'No Easy Place to Understand.' Vancouver, North Shore of False Creek just West of Cambie, June, 2006 (Elvin Wyly). "Vancouver, like the province in which it is located, is no easy place to understand. ... [Many] have despaired of grasping the essence of the contemporary city. 'There is no real centre to Vancouver,' concluded one recent commentator ... it is a place of 'pockets, strips, [and] urban moments,' each of which is but a fragment of an intricate urban kaleidoscope. Because most people are familiar with only a few pieces of this fabric, most views of the city elevate one or two facets of its character above others." Graeme Wynn (1992). "Introduction," in Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke, eds., *Vancouver and its Region*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, i-xvii, quote from p. xiii.

Course Introduction
Urban Studies 200, *Cities*
Elvin Wyly
September, 2012

A Pair of Urban Vignettes

Welcome to *Cities*. The formal description for this course is concise: "An interdisciplinary introduction to the city in the context of contemporary globalization. Analysis of urban patterns and processes from the theoretical perspectives of various disciplines and methodologies." Fine, but what does this really mean? What exactly are urban patterns and processes, and what does it mean to say that something is 'interdisciplinary'?

I'll try to provide clear answers to these questions as we get to know one another in this course. But today I'll offer a preview with some extended examples to illustrate what one kind of urban studies approach looks like. I'll begin with two stories -- one about Vancouver, and one about New Orleans, Louisiana -- to illustrate the simple point that understanding cities requires the help of many different disciplines, traditions, and perspectives. Then we will consider a few formal definitions. Finally, we'll talk about some of the details of course procedures and other bureaucratic stuff.

Don't be intimidated by the length of this introduction; you don't need to memorize everything! There are only a few key points you need to remember -- the large text set off on the left-hand side.

Vancouver

Not long ago, Loretta Lees spent a year in Vancouver doing post-doctoral research on public space and urban architecture in the midst of a fascinating debate over the architectural design of the new downtown public library. She describes her initial sense of the place:

> "As a newcomer to the city I spent a lot of time that summer walking and cycling around the city, in the double role of both tourist and geographer trying to get a feel for the city. On a tour of Granville Island and False Creek, I remember saying to David Ley that I thought Vancouver was 'unreal, too perfect, a chocolate box city.' I thought it resembled a 'city on Prozac.' It was the image of Vancouver that struck me initially, but I had much more to learn."[1]

Most newcomers to the city can relate to this sentiment. "Many ... think of Vancouver 'less as a city than as a resort,'" and this perception is constantly reinforced in the "glossy-brochure portrayals of grand hotels, fine restaurants, sailboats, and ski slopes..."[2] One only gets a different understanding of the city if one stays here long enough -- or ventures well beyond the Prozac landscapes of wealth and tourist entertainment.

Loretta Lees' memorable Vancouver metaphor: "A city on Prozac."

This metaphor -- Loretta Lees' memorable quip of the "city on Prozac" – is quite provocative. To be sure, dozens of metaphors are commonly used to talk about cities: the city is variously likened to an arena, Babylon, Bohemia, fabric, a galaxy, kaleidoscope, labyrinth, machine, market, mosaic, theater, them park, village ... and the list goes on.[3] Vancouver itself has inspired more than a few curious metaphors: it is has been described as an achievement, a

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[1] Loretta Lees (2001). "Towards a Critical Geography of Architecture: The Case of an Ersatz Coliseum." *Ecumene* 8(1), 51-86, quote from p. 57.

[2] Graeme Wynn (1992). "Introduction." In Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke, eds., *Vancouver and its Region*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, i-xvii, quote from p. xiii.

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

dream, and even a "Vancouver Special" (this is the name for a particular, and a particularly ordinary, lower-middle class type of house).[4] And Vancouver is a place where drugs cannot be ignored – where it is quite reasonable to wonder how much the province's estimated $7 billion marijuana economy and 17,500 "grow-ops" help to inflate real-estate values.[5] But, still, Prozac seems different: when's the last time you heard a city described as a prescription drug? It's worth taking a closer look at this particular metaphor and its implications.

