

Course Syllabus

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING AND PRESERVATION

Fall 2019

A4429-1 Studies in Tectonic Culture Earthwork, Roofwork, and the Space of Public Appearance: Architecture in the Age of the Anthropocene

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Class Meetings: Wednesday, 11-1 pm, 412 Avery Hall

It is an ironic fact that the first edition of my *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* which in retrospect may be seen as a re-affirmation of the Modern Movement in its prime was published in 1980 in the same year as the first fully architectural Venice Biennale, which was curated by Paolo Portoghesi, under the slogan “The End of Prohibition and the Presence of the Past”, the first exhibition of the highly expression, soon to be known as Post Modern Architecture. Dis-affected by this manifestation, the center piece of which was the so-called Strada Novissima, built within the Arsenal as a hypothetical “new street,” flanked on both sides by scenographic “shop fronts” designed by the rising international star architects of the moment. I elected to resign from the international commissioning body as soon as I realized which way the wind was blowing.

In 1983, I attempted to set forth my objections to this stylistic postmodernist tour de force in a text entitled *Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, first published in Hal Foster’s postmodern anthology, entitled the *Anti-Aesthetic* which was published alongside the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s critique of the same manifestation, in which he makes the first use of his phrase, “the unfinished modern project.” My 6 Points were set out under the following headings: (1) Culture and Civilization, (2) The Rise and Fall of the Avant Garde, (3) Critical Regionalism and World Culture, (4) The Resistance of the Place Form, (5) Culture vs. Nature: Topography Context, Climate, Light and Tectonic Form and finally (6) The Visual vs. Tactile. Under point (4) I wrote: “The bounded place-form, in its public mode, is also essential to what Hannah Arendt has termed “the space of public appearance” since the evolution of legitimate power has always been predicated upon the existence of the “polis” and upon comparable units of institutional and physical form. While the political life of the Greek polis did not stem directly from the physical presence and representation of the city state, it displayed in contrast to the Megalopolis, the cantonal

attributes of urban density. Thus Arendt would continue in her magnum opus *The Human Condition* of 1958:

“The only indispensable material factor for the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men lived so close together that the potentialities of action are always present will power remain with them and the foundation of cities, which as city states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization, is therefore the most important material prerequisite for power.”

Apart from this categorical definition of Arendt’s “space of appearance,” another aspect of the 6 Points was point 5, evoking Topography, Context, Climate, Light and Tectonic Form, and it is this last which I would eventually focus on in a sequence of four lectures given at Rice University in 1986 devoted to tracing the evolution of a ‘poetics of construction in the history of the Modern Movement; the four lectures treating successively with the work of Auguste Perret, Mies van de Rohe, Louis Kahn and Jørn Utzon. This critical survey of the work of these four architects became the core of the book *Studies in Tectonic Culture* published in 1995; the four successive chapters, being preceded by an introduction, and two chapters devoted to the Anglo/ French Gothic Revival and the rise of Tectonic in German architectural culture, plus a treatment of Frank Lloyd Wright as a tectonic architect. In retrospect it is possible to see that both the French Gothic Revival, particularly adumbrated in the writings of Eugene Viollete-le-Duc and Carl Botticher’s evolution of the concept of tectonik in his 1946 Schinkelfest address finally published as part of his *Die Tektonik der Hellenen* of 1852, were driven by the same recognition that one had to come to terms with iron as the new building material par excellence particularly as it had been made dramatically manifest by Sir Joseph Paxton’s prefabricated Crystal Palace detailed out by railway engineers, Fox-Henderson and Partners and erected in Hyde Park, London in 1851. Thus we also find Viollet-le-Duc writing in his *Entretiens sur l’architecture* of 1872, the following description of his design for his 3,000 seat Great Hall conceived as a space appearance par excellence:

“Solid bodies such as polyhedral consisting of plane surfaces, appear to suggest the elementary forms applicable to the structure of mingled iron and masonry where vaulting is in question. The nature of metal and the forms in which it can be manufactured do not favor the construction of iron arches; (however) if we consider iron as to employ and connect in straight pieces, and if of these separate pieces we form a kind of independent network, and on this network we rest vaulting in separate parts, we shall thus have contrived a system of iron framework consistent with the nature of material ..”

Although there isn’t a trace of tetrahedral geometry in sight, it is nonetheless evident that the iron network vaultings covering Viollet-le-Duc’s hypothetical great-hall already anticipates Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic space frame constructions of the 1950’s.

