

The Making of Cities

MIT SA+P. Course 4.241 J / 11.330 J. Spring 2025

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Time: Wednesdays 5-8. Room 5-233

Units: 3-3-6 G



Wolfgang Tillmans. Edinburgh Builders. 1987

Course Description

Whether planned or unplanned, guided by theory or by 'organic growth,' making cities is one of the biggest and most consistent of all collective human enterprises. Cities' societal and demographic importance is today immense, driven by a relentless process of urbanization. Our chief interest is in understanding this urban process, by looking to the history of how major cities and urban systems are made, remade, and at points have become 'unmade.'

The class will be structured around **four key debates**: 1) the city and the urban, 2) spatial forms of the political, 3) world systems and urban economies, and 4) environmentalism. We will analyze these topics both cross-historically and cross-geographically, consistently moving between historical and contemporary urban formations. These studies will allow us to interrogate, analyze, and differentiate the links between historic and contemporary urban forms. The class will explore these four questions by examining the various artifacts and mechanisms that make up the urban environment (infrastructures, buildings, plans) and the spatial structures they generate.

Our study of cities builds upon three main theoretical assumptions. The first thesis insists on the singularity of each urban form as a specific way of articulating socio-spatial relations. Every case we will consider represents a particular attempt to explore how humans (and often also non-humans) can live together. Even if we will explore the historical continuities or relations between different city forms, our focus will be on detecting the singularities, the unique contributions that each city represents. Throughout history, city building has been a tremendously imaginative enterprise, characterized by changes and drastic discontinuities in what different social groups considered a city was. Acknowledging that richness is a way of keep imagining what cities can be.

The second is that cities and urban systems can only be properly understood when considered territorially. That is, even if the city and the non-city realms have been historically differentiated in contrasting categories (such as urban/rural, or urban/hinterland), these different realms have always maintained a constant interplay. Cities help articulating broader territorial systems, and in turn their functional, formal, and social conditions result from the regime of relations between the urban and non-urban dimensions characterizing that territory. Treating cities and territories as co-constitutive elements allows us better understanding which types of functions, buildings, and structures, a particular city form contains. It also helps us analyzing the relation between cities and material, energetic, and ecological flows, and the challenges these factors imposed on the persistence of urban systems.

Our final thesis is that learning about cities requires both considering systemic factors (environmental, material, or economic force) but also the consequence of specific decisions and interventions, carried out by agents who contribute to shaping urban space. Cities are the object of actions of (often privileged) social or political groups. They are the realm of intervention of particular domains of knowledge and disciplines. Our analyses will insist on the importance of those agents in order to highlight that every city has been the result of choices, and that these choices both entail and give form to a vision of social relations.

Course Format

Most classes will consist of two parts. The first one will be a lecture examining targeted cities throughout history and across the globe. The lectures will draw attention to the forces that have shaped urban form, providing an historical account integrated together with an analysis of various physical changes that have taken place in the city. As such the lectures aid in establishing a conceptual-analytic framework for how to approach, understand, and make use of information and data that concerns urban form. The second part of the class will be a student-led reading discussion. The goal of the discussion is to better unpack the concepts treated in the lecture, and building bridges between those concepts and some of our contemporary urban questions.

Student participation is a crucial component of the course. Participants in the class will divide themselves in groups. Each of these groups will be responsible for:

- 1) Leading one reading discussion. In addition, students will work individually on a semester-long research project, to be presented in our last class. This research project must focus on a particular, existing urban artifact (a building, an urban area, an infrastructure) in order to illuminate how it was produced, what type of urban condition it enables, and what is its potential value for your own way of thinking about urbanism.

Additionally, every student should actively participate in the reading discussions.

Outside of classroom hours, students should expect to devote time to reading texts, preparing their in-class presentations and their semester long research project, as well as attending the meetings with the TAs to develop the project.

Course Requirements and Grading

The course contains several, interrelated assignments. The intention is that you will build your work sequentially, interrelating your participation in class, with your research, with the dialogue with your peers.

1) Attendance, participation, and leading of reading discussions (total 50%)

On the first day of class, you must bring an image of an urban element, and briefly explain in 2 minutes why it is important to you.

