

History I: The Gift of Architecture

ARCH 313

Fall Semester 2024

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This course offers a broad overview of architectural history during the last two centuries by focusing on the relationships between key actors in the production of buildings: the designer, the client, the funder, the builder, and the user. The entrance point to discuss their unequal and uneven obligations, rights, expectations, horizons of choice and spaces of agency is the focus on architectural gifts, or buildings delivered, ostensibly, without an expectation of reciprocity.

After an overview of conceptual literature on gift-giving, course participants will study a range of examples of architectural gifts, from 19th-century housing neighborhoods and public libraries, through 20th-century colonial and postcolonial developmentalism, Islamic charities, post-war European welfare states, state-socialist gift diplomacies, to today's humanitarian architecture and the impact of philanthrocapitalism on cities. Through these case studies we will reassess and test the relevance of gift theory for the understanding of architecture, including questions of the obligation to reciprocate, social bond stemming from the sense of indebtedness, the inalienability of the gift, and specific temporality of gift-giving. We will also discuss how the study of architecture, its production and afterlives, challenges the supposed oppositions between gifts and commodities and between gifts and rights.

We will discuss how the generosity and violence specific for gift-giving impacted the layouts, programs, materialities, construction, and afterlives of buildings in the United States and across the world. We will examine the ways in which the dynamics of gift-giving worked within and against social, political, economic, and racial differences in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. At the same time, we will study how the appropriation of donated buildings by inhabitants and users challenged some of the unequal power relationships specific for gift-giving. In so doing, this course focuses on architectural gifts in order to address key debates in architectural history of the 20th century, and to offer a more differentiated history of global urbanization and its architecture.