

From Grid to Plastic: Architecture as Isolation Machine

Architecture is often described as a response: to economics, to politics, to climate. Over the course of this semester, however, I began to understand architecture less as reaction and more as instrument—one of the means through which those conditions are produced, stabilized, and normalized. Capitalism, in this sense, cannot be reduced to an economic system alone. It operates as a spatial, material, and behavioral logic that organizes land, buildings, infrastructures, and everyday life. Its presence is not limited to moments where money changes hands. It appears quietly, embedded in design decisions that claim neutrality: grids, plots, borders, ownership structures, and materials. Even where no immediate economic outcome is visible, these systems continue to shape how space is divided, accessed, and inhabited.

The grid offers a revealing starting point. By dividing land into abstract, repeatable units, it privileges legibility, control, and exchange over ecological specificity. Lakes, forests, and terrain are subordinated to straight lines that simplify ownership and governance. The grid is therefore not only a technical solution, but a worldview. It trains us to see land as commodity, space as resource, and separation as normal. Architecture participates in this worldview whenever enclosure, privatization, and isolation are treated as default solutions rather than as choices that carry political and ecological weight. Capitalism, in this sense, often begins not with money, but with a line.

Once I began to see design as carrying ideology at this foundational level, it became impossible to treat architecture as neutral. This realization connects directly to one of the course's most unsettling propositions: design is reciprocal. As Escobar (2018) argues, we design our world, and our world designs us back. Architectural tools, materials, and spatial arrangements do not simply serve human needs; they train behavior, shape values, and structure expectation. Design is not only something we use—it is something that slowly uses us. Surveillance architectures, comfort-driven interiors, data infrastructures, and automated design tools all cultivate particular forms of subjectivity, often encouraging self-regulation, dependence, and distance from consequence (Foucault, 1977;

Wallenstein, 2009). Not every building is a prison, but many borrow its logic: organize visibility, normalize behavior, make control feel natural.

The Comfortocene, as Barber (2019) describes it, makes this mechanism especially visible. Modern architecture's pursuit of perfectly conditioned interiors has not merely improved comfort; it has taught us that comfort is what progress looks like. The "better life" becomes a sealed interior: stable temperature, stable air, stable surfaces, stable bodies. Yet this stability depends on vast extractive energy systems that remain invisible to those who benefit from them. Iturbe (2019) names this condition carbon modernity—a worldview built on fossil abundance and the illusion of infinite energy. Malterre-Barthes (2025) pushes the argument further, showing how continuing to build within this paradigm is not neutral development but active ecological harm. Comfort thus becomes more than a physical condition; it becomes an ideology of insulation, a way of living without sensing the systems that sustain life.

Faced with ecological crisis, architecture often turns toward sustainability as a corrective. Yet one of the recurring lessons of this course is how easily reformist intentions are absorbed by the systems they seek to change. Designing "green" within a capitalist framework frequently results in green capitalism: ecological responsibility reduced to aesthetic, technological upgrade, or market category, while extractive logic persists beneath the surface (Barber, 2019; Grima, 2021). At this point, the problem is no longer simply what is wrong, but how change is even possible from within such a system. Reform risks stabilizing the machine instead of transforming it.

This tension mirrors broader ways of responding to unhealthy systems. In the literature discussed throughout the course, responses are often framed as revolution, reform, or hybrid strategies: rupture, gradual change from within, or a tactical combination of both. Alongside this political framing, psychology introduces a parallel lens: how human behavior actually changes. From that perspective, transformation often occurs through trauma, systemic restructuring, or empathy. Trauma aligns closely with revolution, where crisis forces new patterns. Systemic restructuring resembles reform, where rules, incentives, and infrastructures slowly retrain everyday life. Empathy, however, does not fit neatly into either category. It operates through relation rather than coercion, changing behavior by expanding responsibility and care beyond

the self. Yet empathy, too, can be captured. Fleming and Ghosn (2024) warn how institutions turn feeling into performance—awareness without accountability, representation without redistribution. In this form, empathy becomes another commodity, consumed quickly and safely, while the structures that produce suffering remain intact.

That same capture does not only occur in narratives or institutions; it is built directly into the materials we live inside. Materiality provides a concrete lens through which these abstract dynamics become tangible. Plastic, in particular, reveals how capitalist logic is embedded in everyday design decisions. Plastic enables cheap abundance, rapid production, and visual luxury—more options, more surfaces, more objects. More importantly, plastic solves problems through isolation. Food is sealed. Pipes are sealed. Floors imitate wood while resisting decay and repair. Objects are enclosed so completely that the world outside cannot touch them. Where earlier building practices required knowledge of materials and other beings—wood choice, insects, moisture, animals, weather—plastic replaces negotiation with enclosure. Instead of learning how to live alongside mice, insects, and decay, design locks them out. Instead of designing within an ecosystem, we design a bubble.

This shift is not merely material; it represents a transformation in architectural intelligence. Relational knowledge—understanding how materials behave in dialogue with other lives—is replaced by universal containment. Plastic becomes a materialization of capitalism itself: efficient, abstract, scalable, and indifferent to consequence. Humans are placed at the center, while ecological relations are externalized or erased. The result is not only environmental damage, but a thinning of empathy. Other beings stop being co-inhabitants and become intrusions. Design becomes a strategy of exclusion.

Against this logic, several thinkers introduced in the course propose alternative orientations. Haraway's (2016) call to "stay with the trouble" and Tsing's (2015) exploration of life in capitalist ruins reject fantasies of purity and total control. They argue instead for entanglement, friction, and interdependence. These worlds are not clean or efficient; they are layered, compromised, and alive. Architecture, viewed through this lens, shifts away from optimization and toward responsibility—less about sealing ourselves off, more about negotiating how we live together.

By the end of the course, I came to understand that the central danger of contemporary architecture is not only extraction, but isolation from consequence. Surveillance separates action from accountability. Comfort separates living from climate. Data infrastructures separate consumption from resource depletion. Plastic separates humans from ecosystems. Even sustainable design can reproduce this separation when it prioritizes performance metrics over structural change. If design shapes who we become, then continuing to design systems that protect us from consequence also shapes us into subjects unable to carry responsibility.

I therefore commit to an architectural practice that refuses isolation as the default condition. Rather than designing spaces and materials that endlessly insulate humans from ecological and social relations, I aim to design architectures that reintroduce consequence, friction, and accountability. At times, this means designing toward discomfort—not as punishment, but as honesty. Discomfort can make climate, labor, resources, and other beings perceptible again, countering the Comfortocene promise that a better life is a sealed interior powered by invisible extraction (Barber, 2019; Iturbe, 2019). This does not mean rejecting comfort, technology, or sustainability outright. It means asking what they normalize, what they hide, and who or what they exclude. If architecture is always world-making, then my practice must train responsibility rather than dependence, and relation rather than enclosure.

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