

Course Syllabus

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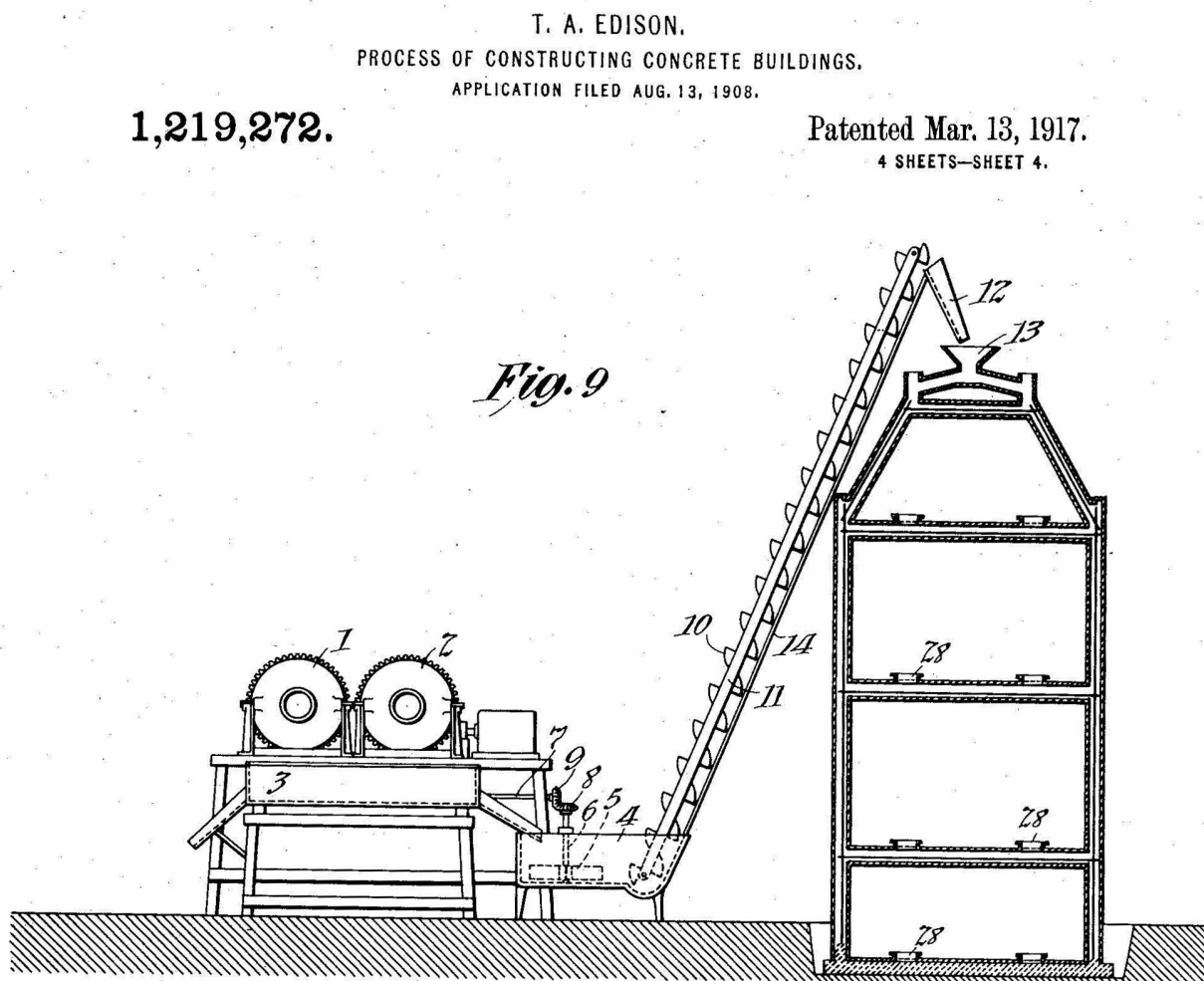
OUT OF DATE:

Expired Patents and Their Unrealized Histories since the 19th century

Instructor: Anthony Acciavatti, PhD

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Fridays, 11AM-1PM, 200 Buell Hall



Above: Patented drawing from Thomas A. Edison's "Process of Constructing Concrete Buildings" (US 1219272), 13 March 1917.

What if the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had developed “soft infrastructures” and “living systems” for dealing with the changing flows of the Mississippi in and around New Orleans? What if Henry Ford had used soy protein for automotive parts *and* synthetic meats in the 1940s? Or what if South Asian nation states had adopted the Ganges Water Machine model in the 1970s to address critical water shortages in urban areas? What do these three, seemingly disparate examples all have in common? Each is based on a patent or series of patents that were never adopted for one reason or another. These are just a few of the questions that animate this course: *Out of Date*. Historians ask the why and the how, but they are rarely trained to visualize what a city, a meal, or a landscape might have looked like had a particular technology or living system been adopted. Rather than shy away from such counterfactuals, we will explore and seek to visualize these historical what-ifs by taking a comparative, global perspective on the history of patents as visual and textual artifacts.

Paradigmatically suited to rallying industries and individuals alike, lucid, overt, and even lunatic at times, patents offer clear if overlooked speculative tools by which to retrieve the past and imagine future scenarios. And yet, while vast expenditures for the past two centuries have been invested in new inventions and designs for nearly everything under the sun, we have no equivalent research into patents that collect dust in archives or rarely show up in Google Patent searches. We know very little about why and how specific patents are not adopted; we do not know if they were ahead of their time; we are without progressive methods for their applicability and relevance to contemporary concerns. This course—a two-pronged, multi-disciplinary investigation, pairing critical and imaginative techniques of researching and making together—will reanimate the historical context of patents and situate unrealized patents at the intersection of contemporary research on cities and the environment.

REMODELING HISTORY

The adoption and rejection of patents and technologies are historically and culturally specific. In order to redress this lacuna in our historical imagination, the course will undertake a collaborative, worldwide survey of patents that will provide a database of patented dreams—a Counterfactual Cloud—from which the students will construct alibis and discourses around patents to repurpose and adopt overlooked designs and inventions to tell alternative futures. Because patents, by their very nature, are grounded in history and include numerous citations and references to that which has come before them, the Counterfactual Cloud will serve as the database from which we will collectively animate counterfactual histories through writing, imaging, and modeling.

Students will collectively rewrite and remodel the past using a set of interrelated patents. Through weekly readings and writings along with four workshops over the course of the term, participants will not only rethink how we narrate and visualize the past, but also question the conventions of historical research and representation.

Over the course of the semester, participants will develop their own research project that will contribute to our Counterfactual Cloud. These may take the form of drawings, para-fictional patents, models, or animations. The final project will be determined in consultation with the instructor.

COURSE STRUCTURE

This course is structured in three parts:

- First, we will examine different techniques of conducting historical research using patents.
- Second, each week we will read a primary and secondary text as well as closely examine a specific patent related to the texts. We will collectively hallucinate on what might have been had this patent been adopted.
- Third, in consultation with the instructor, participants will be choosing a particular patent that they will study carefully throughout the term and imagining what a city, a landscape, a block, or even an entire region might have looked like had such a patent been adopted. We will carefully study why this particular patent was said to *fail*.

COURSE GOALS

- We will study the transformation of patented technologies since the 19th century
- We will investigate the role of these transformations in relationship to political, cultural, and economic changes taking place in specific contexts and periods
- The course will prepare students to study the intended and unintended uses of technologies in other contexts and in disciplines ranging from urban design and architecture to agriculture and geography

No prior knowledge of the history of science and technology or architecture and urban design is required to enroll in this course.

Assessment and Grading

20% Class participation

20% Weekly Anonymous Writing Responses posted to Online Discussion Forum by Thursday at 9PM EST (minimum of 250-words)

60% Final Project

1. **Introduction** (January 25)
2. **Sleuthing Unrealized Histories** (February 1)
3. **Intellectual Property and Confiscation of Creativity** (February 8)
4. **Material I: Concrete** (February 15)
5. **Material II: Plastics** (February 22)
6. **Infrastructures I: Centralized** (March 1)
7. **Infrastructures II: Decentralized** (March 8)
8. **Building Structures + Midterm Review** (March 15)
9. **Spring Break** (March 22)
10. **Resource Extraction** (March 29)
11. **Wetlands** (April 5)
12. **Solar Power** (April 12)
13. **Research Presentations** (April 19)