Theories of City Form
Fall 2018

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Location
200S Fayerweather

Time
Friday 11 am - 1 pm

“The city is not the manifestation of some iron law
but rather part of changing human culture and aspiration.”
-Kevin Lynch

Theories of City Form is a survey course that examines the myriad forces and factors which directly
govern or indirectly influence the size, shape and nature of cities. The class will cover explicit
theories regarding the form of cities as well as explore many interdisciplinary, critical approaches to
understanding urban outcomes that can loosely be categorized under the broad umbrella of “Urban
Studies.” Grades are based on attendance and participation (40%), a mid-semester project (30%) and a final paper (30%).
Acknowledgments & Participatory Pedagogy

Theories of City Form by its very title, takes a pluralist stance on theory that places it within a broad discourse on cities, one which is as dependent on the comments and contributions of students as it is the writings of published scholars. Starting with a strong foundation inspired by courses developed by acclaimed professors Julian Beinart and Ananya Roy, Theories of City Form was conceived as an open and evolving exercise, where students are encouraged to engage the material by constructively critiquing the structure of the course itself. In addition to the lively discussion and participation of all students in the past two years, the current iteration of this syllabus owes particular acknowledgement to past students Michael (Jong Won) Choi, Julie Pedtke, Leonardo Tamargo Niebla, Britta Ritter-Armour, Mayrah Udvardi, and Luis Sebastián Ugás for their contributions.
Overview

Part 1 - Introductions

9/7  Week 1
   Introduction to Theories of City Form

9/14 Week 2
   Models: What is a City?

9/21 Week 3
   Mechanisms: How do Cities Work?

Part 2 - Modernity / Modernism / Modernization & The City

9/28 Week 4
   Industrialization and Reformism

10/5 Week 5
   Film: “Pruitt-Igoe Myth”

10/12 Week 6
   Control and Anxiety

10/19 Week 7
   Colonial Technocracy

10/26 Week 8
   Decolonizing Modernism
   Assignment Due @ 11:59 pm

Part 3 - Postmodern urbanisms, Complications to the Modernist Ideal

11/2  Week 9
   Heterotopia

11/9  Week 10
   Exclusion and Informality

11/16 Week 11
   New Universalism: Globalization and Climate Change
   Paper Abstract Due @ 11:59 pm

Part 4 - Conclusions

11/23 Thanksgiving Break

11/30 Week 12
   Class Canceled

12/7  Week 13
   Final Reviews No Class

12/14 Week 14
   Rescheduled Debates and Conclusions
   Paper Due @ 11:59 pm
Week 1: 9/7  Introduction to the Theories of City Form

What do we mean when we talk about city form? Why do cities look the way they do? What explains differences in the way different cities look? Is a general theory of city form even possible? How could a critical understanding of the factors which drive urban form influence practitioners in the allied urban professions? This introductory class will include a discussion of the precedents of this class, as well as the backgrounds and expectations of students in the class.

Readings

Week 2: 9/14  Models: What is a City?

Despite the classic materialist argument that the first cities arose after the first Agrarian Revolution with the advent of surplus goods, the archaeological record shows the importance of cosmic considerations in ancient city planning. The materialist counterpart to the supernatural city is the mechanical one, where the city must be created quickly with no specific intended outcome and where the forces driving growth are unstated or unknown. Such cities are guided by a few simple rules to govern continuous urban growth. A priority is placed on convenience, speed, flexibility, legibility, equality and speculation. A third normative model city draws heavily from the formal development of biology during the 18th and 19th centuries. The city as organism is considered to be a singular as self regulating whole. Formulations spoke of homeostatic dynamics in urban systems, excessive growth was considered analogous to cancer and other urban maladies were attributed. Basic units of growth are defined around specific activities, likened to metabolic processes. In the 20th century sociologists began to discuss cities as products of collective imagination, in someways bringing the discourse full circle to it’s ephemeral roots.

Readings
Week 3: 9/21  Mechanisms: How do Cities Work?

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, many urban theorists became less concerned with the derivation of totalizing theories of urban form and began to outline meta-theories which examined specific mechanics in the production of the built environment more abstractly. These mechanics range from purely material dynamics of urban economics to the historical and sociological “production of space” explored by Marxist and other critical modes of critical urban theory. The hierarchical models of structuralist designers stake out a middle ground with their formal propositions, material controls for design of spaces that are imbedded in social processes.

Readings


Week 4: 9/28  Industrialization and Reformism

Reform in the face of worsening living conditions has long been a driver of urban formal thought. This lecture traces the twin history of Industrialization and Reformism from the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in England through to the late 20th century post-industrial United States. Traditional English settlement patterns characterized by communal ownership of productive land and shared responsibility for rural poverty were challenged by the labor demands of the new factory system in Manchester and London and the emergence of a new, politically empowered capital class. Despite some tellings of this history, it was not a gradual evolution but rather a violent political struggle.

Responding to the plight of downcast workers who can no longer count on traditional communitarian social safety nets, new Utopian Socialist urban proposals emerge to counter the rising urban strife.

(continued on the next page)

Readings

- Bauer, Catherine, excerpts from A Citizens Guide to Public Housing, Vassar College Press, 1940, pp. 9-34.
In the first half of the 20th century, Reformism gains becomes a significant force in the public consciousness, buoyed by the increasing awareness of the living conditions of the working class enabled by photography. A more ambitious role for the state in dealing with the plight of the urban poor is formulated in new public housing programs as well as in nascent modernist planning.

Fast forward to the second half of the 20th century and the collapse of the manufacturing employment base combines with racial strife, the flight of the upper and middle classes from cities and decades of violent urban renewal policy to create a new urban crisis. The response to this new challenge was deeply imbedded in the free-market discourse that still governs our politics today, yet was wrapped in much of the same reformist language of past state efforts to intervene in urban process.

**Week 5: 10/5 Film: “Pruitt-Igoe Myth”**

The story of the Wendell O. Pruitt Homes and William Igoe Apartments, known collectively as Pruitt-Igoe, captures much of the drama of last week’s class. Best known for the photos of its demolition—which critics have said heralded alternately the death of mid-century social policy or the death of modernism in architecture and planning—Pruitt-Igoe was one of the largest public housing projects in the country at the time of its construction and was initially considered a great success. How it came to be demolished less than 20 years after it was first occupied encapsulates much of the controversy and dashed hopes of the modernist social project.

**Readings**

From another angle, the history of modern planning is less about benign reformism than a narrative of control and anxiety. The example of Vienna will illustrate the modernist remaking of the city—most notably the conversion of its medieval fortifications into a space of leisure and consumption called the Ringstrasse—and its driving factors: both the “modern, urban subject’s” new relationship to the built environment and the desire of the state to project modernity through built form.

Modernism, as it relates to urban form, gives rise to the notion of professional planners. This new form of expertise is concerned not only with the rationality of the plan itself but also with the development of effective techniques for implementing such plans. Two of the clearest examples of modernist planning early in the Modern Era can be seen in the works of Baron Haussmann in Paris and Ildefons Cerdà in Barcelona. These master-planners set the stage for Robert Moses’s work in New York and the resistance he faces from community interests embodied by Jane Jacobs. The trend towards direct, aggressive action in planning policy is contemporaneous with the development of totalizing, “blueprint planning” of cities in modernist architecture and design circles as encapsulated in CIAM’s seminal Athens Charter and realized in Brasilia, Brazil’s iconic modernist capital.

Readings

Film
- Metropolis (1927), directed by Fritz Lang.

The history of modernism and urban form is intimately intertwined with the history of colonialism. Modernist notions of “best practice” and rationality align perfectly with both the colonial drive to “improve the colonized” as well as the efficiencies demanded by carrying out an Imperial administration. The ideas put forward by vanguard modernism and its allies in the (continued on the next page)
nascent social sciences were, at first, not widely accepted in the Western centers of power, while colonial administrators were much more willing to experiment with these new ideas given that they had little-to-no accountability to their colonized subjects. Thus, colonial cities became the sandbox for modernist explorations. Examples are taken from French colonial exploits in North Africa.


Week 8: 10/26 Decolonizing Modernism, Humanizing Modernity

The history of Modernism is often presented as the development of ideas in the West and their export to the wider world, which is precisely why it fits so neatly with the colonial narrative. But this picture, in its Eurocentric orientation, entirely misses the viewpoint of the non-western subjects and in doing so perpetuates colonial power structures. The concept of “Alternative Modernities” suggests that modernism is always experienced contextually, embedded within specific cultures and histories, making the Western perspective only one among many. This heterogeneous approach expands the breadth of modernist theory, allowing for the development of relevant theories in and for non-western sites, but it also complicates the universality of modernist discourse in ways that will be further explored in subsequent classes. Specific cases of modernist planning from the Soviet and Non-Aligned blocks during the Cold War provide a useful departure from the tired narrative a modernism defined by a universalizing discourse of capitalist ingenuity or corporatist/statist dominance in the West, defined instead by the specifics of their contexts. These developments were happening contemporaneously with an increasing unease among Western modernists about the dehumanizing tactics of contemporary urban practice.

Assignment Due @ 11:59 pm

Readings
Coined by Foucault, the notion of a Heterotopia, broadly defined, refers to spaces that have multiple layers of meaning above and beyond a purely superficial understanding. In the early 1980’s theorists in Los Angeles began to put forward new models of urbanism that explained their hometown in ways the older, modernist Chicago School of Urban Sociology couldn’t. The resulting Los Angeles School of Geography was postmodern in its structuring: cities were understood to be heterotopic rather than having a singular linear notion of social mobility relative to urban growth. Notions of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism complicate the universalist ideas of the modern subject. Infrastructural inventions with modernist roots can lead to unintended, divergent outcomes when overlaid with other issues such as race and class, like what rapper Ice Cube calls “bourgie traffic” on Interstate 405 versus “gangster traffic” on Interstate 110. Heterotopic phenomena can be sinister, like the privatization and militarization of public spaces described in Mike Davis’s seminal City of Quartz, or the endemic sprawl and resulting exurban enclaves often attributed to cities like Los Angeles, while others are more empowering, like the urban experimentation found in contemporary barrios and other equivalent “ethnic suburbs” or “ethnoburbs.”

**Readings**


**Film**

- Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles (1972), directed by Julian Cooper for BBC. [https://vimeo.com/22488225](https://vimeo.com/22488225)
- Crash (2005), directed by Paul Haggis [https://www.amazon.com/Crash](https://www.amazon.com/Crash) (free with prime, $2.99 on other sites.)

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**Week 10: 11/9** **Exclusion and Informality**  

**Paper Abstract Due @ 11:59 pm**

As eluded to in many of last weeks readings, the notion of “Heterotopia” is hardly egalitarian. Readings that cover spaces of exclusion will address the issues of urban marginality and informality. The concept of Splintering Urbanism will address the role of contemporary capitalist logic of privatization in developing these spatial patterns. We will see similar phenomena emerging out of more explicit conflicts such as Johannesburg in the

**Readings**

aftermath of Apartheid and the history of Israeli West Bank Settlements, embedded in Israeli politics, racial and religious anxiety, as well the familiar suburban impulses about security and consumption. The San Diego/Tijuana border illustrates a hybrid of these conditions, where conflict both explicit and implicit plays out across the border region, defining complex networks of interdependencies. Finally we will explore ways to deconstruct these power dynamics through collective action and professional recognition of the potential of informality.


**Film**
- The Informal as Praxis (2012), Teddy Cruz. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0WP2v_PPoM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0WP2v_PPoM)

**Week 11: 11/16 **

**New Universalism: Globalization and Climate Change**

By way of conclusion we will examine the contemporary urban universalism embodied by globalization and climate change. Saskia Sassen’s seminal accounting of the “Global Cities” concept will foreground our discussion, complicated by Jennifer Robinson’s provocation of what it means to be “off the map.” Harvey Molotch’s classic notion of “City as Growth Machine,” underscores the policy and development reality presupposed by global urban competition. In an era of increasing climate change awareness, the possibility and paradoxes of sustainable development as means of sustaining growth is hotly debated, as is the role of global urban leadership in solving environmental problems. We’ll close with a look at the collision of sustainability, marginality and the shrinking cities flip-side of the global cities through the story of the Hantz Woodland’s in Detroit, and how creative approaches to ownership, planning, design and development might begin to untangle some of these issues.

**Readings**

**Film**
- Land Grab (2016), Sean King O’Grady. [https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07FYVPZCZ](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07FYVPZCZ)