

Architecture Now: *New Trends, Recent Triumphs and a Few More Terrible Ideas*
OLLI Fall 2026, Week 1 handout
Instructor: M Victoria (Vic) Liptak (email: vic.liptak@gmail.com)



Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, Medora, ND, Architecture: Snøhetta 2026, Photographer: Nic Lehoux.

General Overview

Architecture is an art, a science, a set of buildings, a profession, an experience, and more, so we will build our investigation upon the many perspectives offered by these definitions and by members of our learning community. Each week we open with a set of questions, and by looking at examples of architecture we generate a range of responses to the questions. Each class session includes some famous architectural examples that you might already be familiar with, some examples in northern California that you could put on your must-see list, and others from around the world. A recommended reading and viewing list of websites, books, essays and articles is provided, and we add to it as the learning community builds its interests. The sharing of perspectives and the continued development of an appreciation for architecture are both weekly goals and the most important course outcomes.

Week One: Architecture Now and Then

What counts as good architecture? What and who does architecture serve? We practice looking at examples of architecture and asking questions from many perspectives. This week's lecture and image series builds a foundation for architecture we can agree inspires us, using historical master works and introducing contemporary contenders for the title "great architecture." We review the Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness, and delight and develop a common vocabulary for observing and critiquing architecture. We consider program, site and context, qualities of design and form, material and technology, and narrative and emotional power (the story, including history). These ways of seeing overlap and intersect, and that makes architecture even more interesting.

Week Two: Gimme Shelter

We look at the most basic human need that architecture addresses: shelter. The contemporary house reveals many competing forces at play: What are appearance expectations? Which new technologies are must-haves? How do we respond to natural forces and climate challenges? How have our ideas about comfort evolved? Where and how do we address access and mobility? Using California as a starting point, the discussion opens outward to a regional and national perspective, and touches briefly on global trends and differences in residential architecture.

Week Three: Power Structures

The tallest, the biggest, the most expensive. For millennia (really!) we have been fascinated by setting and breaking architectural records. To what extent do these qualities matter in contemporary architecture? We move toward an answer as we look at how architecture continues to make statements about power – many kinds of power.

Week Four: Culture, Creativity, Communities, and Carbon Copies

We examine contemporary architecture and ask about its relationship to culture. We try to understand what the architect was thinking or trying to do in specific projects. Sometimes we have the architect's own words, and we will compare those written ideas with what we can see in the built project. We ask about creativity, its value in different cultures, and what that has meant for architecture.

Week Five: Technological Wonders and Weirdness

We briefly look at some of the most significant historical technologies for architecture (e.g., concrete, steel) before turning to this week's main question: How has the age of information coupled with climate change affected the practice of architecture and the way buildings look and work? We look at the work of some celebrated architects who are fearless in form making, at new construction technologies and proposals for ever "smarter" and "responsive" buildings and city planning, and at proposed new ways of occupying space and of using resources. We test our vocabulary for understanding architecture, expand or revise it, and build new ideas.

Week Six: On Second Thought

In the final class session, we consider the aesthetic and emotional power of older structures and ways of building. We look at the major approaches to historical preservation and reconstruction, and consider the cultural value and significance of preservation. And we return to our vocabulary, see how our understanding has evolved, and apply it to new examples of architecture and the built environment from our region, our country, and the world. We develop a list of architects whose work we have come to admire, and share architectural experiences we recommend and places we would now like to visit. Finally, we assess how our perspectives on what counts as good architecture have developed.

Week 1 Vocabulary

Commodity, Firmness, Delight
Plan, Section, Elevation
Program, Site and Context
Design and Form, Material and Technology
Narrative and Emotional Power

Week 1 readings and websites worth looking at

Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Dover Publications, 1985 (or earlier versions)
Francis D.K. Ching, *Architecture: Form, Space, and Order*, 3rd ed. Wiley & Sons, 2007
Both available as Hoopla e-books through Sonoma County Library

<https://www.frankching.com/wordpress> Frank Ching's blog. This man draws and thinks.

<https://archinect.com> Mission: make architecture more connected and open-minded.

<https://pritzkerprize.com> The Pritzker Architecture Prize, highlighting every laureate since its inception in 1979. Very compelling photos.