First developed by a researcher at the giant pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly & Company in 1974, the anti-depressant drug that would eventually be named Prozac went through trials in the 1970s and 1980s, and received final approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in December, 1988. It rapidly became an extraordinarily profitable market leader among all anti-depressants, even as this category of medications became the single most widely prescribed class of drugs in the lucrative U.S. market.[6] Within a few years, the implications became enormous:

> "Nearly everyone knows someone who is taking Prozac. In urban centers, where Prozac has achieved fadlike status, most people can name several friends or co-workers who are taking the medication. ... One of my patients recently told me, 'Nearly everyone in my office is on it.' She was experiencing peer pressure to take a prescription medication. ... As a recent *New York Times* headline announced, 'With Millions Taking Prozac, a Legal Drug Culture Arises.' Columnists are joking about putting it in the drinking water.
>
> Prozac is becoming America's drug."[7]

As Prozac became wildly popular -- and as it inspired a wide range of spin-offs and next-generation anti-depressants with broadly similar characteristics -- there was a downside. This is where Loretta Lees' use of the word to describe Vancouver really hits home. Three problems soon became apparent.

First, the drug was quickly prescribed for an astonishing variety of afflictions; once approved by the FDA, there are almost no restrictions on how doctors decide to prescribe it. Prozac was approved to treat clinical depression, but it was soon being used to treat seasonal affective disorder, obesity, anorexia, bulimia, phobia, anxiety and panic disorder, arthritis, migraine headaches, behavioral and emotional problems among children, and many other afflictions.[8] The urban counterpart, as described by Lees and many others, is the way the "prescription" for creating a certain kind of urban experience -- especially for tourists, convention-goers, and wealthy investors or home-buyers -- becomes a medication used in lots of other cities. Vancouver's beautiful downtown peninsula of brand-new, shiny glass condo towers and first-class restaurants with waterfront views is like an urban prescription. It has become a medication used to try to treat the afflictions of all sorts of "depressed" cities, with various problems,

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[4] John Punter (2004). *The Vancouver Achievement.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. Lance Berelowitz (2005). *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre. Charles Demers (2009). *Vancouver Special.* Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

[5] See Frances Bula (2011). "Under the Influence." *Vancouver*, September, 39-41.

[6] Peter R. Breggin and Ginger Ross Breggin (1994). *Talking Back to Prozac.* New York: E-Rights/E-Reads, xv.

[7] Breggin and Breggin, *Talking Back*, 1.

[8] Breggin and Breggin, *Talking Back*, 4.

"Alone Together?" Vancouver is often described as one of the world's most attractive, enjoyable, and "livable" cities -- and yet this is not the entire story. Like all cities and metropolitan regions, Vancouver has many facets, many dimensions. Not long ago, the Vancouver Foundation "released a poll of local community leaders who said their greatest concern about modern life in Metro Vancouver was the increasing social isolation of its residents. They cited decreasing community involvement, falling rates of volunteerism and the growing lack of good old-fashioned neighbourliness." Summarizing a week-long series titled "Growing Apart," a columnist for the Vancouver Sun concluded, "We have, apparently, become a city of loners." The poster above announces a panel discussion of these issues, featuring Larry Beasley, a former senior planner often associated with the rise of "Vancouverism." Sources: Quotes from Shelley Fralic (2012). "One is, Indeed, the Loneliest Number." *Vancouver Sun*, June 23, p. C5. Photograph: Broadway and Cambie, September 2012 (Elvin Wyly).

histories, and circumstances. Vancouver is now seen by city elites and planners around the world as a stunning success worthy of emulation; people around the world read about Vancouver, and many others visit the place to see how it works. A few years ago, when the prominent urbanist Ed Soja gave a talk at UBC, he marveled at the glittering downtown forest of luxury condos. He declared that if he were ever allowed to write his own personal job description, it would be a restaurant critic – but for the kind of global restaurant that served up cities as entrées. His reviews would describe the taste, preparation, and presentation of the cities appearing on the menu – their design and planning, their histories, and their unique attractions. Vancouver is such a delightful dish, he seemed to think.

For other visitors to Vancouver, the place offers a hopeful prescription for the ills of suburban "sprawl," central-city decline, economic stagnation, and un-attractive design in architecture or landscape architecture. Local knowledge about Vancouver has become part of "urban policy

mobilities" and "global circuits of knowledge."[9] Curiously, the example of Vancouver seems to offer two very different medications. One treats the symptoms of cities desperate for downtown development, real-estate speculation, and resort amenities for the wealthy. The other offers to treat the symptoms of places that have tried and failed at harsh, tough-on-crime, "Just say no to drugs" policies to deal with the serious problems of the poor, disenfranchised, and young who get addicted to illegal (non-prescription) drugs. Vancouver has become famous in many cities around the world for the 'resort' landscape, and it is known in other cities for the safe-injection site on Hastings Street in the Downtown Eastside. This site is part of a unique "harm reduction" strategy emphasizing that law-enforcement initiatives and addiction-recovery programs will only succeed in the long run if users have reliable access to *safe* drugs from a *safe* source, outside the organized-crime economy.[10]

The second downside to Prozac -- and to the way a city on Prozac might function -- involves competition. Once Prozac achieved market dominance, it "became a drug for enhancing the lives of people who would otherwise consider themselves normal."[11] One prominent national television investigation showcased a "series of grinning Prozac consumers" ...

> "As the only criticism, the show's analyst wondered if there wasn't something inherently immoral about a drug that was so wonderful. Another show raised the question of unfairness. Because of their increased alertness and drive, weren't Prozac users getting an unfair advantage in the business world? Would everyone feel compelled to take it just to keep up with the competition?"[12]

The same kind of questions of fairness and competition affect cities. Cities -- or, more accurately, the powerful people who shape the most important decisions for cities -- feel compelled to get that edge to keep up with the competition. Any city aspiring to "world city" or "global city" status these days has to have certain things: shiny new buildings with all the latest technologies and amenities, but also some attractive old buildings to provide history, charm, and character; a big, new convention center to lure a steady stream of free-spending business travelers; a modern, efficient airport, with good transport connections to the downtown core and other places frequented by tourists and business travelers; a proven track record in competing for world-class spectacles -- sporting events, World Expositions, or the biggest prize of them all, the Olympic Games; and a thriving real-estate market, with steadily rising property prices to assure potential home-buyers and investors that they will be able to accumulate wealth by buying (in) the city. All of these competitive requirements cost a lot of money, and the expense often means that cities are less able or willing to provide the kinds of services needed by their working-class or poor residents.

The third implication of Lees' provocative metaphor is simple, but crucial: what are the side effects? For Prozac, the side effects were very rare but very severe -- and with so many millions

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[9] Eugene J. McCann (2010). "Urban Policy Mobilities and Global Circuits of Knowledge: Towards a Research Agenda." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101(1), 107-130.

[10] See Eugene J. McCann (2008). "Expertise, Truth, and Urban Policy Mobilities: Global Circuits of Knowledge in the Development of Vancouver, Canada's 'Four-Pillar' Drug Strategy." *Environment and Planning A* 40(4), 885-904.

[11] Breggin and Breggin, *Talking Back*, 4.

[12] Breggin and Breggin, *Talking Back*, 5.

of prescriptions, the dangers made anti-depressants quite controversial. The drugs made most people feel better, but for a very small group of people they seemed to trigger serious thoughts of suicide, violence, and even murder. Prozac soon became one of the most controversial drugs of all time, inciting a wave of lawsuits, including some by people who were convicted of violent crimes and claimed that the drug's effects rendered them not responsible for their actions.[13]

For cities, the side effects were more modest, but still rather important. For one thing, the competitive race never ends: as soon as you finish a major-league sports stadium, you have to plan for the day when the team will threaten to move elsewhere if local taxpayers don't pay for a newer facility; once you build a big convention center, then the major priority of local policy is to do whatever it takes to get enough conventions and trade shows to keep the place filled to capacity; a thriving, steadily-rising property market is great for wealthy investors and owners, but it makes life very difficult for low- and moderate-income people, especially renters; and while high-profile spectacles often give host cities a lot of free advertising, they sometimes become sites of conflict, struggle, and even violence. This now happens frequently in the host cities for major multilateral meetings for organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the economic summits of the groups of large economies known as the Group of 8 (G8) and the G20. Another side effect is the risk of learning the wrong lesson from a particular city, or a particular urban process. Much of the recent global attention tends to "position Vancouver as the center of global policy innovation," and yet this can be quite misleading.[14] Few of the visitors who are enamored with Vancouver's vibrant new downtown core, for example, ever go out to see the vast, low-density, automobile-reliant suburban development that makes the Vancouver region no different from any other large city in North America. Indeed, some of the suburban subdivisions are not that different from new developments on the fringe of large cities across China and parts of Eastern Europe. Some of the policy innovations that work in one place, moreover, won't work in other places. "There is a distinct danger ... that accounts of specific cities, their policy innovations, and their prominence in global conversations about best practices can position them as 'special' places (naturally) endowed with uncommon amounts of innovatory capacity."[15] This is dangerous indeed. Every city is a complex brew of ideas, policies, and experiments -- good, bad and ordinary. Moreover, sometimes the ideas that seem brilliant one year look downright foolish the next. Vancouver's has been wildly successful at achieving steadily-rising property values, for example, and many observers regard this as a good thing. And yet we should not forget that a housing boom was the major factor in the catastrophic mortgage collapse that shook the United States in 2008 -- a meltdown that led serious and conservative analysts to warn about a near-collapse of the entire global financial system, and that eventually plunged the entire world economy into its worst crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Vancouver and Canada have so far escaped the worst of the crisis, but the recent slowdown of the Vancouver market has prompted considerable anxiety in the local and national press. At the end of 2009 for all of Canada, total household liabilities stood at 146.2 percent of disposable income -- the highest figure ever recorded; two-thirds of this debt was tied up in mortgages.[16]

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[13] Colleen Cebuliak (1994). "Life as a Blonde: The Use of Prozac in the '90s." *Alberta Law Review* 33, 611-630.
[14] McCann, "Urban Policy Mobilities," p. 124.
[15] McCann, "Urban Policy Mobilities," p. 124.
[16] Paul Vieira (2010). "Rising Debts Cancel Low-Rate Savings." *Financial Post*, September 8, 1, 4.

Always Ask for a Window Seat: Maple Ridge and Surrey, July 2010 (Elvin Wyly). Many Vancouverites (like me) spend most of their time in the high-density landscapes of the City of Vancouver. It's easy to forget that while a small part of central Vancouver receives all the attention from tourists and other visitors, the region has a vast, complex fabric of suburban communities. At center-right is the Golden Ears Connector, a new bridge recently built to connect the rapidly-growing jurisdictions of Maple Ridge (to the north) and Surrey (to the south, towards the bottom of the image).

What this means is that to understand the city -- *any* city -- we need to venture beyond the Prozac landscapes. It's important to explore the true diversity of neighborhoods and landscapes across the entire city and the entire metropolitan region. Our explorations in any city will reveal a lot of juxtapositions and contrasts -- inequalities and tensions of wealth and poverty, opportunity and oppression, celebration and marginalization, elite power and populist participation. "Cities are unfinished stories," the urbanist Paul Chatterton reminds us, and sometimes the complexities of these stories make it seem like we will never completely understand them.[17]

