OBJECTIVES

Few buildings among the histories of architecture have received as much attention as the Tower of Babel—or illustrate more vividly the ambiguities of architecture’s interdisciplinary appropriations.

Despite the proverbial failure of its builders’ ambitions, Babel has preserved with astonishing endurance its central position among the archetypal structures of architectural narrative. Maintaining a presence throughout the history of architectural thought, the Tower survives for centuries not as a physical object but through representations in text and image—representations that draw their didactic force directly from the absence of the building itself. Its exemplary non-existence is the very thing that lends such vigour to speculative reconstructions, charged all the while by its reputation as a building that by its sheer ambition drew upon itself the wrath of an almighty God. Exploiting the freedoms of its primarily textual conception, its architectural descriptions are invariably accompanied by implied prescriptions for contemporary practice.

This seminar examines the many lives of this extraordinary architectural figure. It studies the arenas of Babel’s appropriation—archaeological, art-historical, theoretical, theological, philosophical, ideological, and literary—as a means of understanding the multivalence of architectural ideas as they circulate within culture. It ends with Babel’s dramatic reassertion under the conditions of modernity as a marker both of aspiration and of doubt; and it aims to speculate on the Tower’s potential future.

REQUIREMENTS

The seminar meets once a week. A series of brief assignments animates engagement with class material and provides a foundation for discussion and for subsequent research either on an aspect of the appropriation of Babel itself or on the trajectory of a comparable architectural figure. Preliminary research is presented in class; projects that examine history’s engagement with the construction of contemporary architectural ideas are especially welcome. Students are encouraged to take advantage of materials in Columbia’s libraries; the class schedule incorporates sessions with the Avery Classics Collection and at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and students are directed toward additional materials at the Met Fifth Avenue and the Thomas J. Watson Library.

SCHEDULE

1. 9/4 — — 2019 MYTHS OF ORIGIN
2. 9/11 — — ARK BEFORE ARCHITECTURE
3. 9/18 — — BABYLON OR BABEL
4. 9/25 — — GENESIS, AGAIN
5. 10/2 — — BUILDING, IMAGE, TEXT
6. 10/9 — paper proposals due SPECULATIVE RECONSTRUCTION
7. 10/16 — ARCHAEOLOGIES
8. 10/23 Midterm Week — UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA
9. 10/30 — paper outlines due LONDON, PARIS, BERLIN, NEW YORK
10. 11/6 — presentations 1/3 METROPOLITAN ANXIETIES
11. 11/13 — presentations 2/3 THE LIBRARY AND BABEL
12. 11/20 — presentations 3/3
   11/27 Thanksgiving Break no class
   12/4 Finals Week no class
   12/11 — papers due

Kyle Dugdale
kyle.dugdale@columbia.edu
office hours by appmt
1. **2019 Traces of architecture’s history**

   No readings.

2. **MYTHS OF ORIGIN Beginnings and ends**

   Genesis 1 [date disputed], New Revised Standard Version.

   >> Choose three of these accounts of architectural beginnings. What are their ostensible ends?

3. **ARK BEFORE ARCHITECTURE Architecture before 1750**


   >> According to Rudofsky, “the question whether the Ark ought to be called a building or a nautical craft is redundant.” Is he right?

4. **BABYLON OR BABEL Textbook architecture**

   Study three of the following accounts—produced across a century of architectural-historical pedagogy—of what is ostensibly the same subject. What changes, and which narrative is more compelling?

   >> Avery Classics session.
5. **GENESIS, AGAIN**  
 **Biblical architectures and appropriations**


>> Post online five thumbnails of book covers that have appropriated the image of the Tower of Babel, with an accompanying assessment of the significance of the appropriation in each instance.

6. **BUILDING, IMAGE, TEXT**  
 **The mortality of architecture and the survival of an idea**


>> For an overview of a thousand years of Babel’s representation, browse the images in Helmut Minkowski, *Aus dem Nebel der Vergangenheit steigt der Turm zu Babel: Bilder aus 1000 Jahren*, on reserve.

7. **SPECULATIVE RECONSTRUCTION**  
 **Paper architectures**


>> Rare Book & Manuscript Library session.

8. **ARCHAEOLOGIES**  
 **Reconstructions of an idea**


>> Scan the Department of State’s exceedingly long Report on Damage to the Site of Babylon, Iraq (2010), and study Google Earth’s satellite imagery of the site of Babylon, coordinates N 32°32′11″, E 44°25′15″. What does the “view from above” reveal?
9. **UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA**  *Archetype, type, and antitype*


» In your own words, define type.

10. **LONDON, PARIS, BERLIN, NEW YORK**  *Monumental spectacle*


» Without reading cover to cover, compare the content, presentation, and role of architecture in the following exhibition catalogues, on reserve:


11. **METROPOLITAN ANXIETIES**  *Babylon, NY*


» Watch Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (Babelsberg, Germany: Universum Film, 1927), 148 minutes.

12. **THE LIBRARY AND BABEL**  *Architectural metaphor and its literary classifications*


And they said, *Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name.*