



U of U • College of Architecture + Planning • Spring Semester 2010  
arch 6971 : Final Design Studio • Critic : Julio Bermúdez

**VAS**  
*Voluntary Architectural Simplicity*

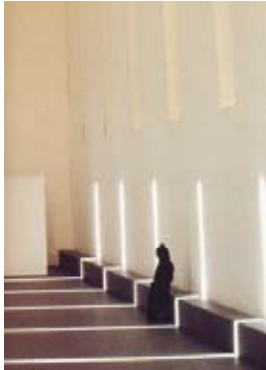


## **REALITY**



*Rembrandt*

*Claudio Silvestrin*



Postmodern apathy notwithstanding, we are experiencing a fragmented and chaotic reality acted out in massively irresponsible behaviors across the Earth. Our world is shrinking under the merciless assault of our polluting and wasteful habits. Habits that come out of accepting a life in the fast lane under the mantra of more, bigger, faster, better, and cheaper. Habits that keep on failing to provide what they promise and instead deliver only more unmet needs, grief and stress. Despite the promises heralded by the rising information age, continuous scientific breakthroughs, the prowess of technological evolution, and the myth of infinite growth and rationality, we always find ourselves returning, increasingly more frustrated, to the same ancient existential dilemmas born out of just being alive and trying to attain some peace, security, and contentment. Little, if any, have we advanced in these simple matters. Escaping this fact into the carefully crafted distractions geared to our most superficial desires and exercised through unchecked consumerism never quite works either. Worse still, we are beginning to see what some of these habits have brought us: global warming, unspoken poverty co-existing with opulent greed, violence, AIDS, terrorism, war, ecological devastation, and economic instability at a planetary scale. Although it is hard to admit it, we ourselves have been all too often shy accomplices of this state of affairs. Confused, distracted and overwhelmed by the neurotic complexity of it all, we feel little more than irrelevant peons, floating astray in the rough seas of 21st Century civilization.

## **ARCHITECTURE**

*Mies van der Rohe*



Architecture, the art of establishing the material order of a cultural order, cannot avoid but to reflect and respond to its surrounding reality. Not surprising, current reality is requiring architectural responses defying all past traditions. Contemporary architects increasingly find themselves with the task of redefining architecture's spirit (utilitas, firmitas, and venustas), based on the needs and visions of our seemingly ungraspable culture.



Richard Meier

Alberto Campo Baeza



Professing architecture is no light matter in these circumstances. True professing demands that we hold a position, stand for something, make a vow in the name of a deep seeded passion for architecture, our fellow beings and Earth. Professing also requires being able to technically and competently respond to architectural challenges. Professing is where belief and knowledge come together in the here and now of present reality. Hence, uncritically adopting off-the shelf Postmodern, Modern, Deconstructivist, and any other pre-digested style appears blantly superficial and irresponsible.

So, how are we to profess architecture facing *this* reality? Can we truly make a committed and caring act in which we use our architectural skills for the sake of improving whatever is trusted to us as architects? Can we make a difference?

## THE VAS STUDIO

The studio will take on this question professionally. And, following the two meanings behind professing, it will move simultaneously in two parallel paths of commitment and embodiment.



Rick Joy

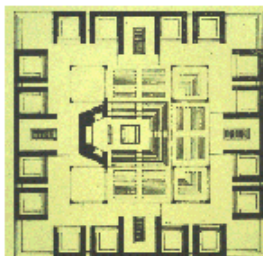


KHR

Yoshio Taniguchi



Louis Kahn



The philosophical path will offer a *voluntary and critical direction that resists the forces of today's zeitgeist*. The disciplinary path will lead towards *architectural clarity, sustainability, and essentialism as concrete ways to embody this resistance*. The two-path road points towards a renewed aesthetics and ethics of 'less is more'. It encourages a turn towards the minimal, the fundamentally uncomplicated, the direct and conscious as a potent antidote to our culture of excess, schizophrenia and unconsciousness. We are talking of an architecture of presence. We will use Duane Elgin's book "*Voluntary Simplicity*" as a source of clarity and inspiration along this road.

The studio will then engage the *hypothesis of simplicity* as a critical, insight seeking, disciplinary and conscious inquiry to confront the professional challenges of today. Starting the journey demands that first and foremost, we do it *voluntarily*. We must freely chose it from within and not feel that it is imposed on us from without. Second, this choice has to come out of some *personal realization (conscious or unconscious) of its necessity*. In other words, we cannot select it as a result of nostalgia or reactionary ideology. Rather it should *grow out of* our direct experience of the situation itself. "Growing-out-of" something means to have been in the midst of it and come out of it by first hand learning and effort. It signifies to embrace (and not to throw away) what has been overcome. In having been intimate with it at one time, we have understood it well enough to attempt to transcend it without narrow-minded resentment. In other

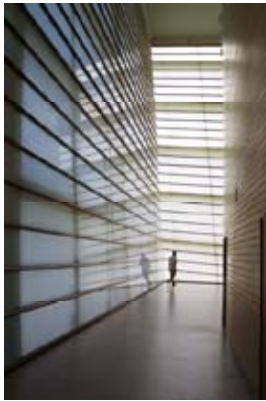


Le Corbusier

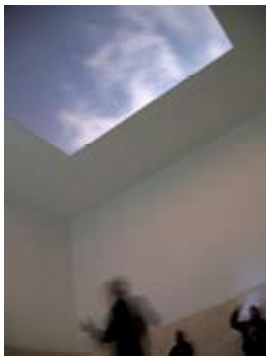


Herzog-de Meuron

Rafael Moneo



## TEAM WORK



James Turrell

## PEDAGOGY & SCHEDULE

words, it is not a position arrived by intellectual reasoning or negative emotions. Rather it is a decision founded in a concrete and personal experience of growth.

