THE CONTEXT OF MATERIAL CULTURE
Anthropology 3890
Spring 2003

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Course Objectives
Human beings use a wide variety of material things to exist in, and give meaning to, their world. This course examines the relationship between people and material culture. The human-object relationship is viewed as dialectical: people use material culture to solve life's existential problems, and material culture uses people by actively teaching them "proper" ways of thinking and behaving. The relationship is also viewed as contextual: objects function differently and carry different meanings depending on time, place, and social circumstance.

The course will take stock of how material culture functions to shape and constrain human behavior. We will examine different classes of material culture—everyday household utensils, specialized technologies, domestic architecture, monumental architecture, city plans, socially-created landscapes—in an effort to uncover the meanings these phenomena embody, the messages they send, and the behavior patterns they teach. We will look at the human-object relationship in a variety of cultural contexts, and at different points in time (ancient, historic, contemporary). We will cast widely across the arts and sciences—including the disciplines of philosophy, economics, history, cultural studies, folklore, geography, architecture, and engineering—for interesting and relevant insights into the materiality of human existence.

The overriding goal of the course is to explore and develop ideas that can help inform critical social analysis in archaeology, ethnology, and museum anthropology, as well as better understand the production and reproduction of human social life generally.

Course Requirements
You are expected to:
(1) actively participate in class discussion of course material and assigned readings by bringing critical commentaries and/or discussion questions to each class meeting;
(2) complete a midterm writing assignment;
(3) complete a final original research paper (this can relate to thesis work or be something completely different).

Reading
The required reading for the course consists of articles on file in the Department of Anthropology main office (Sturm 146).
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mar 26</td>
<td>Introduction and overview of course themes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mar 31</td>
<td>Why we need things; Paradigms for material culture study.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Apr 2</td>
<td>Some classic analyses of the material world.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Apr 7</td>
<td>Style and material culture.</td>
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<td>Apr 9</td>
<td>Portable objects and tribal cognitive orders.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Apr 14</td>
<td>Portable objects and political power.</td>
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<td>Apr 16</td>
<td>Artifacts of resistance.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Apr 21</td>
<td>The determinants of technological form.</td>
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<td>Apr 23</td>
<td>Technology: The case of Mormon fences.</td>
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<td><strong>DISTRIBUTE MID-TERM ESSAY ASSIGNMENT.</strong></td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Apr 28</td>
<td>The nature of built environments.</td>
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<td>Apr 30</td>
<td>Domestic architecture.</td>
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<td><strong>MID-TERM ESSAY DUE.</strong></td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>May 5</td>
<td>Public and monumental architecture.</td>
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<td>May 7</td>
<td>Debating Ground Zero.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>May 12</td>
<td>NO CLASS.</td>
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<td>May 14</td>
<td>NO CLASS.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>May 19</td>
<td>Cities and Urban Form.</td>
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<td>May 21</td>
<td>Space and Landscape.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>May 26</td>
<td>MEMORIAL DAY—NO CLASS</td>
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<td>May 28</td>
<td>What should a comprehensive theory of material culture look like?</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>June 2</td>
<td><strong>RESEARCH PAPERS DUE.</strong></td>
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Introductory


Style and Portable Material Culture


Technology


3


Architecture, Domestic Architecture


Public/Monumental Architecture


Cities and Urban Form


Space and Landscape

4

