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Urban studies prof Elvin Wyly stands in front of an aerial photo of Vancouver taken in 2002.

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Elvin Wyly, man about towns, cities

Ming Wong
Managing Editor, Print

Urban studies and geography prof Elvin Wyly's course site is a maze of information — a mix of quotes he likes, urban geography he finds interesting, movies and songs that catch his attention. It's an online extension of Wyly.

"Well, normal people are on Facebook. For me, I just have that," said Wyly, half-joking.

Wyly is the chair of the urban studies program, an interdisciplinary area of study that deals with the changing landscape, problems and possibilities of city life; this research is especially important at a time in which the majority of the world's population lives in cities. He started teaching at UBC in 2002 and helped restart the urban studies program, which has been around since 1971.

Growing up in a white, middle-class suburb in Washington, D.C., Wyly said cities were problem areas that his parents encouraged him to avoid — so naturally, that's where he wanted to go.

Wyly started out in civil engineering at Penn State, but after the first semester, he realized it wasn't for him. Instead, he dove into a variety of arts courses — history, philosophy, art history — and what stuck was human geography.

"It just dawned on me. The story of being able to analyze and tell a story [about] how places develop in distinctive ways really

connected with me." Or, as he says on his webpage, geography to him is like music that "really reaches you — the stuff that makes you get all Spinal Tap-y as you turn up your amp to 11."

As an urban geographer, Wyly's main research focuses on gentrification, as well as housing-mortgage lending practices in the U.S.

As a teacher, he doesn't shy away from course evaluations. He posts them on his course page, not just because his mean scores are in the high 4.5 range, but because he finds the comments amusing. And they are; one dating from 1999 said Wyly is reminiscent of "Ned Flanders, very perky, makes class interesting."


The comments are largely positive and attest to Wyly's passion for cities. However, this positivity could also be attributed to the way Wyly trusts his students. For instance, he asks all students to write a promise on the first page of their assignments that their work is not plagiarized. "Take credit for your hard work by declaring your honesty and integrity," he writes.

Wyly has reservations about "academic robocops" like Turnitin; for him, they may grade papers and catch plagiarism on the surface, but take away the human aspect of reading through a person's ideas. He tells his students to "write for an audience of humans," not for some Internet program.

Another interactive element in Wyly's teaching is the optional walking tour of Vancouver he leads, which passes through downtown, Chinatown, Olympic Village and more.

"All cities are unique, but Vancouver seems to be particularly distinctive," he said of the mix of past (unceded Coast Salish territory) and present (new buildings and the hi-tech sector) in Vancouver.

As both an academic and a Vancouverite — and in particular, a denizen of the 99 B-Line bus — Wyly sees Vancouver as a challenge.

"This is a problem with academics: we over-analyze everything. Any good academic who's interested in cities [and] who spends time in a rapidly changing city will be constantly on the lookout for remarkable new things,... and Vancouver provides quite a few of those." 

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Wyly has been to many cities, from Halifax to Hong Kong to Delhi to Detroit, but the region he finds most fascinating right now is the start-up-friendly Silicon Valley. "It's creating innovation that percolates around the world," he said. "I'm very much interested in the way that information technology is changing the way people relate to one another."