

ARCH 225.81: Advanced Topics

ARCH 485.76: Grad Seminar in Theory, History, Criticism

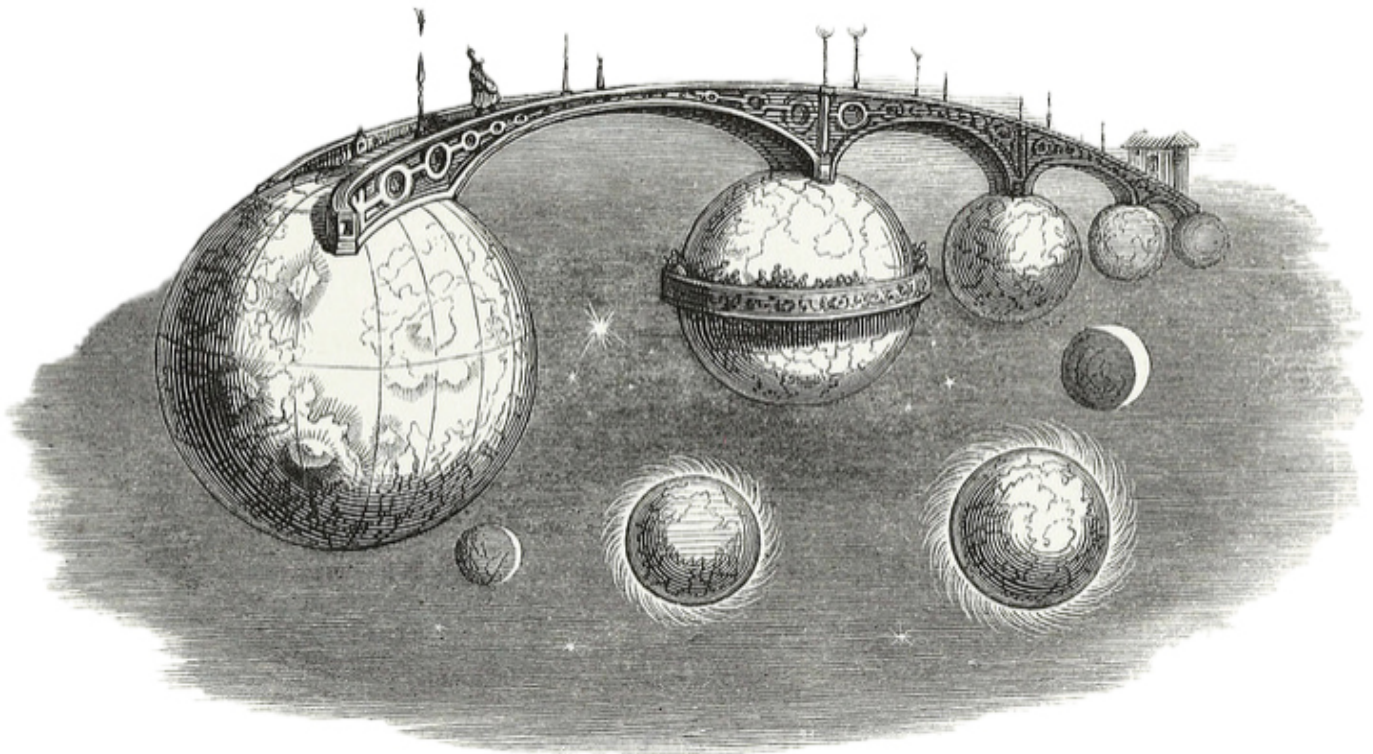
Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture, The Cooper Union

Spring 2025

Thursdays 12:00–1:50 pm, Room 712F

Instructor: Joan Ockman, Joan.Ockman@cooper.edu

TOWARD A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE



J.-J. Grandville, "A Bridge Leads from One World to the Next" from *Another World*, 1844

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The things that make up the built and natural world in the twenty-first century are part of a web of planetary interrelationships that is almost unfathomably complex. What is the place of architecture within this tangled web of connections? How does the architect's work enter into the overall system and cycle of its production? To what extent are architects accountable for effects that may be distant from their work, including ones related to the extraction of materials and the labor of construction? Are there ways that remote material and immaterial processes can be made visible within the work of architecture itself? If the activity of design is understood literally as a *form of environmental production*, can architecture manifest its own disparate processes of coming into being and far-reaching ecological consequences?

