

ARCH 588/520

Instructor: Penelope Dean

Spring 2022: Wednesdays 10:00–12:45 pm



Paul Pry (aka William Heath), *March of the Intellect*, 1829. Etching with watercolor, 28.6 x 40.4 cm

## Whatever Happened to the Future?

... the future has sunk into a swamp.

Edward Shils, 1967

Usage of the word “future” exploded in architectural discourse after the ozone hole was discovered in 1985, exactly at a moment when culture appeared to lose faith in it. Yet this rhetorical invocation of the future would be founded on entirely new assumptions. If, during the 1960s and ’70s, the future was conceived as a long-range unfolding improved by technological advance (i.e., a time *better* than the

present), by the mid-1980s, in a new era of environmental degradation and crises (financial, humanitarian, etc.), the future was viewed as a precarious place demanding the elimination of risk, adaptive reuse, and reversed obsolescence (i.e., a time *worse* than the present). This shift in attitude—from optimism to pessimism; from long-term speculation to short-term meliorism—represented nothing less than an inversion of the question “what can the future *do for us*?” (where the future is first abstracted to an empty condition and then filled with desires, projections, values, beliefs, etc.) into “*what can we do* for the future?” (where the future is contracted and replaced by an extended present). The idea of the future, to paraphrase Paul Valéry, was no longer what it used to be. Or, as Edward Shils more negatively put it, the future had sunk into a swamp.

Focusing on the period from the late 1960s onwards—i.e., our “post-modern condition”—this seminar will explore the fate of the future *as a concept* through a set of readings and images. Interpreting ideas from a diverse set of disciplines—anthropology, business, science fiction, architecture, and environmental studies—and analyzing contemporary architectural images, we will distill conceptions of the future from north to south, and east to west geographically, and examine non-western viewpoints in counter-point to western ones. Across our travels we will seek answers to three questions: one, in what ways has the future been conceptualized generally? two, what assumptions have driven architectural futures historically? and three, what do contemporary architectural images reveal about the future? Our aim is to dredge the future out of the swamp.