Lightscapes and Liminality in Premodern Architecture
Humanities Seminars Program
Fall 2025

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School of Architecture

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. This will be her fourth time teaching in the Humanities Seminars Program, which she also currently serves as a member of the Curriculum Committee. For some twenty years, she taught the initial architectural history survey to Architecture students, undergraduate and graduate, and General Education students at the UA and Georgia Tech. She has also offered many advanced electives that center on specific periods, places, and themes from urban public space to museum design to landscapes of war. She continues to teach courses on light in architecture 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 earned the Superior Teaching Award for the first of them, presented entirely online during the pandemic. She also serves as a member of the HSP Curriculum Committee. The theme of the course derives from her sabbatical work (2024-25) on a co-authored book about liminal design.

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 anthropology of indigenous peoples and western folklore, particularly study of the structure of ritual involving the inclusion of "liminal," or threshold, experience in the transformation of people into new phases of life, or new social/political/cultural roles. The 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 the concept liminality is here applied 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. Light is not uniform in environments around the world but varies depending on latitude, climate, landforms, vegetation, and design of architectural elements. In fact, *light places us*.

The topic of light compels because it extends from the most mundane experiences of daily life to the most profound cultural interpretation: it affects us physiologically and psychologically while also serving to express specific socio-political conditions and intangible cosmological understanding. It facilitates task performance and contributes to fundamental understanding of self and world. Indeed, we might hypothesize that because light is a central element in perception and memory of place, and in dwelling happily, a worthy building *retrains our senses* by focusing

attention on the creative design of light: it expands our perception of design possibilities for healthy habitation.

Fortunately, a recent generation of scholars has turned away 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 "lightscapes" of the course title will broach the design and creation of both exterior and interior environments sculpted by light.

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 are 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 in any period and light is critical to it. The orientation of buildings is a foundational move in relation to natural light and 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. Further design strategies for the framing of light will feature significantly in our coverage.

By means of illustrated lectures on architecture of the Western tradition through the seventeenth century, the course provides 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 secondary buildings and an opportunity to compare those past buildings' light to that of buildings today.

Course Topics and Readings

General Texts (with chapters assigned from some of them below)

Theory

Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, sec. ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Boston and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

Mikkel Bille and Time Flohr Sørensen, "An Anthropology of Luminosity," *Journal of Material Culture* 12/3 (2007): 263-84, esp. 263-73.

Archaeoastronomy

Marion Dolan, *Decoding Astronomy in Art and Architecture* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021).

Clive L.N. Ruggles, ed., *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy* (New York: Springer, 2015).

Architecture

Henry Plummer, *Poetics of Light* (A+U, 1987).

Elisa Valero Ramos, *Light in Architecture: The Intangible Material* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: RIBA Publishing, 2015).

Course Schedule

Req = Required reading
Rec = Recommended reading

[NB: I am not very doctrinaire about the readings and will incorporate all the most important points from these texts in class, so please follow your interests and desires: skim the required readings when you must, do some of the recommended readings if you are intrigued. On occasion, I will provide advice narrowing the page range to what is most pertinent. On the other hand, I do list additional recommended readings on some topics for those who are ready to nerd out! And there will undoubtedly be things I recommend along the way that I may not have gotten my hands on by the beginning of the course. I will be clear in my communications about all this both in class and by email or via the course bulletin board.]

Week 1 **Introduction**
What are "lightscapes"? What is "liminality"?

Req
Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969; repr. 1977), 94-130.
Ramos, "Light and Perception," in *Light in Architecture,* 3-21.

Rec
Van Gennep, "The Classification of Rites," in *Rites of Passage*, 1-13. https://archive.org/details/theritesofpassage.
Denis E. Cosgrove, "The Idea of Landscape," in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 13-38.

Mikkel Bille and Time Flohr Sørensen, "An Anthropology of Luminosity," *Journal of Material Culture* 12/3 (2007): 263-84, esp. 263-73.

Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Week 2 **Prehistoric Architecture on the Atlantic Coastline of Europe**
Lighting Life in Death

"Gathering" land and sky in complex monuments, Neolithic peoples sought to honor the sources of life, including their ancestors, as well as to communicate with supra-human forces, to chart continuities, and to make sense of change. The framing of light, often in relation to astoundingly precise astronomical alignments, was critical to delimiting—and occasionally crossing—the threshold between the past, present, and future, between the heavens and earth, and between the living and the dead.

Req Eliade, "The Sacredness of Nature and Cosmic Religion," in *The Sacred and the Profane*, 116-59.
Robert Hensey, "Waiting for the Sun," in *First Light: The Origins of Newgrange* (Oxbow, 2015), 66-86.

Rec Dolan, "Art, Architecture, and Astronomy in the British Isles" and "Art, Architecture, and Astronomy in England," in *Decoding Astronomy in Art and Architecture*, 47-64 and 65-79.
Paul Davies and John G. Robb, "Scratches in the Earth: The Underworld as a Theme in British Prehistory, with particular reference to the Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age," *Landscape Research* 29/2 (2004): 141-51.

Week 3 **Classical and Hellenistic Greek Architecture**
Natural Light and Divinity

Works of religious architecture summon the gods not only by representing them or evoking them, typically through the handling of light, but also by providing housing for them, as in the Greek tradition. We shall trace the evolution of Greek temples in relation to their landscapes and as they began to cultivate places of mystery and immersive experience as well as stupendous physical presence.

Req Eliade, "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred," in *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20-65.
Vincent Scully, "Landscape and Sanctuary," in *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), 1-8.

Rec Dolan, "Art, Architecture, and Astronomy in Classical Greece," in *Decoding Astronomy in Art and Architecture*, 147-70.
Belen Martin Castro, Ioannis Liritzis, and Anne Nyquist, "Oracular Functioning and Architecture of Five Ancient Apollo Temples through Archaeoastronomy: Novel Approach and Interpretation, *Nexus Network Journal* 18 (2016): 373-95.

Week 4 **Roman Architecture: *Light and Imperium***
Political Power and Aesthetic Pleasure

The rapid expansion of Roman rule just before and during the period of the Empire offered significant opportunities to showcase the structural, material, and decorative evolution of Roman architecture—with light a critical dramatic element across civic and religious building types—while also testifying to the immense power and wealth of the Roman state. Because some of the most exuberant, innovative buildings of the late Empire were located at its geographical edges in

settings very different from Italy, the impressive play of light on and in architecture comes sharply into focus.

Req
William MacDonald, "The Pantheon" in *The Architecture of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1: *An Introductory Study*, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 94-121, esp. 111-21.
Robert Hannah and Giulio Magli, "The Role of the Sun in the Pantheon's Design and Meaning," *Numen* 58/4 (2011): 486-513.

Rec
Dolan, "Art, Architecture, and Astronomy of Petra" and "Art, Architecture, and Astronomy in the Roman Empire," in *Decoding Astronomy in Art and Architecture*, 171-84 and 185-213.
Paul Rehak, "Imperium and Cosmos," in *Augustus and the Northern Campus Martius*, ed. John G. Younger (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 138-46.

Week 5 Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture

Light of the Ineffable

Believing in a God who took human form and adopting new religious rituals, early medieval Christians adapted Roman architectural forms to the new end of evoking a deity whose realm was not just nature but super-nature. The dual dynamic of that which is immanent and that which is transcendent inspired an innovative, congregational architecture in the post-classical world.

Req
David L. Whidden III, "Introduction," in *Christ the Light: The Theology of Light and Illumination in Thomas Aquinas* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 1-11.
Thomas F. Mathews, "A Temple of Transformation," in *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,1998), 97-135.
Bissera Pentcheva, "Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics," *Gesta* 50/2 (2011): 93-111.

Rec
Eliade, "Sacred Time and Myths," in *The Sacred and the Profane*, 68-113.
Andrew Louth, "Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 85-103.
Annabel Jane Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," *Art Bulletin* 69/3 (1987): 358-75.
Nadine Schibille, "The Use of Light in the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: The Church Reconsidered," *Current Work in Architectural History – Papers Read at the Annual Symposium of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, London, 2004* (2005), 43-48.
Bissera V. Pentcheva, "Introduction" and "Material Flux," in *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 1-17 and 121-49.

