

Mark Rakatansky  
*Reading Buildings, Writing Buildings*  
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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, Zeynep Çelik Alexander, Reyner Banham, Beatriz Colomina, Robin Evans, Michel Foucault, Jeffrey Kipnis, Rem Koolhaas, Sylvia Lavin, Neil Levine, Rafael Moneo, Michael Osman, Vincent Scully, Bernhard Siebert, Manfredo Tafuri, 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).

*January 22:*

**Introduction: A Few of Your Favorite (and Least Favorite) Buildings**

*January 29:*

**Architects Reading Against the Grain: Rem Koolhaas and Robert Venturi**

Rem Koolhaas, “How Perfect Perfection Can Be: The Creation of Rockefeller Center” in *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monicelli Press, 1994), 160-207 [208-233 also recommended].

Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), 13-105 [106-131 also recommended].

Recommended:

Alan Colquhoun, “Sign and Substance: Reflections on Complexity, Las Vegas, and Oberlin” in *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 139-151.

*February 5:*

**Architects and Critics Tracking Changes (in the Work and their Minds): Jeffrey Kipnis and Raphael Moneo on Herzog and de Meuron**

Jeffrey Kipnis, “The Cunning of Cosmetics (A Personal Reflection on the Architecture of Herzog & De Meuron)” in *A Question of Qualities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 99-113.

Rafael Moneo, “Herzog & de Meuron” in *Theoretical Anxieties and Design Strategies in the Work of Eight Contemporary Architects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 364-405

*February 12:*

**The Political Fluidity of Forms: New Modes of Digital Analysis**

Manfredo Tafuri, “The Historicity of the Avant-Garde: Piranesi and Eisenstein” and Sergei Eisenstein, “Piranesi, or the Fluidity of Forms” in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992. 55-90).

Reference:

Tafuri, excerpts from “The Wicked Architect”: G.B. Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage” in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*.

February 19:

**Rewriting Wright: Vincent Scully, Reyner Banham, Neil Levine, Michael Osman, and Zeynep Çelik Alexander on Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building (visit to the Avery Library Drawing Collection to view the original drawings)**

Excerpts from Vincent Scully, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: G. Braziller, 1960), Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Reyner Banham, *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (London: Architectural Press, 1969).

Michael Osman, "Introduction" in *Modernism's Visible Hand: Architecture and Regulation in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xi-xxiv.

Zeynep Çelik Alexander, "The Larkin's Technologies of Trust," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77, no. 3 (September 2018), 300–318.

Recommended:

Barry Bergdoll and Jennifer Gray, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017).

February 26:

**Project mid-presentations (for those traveling on Kinnne trips)**

March 4:

**No class: Midterm studio reviews**

March 11:

**Project mid-presentations (for those not traveling)**

March 18:

**No class: Spring Break**

March 25:

**Reading Tectonic Actors: Beatriz Colomina and Sylvia Lavin on Windows (in Le Corbusier, Loos, and Neutra); Robin Evans and Bernhard Siegert on Doors**

Beatriz Colomina, "Window" in *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 283-335.

Sylvia Lavin, "Richard Neutra and the Psychology of the American Spectator," *Grey Room*, No. 1 (Autumn, 2000): 42-63.

Robin Evans, "Figures, Doors and Passages," in *Translations from Drawings to Buildings and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association: 1997), 55-92.

Bernhard Siegert, "Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic," *Grey Room*, No. 47 (Autumn, 2012): 6-23.

*April 1:*

**The Formal and Political Economies of Building Types: Daniel Abramson on John Soane's Bank of England**

Daniel Abramson, *Building the Bank of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), excerpts.

*April 8:*

**Reading Institutional Form: Michel Foucault and Jacques-Alain Miler on Bentham's Panopticon**

Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in Foucault, *Power / Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 146-165.

Jacques-Alain Miller, "Jeremy Bentham's Panoptic Device," *October*, Vol. 41 (Summer, 1987): 3-29.

*April 15:*

**Project Presentations**

*April 22:*

**Project Presentations**

*April 29:*

**No class: Final studio reviews**

*May 6:*

**Final projects due**