

The Catholic University of America • School of Architecture and Planning • Fall Semester 2010
Critic : Julio Bermúdez • arpl 601/603/702 : Themed Graduate Design Studio • 6 credits hour

Cultural Studies & Sacred Space

the **VAS** studio

Voluntary Architectural Simplicity

REALITY



Postmodern apathy notwithstanding, we are experiencing a fragmented and chaotic reality acted out in massively irresponsible behaviors across the Earth. Our world is shrinking under the merciless assault of our polluting and wasteful habits. Habits that come out of accepting a life in the fast lane under the mantra of more, bigger, faster, better, and cheaper. Habits that keep on failing to provide what they promise and instead deliver only more unmet needs, grief and stress. Despite the promises heralded by the rising digital age, continuous scientific breakthroughs, the prowess of technological evolution, and the myth of infinite growth and rationality, we always find ourselves returning, increasingly more frustrated, to the same ancient existential dilemmas born out of just being alive and trying to attain some peace, security, and contentment. Little, if any, have we advanced in these simple matters. Escaping this fact into the carefully crafted distractions geared to our most superficial desires and exercised through unchecked consumerism or medialand never quite works either. Worse still, we are witnessing what some of these habits have brought us: global warming, unspoken poverty co-existing with opulent greed, violence, AIDS, terrorism, war, ecological devastation, and economic instability at a planetary scale. Although it is hard to admit it, we ourselves have been all too often shy accomplices of this state of affairs. Confused, distracted and overwhelmed by the neurotic complexity of it all, we feel little more than irrelevant peons, floating astray in the rough seas of 21st Century civilization.

ARCHITECTURE

Le Corbusier



Architecture, the art of establishing the material order of a cultural order, cannot avoid but to reflect and respond to its surrounding reality. Not surprising, current reality is requiring architectural responses defying all past traditions. Contemporary architects increasingly find themselves with the task of redefining architecture's spirit (*utilitas, firmitas, and venustas*), based on the needs and visions of our seemingly ungraspable culture.



Chaco Canyon
Rembrandt



Professing architecture is no light matter in these circumstances. True professing demands that we hold a position, stand for something, make a vow in the name of a deep seeded passion for architecture, our fellow beings and Earth.

But let us not forget that our professing also requires being able to technically and competently respond to architectural challenges. Professing is where belief and knowledge come together in the here and now of present reality. Hence, uncritically adopting off-the shelf Postmodern, Modern, Deconstructivist, or any other pre-digested style appears blantly superficial and irresponsible. So, how are we to profess architecture facing *this* reality? Can we truly make a committed and caring act in which we use our architectural skills for the sake of improving whatever is trusted to us as architects? Can we make a difference?

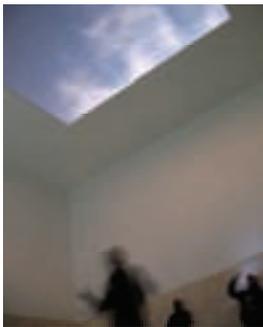
ON VAS



Rick Joy



Mies van der Rohe



James Turrell

Alberto Campo Baeza



The studio will take on this question professionally. And, following the two meanings behind professing, it will move simultaneously in two parallel paths of commitment and embodiment.

The philosophical path will offer a *voluntary and critical direction that resists the forces of today's zeitgeist*. The disciplinary path will lead towards *architectural clarity, sustainability, and essentialism as concrete ways to embody this resistance*. The two-path road points towards a renewed aesthetics and ethics of 'less is more'. It encourages a turn towards the minimal, the fundamentally uncomplicated, the direct and conscious as a potent antidote to our culture of excess, schizophrenia and unconsciousness. The studio will then engage the *hypothesis of simplicity* as a critical, insight seeking, disciplinary and conscious inquiry to confront the professional challenges of today. We are talking of an architecture of presence. We will use Duane Elgin's book "*Voluntary Simplicity*" as a source of clarity and inspiration along this road.

Starting the journey demands that first and foremost, we do it *voluntarily*. We must freely chose it from within and not feel that it is imposed on us from without. Second, this choice has to come out of some *personal realization of its necessity*. In other words, we cannot select it for nostalgic or reactionary reasons. Rather it should *grow out of* our direct experience of the situation itself. "Growing-out-of" means to have been in the midst of it and come out of it by first hand learning and effort. It signifies to embrace (and not to throw away) what has been overcome. In having been intimate with it at one time, we understand it well enough to attempt to transcend it with-



Rafael Moneo



Peter Zumthor



out narrow-minded resentment. In other words, it is not a position arrived by intellectual reasoning or negative emotions. Rather it is a decision founded in a concrete and personal experience of growth.

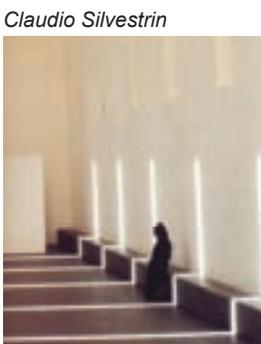
Thus, choosing simplicity grows out of our direct experience of living under unnecessary complexity. Seeking focus comes out of being tired of living in distraction. Pursuing essentialism grows out of realizing that superficiality offers little. And so on, the desire for clarity grows out of confusion, conservation out of wastefulness, austerity out of excess, integrity out of fragmentation, self-restraint out of empty consumerism and spending, poetry out of crude materialism, presence and slowness out of the fleetingness of a fast life, committed participation out of passive following, and the minimum out of overcrowded and cluttered conditions.

