



Syllabus Companion



Towards A Simplicity of Death

Story One

When the great archbishop was buried, his family of over one hundred surrounded him, revered by hundreds of priests solemnly streaming by, his casket mourned and softly touched by his spiritual family of thousands. Over the last ten days since his death, the Archbishop and his 97 years of life had been celebrated in two States, greeted as his body traveled from one city to the next, and revered by hundreds in an evening vigil service that lasted for hours into the night. His casket was lowered into the solemn Crypt of the Catholic Cathedral under its altar platform, where his name will be carved in the granite stone marking the crypt. His casket was made of simple wooden pine planks, and lowered into the Crypt with leather straps around the pine handles by his friends and relatives. The priest who had protected him and been his friend, lowered the coffin with red-lined eyes.



Story Two

On a remote island, a woman who had swallowed two bottles of pills was buried in a small, rural cemetery, set on a grassy hill, facing south. A distant glimpse of the sea lay far away. Six nuns in brown habit carried her simple wooden coffin up the hill. A grave had been dug, and the mound of dirt stood high surrounding the small, huddled mourning family. Sun glimpsed through the heavy winter clouds. The wooden coffin was closed. Words were spoken of intense grief. The coffin was lowered into the grave. The young and only daughter of the woman picked up a shovel and thrust it into the mound of dirt, and let it fall upon the wooden coffin in the dirt grave. Another shovel full of dirt. Then another, larger. Then another, with force. She passed the shovel to her aunt, the woman's sister, then to her younger aunt, then to her cousins. The dirt fell with a force, a prayer, with words, with a cry, from each who placed it there. Later in the summer, the family returned, with a hand made tombstone. They had assembled it on their front porch, by pouring white concrete into a wheelbarrow, and pressed glass marbles, rocks, shells, and tumbled beach glass into the setting white concrete. A brass plaque was pressed into the tombstone, with her name and dates of her life. The family dug again, and set the handmade stone, and noted that the center of the grave had fallen just a little, where the wooden box had given way, under the weight of the dirt. Wildflowers and grasses marked the grave, regenerated with the tilled soil and body beneath it.





A whale funeral

There's a small, dark, sleek, and sleek whale swimming in the water. It's a young whale, and it's swimming in the water. It's a young whale, and it's swimming in the water. It's a young whale, and it's swimming in the water.

"I can't see you go on the water to meet and mourn the loss of a loved one," it says. "I can't see you go on the water to meet and mourn the loss of a loved one," it says. "I can't see you go on the water to meet and mourn the loss of a loved one," it says.



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Story Three

Heaving for breath, the massive mammal leapt, and dove deep and deeper into the cold sea, senses alive, seeking her tumbling, falling, lifeless child, tinged pink with the few minutes of life she had been granted. Black and white stood strongly out in the deep seas, the whale, reunited with the dead larger-than human -sized body of her 400 pound child, circled upwards, gently, so as not to rock the cold and limp corpse off of her arcing back, upwards, upwards, towards the light, until she breached for air. The family of seventy-five mourners, swam anxiously around her, at a respectful distance, some delivering offerings of fresh caught fish for her sustenance. They had delayed their journey north to care for their grieving sister, to care for their dead niece. Days passed. The body of the child whale still balanced, ever more precarious on the arched back of its mother, the pod swam every northwards, slowly, slowly, pacing themselves to the mother's grief. Outside the sea, the world watched. Millions of viewers signaled their own grief, triggered by the mother's grief. Blogs, Facebook pages, Instagram images, newspaper articles and television news reports, captured the grief of a world struck by the simplicity of the whale's grief. Days continued, the whale grieving, the world grieving. No intermediary, no formality, no structure, just the sheer weight of love and grief, embodied in an eight ton killer whale.

DESIGN



Towards a Designed Death

While vastly different circumstances surrounded these dead ones, and their mourners, each had in common a simple principle – that those who loved the dead one the most, would direct the process of mourning themselves. The community of the Archbishop, the family of the aunt, the whale pod would create the moments that were meaningful to their process of mourning, to the being who lived, and to the being who had died. The funerals became a process of design, just as the person's life had been a work of their own design. In the Archbishop's case, he agonized over whether to be buried with his beloved family, in the hills where he grew up, or to be buried in the Crypt of the Cathedral of the Church he had loved so much. He designed his own funeral.

