

Architecture and the Modernist Imagination

Responsables de l'atelier

Anne Besnault

anne.besnault@univ-rouen.fr

Nina Eldridge

nina.eldridge@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

Charlotte Estrade

cestrade@parisnanterre.fr

Xavier Kalck

xavier.kalck@univ-lille.fr

Architecture has long been recognised as foundational to the infrastructure of modernity, at least since Constructivism first emerged among Russian artists around 1913 and advocated, well into the 1920s, for the integration of art, science and technology. As Mauro Guillén explains in *The Taylorized Beauty of the Mechanical: Scientific Management and the Rise of Modernist Architecture* (Princeton, 2006), “modernist architecture is the child of industry and engineering” (16). Guillén goes on to argue that “[architects] became technicians, organizers, and social reformers as well as artists”, as “[t]echnology merged with style, science with history, efficiency with creativity, and functionality with aesthetics” (16). This workshop asks how, in turn, literature and the arts have responded to this profound upheaval, and how architectural thinking has helped shape modernist aesthetics, forms and imaginaries.

One familiar starting point is *Manhatta* (1921)¹, the avant-garde, nine-minute film directed by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, which combines images of New York with excerpts from Walt Whitman’s poetry to create a decentered picture of an apparently unreal, maze-like metropolis. Yet this focus on the city as the central modernist architectural trope, if historically undeniable, is by no means sufficient to explain the role of architectural thinking within modernist works. For among the languages of modernism, architecture stands out as remarkably ubiquitous. It can evoke the visual turn in the literary imagination, with an emphasis on spatial concepts of form, from constellation to collage and montage, as well as the overall materiality of the printed page and the new textual and rhythmic geometries of the word. It can also point to the ways literary knowledge is assembled in anthologies into architectures of reading seeking to promote a different canon or exchanged and translated through the circulation of small magazines and periodicals.

Beyond the representation of buildings and cities, architecture invites us to consider how modernist works construct, inhabit and transform space. Architecture does not simply fill space: it organizes it, creating places through the interplay of solid structures and the voids they enclose or leave open. By delineating spaces for particular activities and forms of life, architecture shapes how we move through and inhabit our surroundings. The tension between enclosure and openness extends beyond individual buildings to the urban environment and the

¹ http://ubu.com/film/strand_manhattan.html. See Antonia RIGAUD, “*Manhatta* de Charles Sheeler et Paul Strand: du panorama au kaléidoscope”, *e-Rea* [Online], 13.1 | 2015, Online since 15 December 2015, connection on 12 October 2026. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/4599>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.4599>

relationship between built and natural spaces. Gardens, for instance, complicate this distinction: open to the sky, they nevertheless remain closely associated with enclosure, delimitation and domesticity.

Modernist works can provide insight into our relationships to these structures and spaces. How might architectural principles illuminate literary composition, the organization of narrative, or the relationship between fragmentation and formal coherence? How do windows, doors, rooms and thresholds mediate between interior and exterior, private and public, individual consciousness and collective experience? In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for instance, the family house becomes a material and temporal structure exposed to absence, decay and the passage of history; in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the room emerges as both a material condition of women's intellectual independence and a figure for literary production itself. Such examples suggest that architectural space is never merely a backdrop: it can shape the conditions of authorship, the experience of modernity and the very forms through which they become thinkable.

Architecture also points to the intersection of aesthetic, social, political, historical and geographical frameworks that shape the modern world anew: where fiction is housed and where literary fiction chooses to dwell; the role of factories and the modern workplace; glass, steel, concrete and plastic, and the ecologies of durability they imply; the gendered organisation of domestic and public space; and the monuments and counter-monuments erected or torn down. Buildings and built environments may embody cultural memory and historical continuity, but they may also register rupture, displacement and the instability of inherited forms. From the modernist city to the domestic interior, from the architecture of the printed page to the material structures of cultural institutions, this workshop seeks to explore the multiple ways in which architecture informs, challenges and reshapes the modernist imagination.

We welcome contributions investigating how modernism makes, inhabits and transforms space. How do modernist literature and the arts negotiate the relationship between built space and artistic form? In what ways do architectural structures, principles and metaphors shape modernist experiments in literature and the arts? How do buildings and urban environments embody, reproduce or challenge social hierarchies, including those structured by gender, class, race and empire? How might architectural space be understood as an embodied and sensory experience, rather than merely a visual object or representational setting? What tensions emerge between architectural permanence and the shifting temporalities of modernity, historical memory and cultural inheritance? Finally, how might bringing architecture into dialogue with the arts complicate established understandings of modernism's aesthetics, politics and historical legacies?

Proposals for papers in English (**300 words** & short bibliography) and a brief biographical note should be sent jointly to Anne Besnault (anne.besnault@univ-rouen.fr), Nina Eldridge (nina.eldridge@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr) s; Charlotte Estrade (cestrade@parisnanterre.fr) and Xavier Kalck (xavier.kalck@univ-lille.fr) before **November 30th 2025**.

Selected Bibliography

- Carr, Andrew. "Cathedrals on the light of a butterfly's wing: the Momentary Architecture of Virginia Woolf". *Architectural Research Quarterly*, Vol. 27, no. 1, March 2023 , pp. 4–23.
- Charley, Jonathan, ed. *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.
- Edwards, Sarah, and Jonathan Charley, eds. *Writing the Modern City: Literature, architecture, modernity*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
- Hyppolite, Pierre, Antoine Leygonie, Agnès Verlet, dir.. *Architecture et littérature : Une interaction en question XXe-XXIe siècles*. Presses universitaires de Provence, 2014.
- Jobst, M. "Writing sensation: Deleuze, literature, architecture and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*". *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 21, no.1, 2016, pp. 55-67.
- Maher, Ashley. *Reconstructing Modernism: British Literature, Modern Architecture, and the State*. Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2020.
- Paquot, Thierry. *L'espace public*. Paris : La Découverte, 2024.
- Paxton, Nancy L. "Virginia Woolf's *The London Scene*: The Politics of the Flâneuse". *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol. 16, 2010, pp. 85–111.
- Rosner, Victoria. *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*. New York: Columbia Univeristy Press, 2005.
- Snaith, Anna, and Michael H. Whitworth, editors. *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Spurr, Arthur. "An End to Dwelling: Reflections on Modern Literature and Architecture". In *Modernism*, vol. 1. Eds Astradur Eysteinsson, and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007, 469-486.
- Thacker, Andrew. *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2009.
- Zinc, Suzana. *Virginia Woolf's Rooms and the Spaces of Modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.