It is established that reusing existing structures is a responsible building approach and many completed projects demonstrate older buildings finding new life through adaptive reuse. When one considers "successful" reuse projects, the architecture that most often comes to mind are turn-of-the-century warehouse buildings and downtown brick mid-rises with overt aesthetic charm and adaptive opportunity. These buildings are loved for their familiar use of materials, high degree of craftsmanship, intriguing detail and, in an urban context, their contribution to a civic identity. This affinity towards pre-WWII buildings combines a good dose of nostalgia with time-tested attitudes of beauty. However, there exist a vast number of underutilized buildings from our more recent past that do not easily evidence these socially acceptable aesthetic qualities and present formidable technical challenges to adaptation. The most notable example of this is the mid-century modernist building. The prototypical elements of modernist structures fall into descriptions of form, space, minimalism, and a rational expression of materials – architectural elements that are not often perceived nor appreciated. The break in stylistic continuity that modernist buildings make from preceding styles has historically alienated people and in many ways continues to do so. Modernist buildings are often portrayed as cold, impersonal, and brutal.

The future of mid-century modernist architecture is a current topic of discussion within the profession that often positions values of intellectualism against values of meaning. A large component of the discussion involves the question of longevity. If a building was never intended to last more than a few decades, can we justify its reuse in the absence of discernible value? Yet, in our current age of sustainable ethic, can new value be imparted to “unimportant” structures to justify their continuity? Needless to say, our abilities as designers to produce compelling architectural transformations that reuse, reinvent and inspire will inevitably determine the future of much of our modernist building fabric.

In this studio we will explore the latent architectural possibilities of the Mid-Century Modernist Building. Students will begin by defining the modernist vocabulary through research, sketch exercises and group discussion and will continue to refine their personal definitions of modernism in the context of their own projects. The core studio effort will involve the complete renovation of a modernist building in downtown Portland incorporating reuse of the existing building in concert with a significant new addition.