

**American Studies 444
The Built Environment
Spring, 2005
Wednesdays, 4-6:45 PM
Education Classroom Building 11**

**Professor Michael Steiner
Office hours: T & Th, 4-5 PM;
W, 11-12 AM; & appointment in EC-608
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Every force evolves a form.

Shaker proverb

There is the same fitness in man building his own house as there is in a bird building its own nest.... Much it concerns a man how a few sticks are slanted over him or under him, and what colors are daubed upon his box.

Henry Thoreau

At first we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.

Winston Churchill

Architecture is the most immediate, expressive, and lasting art ever to record the human condition. Cities are containers and generators of our history and culture. We are what we build; stone and steel do not lie.

Ada Louise Huxtable

This course is concerned with understanding how Americans shape space and how space shapes them: how we make ourselves "at home" in nature and how our "dwellings" in turn influence us. This is a vast, fascinating, vexingly elusive subject. It is concerned with learning to look at the things we build—at our stone and steel, concrete and glass, plastic and stucco, bulldozed and landscaped surroundings—and understand what they tell us about others and ourselves.

What at first seems to be definite and concrete--the land we live upon and the buildings we live within--becomes, after careful consideration, a most compelling and all-inclusive issue. Very little of the world around us is untouched by human endeavor. The land itself is largely an artifact, a built environment. Built environments effect every moment of our lives, yet we rarely think about their influence. The power of places we have created is ubiquitous yet taken-for-granted like the circumambient air we breathe. Edward Hall, for example, has pointed out that "Man has developed his territoriality to an almost unbelievable extent.... Yet we treat space somewhat as we treat sex. It is there but we don't talk about it."

With this in mind, the primary purpose of this seminar is to learn to talk about space and place and clarify our understanding of the relationship between Americans and their built environments. I hope that this course will awaken us to the fundamental fact that everything takes place and alert us to the taken-for-granted power of constructed places as the ubiquitous background, context, and

condition of our lives. Emphasis is upon the diversity of architectural expression in a pluralistic society, and students will be equipped to “read” a range of built environments as cultural/historical documents. Beyond exploring a variety of environmental and architectural theory, we will become familiar with a kaleidoscope of artifacts from the New England Village to the Southern California suburb, from sod huts to skyscrapers, from log cabins, shot gun houses, and mobile homes to theme parks, shopping malls, city walks, freeways, tract houses, and new urban villages.

A major purpose of this course will be to open our eyes to the grand and ordinary constructions that shape our lives, from celebrated masterworks like Frank Gehry’s Disney Concert Hall or Jose Raphael Moneo’s Los Angeles Cathedral (parts of our LA walking tour) to taken for granted local places like Brea’s Birch Street Promenade, Westminster’s Little Saigon, or the simple dwelling, tract house, bungalow, or dingbat apartment you call home. If there is time, a concluding segment of the course—a soothing coda of sorts—will consider the most intimate of built environments, the home and the meaning of dwelling and comfort in our personal lives and perilous times.

Readings: (Books are available at Little Professor, 725 N. Placentia, Fullerton; phone: 996-3133.)

Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place (partial)

Lewis Mumford, Sticks and Stones (out of print, but available through other sources)

Tom Wolfe, From Bauhaus to Our House

Ada Louise Huxtable, The Unreal America (partial)

James Howard Kunstler, The Geography of Nowhere (partial)

**Recommended: John Milnes Baker, American House Styles: A Concise Guide

Collected Readings, available at Copyco, 2438 E. Chapman, in Fullerton (near the corner of Chapman and State College) phone: 680-9800.

General Format and Requirements:

Although I will lecture from time to time, this course will be largely conducted in a seminar fashion stressing informed discussion of reading materials. For every meeting, I will provide background information and establish the framework for discussion of the reading materials. With this in mind, there are three basic elements to the course:

- 1) **Readings, discussion, small group exercises:** Perhaps the most valuable part of the course involves the give and take of ideas. Especially in a class of this size, I look forward to the free, sometimes heated, intellectual exchange of ideas generated by our community of interest in understanding the built environment. Although I am eager to hear your informed opinions and encourage you to voice them, I certainly respect students who are quieter than others. It is essential that you attend all of the meetings ready to engage in critical discussion and informed debate.
- 2) **Oral report:** I will ask each of you to present one report—five to ten minutes as an individual, ten to fifteen minutes as a small group—on an essay or chapter not assigned to the class as a whole. I hope to begin these reports by the third week of the semester.
- 3) **Response Papers :** You will be asked to write two 4-6 page papers during the semester. These papers should help you capture and develop some of the fugitive thoughts sparked by our readings and discussions. They will also ask you to integrate a variety of sources and texts. I will provide paper topics--questions directly related to the course materials--two or three weeks before the papers are due. The first paper, due by the sixth week of the semester, will examine

general theoretical issues and will be closely tied to the course materials. The second paper, due by the final week of the semester, can be a bit more independent in subject matter, though I will also provide a list of topics directly connected to the readings.

- 4) ***Final exam***: You will write a comprehensive in class essay exam. You will be asked to write two essays that integrate materials studied throughout the semester. Sample questions will be supplied in advance, and you can use your books and notes while you take the exam.

Grading, Participation, Attendance:

Your final grade will be based upon your written work, your oral report, the quality of your seminar discussion, and consistency of your attendance. Your short response papers and final exam will constitute 80% of your final grade; your oral report, quality of discussion throughout the semester, and attendance will constitute the remaining 20%. It is important that all students attend as many meetings as possible, and missing three or more during the semester—unless there are severe and unavoidable problems that you discuss with me before hand—will invariably drop your grade.

Response papers:	40 %	(two 4-6 page papers; each 20 %)
Final essay exam:	40%	(two hour, in-class, open-book, open-note)
Oral Report:	10%	(5-15 minutes, individual or small group)
Discussion/Attendance:	10%	

Graduate students will be asked to write longer, 7-8 page, response papers.

I will use the new +/- grading option; we will discuss this in class.

Course Outline:

I. DEFINING THE FIELD AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS (Four weeks)

"History and geography are bound together by the very nature of things: history takes place, and places are created by history."

Donald Meinig

"You cannot know who you without knowing where you are."

Paul Shepard

"The land is the simplest form of architecture."

Frank Lloyd Wright

"Architecture in general is frozen music."

Freidrich Von Schelling

January 31: Introduction to the course and to the study of the built environment

February 7: Definitions and Distinctions: What is nature? What is culture?

How do human responses to nature compare with the responses of other species? What is the relationship between land and life, between the environment (both man-made and natural) and culture? What is space? What is place? What is a cultural landscape? What is architecture?

Read: Yi-Fu Tuan, "Man and Nature," Ellen Churchill Semple and George Perkins Marsh (brief excerpts, in Collected Readings); begin Tuan, chapters 1 and 8 of Space and Place, pp. 3-7 & 101-117
 **Recommended reading, Yi-Fu Tuan, "The Significance of the Artifact." (I may have this available as a class handout.)

February 14: From the Ground Up: Intimate Experiences of Place and Built Environment

a)--Personal Space/Proxemics: Read: Edward T. Hall, "Space Speaks" (Collected Readings).

b)--Sense of Place, Stages of Life, and Remembered Places: Read: Loren Eiseley, "The Brown Wasps," Walt Whitman, "There Was A Child Went Forth," Milburn Rice, "The Last Stop," and Harvey Cox, "Restoration of a Sense of Place" (Collected Readings).

c)--The Meaning of Home: Arthur Danto, "Our Houseness," Clare Cooper, "The House as Symbol of the Self," and Alistair Cooke, "The New Californian," (Collected Readings). We may return to this vast issue at the end of the semester.

**Recommended reading/possible reports: Yi-Fu Tuan, "Rootedness vs. Sense of Place," and Paul Starrs, "The Digital, the Regional, and the Sacred," and other possibilities—available in my office

February 21: Presidents' Day—Campus Closed

February 28: Varieties of Space, Place, and Architecture, building upon our discussion of the meaning of the home, we will discuss significant portions of Yi-Fu Tuan's Space and Place, chapters 3, 4, and 5, pp. 19-66, on children, body orientation, spaciousness, crowding, and other issues, and chapters, 10, 11, and 14, pp. 136-160, 199-203, on intimate experiences of place, homeland, nationalism, and other issues.

**Recommended readings/possible reports: Tuan, "Place and Culture" and Clarence Mondale, "Place on the Move" both in Franklin and Steiner, Mapping American Culture, as well as many other possibilities.

II. AMERICAN SPACE, PLACE, AND ARCHITECTURE (Nine weeks)

"Everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round."

Black Elk, Oglala Sioux

"The American landscape is lovely save where American man has touched it."

Dwight MacDonald

"Learning from Las Vegas."

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, et al.

"The shell that we create marks our spiritual development as plainly as that of a snail denotes its species. If sometimes architecture becomes frozen music, we have ourselves to thank when it is a pompous blare of meaningless sounds."

Lewis Mumford

"What evidence of imaginative wealth does the sea-to-shining-sea strip-malling of America provide? When, exactly, did we all decide that every Main Street...should look exactly the same, with exactly the same corporate eateries—Applebee's unto Bennigan's unto Olive Garden—punctuated by Wal-Marts and Best Buys all sitting on the shoreline of an inexhaustible automobile busyness?"

Curtis White, The Middle Mind

A. FROM NATIVE AND MEDIEVAL TRADITIONS TO THE CHICAGO SCHOOL:

March 7:

1) The spirit of place and what is American about American architecture? Native Americans, transplanted Europeans, and their built environments. Read: David Lowenthal, "The American Scene," Paul Shepard's "Place in American Culture," and excerpt from Vincent Scully's American Architecture and Urbanism (Collected Readings)

2) Begin Lewis Mumford, Sticks and Stones (1924).

****Recommended Readings/ possible reports:** Steven Nissenbaum's essay "New England as Region and Nation," (available in my office) and/or John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time," in his book of the same title (available in my office.)

March 14:

Finish Mumford's Sticks and Stones, see his film "The City" (1939), Ken Burns's film, "Brooklyn Bridge," and begin a myriad of slides related to the Chicago School of modern architecture.

****Recommended readings/possible reports:** Peirce Lewis, "Common Houses, Cultural Spoor," James Deetz and John Vlach on the shotgun house, Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Art and Craft of the Machine" and many other possibilities—available from my office.)

First Paper is due

B. THE LEGACY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

March 21:

Glass and Steel Prisons: Begin Tom Wolfe, From Bauhaus to Our House, see portions of Ken Burns's documentary on Frank Lloyd Wright, and a plethora of slides on Chicago and selected modern American architects, including H. H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan, Irving Gill, Charles and Henry Greene, and others.

SPRING BREAK

April 4:

1) From Wolfe to Kunstler and the postmodern response: Finish From Bauhaus to Our House; read James Howard Kunstler's "Yesterday's Tomorrow," pp. 59-84 of his Geography of Nowhere, and glimpses of some postmodern architectural responses—Philip Johnson, Frank Gehry, Robert A.M. Stern, and many others

2) Folk, vernacular, and commercial responses: Read: Dolores Hayden's "The American Sense of Place and the Politics of Space" (Collected Readings)

C. A PANOPLY OF CONTEMPORARY PLACES AND THE LURE OF THE FAKE

April 11:

1)--Symbolic landscapes: Read: D.W. Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," John Fraser Hart, "The Bypass Strip as Ideal Landscape," Margaret King, "McDonalds and the New American Landscape" (Collected Readings)

2)--The malling and theming of America: Read: Witold Rybczynski, "The New Downtowns" and Michael Steiner's "Frontierland as Tomorrowland" (Collected Readings)

3)--Automobility and Architecture: Kunstler vs. Jackson: Read: James Kunstler, "Joy Ride" and "The Evil Empire", pp. 85-131 of his Geography of Nowhere and John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "The Mobile Home and the Range" (Collected Readings)

**Possible reports: Richard Keller Simon, on shopping malls in Mapping American Culture; Margaret Crawford and Michael Sorkin on malls and Disneyland in Variations on a Theme Park; Jennifer Price and Susan Davis on the Nature Company and Sea World in Uncommon Ground—available from my office.

April 18: The Lure of the Fake: Varieties of Unreality from Williamsburg to Las Vegas and Beyond. Read: Ada Louise Huxtable, The Unreal America, pp. 1-124, as well as Roger Vick, “Artificial Nature,” and Paul Golberger, “Casinos Royale,” (Collected Readings)

**Possible reports: essays on the lure of illusion, facsimile, and simulacra at Disneyland, Beach Boulevard, and the Boneventure Hotel by Miles Orville, Jean Baudrillard, and Frederic Jameson—available in my office.

D. FIXING THINGS: MAKING BETTER PLACES IN AMERICA AND ELSEWHERE

April 25: “Scary Places,” “Three Cities,” and “Capitals of Unreality,” in Kunstler’s Geography of Nowhere, pp. 9-15, 189-244.

**Possible reports: Mike Davis, “Fortress Los Angeles,” Reyner Banham, “Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil”—available in my office.

April 30: **Saturday Walking Tour—down town Los Angeles or elsewhere** (an optional event, open to any interested students.)

May 2: “Better Places,” Geography of Nowhere, pp. 245-275, and possible discussion of Christopher Alexander’s masterpiece, A Pattern Language

**Possible reports: essays on neo traditionalism, the new urbanism, and the Disney Corporation’s Celebration—available in my office.

III. CODA: THE MEANINGS OF HOME, COMFORT, AND WELL-BEING (Two weeks—though as we approach the end of the semester, we will see if there is time left for this)

"Dwelling is the basic principle of human existence."

Martin Heidegger

"But it was good to think that he had this to come back to, this place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome."

Mr. Mole in Kenneth Grahame's Wind in the Willows

May 9: Witold Rybczynski, Home: A Short History of an Idea (portions) as well as oral reports on a wide variety of scholarship analyzing the meaning of dwelling, gender roles, shifting notions of comfort, homelessness, and other issues.

May 16: **Second paper is due**

May 23th: **Final essay exam—in class, open book, open note**

Some important dates:

March 14: **First response paper**
April 30: **Walking Tour**
May 16: **Second response paper**
May 23: **Final Exam**