- **As an individual**, you are expected to come to every class with thoughtful questions and well-reasoned arguments based upon the assigned readings, and to participate fully in the discussion. Every Tuesday before class, you must upload to canvas:
 - 1) a key question you'd like to address in the conversation,
 - 2) paragraph from each text that you find important to discuss in relation to your question.
- **As a member of a group**, you are expected to present the readings assigned to your group, structuring and leading the conversations about them. This last conversation must be prepared with the class TAs.

In the class we all learn through mutual dialogue. As such, attendance in class is mandatory, and your participation mark will be impacted if you fail to actively participate in class.

Absences to the class should be notified, although we understand that in emergency cases that may not be possible. Please note that more than one unexcused absences, will lower your final grade by one grade (A to A-, C- to C+, f.i). In turn, greater than two absences from class without medical excuse supported by a doctor's note or verifiable personal emergency could result in a failing grade or a NE for the course. Finally, those missing more than 3 classes during the semester will receive a fail or NE. Persistent lateness will also contribute to a lowered grade for participation.

A final note relates to the class no-screen request. While this is hard for all of us in a connected and digital age, it substantially improves the focus and quality of our discussions, and the work that results from them. If you find yourself truly needing to respond to a call or other phone-related emergency, please feel free to do so but leave the classroom quietly.

2) Semester long research project (total 50%)

Every student will develop a semester long research project. In this exercise you need to select an urban artifact (a building, a neighborhood, a street, an infrastructure) that you can approach as a historian. This artifact must have been built, even if it has disappeared since its original construction. Then, your work should illuminate at least three things: 1) how this element was produced and what is its relation to the history of the area where it is located; 2) what are the conditions that this urban element has enabled or enables, 3) why it is important and we should be looking at it today. The final format of the project is a pdf booklet with a 3,000 words text, properly referenced and sourced, plus 6 visualizations of your own making. The instructors will provide an InDesign template for the pdf. The students will present their project the last day of class. The visualizations must be printed independently in a tabloid paper.

The project will be developed sequentially and debated with the instructors during office hours. We will organize your topics thematically so that you can always develop your work in conversation with your peers. The idea is that we will be able to discuss urban topics collaboratively.

The submission sequence is as follows:

W2 Feb 12 Meet Roi to discuss topics on Friday Feb 14.

W3 Feb 19 Discuss projects with TAs.

W4 Feb 26 Presentation. Bring to class 3 reference images. These last are images you find, not images that you produce. Just a part of your personal archive.

Submission 1. Due: March 5 before class.

- Including: 1)title, 2)300 words abstract, 3)three main questions that you want to study, 4)basic bibliography with ten titles (MLA citation), 5) two drawings of your urban artifact, with captions, dimension 22x17 inches, 6)themes of potential next 6 drawings, and 7)the three images you used to present your project, 8)archival images

Present all your documents in the layout we'll share with you. Upload documents as pdfs.

File names: Document: Surname, Name_Your project's title

Drawing 1: Surname, Name_Your project's title_Image 01

- For instance: Salgueiro Barrio, Roi_Karl Marx Hof.

Salgueiro Barrio, Roi_Karl Marx Hof_Image 01

Please follow the same naming criteria in the rest of submissions

March 5 Workshop

W9 April 2 Submission 2: 2 Analytical drawings with captions. Due: Wednesday April 2 before class.

Submit: Two new analytical drawings and revised versions of your previous work.

W12 April 23 Submission 3: 2 Analytical drawings with captions . Due: Wednesday April 23 before class.

Submit: Two new analytical drawings and revised versions of your previous work.

W15 May 14 Submission 4: Final. Image 5 Analytical Drawing. Due: Wednesday April 10 before class.

- 3000 words research paper (plus bibliography and notes) and images, formatted according to the exercise template.
- 6 images submitted independently of the paper.

In addition, during class time we will hold two presentations and two/three workshops to discuss the projects. The projects must be also coordinated and discussed with the TAs.

Course Schedule and Reading Assignments

W1 Feb 5 **Class Presentation.**

Presentation of the class contents and structure. Introduction of the teaching team and students. Submit an image to accompany your presentation.

W2 Feb 12 **The origins of cities**

Readings:

- David Graeber and David Wengrow, "Imaginary Cities. Eurasia's first urbanites – in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, Ukraine, and China – and how they built cities without kings," in *The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 276-328.
- Lewis Mumford, "The Crystallization of the City," in *The City in History. Its Origins, Transformations, and its Prospects* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World Inc, 1961), 29-54.
- Bernardo Secchi, "A New Urban Question 3: When, Why and How Some Fundamental Metaphors Were Used," in *Metaphors in Architecture and Urbanism* vol. 19 (2014): 123–32,
- Achille C Varzi, "What is a City?," *Topoi* 40 (2021): 399-408.

W3 Feb 19 **Part 1. Lecture: Metropolitanization and urban science. 19th century Barcelona.**

Part 2. Student presentation of readings and discussion.

Readings:

- Christine Boyer, "The City as a Machine.," in *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983)
- Constantinos Doxiadis, "Anthropocosmos Model," *Ekistics* 72 (2005): 430-435.

- Ross Exo Adams, "Natura Urbans, Natura Urbanata: Ecological Urbanism, Circulation, and the Immunization of Nature," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014): 12-29.
- Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, "Planning as a Historical Project," in *Against The Commons: A Radical History Of Urban Planning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 1-30.

W4 Feb 26 Part 1. Guest Lecture: Angelo Bucci
Part 2. Student presentations of research topics.

W5 March 5 Workshop

W6 March 12 Part 1. Lecture: Polis and demos. The autonomous Greek city.
Part 2. Student presentation of readings and discussion.

Readings:

- Aristotle, *Politics*: Book 7, chapters 4 to 7
- H.D.F. Kitto, "The Polis," in *Urban Politics*, Jonathan S. Davies and David L. Imbroscio ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 1-12.
- Ellen Meiksins Wood, "The Polis and the Peasant Citizen," in *Peasant-Citizen and Slave. The Foundations of Athenian Democracy* (London: Verso, 1988), 101-125.
- Richard Sennet, "The Spaces of Democracy," in *Democracy and Urban Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024)
- Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 94-114.

W7 March 19 Part 1. Lecture: Urbs, civitas, empire. Roman urbanism.
Part 2. Student presentation of readings and discussion.

Readings:

- Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 17-35.
- Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 81-88. Or Leonardo Benevolo, "Roman Urbanism," in *The Origins of Modern Town Planning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971)

- Aldo Rossi, “The Roman Forum,” and “Monuments: Summary of the Critique of Context,” in *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991 [1966])
- Colin Rowe, “Collision City and the Politics of Bricolage,” in *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).
- Massimo Cacciari, “The Myth of the Growing City,” in *Europe and Empire. The Political*.
- Leonardo Benevolo, *The Origins of Modern Town Planning* (1967), Section on Roman Urbanism

W8 March 26 No Class. Spring Break

W9 April 2 Part 1. Lecture: Commerce and utopia. Cities in the Hanseatic League and the Italian Renaissance.

Part 2. Student presentation of readings and discussion.

Readings:

- Tomas More, *Utopia*, excerpts.
- Manuel de Landa “Geological History 1000-1700,” in *A Thousand Years of Non Linear History* (New York: Swerve Editions, 2000), 26-56.
- Aihwa Ong, “Worldling Cities, or the Art of Being Global,” in *Worldling Cities. Asian Experiments in the Art of Being Global*, Ananya Roy and Aihwa Hong, ed. (Chichester, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 1-26.
- Saskia Sassen, on “Medieval City-States and Economic Networks,” in *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008)
- Sheilagh Ogilvie, : “Guilds, Cities, and Trade,” in *Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds, 1000–1800* (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 2011).

W10 April 9 Part 1. Lecture: What is it to “have” a continent? City building and the colonization of America.

Part 2. Student presentation of readings and discussion.

Readings:

- G.A. De Bruijne, “Colonial cities and the post-colonial world,” in Raymond F., Robert Ross, and Gerard J. Telkamp, ed. *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context*. (Dordrecht, NL: M. Nijhoff, 1985).

