Course Syllabus

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Reading Buildings, Writing Buildings

This seminar will explore a variety of visualization and written techniques in the close-reading of buildings, contemporary as well as those of prior centuries, that have been engaged to investigate the significance of the built environment. The building that you choose to develop your own forms of close-reading for the course can be from any time and any place, chosen by you because you find it particularly engaging — either because it really intrigues you or really disturbs you.

Readings will include short texts and excerpts from the writings of Daniel Abramson, Reyner Banham, Giovanni Careri, Beatriz Colomina, Peter Eisenman, Robin Evans, Michel Foucault, Kenneth Frampton, Jeffrey Kipnis, Rem Koolhaas, Irving Lavin, Sylvia Lavin, Greg Lynn, Colin Rowe, Bernhard Siegert, Manfredo Tafuri, Bernard Tschumi, Robert Venturi, and Rudolf Wittkower. As writing is itself an act of design, one can track how these writings are constructed so that an intended argument is proposed, developed, and articulated through the narrative and rhetorical attentions in its design as it tracks the attentions of the building under investigation.

We will not only explore these written techniques of close-reading that have proved influential in the past, but will also investigate new forms developing in the digital humanities. Students versed in digital visualizations techniques may elect, as an alternative to a substantially written analysis of their selected building, to produce either a written paper augmented with their graphic analysis or to develop a substantially graphic form of analysis augmented with their narrative text.

 Just as critical readings have illuminated new ways of understanding buildings, in a reciprocal manner digital techniques developed through the design fields can now be used to intensify the analysis of design, sharpening the visual acuity and agency in research and presentation. So parallel to an examination of the techniques of the writers listed above, we will explore how innovative 2-D and 3-D modeling and visualization techniques can move beyond merely documenting a building to provide new forms of critical and historical analysis. The course will investigate the diverse ways digital visualization can be a crucial new lens of perception and communication.

In every reading — whether by an architect, critic, historian, or theorist — the building is re-constructed in the act of writing, even and especially if the author is the very architect of the building in question. These exchanges will be especially evident when you compare the various written commentary on the building that you choose to analyze as your major project for the course, as every reading is an act of adaptive reuse of the building for the issues the writer seeks to convey.

So while it is not possible to discern or preserve some absolute intention of the building or its architect, what can be discerned and explored are various forms of attention in the building. These forms of attention can lead to various hypotheses regarding the relations of its architectural form and the cultural/political intentions enacted through the building. Formal techniques can be utilized to draw forth questions of meaning, and questions of meaning can be utilized to draw forth questions of form — developing corroborating evidence to cross-reference the building's architectural and cultural positions through what are often seen as divergent forms of architectural

analysis (formal, social, political, economic, institutional, structural, material, biographical, iconographic).