

AR-505

**Modernity, architecture and the environment**

Mações Costa Bárbara

Cursus	Sem.	Type
Architecture	MA1, MA3	Opt.

Language of teaching	English
Credits	3
Session	Winter
Semester	Fall
Exam	Oral
Workload	90h
Weeks	12
<b>Hours</b>	<b>2 weekly</b>
Courses	2 weekly
<b>Number of positions</b>	

**Summary**

Theory course on the history of modernist environmental aesthetics in architecture.

**Content**

Environmentalism is a modernist concern. Its roots can be traced back to Romanticism and the Industrial Revolution, two major manifestations of the rise of capitalism and its contradictions in modern bourgeois society. The turmoils of land enclosure, peasant migration, and rapid urban growth tainted the edifice of Enlightenment reason with a sense of the tragedy of development. In this new world, as Marx described, "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and humans are at last compelled to face with sober senses their real conditions of life, and their relations with their kind." In other words, orphaned from divine providence modern individuals struggle with their newfound consciousness over the volatile nature of their environment.

The so-called "will to architecture" is at the heart of this struggle. Architects shape and preserve social memories while striving to give form to individual and collective desires. The balance between preservation and development is the object of our discipline, and it is one of the most pressing political issues of our time. With this in mind, the course maps the evolution of the environmental question in architecture over its *longue durée*, i.e., from the beginning of modernism (around 1848) to postmodernity, which is here understood as part of the same cultural movement. From this period we abstract twelve architects and concepts, each mediating a specific relation between building and context. The aesthetic choices conveyed in the architecture thus appear no longer disinterested but complex, while at the same time, from the overall map of concepts we unfold a history of the modernist idea of environment.

Throughout the course students should keep in mind the following questions: how should architecture reflect society's relation to the environment; how should it constitute a critique of said relation; and how should it predict a collective ideal?

**Sessions**

1. Ledoux and the Primitive Hut
2. Morris and the Crystal Palace
3. Geddes and the Valley Section
4. Wright and the Prairie Bungalow
5. Gropius and the Abstract Machine
6. Ginzburg and the Social Condenser
7. Smithsons and the Habitat Threshold
8. Rossi and the Historical Type
9. Siza and the Proletarian Island
10. Banham and the Cybernetic Bubble
11. Venturi & Scott-Brown and the Stripmall Monument
12. Koolhaas and the Schizoid Object

**Keywords**

Modernism, architecture, environmental aesthetics, historical and geographic materialism, political ecology.

**Learning Prerequisites**

### Recommended courses

Preparation for design and research studios that reflect on cross-scale relations and the ecological backgrounds of architectural form. Provides methodological basis for the Enoncé théorique de master and the orientation Project Urbain. Content is closely related to UE U: Cartography, where a more practical and design-oriented method of environmental analysis is taught.

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, the student must be able to:

- Contextualise / Ground architectural 'objects'.
- Interpret explicit/implicit environmental narratives in architectural form.
- Assess / Evaluate the contradictions between the material and ideological layers of the environment.
- Structure / Describe architecture as an environmental totality.

### Teaching methods

This course does not see the environment as synonymous with 'non-human nature', or architecture as a purely cultural practice. The environment is a socio-biological metabolism and architecture is an activity that mediates it. This course employs a dialectical method that allows for buildings to be judged beyond their apparent 'iconic' abstraction, as a rich totality of moments that includes nature, technology, production, reproduction, aesthetics, etc. Each class pairs a relevant architect with a concept that encapsulates a formalization of this totality and reveals a dialectic of environmental aesthetics and praxis. The classes present a selection of historical texts and projects, as well as maps produced by students of UE U: Cartography. A weekly bibliography is provided and reading ahead is advised.

### Assessment methods

Students are asked to submit an essay (ca. 3'000 words) elaborating an environmental critique of an existing building/project. An oral exam based on the essay is later held centered on the following questions: how does the chosen building reflect a social relation to nature; how does it critique said relation; is it coherent or are there contradictions? All classes are held in English, essays may be written in English or French. Students may work in pairs.

Essay coherence and pertinence: 50% of grade.

Oral exam: 50% of grade.

### Supervision

Office hours	Yes
Assistants	No
Forum	No

### Resources

#### Bibliography

- BENJAMIN, Walter, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé of 1939" in *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1939], pp. 14-26.
- BERMAN, Marshall, "Goethe's Faust: The Tragedy of Development" in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*. London: Penguin, 1982, pp. 15-86.
- HARVEY, David, "The Passage from Modernity to Postmodernity in Contemporary Culture" in *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 3-120.

#### Ressources en bibliothèque

- [The Arcades Project / Benjamin](#)
- [Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle / Benjamin](#)
- [All that is solid melts into air / Berman](#)
- [Tout ce qui est solide se volatilise / Berman](#)

- [The Condition of Postmodernity / Harvey](#)

**Notes/Handbook**

Detailed syllabus with dedicated class readings provided upon enrolment.

**Moodle Link**

- <https://go.epfl.ch/AR-505>