

*Contemporary Debates in Architecture*

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Arch 420  
Fall 2009  
history.theory.criticism seminar

California Polytechnic State University  
Department of Architecture



M|W  
10:10 – 12:00  
05-106

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Office Hours  
M|W|F 8-10  
34-220A

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## 01 Introduction

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### 01.01 Background

This seminar begins with the assumption that a professional education should do more than teach technique or a method of design, and further that an architect may be more than a cultured aesthete. It is my position that the professional architect is one who is able to ask well-formed and appropriate questions. And, further, that such questions may be fleshed out through research, active dialogue with the discipline of architecture, and most importantly through making. The approach of this seminar, then, is to engage students in contemporary architectural debate. This, of course, assumes that such debate and/or discourse exists and can be engaged. We will make this assumption.

### 01.02 Questions

The seminar poses four questions:

#### **Which comes first, the form or the material?**

The making of meaningful architecture has long been tied to an understanding of materials. Architecture is, of course, made of something rather than nothing. With the recent interest in new means of representation and fabrication, new forms of architecture are being proposed and built. What role does the nature of materials now play in the construction and construing of meaningful architecture? Do we still care what a brick wants to be? Is there a nature of materials that can be considered “truthful” or are we only able to lie well? Do materials even matter anymore?

#### **Is architecture local or global?**

We live in a global world. It is not unusual for a building in Dubai to be designed by an Iraqi architect based in London and built by a Chinese developer for a Saudi prince. Indeed, such architect may have even been chosen as a brand in the same way someone may choose a car or a pair of sneakers. Yet, even in our global world, architecture exists in a very specific place and time. Can one make meaningful architecture in a culture that is foreign?

#### **Is architecture critical?**

This session seeks positions that argue for, or against, demonstrate, reveal, or castigate architecture as a critical project. We will attempt to determine if the critical project is relevant or simply an antiquated notion? Is there a critical project that does not operate under Tafuri's shadow? What is the role of theory in such production? Is there a strictly “architectural” theory, or must we look to other fields of inquiry for validation? Can a critical project be built, or, is it only a “paper” project?

#### **Can meaning be found in affect, sensation, or embodied experience?**

The recent fascination with the affect of sensation is certainly connected to Enlightenment ideals of beauty and aesthetic theory. Is architecture, construed in this way meaningful, or simply relative? Doesn't all architecture have some sort of atmosphere, intended or not? How does the interest in atmosphere relate to and differ from the fascination that architects have with phenomena, or even the longer tradition of phenomenology? This session will attempt to differentiate the issues surrounding the affect of sensation from that of an architecture of embodied experience.

Each of the above questions will be prefaced by a general lecture given by the instructor. Then, groups will present positions and oppositions and then finally, in the fourth class of the unit, the two groups will debate. A winner will be chosen by straw poll.

## 02 Guidelines

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### 02.01 Catalogue Description

Special topics based on the exploration of specific approaches, periods of time, and cultural or geographic areas. The Schedule of Classes will list topic selected. Total credit limited to 12 units; repeatable in same term. 4 seminars. Prerequisite: 4th year standing and ARCH 217, ARCH 218, and ARCH 219, or consent of instructor.

### 02.02 Program Learning Objectives

The objectives for the course are to develop critical thinking skills as follows:

- Analyze and understand projects (text, buildings, etc) within the longer tradition of architectural theory.
- To relate the projects (text, buildings, etc) to other fields of inquiry.
- Develop presentation skills verbally and graphically.
- Demonstrate the ability to utilise the research tools available at the library.
- Demonstrate the ability to research a topic.
- Present a cogent position dependent upon research.

### 02.03 Seminar Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this seminar,

- Students will be able to critically communicate architectural ideas.
- Students will be able to research architectural topics and present such material in a variety of formats: graphic, verbal, and text.
- Students will be able to work productively in a group.

