



Photographs by Elvin Wyly

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

**Urban Studies Program**  
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## ***Cities: A Discussion Guide***<sup>1</sup> September, 2007

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared to accompany Urban Studies 200 / Geography 250. Initial version drafted September, 2004, by Elvin Wyly; revised September, 2006 by Tyler Pearce, Ted Rutland, and Elvin Wyly, revised again August, 2007. This is a *guide* with suggestions to stimulate conversation and discussion; it is not a *straightjacket*. Teaching Assistants and students in discussion sections may decide to explore other questions, and to devote more time for exam review and other activities.

Meeting times for discussion sections:

*Urst 200:*

L1A	Wednesday	12:00-13:00
L1B	Wednesday	13:00-14:00
L1C	Friday	10:00-11:00
L1D	Friday	13:00-14:00

*Geog 250:*

L1A	Thursday	13:00-14:00
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*Notes: Urst200, L1B meets in Room 215 of the Geography building. All other discussion sections meet in Room 242. If the only discussion section that fits your schedule is already full, then feel free to register for any one of the sections the system permits, and then attend the section that will actually work in your schedule. But you must attend the same section consistently throughout the term, and you must inform your Teaching Assistant at the first discussion meeting you attend.*

## **Tentative Schedule**

### **Discussion 1, week of September 10. Introduction.**

Introduction to the Teaching Assistants. Outline of the purpose of the discussion groups, and then a low-impact introduction to an ongoing conversation in urban studies. Read this article before you come to your discussion section:

Taylor, Peter J., and Robert E. Lang. 2004. "The Shock of the New: 100 Concepts Describing Recent Urban Change." *Environment and Planning A* 36, 951-958.

This short piece reflects on the proliferation of new words coined in recent years to describe changes in cities and urban studies. Don't worry if you don't recognize many of these terms -- and under no circumstances should you try to memorize these lists! The key point is to appreciate how changes in cities (and how we think about cities) have a new and fascinating vocabulary. Taylor and Lang regard this new vocabulary as an indicator of two simultaneous trends over the last thirty years: shifting ideas of high-level theory and epistemology (questions of what we know, and how we know what we know), and the more immediate tasks of describing rapid changes in what we see in cities and urban processes. "At the coalface, social scientists have been forced to keep reconceptualizing their particular subject matters in order to maintain credible descriptions." Taylor and Lang compile a list of new terms coined in the attempt to maintain credible descriptions of new urban things; they sifted through some of the most widely-debated books and articles in urban studies to come up with this list, so their bibliography is a valuable starting point for further reading and research.

Consider some of these questions to guide your reading and discussion: First, do you recognize any of these terms? If so, do you recall where you first saw specific terms? Second, consider the

distinction between the fairly abstract, social-science terms (the ones that often involve adding lots of syllables before stirring, like “concentrated decentralization”) and the playful new words (“anticity,” “disurb,” “slurbs”). What are the implications of these different ways of describing the process of suburbanization? Do you think these terms are helpful or confusing? Finally, what terms would you add to Taylor and Lang’s list based on your own acquaintance with and experience of metropolitan life?

### **Discussion 2, week of September 17. *Ancien* or Postmodern?**

Urban archaeology and contemporary relevance. Scholarship on ancient cities has been shaped by debates in archaeology for many years, with the most important shift prompted by the excavation of Çatal Hüyük in the 1960s -- a site that contradicted the conventional wisdom that the first cities emerged in the fertile river valleys of present-day Iraq around 3,500 B.C. Suddenly there was evidence of cities emerging around 8,000 B.C., or even earlier. This evidence began a wide-ranging debate on the relations between societal change and the fundamental reasons why cities appeared. The debate continues today, with new archaeological excavations and new scholarship providing insights from more and more sites around the world, in turn raising important new theoretical questions. But what is the contemporary and popular relevance of specialized scholarly debates over cities that emerged thousands of years ago? This week we’ll read a contemporary piece by Sharon Zukin on the cultures of today’s cities, where diverse urban actors fight over what she calls the symbolic economy and where notions of urban heritage and tourism loom large in public debate. The relationship between Zukin’s piece and archaeological excavations may seem tenuous, but as the second piece illustrates, perhaps this is not the case....

Zukin, Sharon. 1995. “Whose Culture? Whose City?” from her *The Cultures of Cities*, in R.T. LeGates and F. Stout (Eds.), *The City Reader*, pp. 136-146. New York: Routledge.

Lobell, Jarrett A. 2004. “Does Greece Need the Olympics?” *Archaeology* 57(4).

While Zukin’s piece raises wider issues about the place of culture in today’s economy, today we will note how notions of “heritage” and imagineered urban pasts play a key role in her questions whose city? whose culture? How, following Zukin, have questions of urban archaeology influenced present-day concerns? And how have contemporary trends -- tourism, urban development and resource consumption -- shaped archaeology and attitudes toward the past? How are these issues raised in the piece on the Olympics? How might you draw on Zukin’s work to “excavate” these issues further?

### **Discussion 3, week of September 24. A World Urban System.**

E. Barbara Phillips (*City Lights*, p. 108) sums up the consensus on the relations between cities and globalization: “...there is a world urban system: an interdependent system of ‘people, knowledge, images, and ideas,’ and, to varying degrees, ‘capital, labour, and goods.’ Cities perform differing economic roles in the new international division of labor, and their roles lead to disadvantages or advantages for residents. Places at the bottom of the urban heap may

compete for garbage, nuclear waste, or potential toxic spills, often becoming ‘contaminated communities’.... Meanwhile, world command cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo attract heavy concentrations of top corporate decision makers from finance, industry, commerce, law, and the media.” This way of looking at cities has inspired an entire industry of academic and press attention, but here we will just consider a few contributions.

Short, John Rennie, Carrie Breitbach, Steven Buckman, and Jamey Essex. 2000. “From World Cities to Gateway Cities.” *City* 4(3), 317-340. You don’t need to read the entire article (unless you are passionately fascinated by questions of globalization and urban theory). Just read the opening section, in boldface, on pages 317-318.

Fountain, John W. 2001. “Struggling City Preps for National Close-Up.” *New York Times*, March 2, A14.

Davey, Monica. 2003. “City’s Bad Luck Takes Another Spin.” *New York Times*, November 30, A28.

The central question you should consider is deceptively simple: Is Gary, Indiana, a ‘global city’? To be sure, the place is a far cry from the ‘global command city’ status of New York, London, and Tokyo. Yet hasn’t this city been shaped by globalization processes? How does the place fit into the framework suggested by Short?

#### **Discussion 4, week of October 1. Metropolitan Community.**

One of the central tensions in urban studies is how to define and measure ‘community,’ a concept that itself is often poorly defined. Urban scholars are particularly interested in the relationship between urbanization and the ways people build and maintain a sense of belonging: is there a distinctive ‘urban’ personality? Is there a fundamental difference between community and sense of belonging in rural areas and big cities? These sorts of questions were at the heart of the new field of sociology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As industrialization and urbanization accelerated, cities were seen as threats to the established notions of community prevailing in rural agricultural areas and small towns; indeed, one of the most important streams of urban sociology in these years focused on various forms of deviance as a barometer of the effect of the metropolis on social life. Yet many sociologists saw the city in a more balanced, complex way, with modern industrial life providing new freedom and opportunity as it selectively undermined rural traditions. For this week’s discussion, let’s read a classic essay on “urbanism” and consider whether, and to what extent, it remains relevant today. Here is Louis Wirth’s hugely influential treatise:

Wirth, Louis. 1938. “Urbanism as a Way of Life.” *American Journal of Sociology* 44, 1-24.

Part of Wirth’s essay is descriptive. How does Wirth define and characterize the city? How does he differentiate urban and rural? What major assumptions underlie this differentiation? Do you think these are reasonable assumptions? Do you see the same assumptions being made today (in

newspapers, television, and in more academic readings)? There is also a predictive element to Wirth's essay. Is Wirth's vision of the future of urban life a positive or negative one? Do you feel that his predictions were correct? How? Have rural areas followed a different path, missing the negative and positive aspects of urban life?

### **Discussion 5, week of October 8. Race, Immigration and Citizenship.**

This week we will read a chapter from Aihwa Ong's brilliant ethnographic study of negotiating and claiming citizenship from the perspective of refugees who work "at the bottom" of the globalized economy in southern California. The chapter we will read examines the role of capitalism and citizenship in the lives and relationships between what she calls "two streams of new Asian immigrants—low-skilled workers and entrepreneurial actors" (265). As Ong outlines, the promotion of a pan-Asian identity has been one political strategy which Asian immigrants have sought to challenge racist practices at individual, institutional and state levels, and here she examines the limits – the violent exclusions – such claims impart on non-elite Asian subjects. As Ong argues, notions of belonging and citizenship, legality and nationalism cannot be separated from economic restructuring.

Ong, Aihwa. 2003. "Asian Immigrants as the New Westerners?," Chapter ten in her *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, The New America*, pp. 253-273. Berkeley: University of California Press.

In what ways does Ong show that racial categories and affiliations are articulated through processes of hypercapitalism? What does Ong say about the roles race, economic performance and "moral capital" figure in citizenship acquisition? What are the implicit limits of the dominance of a "rights-based" notion of citizenship in Ong's view? Drawing on Ong's arguments in this chapter, how would you go about answering her question at the chapter's end? ("...how receptive will the American public be to the ethical claims of this new form of indentured immigrant servitude engaged in flexible production?", p. 273).

[Mid-term examination, Thursday, October 18;  
No discussion meetings the week of October 15.]

### **Discussion 6, week of October 22. Conversations on Term Papers.**

### **Discussion 7, week of October 29. Urban Political Power.**

Media reporting on urban political issues tends to focus on the politicians and political parties responsible for particular policies, projects, and programs. All of the action seems to happen at city hall. While city mayors and other representatives are certainly important actors in urban politics, a long history of writing in urban studies aims to understand how other individuals, groups, and processes influence political outcomes. Marxists, for example, tend to see political decision-making as severely constrained, if not determined, by business interests. Profit trumps other kinds of considerations. Pluralists, in contrast, tend to see political decisions as the outcome of a broad process of contention among multiple groups. In this case, no particular interest is likely to win every time. To consider how urban politics is shaped by people and

processes beyond city hall, let's read John Mollenkopf's survey of the various schools of thought and his proposed resolution:

Mollenkopf, John. 1992. "How to Study Urban Political Power." *A Phoenix in the Ashes: The Rise and Fall of the Koch Coalition in New York City Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of each school of thought mentioned by Mollenkopf? Which ones might be called "economy-centred theorizing"? Which might be called "polity-centred thinking"? Why does Mollenkopf suggest that these two kinds of thinking need to be combined? Do you agree? Can you think of a recent urban policy or program that seemed to be influenced by particular local interests? How might we think about political power in this case? Given Mollenkopf's view, how might a group go about effecting political change at the local level?

### **Discussion 8, week of November 5. Space.**

Space has occupied a curious position in a number of disciplines. Since the middle years of the twentieth century, geographers have had an ambivalent attitude towards the concept, first embracing it as a means of building a hopefully prestigious "spatial science" (for a time a cohort of prominent scholars were dubbed the 'space cadets') and later emphasizing its social, cultural, and political production. Many sociologists have followed a similar intellectual path. Economists built a new specialization often called 'the new spatial economy' in the 1990s, belatedly incorporating insights pioneered by geographers in the 1960s. In many quarters of the humanities, a proliferation of spatial metaphors in the 1980s and 1990s led to the growth of a rich, rigorous literature on the ways that space is at the heart of social and cultural communication and imagery. But in all of this literature, one of the key divisions involves how to interpret simple geometric concepts: what is good or bad about things like distance, separation, proximity, or accessibility?

