



West End, Vancouver, June 2006 (Elvin Wyly)

Course Introduction

Geography 350, *Introduction to Urban Geography*

September 4, 2012

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Welcome to *Introduction to Urban Geography*. The formal description for this course is concise: “City systems and theories of urban location; internal spatial structure of the city; commercial and industrial location; social areas; neighbourhood and land use change; urban trends and public policy.” In the short time we have today, I’ll offer a very short preview of some of these topics. Contemporary urbanization is making urban geography ever more fascinating, relevant, and important. As the prominent urbanist Ed Soja observes,

“This may be the best of times to be an urban geographer. ... Never before has a critical spatial perspective been so widespread, so focused on cities and urban life, and so generative of new ideas about economics, politics, culture, and social change more generally. Today, no scholar of any stripe can afford not to be, to some degree, an urban geographer.”¹

I’ll begin with a set of brief vignettes, and then we’ll consider some formal definitions of the subfield of urban geography. Then we’ll talk about some of the details of course logistics and

¹ Ed Soja (2011). “Beyond Postmetropolis.” *Urban Geography* 32(4), 451-469, quote from p. 451.

bureaucratic stuff.

“We Need a New Map.”

Not long ago, the third United Nations World Urban Forum brought together hundreds of delegates from around the world to Vancouver. Including all audiences for the related events that went on outside the formal conference hall, the event attracted some 8,000 participants, ranging from the predictable battalions of policy wonks, academics, and political appointees to more surprising attendees:

“As chatter in different languages filled the exhibition halls, voices outside the building were rallying for the key issue of affordable housing.

A 20-year old who gave his name as Smoke and who lives on Vancouver’s streets was among them. But in what might seem as uncharacteristic for a homeless man, he shook hands with a delegate waiting outside before asking permission to record an interview with him using a Sony PD-170 camcorder.

‘What brings you here today?’

‘What do you think of this homeless problem?’

‘Do you have anything to say about welfare rates?’

His subject answered his questions and Smoke filmed it all. For \$14 an hour, he said, ‘I’d much prefer to work with a camera than pick up needles and condoms off the sidewalk’ for Street Youth Job Action.”²

Smoke was filming material for what was described as the world’s first website run by and for street people -- developed by Daniel Cross, a Montreal filmmaker who sought to mobilize the creativity of those who are often cast as invisible subjects of policy debates.³ *Homeless Nation* launched in November, 2005, and the project has received support from Canada’s National Film Board, Concordia University, the Canada Arts Council, and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.⁴ One of the many items posted to *Homeless Nation* came from Sandy Cameron, a Vancouver poet who had also been, at various points, a prospector, a miner, a logger, and a teacher working in various parts of northern Canada, from Labrador to Yukon. Cameron presented his poem, “We Need a New Map,” part of which goes like this:

“We need a new map.
The map we inherited isn’t any good.
The old roads mislead,
 and the landscape keeps changing.
People are confused,

² Matthew Kwong (2006). “Tackling a Crisis in the Streets.” *Globe and Mail*, June 20, S1, S3, quote from p. S1.

³ See <http://www.homelessnation.org>

⁴ Kwong, “Tackling a Crisis,” p. S3.

and drift from place to place ...
The old map tells us to look for gold in the city,
so we go to the city
and find a garbage dump.
We need a new map,
with new roads,
and a new destination ...”⁵

Unfortunately, I never got the chance to meet Sandy Cameron before he died, in October, 2010. For several years now, however, his longtime partner Jean Swanson has helped me learn about Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the politics of poverty in Canadian cities.⁶



Vancouver March for Housing, Hastings and Main, April 2009 (Elvin Wyly). Cities in the wealthy countries of the “Global North” have been transformed by the intense capitalization of property markets and capital investment. Unfortunately, economic growth often makes things unaffordable, and so there is a growing movement in cities across the world that asks, are cities for profit, or for people? The leading force in this movement is a coalition of scholars, and activists known as the “Right to the City.” See <http://www.righttothecity.org/>

⁵ Sandy Cameron (2006). “We Need a New Map.” *Homeless Nation*, available at <http://homelessnation.org/node/2249>. Last accessed September 4, 2007.

⁶ See Jean Swanson (2001). *Poor-Bashing: The Politics of Exclusion*. Toronto: Between the Lines Publishing.

