House in Seijo by Jenny CHUNG, LAW Yui Hin, LEE Wing Yan, LIU Wun Yan, 2021

VISUAL NARRATIVE AND METHODS

INSTRUCTOR
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ISSUE

In the age of ubiquitous digital media, architectural photography has become a powerful tool for representation and dissemination. However, is it merely a passive medium for documentation, or can it be leveraged as an active instrument of design inquiry and/or an effective qualitative research tool? This course challenges the idea that architectural photography is a neutral, objective recording of the built environment. Instead, it asserts that the act of framing, selecting, and sequencing images is a profoundly subjective process that can significantly shape our understanding and perception of architecture.

DESCRIPTION

Over the past two decades, there has been a surge in publishing architectural projects on digital media, as design studios recognise the efficiency of information dissemination and the opportunity to reach a broader global audience. Visual communication through photography has become a preferred mode of representation. However, the challenge lies in effectively curating and sequencing project photographs. Architects must not only select appealing views but also ensure that the chosen images collectively capture the various aspects of a design, guiding the viewer's perception and interpretation. This elective course aims to address the challenges and opportunities presented by this shift in the landscape of architectural representation.

This elective course explores the relationship between architecture, visual perception, and representation. It focuses on the study of photography and other tools for representing virtual reality. Architectural photography has often been viewed primarily as a representational tool for documentation. This course, however, takes the stance that it involves a more nuanced process of investigation and analysis. By focusing on how we see and perceive the built environment, the course aims to equip students with the skills to create, select, and organise visual materials to communicate design ideas and navigate spatial cognition more effectively.

This course on architectural photography and representation has strong synergies with the core design studio courses in the BSSc (Architectural Studies) Programme. While design studios concentrate on the essential act of conceptualising and generating architectural proposals, this elective course equips students with vital skills and perspectives to document, communicate, and ultimately propel the design process. Students should already possess a fluent competence in using Rhino, the primary digital modelling software utilised in this elective.

IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

1. Expanding the Architect's Toolkit: By positioning architectural photography as an "active instrument of design inquiry," this course empowers students to view visual representation as an integral part of the design process, rather than merely a means of documentation. This can help broaden the architect's creative toolkit and encourage more experimental, conceptual approaches to visualisation.

2. Developing Critical Visual Literacy: The emphasis on the "photographer's role as an interpreter and storyteller" underscores the significance of fostering critical visual literacy among students. This can aid them in becoming more discerning and intentional in how they utilise photography and other media to convey their design ideas, rather than relying on standard tropes or clichés.

3. Bridging Design and Communication: By highlighting the "strong synergies with the core design studio courses," the course positions architectural photography and representation as a vital bridge between the conceptual, spatial aspects of design and the communicative, narrative aspects. This can help students better integrate these two crucial dimensions of architectural practice.

4. Embracing Subjectivity in Representation: The course's willingness to challenge the notion of architectural photography as a "neutral, objective recording" opens up important conversations about the inherent subjectivity of visual representation. This can encourage students to be more self-reflective and critical about their own biases and choices when creating and curating visual materials.

COURSE SYLLABUS

TOPIC 1: THE INTERPRETIVE POWER OF ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

The course aims to explore how photographic representation shapes our perception and understanding of the built environment, examine the subjective, narrative-driven nature of architectural photography beyond mere documentation, and investigate the role of composition, framing, lighting, and other photographic techniques in constructing architectural meaning.

TOPIC 2: PHOTOGRAPHY AS A DESIGN INQUIRY PROCESS

This course explores how photography can be used to investigate, analyse, and challenge the development of design. It aims to reveal hidden aspects, spatial relationships, and experiential qualities of architectural spaces. The goal is to help students develop a critical photographic eye to inform the design process.

TOPIC 3: NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING IN ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION

The course aims to help students understand how photographic sequences, juxtapositions, and editing can be used to craft compelling narratives about buildings and their contexts. It explores the role of architectural photography in communicating design intent, user experience, and broader social and cultural meanings. Importantly, it invites students to consider the ethical implications of photographic narratives and their potential to shape public perceptions of architecture.

