436-01 Urban Ecologies and Economies

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Urban Ecologies and Economies

This course is an historical investigation of the intersections, collisions, and synergies between urban ecologies and urban economies. It is intended to enhance our ecological understanding of the city. It should also stimulate our thinking about the future of the city as a habitat (settlement) and a mode of production (economy). Reflecting the complexity of the city, the course is multidisciplinary. We will be reading work in history, ecology, economics, geography, philosophy, sociology, urban planning and design, and literary theory among other disciplines.

The premise of the course, open to revision, is that both cities and economies are a part of nature. Indeed cities and economies are that part of nature for which we are most responsible. Everything we produce, including cities, is constructed from natural materials (even synthetics like plastic are derived from natural materials). Cities and economies are also dependent on natural processes, particularly hydrologic and nutrient cycles, the reproduction of natural resources, and the recycling of wastes. Our complex urban economies are extensions and elaborations of human crafts with more immediate and obvious connections to nature, particularly agriculture and animal husbandry, forestry and mining. City life seems unnatural only because many of the biophysical systems upon which it depend are consciously-constructed, specifically the urban water supply and sewage disposal systems and street, transit, electrical
and garbage collection systems that import materials and energy and export wastes. But these built systems are biophysical systems nonetheless. They depend upon and tax the natural world, and the various ecosystems, upon which they depend.

A further premise of the course, again open to revision, is that the design of urban settlements and economies is the key to the environmental challenges we face. As the dominant species on earth, we are exceeding the carrying capacity of the planet, drawing down resources and degrading essential ecosystems. Our urban habitats and economies (including urban-oriented agriculture) are at the center of that destruction. Growing populations and high levels of material consumption in metropolitan areas across the globe intensify resource depletion and climate change, increase the pollution of air, water and land, generate increasing amounts of waste, much of it toxic, and accelerate the loss of agricultural land and the destruction of habitat. But as compact and resource-efficient settlements that substitute the pleasures of civic and public life for insatiable consumption, cities might also ease the stresses we place on the environment. Either way, cities will be a crucial factor shaping the biosphere in the foreseeable future.

**Student Learning Outcomes:** Students who read the assignments, participate in the discussions, and complete the assignments in this course will be able to:

1. Explain the role of cities and urban standards of living in environmental degradation.
2. Trace the historical development of environmental challenges and corresponding environmental responses.
3. Compare and assess the contributions that various disciplines (history, ecology, economics, philosophy, geography, etc.) can make in the effort to understand and address environmental degradation.
4. Construct and evaluate arguments for and against treating human beings as part of nature.
5. Examine and analyze the relative effectiveness of market and regulatory mechanisms for reducing environmental degradation.
6. Articulate a vision, making use of words and images, of future urban development that reduces environmental degradation (or, alternatively, makes the case for the maintenance of the status quo).
7. Present their ideas, in verbal and visual forms, in a clear and effective manner.
8. Work effectively in groups where they act as both teachers and learners.

**Assessment:** Grading is on a 1,000 point scale. The paragraphs on the readings (see below) are due before each day’s class and should be posted on the appropriate discussion board on Canvas. All other assignments should be loaded to turnitin.com (links are provided on Canvas) by 11:59PM on the due date. Grading rubrics for all assignments can be found on the Canvas site.
A. **Class attendance and participation.** This includes regularly writing paragraphs on the reading. These paragraphs should be written so as to contribute to the short essays (see B below). This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-5, 7. (200 points)

B. **Four short essays** (750-1000 words, three to four pages each) on the questions framing the four sections of the course. These essays should reflect your understanding of the reading and class discussions. They should be written so as to contribute to the seminar paper (see C below). The due dates for these papers are, respectively, Sept. 28, October 16, November 2, and November 23. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-5, 7. (200 points)

C. **Seminar paper** (4,000 to 5,000 words – roughly 16 to 20 pages) that evaluates the environmental consequences of past and present urban development and articulates a vision of future urban development that reduces environmental degradation (or, alternatively, makes the case for the maintenance of the status quo). This paper should make use of the assigned texts, class discussions, outside reading, as well as your other writing in the course. The final paper is due December 12. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-7. (400 points)

D. **Individual and group presentation of your seminar papers.** We will discuss this more in class but I anticipate the creation of two or three groups who will work together on their papers and the presentation which may include a short film, presentation slides, and/or pamphlet. These presentations will take place in the final two class periods and the final exam period (Wednesday, December 17, 4:00-6:30) Your presentation should include a one-page, two-side handout to distribute and which should also be uploaded to the Canvas site before the day of your presentation. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-7, 8. (200 points)

****Late assignments will be penalized at the discretion of the instructor.

Please note the following policy from page 52 of the Xavier University Catalog (the History department and your instructors take this seriously.