#### *Option 1:*

One way to explore this question is to compare several of the classical 'models' of urban space with an update by Mike Davis:

Davis, Mike. 1992. *Beyond Blade Runner: Urban Control -- The Ecology of Fear*. Westfield, NJ: Open Media Magazine Series, Pamphlet 23.

In the early 1990s, this essay was seen as a fearful *and genuinely new* take on urban space. Anyone who visited Los Angeles after reading Davis, it seemed, could not help but see the urban environment through his lens. From today's vantage point, however, you might find some of this material unsurprising and perhaps even quaint, particularly in light of the proliferation of ever more sophisticated surveillance technologies in the last few years. What examples can you cite from your own experience that fit with, or contradict, Davis' interpretation? Do you agree with his central contention that urban space is becoming a more hostile mechanism of control? If not, do you think that Davis' anger can be explained by his vantage point at the time (Los Angeles)?

If you do agree with his central argument, do you think that this process is inevitable, or can it be altered?

*Option 2:*

Another way to examine these questions is to evaluate how societies and political institutions define and control various kinds of activities in and through urban space. First, read this short newspaper article:

Kari, Shannon. 2006. "B.C. Bylaws Targeting Homeless Face Court Challenge." *Globe and Mail*, August 29, A1, A6.

Suppose you are a law clerk to the B.C. Supreme Court judge who is asked to decide whether Victoria's bylaws violate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. What advice will you offer to the judge, who must evaluate the challenge mounted by Catherine Boies Parker (whose firm is doing the pro bono work on the case) as well as the defense by the city attorney for Victoria? How would an urban studies perspective on space help the judge to make a decision? How does space alter legal conflicts and debates? Glance through these sources to glean information that would help a judge decide whether Victoria's bylaws should stand or be struck down:

*Jones v. City of Los Angeles*. 2006. Opinion on Appeal from U.S. District Court for the Central District of California, No. 04-55324, Opinion by Judge Wardlaw. Pasadena, CA: U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. (Skim through pp. 4417-4432, and 4452-4454).

Mitchell, Don. 1997. "The Annihilation of Space by Law: The Roots and Implications of Anti-Homeless Laws in the United States." *Antipode* 29(3), 303-335.

For further background on how the Charter challenge found an individual plaintiff to test the limits of the bylaw, see

Metzger, The Honourable Mr. Justice R.W. (2006). *Reasons for Judgment, R. v. Johnston, 2006 BCSC 1592, Decided October 27, Docket 129185*. Victoria: Supreme Court of British Columbia.

*Note:* In August, 2007, the B.C. Supreme Court denied the City of Victoria's request for a permanent injunction against camping in City parks, but the full challenge to the overnight camping ordinance was delayed until September, 2007. For the latest information as described by the defendant, David Arthur Johnston, see <http://www.loveandfearlessness.com/home.html>

**Discussion 9, week of November 12. Place and Sense of Place.**

Place and "sense of place" are seemingly "natural," self-apparent notions. But geographers have long suggested that this is far from the case, as the two definitions from *The Dictionary of Human Geography* illustrate. This week, we'll examine these definitions and look at an article on

the meaning and significance of the design of the Vancouver Public Library as a public space which draws on these concepts to raise issues of exclusion and belonging. Read the two definitions and skim the article by Loretta Lees. The definitions should give you a sense of the scope of the wider literature within human geography, while Lees' article offers a textured example of this approach to urban issues.

Duncan, James. 2000. "Place." In *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, R.J. Johnston, D. Gregory, G. Pratt, and M. Watts, Eds., pp. 582-584. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Cosgrove, Denis. 2000. "Sense of Place." In *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, R.J. Johnston, D. Gregory, G. Pratt, and M. Watts, Eds., 731-734. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Lees, Loretta. 2001. "Towards a Critical Geography of Architecture: The Case of an Ersatz Colosseum." *Ecumene* 8(1), 51-86.

What does Lees reveal about the nature and meaning of contemporary public space? What struggles over meaning and place-making does she highlight? What notions of place and sense of place does she draw on? What inherent ambiguities in the notion of a "sense of place" does this piece raise? How does her narrative of life at the VPL compare to your own experiences of the library? What moral or political issues does Lees raise about being and belonging in public space?

