

# Ecology & the Manifestations of Identity Politics

*Research plan on the Collective Mapping of Tbilisi*

integrated with  
Borders & Territories Graduation Studio

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*The Assemblage of Tbilisi: View from Funicular Park*  
Source: Shruti Bangari

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# Introduction

In the weeks before and on the 14th of May 2024, tens of thousands of protesters gathered in front of the parliament building of Tbilisi. Inside, the members of the parliament voted to pass the controversial “foreign agency bill”. The bill, also called the “Russian law” states that all NGOs and independent media sources with more than 20 per cent of foreign funding, will be stapled as organisations “bearing the interests of a foreign power”. The bill is seen as a step towards closer relations with Russia. Even though Georgia has had aspirations to become a NATO and European Union member<sup>1</sup>, both have condemned Russia’s actions throughout the years. Looking at images of the protests, it is noticeable that both old and young come to express their discontent with the policy. The protest brings people from different paths of life together in one place.

This protest and the converging factors that created the singularity were inspiration to work on the map ‘Ecology vs Identity Politics’.

## Background

Georgia is located in the South Caucasus, at the intersection between several major empires in history, making Tbilisi, the capital, a region of frequent political conflict and turbulence. The country gained independence from the Soviet regime in 1991, following which an assemblage of processes such as ethnic homogenization, social changes, market liberalization and the informalization of the built environment re-shaped the urban fabric of Tbilisi, among many other cities in the country.

Therefore, Georgia is made up of complicated geopolitical, geological, social, and cultural relations that shape the people living in and the spatial fabric of the city of Tbilisi. The city can be read as the accumulation of forces, both visible and hidden, top-down and bottom-up. Underlying systems

like foreign powers and economic networks influence the city and identities within it, just as they are influenced by them.

<sup>1</sup> Rayhan Demytrie in Tbilisi and Emily Atkinson. 2024. Georgia approves controversial “foreign agent” law, sparking more protests. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-69007465>

<sup>2</sup> CHAKHAVA, K. (2012). Road Leading Georgia to the European Union Membership. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 43-49. <https://doi.org/10.31578/jss.v1i1.33>

Any intervention in the urban fabric should be made with a broader understanding of the different systems and powers in the city and how different groups of people can be affected. Therefore, it is important to understand how various identity groups operate within the current (and dynamic) urban ecology of Tbilisi, and what ideologies are reflected in the identity politics amongst them. In this project, identity groups are not pre-assumed based on traditional categories such as religion, gender, ethnicity etc. Instead, the ideological differences reflected in identity politics is garnered through the exercise of mapping.

To reveal the intricacies of these relations, this research plan and the co-constructed map ask the question:

How does identity politics manifest in the ecology of Tbilisi?

To find answers to this research question, we ask the following sub questions:

- » How do we read “identity groups” situated in the political ecology of Tbilisi?
- » How do/are various processes and systems affect/affected by various events in Tbilisi?
- » What are the “hidden” or less visible forces driving urban change in Tbilisi?
- » What are the key systems (e.g., political, economic, and social) influencing urban development in Tbilisi, and how do they interact?
- » In what ways do foreign powers and external geopolitical interests shape local policies, infrastructure, and social conditions in Tbilisi?
- » What are the ideological differences between identity groups that are revealed in the assemblage of the city?

focus on further understanding fragmentation in contemporary Tbilisi. What we observe as the conflicts or overlaps between different identity groups in social events is merely the tip of an iceberg on the surface, with a mega-system hidden in the depths, influenced by various factors such as politics, economics, geography and spatial configuration. As we choose mapping as a critical research tool and narrative medium, it is crucial to establish steps for combing the different layers within ecology with theoretical and methodological support.

