Course Syllabus

HISTORIES OF AMERICAN CITIES

Jennifer Gray  Fall 2019  Mondays 11-1  209 Fayerweather

This course surveys urbanism in the United States from the colonial era to the present. During these years, industrialization, urbanization, and mass migrations, all fueled by an expanding market economy, transformed the built environment. We will learn about ambitious urban plans, exceptional architects, and iconic buildings, but also about everyday spaces, such as shopping malls, suburbs, and highways. Questions about race, gender, inequality, and militarism as they relate to urban space will be explored. We will unpack the meaning of terms such as modernism, democracy, and American and consider them in a global context, especially the geopolitical relationship between North and South America. We also will engage topics in critical preservation, such as ecological conservation and curatorial practices. The class will be a mixture of lectures and discussions; walking tours in New York City; a film screening; as well as visits to museums and to special collections at Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, where students will have the opportunity to engage with original drawings, rare books, and archival materials relevant to the course.

Course Format

Weekly lectures provide the framework for the course. A portion of some classes will be devoted to discussion of contemporary architectural issues that relate to material in the course. The slides for each lecture will be made available on the course website. There will also be two visits to Avery Drawings & Archives, a museum visit and gallery talk, a film screening, and a walking tour of Lower Manhattan, during which we will explore modern and postmodern buildings and public spaces. Students are expected to attend all lectures and site visits and to participate in class discussions. Readings will be posted on the course website. There will be three short writing assignments – an exhibition review, one essay that uses archival materials, and one topic chosen by the students – throughout the semester. Details to be discussed the first week of class.

EXHIBITION REVIEW – 25%

DUE OCT 28
ARCHIVAL/FILM – 25%
DUE NOV 18

CHOICE – 25%
DUE DEC 13

CLASS PARTICIPATION – 25%

Office Hours and Contact Information
Prof. Jennifer Gray
Curator of Drawings and Archives
Avery Hall MC 0301
By appointment (jlg2006@columbia.edu)

CLASS SCHEDULE

- Sep 9: Welcome
  Introduction to the course; American exceptionalism and transnational influences; questions of national identity, democracy, and modernism


Further Reading
Sep 16: Colonial Origins and the Emergence of Industrial, Civic, and Commercial Culture

Cities as key to European colonization; authority and its breakdown; L’Enfant’s Plan for Washington; Commissioner’s Plan for New York; urban boosterism; dissemination of the grid, the town square and the great urban park; producing industrial space; the construction of wilderness and national identity; ecotourism and cities


Further Reading


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**Sep 23: New York: from Trinity Church to Occupy Wall Street**

**Walking tours of Lower Manhattan – please sign up on CourseWorks**

Skyscrapers and zoning laws; military urbanism; Ground Zero and target architecture; place annihilation; the politics of public space; terrorism and cities; architecture as social practice; Occupy Wall Street


Further Reading


Sep 30: Social Science and the City Beautiful

*Visit to Drawings & Archives, Avery Library
1893 World’s Fair and the City Beautiful Movement; progressive social politics; impact of the social sciences on urban planning and architectural representation; race, ethnicity, and immigration; civic spaces and national identity; the play movement; the social center movement; public schools; municipal playgrounds; the neighborhood unit


Further Reading


Oct 7 – NO CLASS

Oct 14 – Futurism, Fantasy, and Architecture

Fantasy spaces and leisure activities; “total experience design” in hotels; movie houses and theaters; Radio City and Rockefeller Center; 1933 Century of Progress; 1939 New York World’s Fair; restoration of Colonial Williamsburg; shopping malls and festival marketplaces; brandscapes; analogous urbanisms; Disney urbanism


Margaret Crawford, “The World in a Shopping Mall,” in *Variations on a Theme Park*, pp. TBD.

Christine Boyer, “Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at the South Street Seaport,” in *Variations on a Theme Park*, pp. TBD.

Further Reading


**Oct 21: Technological Sublime: Automobiles, Infrastructure, and Landscape**

*Visit to Drawings & Archives, Avery Library*

Highways and infrastructure; model communities of the New Deal; Robert Moses as urban czar of New York; modernist planning; Tennessee Valley Authority; back-to-the-land movements

Robert Fishman, “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City,” in Urban Utopias of the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier (MIT Press, 1982), pp. TBD.

Further Reading


**Oct 28: Military-Industrial-Architectural Complex: from Total War to Total Living**

1940s-50s; defense industries and garden suburbs; military-industrial complex; 194X; Federal Highway Administration; Federal Housing Authority; suburban tract housing; race and gender politics of postwar domestic environment

**PAPER 1 DUE**


**Further Reading**


**Nov 4: NO CLASS – ELECTION HOLIDAY**

**Nov 11: Urban Renewal, Slum Clearance, and Housing Reform**

Title I and slum clearance; urban renewal; successes and failures of public housing; zoning; “white flight”; defensible spaces; gated communities; New Towns; contemporary responses to low-income housing (e.g. Estudio Cruz,
privatization of affordable housing; demolition and replacement low-rise construction); rural poverty and housing (e.g. Rural Studio, Alabama); housing for homeless and displaced populations (e.g. Mad Hatter project, Atlanta)


Further Reading


Nov 18: Learning from Brasilia and Las Vegas: Modern and Postmodern Urbanism

CIAM planning; international style modernism; global vs. regional expression; structuralism and semiotics; phenomenology; the intellectualization of architecture; historic preservation as avant-garde; site sensitivity; regionalism

**PAPER 2 DUE**


Further Reading


**Nov 25 – The Neoliberal City**

Spatial manifestations of deregulation, privatization, and globalization (e.g. *favelas*, spontaneous communities, gated communities; archipelago urbanism; informal cities; self-build communities; capitalism and the production of space; private property vs. rights to the city; use-value vs. exchange value (real estate speculation); borders and extraterritoriality; tactical urbanisms vs. centralized planning; limitations of tactical urbanisms


Further Reading


**DEC 13 - PAPER 3 DUE**