This is one vignette among hundreds or thousands that hint at the precarious balance between optimism and pessimism for cities and urban life. *Homeless Nation* is only the tip of the iceberg of urban social movements devoted to new ways of thinking about, living in, and improving cities; there are many others focusing on the concerns of different groups of urbanites in cities of the wealthy but unaffordable zones of the ‘Global North,’ and in cities of the (generally) impoverished but dynamic, rapidly developing urban regions of the ‘Global South.’ New visions are on offer, and exciting, hopeful new possibilities. But the pessimists will remind us that this is the *third* World Urban Forum. The first was held in Vancouver in 1976, and one of its legacies was the creation of a Centre for Human Settlements at UBC, a research centre that is still part of the School of Community and Regional Planning. The second was held in Istanbul in 1996, and then Vancouver again hosted the event in 2006. Each of these events reflected the major concerns of the day, and much was learned by many. Yet there has been far too little coordinated action on all the careful policy proposals offered at these conferences by urban experts working at universities, and by activists and urban experts working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It has proven exceedingly difficult to alter the ongoing trajectory of urbanization in any fundamental way.

In 2007, the world crossed the fifty-percent-urban threshold. For the first time in human history, a majority of the world’s population lives in cities.

time in human history, a majority of the world’s population lives in cities. Some experts quibble over the details of how large a settlement has to be to qualify as a city, and, to be sure, some of these technical discussions can be quite interesting. But there is no disagreement on the unmistakable broad trend of global urbanization. Europe, the Americas, and most of the Middle East are already highly urbanized, and we are now seeing the rise of hundreds of large cities across China, of scores of multi-million “megacities” all across Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Today, the world’s largest city-region -- the extraordinarily

We must keep trying, however, and thus Sandy Cameron is absolutely right: we need a new map. If we are to make urban life better, we have to understand urban theory. At the same time, we are seeing something of an urbanization of theories across nearly every field of study -- from engineering to economics, from poetry to political science, from statistics to sociology. In 2007, the world crossed the fifty-percent threshold: for the first

The World’s Most Populous Cities, 2010

1. Tokyo-Yokohama, Japan,	36.67 million
2. Delhi, India	22.16
3. Sao Paulo, Brazil	20.26
4. Mumbai (Bombay), India	20.04
5. Mexico City, Mexico	19.46
6. New York-Newark, USA	19.43
7. Shanghai, China	16.58
8. Kolkata (Calcutta), India	15.55
9. Dhaka, Bangladesh	14.65
10. Karachi, Pakistan	13.12

Source: United Nations (2009). *World Urbanisation Prospects, 2009 Revision*. New York: United Nations.

dense agglomeration between Tokyo and Yokohama, Japan -- has almost 37 million residents. At this density, the entire population of Canada (about 33.3 million) could be packed into Tokyo-Yokohama -- with room left over for still another metropolis with the population of Vancouver and the entire Lower Mainland. By 2015, the roster of urban regions with more than twenty million inhabitants will include Tokyo-Yokohama, Mumbai(Bombay), Lagos, Shanghai, Jakarta, and Sao Paulo.⁷ Projections suggest that within fifty years, two thirds of the global population will live in cities.⁸ What this all means is that in almost any domain with an interest in society, or in the relations between people and the physical environment, the questions and priorities are being urbanized: political and economic questions are becoming urban questions; cultural debates are becoming debates about cultural practices in cities; questions about environment and sustainability are becoming questions of how cities can best be designed or re-designed.

Predicting Urban Futures

And what will the world urban future look like? Viewed from the vantage point of current events, it's sometimes hard to see the broad trends amidst all the fast-changing events of the day. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's address to the opening session of the World Urban Forum, for instance, had to deal with the sudden and dramatic national political conversation that erupted after the arrest of 17 suspected terrorists in Toronto shortly before the conference; for Harper, the arrests "reminded us that the potential for hate-fuelled violence in Canada is very real."⁹ But Harper nevertheless defended Canadian diversity and multiculturalism, declaring that "Canada's diversity, properly nurtured, is our greatest strength" and noting that in contrast to the different problems of United States and European cities, "We've largely avoided ghettoization ... and the impoverished, crime-ridden, ethnically polarized no-go zones."¹⁰ These parts of Harper's speech were fairly well-received; but many of the delegates from cities in the Global South were more than a bit puzzled by other key points Harper made -- his announcement of a crackdown on street racers, a bit of new money for cities from the federal goods and services tax (GST), and changes to the formula for the allocation of revenues from the federal gasoline tax. Context matters. Delegates from Global-South cities had to be much more concerned with the basic foundations of urban life -- clean water, food prices, sanitation, and economic strategies to improve the lives of millions living in the slums of megacities.¹¹

It's worth considering the contrasts in some of the other urban visions offered by experts commenting on the World Urban Forum. Hank Dittmar, of the U.K. Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment, suggests that "In 2050, I would hope to see cities that restored a more intimate relationship with the countryside around them both in the use of local materials in building construction and local traditions of architecture,"¹² but of course so many trends in the globalization of property markets and commodity chains seem to be running in the opposite direction. Stephen Graham, a prominent human geographer and coauthor of *The Cybercities*

⁷ Mike Davis (2004). "Planet of Slums." *New Left Review* 26, 5-34.

⁸ British Broadcasting Corporation (2006). "Viewpoints: The Urban World in 2050." Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5094602.stm?ls>

⁹ Quoted in Rock Mickleburgh (2006). "Harper Defends Canadian Diversity." *Globe and Mail*, June 20, A1, A7, quote from p. A1.

¹⁰ Mickleburgh, "Harper Defends," p. A1.

¹¹ Mickleburgh, "Harper Defends," p. A7.

¹² Hank Dittmar, quoted in BBC, "Viewpoints."

Reader who visited UBC's Urban Studies Program in May of 2006, addressed the issue of whether technology would render cities and centralization obsolete. "There was a lot of hype in the last 30 or 40 years somehow implying that the more important your technology and more important your information technology, the less and less that you need to meet face-to-face with people and the less and less you need to rely on the city. ... The evidence seems to go completely against that expectation. ... the evidence indicates that the more economies, social interactions, and cultures rely on advanced technologies, the more cities seem to grow."¹³ And Michael Dear, Professor of Geography at the University of Southern California, portrays a world urban future of extraordinary inequality and polarization:

"One of the effects of global capitalism is the creation of an increasingly polarized world. On the one hand you have what my colleague Mike Davis calls a planet of slums, and on the other hand you have what we call cities of gold. While these terms can apply on a global scale, they can also apply to cities, such as Los Angeles and Mexico City, where there is a lot of slum and a lot of gold. What this polarisation within cities creates is what I call post-modern urbanisation and I think we're going to see a lot more of it by 2050."¹⁴

Defining Urban Geography

This course is an introduction to urban geography. Geography is the study of the physical and human/social environments of the earth, while urban inquiry focuses on the processes and people of cities and towns. Urban geography, then, is the study of relations among people, and between people and their environments, in cities and towns across the world.

Both the "urban" and "geography" have been debated and redefined over the years. The 'urban' is often contested and dynamic, as people struggle to understand what is distinctive and fundamentally urban about the important social, political, economic, and cultural transformations of our time. But there is no doubt that the urban is at the heart of many fields of inquiry. One of the most prominent urban geographers sums up the history this way:

Urban geography is the study of relations among people, and between people and their environments, in cities and towns across the world.

"The study of urban places is central to many social sciences, including geography, because of their importance not only in the distribution of population within countries but also in the organization of economic production, distribution and exchange, in the structuring of social reproduction and cultural life, and in the exercise of political power. Sub-fields of the different social science disciplines were established in the decades after the Second World War to study these separate components,

¹³ Stephen Graham, quoted in BBC, "Viewpoints."

