Architectural Arbitrage: An Exploration of the In Between, Along The Strait of Gibraltar
Spring 2012: May 1-June 18, 2012
Destinations: Gibraltar, Ceuta, Morocco (Africa), Andalusia (Spain).

Architectural Arbitrage will inspect the spatial implications of non-architectural factors in the past and future shapings of the built environment. This investigative studio will work through analytic research and generative exercises that cultivate a mastery of translation between the abstract and the material. The objective of the studio is to demonstrate: 1) That space and material are mediums with enormous agency; 2) How architects can act as representatives of these mediums in order to effect change, rather than only as respondents to a set of predetermined demands. Thus, concepts such as “fairness”, when considered through an architectural lens, can begin to redefine the decision making of society at large.

---

COURSE DESCRIPTION: (Outlined in Four Parts)

1. Location: The site of the studio is located and structured along the two coasts that flank the Strait of Gibraltar. For millennia, this region has been the locus of shifting (swapping) religious, political, cultural, linguistic, climactic, and economic regimes. Yet, unlike other regions of such contrasts, such incongruencies have managed to strike a provocative balance that is imbedded in the physical and non-physical space of the area. Moreover, given the region’s long and ongoing heterogeneous character, it contains abundant and irrefutable evidence of the mutual influence of the built environment with religious, political, legal, and financial processes.

North of the Strait, we find Gibraltar, a territory that is both British and Spanish, and neither. Its location has made it a crucial military asset; yet, its continued survival rests on its ability to be open and non-strategic, a destination for tourism and banking. Immediately to the South of the Strait, in an act of a geographic mirroring, we find Ceuta, a Spanish city that is not in Spain at all, but in the unusual place between two nations (Spain and Morocco) and two continents (Africa and Europe).

The actual geographic and political situation of these places is far from straightforward: the accumulation of millennia of social, cultural, and religious dysplasia provides the studio with an incredible territory for conducting an investigation into architectural arbitrage. In its purest form, arbitrage is risk free: it produces profit through the exploitation of differences in the price of a particular asset. It is the objective of the studio to identify and record the spatial and material outcomes of this dysplasia and to grasp the opportunity to occupy this arbitrage space as a means to not only expand the potential products of architectural activity, but also to expand the agency of the discipline in contemporary society. By understanding first-hand, the spatial and material consequences of the various social, cultural, or economic factors that have shaped the built environment of and around Gibraltar’s extremely layered contexts, students will work to translate between the traditional artifacts of architectural agency and the contexts within which they operate.

2. Pedagogic Intent: The studio is primarily concerned with the act of translation—a as a means and an end: students will learn how to operate in both the abstract and the concrete, moving back and forth, from one to another. Students will reinforce their ability to develop a self-critical, intellectual project of architecture through the shaping of space and material. Through a series of action driven, spatial exercises, students will acquire a series of conceptual skills that deal directly with space making through a consideration of shifting and competing contexts.

3. Outcomes and Deliverables: For the duration of the course, students will speculate and develop abstract concepts through spatial and material definition. At various sites along the Strait, students will be asked to examine their physical surroundings through an initial documentation of the site’s non-material and physical characteristics. This documentation will take on the form of two glossaries: one verbal and one visual. Next, students will execute a series of spatially driven, design projects to produce multiple, but specific outcomes. Students will pair an abstract concept (i.e. closeness, comfort, public, private) to a specific design project (i.e. plaza, entryway, passageway, courtyard, kiosk, boundary, threshold). What are the formal characteristics of “comfort” defined in house located in the desert versus a temperate climate? How is “sacred” understood when a mosque is re-appropriated as a church? How is “community” interpreted in a Christian, versus Muslim residential neighborhood? What does a study of “closeness” yield in terms of medina architecture (old city), vernacular residences, and cultural practices? How private is a riad (traditional house) under a restrictive political regime versus a tourist governance?

4. Long-term Objectives: As professionals, architects are held accountable for affecting/impacting the wellbeing of society, historically exercising their agency through the making of buildings. Yet, space and material, mediums of tremendous agency, still remain extremely underrepresented in society’s decision-making. “Architectural Arbitrage” hopes to increase the discipline’s agency not through an understanding of how to make a better building, but rather through a development of skills that refine the architect’s ability to communicate the agency of space and material itself. Whereby architects and architecture are involved in decision making at the level of policy: imagine a welfare state that no longer distributes wealth under an accounting-based formula of “fairness” that dictates that each citizen receives the same dollar amount; a type of accounting that would drastically change if it were to consider the cost differentials of a person living in a city versus one in the countryside.

By understanding the multiple spatial/material outcomes for a common abstract concept, students will lay the groundwork for demonstrating how spatial thinking, or the particulars of an architectural mindset, can exert influence beyond the immediate and traditional domain of the discipline.

* Additional funding will be sought in the form of an Experiential Learning Fund grant provided by the International Institute at the University of Michigan.