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Art History: Exploring Architecture: Emory, Atlanta and Beyond

I am in the process of finalizing my two syllabi for this coming term, each of which will incorporate material that I have thought about more intensely as a result of my participation in the Piedmont project. Eventually I would like to offer a course focused entirely on "Green Architecture" and possibly another on the Urban/Suburban Atlanta built environment focusing on the ramifications of growth, sprawl, gentrification, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, environmental rehabilitation, historic preservation, and New Urbanist principles. At this point, as I am still aware that I have much to learn, these topics will simply form part of the two courses that I am teaching in the fall: a Freshman Seminar called "Exploring Architecture: Emory, Atlanta and Beyond", and an upper level undergraduate course (ArtHist 369), "Architecture After Modernism".

In conceptualizing the Freshman Seminar (a new course), I have begun to think more clearly about Emory and Atlanta as places that have brought the built and natural environments into dialog, sometimes successfully and at other times, less so. While much of the seminar will involve an examination of the built environment and of specific buildings and neighborhoods of particular architectural interest --learning how architecture "speaks" to us and conveys meaning, as well as the vocabularies of architectural style and construction-- we will now want to consider what existed prior to the urban/suburban/campus fabric and how buildings have displaced or given shape to the natural and social environments they inhabit. I intend to consider "place-making" and "place-consciousness" as a part of community building and good urban planning practice. This aspect of the course will be reinforced by visits to the Historic District Development Corporation and the Old Fourth Ward, the East Lake Village projects. Gentrification will be studied in a field trip to Kirkwood, East Atlanta, Cabbagetown and Grant Park. To experience the negative aspects of "sprawl" and haphazard development, we will visit the Buford Highway corridor and the area around the Mall of Georgia (which is itself themed to "recall" the natural environments of Georgia -- the "Piedmont", the "Savannah", etc.). We will also tour the Atlantic Station development in mid-town with one of the architects involved in this major brownfield re-development and Ruth Dusseault, a photographer who is documenting the transformation of the site from steel factory to built community. Another project that we will follow is the architectural expansion of the High Museum and the creation of the "community of the arts" at Woodruff Arts Center as Renzo Piano's "urban piazza" takes shape on Peachtree. Closer to home, we will study the landscaping of Druid Hills by the Olmsted firm, and the Emory campus from its origins in the Hornbostel plan, through the brutalist design of the 60s and 70s, to the recent Master Plan enhancements. In our explorations of the campus environment I will emphasize, more than I might have before Piedmont, the relationship between the built and the "natural", making use of the postcard and photograph collections in the library and the Reconciliation environmental signage to trace the changes. A major project of the seminar will be to produce an architectural guide to the

Emory campus. One of our campus field trips will focus on LEEDS certification with tours of the Whitehead and Math and Sciences buildings. Over the course of the semester we will visit several architectural firms with differing ideas about environmental issues and sustainability (most probably Mack Scogin/Merrill Elam Architects; TVS; and HOK).

With regard to the lecture/discussion class, "Architecture After Modernism", I will include a couple of weeks specifically centered on "green architecture" and architectural practices of sustainability, recycled materials, and "gentle" design; but I also intend to emphasize, again more than I might have before Piedmont, the dialog with the natural environment sustained by architecture that is not specifically "green". In this course, too, we will be discussing issues of community building, the dialog with traditional architectures, concerns of the New Urbanist designers, and the making of "places" as aspects of contemporary practice. In thinking about this course I have been influenced by my Piedmont project reading to think less in terms of the "big name" or "star" architects that I might have emphasized in the past and to seek out practices that are less well known but sometimes more socially and environmentally responsible, e.g., Glenn Murcutt's regionally appropriate work in Australia, Sam Mockbee's Rural Studio projects for poor communities in Alabama, Shigeru Ban's houses of recycled cardboard in Japan and his weatherproof tents for displaced populations everywhere.

In addition to beginning to read seriously in topics of environmentally responsible design this summer, I spent time at the National Building Museum in Washington viewing the "Big and Green" exhibition -- the first major exhibition of large-scale building projects using sustainable design in the creation of congenial and aesthetically stimulating environments for housing, work and commerce. It was a great primer in the principles of green design presented in models, diagrams and photographic images. I've had slides made (from the catalog) that I will use in future courses. I also saw the exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York of the architectural practice of Diller + Scofidio, a team that is concerned with creating work that exposes the usually unseen codes and surveillance practices that limit freedom of decision and action in design and habitation. Of particular relevance to Piedmont issues were their "Traveling Exhibition" -- on the commodification of "place" and tourist sites -- and "Docket" -- a room devoted to legislation and court cases related to the regulation of lawn maintenance in American suburbs.

On a more personal note, the Piedmont project re-awakened my childhood interests in field botany and forest hiking and I was able, at the end of the summer, to take some time to hike in the rain forests on the ocean side of the Olympic National Park and the trails of the Makah Indian Reservation in Washington state -- "places" to which I feel strongly attached. Though I had not been to this part of the world for a couple of decades, I was moved by the familiarity of it and the realization that this was my natural "home". I was also moved by the progress made in recent decades by the Makah people in retrieving their tribal traditions and in teaching the younger generations the wisdom of the elders, so often manifested in respect for the natural environment and its ecology. This is particularly evident in the Makah Museum in Neah Bay which has served as a center for

this cultural pride. Inside the museum a traditional cedar long house has been reconstructed and this has sparked an interest in traditional building methods that can be seen in the contemporary architecture of Neah Bay as well. My recent reading about Atlanta's history and my work this summer at the Atlanta History Society in preparation for the Freshman Seminar have begun to ground me a bit more to this other place in which I have found myself for so many years now. I have equipped myself with a naturalist's guide to the Piedmont and hope to get out "into nature" more than I have been able to in the past. And I intend to become more active in Sustainable Atlanta roundtable activities and neighborhood creek maintenance.

All in all, the Piedmont project has been inspirational and encouraging as I focus on things that have been dear to my heart but far from my specialized research. I hope that funding will be available for it to continue into the future so that others will have a chance to be similarly encouraged.