Week 6 Pagan Environments

Light and Mysterious Thresholds

Bronze Age, Iron Age, and early medieval pagan peoples (Celts, Goths, and other tribes) and their successors (such as the early Vikings) returned to a pregnant sense of the landscape in remarkable practices such as bog sacrifices of people and weapons. Hoards, too, found their protected resting place in the earth. We will explore the liminality of sites in nature like bogs and marshes (and perhaps other watery edges) while also considering examples of the uncanny, flickering light at play in domestic settings on ritual occasions.

Req
Neil Price and Paul Mortimer, "An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo," *European Journal of Archaeology* 17/2 (2104): 517-38.

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

Week 7 **Romanesque Architecture**
Light and Asceticism

The development of Christian monasticism spurred the evolution of architecture in response to the large numbers of monks at some sites and the wealth of certain foundations. The reform of monastic life evident in the repeated establishment of new orders, each with its own *Rule* to govern the lives of the monks, found expression in innovative architectural structure, spatial articulation, fenestration, and decoration. All were meant to reinforce the boundaries—ever in danger of violation—between the secular and sacred worlds.
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Req Robert L. Harris, "Architecture of Light," in *Returning Light: Thirty Years on the Island of Skellig Michael* (New York and Boston: Mariner, 2022), 117-32.

Week 8 **Gothic Architecture**
Light and Diversifying Communities

Later medieval innovation in architecture served a broad spectrum of communities, both secular and religious. In resurgent cities with their diverse, dynamic populations, soaring cathedrals expressed local ambition while also changing functionally over time as the system of parish and private churches developed. New approaches to space, light, color, and imagery remade church interiors, while the hyper-development of portals and towers articulated building exteriors in public settings. Castles did not foreground the mediation of light to the extent that religious architecture did, but their reliance on multiple, massive walls is at odds with the porosity of sacred architecture and makes for an instructive comparison. In a different context, the wooden stave churches of Scandinavia offer a contrast with normative Gothic architecture in their elaborate but somber, black-tarred exteriors and the minimal provision of light inside.

Req Georges Duby, "God Is Light, " in *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980-1420*, trans. Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 97-135, esp.97-108 and 118-28.
Conrad Rudolph, "The Contradiction," in *Artistic Change at St-Denis: Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy over Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 64-68.

Rec Otto von Simson, "Gothic Form," in *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, Bollingen Series 48 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 3-20.
Hans Jantzen, "Light" and "Gothic Space and Its Containment," in *High Gothic: The Classic Cathedrals of Chartres, Reims, and Amiens*, trans. James Palmes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 67-70 and 70-80.

Week 9 **Renaissance Architecture**
Light of Human Knowledge

The humanist developments of the Italian Renaissance and the revival of forms from Classical Antiquity led to a limpid clarity in Early Renaissance interiors which became spaces of new serenity, balance. The light is grounded rather than ethereal. The ongoing pursuit of knowledge in the period and the long lives of many famed architects (Brunelleschi, Bramante, et al.) and artists (Michelangelo, Leonardo, for example) provide an opportunity to witness stylistic evolution over

the course of individual careers, entailing a shift from the relative simplicity of the earliest Renaissance buildings to complex and sometimes playful new structures. Domestic architecture by the likes of Palladio achieved a light-filled grace that appears simple but is exquisitely achieved via careful siting, orientation, and proportions.

Req TBA

Week 10 **Baroque Architecture**
Ardent Light

The Reformation that originated in Northern European lands invited a return to simple church interiors less focused on the symbolism of architectural forms and lavish decoration; instead, it was dedicated to the pragmatic provision of spaces for preaching. In parts of the world where wood was more available than stone, buildings departed from the heavy mural architecture of the Renaissance, adopting lighter, simpler, more planar forms despite the late Gothic heritage of almost calligraphic linearity and sinuosity in wood. The Counter-Reformation reply to the Reformation and to Protestant architecture re-asserted the value of assertive structure, complex geometry, ornate ornamentation, and, above all, the incarnational drama of light. All this was meant to stimulate the senses of worshipers and bring them into ecstatic union with God and the saints.

Req TBA