The Dual Scope of the Seminar:

Although it is rather self-evident that in use of the term Late Modern Architecture is designed to avoid evoking the idea of the Postmodern in terms of style. It nonetheless has to be acknowledged that the concept of the liberative, socialist modern project is as remote today from being realized than it ever was when we compare it in both social and architectural terms, to the modern project of the 1920s and 1930s; the golden era, so to speak, between the two world wars, when the potential of the Modern Movement in every conceivable respect was at its height, particularly as this is revealed in the housing hospitals and schools etc., designed during this period. So that while this seminar is addressed to revealing the way in which the various works under consideration address themselves to the latent tectonic dimension of all built form, attention also has to be paid to the way in which the works of each architect answer to the Arendtian charge of creating spaces of public appearance since given the privatization of modern life it is exactly this dimension which has been and still is being undermined by the current processes of universal civilization.

Lecture Schedule:

Lecture 1: (Sept. 4) Introduction to the Seminar

Lecture 2: (Sept. 11) Greco-Gothic & Neo-Gothic Anglo French Origins of Tectonic Form

Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture MIT Press, 1995. pp 1-61

Lecture 3: (Sept. 18) Gottfried Semper and the Anthropology of Building 1851 The Four Elements of Architecture

Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture MIT Press, 1995. pp 61-91

Lecture 4: (Sept. 25) The SdN Competition 1927 The Humanist vs. the Utilitarian Ideal

Frampton, Labour, Work and Architecture Phaidon Press, 2002. pp 108-119

Lecture 5: (Oct. 2) Louis Kahn: Modernization and the New Monumentality. 1944-1972

Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture MIT Press, 1995. pp 209-246

Lecture 6: (Oct. 9) Jørn Utzon and Transcultural Form 1947-1982

Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture MIT Press, 1995. pp 247-298

Seminar 1: (Oct. 16) Owen Williams (1930-1970) UK

Frampton, The Other Modern Movement Yale University Press pp 145-151

(Class notes)

Seminar 2: (Oct. 23) Le Corbusier (1934-1958) France

Frampton, Labour, Work and Architecture Phaidon Press, 2002. pp 219-225

(Class notes)

Seminar 3: (Oct. 30) Kenzō Tange (1960-1970) Japan

(Class notes)

Seminar 4 (Nov. 6) Alvar Aalto (1949-1957) Finland

(Class notes)

Frampton, Labour, Work and Architecture Phaidon Press, 2002. pp 234-253

(Class notes)

Seminar 5: (Nov. 13) Alessandro de la Sota (1950-1980) Spain

(Class notes)

Seminar 6 (Nov. 20) Roland Rainer (1960-1980) Austria

(Class notes)

Seminar 7: (Nov. 27) Sverre Fehn (1960-1980) Norway

(Class notes)

Seminar 8: (Dec. 4) Mendes da Rocha (1990-2002) Brazil

(Class notes)

Seminar 9: (Dec. 11) Norman Foster (1975-2000) UK

(Class notes)

Seminar 10: (Dec. 18) Grafton Architects (1990-2020) Ireland

(Class notes)

Course Requirements:

Seminars 1 to 10 will be developed by pairs of students who will be responsible for presenting their analysis of the architects to the class. Each case study will involve considerable research and analysis. After their presentation student teams will be expected to write up their research so that it may be made available to the class as a whole. Grades will be given based on attendance, participation in class discussions and the final presentations.

General Bibliography:

Kenneth Frampton Studies in Tectonic Culture MIT Press, 1995.

“ ” Labor, Work and Architecture (Collected Essays) Phaidon, 2002.

“ ” Modern Architecture A Critical History 4th Edition. Thames and Hudson, 2007.

David Leatherbarrow Uncommon Ground Architecture, Technology, and Topography MIT Press, 2000.

Isak Worre Foged and Marie Frier Hvejsel Reader: Tectonics in Architecture Aalborg University Press, 2018.

Mari Hvattum Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City Psychology, Press 2004.

Hannah Arendt The Human Condition University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Methodology

This class seeks to focus on the interrelationship between the ‘space of appearance’ as a political/cultural nexus and the expressivity of structure and construction in realizing this ‘space/place’ in each work and throughout the career of each architect. The privatization and commodification of everyday life has rendered the public domain increasingly vulnerable and to the extent that architecture is commodified to the public dimension tends to be eclipsed. One may make the case that that the space of public appearance is the liberative ‘what’ of architecture and the tectonic dimension is the ‘how’ evident in the realization and presentation of its being in time.