“The pursuit of truth demands high standards of personal honesty. Academic and professional life requires a trust based upon integrity of the written and spoken word. Accordingly, violations of certain standards of ethical behavior will not be tolerated at Xavier University. These include theft, cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized assistance in assignments and tests, unauthorized copying of computer software, the falsification of results and material submitted in reports or admission and registration documents, and the falsification of any academic record including letters of recommendation.”

“All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student’s own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students. However, the direct and unattributed use of another’s efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one’s own.”
“Penalties for violations of this policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an “F” in the course, and expulsion from the University.”


**Texts:**

Lasch, *Plain Style* (recommended writing primer)

***Other readings are on the Canvas site. Please consider using double-sided printing and other measures to reduce waste (including, in some cases, not printing at all – the image-laden writings are probably best in digital form). I love books and will bring many books into class. I encourage you to get your hands on some of the books that the required readings are taken from as well as – especially - those listed under recommended readings. The recommended primary sources (***see explanation below) are intended to get you to consider to what extent the modern environmental movement came out of the post-World War II transformation of the metropolitan regions of the United States. They were all written between 1940 and 1980. Finally, I encourage you to screen the recommended films (one for each section of the course, plus a Chaplin short), which might also be treated as primary documents that illuminate the urban dimensions of modern environmentalism. I also recommend these films as a means of stimulating your own visual creativity for the presentations.

****Primary sources: sources from the time period under examination and which reveal the assumptions, motivations, interests, and actions of historical actors (diaries and correspondence, polemics, political platforms, philosophical treatises, etc.) or provide insight into the character of an historical period or the impact of historical forces (novels, films, material culture from architecture and urban design to consumer goods, photographs, popular music)

****Secondary sources: second-hand accounts and analyses of historical events; useful for background material to aid the primary researcher; also the stuff of historiographic papers where they are treated as primary sources.

The web sites listed below may prove useful in developing your seminar paper.
http://www.scientificamerican.com/cities/

**Schedule of Classes and Reading Assignments:** All readings can be found on the Canvas site. Please take note of the specific pages assigned; in some cases I am not asking you to read the entire pdf. I recommend that you read each class period’s assignments in the order listed.

environmental and economic issues in urban development since 1945) 2. Michael Pollen’s letter to “The Farmer in Chief” (8) 23 pages

***Please note, after the first session, there are two topics and two reading assignments per session:

Part One: Cities, the Biosphere, and Postmodernism: What has been happening in cities and in the biosphere the past half century? Is there a connection between those developments and, if so, does postmodernism help us understand it?


Recommended: Primary source: Paul and Percival Goodman, Communitas / Secondary Source: Register, Ecocities


Recommended: Primary source: Raban, Soft City / Secondary Source: Glaeser, The Triumph of the City; Harvey, The Postmodern Condition


September 17: **Open:** we may just do some catching up and reflecting the second half of class.

**Recommended Film:** *Lady From Shanghai* (1947): There is an easy if superficial hook to our “cities and the biosphere” theme via the crazy guy’s “I want to be as far away from that city and every city when the bombs start dropping” (i.e. fleeing the city for suburbia; nukes and biosphere). As a classic example of film noir, the movie can also be seen as calling attention to the historical moment of urban disinvestment and mass suburbanization. Also consider carefully the passage of the film from the disruption of the trial through the end, including the famous funhouse scene. In the short run, those scenes might be seen as anticipating postmodernism’s critique of rationality and its curiosity about images and virtual reality. The final exchange also raises the issue of “mastery vs. surrender” as competing (ecological?) visions of the human relationship to nature. The scene might also look different by the end of the semester once you know more about panoramas and labyrinths as urban and movie images (and tropes – i.e. conventional sorts of narratives).

