VALUE ENGINEERING

Architecture in the Marketplace

MIT / Department of Architecture / ARCH 4.183
Fall, 2025 Mondays, 2-5pm, 1-132
Course Credit / 3-0-9 G

Jaffer Kolb
Office hours by appointment
Email: jakolb@mit.edu

Course Overview

Clients, funding, consultants, contracts: architects are enmeshed in financial mechanisms that forever remind us of our direct reliance on local and global economies. Money talks and architecture follows: our work articulating the interests of those served while fluctuating with the rapidity of the market. And while this relationship may be fixed, perhaps we can find ways to resist its normative logics, which exacerbate social inequalities and consolidate power in the hands of the few and the privileged. This workshop will explore alternative economies and financial arrangements to find ways to re-code capitalism's tendencies, desires, and outcomes. We'll draw from a range of writing—from queer theory to post-colonial studies to literary criticism—to undo dominant financial orientations.

What if we thought about money itself like we think about wood, or glass, or concrete, or steel—a material that shapes the built environment, that has material properties, or that makes things *look* or *feel* a certain way. What if, like wood, we could bend financial structures into surprising forms and unexpected outcomes? That we can shape and draw and piece together into a new language like a bending bridge or a precarious pencil-tower? That we can pass and see and that shapes how we live and work?

We will ask whether in addition to designing architecture, we can also design the market that demands architecture—to produce economic scenarios under which we might build. We will read constellations of texts that include economic anthropology (studying how economies are shaped by behavior, cultural values, and social relationships), work from other disciplines, and case-studies to invent atypical demand-chains, resist models of optimal performance, and instrumentalize culture to undercut efficiency. We will look at how we might produce clients, programs, and actor networks rather than responding to the whims of the market. We will consider how we might think of economic arrangements as tools for designers.

Students are asked to produce written responses to the reading and to help guide discussion, researching and exploring examples and references to ground our work. The task is to produce a collective and cumulative body of knowledge. Together, we will read, write, and compile a compendium of research on the topic. Students are encouraged to find broad reaching examples—from the domestication of post-war military technology to the proliferation of sharing economies to recent trends in reuse and the circulation of materials and everything in between. The course will focus on real examples of immaterial and material phenomena, inventing new languages and representational strategies along the way.

Course Structure

The course is organized by five major themes (outlined below), each developed over two weeks. While the weeks are thematic, they follow a loose organization where in the first week we establish a 'what' (to define the theme) and the second we develop a 'how' (that is, how we might act on, with, or through that theme). In turn, students will be asked to produce two kinds of responses depending on the week.

For the first week of the theme (09/15, 09/29, 10/20, 11/03, 11/24), students should submit a reading response before by 11:59pm the day before class through a shared dropbox folder. The reading response might draw from one, some, or all of the texts but clearly situate it within the readings as a group. Some prompts for the reading response:

1. Find and describe key points per text that relate to the course at large.
2. Choose three passages from the text(s)that are particularly compelling.
3. Outline key questions per text to the class that spark discussion
4. Synthesize key information, cite references and connect to larger issues.

For the second week of the theme (09/22, 10/06, 10/27, 11/17, 12/01), students are encouraged to apply the theme from that week towards developing a final project. This may start by collecting a series of case studies to determine a direction, or for students with a clear interest working through their final project through each week's theme. These weeks should involve collecting, synthesis, diagramming, and presenting independent research, under guidance by the instructor and with feedback from classmates.

For the final project, each student will pick their own related topic for which they will compile and present a research dossier. This dossier should contain a thorough written description and key research, and may also include interviews, diagrams, drawings, video/photography, data, and any other material that may be relevant to the case study. Topics may be a building, a company, a product, a person, a business, a business model, a method, or something entirely different.

Course Schedule
*Readings are subject to change. Weekly assignments will be clarified in class and uploaded thereafter.

Week 1 **09/08** ***Introduction: principles of pleasure***
Outline key themes, concepts, and course direction/expectations.

Week 2 **09/15** ***Disoriented Benefits*** / on value

1. Graeber, David. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Desires* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), Ch. 2 "Current Directions in Exchange Theory", 23-47.

2. Harcourt, Bernard E. *The Illusion of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), Chapter 8 "The Illusion of Freedom", 176 - 190.

3. Preciado, Paul. Testo Junkie, Chapter 2: The Pharmacopornographic Era (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 23-55.

4. Lee, Roger. "The Possibilities of Economic Difference?" in Hildebrand and Zademach, 69-84.

Week 3 **09/22** ***Disoriented Benefits*** / market experiments

1. Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" in GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, V. 12 no. 4, 2006, 543-574.

2. Deamer, Peggy. "Cooperativizing Small Firms" in *Log 48* (Spring, 2020), 99-106.

3. Gordon Nembhard, Jessica. *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (Penn State University Press, 2014), Introduction, 1- 25 and Ch. 8 "Black Rural Cooperative Activity in the Early to Mid-Twentieth Century, 172 – 187.

Week 4 **09/29** ***Risky Business*** / liability, security, debt

1. Bernstein, Peter L. *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (John Wiley and Sons, 1996), Ch. 11 "The Fabric of Felicity", 187-193 and Ch. 19 "Awaiting the Wildness", 329 – 337.

2. Feher, Michel. *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* (New York: Zone Books, 2018). Introduction / Chapter 2.

3. Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013).

