical geographies. And because historical narrative plays such a critical role in Alaska Native heritage, students were tasked with prioritizing the materialization of memory within the landscape as well.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

The architectural interventions then designed by students were products of both this mapping and the community engagement process in Alaska, a process that continued virtually with critiques and updates throughout the semester. One student focused on the meaning of memory to the Dena'ina People by investigating their practice of *place naming*, a means of navigating the world through the naming of places where significant events occurred. His mapping translated the physical environment into one reimagined through memories, made possible through studio partnerships with regional linguists and geographers. This ultimately led to an intervention designed to frame views of specific places named by the Dena'ina along the trail meant to give an account of their history and afford visitors an intimate insight into their culture. Another student focused on the ways in which oral traditions and storytelling informed a negotiation between people and the environment from the art of weaponry and tool making to the ethical operation of their hunting practices. Her mapping translated an environment of birch bark trees

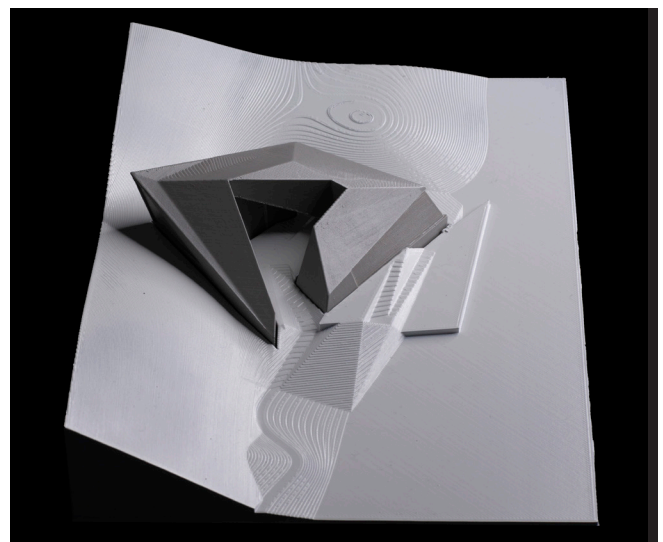


Figure 5. Intervention massing model. Image credit: Arte Limani.

and native animals into one reimagined through traditions and stories called *Ninya Sukdu*, or animal stories, and led to an intervention designed to showcase the ways in which the Dena'ina exist symbiotically within the world around them. This design process as a whole led to incredibly thoughtful methods of investigation and meaningful conclusions for students that also resonated with Native community members and practitioners in ways that have fueled ongoing projects.



Figure 6. Project renderings showing curated views of places navigated by memory. Image credit: Seth Rowe.

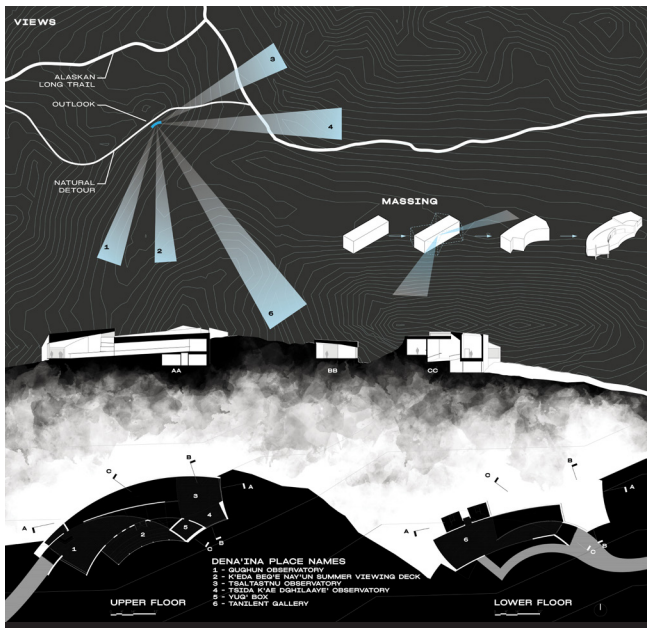


Figure 7. Map of place names along the trail. Image credit: Seth Rowe.



Figure 8. Project renderings in seasons. Image credit: Richa Verma.

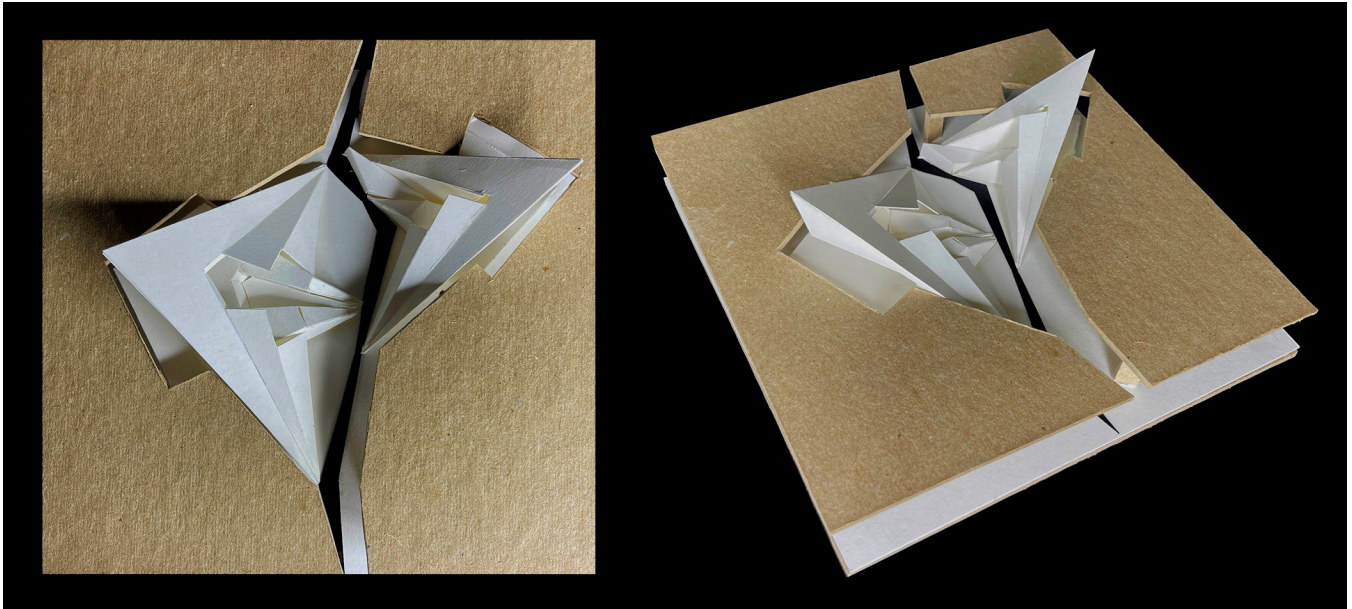


Figure 9. Spatial study models transitioning from mapping to intervention design. Image credit: Arte Limani.



Figure 10. Project renderings showing views into the environment along the trail intervention. Image credit: Arte Limani.