POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DESIGN – The value of robustness **AR-485 / Spring 2020**

Team: Paolo Tombesi, André Ullal, Riccardo Vannucci

Duration: Spring Semester

Content: *Political Economy of Design* seeks to position and discuss architecture in relation to the world of production, economic interests and community benefits, at a local and global scale. By integrating yet moving beyond the stylistic, technological or sociological aspects of the discipline, the discussion reviews the industrial elements that are likely to affect programmatic objectives, formal directions and technical outcomes of building projects. In this context, architecture's connection with planning and building disciplines is examined and criticised in the attempt to formulate a strategic framework for its use as an environmental policy instrument.

This year, *PED* focuses on the notion or 'robustness' and its operative meaning in architecture and building design. We are interested in looking at design as something that generates collective value, a notion that extends to the environment at large. If this were the case, what qualities (or generic quality) must a design (in its built form) possess and reflect in order to be considered of value within its environment of reference? Furthermore, whom establishes value and whom or how one determines quality? Could it be that some of our most treasured architectural convictions will not stand up to scrutiny against this type of political assessment of design value?

On the basis of this possibility, half of the semester will be spent reviewing built designs and their performance against a simple yet challenging rubric of parameters aiming at reflecting on the meaning of precision, durability and technical success.

The subject has a lecture component and a research component.

Lecture-wise, the class is notionally divided into three parts: 1. Week 1-5; 2. Week 6-8; 3. Week 10-13. (Week 9 is Easter non-instruction period.)

Part 1 provides a general theoretical framework largely borrowed from political economy, industrial theory, innovation theory and labour studies literature, but adapted to the analysis of the design and building sector.
Part 2 defines the analytical framework of the class by introducing architecture and building-specific notions of quality, fitness for purpose and intellectural precision.
Part 3 enters the details of 'robustness' as a building design attribute of value.

The research component, in the form of an individual assignment to be developed from Week 7, seeks to apply the reflective and operative elements of this framework to a specific design context or design product chosen by the student. The details will be posted in due course on Moodle and explained in class on April 2.

On completion of the subject students should be able to: 1) identify and engage with the various types of environmental conditions that have an impact upon the role of

the design professions, the configuration of the building industry and the nature of its products in any given region; 2) demonstrate a critical understanding of the relationship between design practice, cultural values, spatial needs and industrial landscapes.

Language: The language of instruction is English, but the written assignment can be developed in (almost) any language, including French, German, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian.

Assessment: Assessment revolves around three components:

1) Class participation, or the display of one's ability to discuss how project outputs can be used to reflect about cultural intent, technical awareness, economic means, social priorities, and technological alternatives, according to the topics weekly introduced in class, four small exercises, and the readings assigned (25%). (Contributions to the discussion can be also in French.)
2) Gathering of discussion-specific data, showing one's ability to research and collate information about relevant technological options in given industrial contexts /situations. This is essentially the preparatory work for the assignment that follows. (15%)
3) Essay due at the end of the term, demonstrating one's ability to identify and discuss robust or sensitive features in specific building design solutions, and propose interventions in line with the analysis carried out. (60%)

It must be taken in mind that this is a class that applies the EPFL marking system literally. This means that, in order to gain a pass of 4, student performance must be at least at 66/100, not 50/100 as in many other schools. This would be a 3 at EPFL, and as such it does not warrant a pass.

References: A bibliography has been prepared by the instruction team and will be made available in Moodle.

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CLASS CALENDAR

	Date	Lectures	FAR Lecturer	Room
Week 1	February 20	Introduction to the subject – Robustness as a filter.	Paolo Tombesi	AAC008
Week 2	February 27	The context: Design and its multiple dimensions. (Exercise 1)	Andre Ullal	AAC008
Week 3	March 5	The dynamics: Value creation as a process.	Andre Ullal	AAC008
Week 4	March 12	The relationship between design and construction. (Exercise 2)	Riccardo Vannucci	AAC008
Week 5	March 19	Differences in technological frameworks.	Andre Ullal	AAC008
Week 6	March 26	Dimensions of quality and fitness for purpose. (Exercise 3)	Andre Ullal	AAC008
Week 7	April 2	Durability vs sustainability. Assignment introduction (Exercise 4)	Paolo Tombesi	AAC008
Week 8	April 9	Precision and its multiple meanings – A possible rubric.	Paolo Tombesi	AAC008
Week 10	April 23	Sensitivity or robustness as design outcomes.	Andre Ullal	AAC008
Week 11	April 30	Dimensions of the sensitive-robust spectrum.	Andre Ullal	AAC008
Week 12	May 7	A technologically inclusive view of robustness.	Paolo Tombesi	AAC008
Week 13	May 14	Conclusions – Types and methods of work.	Paolo Tombesi	AAC008
Week 15	May 28	Assignment submission		Moodle