

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 Lukacs, "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, reason and experience are one.

Modernity, on the other hand, is an age of separations. No other period has been so densely connected, so thoroughly humanized, so artificially ours; and yet, even the objects and institutions of our making appear abstract, technocratic, alienated. For Lukacs, 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."

In Rousseau's modernity, individuals were "forced to be free." While the epic hero in premodern literature represented a collectivity, the hero of the modern metropolis is always solitary, problematical and must always stand in opposition to his setting, to nature or society. Odysseus stood for, and with, Ithaca; Baudelaire stands for, and by, himself--even as he strolls through the Parisian crowds. So, too, is the architecture object. Severed from the totality of the city, it must now set forth to "prove its soul" in the emptiness of the world. Premodern architecture had totality as a given, the modern object seeks totality as an aim.

This course offers a critical history of architectural modernism by mapping crucial moments of this recurring debate over the interrelationship and opposition between the object and urban organization. Each class pairs an architect with a concept of mediation, spanning from the nineteenth century to postmodernity. The sequence is organized in four periods: Bourgeois Utopias, Heroic Internationalism, Postwar Welfare, and Neoliberal Disenchantment. Throughout the course, students will consider the following questions: how does architecture reflect a social relation to the environment, should it constitute a critique of said relation, and can it project a collective ideal?

Sessions*I. Bourgeois Utopias*

1. Ledoux, or the Primitive Hut
2. Morris, or the Artisan Cottage
3. Geddes, or the Valley Section

II. Heroic Internationalism

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

III. Postwar Welfare

7. Smithsons, or the Ecological Threshold

- 8. Rossi, or the Historical Type
- 9. Siza, or the Proletarian Island

IV. Neoliberal Disenchantment

- 10. Banham, or the Gizmo Bubble
- 11. Venturi & Scott Brown, or the Bill-ding-board
- 12. Koolhaas, or 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 *Enonc  th orique de master* and the orientation *Cities& Territories*. 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 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, 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.
- HEYNEN, Hilde, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Ressources en bibliothèque

- [Find the references at the Library](#)

Notes/Handbook

Detailed syllabus with dedicated class readings provided upon enrolment.

Websites

- <https://modernityae.com>

Moodle Link

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