Syllabus 02:

Architecture Unbound

Abstract

One basic way to challenge architectural theory to think globally is to challenge it to think beyond itself. Thus, this syllabus aims to connect architectural theory with global issues through a series of themes directed outside of the confines of traditionally-conceived disciplinarity. This, of course, is not a new idea in architectural theory, as the central place of literary and textual practices of deconstruction in late-twentieth-century architectural theory demonstrates. However, the aim here is to turn not to an outside field for concepts to impress upon architecture, and in particular in relationship to architectural form. Rather, the five themes developed—property, labor, inhabitation, media, and environment—are meant to situate architecture within diverse and complex material and intellectual exchanges that circulate across the globe.

Each theme is meant to provide roughly self-sufficient units that can be arranged in any order. They aim to use theory written from both within and without architectural discourse to “unbound” architecture by setting its interior in relationship to various outsides. First, the consideration of property positions architecture in relation to issues of ownership, security, and the political and legal divisions of space. This theme includes considerations of the ways in which architecture has participated in colonialism and racial segregation, but also more broadly the ways architecture has been produced by and helped produce ideologies of how life can be planned and divided up. The second theme, labor, sets architecture in relationship to its material and intellectual production. It examines how labor has been theorized in the age of technological reproduction, including considerations of colonial histories of labor and reproduction, histories of intellectual property, the socio-politics of higher education, and how architectural construction has been conceived in revolutionary contexts, including the Soviet Union and Maoist China. The third theme, inhabitation, focuses on the human body and how architecture participates in its activities and passivities of inhabiting space. In particular, it considers how theorizations of race, gender, class, and disability can guide consideration of the diversity of bodies that encounter and shape architecture. The fourth theme, media, examines how drawings, digital media, and their embodiments have participated in the construction of architectural discourse in diverse global contexts. This theme focuses not only how architects represent building but also how architecture as a practice represents itself in the global market. The final theme, environment, situates architecture in relationship to the earth. It pays particular attention to notions of climate change, political ecology, and globalization, and investigates these issues through architecturally-influential concepts such as development, modernization, and heritage.
These five themes are not meant to set the boundaries of architectural discourse, but rather to open up ways in which its discourse and practice are connected to many other fields. The globalization of theory should not be understood as a new attempt at universalization or essentialization, but rather as a recognition that architecture can always be different than it currently is.

Property, Session 1: Land, As Property and Appropriation

Etymologically, property suggests a form or extension of selfhood. Attendant with the concomitant development of colonialism and the modern nation-form in Europe, the conversion of land into private property was pivotal in formulating new relationships between landowning classes, the state, labor, and capital. With chattel slavery and private property, the scope and meaning of ownership underwent a radical expansion, which was marked by new architectural devices—and representations—of ownership as a form of modern citizenship. This session examines both capitalist and non-capitalist modes of land tenure and how these were bound up with different societal forms, and sets the stage for considering architectural modes of settlement and real-estate development in the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries.

Readings


Property, Session 2: Real Estate, Or, the (Racial) Production of “Main Street”
As a device for reifying land’s value as capital, architecture’s effectiveness in processes of urban revaluation depends not only on financial devices of discrimination but also on aesthetic-semiotic modes of signaling value. Helping to mark the (often racialized) distinction between “suitable” and “unsuitable” economic subjects, domestic and commercial architectures are complicit in staking out new domains of financial expansion and, conversely, disinvestment. This session considers the concept of “the decorated shed” in relation to these systems of financialization and racial production.

Readings


Property, Session 3: Planning and “Unplanning”

Interrogating the mutually-constitutive relationships between formal and informal architectures, formal and informal markets, and macro- and micro-finance, this session attends to various modes of architectural production that operate at the interstices between the formal and informal (including self-help architectural planning, land-titling schemes, resettlement, and infrastructural developments). Putting pressure on a commonplace critique of “high modernist” planning, we examine how more microscopic, localized processes of planning (and the absence of planning) work to instate modes of class and ethno-racial difference.

Readings

Labor, Session 1: Alienation

The concept of alienation serves as a historical and conceptual lynch-pin between land ownership (i.e. the alienation of land under regimes of privatization) and the view of labor as alienable (i.e. according to philosophers and economists from the European Enlightenment onward). This session focuses on the historical relationship between the alienation of land and theories of alienable labor and consciousness, beginning with the English enclosures movements and subsequent industrialization up through Soviet Socialist Realism. As a counterpoint—or perhaps complement—to Marxian theories of alienation, Hegel and Ruskin offer theological and quasi-theological concepts of spiritual-material synthesis as an antidote to the alienation of spirit.

Readings

Labor, Session 2: Design

As distinct from education in architecture or in specific craft techniques, “design” appears as a disciplinary rubric in the late nineteenth-century with the proposition that competency in architecture and the various industrial arts consists not in specific craft techniques so much as in elementary skills of mind-body coordination—requisite to the art of drawing—and foundational to all branches of the plastic and visual arts. The development of design pedagogy arose as a response to industrial production, which required designers to be proficient not only in a craft but in the art of instruction—that is, in trans-coding the artwork into a procedural method capable of integrating human-machine modes of labor. As a form of trans-coding a material object into a process of materialization, design belonged to the rise of intellectual property in the technologically-reproduced object and hence to the rise of a racial division of labor.