¹⁴ Michael Dear, quoted in BBC, "Viewpoints."

such as urban anthropology, economics, geography, politics, and sociology; later attempts were made to integrate these under the umbrella title of urban studies.”¹⁵

Second, the ‘geography’ part of the phrase brings us into interesting territory. Many people don’t really understand what geography is, other than the elementary-school memorization of countries, capitals, and commodities.¹⁶ Don’t we already know where everything is? But even once we get past the widespread popular misconceptions, it is still difficult to categorize geographers. “Like other aspects of human geography,” Paul Knox and Linda McCarthy write, “urban geography is concerned with ‘local variability within a general context.’ This means that it is concerned with an understanding of both the *distinctiveness* of individual places (in this case, towns and cities) and the *regularities* within and between cities in terms of the spatial relationships between people and their environment.”¹⁷ Environment means both the physical-natural and human-social worlds, of course, reflecting the shared heritage of human and physical geography. In turn, the human-physical duality in the field hints at the sense of ambiguity that you probably detect when you talk with geographers: they’re pretty hard to pigeonhole, not only because some of them study physical phenomena (climate, rivers, mountains, forests) while others focus on human processes (social, economic, political). But they also seem to go about their work in very different ways, using different tools, languages, and styles of communication. As a result, geographers might very well be best described as undisciplined members of an elusive discipline. David Livingstone describes efforts to write a history of the field this way:

“Because the term ‘geography’ means, and has meant, different things to different people in different times and places, there is no agreed-upon consensus on what constitutes the project of writing the history of this enterprise. Moreover, while the story of geography as an independent scholarly discipline is inescapably bound up with the history of the professionalization of academic knowledge since around the middle of the nineteenth century, it is clear that the history of geography as a discourse not only operates without such constraints but also reaches beyond the historical and institutional confines of the modern-day discipline. Of course geography as discourse and discipline are interrelated in

¹⁵ Ron J. Johnston (2000). “Urban.” In R. J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, eds., *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, Fourth Edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 870-872, quote from p. 870.

¹⁶ Don’t get me started. See my discussion of how the late, great Peter Gould dealt with this issue, available at <http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly>

¹⁷ Paul Knox and Linda McCarthy (2005). *Urbanization*. Second Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, p. 2, citing also Ron Johnston (1984). “The World is Our Oyster.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, NS 9(4), 443-459, quote from p. 444. When you track down the full text of Johnston’s article, things get interesting. He begins this way: “The basic thesis of this paper is that the enthusiasms of geographers over the last thirty years, principally though not entirely those of human geographers, have resulted in an unfortunate bias in their work towards the general and away from the unique, leading to a diminishing awareness of the variability that makes up the ‘real world.’ ... We need to redress the balance by focusing more geographical work on the variety of unique situations that comprises our subject matter. ... We must stress both the general and the unique, but should not descend to the singular.” The unfortunate bias of which Johnston spoke in 1984 has, many believe, reversed, such that many human geographers have become too cautious in generalization; but Johnston’s plea to stress *both the general and the unique* remains a widely shared aspiration.

intimate ways -- one might even say that the purpose of a discipline is precisely to 'discipline' discourse."¹⁸

But if geographers seem to be undisciplined and perhaps a little disorganized, we are not alone. Scratch between the surface of almost any field and you'll find quite a bit of ambiguity and anxiety, even at the level of the simple words we use to begin the conversation.

It can be frustrating, or amusing. Crack open your dictionary, and seek out the word "urban" to see where it takes you. There you find it hiding right below *urb* and the French chemist Urbain, Georges (1872-1938), and right above urban enterprise zones, urban guerrilla, and Pope Urban II (c. 1042-1099). From the Latin *urbanus*, of the city, "of, relating to, belonging to, or

Dictionary definitions of urban geography can be confusing, because there are many questions about what "the urban" really means.

characteristic of a city or town or of people living in a city or town."¹⁹ But "city" gives us "an important town," while "town" gives us "a place consisting of an agglomeration of houses, shops and other buildings, bigger than a village but usually smaller than a city," and "village" yields "the houses and other buildings of a community of between about a hundred and a few thousand people."²⁰ Hmm. When you look up the word "redundant," does it say, "see redundant"? Everything seems related to everything else. Each of these entries also goes on to mention issues of community, density, economic activity and trade, and municipal governments granted certain legal rights by higher units of the state. All of these things are important themes in urban geography, while the many different meanings in the dictionary definitions reflect disagreement, for instance, on where to draw

the line between urban, small town, and rural settlements. In a review of recent theoretical debates, the distinguished urbanist Robert Beauregard notes that "if the literature is any indication, theory-building mainly involves interrogating the 'urban.'"²¹

And things get even more delightfully complicated when we consider the many metaphors that have been used -- in academic writing, as well as journalism, literature, poetry, and cinema -- to describe cities and urban life (see next page).

¹⁸ David N. Livingston (2000). "History of Geography." In R. J. Johnston et al., *Dictionary*, 304-308, quote from p. 304.

¹⁹ Lexicon Publications (1990). *The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Lexicon Publications, p. 1082.

²⁰ Lexicon Publications, *The New Webster's*, various entries.

²¹ Robert A. Beauregard (2011). "What Theorists Do." *Urban Geography*, forthcoming, p. 2.

Metaphors Commonly Applied to Cities

Arena	A place of contest between different interest groups
Babel	A cacophony of discordant, non-communicating voices
Babylon	A place of luxury and affluence, but also vice, corruption, and tyranny
Body	A living organism – healthy or sick -- with circulation through various arteries, limbs, bowels and control centers
Bohemia	A place where people defy social conventions
Cesspool/sewer	A dirty insanitary place of physical and moral decay, squalor, and corruption
Circuit/flow	A place in which money, people, goods, services, and ideas continuously circulate
Fabric	A place with many interwoven elements (that can also be tattered and torn)
Forum	A democratic place in which people can give expression to many diverse opinions
Fragments	Diverse, randomly placed and disconnected spaces (as in ‘postmodern’ cities)
Galaxy	A widely dispersed set of diverse elements (as in large, sprawling cities)
Game	A place in which economic and social development is like a lottery, casino game, or Monopoly
Hell	A nightmarish place of punishment
Jerusalem	A potentially Utopian place of salvation
Jungle	A threatening and dangerous place in which the inexperienced and unwary may not survive
Kaleidoscope	A continually changing mixture of images
Labyrinth/maze	A confusing place from which there is no escape
Machine/system	A set of interrelated parts that can be analyzed and controlled
Market/bazaar	A place in which goods and services are exchanged, often exotic, mysterious, and enticing
Melting pot	A creative place in which diverse ethnic groups mix together producing new cultural forms
Mosaic/patchwork	A diverse set of residential areas and land uses with distinct patterns
Network	A conjunction of many overlapping webs of social and economic interaction
Nightmare	A disturbing mix of almost surreal images and experiences
Organism	A living system with a hierarchy of cells
Text	A mixture of landscapes and images that can be ‘read’ like a book for cultural meanings
Theatre	A city of diverse sets and backdrops in which people play out different roles
Theme park	A place of fantasy, spectacle, and excitement
Urban village	A place of many small communities in which people have close personal contact

Source: Paul Knox (2003). *Urban Social Geography*, Fourth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 7.

To help make sense of all these definitions, it is helpful to consider the work of Canadian urban geographers Pierre Filion and Trudy Bunting, who identify seven fundamental properties of cities -- foundational concepts and processes that have defined the meanings and functions of cities in the past and today.²²

1. **Production.** In certain times and places, some cities emerged for political or cultural reasons. Yet the overwhelming imperative of urbanization has always been production: the need to produce goods and services to sustain the livelihoods of people living in dense settlements. The “urban revolution” of Mesopotamia, about 5,500 years ago, involved the development of an agricultural surplus in the fertile river floodplains between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers; cities developed with a specialization of labor -- an agricultural surplus allowed some people to stop farming, and in turn to do other things (like developing ways to organize and keep track of the growing agricultural surplus). Urbanization allowed the production of something new -- in this case, a certain kind of management expertise -- that could not be produced by a society where all members were devoted entirely to farming. After the “industrial revolution,” of course, cities became crucial for the production of manufactured goods. More recently, even as a massive wave of industrialization showcases the production imperative of cities across India and China,

²² See Pierre Filion and Trudy Bunting (2010). “Fundamentals of Cities.” In Trudy Bunting, Pierre Filion, and Ryan Walker, eds. *Canadian Cities in Transition: New Directions in the Twenty-First Century, Fourth Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4-18.

cities in Europe and North America have been re-shaped by de-industrialization. So-called “postindustrial” cities have tried, with varying levels of success, to reposition themselves by producing certain services needed by global companies and investors: banking and finance, research and development, advertising, legal services, and the like.

