

Past Futures: The Ohio River Valley

Architecture, Environment and Aesthetics through Speculative Fictions

“What is history? An echo of the past
in the future; a reflex from the future on the past.”
Victor Hugo



Background

Projections into the future can often become mere fantasy escape. But an aesthetics of a speculative realism can produce scenarios that directly comment on our own moment in time through advancing a particular crisis into the near future. These scenarios are often great lenses for a critical engagement with contemporary problems. In many ways architecture is always a future speculation. This can be as simple as proposing a new lifestyle for a client's domestic environment, or as grand as imagining a new city with new social relations. This aspect of architecture places great pressure on the representations that create the plausibility of this new reality.

If the aesthetics of a future reality can be articulated to a point where the familiar becomes strangely other, these speculations can gain political influence; they can build new audiences, new constituencies. How architects have made aesthetic arguments through different mediations is of crucial importance for the discipline of architecture, both past and future.

What will be the role of architecture in relation to the different issues that exist today, and of the past, accelerated into tomorrow?

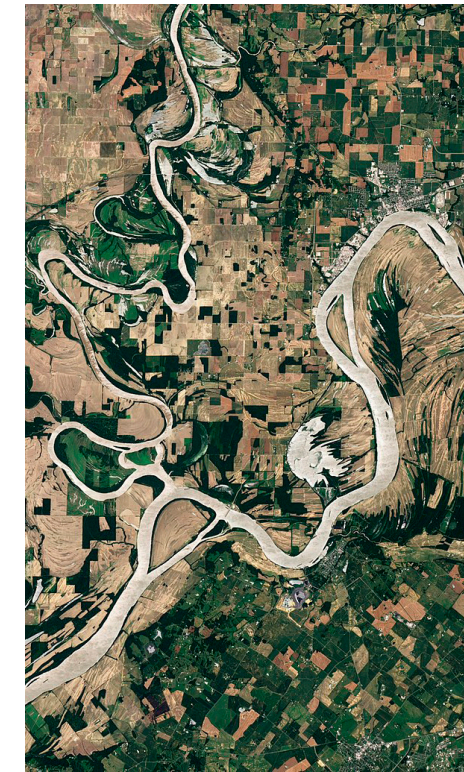


IMAGE LEFT:
The City in the Sea. Liam Young
“A speculative architect should know how to tell stories about cities and spaces to launch these narratives into the world with such force that they find traction.”-Liam Young

IMAGE ABOVE:
Ohio River, NASA Observatory
Away from the water, the land is a patchwork of croplands shaped by human design, and floodplains shaped by overflowing rivers.

Context

The American Midwest presents a unique setting for the issues of accelerationism. Where East meets West, in the overlooked regions, and its neighboring geographies present uniquely American scenarios – testing beds for issues of politics, social conditions, infrastructure, and identity. The primary questions that the studio will ask for this situation are: How will the aesthetics of the background reality in the Midwest be altered in the next two decades? How will the variables in the past affect future conditions: social, political, ecological?

We will investigate the Past Futures of the Ohio River Valley. Beginning in the mid-18th century, the Ohio River was one of the great highways of North America. Tens of thousands of people used it to float westward down from the Appalachian Mountains into the interior of the continent. In recent generations, few places so darkly illustrated the erosion in American industrial vitality, and the heart-sore circumstances of its people, than the Ohio River Valley. The 981 miles of river from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Ill., strikingly beautiful as it flows past rounded hills, also drained a landscape of shuttered plants, broken towns and lives bent by lost jobs and frantic worry.

Constructed Scenarios & Typology Hybrids

As building types, we will question the architecture of the people – programs of the past- combined with existing infrastructure and the associated stories. The goal is to hybridize existing infrastructure with new architectural elements, to present these ideas as decontextualized “objects.” We will be operating at a range of scales through developing constructed scenarios, intermixing past, present and future conditions, to investigate potential hybrids. The reconstruction of formal typologies – both dead and new – will be explored.

Operations & Methodology

We will take up the tactic of the Mashup and expand upon the American “melting pot”. What does combining cultural and spatial traditions and typologies do to affect and transform our built reality?

The mashup methodology has seamlessly assumed a defining position with global cultural production. The complexity and variety of technique embedded in the mashup presents the architectural operation mixing, blending and reconfiguration of existing inputs (political, cultural, typological, social) to produce new outcomes - past, present & future. Rip, remix, recombance, postproduction, cut/copy, supercut, hack, culture jamming, slice, aggregator, sampling, appropriation, cut-up, collage etc...



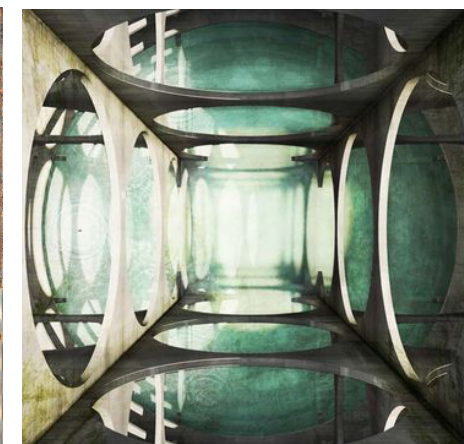
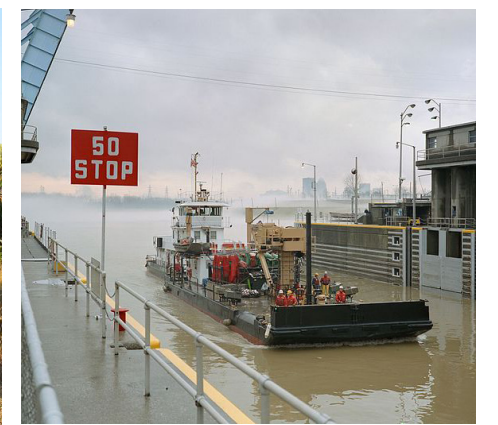
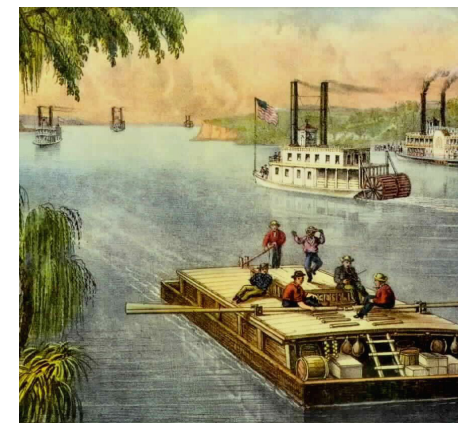
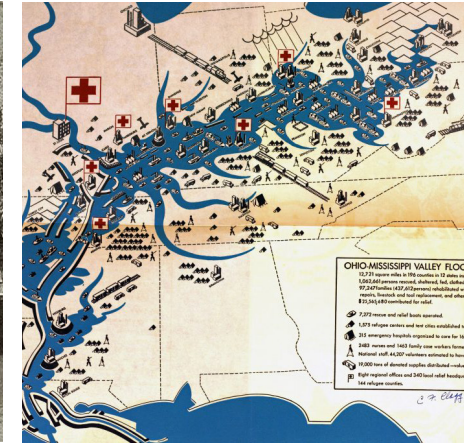
Aesthetics & Worlding

It is necessary for a cultural practice such as architecture to deeply investigate questions of aesthetics. Architecture is a cultural project that contributes to a developing understanding of how tradition and identity affect our built reality: past, present and future. We will explore, and investigate through multiple mediums; both 2D and 3D.

To fully appreciate a representation, the viewer or listener must understand this ‘worlding’ aspect: an image does not simply present an object or a moment, but represents a world. Exchange is inherently essential when considering the mashup and defining the American melting pot. The building designs will be fully represented through sets of architectural representations, based out of the initial representational exercises from the start of the semester. All forms of media are available for these speculations. The two key questions pertain to: plausibility as established through representation, and the aesthetics of realism.

IMAGE ABOVE:
"Duck Hunters on the Ohio River"
William Louis Sonntag

- SELECT REFERENCES:
Groys, Boris, *In the Flow*;
Ranciere, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*;
Easterling, Keller, *Extrastatecraft*;
Lambert-Beatty, Carrie, *"Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility"*;
Young, Michael, *"Reality Modeled After Images: Architecture & Aesthetics after the Digital Image."*;
Steyerl, Hito, *"In Defense of the Poor Image"*;
Latour, Bruno, *"Visualisation & Cognition: Drawing Things Together"*



TOP ROW:
Flatboat, 1924;
Artistic rendition of map of the Ohio-Mississippi valley flood disaster of 1937, showing American Red Cross locations;
Planet City, film still. Directed by Liam Young

MIDDLE ROW:
"Bound Down the River," Artist unknown
A termite mound. Photo: David Davies/Wikimedia Commons;
Coast Guard buoy tender "Obion", 200-foot main lock at McAlpine Locks, Louisville, Kentucky

BOTTOM ROW:
NN_Tower 1 Elevation Study, Casey Rehm, 2019
Alberto Kalach, Concrete structure, 2017
Swamp City, Alice Bucknell, 2021

Learning Outcomes

The course is designed for students to produce a semester long, studio based project. The course will hinge around the articulation of the architectural argument into a design proposition culminating in the exhibition of work.

- Leverage verbal, written, and visual forms of communication to describe complex ideas.
- Transition research based design to projective design processes.
- Understand how the choice of design media, method and representations affects the understanding of the built environment.
- Development and execution of design methodology.
- Production of final materials for exhibition and publication of work.