These are among the questions to be addressed in this seminar-workshop, which is concerned with what we are calling a *political ecology of architecture*. Students are asked not only to reflect on the above questions theoretically and historically but also to sketch out a design that addresses them in the form of an architectural project. In recent decades political ecology has become the subject of a burgeoning and multidisciplinary field of inquiry. It is the aim of this seminar to bring this discourse into the realm of architectural thought and practice. The seminar is organized around clusters of keywords that, taken together, not only circumscribe the field but prompt an original creative exploration. During the semester each student will carry out a sketch project consisting of a visual and written argument. Two sessions will be devoted to workshops in which students share their in-progress work and receive feedback from their colleagues. A final project presentation will conclude the class.

Format:

Weekly seminar consisting of discussions of assigned readings, lectures by the instructor and possibly invited guests, a film screening, and three workshop/presentation sessions.

Course goals and objectives:

To foster critical and creative thinking on the topic of the seminar; to sharpen reading, research, writing, and presentation skills; to stimulate interest in current debates in architectural theory and history; to encourage future design practices based on a sophisticated understanding of ecological issues

Requirements and outcomes:

Term project developed over the course of the semester, culminating in a design supported by a written essay and original research; responsibility for one of the keywords on the syllabus and leadership of class discussion of it on the date it is assigned; brief commentary on a film shown at mid-semester. (See below for further elaboration.)

SCHEDULE AND SYLLABUS

WEEK 1

January 23

Introduction. Political ecology; political economy

readings:

Joan Ockman, "Toward a Political Ecology of Architecture," *Places Journal*, March 2022; online at <https://placesjournal.org/article/toward-a-political-ecology-of-architecture/> (for reference after first class)

WEEK 2

January 30

Circulation; globalization; supply chains

readings:

David Harvey, "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?" from Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Duke, 1999), 327–55

Nick Dyer-Witheford, "Circulation" and "Globe," from *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (Pluto Press, 2015), 81–101 and 124–46

Anna Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 21, no. 2 (2009), 148–76 [recommended]

WEEK 3

February 6

Cognitive mapping; representation; neoliberalism

readings:

Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," from Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Illini Books, 1988), 347–57

Fredric Jameson, "Culture" (excerpt), from *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1992), 38–54

Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, "Capitalism and Panorama," from *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Zero Books, 2015), 33–68; online link available through Cooper Union Library Stack

Douglas Spencer, Introduction to *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy* (Birkhäuser, 2021), 18–27 [recommended]

WEEK 4

February 13

Anthropocene; capitalocene

readings:

Andreas Malm, "The Anthropocene Myth," *Jacobin* 30 (March 30, 2015), 1–6

Edward Burtynsky with Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, *The Anthropocene Project* (2018–), <https://theanthropocene.org> (browse through website)

T. J. Demos, "Welcome to the Anthropocene!" from *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2012), 7–23

Douglas Spencer, "Habitats for *Homo Economicus*: Architecture, Design and the Environment of 'Man,'" from *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy* (Birkhäuser, 2021), 61–77 [recommended]

WEEK 5

February 20

WORKSHOP 1: Project proposals with accompanying "atlas of inspirations"

WEEK 6

February 27

Extraction; construction ecology; labor; material and immaterial production; "human resources"; precarity

readings:

Stephanie Carlisle and Nicholas Pevzner, "Introduction: Extraction," *Scenario Journal 05: Extraction*, Fall 2015, 1–10; online at <https://scenariojournal.com/article/introduction-extraction/>

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "The Devil Is in the Details: "Who Is It That the Earth Belongs To?"" *Non-Extractive Architecture*, vol. 1 (Sternberg Press, 2022), 85–96

Kiel Moe, "Prologue," from *Unless: The Seagram Building Construction Ecology* (Actar 2021), 26–49

Alf Hornborg, "Energy and Labour-Power: When All People and All Things Become Instruments," from *The Magic of Technology: The Machine as Transformation of Slavery* (Routledge, 2023), 85–102

Andrew Ross, Introduction to *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (NYU Press, 2009), 1–12 [recommended]

WEEK 7

March 6

Post-Marxism; finance capitalism; environmental capitalism; disaster capitalism; risk

readings:

Matthew Soules, "Finance Capitalism and Architecture" and "The Forms of Finance," from *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), [1–37]

