SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
ARCH 4270-001, ARCHITECTURAL THEORY AND CRITICISM

Course Syllabus

Spring Semester 2011, 10:45 am to 12:05 pm, MW, Arch 228

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On Architectural Theory

Lurking beneath almost any writing or pronouncement on architecture, especially those aspiring to theory is frequently a quest for some overarching construct of the world that will guide and be reflected in architecture. Behind every aphorism, maxim, and dictum, if not every rule of thumb, is some nascent “grand theory”.

The word “theory” comes from the Latin theoria, in turn adopted from the Greek theoros, which means “spectator, envoy”. Its base, theasthai, means to “look upon, contemplate”. The English meaning of theory is a conception or mental scheme of something to be done, or a method of doing it, or a systematic statement of rules or principles to be followed.

The English word “practice” is adopted from the Latin practicus and from the Greek praktikos, meaning “record, action”, and from prattein, meaning to “do, act”. Practice also means the habitual doing or carrying on of something, or a customary or constant action.

As architecture is both a discipline and a profession, this course will examine architectural theories in relation to practice. Most architects say they have a foot in both worlds, with principles guiding action and experience confirming the appropriateness of such action and the principles behind it. A basic assumption by architects is that theory is a “thing that guides” action. Theory and practice form the counterpoint of architecture . . . or designing and building . . . it is always out of this bi-polarity that architecture can be comprehended, that the story of architecture as idea and reality can be told.

In everyday terms we might say that practical knowledge is “knowing how” and theoretical knowledge is “knowing that or what”. Architecture utilizes both, and the balance between them depends on the thrust of an architect’s practice, from the more practical “knowing how” to the more theoretical “knowing that”.

Theory also develops ideas and terminology for the discussion of architecture, both among professionals and the public. What we can build depends on the nature of the ideas and words we can use to discuss our work. It is therefore a vital task of theory to discover, present and gain acceptance for new ideas. Several theoretical texts will be read to see how they attempt to accomplish these tasks. It is hoped you will come to see that architecture is a worldview, a lens through which the entirety of human activity can be viewed.
Course Introduction

This course is designed to help you see the way writing and theory can serve you as tools in the design process, professional practice, and the way you engage in the world around you. Writing can introduce you to more conscious living, tap unused resources that lie dormant within you, and can make you a more valuable and effective member of an architectural design team.

The writing you will do will help you free up your writing style, expand the genres of writing you can master, and consider ways you can use writing to open up your creativity, enable you to process and record your ideas, help you get jobs. It will explore theoretical concepts and their application to your design work. Writing is not the enemy. Hopefully, you will make writing your friend.

This course introduces theory and architectural criticism and demonstrates their application to both communication in the field or with other practitioners and clients, and to the development of your personal philosophy as an architect.

Critical reading

The type of reading you will be required to do in this class moves beyond finding information or locating an author's purpose or identifying main ideas (as useful as these skills might be) and dig deep in theoretical texts to ferret out meaning, systems of relationships between ideas, and examine your own response to these ideas and their impact on the world around them. In short, critical reading requires that you question intensely.

For critical reading, you cannot sit back and wait for the author to tell you a story, what the writing has to say. Reading is a sort of social interaction which requires that you set to work as the author is “silent” to speak in their place, to make your own conclusions and synthesis, and follow your own agenda. You might imagine that you are engaged in a conversation with someone (Corbusier for instance) and once he has completed what he wants to say to you, you are in a position to speak back, to say something of your own. If you have no response, you are readily lazily and need to instead, read critically to formulate a response.

Writing: During this semester we will explore a variety of different types of writing—descriptive, reflective, theoretical, argumentative, always trying to relate our readings and writings to the context of your studio experience, in our classroom discussions and your readings in theory. This will include analysis of architecture, cities and theoretical texts and the formulation of reasoned responses in concise written form.

