

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
Courses	2 weekly
Number of positions	

Summary

Theory course on modernist environmental aesthetics in architecture.

Content

"Happy are those ages", said Georg Lukács, "when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths--ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own." The world and the self are sharply distinct but never strangers, every action feels complete in sense and for the senses, abstract reason and sensuous experience are one.

Modernity, on the other hand, is an age of separations. Separations and alienations that make the world appear abstracted from human subjectivity--I say "appear" because it could be argued that this abstraction is an illusion, the visible fragment of a whole whose ties with the rest are unreadable. As has often been stated, never has the world been so densely connected, so thoroughly humanized, so artificially ours, and yet even the objects and institutions of our making appear technocratic, conventional, and estranged.

"By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent," said Charles Baudelaire in 1863, "the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable." For Lukács, modernity signalled this historical loss of totality, a severance between the individual and the universal that art should attempt to (re)mediate. In this wishful reconciliation, modern art would become "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God."

This course maps a narrative of architectural modernism from the problematic tensions it engendered between buildings and their environments. Each class pairs an architect with a concept of environmental mediation, from around 1848 to postmodernity. The sequence is organized in four periods: Revolutionary Utopia, Heroic Internationalism, Postwar Welfare, and Neoliberal Disenchantment. Throughout the course, students will consider 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/project a collective ideal?

Sessions*I. Revolutionary Utopia*

1. Fourier and the Co-op Panopticon
2. Morris and the Artisan Cottage
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 Habitat Threshold
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 context debates.

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 *Enoncé théorique de master* and the orientation *Projet Urbain*. Content is closely related to the teaching unit UE U: Cartography (AR-476), which offers a more practical and design-oriented version of the same critical question and method.

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

The course offers a method of dialectical criticism that aims to excavate hidden relations between buildings and their environments. This means understanding the environment as a totality of evolving moments, including: nature, technology, production, reproduction, and aesthetics. Class lectures are modelled on this method and 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 architectural project following the course methodology. An abstract must be submitted for feedback mid-semester and an oral exam based on the essay will be held at the end. 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: Exposé of 1939." In *The Arcades Project*, translated by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, 14-26. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1939].
- BERMAN, Marshall, "Introduction" and "Goethe's Faust: The Tragedy of Development" in *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 15-86. London: Penguin, 1982.

- HARVEY, David, "The Passage from Modernity to Postmodernity in Contemporary Culture" in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 3-120. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990.

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://modernityae.com>

Moodle Link

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