**Transition:** By postmodern, I submit, people mean to delineate what has been happening in cities, the biosphere, and human society over the past fifty years. Postmodernism is defined by the increasing geographic and biological reach of capital and the acceleration of its circulation (no wonder the postmodernists tell us our conceptions of time and space are changing). The mobility and agility of capital has required cities to become
entrepreneurial in their orientation, selling themselves as attractive places to both capital and residents. Capital’s reach and energy has also intensified our exploitation of the biosphere. We might turn now to academic postmodernism’s greatest triumph, its discrediting of modernism’s “totalizing meta-narratives” (grand theories which marginalize those people and experiences outside the “norm”). What has our meta-narrative about the human relation to nature been? Are there other possible narratives?

**Part Two: Narratives and their Importance:** Why did narrative evolve? Did it have an ecological purpose? What sort of stories about the human relationship to nature have we told in the industrial era and how have these narratives (and images) shaped our relationship to the environment?


**Recommended:** Primary source: Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (Herbert Gans described this book as “a badly needed urban myth for our now almost urbanized society”) / Secondary Source: Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*; Jacobs, *The Nature of Economies*

September 24: **The Great Divide: “Human Ways” vs. Development** 1. Obituaries for Raymond Williams by E.P. Thompson and Edward Said 2. Williams, *The Country and the City*, 13-22, 142-164, 289-306 (54 pages – hard material, particularly as you are reading excerpts and you won’t know much of the literature Williams is discussing. Read the obituaries first to get a sense of Williams and then keep in mind that he is asking what we mean when we speak about “the country” and “the city” and, especially, what those terms disguise or obscure.)


**Recommended:** Primary source: Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* / Secondary Source: Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: the Suburbanization of the United States*


**Recommended:** Primary source: Sears, *The Biology of the Living Landscape* (I really don’t know this book but I’ll bet it’s worth a look; Sears was an influential and humanistic ecologist;

October 8: **The Machine in the Garden: The Pastoral and Technology as Ecological Ideas**


October 8: **Open**: Again, we can spend the second half of class catching up and reflecting.

**Recommended Film**: *Blade Runner* (1982) I hesitate to recommend this film, particularly due to the loud and violent and long ending, but I believe I’ve acquired a (seemingly) rare copy of the original version (not the so-called “director’s cut) which features the noir-voiceover of Deckert. The film explores the importance of narrative (and memory which is, of course, a crucial component of narrative). What does it mean to be human? Why are stories (and memories) so important to us? Do stories mark the difference between reality and virtual reality? (You might also see *Dark City* (1998) in conjunction with this film.)

**Transition**: Beneath our stories about the country and the city, arcadia and empire, gardens and machines, is the restless working of the market, transforming everything in its path. As the market expanded from a specific place into a placeless and ubiquitous process, it tended to widen the distance between the place of production and the place of consumption. When we no longer knew anything of the joys and pains, and the environmental costs, associated with the things of our daily lives, it became all too easy to avoid responsibility for them. The goods, more abstract symbol than concrete experience, just appeared on the shelves. That doesn’t mean, of course, that the public realm had all the answers or that market mechanisms have no role in our quest for sustainability.

**Part Three: Market Mechanisms and Public Policy**: *What have been the consequences of separating the ecological point of production from the ecological point of consumption? What roles have market mechanisms and public policies played in our environmental difficulties and the efforts to resolve them?*

Recommended: Primary sources: Hayek, The Road to Serfdom; Galbraith, The Affluent Society; Polanyi, The Great Transformation Secondary source (and a key one): Hawkins and Lovins, Natural Capitalism


Recommended: Primary source: Meadows et al., The Limits To Growth; Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America / Secondary Sources: Gandy, Concrete and Clay; Zukin, Landscapes of Power: Detroit to Disneyland

October 22: The Search for the Ultimate Sink or, Affluence and Effluence 1. Tarr, “The Search for the Ultimate Sink” 2. Platt, “Chicago, the Great Lakes, and the Origins of Federal Urban Environmental Policy” 3. Wikipedia article on “Cradle to cradle” (approximately 64 pages but the Platt article is shorter than it appears – pretty straightforward stuff)

Recommended: Primary source: Packard, The Wastemakers / Secondary Source: Melosi, Effluent America and McDonough + Braungart, Cradle to Cradle


Recommended: Primary source: Caro, The Powerbroker / Secondary Source: Kay, Asphalt Nation

October 29: Open: We can catch up and reflect this day and/or I can actually show you some of these film images.