We call the resulting architecture, *Voluntary Architectural Simplicity* or **VAS** for short. The **VAS** Studio is wherein **VAS** is practiced by making use of basic or essential architectural principles, rules, ideas. Two disclaimers here. First, the **VAS** Studio is consciously naïve in seeking to resist the overwhelming forces of our time. It just makes no sense to do so. Second, the **VAS** Studio is not self-righteous. Although it claims to do what is right, it does not see itself as "the only way" to address today's challenges. It just professes, and in so doing offers, humbly, Voluntary Architectural Simplicity.

ON CSSS



Craig Hartman



Claudio Silvestrin

Yet **VAS** is not enough. For there is something unspoken of great power that is pushing us into this path of simplification: *Spirituality*. We "sense" that today's huge problems will never be sincerely addressed (and thus solved) unless we acknowledge the ultimate meaning, wholeness, or trans-personal nature of reality and all beings. While this vision does not require a divinity, it doesn't shy away from the sublime and metaphysical either. In this sense, perhaps, *our most urgent job as architects is to profess the sacredness of all space on Earth* so that land development may be done with care and wisdom. The preservation, respect, and celebration of space can only come when we honor its sacred dimension. By bringing a spiritual sensibility to its fold, architecture may be able to positively affect a world in desperate need for truth, goodness, and beauty.

The Cultural Studies & Sacred Space Studio will be our learning laboratory to discuss, explore, practice, and advance an architecture that turns what it touches into sacred by the power of design quality.

PEDAGOGY & SCHEDULE

To carry out this agenda, the semester will be broken down in 4 pedagogic segments with the following general characteristics:



Edward Hopper



Luis Barragan



Ryoanji



Phase	Study/Design Focus	Teams	Duration	Due	Grade %
Part 01	Theoretical Foundation	team 1	2 Wks	13-Sep	10%
Part 02	Precedents, Programming & Site	team 1/2	2.5 Wks	29-Sep	15%
Part 03	Schematic Design	team 2	6 Wks	15-Nov	35%
Part 04	Design Development & Presentation	team 2	4 Wks	13-Dec	40%

The objective of **Part 01 (Theoretical Foundation)** is to make students familiar with **VAS** architecture, fundamental texts and concepts related to CSSS and develop a working architectural philosophy. **Part 02** asks for a rigorous yet interpretive design analysis of the programmatic, contextual, and historical conditions of the project. **Part 03 (Schematic Design)** engages students in the architectural investigation of the given problem using a design method based on analog-digital media migrations.. The goal is devising a schematic design that follows yet transcends what was learned in Parts 01 and 02. **Part 04 (Design Development & Presentation)** is devoted to the development of the schematic design by focusing on experiential and tectonics issues. A detailed scheduled of the studio is attached to this syllabus.

A special component of this semester will be the presence of SOM design partner architect **Craig Hartman, FAIA**. During his visit to our studio (approximately during the third week of October), Craig will conduct design and reflective exercises addressing the intersection between architecture and spirituality.

SITE & BUILDING PROGRAM

Louis Kahn



We will design a treatment-rehabilitation center for consumption addiction (focused on materialism and media) run by Trappist lay and ordained people and grounded on their strict yet liberating living precepts. The building will be sited in an isolated area within the beautiful and empty redrock country of southern Utah. This location in addition to building scale (25,000 sq.ft.) and intriguing program will provide us with an excellent vehicle to employ **VAS** in service of advancing students' understanding of CSSS issues. We will utilize the inspiring work of **Thomas Merton** to guide our inquiry in the relationship between architecture, culture, and spirituality.

READINGS, ETC.



Required readings, bibliographical and web references, particular materials, and other resources as well as specific details about studio activities, goals, and expectations will be presented in four separate assignments following the four pedagogical units and schedule described above.

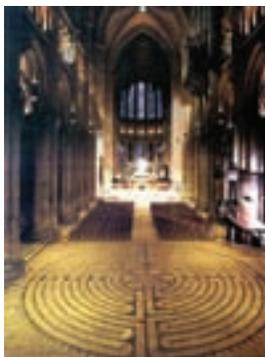
TEAM WORK

Herzog-de Meuron



The work will be done in teams. This is a graduate level studio and will require a very high level of architectural response, development, and communication. It is just impossible to attain this goal by one individual working alone. This fact reflects actual architectural practice, a largely cooperative enterprise in which different people bring their expertise and ideas into a project. Working in teams will also afford students the opportunity to develop collaborative skills and their own strengths as individuals.

EVALUATION



All students are required to present their work for evaluation at the scheduled jury or review time. Late or incomplete work will be graded down. Incompletes will be given only for well substantiated reasons (e.g., documented illness). The student is responsible for knowing what happens during class meetings whether or not she/he attends.



Andrew Wyeth

Given the graduate nature of this studio, it is expected that the work produced fulfills the highest standards of architectural education and therefore can withstand professional and academic scrutiny in an open jury and public exhibit. The assessment standards for each learning unit will be included in the hand-outs describing the particular assignments and follow the given class schedule.



Vincent James

The final grade for the studio will be obtained by compounding the grades of the four assigned pedagogic units as described in the chart above. Studio work and participation as well as the student's evolution over the semester will be taken into account. The course follows the official Catholic University Grading Policy for graduate education, that is: **A** range: means excellent; **B** range: means satisfactory performance; **C**: means passing but marginal; and **F**: means failure.



Accommodations for students with disabilities: Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss specific needs. Please contact Disability Support Services (at 202 319-5211, room 207 Pryzbyla Center) to coordinate reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities.