Parallel Environmentalisms

Seminar & Thesis Preparation Course

In Person & Remote Classes

Course: Arch 407 /507
Instructor: William Smith
Term: Fall 2023
Day: Tuesdays
Time: 3:30pm
Credits: 3
Location: Portland

Requirements include: reading, writing, talking, using rhino, vray and AI image tools (with tutorials).
Seminar & Thesis Preparation Course

What comes after sustainability? It seems like every few years a new word arrives on the scene: Resilience. Adaptation. Etc. These words are certainly compelling, for a time. But so far none seem to grasp at what we’re all facing: some massive collective effort, where all of us should be contributing differently, to adjust to a climate-changed world.

Some architects claim to know what needs doing. Many admit they have no idea. The occasional architect will argue our role is minimal compared to the real solutions out there. The rare one might say architecture shouldn’t try to solve problems at all.

And yet one can’t help but feel the tug underneath the discipline; an emerging architectural symptom to our era’s environmentally charged condition, creeping into discussions everywhere. It’s almost impossible to avoid. And sometimes frustratingly so, since most of the discussion remains conveniently vague about what we can and can’t do about it (perhaps like this one).

Sure, there was a time when architects overtly aimed to save the planet with their tool-kit. Shiny renderings. A lot of green surfaces. Even more parametric surfaces. The occasional “MasterPlanet” manual. The issues warranted attention, true, but the hubris was palpable and led to an appropriate over-exhaustion: enough with sustainability.

And so a certain discursive hangover remains. As does the underlying condition. Our shared environmental dread is still there, tugging away at all of us in the news, throughout our landscapes, our cities, our towns, our grocery store prices. Unfortunately, the ideologically vague but practically narrow idea of sustainability seems to stay with us, crowding the space in our minds that would otherwise offer new explorations. It’s a frustrating tension. One that everyone has to decide how to relieve.

The modernist today might try to go all in and design the world (we know where that leads). The post modernist might pick a lane: autonomy or performativity, and feel content with that (we couldn’t even fathom just two lanes to choose from). Those critical architects that followed would do a good job of articulating more problems (but at this point, we’ve gotten almost too good at that). The “Indifference” crowd today would say to save yourself the stress and focus on the discipline (it’s tempting).

In the profession, there rarely seem to be interesting ways to engage our environmental condition with architecture: tally LEED points for a developer’s marketing brochure, or don’t. Meanwhile in academia, students are offered an impossible task: multiplying an infinite number of problems with an infinite number of potential solutions (but did you consider...?). In turn, the body of resulting environmental production is vast and without organization. No central movement connects this large body of work. No source collects or provides and explanation for the variety of ideological stances found within the work. Climate change is too big, too complex, and too depressing, even if it’s worth addressing. Aren’t all the answers out there anyway, just waiting for political will?

It might finally be time for a re-start; a re-examination of the tools at our discipline’s disposal. A place to start now is to make things smaller, less complex, less bleak. We should continue to question the assumed answers already out there in the world of the “sustainable”: A lot of science.

Not that much art. Similar to the idea of the post-digital, perhaps there is a post-sustainable: An expanded field of work no longer organized around performance alone, but rather a diversity of generative methods towards environmental issues, all aiming towards slightly different ends.

The work is certainly out there. Some of it is new. Some of it is quite old. It can be surprising how two works of architecture can both claim to address the environment, in radically different ways. If “sustainability” as a term has managed to become a clear, marketable idea, its relative term “environmentalism” manages to remain productively murky. Underneath the ease of the word resides diverse and parallel ranges of politics, aesthetics, priorities and communities produced as architecture: a collection of Parallel Environmentalisms.

The goal of this seminar and its associated studios is to begin articulating and expanding these environmentalisms through the form of agency (action) they take. Rather than going all in on one approach, forcing a decision between two, or giving up altogether, the seminar will lay out a spectrum of overlapping environmentalisms. None are better or less than, all are possible, depending on what you’re into. For the more performatively focused, agency can be found in the environmental functioning of the building within its context and within itself. For the more aesthetically focused, agency can be found in representation of the environment and production of heuristic experiences. The seminar will act as a survey of “where we are”, a beginning point for the young architect to develop their own disciplinary stance towards environmental agency in future work.