ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM IN AMERICA 1850-2012 [2014]

Columbia Barnard Course V3901

Instructor: Suzanne Stephens

Hours: Thursday 11:00-1:00 p.m.

Course Description: This seminar investigates the criteria for judging architecture and urban design in the last 150 years in America. In doing so, the class will explore the values (such as functionalism, organicism), principles (compositional, contextual, etc.) and intellectual thought (such as idealism, positivism, phenomenology, structuralism, and post-structuralism) that shaped the criteria for evaluating the buildings. Seminar students will criticize the written results in order to arrive at an understanding about how architectural criticism could be improved.

The focus is on “applied” criticism in magazines and newspapers, where the buildings are evaluated according to criteria derived from theoretical principles peculiar to a certain time. During the seminar students analyze the critical essays to isolate those principles and criticize their effectiveness, while placing them within historical and philosophical frameworks. At the end of the semester, students themselves will criticize a contemporary work of architecture in New York for a seminar presentation.

The seminar readings: Readings include essays by seminal 19th and 20th century architects and architectural historians, theorists and journalistic critics, such as Viollet-le-Duc, Montgomery Schuyler, Lewis Mumford, Philip Johnson, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Colin Rowe, Mark Wigley, Catherine Ingraham, Michael Sorkin, Michael Speaks, Peggy Deamer, Mary McLeod, and George Baird. Interspersed among these essays are pertinent readings from the works of philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, Emerson, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Roland Barthes.

Course Requirements: There is no final paper and there is no exam. Instead, a one or one-and-a-half page paper is due each week, in which the student evaluates the readings according to an assigned topic. The last paper will be a short one-page critique of a work of architecture written by the student. Occasionally, the students will deliver short presentations (with slides) in lieu of the weekly paper. Another form of presentation is the debate, which students, divided up into opposing teams, will participate in during the last part of the semester.

Students will be graded on papers, class participation and the presentations. Readings may be changed during the semester, and substitutions can be made if a student has a particular interest in a topic not on the list.

Class attendance is seriously mandatory. One unexcused absence results in a lowered grade for the papers (e.g., A to B) due that week, plus a failing grade for that week on class participation. Two unexcused absences will result in a lowered grade for the course
(e.g. A to B). Three unexcused absences constitute a failing grade. To arrange an excused absence, you must discuss the matter with the instructor before the class. Notifying the instructor by e-mail the day of the class is unacceptable. If the student can’t make the class due to illness, he or she must call the instructor before class (212-684-4377 or 212-904-3698).

Papers have to be submitted each Thursday during class, unless a student has asked for an extension (one or two days for special circumstances). If the paper is late without permission, the paper will automatically be lowered a grade.

**Learning objectives for seminar**

Students should be able to:

- analyze readings, organize, and write brief critiques.
- verbally present independent or group analyses and research using multiple media formats.
- formulate and conduct advanced research related to architectural criticism in the U.S.
- demonstrate an understanding of the history, role, and types of architectural criticism in the U.S.

**SYLLABUS:** American Architectural Criticism

[READER: refers to the reader of xeroxed articles, which can be purchased, and is on reserve at Barnard Library. BOOK: refers to a book of essays on reserve, Barnard Library, or in some cases Avery.]

**I 19th Century Theoretical Groundwork**


**II A New Building Type: The Tall Office Building**


Frank Lloyd Wright: “In the Cause of Architecture,” I (1908), in Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings, ed. Bruce Pfeiffer, v.1, 1894-1930 (1992), pp. 84-100. [BOOK]


III Columbian Exposition


William Dean Howells, “Letters of an Altrurian Traveler,” 1893. [READER]

Paul Bourget “Farewell to the White City,” (1893) in Architecture in America, eds. Coles and Reed, 1961, pp. 185-86 [BOOK]


Louis Sullivan, “Chapter 15, Retrospect,” in America Builds, ed. L. Roth, pp.361-64. [BOOK]
IV New York Skyscrapers of the Twenties and Thirties


Douglas Haskell, “The Filing-Cabinet Building,” Creative Art, (June 1932), pp. 446-49. [READER]


V International Style and Modern Architecture in America


Catherine Bauer, “Exhibition of Modern Architecture, Museum of Modern Art,” Creative Art, v. 10 (March 1932), pp. 201-06. [READER]


**VI Debates at Mid-Century: Historicism/Vernacular**


Colin Rowe, La Tourette,” in *Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Others Essays*, 1976, pp.GET PAGES. [BOOK]


Philip Johnson: “100 Years, Frank Lloyd Wright and Us,” 1957, in *Philip Johnson Writings*, 1979, (pp.192-98). [BOOK]

**VII Architecture and Language**


**VIII Post-Structuralist Influence on Criticism**


Rowan Moore, “All That’s Solid Melts into Air,” *Blueprint*, (April 1990), pp. 26-31 [READER]

**IX Experiential Criticism: Bilbao and the Getty and Beyond**


**X Typology Today**


Hawthorne, Christopher, Barnes Foundation Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, ArchitecturalRecord.com (from print June 2012 page 46)


XI Various Genres of Architectural Criticism

Nietzsche, “Why I Write Such Good Books” in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968) [BOOK]


http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100014241278873232751104578151653883688578.html


XII Criticism in a Computerized Global Age


XIII Student Critiques

Each student will select a building or an interior in New York to criticize and present during the last class. The selection must be approved by the instructor.