Cindi Katz, "Whose Nature? Whose Culture? Private Productions of Space and the 'Preservation' of

Nature,” from Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, eds., *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium* (Routledge, 1998), 46–63

Mark Schapiro, “A Tale of Three Cities,” from *Carbon Shock: A Tale of Risk and Calculus on the Front Lines of the Disrupted Global Economy* (Chelsea Green, 2014), 109–24

Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 86 (March–April 2014), 55–72 [recommended]

WEEK 8

March 13

Film viewing; details TBA

WEEK 9

March 20

Technology; Prometheanism; techno-fetishism

readings:

Alf Hornborg, “The Ecology of Things: Artifacts as Embodied Relations” and “Land, Energy, and Value in the Technocene,” from Alf Hornborg, *Global Magic: Technologies of Appropriation from Ancient Rome to Wall Street* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9–35

Alf Hornborg, “Solar Power for Whom? The Fantasies of Leftist Ecomodernism,” from *The Magic of Technology: The Machine as Transformation of Slavery* (Routledge, 2022), 136–44

Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (Winter 1980), 121–36 [recommended]

WEEK 10

March 27

WORKSHOP 2: Presentations of work-in-progress

WEEK 11

April 3

Production; consumption; commodity fetishism

readings:

Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” from *Capital*, vol. 1, section 4, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin Classics, 1976), [1–10]

Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” from *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927–1934* (Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 768–82

Manfredo Tafuri, “L’Architecture dans le Boudoir,” from *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (MIT Press, 1987), 267–90

WEEK 12

April 10

Form; visibility and invisibility; abstraction; representation redux

readings:

Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, Introduction to *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (Verso, 2021), 1–25

Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, “Werewolf Hunger (New York, 1970s),” from *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Zero Books, 2015), 105–36; online link available through Cooper Union Library Stack

Matthew Soules, “Constant Object,” from *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), 1–21

WEEK 13

April 17

SPRING RECESS

WEEK 14

April 24

Agency; empathy; planetary imaginary

readings:

Hermann Hesse, “The City” (1910), from *Stories of Five Decades* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), 194–99

Bruce Mau with Jennifer Leonard and the Institute without Boundaries, “Now That We Can Do Anything, What Will We Do?” from *Massive Change* (Phaidon, 2004), 15–19, 24–25

Teju Cole, “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, [1–5]

Douglas Spencer, “On Allegory, the Architectural Imagination and Radical Disillusionment: In Conversation with Miloš Kosec,” from *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy* (Birkhäuser, 2021), 209–24 [recommended]

WEEK 15

May 1

Term project presentations and submission of project in print or pdf format. NO EXTENSIONS

GENERAL INFORMATION

Grading and attendance: Grade for the semester will be based on the following: term project (30%); oral presentations at two workshops and final review (30%); quality of participation in class discussions and

evidence of diligent reading (30%); film review (10%). In-person attendance is mandatory except in case of medical emergency or otherwise excused absence. More than one unexcused absence and/or repeated latenesses will result in lowering of final grade.

Readings: All readings on the syllabus are available on Moodle or at an online link provided on the syllabus. Readings are required unless specified as recommended, in which case they are optional. An effort has been made to keep required readings to 60–65 pages per week.

Workshops: The two workshops scheduled during the semester are opportunities for students to present their term project proposals (Week 4) and work-in-progress (Week 10) to the seminar and receive feedback. Presentation length will be about 10 minutes, depending on size of the class. Both workshop presentations should also include material from the student's "atlas of inspirations"; the latter is meant to be an informal archive of pertinent images and documents added to over the course of the semester.

Film review: A brief critical commentary (1,000 words) on a film viewed in Week 8, due at the beginning of class on Week 9.

Term project: A "sketch design" integrally related to the topic of the seminar, with an accompanying written essay of approximately 4,000 words (10–12 pp.). Students may freely choose the subject and presentation format of their project but their work should be supported by in-depth research and articulate argumentation. The written essay should include full bibliography/source information and properly formatted notes.

Statement on academic integrity

All interactions in class are expected to be civil, respectful, and supportive of an open and inclusive learning environment. Students are strongly encouraged to speak to the instructor if they have any concerns during the semester about classroom participation or dynamics. The Cooper Union Code of Conduct is at <https://cooper.edu/about/policies/code-of-conduct>.