CONDITIONS



Over the last 70 years, the American celebration of death has become highly institutionalized, and sanitized. The gleaming perfect lawns of our memorial parks have been filled with the same size stones and fonts and the bodies there are encased in concrete, around steel or hardwood caskets, and filled with deadly poisonous embalming fluid, while the blood of the dead flows out into our sewers. We have been told that the moment of death of our loved ones is too painful for us to endure, and to make decisions, that our minds are clouded, and that we must give over the process of dying to professionals who know best, and will take care of the details. And as an American culture, for the last 70 years, we have believed these words, and left death to the professionals.

And then again, death breaks out, in spite of ourselves. In spite of a culture that is aging more healthfully, so that we die more often as an elderly person – up to 80% of deaths today are of people over 60 – when we do experience



a death of a person who is not elderly, death comes harshly and with extreme trauma. A death of a person under 50 years old is almost always surprising, and often from suicide or accident. While only a smaller percentage of deaths as a whole, the surviving ones are much more likely to be highly traumatized and deeply engaged in a process of grieving that they may have never known before. Witness the death of Princess Diana, and the public outpouring of grief that occurred. Prince. Michael Jackson. And yes, our families' suicides, MADD deaths, lead to a physical and digital outpouring of grief from GhostBikes to street candles, to Facebook pages not foreseen or mandated in any funeral director's handbook of protocol.

The professionalization of mourning and commercialization of business of dying has been discussed in American culture since Jessica Mitford's seminal book in 1963, *The American Way of Death Revisited*. Sharing a rich connection with the studio premise: Voluntary Simplicity, the 2018 Walton Critic Studio offers the opportunity to design and rethink the steps offered to our contemporary culture to partake in our own, individualized mourning experience.

CONSIDERATIONS



The Studio will consider:

- Whether to hand this intensely personal moment off to professionals, to only those practiced in the care of the dead, is to miss a moment of life that is intensely alive, and vivid.
- What role does design have to play in the celebration of the dead?
- How does ceremony and symbolism play a part in our culture's historical celebration of death and its changes today?
- How to transform the sleek lawns and gleaming granite niches with their plastic flowers into a life-filled place of individuality that people will love to intern their loved ones in, to intern themselves into?
- What does our new perception of the earth and its final limitations induced by climate change have to do with our changing perceptions of death and the American funeral industry? How can we embrace natural burial processes, that do not involve deadly chemicals and and untreated exhaust from cremations? Within the context of voluntary simplicity, we see these patterns of human complexity creating different outcomes for our natural world, vastly different than expected. By thinking systemically, about the cause and effect of our actions in a larger, global context, we may come to see the power of individual action, inspiring collective, community action, leading to broader, global impacts.

REALITY



Global Crises

Over the past decades of the 20th and 21st centuries, we have experienced postmodern apathy, cynicism - relativism notwithstanding. We are experiencing a fragmented and chaotic reality acted out in massively irresponsible behaviors across the Earth. Our world is shrinking under the merciless assault of our polluting and wasteful habits.

Personal Crises

Today's habits come out of accepting a life in the fast lane under a mantra of more, bigger, faster, better, cheaper. Habits that keep on failing to provide

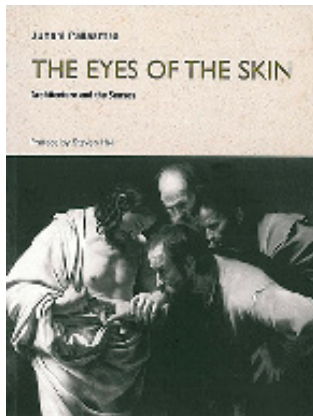


what they promise and instead deliver only more unmet needs, grief and stress. Despite promises heralded by the digital age, continuous scientific breakthroughs, the prowess of technological evolution, and the myth of infinite growth and rationality, we find ourselves returning, to the same ancient existential dilemmas born out of just being alive and trying to attain some peace, security, and contentment. Little have we advanced in these simple matters. Escaping this fact into carefully crafted distractions geared to our most superficial desires and exercised through unchecked consumerism, social media, or entertainment never quite works either.

From Personal to Global

Worse still, we are witnessing what some of these habits have brought us: global warming, unspoken poverty co-existing with opulent greed, violence, AIDS, terrorism, war, ecological devastation, and economic instability at a planetary scale. Although it is hard to admit it, we ourselves have been all too often shy accomplices of this state of affairs. Confused, distracted and overwhelmed by the neurotic complexity of it all, we feel little more than irrelevant peons, floating astray in the rough seas of 21st Century civilization.

ARCHITECTURE



Making Architecture, Still

Professing architecture is no light matter in these circumstances. True professing demands that we hold a position, make a vow in the name of a deep seeded passion for architecture, our fellow beings and Earth. But let us not forget that our professing also requires being able to technically and competently respond to architectural challenges. Professing is where belief and knowledge come together in the here and now of present reality. Hence, uncritically adopting off-the shelf formalistic idioms is superficial and irresponsible. So, how are we to profess architecture facing *this* reality? Can we truly make a committed and caring act for the sake of improving whatever is trusted to us as architects? Can we make a difference? The studio takes on this question professionally. And, following the two meanings behind professing, it moves simultaneously in two parallel paths of commitment and embodiment.

SIMPLICITY



More With Less

The philosophical path will offer a *voluntary and critical direction that resists the forces of today's zeitgeist*. The disciplinary path will lead towards *architectural clarity, sustainability, and essentialism* as concrete ways to embody this resistance. The two-path road points towards a renewed aesthetics and ethics of (following architect Alberto Campo Baeza) 'more with less'. Encouraging a turn towards the minimal, the fundamentally uncomplicated, the direct and conscious as a potent antidote to our culture of excess, schizophrenia and unconsciousness. The studio engages an *hypothesis of simplicity* as a critical, insight seeking, disciplinary and conscious inquiry to confront professional challenges of today. We seek an architecture of presence. We will use Duane Elgin's book "*Voluntary Simplicity*" as a source of clarity and inspiration along this road.

Starting the journey demands that first and foremost, we do it *voluntarily*. We must freely chose it from within and not feel that it is imposed on us from without.



Second, this choice has to come out of some *personal realization of its necessity*. Starting the journey demands that first and foremost, we do it **voluntarily**. We must freely chose it from within and not feel that it is imposed on us from without. Second, this choice has to come out of some *personal realization of its necessity*. In other words, we cannot select it for nostalgic or reactionary reasons. Rather it should **grow out of** our direct experience of the situation itself. "Growing-out-of" means to have been in the midst of it and come out of it by first hand learning and effort. It signifies to embrace (and not to throw away) what has been overcome. In having been intimate with it at one time, we understand it well enough to attempt to transcend it without narrow-minded resentment. In other words, it is not a position arrived by intellectual reasoning or negative emotions. Rather it is a decision founded in a concrete and personal experience of growth

Personal Growth

Thus, choosing simplicity grows out of our direct experience of living under unnecessary complexity. Seeking focus comes out of being tired of living in distraction. Pursuing essentialism grows out of realizing that superficiality offers little. And so on, the desire for clarity grows out of confusion, conservation out of wastefulness, austerity out of excess, integrity out of fragmentation, self-restrain out of empty consumerism and spending, poetry out of crude materialism, presence and slowness out of the fleetingness of a fast life, committed participation out of passive following, and the minimum out of overcrowded and cluttered conditions.

ON VAS



We call the resulting architecture, **Voluntary Architectural Simplicity** or **VAS** for short. The **VAS** Studio is wherein **VAS** is practiced by using essential architectural principles, rules, ideas. Two disclaimers here. First, the **VAS** Studio is consciously naïve in seeking to resist the overwhelming forces of our time. It just makes no sense to do so. Second, the **VAS** Studio is not self-righteous. Although it claims to do what is right, it does not see itself as "the only way" to address today's challenges. It just professes, and in so doing offers, humbly, Voluntary Architectural Simplicity.

