Syllabus 04:

Mediating Theory

Abstract

This syllabus frames the production, transmission, and understanding of architectural knowledge through theoretical discourse. Each session theory is positioned within a specific media form: Matter, Body, Sound, Narrative, Treatise, Map, Manifesto, Diagram, Program, Standard, Image, System, Interface, Heap. The syllabus highlights a central tension: between the global and the local, the shared and the situated, form and content—and the tension between the specificity of instructive case studies and the more general framing of theory.

It frames various forms of architectural theory within a global context. It offers, in roughly chronological fashion, a certain amount of “canonical” material—cases and texts that have traditionally served as a discursive foundation for architecture and which are most important in this day and age to critically deconstruct this historical foundation. The syllabus’s motivating dynamic is to present familiar “canonical” material with materials that can actively “aerate the canon.”

The syllabus’s orientation towards media forms aims to create a productive ambiguity. The treatise, for example, appears as a medium for theory that is in some ways historically situated, but which in other ways has endured over time. An appreciation of the historicity of media forms allows for an understanding of, for instance, how a treatise-based theory is different from an image-based theory.

The second way this syllabus opens up or “aerates” the theoretical canon is by taking a global view. Many important ways of thinking about architecture have simply been left out of standard accounts. Anointing certain conceptual systems as (capital-T) Theories has always been a means of establishing and perpetuating certain values. Many of these inherited conceptual holdovers ought to be done away with because they reinforce injustices or simply fail to address contemporary concerns. We take the view that there are lessons to be learned from the past—both lessons about things to avoid and the larger lesson of historical ontology: that concepts are always historically situated. We also recognize that the comparative approach is effective in raising certain types of questions: What is local and what is global (or even universal)? Does everything depend on context? Are certain media forms common the world over? The syllabus is designed not to come down definitively on one side or the other, but to engage media to broaden the discussion of architectural theory.
The syllabus is not meant to include all the best theories, *per se*, but to instill habits of critical thinking. As students equip themselves with a conceptual toolkit suitable to practicing architecture globally, they should learn to think of theories much as they would think of other tools they use. They should know the power and limitations of theories, have a respect for approaches outside of their current repertoire, and be open-minded when it comes to trying out different ways of thinking. The syllabus will not teach the theories a student should know. Rather it will instill the attitude of self-criticism (personal as well as disciplinary self-criticism) that should be the basis of the life of an architect.

**Session 1: Theory Matters**

How is theory differentiated from history and practice? What are the key cultural and disciplinary forces that transform architectural theory? Why does theory matter, and what comprises its “matter?”

**Core Readings**


**Supplemental Readings**

- Sylvia Lavin, “Theory into History; Or, the Will to Anthology,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (September 1999): 494–499.

**Assignment: The Matter of Theory**

- What is the “matter” of theory? How does theory differ from architectural history or criticism? How is it composed? What is its structure? Isolate the way texts frame theory as such: What are the categories, classifications, and topics that frame theory? Create a comprehensive list of all categories, classifications, and topics for each text. Place all the lists in an agreed upon order (i.e. chronological, list similarity, length of texts, etc.). What are the similarities and differences? Combine similar lists to create the norms of architectural theory and a separate list to best understand their exceptions.

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**Session 2: Body**

Idealized human bodies have historically served as models and metaphors for architectural bodies. Architects have constructed and disciplined bodies, and architecture has been an instrument of bodily management and control—as well as an enabler of performances of individuality and productive disorientation.

**Core Readings**

Globalizing the Theory Survey

Teacher-to-Teacher Workshop


Supplemental Readings

- Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pictura* (1435); *De Statua* (1462), *De re Aaedificatoria* (1454).

Assignment: *Exquisite Body*

- Collect key images of bodies from texts. How are bodies represented in each image? How is each body image measured, standardized, mapped, ornamented, controlled, or disciplined? What are the similarities and differences of the images? How does the body image help to extend the argument by the author? Create a composite body from all the images collected; a new exquisite corpse. Develop a method for each of the individual body images to combine, layer, synthesize, or aggregate.

Session 3: Sound

From rhythmic proportion and spaces suitable for the production of oral culture to modern communication and noise, architecture has often engaged with sound to frame eventful spaces of everyday life.
Core Readings


Supplemental Readings


Assignment: *Pattern Language*

- All things, objects, and systems are composed of patterns and are affected by immaterial rhythms. Select an architectural project and draw its patterns. Draw it only as patterns. Pay close attention to the rhythmic disposition of elements: facade mullions, material patterns, columns, etc. As an additional layer, also draw the immaterial patterns: air, light, sound. For a more precise understanding of these immaterial patterns, consider how light and sound reflect, refract and diffract. Use various line weights to allow for the project’s patterns to be layered and synchronistic. What is the relationship between the physical architectural patterns and the environmental rhythms?
Session 4: Narrative

Storytelling has been key to rendering theory memorable and impactful. Stories are embodied and enacted through architecture. They can be speculatively retold to propel architecture in new directions.

Core Readings


Supplemental Readings

- Rem Koolhaas, Mark Wigley, Ole Bouman, and Jeffrey Inaba, eds., Volume 20: Storytelling (July, 2009).

Assignment: Storytelling

- Recompose an essay as a story. Begin by closely reading it and highlighting key points. Use the select five to ten key points to develop a storyboard; a series of discrete images that depict the main points of the essay. Add a level of dramatic effect or hyperbole to intensify the key points. Develop your storyboard graphically, and present the story.
Session 5: Treatise

The treatise is a classical theoretical form that emerged at a particular moment in history yet has endured. Its principles have become transformed into a systematic discourse of techniques. Within this lies the historical emergence of print and its impact on both forms of thinking and forms of social organization.

Core Readings

- Claude Perrault, *Ordonnance for the Five Kinds of Column after the Method of the Ancients*, trans. Indra Kagis McEwan (Santa Monica: The Getty Center, 1993 [1683]).

Supplemental Readings


**Assignment: Principles & Rules**

• Review the principles & rules established within various treatises, then compare and contrast them. How do they isolate architectural elements (i.e. wall, column, floor, etc.)? What is the sequence of these architectural elements? What ordering systems are established? How do they help to establish architectural discourse? How do they reinforce cultural practices, traditions, and norms? Can the rules from individual treatises be combined to create a super-treatise?

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**Session 6: Map**

Mapping involved the abstraction and condensation of information, geographic and cultural. Maps are more than a way to get from here to there. For architects they are conceptual tools for analyzing the inner workings of environments. Maps build knowledge through the accumulation of layers, symbols, notations—techniques with histories of their own.

**Core Readings**


Supplemental Readings


Assignment: Action at a Distance

- Develop a map that describes the space(s) passed through when traveling from one place to another. What are the different conventions used to represent distance, geographic features, materials, orientation? What are the objective, “factual” ways to communicate (i.e. measured sequence) and the subjective “experiential” elements (i.e. perspective, etc.)? Are recognizable figures used to depict the map (i.e. landmarks, paths) or personal reference points to orient the map (i.e. memories, dreams)? Combine each of the maps on a single sheet to create a collective map of the course participants sequence from home to school.

Session 7: Manifesto

The manifesto is the medium-form through which architects have engaged directly with socio-political issues. Manifestos have been a hallmark of modernity. It is a form for the construction of individuality, providing directed critique, and making a call to action.

Core Readings


Supplemental Readings


Andrew VanLeeuwan, “Mapping the Modern Manifesto,” Arcade 32, no. 2 (Fall 2014).

Charles Jencks and Karl Kropf, Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture (Chichester: Wiley Academy, 1997).


Assignment: Manifest the Position

Select a manifesto and embody its architect-author in a debate with another student embodying an opposing position. Develop an understanding of the issue-position and desired-effect proposed in the select manifesto. Which architect and manifesto articulates the strongest issue, most salient architectural position, and best possible outcome? Dress up as the select architect and use architecture to critique an issue, position it to remedy a problem, and propel society in a new way.

Session 8: Diagram
In an age of information overload, diagrams have become ubiquitous, promising to precision and speed. Architects have often worried about how to make their ideas legible and how to explain complex ideas to clients and publics. The diagram engages a form of thought that is oriented towards action—thus making it a key medium-form in the politics of architecture.

Core Readings


Supplemental Readings


Assignment: Diagram, Diagram, Diagram, Diagram

Diagrams allow for a precise understanding of a thing, object, environment, or system. Conversely, they can serve to loosen up the fixed meanings to help one reimagine possibilities and latent potential. Draw a simple and provocative pattern from something in your immediate environment. Create four copies of the same drawing. Transform the actual pattern into virtual potential. In what ways were the everyday pattern selected transformed into new possibilities? What attributes in the pattern helped to propel the most possibilities?
Session 9: Program

The historical shift from functionalism to programming was a key moment in the emergence of contemporary architectural theory and practice. Several things shifted in parallel: from design/visuality to logic/mathematics; from delineated space to organizational space; and from genius to bureaucracy.

