

SUBTROPEDIA



'A prosthetic leg with a Willie Nelson bumper sticker washed ashore on the beach, which meant it was Florida.'
Tim Dorsey

'We don't create, we imitate.'
Leon Krier on 'Fake'

2017-18 : SUBTROPEDIA

UG FOUR explores architectures that embody a character, challenge a stereotype and engage with the public through all the varying media that the contemporary designer has available to them. Our unit is intrigued by contemporary pop culture mediated by new technologies, and how this may be introduced into architectural design methods.

Our unit pursues speculative work that combines new technologies with the traditional tools of architecture. We explore the digital worlds through physical artefacts and vice versa. We make drawings that move and unfold around the observer. We use game engines to make our architecture come to life through interaction. We make models that intentionally break, super intricate hand drawings of robots and buildings that look like faces. Above all the unit promotes design with an awareness of architectural history and convention, precisely so that we can break it.

This year we will explore the study of architectural 'tropes', understood as implied conventions or storytelling devices that act as a shortcut to describe a situation or convey an idea. The trope can mean something pleasantly familiar, but also can also become a banal cliché.

We are interested in places that have built themselves around a fabricated image fuelled by different types of media, subsequently creating their own particular architectural language. This year we will examine architectural tropes by using new technologies to reframe our design projects. We will make virtual sites that challenge our assumptions about real ones. We will make drawings that shift and models that float. We will let people wander round our buildings without ever moving and make architecture that can unfold around the observer.

We will visit Florida, home of Miami, a city revitalised through the hit television show Miami Vice. Here, in the 1980s, popular media reinvented the city as a seductive and dangerous landscape, building the legend of a place that the locals would not have recognised. In the words of the Miami Herald: 'The show's producers cannily recast a hyper-Miami as a principal character in their cops-versus-drug-lords melodrama — a sizzling cool, sexy, multiethnic, multiracial, exciting place, at once gritty and gorgeous — that even locals had trouble recognizing.'

If Miami could be reinvented through a tv programme, then it was no coincidence it was as a part of Florida, the state that constantly deals in twists of fact, fiction and entertainment. It is a Subtropedia.



SUBTROPICAL FLORIDA

This year our projects will be sited in Florida, which we will explore on a road trip visiting Orlando, Cape Canaveral, Sarasota and Miami. Barely anywhere in the world finds itself more defined by tropes and clichés of other cultural forms than the ‘Sunshine State’. It is where the trope flourishes in a subtropical climate.

Florida twists and combines tropes from different worlds. The luxuriant houses, pink suits and loafers of Miami Vice, Scarface or GTA Vice City sit alongside the spatial tropes of advanced science placed across the landscape by NASA, culminating in the huge Vehicle Assembly Building. The clichés of air-conditioned golf resorts and retirement condos built around fake nature meet Sarasota Modern, a brand of modernism built precisely in response to Florida’s unique subtropical climate. And the cultivated environments of Disneyworld reside in the same state as Mar-A-Lago, the fantasyland that serves as Trump’s real ‘Winter White House.’

1. SUBTROPED SPACE (8 weeks)

In reality, there is no one Florida. Its geographical location, twisted laws, and fictionally constructed American Dream have infiltrated history, inspired media, culture and architecture that in turn fuel the image. Florida is a landscape of tropes collected over time. To begin the year, you will delve beneath the surface and reveal the ‘subtropes’ at work beyond the obvious reading of the state.

In P1 we will develop SUBTROPED SPACES, new forms of site that host your architectural designs. You will select a current event, building, film, virtual environment or other cultural phenomena and explore its relation to the current state of Florida. Over the course of the first term this will develop into a project that takes the defining characteristics, symbols and motifs from one of Florida’s many forms and refashions it into a new architectural condition.

Would you seek to compare fictional depictions of Florida to its ‘reality’ and blend them, or transplant the tropes of one area to another? Could fictional depictions of Miami’s landscape of fantasy, crime and leisure reframe Florida’s other cities, or might we experience the world seen through the types of imaging technologies NASA invented? Can you play with the precarious interface between physical and virtual worlds, that seem to be particularly present in Florida’s fantasy lands.

By the end of the term you will have produced a project that explores Florida by designing both an architectural proposition, and the site within which it sits. Your final piece will explore this relationship as a dynamic situation. This might be an interactive drawing, a database or codex of architectural elements as a toolkit, a virtual environment, a physical environment or a physical model that can be manipulated by observers. In Term One, UG FOUR prioritises experimental approaches that develop multimedia architectures through combining advanced technology with craft and culture.

2. SUBTROPICIA Jan-Jun

Entertainment architecture is rife across Florida and to this it owes a large part of its allure. There are many ways we can interpret ‘entertainment’ and the architecture that characterises it. Examples of this could be the fantasy lands of Disney, the space age technologies of NASA that captivated a generation, or the nostalgic neoclassicism of new urban developments such as ‘Celebration’ and condos built around golf complexes. All have entertainment at their heart and all employ borrowed ‘tropes’. We can see them as the many Subtropicias of Florida, where utopian landscapes struggle to escape the tropes they are built upon.

Project 2 we will study the multifaceted character of Florida to create our own new tropes that will define a new architectural language for the Sunshine State that draws from entertainment as a way of attracting people to places.

Your building project will be informed by your research in term one, with the study of tropes defining a unique approach for the design of a public building that will engage with the act of ‘entertainment’ in its design, both through the programme and style you pursue, but also through the media by which the design is developed.



The 4 Approach

This year we will continue design workshops that allow you to pursue multimedia and hybridised approaches to the design of architecture. UG4 collaborates with architectural visualizers, videogame designers, animation artists and modelmakers.

We want you to be able to place your work into the wider context of Miami and America, as well as architecture as a broader historical field. We will encourage you to understand your subject and design process in intimate detail, to delve beneath the surface and be able to critically position your work through the creation of a unique speculative portfolio.

Find more information on brief, approaches and previous student projects at: www.unit-four.net