Week 5 **10/06** ***Risky Business*** / informal economies, unsanctioned markets

1. Bismark, Pedro Levi. *The Architecture of Pessimism* (Stones Against Diamonds, 2020), online.

2. Dunne, Anthony and Fiona Raby. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), Ch 1 "Beyond Radical Design," 1-9.

3. Jaque, Andres. "Grindr Archiurbanism" in *Log 41,* Fall 2017, 75-84.

4. Muñoz, Jose Esteban. "Ephemera as Evidence" in *Women & Performance: a journal of* feminist theory, 8:2, 5-16.

10/13: Indigenous Peoples' Day

Week 6 **10/20** ***Fashioning Obsolescence*** / preservation rhetorics

1. Abramson, Daniel. *Obsolescence: An Architectural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), Ch. 4: "Fixing Obsolescence", 79-106.

2. Muzaffar, Ijlal and Jorge Otero-Pailos. "Preservation and Globalization" in *Future Anterior,* Vol. 9, No. 1, Summer 2012, pp iii-vii.

3. Shao, Qin. “Citizens versus Experts: Historic Preservation in Globalizing Shanghai” in *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism,* Vol. 9, No. 1, Summer 2012, 17-31.

4. Thompson, Michael. *Rubbish Theory*: *The Creation and Destruction of Value* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), Ch. 3: “Rat-Infested Slum or Glorious Heritage?”

Week 7 **10/27** ***Fashioning Obsolescence*** / degrowth

1. Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): Ch. 3, 87-121.

2. Esposito, Elena. *The Future of Futures: The Time of Money in Financing and Society* (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2011), Ch. 3 “Economy is time: needs and scarcity,” 37 – 46.

3. Schmelzer, Matthias with Andrea Vetter and Aaron Vansintjan. *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2022), Introduction, 1-34 and Chapter 5: Pathways to Degrowth, 212-250.

4. Soules, Matthew. *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), Ch. 2 “Zombies and Ghosts, Growth and Decay,” 50 – 81.

Week 8 **11/03** ***Gifts (strings attached)*** / networks of exchange

1. Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London/New York: Verso Books, 2005), Ch. 2 “The Projective City”, 103-163.

2. Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002).

3. Soules, Matthew. *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), Ch. 6 “Residential Avatars and Life Surrogates,” 156-168.

11/10: Student Holiday

Week 9 **11/17** ***Gifts (strings attached)*** / sharing, caring, subletting

1. Blanchfield, Caitlin and Farzin Lotfi-Jam “The Bedroom of Things” in *Log 41*, Fall 2017, 129-134.

2. Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), Ch. 2 “Critical Rusticity”, 63-97.

3. Hill, Dan. “The Commodification of Everything” in *sqm the quantified home*, ed. Space Caviar, Lars Müller, 2014, online.

4. Sundararajan, Arun. *The Sharing Economy: The End of Employment and the Rise of Crowd-Based Capitalism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016. Chapter 1: “The Sharing Economy, Market Economies, and Gift Economies,” 23-46.

Week 10 **11/24** ***Wild Excess*** / Luxury Unbridled

1. Halberstam, Jack. *Wild Things: On the Disorder of Desire* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2022), 3-32.

2. Holert, Tom. “Hidden Labor and the Delight of Otherness: Design and Post-Capitalist Politics” in *e-flux journal* #17, June-August 2010, 1-9.

3. Martin, Reinhold. “Financial Imaginaries: Toward a Philosophy of the City” in *Grey Room 42*, Winter 2011, 60-79.

4. Veblen, Thorstein. *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Orig. New York: Macmillan, 1899): Ch. 6 “Pecuniary Canons of Taste”, 54-76.

Week 11 **12/01** ***Wild Excess*** / Mission Economies

1. Barber, Daniel. “After Comfort” in *Log 47* (Fall, 2019), 45-50.

2. Bueller, Adrienne, the Value of a Whale, Chapter 6: “Ghosts: valuing a disappearing world”, 227-267.

3. Halland, Ingrid. “Being Plastic” in *Log 47* (Fall, 2019), 35-44.

4. Mazzucato, Mariana. *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism* (Harper Business, 2023), Chapter 6: “Good Theory, Good Practice: Seven Principles for a New Political Economy”, 163-203.

Week 12 **12/08** **Individual Project Meetings**

FINAL **Date TBD, Final Presentations and Project Submission**

Course Expectations

This is a workshop, not a seminar, and students should be prepared to work collaboratively to undertake research and analysis. Students are asked to bring their own interests, their own attitudes, and their own interpretation of the material. They may incorporate other disciplines, conversations, and passions into the work for the workshop. Discussion and conversation will be paramount to the success of the workshop, and students are expected to be engaged, and importantly respectful of others. Grading will be determined through balancing participation, weekly assignments, and the final project.

Additional Bibliography:

Ascher, Ivan. *Portfolio Society* (New York: Zone Books, 2016).

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Collinge, Howard. *Beautiful Economics: A Guide to Gentle World Domination* (powerhouse Books, 2021).

Garutti, Francesco. *Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism* (Sternberg Press, 2019).

Graeber, David. *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012).

Henry, Michel. *Barbarism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing's Continuum Impacts vol. 95, 2012).

Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *The Sense of Brown* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2020).

Scott, Brett. *Cloudmoney: Cash, Cards, Crypto, and the War for Our Wallets* (Harper Business, 2022).

Rao, Vyjayanthi with Prem Krishnamurthy and Carin Kuoni. *Speculation, Now* (Duke University Press, 2015).

Willis, Carol. *Form Follows Finance* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).