To achieve this goal, we have divided the collective research into three stages. The first step involves defining “identity politics” and “ecology” through literature reviews and investigation of the social-political background in Georgia, thereby establishing a foundational theoretical framework for the entire study. Secondly, a series of research on methodologies related to sociology or urban spatial studies, along with research on mapping techniques, such as graphic narrative and symbolic languages, should be conducted. It will serve as a guide for reconstructing a network of ecological systems with multiple connections in the subsequent stages. Thirdly, the investigation focuses on Tbilisi begin with capturing social events, following by digging the intricate roots beneath the surface to a larger scale, attempting to explore their underlying logic. Through the application of network mapping, we can identify the common nodes between these roots and replant the entire system onto the map, eventually, seeking to reveal a fragment of the ecology.

This research proposal aims to establish a framework for exploring identity politics and its role within broad social ecology, with a

# Theoretical framework

“When two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed.”

- Debord, G., Knabb, K. Situationist International Anthology, 1981, P.15

The research investigates the entanglements between ecology and identity politics in complex and dynamic relationships by constituting one element from the other. This map purports to show their deeper implications within modern socio-political landscapes by examining how ecological systems and ways of constructing identity interact and influence the shaping of one another.

This theoretical framework addresses foundational elements that provide key definitional and conceptual theories for assessing ecology and identity as fluid, relational entities in such an analysis. These definitional perspectives provide critical tools by which to question and interrogate the ways in which identity and ecological concerns interrelate and affect each other within an assemblage framework.

## Ecology

Brainstorming on the map ‘Ecology vs Identity Politics’ shows us it is important to clearly define these terms, to work towards the same goals. The Cambridge dictionary gives the following definition of ecology: “the relationship of living things to their environment and to each other, or the scientific study of this”.<sup>1</sup> What, for us, is missing from this definition is the relationship between non-living actors. We see ecology as the accumulation of connections. Ecology is the network, or assemblage. Ecology in this instance encompasses more than natural ecosystems; they are made up of complex webs that consider environmental, social, and cultural settings, along with infrastructural considerations. As Timothy Morton relates to this grand vision, “Ecology includes all the ways we imagine how we live

together” (p. 4).

Expanding on this, Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) conceives ecology as mega-systems comprising human and non-human actors. According to Latour (2008), these worlds can’t be clearly distinguished into social and natural spheres; instead, they are deeply interwoven networks where “there exists only one collective of humans and nonhumans” (p.47). Such a perspective dismantles the long-standing binary divisions and allows us, rather, to consider ecology as a dynamic system comprising innumerable, interrelated parts that make everything up—from people, infrastructural contexts, to political domains.

What ANT offers is to look upon ecology as spaces wherein power, agency, and identity are necessarily worked, offering a powerful way of understanding cross-sections of different systems and identity politics. What this also means is that an act is not a beginning point, as it is the sum of acts. It is also not an ending point as it will lead to acts to come.

## Identity Politics

Ecological thoughts of this type—namely, that ecology be comprised of a complex and diffuse web—find common cause with identity politics as a means to express a self that is fundamentally defined by shared traits among a social group, including ethnicity, gender, and nationality. Nancy Fraser (1995) outlines what she considers the “bifurcated” goals of identity politics: not only demands for economic “redistribution” but also for cultural “recognition” (p. 72). The latter set of definitions provides the necessary background for investigating how ecology and identity politics interrelate, taking us past traditional nature-society binaries and considering both as part of one relational assemblage.

To address the complexity of identity

within these entanglements, Derrida's deconstruction theory addressed identity entanglements with the concept of indeterminacy. Jacques Derrida (1978) writes that identity is never fixed; rather, it moves in fluidity and contradiction: "the center is not the center" (p. 279), suggesting that identities constantly evolve, open to reinterpretation, and resist reduction into neat categories. This perspective upends traditional notions of identity politics, where group identity is often defined by rigid boundaries, instead pointing toward an understanding of identity as something always in the process of being made. By incorporating this deconstructionist view, identity politics within ecological contexts can be seen as equally fluid and dynamic, reflecting a multiplicity of influences that are continuously redefined.

The combination of these approaches ultimately allows us to view ecology and identity politics as interacting assemblages. Developed by Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage theory looks to the ways in which entities come together to form temporary, constantly changing groupings. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari describe assemblages as "machines" that exist only through their relations, with each part continuously shaping and being shaped by the others. Situating ecology and identity politics as assemblages makes evident how they are mutually constitutive; identities influence ecological networks just as identity politics impact ecological interactions.

This perspective illuminates the entangled, co-evolving relationships between ecologies and identities, allowing us to see both as flexible, adaptive networks that resist easy categorization. This theoretical framework framing these themes relationally rather than as separate domains is the means whereby the research may yield a decidedly more nuanced analysis of how ecologies and identities influence and redefine one another.

We perceive both by conceiving of the city as an assemblage of different anatomy entities: fluid, interwoven networks that reshape the boundaries between individuals, communities, and their systems.

# Methodology

Right from the beginning of the exercise, we deliberately made the decision to create a sort of “mind map” of the city, sticking to an abstract, diagrammatic and less spatial and material interpretation of the city. We did this as it would enable us to position the different nodes in relation to each other rather than in relation to their physical space, in order to highlight and read the nature of these relationships better.

The definition of ecology in the theory above shows that the ecology is infinite as well as highly dynamic, which means a complete map is impossible. For this reason, we can only map a section of this network. The mapped section is a selection of events, places, policies, people, parties and issues concerning Tbilisi and Georgia as a whole. The way we started to build up the map is by using news articles of events, government documents, reports, etc to gather information on major events in the city and country at large. The events were the starting point of our research; from these events we started to map the connections.

To map the ecology, we started looking at ways to visualise the actor-network. The ecology can be seen as a collection of data, which is why we tested out different methods of data visualisation. One of these methods is the organisational chart, or the organisational breakdown structure (OBS). The OBS is a diagram that shows the relations between different actors within an organisation or company, seen in Image 1. This is in line with the way we see ecology, a system built by relationships between actors. The problem with this method and the way we see ecology is that the OBS is a hierarchical structure, while the ecology is not. A diagram that starts to get closer to our vision of the ecology is the network diagram. This diagram is also built up from nodes, actors, and the connections between them but starts to build less hierarchical and more intertwined connections, see Image 1. The network diagram starts to show a three

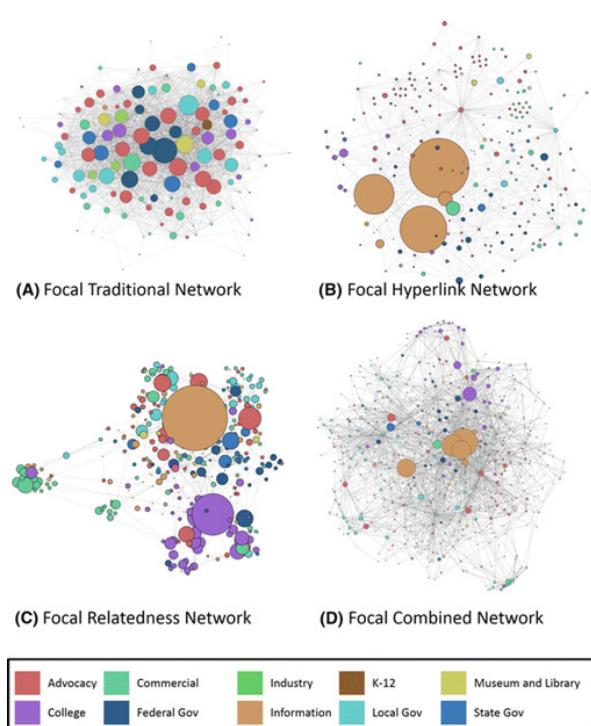
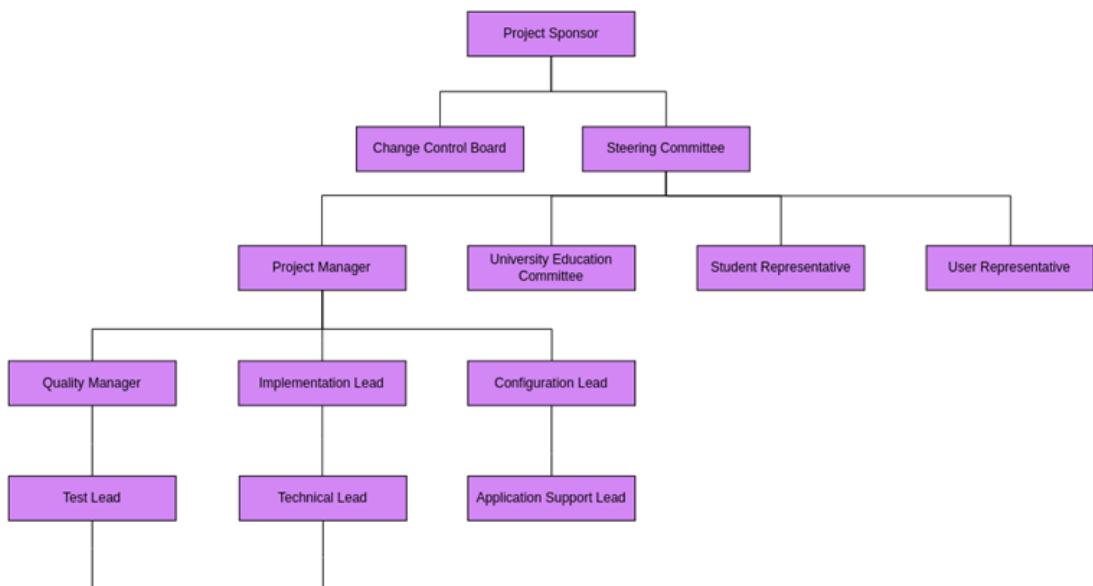
dimensionality and dynamics that the OBS does not. For us the nodes can be defined as the events, the places, the policies and more and the connection between them have endless meanings.

The exercise of mapping as a methodology becomes a tool to understand and interpret the data collected. By testing out different methods of visualisation through making a series of drafts, we can critically reflect on what the relationships between different systems and groups of people, and how their identities are situated within the complex ecosystem of the city.

While trying to establish relationships between the different systems, events and identities, it is found that the relationships are highly intricate and complex and can't be interpreted simply as “cause-and-effect”. While framing these relationships, it appears that the events can be interpreted as highly visible “layers” that occurred as a result of various systems, decisions and people that lie beneath the surface of the iceberg.

However, viewing the systems, places, events and identity groups in a hierarchy would also diminish the complexity of their interrelationships. It would then not be possible to apply a filter in selecting the events to map as this would mean pre-assuming that some events are more critical than others.

Instead, the map should be read as an ever-incomplete snapshot of some current events in Tbilisi, speculating further complicated inter-relationships with other events taking place in the city.



**Image 2.** Network Diagram

# Findings

## 1. Mind map for information collection & network construction

As the first step of systematic research, we researched currently relevant events or phenomena. The events identified were mainly protests, natural disasters/health hazards, policy changes, governmental decisions & agreements, and construction & brownfield/disrupted spaces. These events serve as a catch point to collect further information on different aspects on the scale of the city, country, and globe, to then be consolidated into a mind map. (ref. Image 3)

## 2. Interactive dynamic network mapping with software

After we completed the initial information gathering on different nodes in social ecology such as events, places, and politicians, we attempted to connect these scattered nodes and branches through interactive software. Here, we used the editing software 'Flourish' to create an interactive network cloud, which illustrated the dynamic and unstable features of this infinity system. During this process, many different clusters emerged due to particular networks shared by certain nodes, from where we can already have a glimpse of potential identity groups inside the system. However, the limitations of the software affected the ability of the map to reflect complexities such as the differentiation of connections and graphic illustrations which would lead to over-simplification. (ref. Image 4)