### 02.04 National Architectural Accreditation Board (NAAB) Student Performance Criteria

As a required course for architecture majors, this class addresses several of the criteria mandated by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB).

#### **Realm A: Critical Thinking and Representation:**

Architects must have the ability to build abstract relationships and understand the impact of ideas based on research and analysis of multiple theoretical, social, political, economic, cultural and environmental contexts. This ability includes facility with the wider range of media used to think about architecture including writing, investigative skills, speaking, drawing and model making.

#### **A1 Communication Skills**

Ability to read, to write, to speak and to listen effectively.

#### **A5 Investigative Skills**

Ability to gather, assess, record, apply, and comparatively evaluate relevant information within architectural coursework and design processes

#### **A9 Historical Traditions and Global Culture**

Understanding of parallel and divergent canons and traditions of architecture, landscape and urban design including examples of indigenous, vernacular, local, regional, national settings from the Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern hemispheres in terms of their climatic, ecological, technological, socioeconomic, public health, and cultural factors.

#### **C1 Collaboration**

Ability to work in collaboration with others and in multi-disciplinary teams to successfully complete design projects.

### 03 Deliverables

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<b>Oral Presentations:</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Term Paper:</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Participation:</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Binder</b>	<b>100%</b>

  

<b>03.01 Oral Presentations</b>	<b>2 @ 20%</b>
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#### **Topic**

General topics of the weekly seminars are given in the course schedule. Students will make two, 30-minute oral presentations over the course of the quarter and also lead a debate. It is very helpful to outline your argument and also to coordinate your discussion with those presenting on the same day. Well-crafted powerpoint presentations are encouraged.

For each presentation, you are expected to contribute at minimum four (4) original annotated entries onto the wiki site, one class PRIOR to your presentations. See the wiki site for more details on format. You do not need to post four additional articles for the debate. Some articles have been posted on Blackboard and listed in the course schedule. The texts listed and those on Blackboard serve as a point of departure only. Students who present may need to develop the reading of the primary sources with secondary source material. If, for some reason, you are not able to locate any material please contact me sooner rather than later and I will provide readings to you or help you to locate them.

#### **Format**

Students are expected to present an argument, for or against a position. This can be done in a number of ways: through previous writing, through critical analysis of a building, or a combination of both. A good presentation will synthesize material.

#### **Evaluation**

Evaluation of the presentations will be dependant upon clarity, precision of argument, creativity and depth. See attached rubric.

### 03.02 Term Paper 40%

#### **Topic**

Your term paper topic should be framed as a question. The term paper should answer that question. The topic should be derived from one of the four topics. You may decide to analyse a piece of writing, an architectural project or both. You are asked to meet with the Instructor prior to 11 November to discuss your topic selection.

#### **Format**

The paper shall be between 3000 and 4000 words, not including footnotes or works cited. Please list a word count at the end of your paper.

You will be expected to utilise the library and specifically databases such as JSTOR and the Avery Index. The library may not have every book you are looking for. You may need to utilise Interlibrary Loan and/or Link+. Both are free to students; use them. All sources cited should be peer-reviewed. Wikipedia is NOT an acceptable source for citations. Please

correctly cite all of your sources. The *Chicago Manual of Style* will answer all of your questions regarding form and content of citation.

Images should be included and referenced by figure numbers.

Papers should be double spaced and printed with a font that contains serifs (Times New Roman works well). Fonts without serifs are more difficult to read and it behoves you to make your term paper more readable.

**Evaluation:**

Evaluation for the Term Paper will be dependant upon clarity, precision of argument, creativity and depth. See attached rubric.

Plagiarism is grounds for failure.

**03.03 Participation 20%**

You are required to attend and participate in each class. Each seminar will allow for questions at the end of each class. Please ask questions. The richness of the seminar is only possible when questions are raised and discussion follows.

