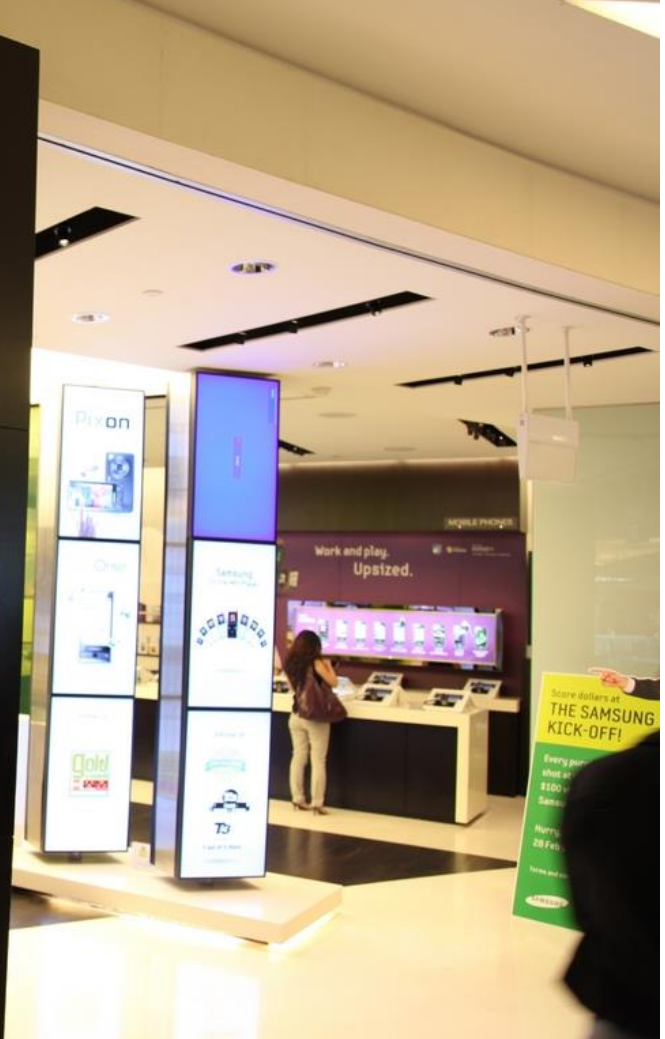


imagine. experience. believe.



Vivo City, Singapore, January 2010 (Elvin Wyly).

Imagine Day

Welcome to UBC! Perhaps this is your first week on campus, or perhaps you've been here for several years. But you've doubtless been told all about Imagine Day, when all undergraduate classes are cancelled for "UBC's comprehensive orientation program for all students," which is announced on the University's website amidst crowds of smiling, laughing students. You worked hard to get into UBC. Imagine Day is the University's way of saying, *you made the right choice; this is the best place for you.* It's just like the way Vancouver presents itself to the world. We want you to like us. This is, after all, a town where it's big news when Vancouver *doesn't* top those rankings of the world's most "livable" cities.¹

Is this *class* the best place for you? I hope so, but only you can decide. Here are three points for you to consider as you make this decision.

1. We're living in an urban world. For the first time in human history, we are living in an urbanized world: a majority of the world's seven billion people live in cities and towns. You and I share the common experience of being part of the first cohort of humans to experience this phenomenon, what the philosopher Henri Lefebvre called "planetary urbanization." For the foreseeable future, almost any issue you can imagine will have an urban dimension. This means it's an especially exciting time to be an urbanist. More and more aspects of human affairs -- and our relations with the natural world and non-human things -- require an understanding of urbanism.

¹ Tiffany Crawford (2012). "Vancouver No Longer Ranked in the Top Ten Most Livable Cities." *Vancouver Sun*, July 4.

2. Cities can be overwhelming, but don't be scared by this. Big cities can overwhelm the senses, and that often applies to large classes at large universities. Don't be scared. Don't panic if you look around the course web page and find long lists of links and lecture notes with many pages. You are not expected to memorize everything! The key points you need to study for the multiple-choice parts of the exams are in the "Lecture Slides" shown on the left-hand side of the Schedule page. For the essay portions of the exams and for the term paper, you should study and explore the readings and other resources in a non-linear, selective fashion -- rather than trying to memorize everything. This is not an exercise in information bulimia, and this is also not the kind of class where you get precise, step-by-step directions on exactly what to do and what to think. *If I can tell you exactly what to do, then I'm preparing you for exactly those kinds of jobs where human beings are rapidly being replaced by computers.* "The Robots are Coming," declares a recent headline in the local newspaper by a journalist who frequently covers matters of culture and religion; the story cites an estimate by University of Oxford researchers that machines might be able to perform half of all U.S. jobs within the next two decades.² Every time I go to one of the chain stores in Vancouver that has installed those 'self check-out' lanes, I see the ghost of a job that once provided me one step on the ladder many years ago. But now automation is working its way higher up the ladder. For several years a small but growing fraction of the news stories you read have been written by algorithms -- "robo-journalists" -- while some U.S. firms are trying to replace psychologists with apps and algorithms.³ In his book *Humans are Underrated*, Geoff Colvin, a longtime editor for *Fortune* magazine documents how "computers will soon be able to do many of the cognitive tasks taught in places like law schools and finance departments."⁴ Instead of discrete instructions on what to do and what to think, we need to focus on how to think and how to feel -- informed human judgment, engaged critical thinking, and creative scholarship that produces new knowledge. This is best done in long seminars with very small classes where everyone has time to get to know one another, and where everyone does the reading but there's no tests, just one long paper at the end. But that's really expensive and schedules are tight, and so that's why we're forced to work together in a rather large class. We'll do our best by blending different kinds of tests, while giving you a lot of freedom in the kind of term paper you wish to write.

3. Cities are based on trust, and so is this class. Cities work best when citizens trust one another. That applies to this class as well. Automation and algorithms are also spreading in education, with artificial-intelligence systems being used to grade student essays -- and to scan student essays for signs of plagiarism. We don't use these algorithmic systems in this class -- Turnitin.com and similar plagiarism-detection systems operate on a "guilty-until-proven" business model, and these cognitive predator drones are useless against the even more dangerous and fraudulent exploitations of the custom write-for-hire cheating industry that operates so aggressively at UBC.⁵ We need to trust one another. When you give us your papers and essays, you can trust that we -- I and our Teaching Assistant -- read your work and think about it carefully. And in turn we need to trust that you will work with integrity and honesty. All written paper submissions *must* include this declaration on the first page: "I, [your name], promise that this is my own work. No part of this work has been plagiarized. This work has not been submitted for academic credit for any other course." Then sign your name.

Welcome to the class! I do hope you'll agree that this is the best place for you. Imagine how much fun we'll have learning about cities, space, and society!

² See Douglas Todd (2015). "Robots are Coming, and Jobs are Going." *Vancouver Sun*, September 5, H5.

³ Steve Lohr (2011). "In Case You Wondered, a Real Human Being Wrote This Column." *New York Times*, September 11, BU3; Elvin Wyly (2015). "Where is an Author?" *City* 19(1), 5-43; and Todd, "Robots," p. H5.

⁴ David Brooks (2015). "The New Romantics in the Computer Age." *New York Times*, September 4, A23.

⁵ If you're interested in learning more about this dangerous threat to the value of your work and the integrity of the credential you're working so hard to earn at UBC, see http://ibis.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly/guidelines.html#why_cheat?