Spirituality

Yet **VAS** is not enough. For there is something unspoken of great power that is pushing us into this path of simplification: **Spirituality**. We "sense" that today's huge problems will never be sincerely addressed (and thus solved) unless we acknowledge the ultimate meaning, wholeness, or trans-personal nature of reality and all beings. While this vision does not require a divinity, it doesn't shy away from the sublime and metaphysical either. In this sense, perhaps, *our most urgent job as architects is to profess the sacredness of all space on Earth* so that land development may be done with care and wisdom. The preservation, respect, and celebration of space can only come when we honor its sacred dimension. By bringing a spiritual sensibility to its fold, architecture may be able to positively affect a world in desperate need for truth, goodness, and beauty. The Sacred Space & Cultural Studies (SSCS) concentration is our learning laboratory to discuss, explore, practice, and advance an architecture that invites us to transcend by the power of design quality



SUSAN JONES



Recognized American architect **Susan Jones** will be teaching the **Walton** studio for 3 weeks. We will follow her vision and expertise to consider the interactions between materiality, light, and the sacred while embracing cross-disciplinary methodologies mined from sustainability, adaptive reuse, and community engagement. **Susan Jones** is known for creating projects of reclamation in which tectonics, spirituality, and social responsibility come together in beautiful and inspiring ways. As the 2018 Walton Critic, architect Jones will participate in the life of our school at large including lecturing, meeting faculty, and so on. We have designed the studio curriculum and pedagogy to offer students the best chance to gain from architect Jones' experience and presence. In addition to this remarkable opportunity, we will be celebrating the *10th anniversary of our Walton Program* by bringing five past Walton Critics for nearly a week in October. During this time, these world-class architects will be visiting our studio and offer crits and reviews of the ongoing work. Our visitors will be: *Juhani Pallasmaa* (2011 Walton), *Alberto Campo Baeza* (2012 Walton), *Eliana Bormida* (2014 Walton), *Michael Crosbie* (2015 Walton), and *Prem Chandavakar* (2016 Walton).

PEDAGOGY & SCHEDULE

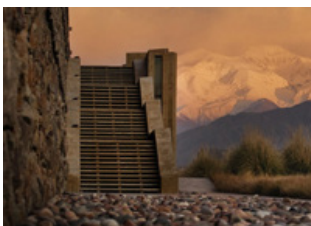
The semester will be broken down in four Learning Phases:



Learning Phase	Study/Design Focus	Modality	Duration	Due	Grade
One	Preparation	team	2 Wks	10-Sep	10%
Two	Parti	individual	2	21-Sep	20%
Three	Schematic Design	individual	5 Wks	26/27-Oct	30%
Four	Development & Communication	individual	6 Wks	7/10-Dec	30%
All	Overall Growth, Participation, Citizenship	individual	n/a	n/a	10%

Phase 1 (Preparation) provides the basic intellectual and precedents scaffolding that students will utilize the rest of the semester. **Phase 2 (Parti)** an architectural scheme is developed for specific programmatic needs and site (funerary complex in Seattle, Washington). **Phase 3 (Schematic Design)** takes the parti produced in Phase 2 and turns it into a building. **Phase 4 (Development & Communication)** involves the in-depth design development and the representation of the whole project. Students will have a chance to work in direct relation with the 2018 Walton Critic. Required readings, bibliographical and web references, particular materials, other resources as well as specific details about studio activities, goals, and expectations will be presented in the assignments covering the four pedagogical phases and schedule described above.

COLLABORATION



The studio work will alternate between individual and team work. It is expected that students actively engage and support one another in the learning/design process. This is an explicit recognition of how architectural practice actually works—a largely cooperative enterprise in which different people bring their expertise and ideas into a project. When asked to work in teams, students will have the opportunity to develop collaborative skills and get to realize their own strengths as individuals at the same time. The faculty will assist such effort but it is the students' duty to find appropriate accommodations to diversity and difference.

REGULATIONS

Specific information regarding grading, support, accessibility, resources, standards, policies and more are included in the OFFICIAL SYLLABUS of this class, as per regulation of The Catholic University of America. All that is included in *this* SYLLABUS COMPANION falls under the regulations and rules described in that document.

