

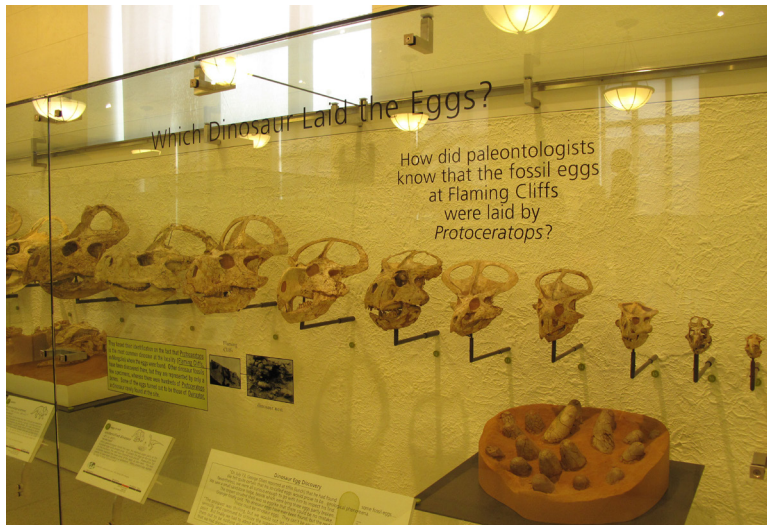


The Museum of (Our) Natural Histories

What would it mean to construct a museum of contemporary culture, as if we were anthropologists from another time and place and could perceive the form of our own life? As if we were a unique tribe with strange and surprising customs, costumes, artifacts, and collective rituals — even as these rituals are transforming metamorphically through time.

We will utilize one of the world's largest and most legendary collections of cultural form and transformation, New York City's own the American Museum of Natural History, as a site to explore these matters with new forms of curatorial and informational space-making. With the recent development of many of New York's primary cultural institutions, like Renzo Piano's Morgan Library/Museum and Diller Scofidio + Renfro's Lincoln Center, the Museum of Natural History is prime for a contemporary evolution.





While the distinction between museums of cultural history and natural history might seem obvious at first: cultural museums display things like high art while the natural history museum display things like dinosaur bones. But in fact The Museum of Natural History displays both dinosaur exhibitions and exhibits about human culture. And not only as might be expected just so-called primitive or pre-historical cultures. In fact all their latest exhibits attempt to make cultural history or ecological history relevant to contemporary life. This semester you will design an addition to the museum focused around the exhibition of one cultural system of our Contemporary Life, the contemporary rituals of us New York City urban tribes:

- collective performance (parades, protests, raves)
- communication systems
- fashion
- food
- habitats
- music
- sports
- transportation
- urban ecology
- or another cultural system you may propose.





As this kind of museum tends towards fixed rather than rotating displays you will spatially curate a collection you select, both from the museum's existing collection and from your own inventive views on our contemporary life. You are simultaneously curator and architect, choreographing a spatial sequence of cultural knowledge. Isn't that one of the main point of traveling to another culture: to become more conscious of your own culture, that seeing foreign rituals so different from and outside your own in order to be able to perceive inside your own culture's rituals. The crisis of natural history museums, indeed all museums, today circulates around this problem of insides and outsides, insiders and outsiders. Your design for an addition to the museum will propose ways the Museum of Natural History can reach out to its surrounding urban fabric and landscape, in contrast to its current retreat from the contemporary city.



In raising the question of “your own culture’s rituals,” I am referring simultaneously to our own ethnic/geographical cultures and to our culture of contemporary architecture. What are some of architecture’s own unexamined customs, costumes, artifacts, and collective rituals? Can we be anthropologists to our own culture, our own spatial culture? In many ways this is the very definition of a professional: a doctor is both a bodily person and someone who can perceive and operate on bodies in a critical manner, a lawyer is someone who is both within the law as a citizen and distant enough from it to perceive it and operate within and upon it.

Architecture always attempts to hold within itself the social and psychological scene of its cultural context. It is its own anthropology, the study of its own local and global rituals, these exchanges of inside and outside, if only we had the distance to see it, if only we as architects as spatial architectural anthropologists would make it manifest for everyone. To be post-professional as in this AAD Advanced Architectural Design post-professional program is to be both inside and outside enough to the profession to bring that higher level of consciousness to the object of architecture, to be able to enact that perception in the very spatial and tectonic and programmatic attributes of buildings, so that everyone may gain the spatial awareness that we as professionals profess to believe in, and hold so dear, and work so hard for, and work so hard to transform. This studio explores the experimental possibilities of cultural metamorphosis, the transformative invention of spatial form as it is manifest in and through social and cultural formations.

