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“The Mangle of Practice”: Assemblages of Design, Science, History and Nature

In December 2005 the design areas at James Madison University were approached by the DuPont Corporation to collaborate on the design of a public information exhibit documenting the work of the South River Science Team (SRST). The SRST—a collaboration of scientists from the Federal and Virginia state governments, five regional Universities, local environmental groups, and private industry—aims to understand mercury contamination in the South River of the Shenandoah Valley. The source of the mercury is believed to be a former DuPont textile manufacturing facility in Waynesboro, VA, which used mercury as a catalyst to produce Rayon from 1939 – 1950. The exhibit's purpose is to educate the public, including school groups, about the contamination in the South River and the ongoing research of the SRST.

The design of the exhibit was a complex, collaborative process, involving interior designers, graphic designers, dozens of scientists working within the SRST, commercial architects, a sculptor, a DuPont curator, commercial printers and construction contractors. The scope of the project included architectural design, custom display units, construction administration, curating the exhibit materials, and a complete graphic design solution which encompassed logo development, type, image, color schemes, information graphics, signage, and the overseeing of the production of all printed materials. Undergraduate students completed a significant portion of the design work.

The SRST exhibit project is a demonstration of our vision for a collaborative design practice, which is inherently affirmative, choreographic and generative. We sought to engage the river through the richness of its multivalent history; to share agency among scientists, “natural” processes, and material objects; to assemble networks; and to construct forums for the emergence of new concepts. Rather than solving, we hoped to cultivate, gather, choreograph, and sustain. The design of the exhibit has become, in its own manner, a participant in the unfolding narrative of a town, its complex industrial past, and its natural and man-made landscapes.