

OLD BUILDINGS – NEW ENERGY: History and Current Sustainable Practices

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Wednesdays 11:00 AM -1:00 PM

SYLLABUS – SPRING 2025

“The role of historic preservation in sustainability strategies and reducing carbon emissions is rapidly changing. A growing body of research and the completion of green rehabilitation projects keeps the topic one of expanding interest and lively debate.”¹

The goal of this seminar is to examine the multifaceted potential of existing historic buildings to serve old uses, or new uses, allowing us to take advantage of their embodied carbon, esthetic and cultural energies. The focus is on the importance of design in the understanding of existing buildings and their environmental wisdom. The focus is also on the exciting design opportunities that come with the re-use, adaptation and transformation of old buildings.

This seminar proposes to inform the students about the history of re-use and building transformation and their formal possibilities, at the same time as introducing them to the practical issues of increasing the environmental performance of historic (in particular Modern) buildings. The seven sessions will combine lectures, conversations and independent work by students.

The position is that the history of architecture is rich with building re-use and transformation, and many buildings that became icons of a new direction in architecture are in fact transformations of older buildings; we need to learn from this practice of re-using, transforming, renewing and adapting our built heritage to a new world view. This is a practice that is alive today; it continues to produce exciting new/old buildings and it has significant positive potential to address our climate emergency.

The position is also that the culture of Historic Preservation has a positive role to play in our climate emergency: historic preservation can offer new solutions by identifying, studying, documenting and valorizing traditional approaches to environmental adaptation – both technical and behavioral – which have been sidelined by the energy-consuming technologies that have impoverished our lives and have become part of the problem. So, we will try to inventory traditional building forms and behavioral modes for lessons and look at recent projects that experiment with the use of traditional procedures.

The seminar will include three invited speakers to talk about the sustainable features of vernacular design, the modern concept of comfort and its effect on the built environment and, current architectural practice in New York City.

Grading is based on the quality of a student’s work and the quality of a student’s participation in all sessions.

¹ Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, “Executive Summary 2011, Sustainability and Historic Preservation”.