

Introduction to the Theory of Architecture : How Buildings Carry Meaning Now

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Description:

Theory of architecture is most often taught through the study of canonical writings about buildings. But it really helps to understand of how buildings carry meaning before discussing the kinds of meaning buildings have been tasked with carrying over the history of architecture! The primary goal of this seminar is to examine how buildings frame experience, which is the main means by which buildings carry meaning. Engaging this issue early on helps you more deeply investigate how your own designs operate.

In this course we will examine a series of recent buildings by case study. The second goal of the class is to introduce you to the pressing issues that define architecture today. Most of these buildings are urban, so you will also be able to get a better sense of how architects, working even on single buildings, can effect reconsideration of the urban world. Many of these buildings also engage the pressing, unresolved question of how sustainability will redirect architectural thinking.

Central to the course is the proposition that a building is a justified negotiation — primarily with the client or inhabitant — about how form can best structure meaningfulness with regard to the specific problem that architecture can resolve (since it cannot resolve all problems). Many people think that a building is primarily about an architect's autobiography — whatever an architect wants to do! — rather than the specific circumstances that make buildings possible at all. But buildings are expensive things, rarely made just because the architect wanted it that way.

So in this class we are less interested in the architect's words (which often disguise what an architect is actually doing) than in the world of experience that a building organizes for its inhabitants, since that is what an architect has to justify. An architect may well have a strong opinion, but this will take its most critical form in the building itself, rather than the architect's verbal justifications.

In this scenario theory is not something *applied* to a building. Here theory is what you form when you attempt to cohesively order the sensate condition of dwelling within that building: you struggle to explain *why*, and, in so doing, posit a framework of meaningfulness. Your intelligence seeks to give order to the knowledge of experience, and that *giving some understandable order* is the main kind of theory we will be discussing. This is theory as the consequence of a verb: to *theorize*.

This course is undertaken entirely by case study, one building per class. Prior to our discussion you will be tasked with imagining yourself dwelling in the buildings to the extent you can through available documentation. We will the talk about what it's like to live in that building, focusing on what is challenging to conventional norms. Through group and seminar discussion — in a form actually resembling synthetic

detective work — the class will attempt to reconstruct each building's conceptual underpinnings. We will then briefly compare our discoveries with writings about the building in order to map out internally and externally developed theoretical models.

The format is loose and free-flowing, and the discussions are wide-ranging, exploratory, and challenging. The past four decades in architecture differ from the prior full century in that the recent past has not been ruled by the sorts of dogmatic theories and movements that to a great degree defined the Modern era. There is no common agreement about where recent architecture has gone. That does not mean the architecture of the recent past does not have consistency – of course it does, just look at it! – but this consistency does not stem from any single agreed upon agenda. What we will ultimately be studying are *different arguments about meaningfulness today*.

Required reading:

In addition to the buildings themselves, for which there will be prepared cases (articles and documentation), we will be reading from the following books in order to give context to our discussions:

1. Rafael Moneo: Theoretical Anxiety and Design Strategies in the Work of Eight Contemporary Architects. Moneo's chapters serve as a perfect counterpart to the course: each describes the horizontal development of an important recent architect's work. We will be working in a sense perpendicular to these writings, plumbing single buildings.
2. Rem Koolhaas: Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan. The last real attempt at a urban architectural manifesto based on density: you can't move ahead without understanding its argument, which, though problematic, is both more serious than the text seems to suggest, and more consequential to much current urban planning. We will compare some of Koolhaas's ideas with equally interesting New Urbanist concepts.
3. Herzog & De Meuron: Prada Aoyama Tokyo. This is perhaps the best book out there describing a design process. It also documents the curious dispassionate-ness that so many architects use today (compared, to say, *The Fountainhead*). Invaluable for young architects.
4. William McDonough and Michael Braungart: Cradle to Cradle. The whole crisis of sustainability and aesthetics is just beginning to come to a head. This book sets out the problem as clearly as possible. It is a landmark in architectural thinking that you have to read.
5. Peter Zumthor, Thinking Architecture. This is a book you will see on many architect's desks. It's subject is how architecture might address the question *what is real?* that partly defines our times.

Classwork:

The work associated with this class will involve, beyond weekly discussion minutes and work in the think pads, a graphic analysis of and written paper on a recent building. Class participation in discussion is the other primary factor in grades for this course.

Evaluation:

Your grade for this course will be assigned on the basis of:

- Paper	35%
- Participation	35%
- Tentative Manifesto	20%
- Minutes	5%
- Think sketchbook	5%

The primary assignment for this course - an analysis paper of a recent building or buildings not included in the class - will be broken into two parts and spread across the semester. The written paper will be +/- 3,000 words. I will also ask you to undertake a "tentative manifesto," which I will explain in class.

Class participation is key to your grade: you must take part – that means: talk. Minutes (tracking your group discussions) account for 5% of the grade. You must keep a “think pad” for this course: a dedicated sketchbook that you use to draw the buildings as we study them. It is not enough to look at photos: you have to map the building, draw its section, diagram its logic, reconstruct its details. This form of “studying by hand” will be critical to your success in understanding architecture. I will pick up think pads twice during the term.