In search of an environmentally responsible minimalism in the age of conspicuous consumption

Instructor: Dr. Vidar Lerum  
Class meets: TBD  
Credits: 3 credit hours  
Max enrollment: 16 students

“The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation, and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise and in the social structure which this institution of ownership touches. The possession of wealth confers honor; it is an invidious distinction.”

“It becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property, in order to retain one’s good name.”

Thorstein Veblen

course description

In the era of conspicuous consumption, improvements in energy efficient building designs are often counteracted by increasing complexity of construction and decreasing efficiency of space. Per capita, the American population occupies a larger floor area in their houses and offices, drive larger cars and trucks and enjoy larger serving sizes at restaurants.

The Eco Mini design seminar will explore current conditions and future potential for an environmentally responsible minimalism in building designs of the twenty-first century. Following the Mies tradition of peeling off what is not strictly necessary in modern architectural designs, the notion of sustainability will be introduced as a juxtaposition.

course organization

Students will read and discuss relevant texts such as “The Theory of the Leisure Class” (Thorstein Veblen), “Walden” (Henry David Thoreau), and “Small is Beautiful” (E. F. Schumacher), and study biographies of artists and designers who have made important contributions to minimalism, such as Colin Chapman, (inventor), Philip Glass (composer), James Dyson (inventor), R. Buckminster Fuller (inventor/designer) and Donald Judd (sculptor).

Students are required to submit short essays in response to bi-weekly assignments. Attendance is required on in-class field trips to energy efficient homes and sites in Urbana-Champaign and to a full day excursion to the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois.