Demystifying Ecological Thinking in Architecture

Kennesaw State University
ARCH/IDST 5115 | Honors course (CACM)
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"[T]hat the earth was not made purposely for you, to be Lords of it, and we to be your Slaves, Servants, and Beggers; but it was made to be a common Livelihood to all, without respect of persons…"
Declaration of Diggers, 1649

Children playing at the Arcadia Education Project, Bangladesh. Aga Khan Trust for Culture / Sandro di Carlo Darsa (photographer)

Course Description

Demystifying Ecological Thinking in Architecture is an upper-level seminar that explores the intersections of architectural theory and ecological thinking. The course questions key assumptions about the centrality of human agency in the transformation of our collective habitat, the Eurocentric conceptualization of Nature, the ethics of "green" development, and the optimism toward infinite growth. The course maintains a critical stance towards both ends of the spectrum of purported solutions: Does either a romanticized return to a preindustrial, idyllic past, or a futurist, technocratic utopia offer a way out of ecological impasse in architecture? The syllabus is organized along three axes: the myth of *return*, the myth of *control*, and the myth of *democracy*. We will engage critical perspectives from diverse historical, geo-cultural, and political backgrounds to examine ecological architecture at the intersection of social justice and environmental justice.

Course Goals and Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

1. Define key terminologies at the intersection of ecological thinking and architectural theory.
2. Critically examine dominant narratives of ecological architecture through an intersectional lens. Student will cultivate awareness of how categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality interact in ecological architecture.
3. Demonstrate cultural competency and global literacy through their research projects. Students will be able to explain diverse cultural and civilizational perspectives on the notions of dwelling, world-making, the nature/culture relationship, and cosmological horizons.
4. Articulate the implications of "ecological civilization" for architectural thinking through writing. In developing their research papers into posters and presentations, students will also learn how to represent their work to a wider audience, including policy-makers, through an accessible, jargon-free language.

Prerequisites

ARCH 4114 - Architecture Cultures IV: The Development of Architecture into the Twenty-First Century.
*Interdisciplinary Studies prerequisites to be determined by the department.

Course Requirements

1. Participation and class discussions: 25%
2. Weekly reading reflections (eight, 500-word reflections):   25%
3. Research project (10 to 12-page research paper):   30%
4. Poster and Presentation (conference poster & 10-minute video):   20%

Structure and Schedule

Weeks I to IV   *Section I: The Myth of Return*

Section I challenges the assumption that a return to an idealized past—imagined as a time of perfect harmony between humans and their (built) environment—offers a viable option for the future of human existence on Earth. We explore different visions of Nature as well as diverse cosmic and mythical foundations that undergird the relationship between the human animal and its environment. This portion of the course thus examines diverse world-making practices and cultural imaginaries positioned within their corresponding civilizational histories and genealogies.

> Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). Excerpts: "The Garden and the Forest," "The Roman Landscape," "The Great Divide"

> Anne Chapman, "The Ways That Nature Matters: The World and the Earth in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Environmental Values* 16, no. 4 (2007): 433–45.

> Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

> Anna M. Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

> Kjetil Fallan, ed., *The Culture of Nature in the History of Design*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), "Ecotopian Landscapes"

> Rosemary Hancock, "Ecology in Islam," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.510.

> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

Weeks V to IX   *Section II: The Myth of Control*

The second part of the course questions the anthropocentric view of agency and control by decentering the Human as the primary actor impacting Earth's processes. We will begin by challenging post-Enlightenment assumptions that humans are bestowed with the right to rule over the world through instrumental reason and technological means. The readings interrogate the connection between the desire for subjugation, hypermasculinity, coloniality, and privatization. We will then explore the structural violence undergirding (certain) techno-solutionist thinking in architecture. For example, while probing the positive aspects of smart cities, we will consider the hidden face of urban development built upon Big Data and hyperconnectivity. What biopolitics will emerge when building user information is channeled for purposes beyond the intended use? Here, we will examine problematics such as the accelerating encroachment of the digital on all domains of life, "the becoming-artificial of humanity," as well as the ecological footprint of digital infrastructure.

> Etienne Turpin, *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy* (Open Humanities Press, 2014).

Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Paradigm (Chicago, Ill.) (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

Yaneva Albena and Alejandro Zaera, *What Is Cosmopolitical Design?: Design Nature and the Built Environment* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Émilie Hache, "Born from Earth: A New Myth for Earthbounds" in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, eds., Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe, Germany, Cambridge, MA: ZKM/Center for Art and Media; The MIT Press, 2020).

Achille Mbembe, *Brutalism*. Theory in Forms. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity*, Contradictions (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, n.d.).

Mark Jarzombek, "Sustainability, Architecture, and 'Nature' Between Fuzzy Systems and Wicked Problems," 2003, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43876160.

Robert B. Marks, *China: An Environmental History*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). "'Controlling' Nature in the People's Republic of China, 1949-Present"

Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

A.E. Kings, "Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism," *Ethics and the Environment* 22, no. 1 (2017): 63–87, https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.22.1.04.

Weeks X to XV   *Section III: Myth of (Liberal) Democracy*

Section III examines ecological design at the intersection of social justice and environmental justice. Today, promoting democratic decision-making, prioritizing individual freedoms and community interests, and recognizing particularist identities are heralded as hallmarks of the civilized world. While acknowledging the emancipatory capacities of these processes, the readings in this section highlight the tension between the collective needs of the planet and its precarious subjects—whether subaltern communities, climate refugees, or endangered species—and human-centered demands for recognition, rights, and freedom. Who is affected by the cementification (*bétonisation*) of the earth's surface in building faster highways, the privatization of water in mega-basins intended for agro-industrial complexes, and the proliferation of "sustainable" skyscrapers in the middle of deserts? Furthermore, does insisting that the developing Global South adopt the same environmental regulations and austerity measures as the developed Global North provide a viable and equitable way forward? In fostering a critical stance toward architectural practices and urban politics that promise a more equitable future, the class will pay particular attention to the categories of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and nationality.

Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

Dorothea Condé and Pierre-Yves Condé, "Turning Sovereignty Upside Down" in *Critical Zones*

Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, Anarchist Interventions (Oakland, CA, Washington, D.C.: AK Press ; Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2013).

Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

Gökçe Günel, "Exporting the Spaceship: The Connected Isolation of Masdar City," in *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress*, edited by Molotch and Ponzini, (New York University Press, 2019), 194-212.

Sarah M. Whiting, ed., *Inclusive Architecture: Aga Khan Award for Architecture* (Berlin, Germany: ArchiTangle, 2022).

António Tomás, *In the Skin of the City: Spatial Transformation in Luanda.* Theory in Forms. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).