- Keller Easterling, “Zone,” in *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014), 22-62.
- Eric Sheppard, Helga Leitner, and Anant Maringanti. “Provincializing Global Urbanism: A Manifesto,” *Urban geography* 34.7 (2013): 893–900.
- Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, “Writing the World from an African Metropolis,” *Public Culture* vol.16, no.3 (2004): 347-372.
- Stephan Kipfer, “Mixing It Up: Demolition and Counter-Revolution in Greater Paris,” in *Urban Revolutions: Urbanisation and (Neo-)Colonialism in Transatlantic Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 200-239.

W11 April 16 Part 1. Lecture. Guest lecture. Huma Gupta
Part 2. Presentation of research topics, in groups.

W12 April 23 Workshop 2

W13 April 30 Remote session

Part 1. Lecture. The medicalization of the city. 18th and 19th century Paris.

Part 2. Student presentation of readings and discussion.

Readings:

- Antoine Picon, “Nineteenth-century Urban Cartography and the Scientific Ideal: The Case of Paris,” *Osiris* (2003): 135–149.
- Matthew Gandy, “Rethinking Urban Metabolism: Water, Space, and the Modern City,” *City* 8, no.3 (2004): 363-379.
- Sabine Barles, “The Nitrogen Question. Urbanization, Industrialization, and River Quality in Paris 1830-1939,” *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 5 (2007): 794-812.
- Alvaro Sevilla Buitrago, “Gramsci and Foucault in Central Park: Environmental Hegemonies, Pedagogical Spaces and Integral State Formations,” *Environment and Planning. D, Society & space* 35, no.1 (2017): 165–183.
- Shannon Mattern, “Urban Technologies,” in *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media*. Minneapolis (MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017)
- Michael Batty, “The Unpredictable City,” in *The Computable City: Histories, Technologies, Stories, Predictions* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2024).

W14 May 7 Part 1. Guest Lecture and discussion. Guest: Jack Hanley.
Part 2. Questions on research with TAs.

W15 May 14 Final Colloquium

Land Acknowledgement Statement

We acknowledge Indigenous Peoples as the traditional stewards of the land, and the enduring relationship that exists between them and their traditional territories. The lands which MIT occupies are the traditional unceded territories of the Wampanoag Nation and the Massachusetts Peoples. We acknowledge the painful history of genocide and forced occupation of these territories, as well as the ongoing processes of colonialism and dispossession in which we and our institution are implicated. Beyond the stolen territory which we physically occupy, MIT has long profited from the sale of federal lands granted by the Morrill Act, territories stolen from 82 Tribes including the Greater and Little Osage, Chippewa, and Omaha Peoples. As we honor and respect the many diverse Indigenous people connected to this land from time immemorial, we seek to Indigenize our institution and the field of planning, offer Space, and leave Indigenous peoples in more empowered positions.

Inclusive Class and Classroom

MIT values an inclusive environment. I hope to foster a sense of community in this classroom and consider this classroom to be a place where you will be treated with respect. I welcome individuals of all backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, national origins, gender identities, sexual orientations, religious and political affiliations – and other visible and nonvisible differences. All members of this class are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive environment for every other member of the class. If this standard is not being upheld, please feel free to speak with me.

Special Accommodations

MIT is committed to the principle of equal access. Students who need disability accommodations are encouraged to speak with Disability and Access Services (DAS), prior to or early in the semester so that accommodation requests can be evaluated and addressed in a timely fashion. If you have a disability and are not planning to use accommodations, it is still recommended that you meet with DAS staff to familiarize yourself with their services and resources. Please visit the DAS website for contact information. If you have already been approved for accommodations, class staff are ready to assist with implementation. Please inform Professor Ryan at bdr@mit.edu who will oversee accommodation implementation for this course.

Grading definition

A. Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive knowledge, and a skillful use of concepts and/or materials.

B. Good performance demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.

C. Adequate performance demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems, and adequate preparation for moving on to more advanced work in the field.

D. Minimally acceptable performance demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems, but also demonstrating deficiencies serious enough to make it inadvisable to proceed further in the field without additional work.

