Course Description

In this seminar we study the two sides of our experiences with buildings: the cognitive / intellectual (thinking) side and the emotional / psychological (feeling) side. The purpose of the study is to develop a set of objectives and criteria, as well as a design method, that can guide decision-making for architects designing buildings.

We investigate issues and positions in five areas of thought relating to architecture: epistemological, metaphysical, historical, psychological, and ethical.

We begin on the intellectual side, with a consideration of epistemology – the branch of philosophy that deals with the origin and nature of knowledge. Epistemology is directly related to architectural design method: that is, how an architect begins and proceeds through the design process. We study the two traditional opposing positions of rationalism and empiricism, and the synthesis of the two in Kant’s “critical philosophy.”

Subsequently we consider metaphysics, the area of philosophy dealing with the study of the underlying nature of reality. The idea is that the best buildings of any era embody the world views of the cultures that produce them. In this sense, metaphysical positions determine the assumptions behind the representational meaning of architecture and should clarify the architect’s priorities and goals. We consider the evolution of world views through the classical, medieval, and modern eras; the perspectives that have developed in Existentialism and the postmodern / poststructuralist era of relativity and quantum physics; and the emergence of a “pan-experientialist” position that relates to aspects of Taoism and eastern mystical traditions.

Finally, the seminar focuses on the implications of evolutionary psychology with respect to the emotional and subconscious aspects of architectural experience. In particular we discuss the concepts of prospect and refuge, complexity and order, and avant-garde and kitsch.

The ultimate goal, which is admittedly ambitious, is to synthesize the dialectic between the intellectual and emotional – the rational and the romantic, the left and the right brain, the progressive and the traditional – into a theoretical foundation that transcends the perspectives of the past and positions us to develop an architecture for a more humane and sustainable future.