

DISCOVERING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

ARTHIST 103 | Emory College of Arts and Sciences, Fall Semester 2025-2026

Mondays & Wednesdays, 8:30-9:45am

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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT: PIEDMONT PROJECT

The Piedmont Project offered a unique space for like-minded people, concerned with issues of sustainability, to develop consequential research and pedagogical tools to think and teach about the subject.

I was not looking to design a single syllabus focused on sustainability as its theme, but rather to integrate new ideas, insights, and practices around sustainability into my teaching of architecture as a whole – which inevitably feed back into my research too. One of the best examples so far of the impact of the Piedmont Project in my teaching is in the introductory studio course of the Architectural Studies minor, *Discovering the Built Environment* (ARTHIST 103). Our discussions at the Piedmont Project influenced:

1. Pedagogical strategies: e.g. strategies for the close observation of nature and the built environment; ideas for enhancing the sketchbook as a means of noting down and reflecting on these observations.
2. Objects of study: e.g. traditional architecture, which often includes ingenious passive sustainability strategies adapted to their particular geographical context, and which then have a cultural impact too; non-human constructions like bird nests, and how birds have been pushed to use artificial materials from human waste like plastic in their nests, or nest on human-built structures like utility poles; the design of train carriages, linked to issues of mobility and emissions; the socio-ecological biases and side effects of certain major infrastructure projects.
3. Design guidelines: e.g. favoring context-awareness and the use of local conditions, rather than demolishing the existing and constructing something from scratch; emphasis on reuse and adaptation in theory (i.e. in the designs) and in practice (i.e. the actual materials used in the studio, such as in model-making).

Students will have an opportunity to develop sustainability-focused themes in other courses I'll offer this year in the Architectural Studies Minor. For example, *Visionary Architectures* (ARTHIST 203) invites students to engage with dystopian literature imagining the future of a climate crisis, and the interconnection between ecology, society, and the built environment in such fictional – or prophetic – works. In another course, *Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics of the Built Environment* (ARTHIST 480), students will reflect on what it means to speak of a sustainable aesthetics, and how it may play an ethical pedagogical role, within the long tradition of philosophical discussions around the relation between aesthetics and ethics.

DESCRIPTION

What makes a house a home? What do cities say about our societies? How do infrastructures change our lifestyles? How are spaces shaped by the ways we use them? And who actually designs our built environment?

In this introductory studio, we will explore fundamental elements and features of the built environment. These range from original houses, grandiose monuments, and revolutionary skyscrapers, to simple streets, hidden tunnels, and non-human constructions like bird nests. You shall also learn the basics of architectural representation, including reading and drawings plans and sections at different scales. You will complete the course by designing an imaginary project of your own.

FORMAT

Our class will meet twice a week: first, for a brief lecture and discussion of preselected texts: second, for a series of practical exercises or work towards your final assignment.

Each week, you will be introduced to a new aspect of the built environment and a different interdisciplinary approach to it. For the first half of the semester, we will focus on fundamental disciplines (e.g. architecture, urban design, engineering) and elements (e.g. the room, the house, the street). For the second half, we will explore more complex topics (e.g. the crossover between architecture and engineering, the role of the law in shaping buildings, the example of animal constructions). In the meantime, you will acquire practical architectural design skills (e.g. drawing plans, sections, elevations, and diagrams at different scales).

ENROLLMENT CAP & SELECTION PROCESS

Class size is limited to 25 participants. This entry-level studio on the design of the built environment is directed at all students, whether intending to pursue further studies in architecture or not.

ARTHIST 103 is a requirement for the Architecture Studies minor, and satisfies prerequisites for ARTHIST 203.

PREREQUISITES

No prerequisites.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Sketchbook

The sketchbook is a record of your work throughout the semester. It contains your weekly class assignments and your follow-up exercises outside of class. You can also add extra content that you have produced on your own and relates to the course, such as reading notes, drawings, photos, studies of the built environment, and imaginary designs. You will submit your sketchbook for midterm and final reviews, with 10 to 15 pages of your choice highlighted for grading. The sketchbook is an individual assignment.

2. Example

This short oral presentation is your chance to talk about a project, space, or other element of the built environment that fascinates you. Pick an example of the built environment (e.g. a particular building, square, or park you know) directly related to the week's readings, and share a short analysis of it with the class. The analysis should include at least one image. The example is an individual assignment.

3. Design

You will create your own design project. Using the design skills acquired throughout the semester, and referring to the case-studies that we read about and discussed, you will draw your own proposal. The site will be in a predetermined area in Atlanta. You will also be supported by basic programmatic orientations. Otherwise, what you choose to invent will be entirely up to you. The design is a group assignment, conducted in pairs.

GRADING

- Sketchbook: 30%
- Example: 10%
- Design: 40%
- Text discussion: 20%

REQUIRED COURSE MATERIALS

Digital copies of the readings supplied on Canvas.

SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction to the Built Environment

Lecture: Lecture and discussion: Introduction of the studio structure, framework, topics, and approach

Exercise: The classroom – plan and section

Week 2: Architecture I

Reading: On the house, from autochthonous constructions to architectural designs

Exercise: The building – analysis of plans and sections

Week 3: Architecture II

Reading: On form and function in public buildings

Exercise: The building – elevations

Week 4: Urban Design

Reading: On the layers of streetscapes

Exercise: The quad – usage in plan and section

Week 5: Landscape design

Reading: On regenerative designs through landscaping, parks, and greenery

Exercise: The green – topographical map

Week 6: Engineering

Reading: On structures and infrastructures

Exercise: The bridge – graphic representation of force distribution

Week 7: Urbanism

Reading: On the city as an overlay of complex networks

Exercise: The campus – figure-ground diagram

Week 8: Architecture & Engineering

Reading: On the adapted use of a train station

Feedback: Sketchbook assignment review

Week 9: Transit Design

Reading: On train cars and other modes of mobility

Assignment: Final project – site analysis (1/2)

Week 10: Legislation and Finance

Reading: On the shape of New York City's skyscrapers

Assignment: Final project – site analysis (2/2)

Week 11: Animals

Reading: On bird nests and other non-human constructions

Assignment: Final project – design (1/3)

Feedback: Individual desk critiques

Week 12: Leftovers

Reading: On non-spaces

Assignment: Final project (2/3)

Feedback: Class critiques

Week 13: Preparation for Final Critiques

Assignment: Final project (3/3)

Feedback: Individual desk critiques

Week 14: Final Critiques

Presentations: Final assignment presentation to visiting critics