

**Points Unknown: Cartographic Narratives**  
**GSAPP A4063-1 / Spring 2018**

**Course Description**

Society is increasingly dependent on data and computation, a dependence that often evolves invisibly, without any critical assessment or accountability. In New York City, with its mandate to make data public, students have an opportunity to learn how to question data through journalistic lines of inquiry: What data are made public? What data are kept hidden? Who was involved what data are included and excluded? Who wasn't? What do they say about life in the city? How are neighborhoods rendered in data and what are the consequences of those representations? What undiscovered stories can be found in the data?

The architectural design process is coming to rely increasingly on complex, large, spatial datasets for urban analysis. In spite of architects' training in visual literacy and basic map-making skills, they too frequently treat spatial data as a neutral backdrop into which their designs will be inserted. Literacy with spatial data analysis, mapping and storytelling have yet to become an integral part of the design process. In pairing spatial training with journalistic approaches, this course will serve as the missing "integrator" of data and the real world.

*Points Unknown: Cartographic Narratives* will focus on rethinking how we characterize a place, an important first step for architectural design, traditionally represented by a basic site plan. In this course, students will explore new forms of site analysis. Through pairing the processes of architecture and some of the skills of journalism, this course will explore five sites in the New York City/Hudson Valley Region—from the proposed redesign of Penn Station to the completion of the Third Water Tunnel. Sites were selected for their unique connection to the city, their impact on certain demographic populations, and their environmental impact.

Students will work in groups under the direction of an editor to explore and report on a select site, spending the semester researching and constructing a geospatial narrative. Students will learn how to investigate their identified site and will select a particular issue to address. Students will research the site, conduct interviews, perform exploratory data analysis, and learn various geospatial visualization techniques to produce a comprehensive narrative. Data journalism is not simply journalism with data attached. This course, instead, will get at the core of data journalism—positioning data as a tool for investigation.

The final output will come in the form of a presentation that successfully highlights an identified problem of the site, posits evidence through novel implementations of data, and provides a

comprehensive narrative through geospatial representations. In addition, the research will surface recommendations for site intervention.

A full description of the course as well as links to resources can be found at [pointsunknown.nyc](http://pointsunknown.nyc).

Up-to-date homework assignments and class responses can be found at [blog.pointsunknown.nyc](http://blog.pointsunknown.nyc).

### **Course Faculty**

Grga Basic, *Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation*  
Michael Krisch, *Columbia Journalism School*

### **Course Outline**

Week 1 - Course Introduction, Narrative Cartography Introduction & Site Discussion

Week 2 - Reporting on a New Topic & Interview

Week 3 - Intro to Public Data / FOIA/FOIL

Week 4 - Ways of Knowing Cities (Conference)

Week 5 - Introduction to Spatial Statistics/Data (Guest Lecture from Prof. Mark Hansen)

Week 6 - Intro to Cartographic Narratives

Week 7 - Pitch to Editors

Week 8 - Mapping Techniques I

Week 9 - Mapping Techniques II

Week 10 - Mapping Techniques III

Week 11 - Working Group

Week 12 & 13 - Final Presentations

### **Grading**

This course will have three major types of assignments:

- Weekly Reflections (20%)
- Reporting & Mapping Tasks (25%)
- Final Narrative (35%)

Grading will be defined by the assignments above, as well as classroom attendance and participation (20%).

### **Sites**

Penn Station  
Garbage and Marine Transfer Station  
Third Water Tunnel  
Rikers Island Closure  
NYC Flood Map

### **Editors**

- Tali Woodward, *Director of the MA Program, Columbia Journalism School*
- Samir Patel, *Deputy Editor at Atlas Obscura*
- Marguerite Holloway, *Professor and Director of Science and Environmental Journalism at the Journalism School*
- Michael Krisch, *Deputy Director & Associate Research Scholar, Brown Institute for Media Innovation*
- Nausicaa Renner, *Digital Editor at Columbia Journalism Review, Senior editor at n+1*

### **Weekly Reflections**

Each week, students will submit reading responses and/or updates on their site investigations, including but not limited to interviews conducted, datasets found, and general research. Response prompts will be assigned at the end of each class, and responses must be posted by midnight on the Thursday preceding class to [blog.pointsunknown.nyc](http://blog.pointsunknown.nyc).

### **Final Output**

The final output for the course will come in the form of a presentation that successfully highlights an identified problem of the site, posits evidence through novel implementations of data, and provides a comprehensive narrative through geospatial representations. In addition, the research conducted will surface recommendations for site intervention.