**Reaction Papers**

For each assigned reading, (see schedule) you are asked to complete a two-page (500-750 words, maximum) reaction paper. All assigned readings are posted on Blackboard. The paper should cite one (relatively short) passage from the text, a description of the intention of the passage, and then your reaction to it. This should not be a summary of the entire text, nor a chance for you to wax poetic about your deep desires of architecture.

Reaction papers are due at the beginning of the first class of the week (Monday).

**03.04 Final Binder 100%**

Each of the above deliverables shall be contained in a three ring binder to be handed in during the week of finals. The binders shall include the following:

- Cover Page
  - To include your name and a brief description of the course.
- Reaction Papers (8 @ 500 words)
  - Include the citation, your name, date.
- Presentation Materials (2 presentations)
  - Outline/Mindmap
  - Powerpoint presentation (as handouts, not slides)
- Annotated Bibliography (8 original articles, minimum)
  - Citation, outline, reaction (all from the Wiki site)
  - Photocopy of the article (or, table of contents if it is a book)
- Term Paper
- Course Evaluation

## 04 Schedule

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- Week One**      23 September    Introduction to Course Materials/Expectations  
Reading Assignments / Library Introduction
- Week Two**      **Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Nature of Materials: A Philosophy," reprinted in *Architecture Culture, 1943-68*, ed. Joan Ockman (New York, 1993): 31-41.**
- Louis Kahn, "Lecture at Pratt University, 1973" reprinted in *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*. Ed. Alessandra Latour (Rizzoli: New York): 320-341.**
- 28 September    Lecture One: *Are Materials Truthful?*
- 30 September    Position One: Form follows material.
- Week Three**      **Greg Lynn, "Blob Tectonics, or why Tectonics is Square and Topology is Groovy," *Folds, Bodies and Blobs: Collected Essays*, (Belgium, 1998): 169-180.**
- 05 October      Opposition One: Materials follow form.
- 07 October      Debate One: Guest Critic: Mark Cabrinha, Robert Arens
- Week Four**      **Kenneth Frampton. "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism." *Perspecta*. Vol. 20 (1983): 147-62.**
- 12 October      Lecture Two: *Is architecture local or global?*
- 14 October      Position Two: Architecture is local.
- Week Five**      **Henry Russell Hitchcock and Phillip Johnson *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*. (New York, WW Norton: 1932), 33-89.**
- 19 October      Opposition Two: Architecture is global.
- 21 October      Debate Two Guest Critic: Doug Jackson, Don Choi
- Week Six**      **Michael Hays. "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form." *Perspecta*. Vol. 21 (1984): 15-29.**
- 26 October      Lecture Three: *Is architecture critical?*
- 28 October      Position Three: Architecture is critical.
- Week Seven**      **Michael Speaks. "After Theory; Debate in architectural schools rages about the value of theory and its effect on innovation in design." *Architectural Record*. Vol. 193 No. 6 (June, 2005): 72.**
- Michael Speaks. "Design Intelligence and the new Economy." *Architectural Record*. Vol. 190 No. 1 (January, 2002): 72.**
- 02 November    Opposition Three: Architecture is not critical.
- 04 November    Debate Three: Guest Critic: Mark Cabrinha

- Week Eight**     **Mark Wigley. "The Architecture of Atmosphere" *Daidalos* No 68 (1998) 18–27.**
- 09 November    Lecture Four: *Affect, Sensation, or embodied experience?*
- 11 November    *Academic Holiday: No Class*
- Week Nine**     **Dalibor Vesely, "On the Relevance of Phenomenology," in *Form; Being; Absence. Pratt Journal of Architecture 2* (Spring 1988).**
- 16 November    Position Four: Affect.
- 18 November    Opposition Four: Embodied experience.
- Week Ten**     **No Assigned Reading**
- 23 November    Debate Four: Critic: Eric Nulman
- 25 November    *Academic Holiday: No Class*
- Week Eleven**   **Dead Week**
- 30 November    No Class
- 2 December     No Class
- 7 December**    **Paper Due**