

University of Washington  
**Freshman Seminar: THE AMERICAN CITY**  
**Autumn 2009**

Tuesdays 10:30-12:20; October 6, 13, 20, and 27  
Parrington Hall, Room 306

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What forces shaped the development of cities in the United States? What effect do these historical patterns have on urban life today? How have American thinkers, artists, and political leaders imagined and re-imagined the city in different points in our history? What are the contemporary challenges facing the American city? This one-credit seminar will explore these questions and give you an opportunity to join in the debate about the American city's past, present, and future.

We will meet for four two-hour sessions during the first four weeks of the quarter. At our second session we will watch and discuss the classic 1939 documentary, "The City." At our third session, students will meet with Bruce Katz, Vice President of the Brookings Institution in Washington DC and one of the nation's leading thinkers on urban and metropolitan policy. Students are required to attend Mr. Katz's public lecture that evening (Oct 13). Students are expected to complete short assigned readings, contribute discussion questions, attend class and the lecture, and write a short final essay.

### **READINGS**

The required articles for this course are available electronically to registered students. Links are embedded below; UWnet ID is required for access to some of these readings. You also will receive discussion questions for each required reading that will help you interpret and respond to key issues raised by the assignments. Come to class each week having read the articles and completed the assignment listed under that day on the schedule.

### **CLASS SCHEDULE**

#### **October 6: Past Visions of the City**

- Introductory discussion to urban history and the American city
- Viewing of *The City* (1939)
- Discussion of film

#### **NO READING REQUIRED PRIOR TO CLASS**

- In-class handout: Peter Stearns, Why Study History?

#### **October 13: Public Policy and the Modern City**

- Discussion with Bruce J. Katz, Vice President for Metropolitan Policy, The Brookings Institution

#### REQUIRED READING

- Kenneth T. Jackson, "The Federal Subsidy and the Suburban Dream" (1980)
- Bruce J. Katz, "Smart Growth: The Future of the American Metropolis?" (2002)
- Executive Summary, Introduction, and Section III of Alan Berube, *MetroNation: How U.S. Metropolitan Areas Fuel American Prosperity* (2007)
- Discussion questions for 10/13

#### ASSIGNMENT

- After completing the readings and no later than 11PM on Monday 10/12, post a comment of at least 50 words on the class discussion board. Your post may be an answer to one or more of the instructor's discussion questions, or respond to a different element in the reading. In addition, you should post one question that you would like to ask Bruce Katz, our class visitor.

**October 13, 6:30PM: Lecture by Bruce Katz, "The Great Recession: What's Next for our MetroNation"**  
Kane Hall, Room 130

ATTENDANCE REQUIRED

#### **October 20: The Image of the City in Popular Culture**

#### REQUIRED READING

- Josiah Strong, "Perils - The City" (1885)
- Chapters 1 and 2 of Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1901)
- John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956) (excerpt)
- Discussion questions for 10/20

#### ASSIGNMENT

- Choose a work of art (film or television, music, fiction, painting, sculpture, photography) that has the American city or suburb – past, present, or future – as its subject. Consider how it is in dialogue with this week's readings. Post a description and/or link to more information about the work on the class discussion board. Come to class prepared to describe and discuss this work and what it tells you about both about the artist's interpretation of the city and of the image of the metropolis in popular culture.

#### **October 27: Reading the City**

#### REQUIRED READING

- Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) (excerpt)
- Matthew Klingle, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (2008) (excerpt)
- Discussion questions for 10/27

#### ASSIGNMENT

- Cities are made up of many different kinds of "environments," natural and constructed. No later than 11PM on Monday, October 26, post two things on the class discussion board:
  - A comment of at least 50 words on the discussion board that responds to the questions raised by this week's readings.

- A “snapshot” – either a photo or written description – of one piece of your immediate urban environment. Come to class prepared to discuss this and place it in its broader context.

**November 4: Final essay due via email to instructor by 5:00PM**

FINAL ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

The architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable has written that “Cities are containers and generators of our history and culture. We are what we build; stone and steel do not lie.” Urban landscapes themselves can be “texts” onto which assumptions and aspirations about urban life are projected. Architecture, landscape architecture, and infrastructure design not only serve practical purposes but also tell us about the society that produced them. Choose one of the following pieces of the Greater Seattle cityscape (all accessible by public transit):

- Seattle Center
- Olympic Sculpture Park
- Pioneer Square
- The Washington State Arboretum
- Downtown Bellevue

Write a 3-page essay (double-spaced, 12-point font) that describes the form and current function of this landscape, describes the traces and layers of history contained in the landscape, and tells how it relates to the greater metropolitan area. Your research for this paper should include visiting the site to “read” it in person. You also should find out about the history of the site by visiting the UW campus libraries to obtain relevant secondary source materials on local history, and consulting objective journalistic and/or academic sources available online (Wikipedia cannot be the only reference). Visit the library’s History reference page for a one-stop introduction to library resources.