

WINTER 2018
GRADUATE COURSE OUTLINE
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM

COURSE CODE: ARC 3016Y S Research Options Studio
L0103

COURSE NAME: INTO THE UPSIDE DOWN:
Toronto's PATH System

CLASSROOM LOCATION: TBD

CLASS HOURS: Tuesday/Friday 2:00-6:00*

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OFFICE HOURS: By appointment.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:



INTO THE UPSIDE DOWN: Toronto's PATH System

This research studio will take up Toronto's PATH System as a site of research and design speculation, examining the potential intersections between infrastructure, public space and architecture that could foster a more robust and dynamic form of urbanity within the PATH, and within the city that sits above it.

The PATH

Downtown Toronto is riven with an ad-hoc system of subterranean passages, commercial spaces, parking, commuter connections and service vaults that constitute what is known as the city's PATH System. The PATH has grown 'organically,' that is to say, expediently and virus-like, since it began in 1900 with the connection of Eaton's main department store with its bargain basement across the way. Desire for connection combined with below-grade, below-retail-cost shopping proved to be a powerful combination.

From its first connection at Eaton's, over time the nascent PATH replicated itself, becoming a metastasizing, composite urban growth built on the incremental logics of private property development. Each segment of the PATH is owned and operated by the owner of the property above or adjacent to it, reflecting a desire for connectivity that is satisfied directly. Segments of the PATH are oddly individual in the character of different materials and finishes selected by their owners. Yet, what lies above is in many instances public infrastructure: streets, sewers, and utilities.

Today, the City of Toronto's website boasts that the PATH system encompasses over 30 kilometers of walkable, "weather-free comfort," and tells us also that "The PATH is waiting to be explored." This studio intends to do just that, opportunistically looking for possibilities latent in the PATH that could provoke an architectural response.

But, what exactly is the PATH? Encompassing four million square feet (371,600 m²) of retail space, 5000+ employees and a daily occupation well beyond the size of a mid-size city – over 200,000 people/day – the PATH is a vast system of connectivity merged with the world's largest subterranean shopping mall.

Is it enough to simply enjoy the City's somewhat smug version of the PATH, described as a "safe haven?" The endless sea of anonymous franchise shopping and feeding opportunities ultimately provide insulation from the stimulation and opportunities, as well as the threats, of urban life that lie but a ceiling plenum/ground plane away. Shouldn't we expect more from such a massive piece of the city?

How did we arrive in the Upside Down of currently-accepted notions of what constitutes a vital urban environment? (Walkability, while one index of the 'health' of urban sites, is the overriding attribute of the PATH, *ad infinitum*. It alone is not enough.)

Is it possible that the PATH has become too big?

Too big to be so banal?

Too big to fail, in spite of its material and spatial impoverishment?

Too big to fix?

Too big not to learn something from it?

Questions of Identity

Is the PATH a form of organic infrastructure? Or, given its extensiveness, could the PATH be understood as a novel kind of urban landscape? Without fresh air, sunlight, and weather – or at least a gleaning of what the weather might be, above – what kind of landscape is it?

The Path is experienced mostly as passage, an all-in, all interior assemblage, lined with washable, durable materials, then coded in a meager attempt to navigate nowhere-ness (red P = south; orange A = west; blue T = north; and yellow H = east). Who knew? Many users were perhaps too lost, disoriented, or safely encapsulated to care. Bereft of a strong enough Wi-Fi connection to reliably access Google Maps while negotiating positions within the labyrinthine apparatus that is the PATH, one user advises looking carefully at changes in flooring materials, to discern whether one has passed from one building to another in the city above.

It seems clear that what the PATH is not (or what it sorely lacks): architecture.

Like the PATH, the arcades of the nineteenth century were created to make connections between urban destinations. The urban experiences of shopping and passage are common to both, although in the case of the arcade, those experiences were fashioned around the spectacle of consumer goods within a kind of space receptive to the projection of fantasy – something that Shoppers Drug, or Starbucks, for many reasons, simply can't deliver for most people today.

Arcades are encapsulated spaces, but not to the degree that the PATH exhibits, reinforced by its unchanging, round-the-clock even glow of artificial lighting, back-lit signage, and the hum of HVAC.

The arcades' architecture, in contrast, utilized a cutting-edge technology of its day, cast-iron, to create spaces full of natural and artificial light, air, volume – that is to say, atmosphere – not in the sense we may use it today (in describing a themed restaurant), but rather, as a quasi-environmental condition.

The arcades featured other accoutrements and attractions, such as lanterns, mirrors, and winter gardens. These elements, combined with the arcade's architectural framework and its occupants, fostered the "whispering of gazes," Walter Benjamin's characterization of an environment closely calibrated to heighten the social aspects of the appearances of things and of people. Benjamin also saw in the arcade an "ambiguity of space," which might be a provocation in the approach to the design of architecture in the PATH.

The nineteenth century arcade is but one possible analogue that could assist in informing a design approach, in considering Toronto's PATH System; other sources of inspiration might be culled not only from architectural examples, but from urban design, landscape and infrastructural examples as well.

What, and where, are the opportunities for the invention of architecture in the Upside Down urbanism of the PATH?

STUDIO PROCESS AND METHODS

Research and Documentation

During the first few weeks of the studio, students will research and document the PATH, examining its history, its current configuration and uses, seeking to identify and understand

elements of its successes as an urban environment, as well as identify its deficiencies, lost opportunities, or failures. Students will be encouraged to use a variety of media (video, film/photography, drawing, digital and physical models) in their documentation.

A collection of readings will be given to provide theoretical and historical background to the studio's work. Students will also be asked to select a comparative project (architectural, urban design, landscape, infrastructural) to be studied and analyzed as part of their initial research on the PATH.

Strategies and Proposals

The studio will next focus upon identifying and developing a set of strategies for architectural interventions: including enhancement, transformation or possible disruption of the PATH. Each student will then select an aspect of the PATH, such as a typical or anomalous condition, or a specific site, to further develop as the basis for an independent project, formulating a design proposal based on their research. The latter part of the studio will be devoted to the detailed development of each student's proposal.

Studio as Preparation for Thesis

Students' research on the PATH and its Upside Down urbanism, including the themes, historical models and design methods explored, will inform each student's thesis project in the following semester. The PATH as a site provides the opportunity for a wide range of projects of very different scales, and kinds of focus.

Thesis projects may either located in the PATH itself, or may be more conceptually related to the principles and design strategies developed in the research studio, applied to another set of circumstances of the student's choice.