## 3. Four story lines layout following the Iceberg logic

We then attempted to give the map a structure by filtering all the information we had into four story-lines. The filter we had put over the information was to start with four visible spatial manifestations within the city of Tbilisi - four protests. These protests could be seen as the tip of the iceberg that was visible above surface. What we wanted

to show were the invisible forces underneath that lead up to these protests and how these forces interconnected the four different protests through time and space. (ref. Image 5,6)

The map did not work as we intended, and this showed at the presentation. The first problem of the map was that it had a hierarchical or layered structure. The layers made it look like there was a beginning point, a main focus and a direct cause. The story we wanted to tell was one that showed there is no beginning and no linear causation of events, with no single factor bearing more importance or prominence than others.

Another problem of this map was the fact that we tried to filter the data, making it seem like it was possible to have a finished story. This did not match our ideas, as our intention was to make sense of the unstructured, never-endedness of the ecology through the map.

## 4. Final mapping as an endless circle showing the dynamic positions and links in this mega-system

The final mapping presents itself as an endless circle, with open connections on the top and bottom that link to more actors hiding behind the fog of ecology. Readers can only read a part of the networks, reflecting the infinity feature of ecology. With a decentralized layout of visualized nodes, diversity of lines and fields, the map can be read from different perspectives by starting at any one node and following the connection lines to form the story.

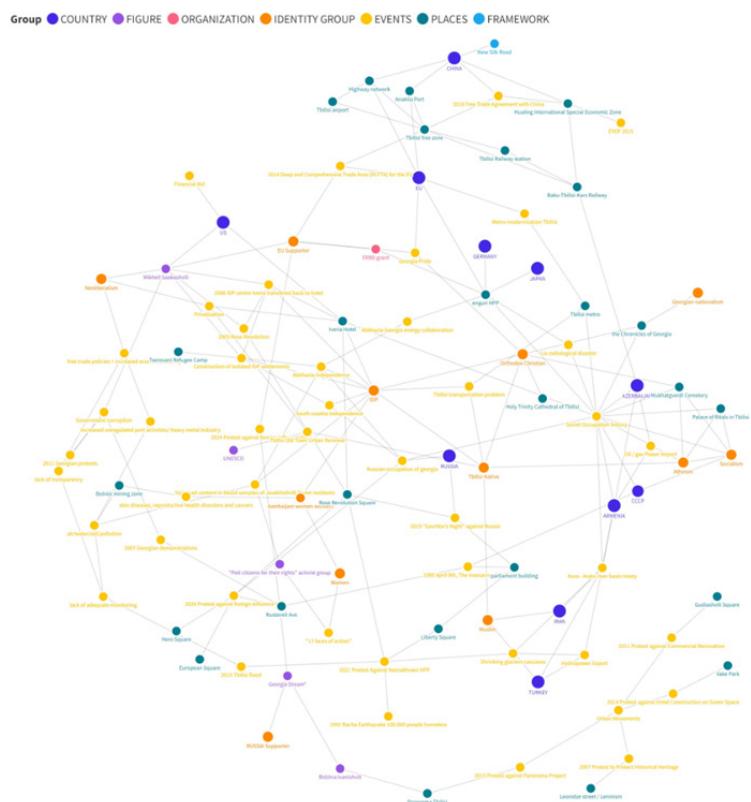
The mapping exercise helped us to understand and reflect on the complexity of the urban fabric of the city, and how it manifests as different political events and ideological conflicts. Prominent identity groups reveal themselves through their politics and help us to understand their ideological positions.

Creating a “mind map” rather than a conventional spatial map helped us to focus and contemplate the nature of the relationships or “politics” that is found between identity groups through events, places, figures, organizations and find over-arching patterns or themes.

