

Past Futures: The American Rust Belt

Aesthetics, Environment & Architecture through Speculative Fictions

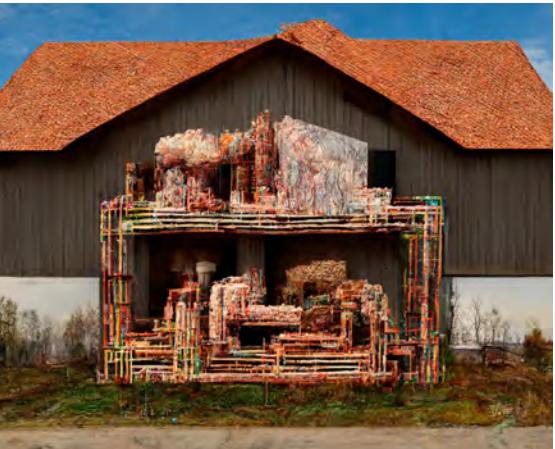
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PROMPT

The American Rust Belt presents a unique setting for the issues of speculation and 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 Rust Belt be altered in the next two decades? How do the variables in the past affect future conditions: social, political, ecological? How do these conditions affect typology, scale, and tectonics? We will consider these relationships as potential moments for discovery and innovation.

We will investigate the Past Futures of the American Rust Belt. For over four decades, the term, “Rust Belt” has been deplored, praised, and parsed. There are no natural borders, as there are with the East and West Coasts, or topographic features. Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania are central to the region, as well as parts of Illinois, Wisconsin, and New York. And while the term may lack geographical strata, it has historical layers, and they are thick and evocative. The phrase is born of loss, but has acquired texture, depth, and decades’ worth of meaning. What is extractivism in relation to the Rust Belt’s stories: the people and the environment?



“To assess and manipulate the medium, you may have to cultivate a capacity to perceive in a split screen—to straddle mental partitions that separate the nominative from the active and dispositional. You must develop something like a canine mind; you see things with names and hear humans speaking words but those things cannot be comprehended in the absence of a thousand other affective cues and relative positions between things in context.”
-Keeler Eastling, Medium Design

AESTHETICS

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, environment, 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 interrogating the culture machine. 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.



PROCESS

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. Students will work in collaboration, as well as individual project studies to develop a semester long design project, in high resolution.

CONTEXT

Many Rust Belt cities have minority populations that statistically outpace those in other parts of the country. The largest per capita Muslim population in the United States is in Dearborn, Michigan. For much of the “Rust Belt”, emphasis is placed on the manufacturing sector, overlooking many of the largest employers in the region: retailers, hospitals, and institutions of higher education, as well as the local typologies and infrastructure of the people. Of the handful of cities in the United States that support an Orthodox Jewish population, many are in the Rust Belt. A century ago, the region’s cities were often populated primarily by non-native English speakers. For example, in 1900, over 75 percent of the residents of Cleveland, Ohio, were foreign-born or first-generation immigrants.

Who are the children of the settlers in the Rust Belt? It’s time we create a much-needed space for the deep, various, complex, sad, wonderful, and pressing stories of the Rust Belt, which perhaps has the potential to heal a country overrun by division.

OPERATIONS

In principle, we’re going to think critically about how we construct the identity of a place through its cultural, social, political, and ecological systems and develop procedures for doing so. What are the effects and consequences upon our operation design thinking? Who are the constituents and social traditions; how do these challenge new typologies; what are the tectonic details as a result?

This studio is focused, in part, on the problem of how we construct facts and our understanding about the built environment. What is our understanding of history, and whose history have we been given through the “facts”? We will explore operational speculations through the lens of plausibility. Where do the scopes of future imaginaries and innovation lie in the stories of the past?

We will think ethically about the modes of communication and translation we develop and use in our projects. How does AI understand and interpret our environments; what is our agency and relationship to machine learning in our design processes and cultural speculations?



Images (2,3,4,7) via NYTimes



EXTRACTIVISM

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.

We will consider the contemporary issues of climate change, resources, labor and social-political relations in the Rust Belt. What is the role of architecture? “The old idea of infrastructure as “grey buildings behind a chain-link fence” gives way to a different social and political imaginary for how planetary metabolism of energy, food, information and so on are produced, refined, and distributed. In the future of architectural history, I think there’s going to be a re-appreciation of what we’ve generally dismissed as “industrial architecture.” - Benjamin Bratton, *The Terraforming is Not Optional*



LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of this studio you should be able; 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.



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