How do we approach the subject of nature’s relationship to architecture? Nature, as a design concern, as an aesthetic, and even as a political disposition has returned to the discipline in recent decades, couched implicitly within the narratives of architectural projects, cited explicitly in design policies like LEED and sustainable architecture, and interpreted as an alternate form of intelligence for technologically oriented architectural pursuits.

But despite the prevalence of natural narratives currently circulating within contemporary architecture, relatively little critical analysis has been done to draw out the implicit ideologies latent in architecture’s relationship to the concept of nature and its ongoing cultural utility. However this class will argue that the ambiguity of the concept of “the natural” within the architectural discipline is not the result of lazy scholarship or a lack of disciplinary awareness, rather we will argue that it is precisely an operative malleability that defines nature’s import into architecture, and perhaps always has.

Like an object which can only survive in our peripheral vision, it seems the usefulness of nature exists entirely in the perpetual mutability of its own definition. The more it’s explicitly focused on, looked directly at, or called to task, the more either nothing at all is natural or seemingly everything takes on a vaguely natural hue. This class begins with the supposition that nature is already not (and never has been) ‘out-there’ but is precisely ‘in-here’, which is to say that nature is a complex and powerful form of cultural discourse, one whose boundaries are continually redefined and reconfigured in order (like all cultural discourses) to do particular types of work for those who wield it.

Once extricated from the long-standing myth of a regenerative, beneficial, or beautiful ‘out-there’, nature, rethought of as a cultural instrument allows for new types of analysis and the awareness of new forms of implication between architecture and that ambiguous ghost: nature. But it also reveals that the discursive ghost of nature has long haunted the architectural discipline in concealed and often radical ways. From the politics of 18th century garden design and the architectural plan as an operative mechanism for viewing, to contemporary ecological and biologically determined conceptions of architectural program, the peculiar manifestations of natures-past have historically recalibrated, reconfigured and transformed many of the conventions we assume to be at architecture’s core.

This class will be a survey into the discursive role of nature within nineteenth and twentieth century architectural and landscape architectural practices. Focusing on nature as a social construction directed towards particular social and political ends, and the role of design in reconfiguring nature’s relationship to the artificial world. The class however will attempt to talk about nature as a peripheral object, exploring it not through head-to-head confrontations with the concept but attempting to glimpse it from the back door, by retelling natural histories of some of architecture’s most tried and true conventions and ambitions, from climate control to infrastructure and utopia. We’ll exorcise the ghosts of natures now long-gone by rereading the histories of architecture’s most basic elements and beliefs.
Class Structure

Each class will focus on a specific, predefined architectural convention or concern. The first half of each class period will be comprised of a lecture which essentially reconstructs the history of this convention by situating it within period concerns surrounding the role of nature as a form of cultural or social currency. The class will use nature to politicize these conventions while drawing out lost histories of architecture’s relationship to nature.

In conjunction with the lecture which will introduce and define the parameters of each week’s debate, the class will have a collection of assigned readings which help to situate the relevance of each class. Readings will be posted at least two weeks in advance of every class.

Student Participation

Every week one to two students will introduce the readings to the class for discussion by summarizing and staging their positions relative to each other. This same student will then present an analysis of a project relevant to the topic of the session in a 15-20 minute presentation. Following the presentation the student and I will lead the class in a short discussion on both the larger historic narrative and the details of the specific presented project(s). The presenting student should come with 8-10 questions prepared for his or her fellow classmates.

Each student will be expected to write one short midterm paper which adopts the class’s mode of investigation to explore an assigned topic. This paper will be a minimum of 6 double-spaced pages and will employ both original research and analysis.

The semester will conclude with the presentation of a dossier, this will be a graphic and textual analysis on a topic of the student’s choosing which explores the natural history of a convention or movement within the disciplines of architectural, landscape or urban design.

Requirements:

A: Class presentation of readings and assigned building/project(s) (20%)
B: Midterm Paper: 6 page double-spaced research paper with original content (topic assigned) (30%)
C: Attendance and participation (10%)
D: Final Dossier: Textual and graphic analysis with original research and analysis (topic chosen) (40%)

Week 1: The Picturesque Movement and the Architectural Plan
Week 2: No Class (Labor Day)
Week 3: Transcendental Biology and the Decorated Detail
Week 4: Disgust, Filth, and the Modern Subject
Week 5: Waste and the Modern City
Week 6: The Emergence of Atmosphere and Contemporary Conditioning
Week 7: No Class (Columbus Day) (Midterm Papers Due)
Week 8: Twentieth Century Organisms and Contemporary Program
Week 9: Ecology and Urbanism
Week 10: Biology and Form
Week 12: Environmental Management and the Geographic Project
Week 13: Nature as Nowhere and the Utopian Project
Week 14: Dossier Presentation Day 1
Week 15: Dossier Presentation Day 2