Ph.D. Colloquium

Theorizing Modernism and Avant-Garde: Modern Architecture and Theory in the Netherlands, France, and Germany, 1917-27

Modernism, the most significant aesthetic movement of the twentieth century, found expression across a range of forms, including architecture. While participants and critics associated the movement with innovation and the disruption of traditional aesthetic conventions, there is considerable dispute today about what modernism was. For example, did it focus on internal formal qualities or did it explore and disrupt the boundaries of disciplines, calling for the dissolution of art itself? Was it involved with fragmentation or pastiche (qualities now often associated with postmodernism), or did it seek to attain a new form of aesthetic unity or order, which in turn imposed new compositional constraints? Was it concerned with “truth” and “essence” or rather with multiple realities and appearances? Was it elitist in its formal abstraction and experimentation, or was it democratic and populist in its engagement with everyday life and mass culture?

This seminar addresses some of these questions by investigating the theoretical and ideological positions of several movements in modern architecture, during the years immediately following World War I. These include De Stijl in the Netherlands; Purism
and *L’Esprit Nouveau* in France; and Elementarism, the Bauhaus, and New Objectivity in Germany. The intention is not only to gain a deeper knowledge of these developments, but also to explore more broadly theoretical issues surrounding the concepts of “modernism” and “avant-garde” as they apply to architecture. In particular, the seminar will examine the tensions between formal autonomy and the role of technology and mass culture in architecture.

The first few weeks of the class will be spent studying a number of “classic” texts that attempt to characterize “modernism” and “avant-garde”, and which have gained almost iconic status, primarily in literature and cultural theory. For the most part, these writings are cited less frequently in architecture writing. Ironically it was not until the emergence of postmodernism that cultural theory became a major component of architecture discourse, with the result being that “postmodernism” and “deconstructivism” have been more clearly defined relative to poststructuralist theory (especially, the French Derridean strain), than modern architecture has been relative to broader theoretical conceptions of modernism. Indeed, it is that moment that the word “modernism” generally begins to replace terms such as “modern movement,” “modern architecture,” and “Neues Bauen” in architecture writing.

The remainder of the course is divided into three sections, exploring modern movements in the Netherlands, France, and Germany. The focus will be on analyzing primary texts. Secondary texts will be used for general background or for comparing interpretations of a movement with its own self-definition. In each of the three sections devoted to architecture, a few seminal projects or buildings will be analyzed, especially in terms of the relationship between theory and practice. The hope is that students will gain an understanding of how each group conceived its position and objectives and how these ideas relate to general theories of modernism and of the avant-garde. The intention is not “to apply” cultural theory to architecture, but rather to examine critically possible connections. Does the division that Peter Bürger and others have stipulated between modernism and avant-garde have any meaning in architecture? Can these terms be redefined to retain some productivity in architecture?

Enrollment: Besides doctoral students in the GSAPP, the seminar is open to doctoral candidates in art history and other related fields in GSAS.

Readings: Given the range of languages (and the fact that few of you will have mastered Dutch, German, and French), I have depended on English translations in this list. If you know the original language of a text, however, I would urge you to read the original. There is no substitute, and the emotional tone of manifestos often becomes lost in translation. Almost all original editions are available in Avery library (many are in the Rare Book Room).
Books marked with * have been ordered at Book Culture, 112th St., between Broadway and Amsterdam.

A number of books have also been placed on the seminar shelf in Avery Library, no. 350.

In general, if students have limited background in (or hazy memories of) the history of a particular architecture movement, they should read the relevant sections in "standard" architecture histories to familiarize themselves with basic chronology and sources. Although *Reyner Banham's Theory and Design in the First Machine Age (1960) may now seem dated, it is especially useful in the context of this course, given that Banham work depends heavily on readings of primary texts. Two indispensable sources for primary texts of the modern movement, which will be on the seminar shelf (if not permanent reserve) are:


Assignments: Students are expected to make several brief presentations and help lead discussion on specific readings in the course of the term. At least one of the presentations should be of a major representative building or design, showing images of the work as well as discussing its reception. Students will also be asked to write 2 brief critical papers and I longer essay on a topic relevant to each of the sections (one section may be skipped). These papers, especially the longer essay, may compare two movements’ ideas concerning a particular theme or problem. The short essays are due on the Friday following the last class of a section. The longer essay is to be turned in at the end of the semester.

Week 1
Introduction: Modernization, Modernity, Modernism

Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, rev. ed. (Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 208-09.


Mary McLeod, “Modernism,” in Forty Ways To Think About Architecture, ed. Iain Borden, Murray Fraser, and Barbara Penner (Chicester, West Suffolk: Wiley, 2014), pp. 185-93. A longer version of this essay will also be provided.

Recommended:

*Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 3-92. While the emphasis in this book is on literature not the visual arts, it is a useful survey of ideas.


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Week 2

Avant-Garde


Recommended:

Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity, pp. 95-132.


Recommended:


Note: The critical literature on Adorno is extensive, and I would especially recommend Terry Eagleton’s The Ideology of the Aesthetic, Martin Jay’s Adorno, Fredric
Jameson’s Marxism and Form, and Susan Buck-Morss, The Origins of Negative Dialectics as four useful starting points. For a synthetic reflection on Adorn’s aesthetic theory as it relates to architecture, see *Hilde Heynen’s Architecture and Modernity, pp. 174-200.