2. **Proximity.** Cities are defined by the need for certain activities to locate near one another (and the corresponding need for some activities to be separated by larger distances). Proximity matters at multiple scales. In urban history, cities emerged and thrived in those locations that were most favorable in terms of transportation and trade routes, or strategically advantaged for defense and control of territory. Whenever conditions change – when empires rise or fall, when transportation technologies shift – cities find themselves with a new set of proximity considerations. From the perspective of any particular city, history is an ongoing struggle of adaptation and reinvention, of adjustment to ever-changing circumstances of proximity.

Within cities, proximity shapes the daily conditions of life. In preindustrial cities where the main modes of transport were by foot or by animal-drawn cart, all sorts of activities and social groups were forced into close proximity. Density has many virtues, and it is the essence of urbanization; but without sufficient safeguards – especially in public health and public safety – it can also be quite risky. Go to any city that’s more than a century old, and ask the locals to tell you about the Great Fire. You’ll always get a good story, because every great city had a Great Fire. The dates and details obviously vary from place to place. In London, the Great Fire (or at least the greatest among many great fires) was in 1666. In Vancouver, the Great Fire was on June 13, 1886: “In twenty minutes, Vancouver had been wiped off the earth.”²³ But the power of proximity in a continental and global context prevailed: Vancouver’s location as a superior deep-water port on the West coast of the North American section of Britain’s global empire meant that the city had to be rebuilt, and indeed it was: “In twelve hours it was rising again.”²⁴

Changes in transportation technology have dramatically reshaped the meaning of proximity inside cities. Horse-drawn carriages, then railroads and street railways – “streetcars” – allowed a massive re-sorting of different land uses and social groups. For most people living in cities, the most crucial factor of proximity is the daily journey to work. As transportation technologies evolved, and as cities were built and rebuilt to accommodate new kinds of movement – city residents saw new choices and constraints in where to live, where to work, and how to get from home to work and back again each day. From the late nineteenth century up to the present day, this story has mainly involved dispersal and decentralization – with a massive shift from collective forms of movement (public or mass transit) to private, individual mobility (the private automobile). Some parts of some cities have managed to defy this trend. If you live in central Vancouver or anywhere along its dense transit corridors, then you’re living in one of these exceptional places. But the Vancouver *region* also has its share of lower-density suburbs where daily life is impractical for anyone without regular access to a private automobile.

3. **Reproduction.** To survive, cities must be re-produced. This has two related meanings. On the one hand, the city’s population must reproduce itself: people move into a city, others leave,

²³ Alan Marley (1976). “The Great Fire.” In Chuck Davis, ed., *The Vancouver Book*. Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, Ltd., 26-27, quote from p. 27.

²⁴ Marley, “Fire,” p. 27.

some die, and others are born. The factors affecting these aspects of demography -- for instance, the catastrophic plagues and fires that swept across cities in medieval Europe -- have profound consequences for the trajectory of urbanization. The eminent historical urban geographer James Vance puts it eloquently: "The mortality of persons contrasts sharply with the immortality of cities."²⁵ But reproduction also refers to something much broader -- what political economists refer to as "social reproduction." This is the ongoing construction and re-construction of yesterday's *social relations* for today and tomorrow. If today's city has an elite, wealthy powerful elite alongside a vast, poorly-paid working-class population, for example, then the various institutions created by and serving these different groups will tend to "reproduce"

Fundamental Properties of Cities:

1. Production.
2. Proximity.
3. Reproduction.
4. Capitalization.
5. Place.
6. Governance.
7. Environment.

themselves. Aging powerful leaders will look for the 'new generation' to take their place, for example, while today's working-class parents unable to afford anything else will likely send their children to educational institutions that prepare them for jobs in the working class.

4. **Capitalization.** Cities involve people and activities coming together -- in ways that create intensity and density. Concentrating all these things means major investments -- in buildings, factories, roads or railways, and all sorts of other crucial needs. In turn, once density increases in an urban place, being at or near the center of the action becomes very valuable. "Because urban land is scarce, it becomes the object of substantial capital investment so its use can be maximized."²⁶

5. **Place.** Geographers often define 'place' as a portion of space that is invested with human history, practice, and meaning. While cities must produce to survive, individual people only care about them because of the sense of place. It is sometimes hard to pin down exactly what sense of place is, and how it works -- and yet everyone has an intuitive understanding of place, and can describe their feelings about cities and neighborhoods they've experienced.