F. Failed. This grade also signifies that the student must repeat the subject to receive credit.

NE. No record will appear on the external transcript.

Academic Integrity and Honesty

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently. Plagiarism is a major academic offense. Read: <http://integrity.mit.edu>.

Writing and Communication Resources

The WCC at MIT (Writing and Communication Center) offers *free* one-on-one professional advice from communication experts. The WCC is staffed completely by MIT lecturers. All have advanced degrees. All are experienced college classroom teachers of communication. All are all are published scholars and writers. The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including practicing classroom presentations & conference talks as well as designing slides). No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, helps you see new implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with all English as Second Language issues, from To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to <https://mit.mywconline.com/>. To access the WCC's many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, go to <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/>. Check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours and available appointments.

Student Performance Criteria. NAAB

Realm A: Critical Thinking and Representation

• A1. Communication Skills: Ability to read, write, speak and listen effectively• A2. Design Thinking Skills: Ability to raise clear and precise questions, use abstract ideas to interpret information, consider diverse points of view, reach well-reasoned conclusions, and test alternative outcomes against relevant criteria and standards.• A3. Visual Communication Skills: *Ability to* use appropriate representational media, such as traditional graphic and digital technology skills, to convey essential formal elements at each stage of the programming and design process.• A5. Investigative Skills: *Ability to* gather, assess, record, apply, and comparatively evaluate relevant information within architectural coursework and design processes.

Communication with the instructor

I will reply to your emails promptly, usually within 24-48 hours, excluding weekends. Office hours are by email appointment.

Schedule Summary

Week	Topic	In Class	For Class
W01. 02.05	Class Presentation.	Lecture	
The city & the urban			
W02. 02.12	What is a City? The Origins of Cities.	Lecture Reading Discussion	Read, submit response, prepare discussion. Responsible group: Meet TAs, lead, present. Discuss topic with Roi on Feb 14.
W03. 02.19	What is the Urban? Metropolitanization & Urban Science	Lecture Reading Discussion	Read and prepare discussion with TAs. Responsible group: Meet TAs, lead, present. Meet TAs about project by Feb. 21.
W04. 02.26	Guest lecture: Angelo Bucci. Sao Paolo.	Lecture Presentations	Present your research topic. 1st submission: Bring 3 reference images of your project. 300 words abstract, 3 research questions & 2 Drawings.
W05. 03.05	Mid-term work session	Workshop on research proposals	Bring your document printed
Spatial forms of the political			
W06. 03.12	Polis and Demos. The Autonomous Greek city.	Lecture Presentations	Read and prepare discussion with TAs. Responsible group: Meet TAs, lead, present
W07. 03.19	Urbs, Civitas, Empire. Roman Urbanism.	Lecture Presentations	Read and prepare discussion with TAs. Responsible group: Meet TAs, lead, present
W08. 03.26.	Spring Break		
World-system & empire			
W09. 04.02	Commerce and Utopia. Cities in the Hanseatic League and the Italian Renaissance.	Lecture Reading Discussion	Read, submit response, prepare discussion. Responsible group: Meet TAs, lead, present. Research: 2nd submission. 2 Drawings and 20 titles bibliography. Revise previous drawings and abstract.
W10. 04.09	City Building and the Colonization of America.	Lecture Reading Discussion	Read and prepare discussion with TAs. Responsible group: Meet TAs, lead, present
W11. 04.16	Guest lecture. Huma Gupta. Baghdád.	Lecture Presentation	Present your research topic in groups.
W12. 04.23	End of term work session	Workshop on research proposals	Research: 3rd submission. 2 new drawings and Revise previous 4 drawings.
Environmentalism: Data v. Form			
W13. 04.30	The Medicalization of the City	Lecture Reading Discussion	Read, submit response, prepare discussion. Responsible group: Meet TAs, lead, present.
W14. 05.07	Guest lecture. Jack Hanley	Lecture Meet the TAs	Discuss doubts with TAs.
W15. 05.14	Final Presentation	Final Presentation	Submit final project. Booklet. 6 Printed drawings. Prepare presentation.