Readings

Labor, Session 3: Construction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, domestic auto-construction—often in the form of “self-help” architectures—became construed as a form of nation-building and incipient citizenship in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Self-built architectures were framed alternatively as a form of burgeoning entrepreneurialism and investment (e.g. in US interventions in postcolonial contexts of “development”), as a form of community-formation and resource-redistribution (in Maoist China), and as means of resuscitating ancient national heritage (in Egyptian schemes of eviction and resettlement).

Readings


Inhabitation, Session 1: Habitat / Habitus

Drawing from the social sciences, post-War modernist architects sought to develop culturally-appropriate subaltern architectures through the translation of cultural habitus into habitat. Implicitly, this focus on cultural “patterns” was deemed applicable to low-end housing or to colonial and neo-colonial development. Whether considered from the angle of the necessities of utilitarian survival, the practices of individual placemaking, or the politics of collective identity, architecture participates in the creation of environments for inhabitation. This session turns its attention to theories of inhabitation, and in
particular to the ways in which theories of inhabitation are developed in specific positions that are shaped by frameworks and experiences such as those of gender, class, and place.

Readings


Inhabitation, Session 2: Bodies

Bodies and their activities, habitual and otherwise, shape inhabitation in a multitude of ways. Fields such as gender studies, critical race studies, and disability studies have challenged the assumption of a universal body to which architectural theory historically often appealed. This session, drawing in particular on the theorizations of black feminism and disability studies, considers the ways in which the varieties of experience may be brought to bear on architecture.

Readings

Globalizing the Theory Survey

- Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141–159.

Inhabitation, Session 3: Subaltern Identity

Of particular concern for the ways in which a diversity of bodies interact with architecture are questions of recognition, legibility, voice, and agency. This session turns to theorization of the other, looking both at the character of subaltern identity and at the ways in which colonizing subjects use subaltern bodies to position themselves.

Readings


Media, Session 1: Architecture’s Medium

Examining the passage from perspective and orthographic representation to the algorithm and digital model, this session investigates the idea of architecture as medium.
Central focus is on the changing ways architects see, read, and use the images and words of architecture. Special emphasis is placed on how drawings, digital media, and their embodiments have participated in the construction of the architectural discourse in diverse global, post-colonial, and feminist contexts.

Readings


Media, Session 2: Digital Media and Workspace

According to several architects and critics, architecture no longer embodies concepts, symbols, and ideologies. To bypass the formal conundrums of post-modernity, they have concentrated on the development of original theories and the use of new media. This session focuses on the digital turn and the recent rise to pre-eminence of both computer-based design and production. Special emphasis is placed on the investigation of the culture and bias brought by the use of this medium, and the exploration of how the adoption of computers has changed the work of architects together with the appearance, structure, and program of the architectural office.

Readings

Media, Session 3: Integrated Practices and Marketability

This session investigates the emergence of the so-called integrated project delivery and its ability to compress design and construction. Introducing the mobility and politics of knowledge surrounding the practice, reception, and experience of architecture, particular attention is paid to how space is designed and experienced in oral versus writing cultures. Points of interest are the definition of the idea of participation, the examination of the so-called actor-network theory (as applied to architecture), and its controversial approach to materiality, relationality, and process.

Readings


Environment, Session 1: Theories of Environment

This session investigates mythologies and ideologies about the environment and their complex theoretical geography. Through the examination of the idea of place versus space, the session defines concepts such as nature, environment, and wilderness, placing emphasis on the suspension of the classical dichotomy of nature and society. In its place, the session examines the constitution of communities and collectives incorporating humans and nonhumans and building on the experiences of the sciences. Cultural studies, political ecology, history, geography, and contemporary art are woven together with architectural theory to provide an examination of these multiple senses of environment as applied by and to architecture.
Readings


Environment, Session 2: Climate Change

Anthropogenic processes have had planetary effects, and architecture has played a central role in the transformations of the globe that have ensued. This session examines and connects notions like the Anthropocene, climate change, and globalization. Focusing on the responses to the contemporary environmental crisis, the session offers diverse and global perspectives on the role played by architecture in long-lasting changes of weather patterns. Special emphasis is placed on humanist critiques of climate change and the Anthropocene while harnessing the notion's potential for challenging political and architectural imagination.

Readings


Environment, Session 3: Heritage, Development and Modernization
According to several scholars, the megacity of the so-called Global South embodies the most extreme instance of economic injustice, ecological unsustainability, and spatial apartheid ever confronted by humanity. This session investigates concepts such as development, modernization, and heritage in the Global South, its environments, and its metropolises. Questioning common misconceptions and stereotypes on the evolutionary pathways long assumed by architects and social scientists, the session examines theories developed from an “ex-centric” vantage, giving an ironic twist to the fetishization of the environment residing in the South.

Readings

Globalizing the Theory Survey

Teacher-to-Teacher Workshop