We find that the circular map enables us to read these relationships not only as “above” and “below” a visible surface, but also as different polarities of “top-down” policies and “bottom-up” movements. Upon further reflection, the map encourages us to contemplate the idea of “identity” - while the map purely aims to view identities through the lens of ideological and political differences between certain groups, it invites the viewer to question - do identities only emerge in the event of ideological clashes?

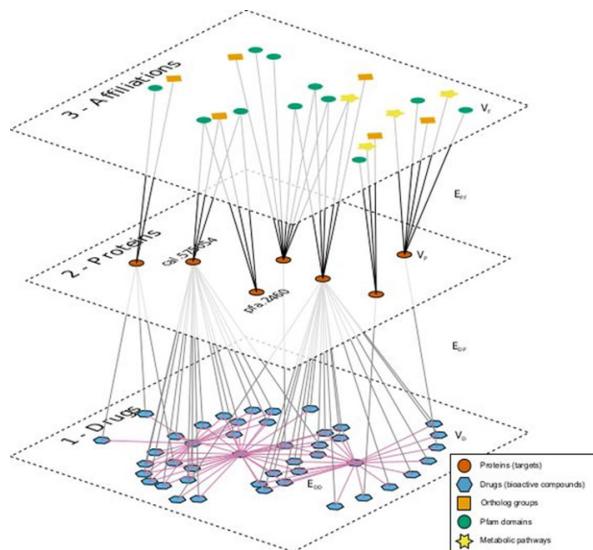


**Image 3.** Mind mapping, information collection and initial network construction

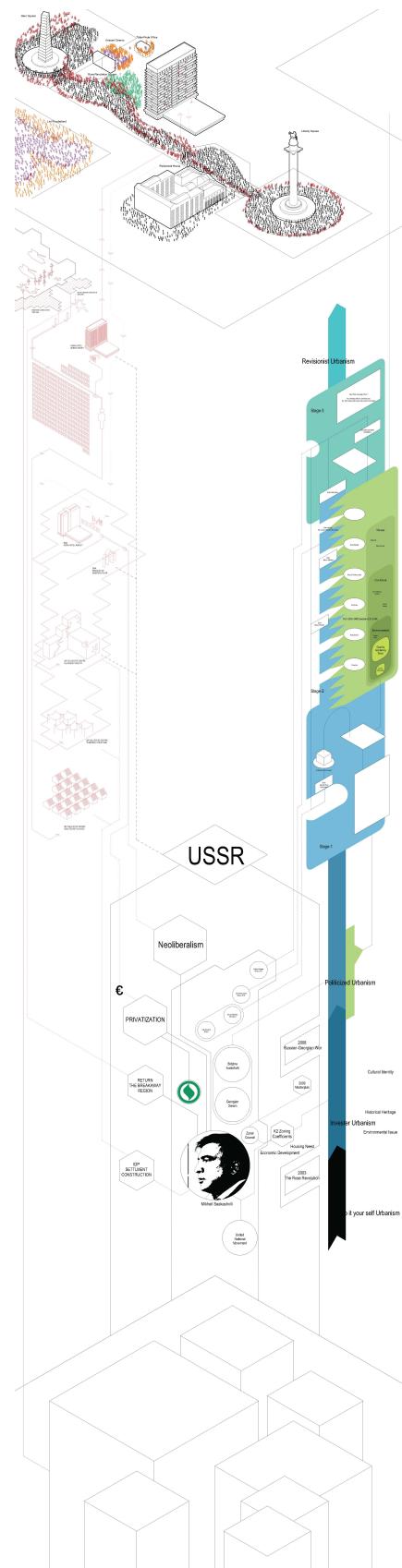


**Image 4.** Dynamic network mapping using ‘Flourish’ software

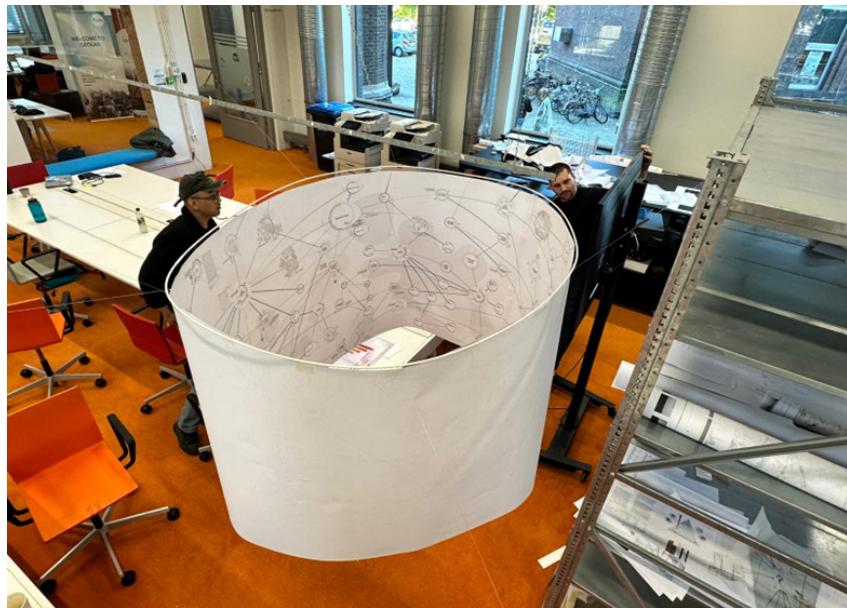
# Findings



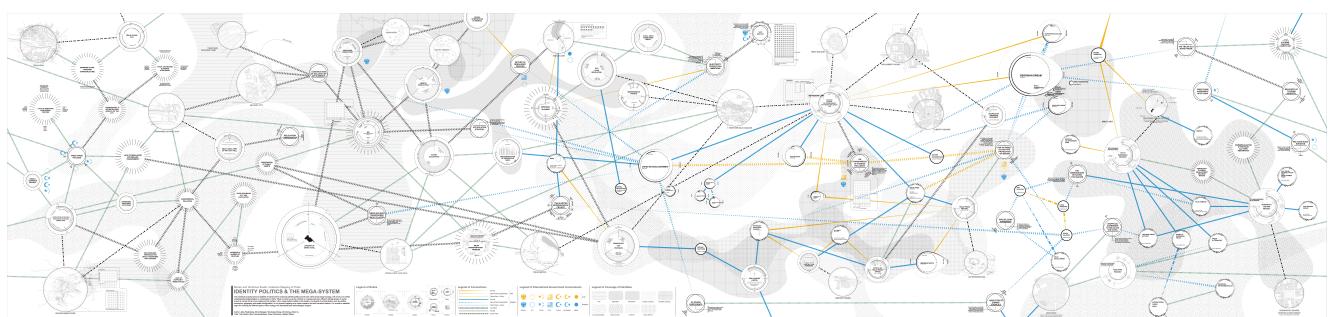
**Image 5.** A multi-layer network approach to data visualization.



### Image 6. Layered “Iceberg” mapping



**Image 7.** The final “circular” map installed in the studio



**Image 8.** Final map: “Ecology and the manifestations of identity politics”

# References

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6. Morton, T. (2010). **The Ecological Thought**. Harvard University Press.

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- Image 1.** **Organizational Breakdown Structure** (<https://online.visual-paradigm.com/diagrams/templates/organization-chart/organizational-breakdown-structure/>)
- Image 2.** **Network Diagram** ([https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Network-diagrams-including-only-nodes-with-a-total-degree-of-two-or-higher-The-nodes-are\\_fig1\\_283293387](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Network-diagrams-including-only-nodes-with-a-total-degree-of-two-or-higher-The-nodes-are_fig1_283293387))
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