Week 4
Autonomy versus Mass Culture
Part II: Mass Culture


Recommended:


Additional Bibliography: Modernism/ Avant-Garde


Part II: De Stijl

Week 5
Intellectual Origins and Beginnings


De Stijl. Internationaal Maandblad voor nieuwe kunst, wetenschap en kultuur, ed. Theo van Doesburg, 1917-28, -32; rpt. (Amsterdam: Athenaeum and Polak and Van Gennep; The Hague: Bert Bakker, 1968). For an extensive anthology of selections, see Hans Jaffe, De Stijl (New York: Abrams, 1970). An index to De Stijl appears in Form (Cambridge), no. 6 (December 1967). While few students will be able to read the articles in Dutch, all should familiarize themselves with its contents and graphic presentation. For the first class on De Stijl, students should focus on the years 1917-22 and read the documents in Jaffe, pp. 35-179.


Recommended:


*Banham, pp. 139-200. More recent studies are more accurate guides to de Stijl, but Banham's account was innovative in its attempt to use Berlage as an intellectual source of both de Stijl and Dutch expressionism. This needs to be reassessed.

*Paul Overy, _D=Stijl_ (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991). This is a useful—and concise—historical account the movement, if you need general background.


**Week 6**

De Stijl and Modern Architecture, 1923-30

Rosenberg exhibition, Schroeder House, Oud’s housing (Hook of Holland, Kiekhoek, Stuttgart)

Theo van Doesburg, selected writings 1923-30, in Baljeu, pp. 131-86.

*Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (orig. ed. 1941; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 430-48, esp. 442-43. It is useful at this point to assess Giedion's cursory treatment of de Stijl, relative to the primary material that the class has examined.


Recommended:


Additional Bibliography: De Stijl


Index to and partial translations from *Mecano* (Hague/Paris). *Form*, no. 4, pp. 30-32.

Part III
France and L'Esprit Nouveau

Week 7
Purism

Note: Students should familiarize themselves with L'Esprit Nouveau. The original is in the rare book room at Avery and worth looking at. A reprint is available on the open shelves.


Recommended:

Le Corbusier (C. E. Jeanneret) and Amédée Ozenfant, La Peinture moderne (Paris: Crès, 1925).


Week 8

L’Esprit Nouveau: From the House to the City

Note: It’s assumed that everyone has read *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1986) or the new translation by John Goodman, *Toward an Architecture* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2007). Please skim through it, and reread the last two sections, “Mass-Production Houses” and “Architecture and Revolution.”


Recommended:


**Week 9**

Modern Architecture Accomplished: Le Corbusier’s Villas 1925-30

Four modes of composition; five points of modern architecture; La Roche-Jeanneret, Plainex, Cook, Garches, Savoye.


Recommended:


Additional Bibliography: Le Corbusier


Part IV

Germany: the Bauhaus, objectivism and elementarism, housing

Week 10

The Bauhaus

Walter Gropius, “Address to the Bauhaus Students” (1919); Gropius, “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus” (1923); Gropius, “Where Artists and Technicians Meet” (1925-26); Wassily Kandinsky, “The Value of the Teaching of Theory in Painting” (1926); Hannes Meyer, “Address to the Student Representatives at the Bauhaus” (1928); Ernst Kallai, “Ten Years of Bauhaus,” in Benton, Form and Function, pp. 78-80, 119-28, 147-51, 168-70, 172-75.


Recommended:


Week 11
Objectivism and Elementarism

G and Vesc [Veshch]


Index of and extracts from G, Form (Cambridge, Eng.), no. 3 (December 1966).


Recommended:

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Bann, pp. 51-64, 66-76.


*Wolf Tegethoff, "From Obscurity to Maturity: Mies van der Rohe's Breakthrough to Modernity," in Franz Schulze, ed., Mies van der Rohe: Critical Essays (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), pp. 28-57 (the first part of the article). This article is one of the few publications to discuss Mies van der Rohe's work during the G period. One of the issues to consider is whether Tegethoff's interpretation underplays the materialism of G.

Architettura nelle riviste d'avanguardia/Architecture in the Avant-Garde Magazines. Rassegna, year 4, no. 12 (December 1982). The brief descriptions at the back of this review are useful, and also in English.

Week 12

Housing: Das Neue Frankfurt and Weissenhof Seidlung


Recommended:


Mohr and M. Müller, Functionalität und Moderne, Das Neue Frankfurt und seine Bauten, 1925-33 (Cologne: Rudolf Müller, 1984).
Additional Bibliography: Weimar and German Modern Architecture


Ernst May und Das Neue Frankfurt 1925-1930 (Frankfurt: Deutsches Architekturmuseum, 1986-87).


Peter Noever, Die Frankfurter Küche von Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, n.d.).


**Week 13**

*Contemporary Interpretations of Modern Architecture*


Adolf Behne, *The Modern Functional Building*, trans. Michael Robinson (Santa Monica: Getty Research Institute, 1996). The introduction by Rosemarie Bletter is also highly recommended. This book is out-of-print, but if you can find a used copy, you may want to purchase it.


Recommended:
