“Architecture needs an enemy,” declared critic Pier Vittorio Aureli.\(^1\) Indeed, since its formal theorization in the fifteenth century, architecture has always worked against something to produce meaning. Gothic urban fabric, eclecticism, capitalism, and urbanization have all been major architectural adversaries at some moment in history. For Aureli, such antagonistic friction has spurred some of the most provocative and innovative ideas in the field.

The group of discursive projects collectively known as Critical Architecture,\(^2\) for example, sought to undermine the hegemony of entrenched power vectors through subversive spatial strategies and manifestos. Inspired by the reactionary political climate of the late 60s, Critical Architecture’s weapon of choice was direct confrontation with the establishment. Architects such as Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi developed outrageously experimental design ideas to attack dominant preconceptions of the built environment. But after paying dividends for over four decades, the critical impetus seems to have run out of steam.\(^3\)

Architect and scholar Keller Easterling turns to social theory in her proposition to break from the binary logic of resistance characterizing Critical Architecture.\(^4\) Easterling maintains that “the same blunt tools” used by Critical Architecture “are completely inadequate to address perennial problems and contemporary chemistries of power.”\(^5\) She argues that late capitalist\(^6\) modes of governance are much too elusive and sophisticated to engage with symmetrical confrontations. Easterling proposes to use political theorist James C. Scott’s concept of infrapolitics\(^7\) as the flipside to old school criticality. Infrapolitics designates a set of subtler strategies whose purpose is to study and stealthily infiltrate, rather than loudly denounce and assault, the structures of authority it seeks to subvert. An infrapolitical architecture would then refrain from dramatic iconic pronouncements that “stand out,” but rather hijack the spatial language of power and short-circuit it from within.

This studio proposes to use U.S. presidential libraries as a case study in deploying an infrapolitical architectural methodology. Presidential libraries are perhaps the purest expression of modern authority through architecture. Conceived by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 to fulfill a straightforward civic purpose—to house the presidential archives—such buildings quickly ballooned from impartial repositories to monumental shrines. In 1971, for instance, Lyndon B. Johnson constructed a 14-acre campus as his library, and insisted on fitting an exact replica of the Oval Office on the top floor of the main building. Barack Obama’s library, which breaks ground in 2019, will be even larger (19 acres), and include a 235-foot-high museum tower, a two-story event space, an athletic center, a recording studio, a winter garden, and even a sledding hill—but conspicuously absent will be the presidential papers such libraries are meant to house.\(^8\) “America’s pyramids,”\(^9\) as historian Robert Caro once called the libraries, bent the tropes of institutional architecture into increasingly politicized designs.\(^10\) Space became a partisan instrument reinforcing the mythos of presidential power and architects, for the most part, just played along.

This studio will begin by creating a genealogy of presidential libraries through targeted case studies, tracing the typology’s roots to historic structures such as temples and mausoleums, and by analyzing a range of modern monuments, museums, and archives. Special emphasis will be placed on mining the intersection of form, program, and the political forces that shape them in buildings with strong power narratives. Arguing that presidential libraries represent a unique opportunity to test novel design approaches such as infrapolitics, the studio will be open to both retroactive and projective theses. Students may choose to reinvent existing presidential libraries or develop design proposals for upcoming ones. Students may also adopt more speculative agendas, including—but not limited to—positing that the kind of pagan shrines that are now reserved for commanders-in-chief might one day be erected for Hollywood stars, musicians, or athletes. While open to a wide range of formats based on individual student interests, this studio will primarily focus on building projects.
Notes
5. Ibid.