

SI 658 Information Architecture at the University of Michigan School of Information

Short Course Description

In the class this term, we'll learn about the spatiality of meaning and the placefulness of users experiences by conducting analyses of physical and digital environments, and by solving an info/spatial problem. Along the way we'll ask some questions:

- Do the normative criteria used to evaluate architecture in the built environment work on products and services made of information?
- What is the material of UX design?
- How much or little of the designer's selfhood should be present in the processes and products industry pays them for?
- What should architects and designers do with the awareness (once they get it) of biases and power structures reified in the products and processes they make?

Learning Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Use info-architectural methods to identify and explain what's happening in complex information environments;
- Conceive and construct models at varying levels of abstraction in order to;
- Appreciate some of the ways that the organization of information changes what's possible experientially; and ultimately
- Develop and explain recommendations for eco-systemic structural change using architectural concepts and methods.

Theme for Winter 2021 - Sacred Space

By the time we're done with this course, each of you will have developed an explanation of the problems suggested in the image at the right. You'll make some sense of it.

And then each of you will respond to those problems in terms of space and place: the way that architects do.

You'll focus less on the things in the picture, and more on the relationships and systems of arrangement that the thing-ness of those things depends on.

Architecting is a particular kind of making where the reasons for why things show up in the ways that they do are based in complex multi-party agreements about values.

Is it right for us to use the photo of the iPad stations as an explanation for the values of the people at the hospital? Or of the people who're ill, and their family members?

I don't think so.

My guess is that this was just something people tried, in the midst of a crisis, that seemed to be better than not trying.

The rig in the picture was **designed** to solve for a particular instance of a problem, in a particular environment. As contrasted with an **architected** approach, whose remit would necessarily have included solving for pattern as well as for problem.

The American architect Louis I. Kahn said that a house is only great when it's great for "the next man". He felt that the real work of an architect is to do nothing less than, while building a particular house to address the client's particular preferences, offer a solution for the pattern (not his word) [House](#).



The pattern we'll offer solutions for in this class, vis-a-vis that picture at the top of the page, is called Sacred Space.

It recurs in places where people attune themselves and arrange things in ways that correspond to belief systems.

It's what makes shared and heightened experiences of special significance work, or not work.

In the built environment, evidence of humans instantiating this pattern goes back more than 10,000 years: back to places like Göbekli Tepe, in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey.

Sacred Space in the natural environment isn't an exclusively human conceptualization (Cf. human, elephant, and chimpanzee death rituals), and as far back as 50,000 years ago we can see evidence of our ancestors sacralizing caves and hilltops and low places.

This demonstrably ancient—and arguably necessary—pattern still shows up in the world today. For certain technology mavens, it happens in the Apple Store. For others, an experience of sacred space is available on football Saturdays at the Big House in Ann Arbor.

Inhabiting or visiting a sacred space can require preparation; ritual behaviors, food, postures, and attire changes on the part of the people who're inhabiting it. As was the case with Moses in the presence of the burning bush, removing his sandals at the god's command. Or—with sandals on—at Shakedown Street, in the parking lot outside of any given Grateful Dead show.

Sacred Space isn't necessarily durable. And it can challenge cursory definitions of permanence. For example, the packing up and rebuilding of Shakedown Street in every city and town that the Grateful Dead played in, year after year. I've seen it come and go from the landing at the bottom of the escalator at the airport baggage claim in Salt Lake City, depending on who's arriving via the incoming flights. Sacred Space comes and goes seasonally at [the Serpentine Gallery](#) in London. And sometimes (back to Utah, USA) it disappears for years, and then re-surfaces, like the [Spiral Jetty](#).

In June of 2020, in Lafayette Square, and in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington D.C., peaceful anti-racism protestors were tear-gassed and arrested *en masse*, destroying what had been a longstanding multi-party agreement about values. Is the violation of such an agreement tantamount to the desecration of Jackson Square? Does the presence of a bronze statue wrought by the hands of an enslaved man, depicting a slave owner and murderer of Native Americans, mean that the square was already pre-desecrated?

The conceit the course depends on this term is that each of us in our own ways and lives has had and can attest to encounters with sacred architected spaces in the built environment. And that we can fruitfully consider the workings of sacred spaces in the built environment as part of the process for re-architecting what shows up on the iPads in the ICU.

Assignments

1. Short presentation and 1:2 dialogue on the information architecture of a complex product or service.
2. Short presentation and 1:2 dialogue on the power of sacred space.
3. Short presentation and 1:2 dialogue on the problem of the iPad on a stick.

Students are also asked to write a question about each of the assigned readings in the course, with the option to skip two of them:

Date Due	Book	Author	ETC
2/1	Invisible Cities	Italo Calvino	Choose one city as your focus, ideal if you read the entire book
2/8	Living In Information	Jorge Arango	Especially the Architecture chapter
2/15	Computers As Theatre 2nd Edition	Brenda Laurel	Ideally, read the book in its entirety
3/8	The Timeless Way of Building	Christopher Alexander	The table of contents is a mini version of the book itself: read as much as you can / like
3/22	The Poetics of Space	Gaston Bachelard	Especially chapters 8 and 9
4/5	The Elements of User Experience 2nd Edition	Jesse James Garrett	Ideally, read the book in its entirety
4/12	Understanding Context	Andrew Hinton	Especially chapters 3 and 4
4/19	How To Make Sense Of Any Mess	Abby Covert	Ideally, read the book in its entirety