

Transformations of Urban America: Making the Unequal Metropolis, 1945-Today

HIST / URBS1153



Philadelphia's famous urban planner Ed Bacon (center) surveys a model of an urban renewal plan.



Protesting contemporary displacement and gentrification in Chicago.

Instructor:

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Overview

This lecture and project-based course is designed to introduce students to the historical development of modern American cities and their suburbs since World War II. Organized chronologically and thematically, the course is also intended to offer students an introduction to different ways of *knowing* and *experiencing* urban life through projects, readings, documentaries, and lectures organized around particular fields of inquiry on urbanity. These include sociology, ethnography, political science, and, of course, history. Assignments will include a short ethnographic research project, mapping projects, short written assignments, and historical and contemporary digital research projects on urban renewal sites in Philadelphia (or possibly elsewhere). Course topics will include the histories of housing and gentrification; power, democracy, and urban citizenship; education; suburbanization; crime and policing; and the endurance and entrenchment of racial and spatial inequality in the context of the urban renaissance of the 21st century. Finally, this course fulfills the College of Arts & Science's **Society Sector Requirement**.

Society Sector Definition:

This sector focuses on the structure and norms of contemporary human societies, including their psychological and cultural dimensions. Courses in this sector use many analytical techniques that have been developed to study contemporary society, with its complex relations between individuals and larger forms of mass participation. Some Society courses are largely devoted to the analysis of aggregate forms of human behavior (encounters, markets, civil society, nations, supranational organizations, and so on), while others may focus on the relations between individuals and their various societies. While historical materials may be studied, the primary objective of Society courses is to enable students to develop concepts and principles, test theories and perfect tools that can be used to interpret, explain and evaluate the behavior of human beings in contemporary societies. This objective will be realized through the specific content of the various courses, but the emphasis in each course should be on developing in students a general capacity for social analysis and understanding.

Course Details

This course is roughly divided between lectures (marked “L” on the syllabus) and what I call workshops (marked “WS” on the syllabus). The workshops will take a variety of forms: we will explore various digital-historical applications, databases, and mapping platforms; we will view and discuss various forms of media; we will read and discuss primary source documents; and we will work on projects in a collaborative and informal setting. On WS days, *please bring your laptop or tablet, if you have one*.

There is no “textbook” for this course. Instead, my lectures, augmented by our readings (roughly 40-125 pages / week), are designed to provide the primary intellectual and historical framework. The mid-term assessment will draw not only upon our readings, but also upon lecture material: our key concepts, IDs, and “big questions,” which will be identified at the start of each lecture. Throughout the semester, students will have a variety of different ways to engage with and hone

mastery of key concepts. These will include short written responses, longer form projects, and in-class discussion. In addition to gauging your facility with the material in real time, these exercises will prepare you for the format of the mid-term and projects, which, in differing degrees, will ask you to consider the historical development of American cities writ large and small.

Communication

I am available during office hours and by appointment. Email is the best way to get in touch with me. *Please do not contact me via Canvas messenger; the interface is cumbersome and its alerts are spotty.* I will make my best effort to respond to your emails in a timely fashion (i.e., within a few hours), but I may not reply as promptly to emails received after 5:00pm or on weekends. If your note is urgent, please indicate that in the subject line!

Attendance Policy

I allow two (2) unexcused absences, no questions asked. That said, I encourage students to be in touch with me and / or Nicole and Andres (the keepers of our attendance) to let us know what's going on, particularly if you need to miss for an excusable reason: illness, family situations, etc. After two unexcused absences, however, ***each subsequent unexcused absence will result in a five-point reduction of your attendance and participation grade (10% of the overall course assessment).***

Mandatory Book to Purchase

Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996 [2014]).

Using Canvas

There are four main ways that we will use Canvas:

1. **Course Announcements** will get pushed to your email and will be archived under the “Announcements” tab
2. **“FILES”**: this tab is where all readings (in the “readings” file) are posted other than those from Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* or those linked and marked “Online” on our syllabus (in these cases, just click the link and read on your browser). All of our assignment guides will also be posted here, too, in the “Assignment Guides and Other Course Material” file.
3. **“ASSIGNMENTS” & “SYLLABUS”**: each of these tabs catalogues the various assignments and enables you to submit your work. Both include all submission links for written assignments and projects, but the Syllabus tab also includes a linked and pasted version of this syllabus and all of our daily readings, etc., listed below.

4. **RESPONDUS:** We will use this app (despite its rather silly name) to complete in-class writing assignments on designated workshop days.

Using this syllabus

A syllabus is both a statement of course goals and policies and a list of all assignments. Under each date below, you will find a set of readings, movies and documentaries to view, and other assignments, due dates, and materials, all of which are to be completed by the date of their assignment. **I strongly urge you to read each day's assignments *in the order they are listed*.** For example, on September 18, the Hartman reading is very much a response – a clap back, even – to the DuBois piece, and reading them in order is essential to follow the arguments and debates between our texts, which play out not just on a given day but over the course of the semester. All readings other than the mandatory Sugrue book are available on Canvas or, as noted on the syllabus, **online** and linked.

Except where noted, all movies for this class will be available via the Penn Video Network under the [Academic Support Movies](#) tab. N.b., the PVN is meant to be used on campus, though students have, in the past, been able to access movies off campus at times. I trust that you young people have many and sundry ways of finding and viewing content, but please be in touch if you're having trouble accessing or finding a film.

A note on technology in the classroom . . . and elsewhere

Technology is great for lots of things, but our cell phones and apps have robbed us of the ability to do sustained, deep thinking. **One recent study found that college students switch tasks once every sixty-five seconds, and that the median amount of time they spend focused on any single task was just nineteen seconds.**¹

I strongly urge you to simply turn off your cell phone or put it on airplane mode while in class. Not to vibrate. Not to silent. Do yourself the favor of focus. While we will not be actively surveilling you guys, we reserve the right to embargo any devices that become a distraction during class.

Taking notes on your laptop or tablet is a devil's bargain. While I would prefer that you take notes by hand – studies show doing so dramatically increases focus not only for you but for your neighbors who might be tempted to see what you're doing on your computer – I recognize that this is not always possible. If, like me, you have trouble remaining on task when the internet beckons, I recommend using website blocking software such as Freedom or simply turning off your wifi access while we're in class. I also strongly recommend doing so when you are reading at home or in the library. In order to maximize my focus, I often leave my computer and phone in another room.

¹ Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention and How to Think Deeply Again* (New York: Crown Books, 2022), 10.

It's also important to remember that Penn is committed to equal access to education and if you have a compelling reason or a confirmed need, please use your laptop for notes. If you have a disability or need accommodation, i.e., a note taker, please consult the Office of Student Disabilities Services, and we can ensure that you receive the proper support and accommodation. Their website is: <https://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc/sds/>

A note on class environment

I urge and invite diversity of opinion and strive to cultivate an environment in class and out in which students feel encouraged to freely express themselves. Higher education is meant to foster sustained, critical engagement with a broad range of material and perspectives but also, and most especially, to stimulate critical self-assessment and intellectual and personal growth. Civility, respect, tolerance, patience, and good humor are cornerstones of a thriving academic community and are essential to fostering meaningful personal introspection. These values are especially important as we wade into contentious issues of the last half century, many of which continue to define and divide the American body politic and many of which have their roots in urban space, urban politics, and urban inequality or perceptions about these spaces. This class is an opportunity to practice and model the best civil discourse that our broader national political conversation all too often lacks.

A note on academic honesty & integrity

Students' work must be completed in line with Penn's Code of Academic Integrity, <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>

The library has pulled together a useful guide to avoiding plagiarism, here: <https://guides.library.upenn.edu/citationpractices/plagiarism>

I am always happy to discuss these matters in order to help you avoid costly mistakes. Violations – cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, facilitating others' dishonesty, etc. – will almost certainly result in failing the course.

A note on our ChatGPT and AI use policy

Some have described the proliferating AI platforms as nothing more than a sort of calculator – a tool used in pursuit of higher order thinking. The problem with this analogy is that calculators don't make up answers. The various AI platforms, however, do—a reality that developers euphemistically dub "[hallucinations](#)." There have been numerous cases of AI platforms even fabricating or inventing citations – e.g., references to scholarly or journalistic articles that *do not exist in the real world*. Some experts worry that this will only get worse as more AI-generated content saturates the web – meaning the services will be using more and more AI-generated content as their source base, hallucinations and all. This may become a problem that is simply [not fixable](#).

I recognize the utility and convenience of these tools. But I want to offer a strong note of caution: they are risky in the ways noted above, they rob you of the very thing you came to college to do

(to learn how to think for yourself!), and they run the risk of violating our standards of academic honesty and integrity.

My AI policy for this semester, then, is this: **if you employ an AI platform in the production of an assignment (to search for sources, get the gist of the history of a given topic, get a summary of a reading, to generate an outline, whatever), you are required to write a short paragraph describing in clear terms how you used it and which platform(s) you used.** If we discover that you have used a platform without writing this statement, you will receive a failing grade for that project. If we discover that you have used a platform to substantially write and generate the arguments for a project, such use is in violation of norms of academic integrity and will be treated as such.

I am also, however, a [realist](#) and recognize just how ubiquitous these platforms have become as well as the fact that they are treated very differently in different fields. I have neither the time nor the inclination to chase down misuse of these fast-evolving technologies, and the bottom line is that humanities courses are designed to challenge you to develop your critical thinking, writing, and reading skills. Depending upon AI platforms will limit your growth in these areas.

A note on in-class writings

This semester, I am trying something new. Rather than have you write a couple of five-page take-home essays, you will write a series of shorter responses to prompts at the start of many of our workshops. These extemporaneous writings will be designed to do a couple of things. First, **the prompts will ask you to respond to or elaborate on themes from the previous night's readings.** Second, **they will encourage you to engage with themes across lectures and other readings.** And third, **they will sometimes be based on a close reading of a new primary source.** In all cases, they will be designed to stimulate class discussion once the writing is completed.

I have marked those WS with writing prompts with an asterisk (*WS). There will be seven of these throughout the semester, and I will drop your lowest grade. I will provide a short rubric with the first prompt on M. 9/11. Finally, you will write these responses in Respondus, a plug-in for Canvas that saves you from using other tabs or windows for the duration of the assignment. These assignments, then, will be opportunities to think and focus and write and will depend upon a foundation of close, focused reading.

Outline of Assessments

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|--|-------|
| West Philadelphia observation & SocialExplorer project | (15%) |
| Workshop in-class writing (lowest grade dropped) | (20%) |
| Attendance & participation | (10%) |
| Midterm exam | (20%) |

Urban Renewal Project

(35%)

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

Wed., Aug. 30 **Introductory Lecture**

Mon., Sep. 4 **NO CLASS MEETING / LABOR DAY**

Unit 1: Approaches to the City

Wed., Sep. 6 **L: Penetration: West Philadelphia, University City, Black Bottom, and the Making of the Modern Metropolis**

Margaret O'Mara, "Building 'Brainsville': The University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia," *Cities of Knowledge*, 142-181

Davarian L. Baldwin, "When Universities Swallow Cities," *The Chronicle Review*, July 30, 2017

Taylor Allen, "[As building boom continues in West Philly, Black Bottom Tribe fights for a sign of the community they lost](#)," *Plan Philly*, August 9, 2021

Mon., Sep. 11 ***WS: Discussion: Jacobs, reading like a historian, and positionality / West Philly Projects assigned**

Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 5-96

Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "The Trials of Alice Goffman," *New York Times Magazine*, January 12, 2016

Wed., Sep. 13 **Maproom 1.0** (Meet in Van Pelt's Class of 1979 Interactive Learning Porch on first floor)

Mon., Sep. 18 **L: Histories of urban sociology, ethnography, and real estate**

W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 1-9, 58-65, 97-111, 126-146, & 322-358

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 3-10 and 81-120

Wed., Sep. 20 ***WS: Gentrification Discussion and introduction to Social Explorer**

Before class, view: *Do the Right Thing* (1989) via Penn Video Network
**n.b., this film depicts police violence

Lance Freeman, *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up*, ch. 3

Mon., Sep. 25

Maproom 2.0

Jake Blumgart, "[West Philadelphia](#)," *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* ([online](#))

Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise*, ix-6 and chapter 6 ("The Black Male in Public"); **n.b.**, Anderson was on the faculty at Penn when he wrote this, and "Village-Norhton" was his anonymized name for West Philly-U-City-Powelton, the subject of *Streetwise*

Wed., Sep. 27

**NO CLASS MEETING:
WEST PHILLY PROJECTS DUE BY CLASS TIME**

Unit 2: Making the Unequal City

Mon., Oct. 2

L: The Politics of Redlining and Suburbanization

Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Introduction, chs 1 & 2

Wed., Oct. 4

***WS: HOLC Neighborhood Redlining (bring laptops to class, and I encourage you to preview our workshop material at [Mapping Inequality](#))**

***View: [Crisis in Levittown](#) (online; ~30 minute version)

Norris Vitcek, "Confessions of a Block-Buster," *Saturday Evening Post* (1962)

Kevin Kruse, "The Politics of Race and Public Space: Desegregation, Privatization, and the Tax Revolt in Atlanta," *Journal of Urban History* (2005)

Debra Kamin, "A Professor Who Studies Housing Discrimination Says It Happened to Him," *New York Times*, August 18, 2022 ([online](#))

Mon., Oct. 9

L: Urban Renewal / Public Housing Crisis

Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, chs. 3 and 5 (chapter 4 is not required but is recommended)

Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality*, skim introduction and read ch. 4, “Shelter”

Wed., Oct. 11

***WS: Urban Renewal Discussion & Final Projects Assigned**

***View: *Pruitt Igoe Myth* (via Penn Video Network)

Rhonda L. Williams, “To Challenge the Status Quo by Any Means Necessary” in *The War on Poverty: A Grassroots History*

Andrew Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America*, ch. 4, “Building the Urban Crisis”

Mon., Oct. 16

L: Making Cities for Suburbs

Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, ch. 5, “Residence: Inequality in Mass Suburbia,” and ch. 6, “Commerce: Reconfiguring Community Marketplaces”

Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, ch. 7

Tue. Oct. 17

*****Urban Studies Annual Lecture*****

(Location and Time TBA)

The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs

Matthew Lassiter, University of Michigan

Wed., Oct. 18

L: The Urban Crisis

Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, chs. 8, 9 and conclusion

Mon., Oct. 23

Midterm Exam (in class)

Wed., Oct. 25

NO CLASS

*****Final Project Proposals due F. Oct. 27 via Canvas*****

Mon., Oct. 30

L: Benign Neglect? Cities in the 1970s

Kim Phillips-Fein, “The New York City Fiscal Crisis and the Idea of the State,” in Sven Beckert and Christine Desan, eds., *American Capitalism: New Histories* (2018)

Timothy Lombardo, “He’s One of Us,” in *Blue Collar Conservatism* (ch. 5)

Wed., Nov. 1

***WS: “Underclass” Discussion and Project Workshop**

Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, ch. 5

Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough*, chs. 3 & 4

“The Underclass,” *Time*, August 1977

Mon., Nov. 6

L: Reagan’s Cities: Sprawl, Devolution, Privatization, and Silver Bullet Development in the 1980s

Mike Davis, “Fortress Los Angeles and the Militarization of Urban Space”

Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams*, chs. 8 and 9

Unit 3: Power, Politics & Policing in the Unequal City

Wed., Nov. 8

L: The War on Crime & Criminalizing Communities of Color

Toussaint Losier, “The Public Does Not Believe the Police Can Police Themselves,” *Journal of Urban History* (2020)

Mason B. Williams, “How the Rockefeller Drug Laws Hit the Street,” *Modern American History* (2021)

Mon., Nov. 13

WS: Research Methods, StoryMaps, and Displacement Discussion

Wed., Nov. 15

***WS and Short Lecture: Punitive Policing and Carceral Communities**

***View: *Let it Fall*

Joe Soss and Vesla Weaver, “Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race-Class Subjugated Communities,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (2017)

- Mon., Nov. 20 **L: Immigration, Queer Spaces, and Alternative Forms of Urban Power**
- Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City*, chs. 10 & 11
- Tamar W. Carroll, “Turn Anger Fear, Grief into Action,” in *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism*
- Wed., Nov. 22 **NO CLASS MEETING (FRIDAY SCHEDULE)**
- Mon., Nov. 27 **L: Education, Resegregation, and Urban & Suburban Schools in the 21st Century**
- Kim Phillips-Fein and Esther Cyna, “Harlem Schools in the Fiscal Crisis”
- Ansley Erickson, “Schools in U.S. Cities,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 2018
- Lisa Haver and Deborah Grill, “[Should the rich rule the schools in Philadelphia and beyond?](#)” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 20, 2018 (**online**)
- Jake Blumgart and Ryan Briggs, “[Houses in the Philly suburbs are still in high demand, but developers aren’t building there,](#)” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 8, 2023 (**online**)
- Wed., Nov. 29 ***WS: Final Project Workshop**
- Mon., Dec. 4 **L: Who Governs? The Opportunities and Constraints of Urban Democracy**
- Archon Fung, “Democracy as a Reform Strategy”
- Wed., Dec. 6 **WS: Final Project Workshop**
- Mon., Dec. 11 **L: Unequal Cities in the 21st Century**
- Fri., Dec. 15, 11:59pm Final Urban Renewal Projects due via Canvas
(be sure to hit “publish” on your StoryMap to ensure that any final edits are included prior to submitting your link via the assignments tab)**