

AR-501

Lives of the most excellent architects

Weaver Thomas

Cursus	Sem.	Type
Architecture	MA2, MA4	Opt.

Language of teaching	English
Credits	3
Session	Summer
Semester	Spring
Exam	During the semester
Workload	90h
Weeks	12
Hours	2 weekly
Lecture	2 weekly
Number of positions	

Summary

This course presents a history of architecture not so much as a history of projects, buildings, movements or styles, but as a history of lives. In the process, it will argue for the relevance of biography, stories, anecdotes, jokes, truths, half-truths and even wilful fabrications.

Content

One of architecture's enduring oddities is that the entirety of its bibliography features very little biography. This realisation is cloaked by the fact that to survey a large architectural library is to be confronted by the spines of various books identified only by a name - not merely that of the architect-author, but also that of the architect-subject. Yet in spite of this abundance of appellations, upon opening these volumes it soon becomes obvious that in architecture a name is not a passport to the understanding of a life, but rather is key only to the presentation of a body of work, since most architects of the last 2,000 years have been confidently telling us about everything except themselves. It is this omission that this course seeks to address, and is inspired by in many ways the *only* sustained investigation into architectural biography, Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (first published in 1550). Following an introductory session that explores the history of the absence of biography, the course will proceed through profiles of assorted architects, arranged through various characterisations, and profiling figures whose lives and work have been recorded in oral histories developed in the pages of the journal *AA Files*.

Course Sessions

- Session One, Thursday 23 February (Zoom)

Introduction, A Story for Myself and description of the final assignment

- Session Two, Thursday 2 March (In Person)

Architects of the Ordinary (John Winter, Kate Macintosh)

- Session Three, Thursday 9 March (Zoom)

Architects of the Extraordinary (Ricardo Bofill, Itsuko Hasegawa)

- Session Four, Thursday 16 March (In Person)

Architect as Artist (François Dallegret, Alexander Brodsky)

- Session Five, Thursday 23 March (Zoom)

Architect as Photographer (Hilla Becher, Lewis Baltz)

- Session Six, Thursday 30 March (In Person)

Paper Architects (Masimo Scolari, Shin Takamatsu)

- Session Seven, Thursday 6 April (Zoom)

From Soane to the Strip (Denise Scott Brown) + the making of *From Soane to the Strip*

- Session Eight, Thursday 20 April (In Person)

Architects on Holiday (Alberto Ponis, Arata Isozaki, Hiroshi Hara)

- Session Nine, Thursday 27 April (Zoom)

Architects in the Library (Robin Middleton, Bernd Grimm)

- Session Ten, Thursday 4 May (In Person)

Architect as Villain (Leon Krier, Peter Eisenman)

- Session Eleven, Thursday 11 May (Zoom)

Architect as Hero (Kevin Roche, Neave Brown)

- Session Twelve, Friday 19 May (In Person)

The Death and Life of Architecture (Patrick Hodgkinson)

Learning Outcomes

- Develop an appreciation of oral history as an essential tool of the architectural critic, historian or theoretician, and of the history of oral history more generally
- Develop a new sense and appreciation of the lives, character and work of the architects presented in each lecture
- Develop their own skills in working with oral history through the transcription and editing of a given case study, and from transforming the spoken word into the written word

Expected student activities

Students are expected to attend each of the twelve course lectures; to read the texts provided for each lecture; to complete the written assignment.

Assessment methods

The course will be assessed by an assignment for which students will first select an architect for an oral history of their own. It is anticipated that the majority of students will choose one of the architectural figures who have recorded oral history interviews through the *National Life Stories Architects Lives* initiative of the British Library as an ongoing project, established in 1995, in which distinguished British architects speak at length about their life and work (<https://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories-architects-lives>). A full list of figures will be provided, but to date, more than 130 separate lives have been recorded, and all are freely available via <https://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories-architects-lives>. Many of these same architects are also collected within another oral history project, namely the Pidgeon Digital archive, established by the architectural editor and critic Monica Pidgeon in 1979. In total more than 220 architects are accessible online (all for a small fee), but these audio files are typically architects lecturing about their ideas, rather than being interviewed about their lives, and so this resource should only be used to complement an existing oral history. Students are also free to access other recordings of other celebrated architectural figures (like those assembled through the Columbia Oral History Archives: <https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/ccoh.html>), but these interviews should ideally be conducted in English. Even more

adventurous students may want to consider recording an oral history themselves, approaching a suitably significant and engaging figure, and then conducting their own recorded interview. The only real criteria in selecting an architect is that they are interesting, and that each student works with a different figure.

After having chosen an architect and a recording (either inherited or created), the student then needs to create a text of a maximum 2,000 words. The first 150 words of this text should consist of a succinct introduction; the remainder should comprise an edited transcript of the architect's words, but edited in such a way that these flow together into a coherent, complete, highly readable text (rather than as a series of disconnected anecdotes, lines, reminiscences). Many of the archival recordings are long (sometimes several hours long), but please bear in mind that 2,000 words equates to only around 20 minutes of speaking (but as you will discover, very few people can speak coherently for 20 uninterrupted minutes). Pay special attention to the final lines of your text, which should end like any good presentation, story, or even like a good joke.

The last component of this assignment is that it should be illustrated with an original, line-art sketch of the face of the architect in question, in the spirit of those characterisations drawn by Giorgio Vasari in his famous *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (second edition, 1568). These drawings, along with the 2,000-word texts, will all be flowed into a graphic template and then bound into a singular anthology, printed at the EPFL and made available to each of the students as their own record of the course. In addition to attending all lectures and undertaking all readings, students will be assessed on the basis of the grammatical accuracy of their texts (20%); the clarity of their short introductions (20%); the coherence, flow, readability and charm of their edited transcripts (50%); and the appeal of their graphic portraits (10%).

Resources

Moodle Link

- <https://go.epfl.ch/AR-501>