TOPIC 4: DIGITAL TOOLS AND VIRTUAL REPRESENTATION

The course aims to explore how photographic representation shapes our perception and understanding of the built environment, examine the subjective, narrative-driven nature of architectural photography beyond mere documentation, and investigate the role of composition, framing, lighting, and other photographic techniques in constructing architectural meaning.

METHODS

This elective includes lectures, workshops, in-class discussions, tutorials, outing and exhibition curating. There are three interrelated tasks, designed to address specific issues and competencies related to photography, architectural design and built environment research.

1. **Navigating through Photographs (group of two students)**
   The first task invites students to read and comprehend architectural design through a series of photographs. The photos are sourced from the design report of built housing projects. Each pair of students will collaborate to piece together the spatial relationships of the project by sketching the plan drawing(s). This exercise focuses on two key aspects: the process and method of translating photographic information into an abstract 2D configuration, and the evaluation of each image's role in shaping the viewer's perception of the design narrative; in other words, interpreting the reasons the architect chose to include these images in this package. By navigating the visual information, students will gain deeper insight into how photographic framing, composition, and sequencing can influence our perception and understanding of architectural design. The group will utilise in-class time to work on the navigation process and after-class time to organise their study materials in response to the two key aspects mentioned above. This exercise encourages students to focus on their thinking process while still allowing them, at the end, to compare the inferred plan with the actual project drawings for reflection.

2. **Inquiry, Interpretation, and Narrative (group of two students)**
   In the second task, each pair of students will leverage digital modelling and rendering tools to study and represent the design of a house by the renowned architect Kazuo Shinohara. Beginning with a rendering exercise that reproduces published project photographs, students will analyse the camera settings, viewing directions, and atmospheric qualities of each image. They will then expand upon this initial inquiry to develop their own interpretive narrative of the design through a series of photorealistic renderings. This exercise positions photography as a method of design research and communication, challenging students to translate their spatial understanding into compelling visual stories. By the end of this exercise, students will have the opportunity to curate an exhibition showcasing their works, encouraging them to consider how the collection of images can be arranged and displayed.

3. **Reflection on the Methods (individual)**
   The previous two tasks present two opposing directions in the interplay between design and visual narrative. The first exercise offers students an opportunity to observe how architects select and utilise visual materials to convey design narratives. In contrast, the second exercise invites students to conduct case studies through photography—a unique approach—while also allowing them to develop their own interpretations of the design narrative and present it through images. In the third task, students will compose a reflection (min. 500 words) on their learning process from a first-person perspective. Specifically, they will be introduced to the publication of an image-related design workshop led by Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats.

DELIVERABLES

Students will be required to submit a process book for each task, documenting their study process. This document will assist students in reflecting on and communicating the steps they took, the decisions they made, and the insights they gained during their learning journey. The course will provide a basic format guideline for the process book to ensure a consistent and organised presentation. A comprehensive list of deliverables will be provided to students for each assigned task.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Ability to apply skills and techniques in architectural photography, emphasizing effective use of light, shadow, and composition.
2. Understanding of digital design publication workflows and the significance of photography in architectural documentation and communication.
3. Ability to utilise photography as an effective tool for exploring and interpreting architectural design concepts and spatial narratives.
4. Ability to analyse and interpret photographic and photorealistic rendering information, translating visual cues into an understanding of architectural form, function, and design intent.
5. Ability to strategically create, select, and organise photographic views to creatively explore design ideas and enhance spatial cognition.
6. Ability to present creative photographic works through the curation of an exhibition.
7. Ability to engage in cooperative teamwork and collaborative problem-solving.

ASSESSMENT SCHEME

SPECIFIC ASSESSMENT

1. **Task 1 (20%)**
2. **Task 2 (50%)**
3. **Task 3 (20%)**

A list of assessment criteria for each assigned task will be provided.

4. **Peer Review (5%)**

A peer review form with detailed guidance will be provided.

5. **In-class Participation (5%)**

In-class participation is a vital aspect of our course, promoting engagement and collaboration among students. Students are expected to be actively involved in all class activities, including individual tutorials, group discussions, sharing sessions, and exhibition preparation and setup. Participation will be assessed based on several criteria: consistent attendance, the quality and relevance of contributions, the demonstration of critical thinking, and the willingness to engage with peers.