Recommended Film: Chinatown (1974): This film continues the theme of mastery and surrender and centers on an explicitly environmental theme – water resources and urban development. It also continues to explore the
idea of images as shaping and distorting our understanding of reality (does Jake Gittes really understand what he is seeing?). It’s also a narrative with legs, reworking the actual history of water in Los Angeles and also influencing the subsequent history of water in LA (see Erie, Beyond Chinatown). But finally it’s about market ambitions and public responsibilities in the construction of LA’s environment.

Transition: Ecological thinking developed in tandem with the industrial revolution. In some forms, ecological thinking has served as a tool of industry, strengthening human mastery of the nature world. But in other forms, ecological thinking has warned that this apparent mastery is illusory, that everything is connected and nothing, least of all wastes, ever goes away.

Part Four: Ecology’s Civic Aspirations: Why is it that ecological thinking, both professional and popular, always seems to carry civic aspirations, the urge to apply ecological principles to the reconstruction of society? Can ecology’s assertion that “everything is connected” be understood as a response to the separation of production and consumption? Has the failure to treat humans as an integral part of the natural world frustrated ecology’s civic aspirations? Does ecology have anything useful to say about the spatial reorganization of city since 1945?


Recommended: Primary source: Freidan, The Feminine Mystique (it is time someone reads this through an environmentalist lens; see Lasch’s “Civic Culture in the Suburbs” in his Women and the Common Life as a companion piece) / Secondary Source: Clarke, Ellen Swallow: The Woman Who Invented Ecology


Recommended: Primary source: The Whole Earth Catalog / Secondary Source: Brand, Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto

5. Kinkela, “The Ecological Landscapes of Jane Jacobs and Rachel Carson” (58 pages, straight forward)


**Recommended:** Primary source: Meadows, et al., The Limits to Growth / Secondary Sources: Benyus, Biomicry and Hedeen, The Mill Creek


**Recommended:** Primary source: Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities / Secondary Sources: Pellow, Garbage Wars; Sze, Noxious New York


**Recommended:** Primary source: Schumaker, Small is Beautiful / Secondary Source: Newman and Jennings, Cities as Sustainable Ecosystems; Schneider, Forging a More Perfect Union: For a Grand Harmony of Cities, Democracy, Ecology (I cannot vouch for these last two – I’ve been meaning to tackle them but haven’t yet).

**Recommended Film:** I have two here. First Easy Street (1917), a classic Chaplin two-reeler (i.e. 20 minute film) that might help to put all these other “city flicks” in historical perspective. The city played a starring role in early movie culture, from Muybridge’s famous panorama of San Francisco (1878, pre motion pictures), through the Edison and Biograph “actualities” (live shots on city streets) in the first years of the century, onto huge, ambitious films like Greed (1924) (a sprawling, ten-hour movie filmed on location in San Francisco), Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927), Metropolis (1927), Man with a Movie Camera (1929). I’m suggesting we need an environmental reading of them. All these films are, whatever else they are,
attempts to give citizens a more complete comprehension of sprawling cities that extend beyond their immediate experience. They offer, in other words, an ecology of the city in the sense of explaining and illustrating how they dynamic cities are spatially organized. The films also reflect a consciousness of the physical expansion and imperial reach of great cities (an early version of “what’s happening in cities and the biosphere). Not surprisingly these films reflect something of an environmental awareness (actualities of garbage dumps and sanitation works, shots of filthy streets, sewers, dead rats, the separation of production and consumption dramatized in Metropolis). Easy Street is particularly interested in what the historian Paul Boyer called “positive environmentalism,” the belief that a cleaner and more orderly environment would serve to right social wrongs and pathologies. The Chaplin short reaches down, as it were, into one neighborhood in one of these expanding metropolises to explore the environmental challenges of the poor and a suggests an appropriate response.

The second film is Hitchcock’s Rear Window (1954), a film made in the midst of the post World War II reorganization of the city that this course began with. Aside from continuing some of the themes of the other films (the confusion of image and reality; panoramas and labyrinths as competing ways of thinking about the city), Rear Window is a fascinating historical document from what might be called the “noir” moment in US urban history (although it is not really a noir). As white, middle-class Americans fled the central cities for the suburbs, noir lovingly photographed those declining cities, calling attention to the momentous decision we were making. And so Hitchcock, as federal bulldozers demolished central city neighborhoods in favor of commuter highways and high rise developments (like the infamous Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis), lovingly recreated the delicate ecology of a big-city neighborhood and celebrated its many attractions.

November 29: Thanksgiving Break

December 3: Presentations

December 10: Presentations