### **Discussion 10, week of November 19. A New Economics for Cities?**

One of the key divisions in urban economic theory has been that between conservative analysts emphasizing the unfettered efficiency of pure, centralized market processes, and liberal observers who place a greater emphasis on equity and the relations between economic and social-cultural processes. In the last few years, the latest high-profile attempt to move beyond this dichotomy has been offered by Richard Florida, author of the best-seller *The Rise of the Creative Class*. His main point is quite simple (tolerant and open cities tend to be more creative, and hence more economically productive), but the implications are wide-ranging (for example, a new perspective on the relations between production and consumption, new ways of thinking about how economy and culture interact). The book has inspired a considerable literature ranging from uncritical adoration to neutral commentary all the way to harsh critique -- from both the left and the right. Florida is not the shy type, despite his frequent claims to be surprised by the popularity of his book; his work has become the rage among board-of-trade types in cities eager to promote growth and redevelopment. Florida has a very busy speaking schedule, and his large speaking fees imply the bizarre possibility of a professorial rock star. Some of his catchy and memorable ways of conveying abstract statistical research (he has devised a "gay index" and a "bohemian index" in an attempt to measure cities' tolerance and openness) have brought him right into the middle of contemporary culture wars.

*Option 1: Make a lot of money.*

First, read a short interview with Florida published in *Money* magazine to get the gist of his thesis. You should also visit his web site, <http://www.creativeclass.org>, and wander around to see what interests you. The 'Hot off the Presses' section includes a number of short news pieces in which Florida is quoted, including a few choice remarks on the June 2004 federal election in Canada.

Gertner, Jon. 2004. "What Makes a Place Hot?" Interview with Richard Florida. *Money*, June, 86-92.

Choose any distressed city you know and care about. What would you recommend to the local elites and economic boosters based on Florida's analysis? How would you revise or adapt Florida's ideas to help the city promote economic development?

*Option 2: Slap a warning label on the bottle of snake-oil.*

Florida's ideas may be wildly popular amongst local boosters, but they have been harshly criticized by many experts. Jamie Peck's critical essay is the best assessment (p. 759): "Florida advocates a form of creative trickle-down, with the lumpen classes of creatives eventually learning what the overclass has already figured out, that 'there is no corporation or other large institution that will take care of us -- that we are truly on our own....' This is familiar neoliberal snake-oil, of course -- insecurity as the new freedom." Your job is to skim through Peck's assessment (focus on the first five pages and the last section) and then suppose you're an advisor to a mayor of a distressed city. Your mayor has recently become infatuated with the creative class menu of simple policy prescriptions. How do you convince your mayor to steer clear of this popular mantra?

Peck, Jamie. 2005. "Struggling with the Creative Class." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29(4), 740-770.

**Discussion 11, week of November 26. Planet of Slums?**

The development of urban studies reflected a strong bias toward the experience and concerns of cities in North America and England, and key parts of the interdisciplinary field's history were shaped by a regrettable tendency to universalize or 'export' an historically and geographically contingent view of urbanization. In recent years, theoretical developments and empirical trends are both forcing conventional urban theory to confront these biases, and to recognize the influence of the so-called 'Third World' city on ideas of cities in wealthy, post-industrial societies. Much of this debate is situated at the intersection of futurism, urban analysis, and critical perspectives on the nation-state and transnational organizations. For this week's discussion, take a look at an insightful yet frightening portrait of a world urban future:

Davis, Mike. 2004. "Planet of Slums." *New Left Review* 26 (March/April), 5-34. If you're pressed for time, just read pages 5 to 17.

How does Davis' perspective influence your interpretation of Canadian and U.S. urban problems? In what ways does the current growth of urbanized slums around the world challenge traditional ways of thinking in urban studies? What does urban studies offer for understanding and positive change? What reasons for optimism and hope can you offer in response to Davis' warnings?