



Syllabus Companion

The Catholic University of America  
arpl 601/603/703

School of Architecture and Planning  
Fall Semester 2013

Sacred Space & Cultural Studies

studio

Bermudez / Silvestrin

VAS

**REALITY**



Postmodern apathy, cynicism, and 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. Habits that come out of accepting a life in the fast lane under the mantra of more, bigger, faster, better, and cheaper. Habits that keep on failing to provide what they promise and instead deliver only more unmet needs, grief and stress. Despite the promises heralded by the rising digital age, continuous scientific breakthroughs, the prowess of technological evolution, and the myth of infinite growth and rationality, we always find ourselves returning, increasingly more frustrated, to the same ancient existential dilemmas born out of just being alive and trying to attain some peace, security, and contentment. Little, if any, have we advanced in these simple matters. Escaping this fact into the carefully crafted distractions geared to our most superficial desires and exercised through unchecked consumerism, social media, or entertainment never quite works either. 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**



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 Postmodern, Neo-Modern, Deconstructivist, or any other pre-digested style 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?

## ON VAS



The studio will take on this question professionally. And, following the two meanings behind professing, it will move simultaneously in two parallel paths of commitment and embodiment.

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 Campo Baeza) 'more with less'. It encourages 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 will then engage the *hypothesis of simplicity* as a critical, insight seeking, disciplinary and conscious inquiry to confront the professional challenges of today. We are talking of 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*. 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.

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-restraint 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.

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.

ON SSCS



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 transpersonal 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) Studio is our learning laboratory to discuss, explore, practice, and advance an architecture that turns what it touches into sacred by the power of design quality

Claudio Silvestrin



We should be very grateful to have internationally acclaimed architect **Claudio Silvestrin** teaching the **VAS** studio for 3 weeks. He has been one of the greatest inspiration for developing this philosophy and practice of architecture in the first place. As the 2013 Walton Critic, he will be also expected to participate in the life of the school at large including lecturing in other classes, meeting faculty, and so on. However, the main focus of Claudio's residency at CUArch is to teach our studio. Naturally, given this remarkable opportunity, we have designed the studio curriculum and pedagogy to offer students the best chance to gain from architect Silvestrin's experience and presence. We hope students will take full advantage of this situation.

PEDAGOGY & SCHEDULE

The semester will be broken down in five Learning Phases:



Learning Phase	Study/Design Focus	Modality	Duration	Due	Grade
One	Preparation	individual	2 Wks	6-Sep	5%
Two	Design Exercises	team/ind	1	23-Sep	10%
Three	Site, Program & Precedents Analyses	team	3	4-Oct	10%
Four	Schematic Design	team	2	16-Oct	25%
Five	Design Development & Presentation	team	7	9-Dec	40%
All	Overall Growth, Participation, Citizenship	individual	n/a	n/a	10%

**Phase 1 (Preparation)** provides the basic intellectual scaffolding that students will utilize the rest of the semester. Specifically, this phase involves studying (reading) and writing about architect Claudio Silvestrin's work and ideas as well as other related material (Voluntary Architectural Simplicity – VAS). **Phase 2 (Design Exercises)** asks students to produce quick responses to a series of architectural-theoretical provocations. The goal is





to build students' intuition, capacity for rapid and appropriate design reaction, confidence, and sensibility to the essence of things. **Phase 3 (Site, Program & Precedents Analyses)** familiarizes students with the site conditions as well as the building program and past examples of similar architectural challenges. **Phase 4 (Schematic Design)** develops an architectural parti for the assigned building program and site following a design methodology provided by Claudio Silvestrin. Students will also have a chance to work and in direct relation with the 2013 Walton Critic. **Phase 5 (Design Development & Presentation)** involves the careful and skillful evolution of the scheme produced in Phase Four.



During the semester, our class will be periodically working together with Professor **Randall Ott's** arpl 401 undergraduate studio. While our two studios will work next to each other and share some of the same assignments, lectures, crits, and faculty, the students will remain working within their given studio units and directing their efforts toward slightly different issues, given their distinct educational goals.

**READINGS, ETC.**



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 each specific assignment that follow the four pedagogical phases and schedule described above.

**TEAM WORK**



For the most part, the work will be done in teams. This studio will require a very high level of architectural response, development, and communication. It is just impossible to attain this goal by one individual working alone. This fact reflects actual architectural practice, a largely cooperative enterprise in which different people bring their expertise and ideas into a project. Working in teams will also afford students the opportunity to develop collaborative skills and their own strengths as individuals.



However, since students are individuals with a variety of backgrounds, skills, knowledge, and expectations with some just starting and some finishing graduate education, teams will need to figure out their own way to adjust their members' differences in order to match the required learning outcomes. The faculty will try to 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 the former.

*These opportunities are not available every day, so make it count !*