Readings


Supplemental Readings


Assignment: Protocols & Procedures

- Building codes help to manage and control the environment. Protocols and procedures are the basic units of these codes. They allow for a clear understanding of the how the code engages relationships, define a given space, for a certain amount of time, and within a given sequence. Protocols and procedures help humans and non-humans engage space and carry out specific actions. Review the wall drawings and procedures of artist Sol LeWitt. Select an architectural element your immediate environment (i.e. a stair, wall, room, etc). Develop a series of protocols and procedures to create a large wall drawing on the select architectural element. Which protocols and procedures will be most transformative and have the potential to propel the program of the space?
Session 10: Standard

A ubiquitous part of the everyday architectural life, standards are “Modernism’s Visible Hand.” They shape the industrialization of objects, the units of measure that regulate form, and the norms that condition people and shape disciplinary conventions. They materialize the essential codes for the objects, environment, and interactions that architects design.

Core Readings


Supplemental Readings


**Assignment: Manual**

• Standards help to control and manage the norms within disciplines. The manual is a type of text that systematizes a series of methods, measurements or objects around a specific discourse. The manual (as a text) standardizes the manual (as labor). Manuals exist for most topics and provide an accessible and expedient guide on what “to do,” and often what “not to do.” Develop a manual for an incoming architecture student. What would that manual be composed of? What topics would it cover? How would it be structured?

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**Session 11: Image**

While images contain content, they also shape conversations. It is through images that we can see the shifting techniques and technologies that architects use. With new devices, techniques and the aesthetics associated with them have recently articulated into a bewildering array.

**Core Readings**


**Supplemental Readings**


Vilem Flusser, “Warning,” “To Abstract,” “To Imagine,” and “To Make Concrete,” in *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).


**Assignment: Singular & Serial Image**

Within the various technological histories of images, chronophotography, a predecessor to the cinematic-film, allowed for an intimate understanding of images of the environment broken down into measurements of time. It was a type of photography used a sequence of individual photographic stills to understand the complexities of motion, or what often was imperceptible to human vision. Using singular and serial images, capture a sequence of images that evidences a phenomenon that is imperceptible to human vision.

**Session 12: System**

As large-scale technologies have developed, so have the concepts used to describe and engage with them in a productive manner. Socio-technical systems engage with one another, produce “synergy” to effect complex energetic systems, such as cities and environments. How to work at this scale (as a designer? a manager? a scientist?) is among the most pressing issues facing architecture today.

**Core Readings**


**Supplemental Readings**


**Assignment: System Boundaries**

To best understand a system, it is essential to locate its “system boundaries” and how energy moves through it. Review the “system diagrams” of Howard Odum, an important ecologist and systems thinker. Develop a system diagram of an important, everyday environment (i.e. home, school, city, etc.). For added level of knowledge, review Odum’s “flow diagrams.” What are the differences between these two diagram types? Transform your system diagram to depict flow? What are the shared and discrete inputs and outputs?
Session 13: Interface

An interface is a point of contact between unlike things: between people and environments, social and technical systems, hardware and software. As interfaces increasingly compose the environment, they often “black-box,” or obfuscate, the relationships beyond.

Core Readings


Supplemental Readings


Assignment: Conversational Interface

- New digital technologies have allowed for a new level of interactivity and collective engagement. Cloud technologies allow for an important new type of interface for the remote storage of massive amounts of data, access to program applications, and new forms of interactivity. Discuss a text with others, and collectively take notes on a shared cloud document. Project the document to allow for it to be a “real-time” interface. Record important ideas from the reading and the conversation and nudge the conversation into important arenas.
Session 14: Heap

How should architects respond to the piles building up around them? Not only piles of data and piles of trash, but the “detritus” of history, the flux of contemporary discourse, and the formal heaps that architects have recently been designing? Is theory necessary in the age of predictive algorithms? Should we sort through things or add another scoop on top?

Core Readings


Supplemental Readings


Assignment: *Excess to Surplus*

- All too familiar in the information age is the massive excesses of theories, bodies, sounds, narratives, treatises, maps, manifestoes, diagrams, programs, standards, images, systems, and of course, interfaces. Display all the assignments produced during this course and project the syllabus on the wall. Select the two best projects.
and the two most influential readings from each week. From the excesses of the semester, create a curated surplus of new possibility for the following course.