A canon from scratch: Shaping a new architecture guidebook for Los Angeles
Urban/Environmental Policy 308
Occidental College, Spring 2014

Instructor: Christopher Hawthorne (Christopher.Hawthorne@latimes.com)

Course Meetings: Wed. 7:15 pm – 10:15 pm, Johnson Hall 106

Course Description:
How do we decide what pieces of architecture in any city are the most significant? How do we guide people through the 21st-century city? Is the traditional idea of an architecture guidebook -- as a collection of maps, as a steady voice of authority, as a way to determine and fix the architectural canon -- obsolete? For that matter, are the familiar definitions of Los Angeles urbanism and architectural innovation obsolete too?

This course will allow students to explore those questions as they work alongside Los Angeles Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne in helping conceptualize a new architectural guidebook for Southern California, a project on which Hawthorne is collaborating with the leading architecture photographer Iwan Baan. Students will read and assess guidebooks and other treatments of LA architecture and the architecture of other cities; they will help divide the Southern California region into sections and begin debating which new and old buildings are worthy of inclusion in the new guidebook and why; and they will receive detailed feedback on their own writing and criticism (and/or photography) while examining the ways that guidebooks, the publishing business, and the city of Los Angeles itself have all changed since the most influential and popular guidebooks to L.A. architecture first appeared several decades ago. A key part of that analysis will be helping develop ideas for a digital version of the book for mobile phone and iPad. Perhaps a digital guidebook also means a fluid one that can be continually updated and reordered, rendering a traditional definition of the architectural canon obsolete. And perhaps a new approach to compiling a guidebook will offer the chance to move beyond a limited list of pedigreed architectural landmarks and think about L.A.’s vernacular architecture as well as the way that new investments in transit and public space and waves of immigration have changed the city’s built form over the last several decades.

Course Organization:
The course will be organized, roughly speaking, into thirds. The first few weeks of the term will include some fieldwork but will focus on analyzing a handful of the most important books and guidebooks on Los Angeles architecture and urbanism. The middle weeks will be the period when students, alone and in groups, get out into the city to visit, photograph and assess significant buildings. In the last several weeks students will work on a final project that advances an argument about the best way to capture and describe contemporary Los Angeles. They will present a draft version of that project in class before refining it and submitting a final version at the end of the term.

Project Overview:
The course’s main goal will be to generate a new framework or frameworks for a guidebook to historic and contemporary architecture in Los Angeles (and perhaps in Southern California more broadly). Student projects, to be discussed in detail during class time, will include writing, photography, or technology/mapping work, or some combination of the three.
COURSE SCHEDULE

**January 22**
Introductions, course overview. “Los Angeles is like your brain. You only ever use 20 percent of it. But imagine if we used it all.” How Los Angeles has changed since the last major new architecture guidebook to the city was published. How publishing and technology – and notions of critical authority – have changed over that time.

**January 29**
Walking tour of the Occidental Campus for discussion of its architectural landmarks. How to look at a building. How to write about a building. Assignment of one campus building to each student.

**February 5**
Readings/analysis part 1: Early takes on Los Angeles and its built environment. Anton Wagner, Carey McWilliams et al. Oxy buildings, part 1. **To read: McWilliams.**

**February 12**

**February 19**

**February 26**

**March 5**

**March 12**
NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK

**March 19**
Trip 1: Downtown and Bunker Hill. SHORT PAPER DUE.

**March 26**
NO CLASS. Time to be made up with trips on your own to Boyle Heights, North Hollywood or the Eames House (Pacific Palisades).

**April 2**
Presentations on Downtown trip. Discussion of AIA NYC Guide. **To read: AIA NYC (TBD).**

**April 9**  
Trip 2: Culver City via Expo Line.

**April 16**  
Presentations on Culver City. Digital guidebooks and the refreshable/liquid canon. The potential and perils of crowdsourcing. Challenges to critical authority/“everybody’s a critic.” “Every building on the Sunset Strip” → “Every building in Los Angeles”? **To Read: selections of digital/online guidebooks.**

**April 23**  
Draft presentations, part 1.

**April 30**  
Draft presentations, part 2. Final class.

**FINAL PROJECT DUE: WEDNESDAY, MAY 7**

**Assignments:**  
Students will be responsible for helping guide the discussion of one of the books on the syllabus (details provided in class). They will also be asked to produce one short (3-4 page) paper on the readings; produce short presentations on one building on the Occidental campus and on each of the class’s two field trips; and produce a final project in the form of a short section of a new architecture guidebook to Los Angeles (again, more details on this in class).

**Grading:**  
Grades will be determined as follows:  
Presentation of an Occidental building: 10%  
Guiding in-class discussion for one book: 10%  
3-4 page paper: 20%  
Short presentations based on field trips: 5% each, or 10% total  
Class participation for entire term: 10%  
Final project: 40%

**Readings. Selections from:**

**Further reading (optional):**