6. **Governance.** As concentrations of people and wealth, cities require a variety of administrative structures and political processes to make key decisions. When people are brought together into urban settlements, there will be all sorts of disagreements; various kinds of governance structures have been created to deal with these disagreements. Moreover, the governance of urban areas interacts with political processes at different scales: in some national settings, certain large cities have a lot of power; in other cases, cities are subordinated to other levels of political organization, like provinces or states.

7. **Environment.** Today urban production, and the rising consumption needs of middle-class and wealthy urbanites, have enormous consequences for the physical environment. At the origin of cities thousands of years ago, the survival of urban settlements was deeply shaped by the

²⁵ James Vance (1990). *The Continuing City: Urban Morphology in Western Civilization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 4.

²⁶ Filion and Trudi Bunting (2010). "Fundamentals," 10.

possibilities permitted by the physical environment. In the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia, the bounty of river floodplains allowed the production of an agricultural surplus that enabled a growing number of people to survive without engaging in farming themselves; on the edges of vast deserts in North Africa, by contrast, there was no local surplus available, and so cities emerged only where it was possible to coordinate and profit from long-distance trade routes that linked various regions with complementary agricultural goods.

Contemporary discussions of energy use and environmental sustainability have enormous implications for cities. On the one hand, any attempt to control global warming will affect cities -- and will have different impacts on different kinds of cities. On the one hand, re-orienting the ways of life of companies, workers, and consumers across the globe will require a major restructuring of the geography of the human population. One of the most effective ways of reducing the per-person environmental consequences of human life is for people to concentrate in cities. Unfortunately, urbanization is bound up -- in contingent, variable ways -- with economic growth and affluence. And the prevailing consumption patterns of the wealthy are fundamentally unsustainable.

Crossing Boundaries and Asking Questions

If sharp boundaries and organized definitions are the goal, then we're headed for frustration. But once we realize that the boundaries are contested, it can be quite liberating to cross them. The advantage of geography's apparent lack of a "disciplined discourse" is that the field doesn't have a lot of defensive mechanisms -- and so it is quite open to new ways of doing things. In turn, urban geography is particularly receptive to new and fascinating ways of seeing and understanding cities, places, and urban processes. And everything indeed is related to everything else.

But this is a recipe for exploration and discovery, not frustrated resignation of the impossibility of understanding. Indeed, many years ago Waldo Tobler was trying to use then-new computer technologies to map the changing distribution of urban population growth, and at one point he explained the assumptions he was using to build a model by invoking "the first law of geography: everything is related to everything else but near things are more related than distant things."²⁷ "Tobler's First Law" quickly became an influential, if sometimes playful, way for geographers to describe the kinds of questions that they like to ask; it probably ranks as the most famous one-liner about geography.²⁸

Keep these principles in mind -- be cautious about disciplining boundaries, stay open to new ways of seeing things, explore connections between things distant and near, and always remember that the questions you ask are usually more important than the answers you get. In this course, our fundamental task is "to make sense of the ways that towns and cities have

²⁷ Waldo Tobler (1970). "A Computer Movie Simulating Urban Growth in the Detroit Region." *Economic Geography* 46, 234-240.

²⁸ But like all one-liners among academics, this also means that it is the subject of considerable debate. See Daniel Z. Sui (2004). "Tobler's First Law of Geography: A Big Idea for a Small World?" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94(2), 269-277. Sui edited a special forum on Tobler's First Law, with commentaries by Trevor Barnes, Harvey Miller, Jonathan M. Smith, Michael Goodchild, and a response by Waldo Tobler himself.

changed and are changing, with particular reference to the differences both between urban places and within them.”²⁹ We tackle four distinct, and yet inter-related, sets of questions.



Me & City. Shanghai, China, March 2010 (Elvin Wyly).

First, how do cities and other kinds of human settlements vary across time and space? How has the evolution of cities reflected prevailing historical conditions? What are the crucial differences between cities within particular regions or countries, and between different countries? How do certain cities reflect the distinctive circumstances of their geographical context?

Urban geography explores four key questions: how are cities unique? how are they similar? how do they shape society? how does society shape them?

Second, what *regularities* unite seemingly different cities? What are the similarities in patterns, processes, and relationships within different cities, and in networks between cities?

