

**ARC 327R 2 / 386M 3**

**Digital Photography : Architectural Potential**

Spring 2019

David Heymann

Tuesday, 2:00-5:00

### **Course Description**

The subject matter of this seminar is the potential of digital photography to describe architecture in ways that take distinct advantage of digital imagery's particular attribute: the ridiculously easy mutability of images by the means of production. While it is true that all photographic images are by default manipulated (initially by lensing, framing, editing, etc.), and that, already since the earliest years of photography, images have been intentionally falsified, nonetheless, one essential truism of pre-digital photography has been a base-line trust in the fealty of the image (partly because of the extraordinary technical skill required to seamlessly combine negative based images). One hallmark of the end of the Modern era was a criticism of this particular quality of photographs, and, arguably, the trust we have in photographic images has evolved from blindness to something more nuanced, a change only accelerated by the arrival of digital photography and the various processes by which such images are endlessly alterable. That said, the status of photographs with regard to truth may have changed, but photographs are no less interesting for that change — they just have a different potential.

In this seminar, we are interested in *how the particular and complex mediated fact of digital photographs allows for new means to describe architecture*. You will be working on this problem directly, by taking and manipulating photographs (for this course you will need a digital camera, and the Adobe Creative Suite software package). During the first quarter of the semester you will be undertaking exercises based on short lectures intended to introduce you to a series of essential issues and techniques central to photography, architectural photography, and digital photography. During the second quarter of the semester you will undertake the documentation of a single building as a means to explore the limits of digital photographs to describe architectural space in ways associated with traditional architectural photography. From this work you are to develop an open-ended thesis about the potential of digital images to describe architecture that you will use to develop a self-guided investigation through the remainder of the semester.

This is NOT a course about the history of photography (though that will be touched on), the history of architectural photography (though that too will be touched on), or the techniques used in architectural photography (ditto). This is NOT a course about making the airless perfect isolated object image you see in architecture magazines. This is also NOT a training course in the techniques used to make digital photographs. This IS a theory class that takes the form of a design-based seminar. The course asks: how can architecture now best be explained through the medium of the digital photograph, as a consequence of the potential of the medium, and the current status of photographic images?

Your grade will be based on the ambition, insight and drive you bring to the specific photographic project you will undertake documenting architecture in ways that only digital imagery allows, and the quality of images you produce. Central to the

discussion in this course is the complex question of the distinction between a great *photograph* (which has an evolving cultural component), and a great *architectural photograph* (which not play the same role culturally as a photograph). You will be expected to take a thesis-based stance on this question, and make that stance evident in the photographs you make.

The class meets once a week. Most classes will consist of two parts. Most weeks, at the start of class, you will be presenting photographs (sometimes printed out, sometimes on the monitor – we will decide which format works best as we proceed) as your form of argument about the topic or exercise introduced in the prior class lecture and/or the readings for class. We will be discussing/criticizing these photographs as they pertain to the issues at hand. Though you will be making your argument visually, first and foremost, through the evidence of photographs, you will have to expand your arguments verbally. But, in this class, *the SANA rule applies*: you cannot say anything UNLESS you bring photographs.

## **Readings**

I will post most of the readings on Blackboard. In addition, there are several books you will need to buy for this course (get them at Amazon, where they will be cheapest):

1. John Szarkowski: Looking at Photographs (Museum of Modern Art). I have already written you over the break about reading this essential text. As I wrote in that email, this book is a great introduction to theory in the form of the practice of seeing and thinking, to the evaluation of the products of culture in general, to a broad brush history of Western photography in particular, and, specifically, to the simultaneous valuation of individual photographs as singularly important while at the same time being symptomatic of larger trends (the ability to express this contradictory facet of art objects was Szarkowski's exceptional gift as a thinker and writer). Plus Szarkowski was one of the great crafters of words. As I wrote, I have found this book a bottomless source of inspiration. You should be able to get this book second hand.
2. Jesus Vassallo: Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture. This book gets right at the issue. How does digital photography change architecture? In these terrific essays, the author documents case studies in which this question is actively at work in direct collaborations between photographers and architects. Also, writing about photography is a famous black hole that Vassallo manages to side step, somehow.

You do not need to buy, but should consider purchasing:

Susan Sontag: On Photography. All after-Modern theories of photography more or less begin with the arguments first put forward clearly in this small book. These can be summarized in several ways, but the easiest is to say that, in the modern world, photographs validate rather than document, and so they are neither neutral nor innocent, despite their seeming that way. Sontag's ideas owe much to Walter Benjamin, but we are not going to go that far back.

Erroll Morris: Seeing is Believing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photographs. One whole branch of the discussions about photographs as cultural objects in the After-Modern has to do with authenticity. Morris is — as you know if you have seen *The Thin Blue Line* —obsessed with the actual truth, so, given Sontag's dictum, that means he is necessarily obsessed with the difference between the problematic truth of an image, and the actual truth. These are great essays. I have copied one for you, but they are all good, if a little obsessive.

There are technical books that might aid you if you want to get into the complexities of image processing:

Ben Long: Complete Digital Photography (7<sup>th</sup> edition). We are not really going to go too deeply into the techniques involved in digital photography, but this is pretty much the standard textbook. I find it larded with a lot of tricks about composition, which rely on a general rather than conditional definition of beauty. These are of use only in so far as you have to be careful not to rely on them in this course: for you to know why, re-read Szarkowski's essay on the Lee Friedlander photograph...

Adrian Schulz: [Architectural Photography](#). This seems to be a very popular book, and it is clear and readable. Again, it covers a lot of basics, and lists a lot of tricks, but with more clarity than the Ben Long book. It does not go as deeply into image management and processing as the Long book, but we are using this basic outline for this course.

## Work

The final product of this seminar will be an individual visual study that has three subjects: 1. an underlying aesthetic question that you are asking about digital photography's potential as a distinct medium; 2. The representation of architecture, through the study of which aspects of the aesthetic question become apparent; 3. a format for presenting this study that is itself related to 1 and 2. With regard to the assignment, I want to make a couple of suggestions. Though 1 and 2 seem the drivers here, please do not underestimate 3. Remember: this is a course in the theory of representation. In the simplest sense, theories of representation run smack into theories of aesthetics, and aesthetics is the contested bridge between what you think is beautiful and what is culturally considered beautiful (which may not be the same thing). It is of course a truism of the After-Modern era that all means of communication are laden with content!



Your production in this class will first be controlled by the camera you have to work with. Please start now thinking of what the limits of that might afford. By way of example, here is UTSOA student Bud Frank's stitched pan of Bernini's circular colonnade at St. Peters. Because the camera is rotating about the center point as it pans, it flattens that building into a perfectly rectangular elevation, while everything else warps. Actually, it is no less warped, but as a phenomenon of optics, it has warped *into normalcy*. This is about as useful an image as I have ever come across to explain what the camera sees versus what your eye, in collaboration with your brain, thinks it sees.

Bud's photo could, of course, have been made with an older format film camera (in fact, such panning cameras were quite popular). Beyond the potential, in this class, that a camera offers, you must deal specifically with the potential

digital images provide. I cannot stress enough about how you might think of the digital image in a dynamic way: its warp-ability, transmutability, its potential for collaboration, etc., all open doors into NOT thinking of it as a little window that records faithfully a moment in space/time. There are multiple ways it can be stitched, and multiple axis' across which it can be set or stitched. Its warp-ability means that it can be configured into a measured document, set against other images, or other forms of representation. I would think of it as a drawing tool, like an adjustable triangle; or as a fact set in space. I would begin to think of it as dispassionately as I could, almost clinically. Here is a goofy example of something that can readily be done digitally that would almost be impossible in analog:



You are going to be pushing hardest on this boundary, and in so doing challenge conventions of format. Specifically, I want you to see where the potential of digital representation leads with regard to how architecture can be explained. On the next page is a better example of what I mean: Paul Hester's superimposition of an old and new photograph. Again, this COULD be done with analog, but it is closer, and it necessarily engages us in an interesting theory question: the degree to which we no longer believe in the verity — the truth — of the photograph, and the potential of

that strange evolution. These two issues — the distinct potential of the digital photograph, and its possibility as a heightened non-reality — really are the SUBJECT of this course. Your task will be to find how to apply these potentials to the representation of architecture.



#### E V A L U A T I O N :

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

- Initial Exercises	10%
- Single building documentation	25%
- Thesis photograph portfolio	40%
- Participation in discussion	25%

Class participation is key to your grade: you must take part – that means: talk. Attendance is mandatory. One class session is the equivalent of two normal classes, so two absences will constitute a letter grade drop, and with three absences you will be stricken from the roll.

Religious holy days sometimes conflict with class schedules. You must notify each of your instructors as far in advance as possible prior to the classes scheduled on dates you will be absent to observe a religious holy day.

The UT Honor Code applies to all work undertaken in this course. Here it is:

**"The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness and respect toward peers and community."**

You must also review the University website about plagiarism: it is useful about what is expected in terms of identification of sources: [http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acadint\\_plagiarism.php](http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acadint_plagiarism.php)

From that website, please review the link about Academic Integrity, and the consequences of Academic Dishonesty.

#### **S T U D E N T S   W I T H   D I S A B I L I T I E S :**

Students with disabilities who require special accommodations need to get a letter that documents the disability from the Services for Students with Disabilities area of the Office of the Dean of Students (471-6259 voice or 471-4641 TTY for users who are deaf or hard of hearing). This letter should be presented to the instructor in each course at the beginning of the semester and accommodations needed should be discussed at that time. Five business days before an exam the student should remind the instructor of any testing accommodations that will be needed.

#### **S E C U R I T Y ,   S A F E T Y :**

Because this class meets late, please be mindful not to admit any uninvited visitors and keep all exterior doors locked after hours.

#### **C O N T A C T :**

David Heymann: [heymann@utexas.edu](mailto:heymann@utexas.edu)