

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
Hours	2 weekly
Lecture	2 weekly
Number of positions	

Summary

Theory course on modernist environmental aesthetics in architecture.

Content

Environmentalism is a modernist concern. Its roots go 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, Marx observed, "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 to their kind." In other words, orphaned by divine providence, modern individuals struggle with a 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 giving form to individual and collective desires. The balance between preservation and development is crucial to our discipline because every project is an act of creative destruction. In the face of ecological collapse, this question has become existential but the underlying sentiment is not entirely new. "Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent," said Baudelaire in 1863, with equal enthusiasm and anxiety. Planetary dysphoria, disenchantment with nature, and ecological grief are the latest forms of fear and loathing in the capitalist landscape. Hence, the increasing relevance of environmental history.

With this in mind, the course maps key moments in the development of environmental aesthetics in architecture over the *longue durée*, from the beginning of modernism around 1848 to postmodernity. Each class pairs an architect with a concept of environmental mediation. The sequence is organized around four periods: Revolutionary Utopia, Heroic Internationalism, Postwar Welfare, and Neoliberal Disenchantment. From this totality of mediating devices, we unfold a history of the modernist idea of the environment.

Throughout the course, students are encouraged to consider the following questions: how should architecture reflect society's relationship to the environment, how should it constitute a critique of that relationship, and how should it predict a collective ideal?

Sessions*I. Revolutionary Utopia:*

1. Fourier and the Co-op Panopticon
2. Morris and the Crystal Palace
3. Geddes and the Valley Section

II. Heroic Internationalism:

4. Wright and the Prairie Bungalow
5. Taut and the City Crown
6. Ginzburg and the Social Condenser

III. Postwar Welfare:

7. Smithsons and the Ecological Doorstep
8. Rossi and the Analogous Type

9. Siza and the Proletarian Island

IV. *Neoliberal Disenchantment:*

10. Banham and the Gizmo Bubble
11. Venturi & Scott Brown and the Bill-ding-board
12. Koolhaas and the Schizoid Skyscraper

Keywords

Architecture, Dialectical criticism, Environmental aesthetics, Modern/postmodern urbanization.

Learning Prerequisites

Recommended courses

Preparation for design and research studios that reflect on cross-scale relationships and the environmental backgrounds of architectural form. Provides a methodological basis for the *Enoncel# the#orique de master* and the orientation Project Urbain. Content is closely related to the teaching unit UE U: Cartography (AR-476), which teaches a more practical and design-oriented method of environmental analysis.

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 architectural projects as environmental totalities.

Teaching methods

This course uses a method of dialectical criticism that aims to excavate hidden relations and associations between built form and its socio-economic and natural contexts. This means understanding the environment as a totality of evolving moments: nature, technology, production, reproduction, and aesthetics. When we apply this totality to a concrete location, a system emerges from the palimpsest of layers. We can then measure how a project inserts itself within that palimpsest and deduce a more or less conscious positionality, i.e., we can see architecture as a device of environmental mediation. Class lectures are modelled on this methodology. They present a selection of texts and projects, as well as maps produced by students of the teaching unit UE U: Cartography. A weekly bibliography is provided and prior reading is advised.

Assessment methods

Students are asked to submit an essay (ca. 3,000 words) in which they develop an environmental critique of an existing building or project following the course methodology. An oral exam based on the essay will be held at the end of the semester. All classes are held in English, and essays may be written in English or French. Students may work in pairs. Assessment: class participation: 10%; Paper abstract and outline: 10%; Paper coherence, pertinence of topic, depth of analysis: 40%; Oral Exam: 40%.

Supervision

Office hours	No
Assistants	No
Forum	No

Resources

Bibliography

- BENJAMIN, Walter. "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century: ExposÃ© of 1939." In *The Arcades*

Project, translated by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, 1999. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

- BERMAN, Marshall. "Goethe's Faust: The Tragedy of Development." In *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 1982. London: Penguin, 1982.
- HARVEY, David. "The Passage from Modernity to Postmodernity in Contemporary Culture." In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1990. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990.
- HEYNEN, Hilde, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Ressources en bibliothèque

- [The Arcades Project / Benjamin](#)
- [All that is solid melts into air / Berman](#)
- [The Condition of Postmodernity / Harvey](#)
- [Architecture and Modernity / Heynen](#)

Références suggérées par la bibliothèque

- [Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle / Benjamin](#)
- [Tout ce qui est solide se volatilise / Berman](#)

Notes/Handbook

Detailed syllabus with dedicated class readings provided upon enrolment.

Websites

- <https://barbaramacaescosta.info/EnvironmentalAesthetics>

Moodle Link

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