Third, how do social relations shape the form of the city? Studying how particular activities, land uses, and social groups are distributed among a nation's cities, or within a particular city, is a good way of learning about the society of that nation or region. Indeed, some experts argue that the only thing interesting about the city is that *it is a reflection of the society that produced it*.

One implication of this line of thinking is that to understand a society, we need social theory

²⁹ Knox and McCarthy, *Urbanization*, p. 2.

but not urban theory: if the city is just an expression of social relations, then strictly speaking, there is no such thing as urban theory.

Fourth, how does the form of the city shape social relations? For other experts, while a city may indeed reflect the society that produced it, there is a need for explicit urban theory: when certain things happen in cities, the urban context does make a difference, and the city can shape social relations in meaningful ways. People who explore these issues ask a range of interesting questions. How do spatial constraints and locational considerations, for example, influence the way that people decide where to live and where to work? How do the geographies of cities created in previous generations influence the decisions of today's corporations, investors, and governments as they gradually create *new* urban geographies?

In this course, I approach these questions while honoring three crucial commitments.



“Behave,” the urban commercial landscape always seems to be telling us. West Edmonton Mall, Edmonton, Alberta, August 2010 (Elvin Wyly).

First, we pay close attention to the interplay between old and new urban realities, experiences, and conditions. As Derek Gregory reminds us, understanding the hopes and horrors of today “requires us to rethink the lazy separations between past, present, and future.” Gregory’s priority involves the history of colonialism, which is often mistakenly seen as part of the distant past; there are deep and lasting “continuities between the colonial past and the colonial present. While

they may be displaced, distorted, and (most often) denied, the capacities that inhere within the colonial past are routinely reaffirmed and reactivated in the colonial present.”³⁰

But a **second** point is also crucial. We must consider the interplay and mutual strength of both old and new *ways of analyzing* cities. The ‘urban’ has been at the heart of every major transformation in the field of geography over the last half century, and the same might be said of several other disciplines as well. New theoretical and political movements have brought valuable new insights, approaches, and methodologies to bear on pressing urban questions. But the development of new schools of thought has also caused quite a bit of disagreement. Although debate is surely a sign of health and dynamism, it does sometimes make it easy to lose sight of some of yesterday’s important contributions, and their relevance to urgent issues we face today. I have been influenced by many different ways of doing urban geography; my approach thus combines methods, approaches, and styles from very different generations and schools of thought.

Finally, the logical implication of both of these points -- the interplay between old and new realities, and the synthesis of old and new theories and techniques -- suggests a **third** insight. New cities, new urbanisms, are constantly under construction. Cities are in constant flux, even though in many cities the rhythms of change can span decades or even centuries for particular kinds of processes or patterns. Elsewhere, the catastrophes of so-called ‘natural’ disasters, terrorism, and war make it quite clear that new urban geographies are being created. What this means is that we dive into urban geography at an especially exciting time, at the beginning of an urban century in which we can clearly see that cities represent both the best and worst of the human experience -- and where we can decide to learn some of the tools of the trade to understand cities and to make them better. Sandy Cameron is right. We need a new map. Get out your pens and pencils, because in this course we’re going to explore different ways of creating new maps for new (and old) cities.

Pens and pencils? Yes, I know what you’re thinking: can’t we just go to Google Earth and get the maps there? Of course we can. But why should we outsource such a joyful, exciting enterprise to a computer, to a giant corporation? Use machines when they’re appropriate, but don’t allow your humanity to be automated. And keep in mind that the most important new maps are of cities that do not yet exist -- and some of these maps can’t be rendered by fancy computer software, but must be described in prose, or poetry, or pictures, or numbers. We live in an exciting and changing world of new maps, new cities, and new possibilities.

Policies and Possibilities

In the final moments we have today, I’ll tell you a bit more about my background and my approach to cities. We’ll then discuss the course syllabus, logistics, and our expectations for this course -- yours and mine. Please read the syllabus carefully, because you will be responsible for following the rules and procedures specified thereon. I apologize for the harsh bureaucratic language -- “procedures specified thereon”! -- but it can’t be helped. Like all institutions, UBC loves its bureaucratic rules, which are imposed on me just like you.

³⁰ Derek Gregory (2004). *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 7.