

Preliminary Syllabus - Details Subject to Modification

Lightscares and Liminality in Premodern Architecture

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Course Description

This ten-week course centers on a particular interpretive methodology (liminality) and a particular phenomenon (light) in the design and experience of architecture. The animating theoretical concept of liminality was originally developed in the anthropological study of indigenous peoples and western folklore, particularly the structure of ritual and the inclusion of liminal, or threshold, experience in the transformation of people into new phases of life, new social/political/cultural roles, or new kinds of understanding of self and world. This concept, rooted in the work of European scholars Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, has been adopted throughout the humanities and is even making its way into contemporary sociological and political science discourse. The architectural phenomenon to which this concept will be applied in the course is the handling of light, at once one of the most fundamental, if immaterial, aspects of architecture and one of the most central in cultural, including symbolic, interpretation. Fortunately, a recent generation of scholars has turned from purely textual analysis of the meaning of light and formal/structural analysis of architecture to an inquiry into the somatic experience of buildings as the basis for religious, political, and cultural interpretation. This makes for a rich stew of factors and conditions to be investigated. The “lightscares” of the course title will broach the design and creation of both exterior and interior environments sculpted by light.

Of course, light doesn’t just happen to architecture. Its play over architectural masses and surfaces, its entry into interiors, its distribution, clarity, direction, and strength are all mediated by architecture. What that means is that the study of light in architecture involves study of all other architectural features: scale, form and geometry, structure, space, surface, materials, decoration, and use. For some buildings, we have precious contemporary accounts of their erection and initial function. For others, we must infer information from the lithic evidence alone in buildings that still stand or as they may be revealed by archaeology. Again, it is fortunate that a new generation of scholars has many new tools at its disposal.

If you consider any building you enjoy (or disdain), it’s likely that light plays a role in the impression the building has made on you: it can be warm and welcoming, cool and calming, bright for task performance or low for mood, fearful when used as a tool of surveillance and power, uplifting in religious or educational contexts, enlarging when it takes your mind beyond yourself. This is the power of good architecture of any period and light is critical to it. The orientation of buildings is critical as are the strategies for handling light. The siting of structures in relation to the movements of the sun and other celestial bodies is a major factor in many canonical premodern buildings.

By means of illustrated lectures, the course will provide ample material to learn about architects’ aspirations and technical mechanisms for mediating light in buildings of the past—with all their precedents, history of development, and vocabulary. It will also offer time for discussion of

primary and secondary buildings and an opportunity to compare those buildings' light to that of buildings today.

Course Structure

Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Week 1 Prehistoric Architecture on the Atlantic Coastline of Europe: *Lighting Life in Death*

Possible authors: Bradley on the archaeology of natural places, Williams on the Neolithic mind, Watson on archaeoacoustics, Scarre on prehistoric Brittany, Robin on Irish passage tombs, Pearson on the Stonehenge Riverside Project, Stonehenge Hidden Landscape Project, Pryor on Seahenge,

Week 2 Classical and Hellenistic Greek Architecture: *Natural Light and Divinity*

Possible authors: Boutsikas on archaeoastronomy, Castro on oracular temples, Parke on the Temple at Didyma

Week 3: Roman Architecture: *Light and Imperium: Political Power and Aesthetic Pleasure*

Possible authors: Ward-Perkins on Roman imperial architecture, MacDonald on the Pantheon, MacDonald and Pinto on Hadrian's Villa, Lancaster on Roman concrete

Week 4: Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture: *Light of the Ineffable*

Possible authors: Krautheimer and Mathews on Early Christian and Byzantine architecture, Wharton on the Baptistry of the Orthodox; Mainstone, Pentcheva, Barry, and Frank on Hagia Sophia; Ousterhout on later Byzantine architecture

Week 5: "Barbarian" Environments: *Light and Mysterious Thresholds*

Possible authors: Price on the Vikings

The High Middle Ages and the Pre- and Early Modern World

Week 6: Romanesque Architecture: *Light and Asceticism*

Possible authors: Stalley and Mumford on early medieval architecture, Kinder on Cistercian monasteries

Week 7: Gothic Architecture: *Light and Diversifying Religious Communities*

Possible authors: Jantzen, Bony, and Murray on Gothic architecture; von von Simson and Panofsky on Gothic symbolism

Week 8: Renaissance Architecture: *Light of Human Knowledge*

Possible authors: Panofsky and Pérez Gómez on Renaissance perspective

Week 9: **Baroque Architecture: *Ardent Light***
Possible authors: Norberg-Schulz, Hersey on Baroque architecture

Coda

Week 10 **Eighteenth-Century Architecture: *Light and Enlightenment***
Possible authors: Etlin on 18C architecture

Course Texts

Bille and Sørensen, “The Anthropology of Luminosity”

Dolan, *Decoding Astronomy in Art and Architecture*

Mark, *Light, Wind, and Structure*

Plummer, *The Poetics of Light*

Ramos, *Light in Architecture: The Intangible Material*

Turner, *Ritual Process*

Course Instructor

Laura Hollengreen is an Associate Professor in the School of Architecture and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture. For some twenty years, she taught the initial architectural history survey to Architecture majors and General Education students at the UA and Georgia Tech, as well as advanced electives that centered on specific periods, places, and themes. She continues to teach courses on light in architecture and on architectural theory today and she is the founder and chair of the (Meta)Physics of Light Research and Innovation track in the School of Architecture. She has offered three prior HSP courses and won the Superior Teaching Award for the first of them, presented entirely online during the pandemic. The theme of the proposed course derives from her sabbatical work on a co-authored book about liminal design.