Total: 100%

Each assessment result will be released to students upon completion accompanied by written comments based on student progress and performance.

COURSE FORMAT

Teaching Days

1. Students must attend for F2F teaching during these teaching hours.
   Teaching Day: 10:30-13:15 am, Wednesday
   Classroom: YIA 406
2. Field trips, lectures, and other learning activities may be scheduled outside of teaching days.

Student Study Effort (Total: 140 hrs)

1. Class Contact: 39 hrs (Lecture, Tutorial, Critique, Field Trip)
2. Other Student Study Effort: 100 hrs (Studio / Self Study)

REQUIRED READINGS

Berger, John, ed. *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger*. Repr. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1990.
Flores, Ricardo, and Eva Prats. *Through the Canvas: Architecture inside Dutch Paintings*; Architectural Design Workshop. 1. publ. Barcelona: Actar-D, 2008.
Mannay, Dawn. Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods: Application, Reflection and Ethics. 1 Edition. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.
Psarra, Sophia. Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.
Redstone, Elias. *Shooting Space: Architecture in Contemporary Photography*. London: Phaidon Press, 2014.
Valero Ramos, Elisa. Light in Architecture: The Intangible Material. London: Riba Publishing, 2015.

OTHER REFERENCES

Christenson, Mike. “Critical Dimensions in Architectural Photography: Contributions to Architectural Knowledge.” Architecture_MPS, February 1, 2017.
Janser, Daniela, Eva Kurz, and Fotomuseum Winterthur, eds. Concrete: Fotografie und Architektur ; photography and architecture. Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013.
Plummer, Henry. Masters of Light. 1: Twentieth-Century Pioneers. Kenchiku-to-Toshi / Rinji- Zōkan; 2003,11. Tokyo: a+u Publ, 2003.
Tsukamoto, Yoshiharu, Fuminori Nōsaku, and Chie Konno. *WindowScape: mado no furumaigaku. WindowScape 1*. Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Verlag nicht ermittelbar, 2010.
Yot, Richard. *Light for Visual Artists: Understanding & Using Light in Art & Design*. London: Laurence King, 2011.

IMPORTANT NOTE TO STUDENTS

Expectations for Professional Conduct
The motto of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) is "Through learning and temperance to virtue". This motto places equal emphasis on the intellectual and moral education of students. In addition to pursuing academic excellence, students of CUHK are expected to maintain and uphold the highest standard of integrity and honesty in their academic and personal lives, respect the rights of others and abide by the law. More information on undergraduate studies can be found in the UG Student Handbook. https://rgsntl.rgs.cuhk.edu.hk/aqs_prd_applx/Public/Handbook/

Attendance
Class attendance is required in all courses. For an excused absence, the instructor must be notified and presented with documentation of illness or personal matter. Please note: **Three (3)** or more unexcused absences may result in a failing grade for the course.

Academic Honesty
The Chinese University of Hong Kong places very high importance on honesty in academic work submitted by students and adopts a policy of zero tolerance on academic dishonesty

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at: http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/.

With each assignment, students may be required to submit a statement that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

Third-Party Assistance
All intellectual work essential to the design project must be completed by the student and cannot, under any circumstance, be outsourced to a third party (including, but not limited to a company, consultant, alumni, and/or friend).

In the design studio context, students may utilize external resources, such as printing services for presentation materials, and/or laser cutting and 3D printing services for prototyping purposes. Use of such third-party services constitutes non-intellectual work done by others. It is only permitted with prior written consent from the studio tutor and acknowledgment of such work done by the third party.

Assistance from other students or friends for aspects of project production also constitutes non-intellectual work done by others; this is allowed only if declared and acknowledged in a written statement attached to any such work that has received assistance.

Under all circumstances, students must declare all work done by others by completing the school's designated form before assessment. This form must include a detailed explanation of the third party's identity (name and relationship to the student), when and how they were utilized, and the specific tasks they performed in the project. The completed form, signed by the student, must be endorsed by the tutor and presented during the final review. The school will collect and retain this form for record-keeping purposes.

Failure to follow this code of conduct may be considered a case of academic dishonesty, to be reviewed by a disciplinary board, and possible failure of the course.

Artificial Intelligence
Students are allowed to use AI tools in any learning activities as long as they explicitly acknowledge the use of these tools. When utilising AI tools, students must document the following in their process book: the specific AI tools used; how these tools were employed, including details of their interactions; their assessment of the feedback received from the AI tools and whether that feedback was incorporated into their submitted work.

Students may refer to Approach 3 of the CUHK guide titled "Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools in Teaching, Learning, and Assessments – A Guide for Students."

Student Work
Submission of course work documentation must be complete and correctly formatted. Missing or incomplete submission of the documentation folder will result in the grade for the course being withheld. This will prevent registration for the following term or delay graduation.

External Examination
Of paramount importance to the academic rigour and professional relevance of the architecture programme, the external examination process serves as a critical and impartial review mechanism. An invited panel of distinguished practitioners, academics, and industry experts convenes to rigorously evaluate the school's pedagogical ecosystem. This comprehensive audit scrutinises the fairness and consistency of the internal assessment process, benchmarks the standard and ambition of student work against national and international norms, and provides invaluable feedback on the intellectual and pedagogical direction of the curriculum itself.

As a cornerstone of this process and a mandatory graduating requirement, final-year students from both the Bachelor of Social Sciences (Architecture) and Master of Architecture programmes must present their final project and portfolio work in person. This formal defence before the external panel not only validates the authenticity and depth of their learning but also simulates a professional practice environment, demanding they articulate their design rationale, critical thinking, and technical resolution to an authoritative audience, thereby preparing them for the collaborative and discursive nature of the architectural profession.

Term 2: 7 January 2026 (Wednesday) – 27 April 2025 (Wednesday)

WEEK 01		
07.01	**Course Introduction**	Task 1_ Introduction & Workshop
WEEK 02		
14.01	Group Sharing	Task 1_ Student Presentation
WEEK 03		
21.01	**Lecture 1**	Task 2_ Introduction & Case Selection
WEEK 04		
28.01	**Lecture 2**	Task 2_ Material Collection & Digital Modeling
WEEK 05		
04.02	Group Sharing	Task 2_ Digital Modeling (cont.) & Finding the Angles
WEEK 06		
11.02	**Lecture 3**	Task 2_Test Renderings & Finding New Angles
WEEK 07		
18.02	**PUBLIC HOLIDAY_NO CLASS**	
WEEK 08		
25.02	Individual Tutorial	Task 2_Feedback
WEEK 09		
04.03	**READING WEEK_NO CLASS**	
WEEK 10		
11.03	Individual Tutorial	Task 2_Feedback (cont.)
WEEK 11		
18.03	Individual Tutorial	Task 2_Feedback (cont.) & Exhibition preparation
WEEK 12		
25.03	Group Sharing	Exhibition Set-up
WEEK 13		
01.04	Seminar	Task 3_ Introduction & Workshop
WEEK 14		
08.04	Seminar	Task 3_Discussion

WEEK 15		
15.04	**STUDIO REVIEW_NO CLASS**	
WEEK 16		
22.04	Individual Tutorial	By Appointment Only
WEEK 17		
27.04	**Final Submission**	

Grade	Descriptor	Criteria	Points
A	Excellent	Comprehensively excellent performance on all aspects of the course learning, project development, presentation and documentation. Achieving all learning outcomes with distinction.	4
A-	Very Good	Generally outstanding performance on the course learning, project development, presentation and documentation. Achieving all learning outcomes with merit.	3.7
B+	Good	Substantial performance on the course learning, project development, presentation and documentation. Achieving all learning outcomes satisfactorily.	3.3
B			3
B-			2.7
C+	Fair	Fair performance on the course learning, project development, presentation and documentation. Achieving all learning outcomes at a passing standard.	2.3
C			2
C-			1.7
D+	Pass	Barely satisfactory performance on the course learning, project development, presentation and documentation. Achieving all learning outcomes at a barely satisfactory standard.	1.3
D			1
F	Failure	Unsatisfactory performance on the course learning, project development, presentation and documentation. Not achieving all learning outcomes.	0

Written Feedback to Students

Term: _____ **Grade:** _____

Course Code: _____

Review: _____

Tutor: _____

Student Name: _____

Student ID: _____

Feedback from Course Instructor:

Achievements:
Challenges: