

48241 “Modern Architecture” Course Description -- S’21 -- Prof. Kai Gutschow

This historical survey of modern architecture picks up where the Survey I (48-240) leaves off, with the “crisis of modernity” in late 19th-century Europe. We survey developments globally from before WWI through Postmodernism and into the 21st century. We investigate the network of issues, events & people that led to the rise and fall of a distinct intellectual tradition of “modernism” in architecture and the arts, and how these ideas eventually spread around the world and changed with time and context. We explore major movements of the European avant-garde, but also other responses to modernity, including vernacular, popular, and tropical architectures in the so-called “Non-Western” contexts of the Third World, Global Socialism, and the Cold War.

By investigating the invention, contexts, and reception of modern architecture, we seek to understand its reflexive relationship with culture and the environment. We highlight the role of experimentation and provocation, as well as tradition and the timeless, and how they each intersect with the demands of function and technology as well as social and political imperatives.

Along the way, we ask about the role of history in architecture school, differences between history, theory, and criticism, and divergent definitions of architecture and building. We problematize canon formation, who gets left out of histories, ideas of progress and globalization, as well as the legacy of colonialisms, global politics, and social equity in modern architecture. We see “architectural history” as a particular way of thinking, a practice with distinct methods and questions, but also an essential part of the discipline of architecture. History provides examples, articulates principles and processes, but above all, helps us ask incisive questions.

Work for the course falls into four categories: 1) active listening & note-taking in lectures (many pre-recorded); 2) readings, both original documents from the period and more recent and critical reflections on the work; 3) writing a series of 2pp. “reading reports” and participating actively in smaller discussions about these readings; 4) two short research projects on modern “Non-Western” buildings of your choice.