Thus, choosing simplicity grows out of our direct experience of living under unnecessary complexity. Seeking focus comes out of being tired of living in distraction. Pursuing essentialism grows out of realizing that superficiality offers little. And so on, the desire for clarity grows out of confusion, conservation out of wastefulness, austerity out of excess, integrity out of fragmentation, self-restraint out of empty consumerism and spending, poetry out of crude materialism, presence and slowness out of the fleetingness of a fast life, committed participation out of passive following, and the minimum out of overcrowded and cluttered conditions.

We call the resulting architecture, *Voluntary Architectural Simplicity* or **VAS** for short. The **VAS** Studio is wherein **VAS** is practiced by making use of basic or essential architectural principles, rules, ideas. Two disclaimers here. First, the **VAS** Studio is consciously naïve in seeking to resist the overwhelming forces of our time. It just makes no sense to do so. Second, the **VAS** Studio is not self-righteous. Although it claims to do what is right, it does not see this path as the only or best path to address today's challenges. It only points at one potential way of professing architecture. It just professes, and in so doing offers, humbly, Voluntary Architectural Simplicity.

The work will be done in teams. This is the graduate program's final studio and will require a very high level of architectural response, development, and communication. It is just impossible to attain this goal by one individual working alone. This fact reflects actual architectural practice, a largely cooperative enterprise in which different people bring their expertise and ideas into a project. Working in teams will also afford students the opportunity to develop collaborative skills and their own strengths as individuals.

Students enter the final design studio after successfully completing seven or eight design studios. As a result, this class assumes a fundamental level of knowledge, skill and awareness related to architectural design. ARCH 6971 will build upon this design foundation.

To carry out this agenda, the semester will be broken down in 5 pedagogic segments with the following general characteristics:



Ryoanji



Edward Hopper

Luis Barragan



Phase	Topic	Duration	from-to	Grade (%)
Par 0	VAS Theory & Trip Preparation	2 weeks	late December	N/A
Part 1	Field Trip to France & Holland	2 weeks	30 Dec – 15 Jan	5.0%
Part 2	Trip Analysis/Synthesis	2 weeks	18 Jan – 29 Jan	10.0%
Part 3	Programming & Site Analysis	2 weeks	1 Feb – 10 Feb	15.0%
	Schematic Design	4.5 weeks		35.0%
Part 4	• Parti	2 weeks	15 Feb – 3 Mar	15.0%
	• Schematic Design	2.5 weeks	5 Mar – 17 Mar	20.0%
Part 5	Design Development & Presentation	3 weeks	29 Mar – 18 April	35.0%

**Part 1 (VAS Theory + Trip Preparation)** asks students to spend a portion of their Semester Break getting acquainted with VAS theory and attitude. The reason for this unusual request is to free time so we can invest it in the design phase of the studio later on as well as to best use our time while abroad. The objective of **Part 2 (Foreign Trip Analysis-Synthesis)** is to make students reflectively digest their visit to Europe. **Part 3 (Programming & Site Analysis)** demands the study of the fundamental conditions shaping the building to be designed. **Part 4 (Schematic Design)** engages students in a design and theoretical investigation of architectural issues in the context of the given problem and using a design method based on analog-digital media migrations. **Part 5 (Design Development & Presentation)** is devoted to the development of the schematic design by focusing on experiential and tectonics issues. A detailed schedule of the studio is available on the course website.

## SITE & BUILDING PROGRAM



Stéphane Beel

We will design the *Theopraxis Institute*, an ethical-spiritual institution with global reach founded upon the premises laid out in Michael Benedikt's book "God is the Good We do". The character and mission of this project, its scale (around 30,000 sq.ft.), location (Amsterdam), and unique program will provide us with an excellent vehicle to test and develop **VAS** architecture.

## TRAVELING ABROAD

Louis Kahn



We will spend 2 weeks in France and Holland in early January. There are many reasons for traveling abroad. Arguably, the most important one is making visible the invisible layers of social, cultural and architectural conditioning that govern our ordinary lives. In so doing, it has the potential to deliver students into the open space of creative yet critical innocence that is the hallmark of not only great architectural expertise, but also of getting at the root of life-long learning, social interaction, and cultural maturity. This is, however, only a possibility that depends on each student's honest effort to be sensible to the multiple situations they will surely encounter.

**EVALUATION**



Jean Nouvel



Kazuyo Sejima



Philip Johnson



Andrew Wyeth



Aldo Rossi

Peter Zumthor



All students are required to present their work for evaluation at the scheduled jury or review time. Late or incomplete work will be graded down. Incompletes will be given only for well substantiated reasons (e.g., documented illness). The student is responsible for knowing what happens during class meetings whether or not she/he attends.

Given the final nature of this studio, it is expected that the work produced fulfills the highest standards and can stand in depth professional/academic scrutiny in an open jury and public exhibit.

The final grade for the studio will be obtained by compounding the grades of the five assigned pedagogic units as described in attached sheet. Studio work and participation as well as the student's evolution over the semester will be taken into account. The course follows the official University Grading Policy, that is:

- A range: represents excellent performance, superior achievement (outstanding work)
- B range: represents good performance, substantial achievement (above average work)
- C range: represents standard performance and achievement (meets class requirements)
- D range: represents substandard performance and achievement (not passing)
- E : represents unsatisfactory performance and achievement (failed; no credit)

The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in the class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability Services, 162 Olpin Union Building, 581-5020 (V/TDD). CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations.

All written information in this course can be made available in alternative format with prior notification to the Center for Disability Services.