An underlying theme that will run through every writing assignment or exercise is that you will learn to write an argument. This requires clarity of thinking, a clear and succinct choice of words, and the development of an argument with strong supporting evidence. This does not mean that you will become better debaters by the end of the semester, but that you will be able to more clearly describe your ideas, communicate...
your ideas in written documents or oral presentations because they will be based on a sound argument that is communicated visually and through writing.

Among the movements in architectural thinking that played a significant role during the 20th century and continue to influence contemporary work that we will include are the following:

Modernism: As exemplified by Le Corbusier’s classic text Towards a New Architecture this movement emerged as a response to accelerated industrialization and the social changes that accompanied this transformation.

Structuralism: This philosophical movement attempts to discover formal patterns underlying a wide variety of social phenomena from myths to poetry. In architecture one of its expressions was neo-rationalism, represented by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi and his concept of typology.

Postmodernism: This catch-all term has many meanings, but it will be used here to signify a new (after Modernism) appreciation of the social construction of virtually every type of human activity and the ambiguities that result from this view. One of the earliest advocates of this attitude was Robert Venturi, whose book Complexity and Contradiction explores the essential role of ambiguity in architecture.

Post-structuralism/Deconstruction: These terms loosely describe the work of a group of philosophers who analyze written texts and other social artifacts to reveal the biases and expressions of political power they conceal. The architect best known for applying these ideas in our field is Peter Eisenman.

**Communication Emphasis**

Architecture 4270 will explore the full range of communication modes used in the practice of architecture including:

- Communicating architectural concepts clearly, concisely, and effectively in both speech and writing.
- Developing critical reading and writing skills.
- Understanding some of the main theoretical currents of the twentieth century in architecture.
- Analyzing built works and question the ideas and view of practice they represent.
- Learning a schema for the analysis of architectural texts for analysis, evaluation and comparison.
- Integrating non-verbal communication skills in presentation and analysis.
- Integrating written language with graphics in professional communications, the relationship between image and text.
- Learning the skills to refine, revise and edit communication projects to meet professional standards.
Assignments

1. Personal statement 10 Points
   a. Reflection of your personal approach to design or your philosophy about design
   b. Reflection of your personal philosophy about the role of design in the world surrounding you.
   c. Reflection of the design theories that most closely correspond to your own attitudes about design.

2. Short essay responses to two texts (20 points each) 40 points total
   d. Critical book review
   e. Relation to personal philosophy
   f. Corbusier, Huxtable texts

3. Final project (written final report about integrative studio project)
   g. Argument paper 50 Points
   h. Descriptive writing
   i. Annotated bibliography
   j. Precedent analysis
   k. Integrated with final studio project
   l. Revision (must revise one section)
   m. Visual component

4. Oral presentation of chapter/essay section 20 points
   Each of you must sign up for an oral presentation that you will give in groups of two or three. Each group will teach one essay (from the list below). You will analyze and teach using written texts (class members will read the essay and write a critical response sheet in addition to a presentation assessment) visual material (video, photographs or sketches) that analyzes the material visually, and an oral explanation/presentation. You will be graded on what you say and how you say it, and the way you communicate your ideas visually—you must have a strong visual component.

5. Critical response forms for articles/essays 35 Points
   n. Critical assessments of the reading.

6. In class writing assignments 15 Points

Total Points 170 Points

Required Readings


Essays for group presentations/class discussion:
Aldo Rossi. The Architecture of the City (only chapter 1)

- Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space
- Bernard Tschumi, “The Architectural Paradox”
- Peter Eisenman, “Post Functionalism”
- Michel Foucault, “Space, Knowledge and Power”
- Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”
- Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition
- George Baird, “La Dimension Amoureuse”
- Juhani Pallasmaa, Encounters.


Instructor Absence and Communication

Faculty members are involved in scholarly and creative endeavors, professional and theoretical practice, professional service, and other activities. As such, the instructor may be absent from time to time during the semester.

Email is an official means of notification for both the university, college, and this course. Please make sure you regularly check your college account, or have email forwarded from that account to your regular address, to ensure you receive all information concerning the conduct, meetings, and assignments for the course.

Access to the Course

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