Complete understanding might be a bit too ambitious. But we can learn quite a lot. And we will learn the most about the broadest possible kaleidoscope of urban images if we explore cities with an interdisciplinary approach. This simply means that we draw on the insights of people who work in quite different traditions, with different kinds of specializations and expertise. We need the popular appeal and rich empirical view of non-academic, **popular writers** like Chuck Davis, who many years ago opened *The Vancouver Book* with these lines: "The Vancouver Book was

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[17] Paul Chatterton (2010). "The Urban Impossible: A Eulogy for the Unfinished City." *City* 14(3), 234-244, quote from p. 235.

born in July, 1967, on a little slip of paper on which I had written an idea: 'should do urban almanac on Vancouver.'"[18] The result is an impressive and wide-ranging compendium of historical and contemporary information about many of those 'pockets, strips, and urban moments' Graeme Wynn introduced us to. We need the celebration of **urban design** and **architecture** offered by Lance Berelowitz, who boldly declares in his book *Dream City* that "Vancouver has emerged as the poster child of urbanism in North America. In recent years, through a series of locally grown strategies, Vancouver has consciously willed itself into becoming a model of contemporary city-making."[19] We need the sophistication of **political science**, of analysts like Donald Gutstein, who once began a chapter with the concise simple observation that "For almost a century local politics in Vancouver has been dominated by business interests," and after a rich narrative of the evolving balance of power between the municipal parties of TEAM, COPE, and the NPA,[20] ends with: "The power of the provincial government is such that the city is bound to be limited in its ability to control its own development. At the same time, council is recognized to be an important enough prize to make it worthwhile for the provincial parties to intervene (however covertly) in municipal affairs; at the least they want to deny control or success to their opponents."[21] We need the rich insights of **history** and **ethnic studies** to understand the evolving social mosaic of the place, for instance Wing Chung Ng's analysis of Vancouver as a setting for "an ongoing contest -- engaged in by several generations of Chinese immigrants and their Canadian-born descendants -- over the meaning of being Chinese in Canada."[22] And we need the spatial perspective of **geographers** like Loretta Lees, or Neil Smith, the Director of the (interdisciplinary!) Center for Place, Culture, and Politics at the City University of New York; Smith's chapter with Jeff Derksen in *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* shines a bright light on the effects of global capital investment on Vancouver's gentrification and the disenfranchisement of the urban poor: "...the mobilization of urban real estate markets as vehicles of capital accumulation is ubiquitous, and can be registered dramatically in Vancouver in the last decades."[23]

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[18] Chuck Davis, general editor (1976). *The Vancouver Book.* North Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, Ltd., p. v. Davis continues: "Those few modest words have led to the book you now hold, the largest ever written about any Canadian city. ... And it all started because I'm a list freak. When I was a kid, I remember being more than usually interested in lists. I read, or made up, lists of the longest rivers, the tallest buildings, the oldest people, the widest bridges, and so on. ... I've never been too sure why I have rotaphilia (abnormal fondness for lists, a word coined by a friend), but perhaps it's a subconscious desire on my part to bring order into the untidy phenomenon of my life..." Two decades on, Davis was working on a revised history of the metropolitan region, with each year since 1886 available for sponsorship by local companies or foundations. See http://www.vancouverhistory.ca/sponsors.html Sadly, Davis ran out of time; he died of cancer in November, 2010.

[19] Lance Berelowitz (2005). *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, p. 1.

[20] TEAM stands for The Electors Action Movement; COPE, the Committee of Progressive Electors; NPA, the Non-Partisan Association. TEAM and COPE are center-left, while the NPA is center-right.

[21] Donald Gutstein (1983). "Vancouver." In Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton, eds., *City Politics in Canada.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 189-221, quotes from p. 189, 215.

[22] Wing Chung Ng (1999). *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-1980: The Pursuit of Identity and Power.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, p. 4.

[23] "Urban Regeneration: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy." In Reid Shier, editor*, Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings.* Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery/Arsenal Pulp Press, 62-92, quote from pp. 88-89.

New Orleans

If Loretta Lees thought of Prozac when she arrived in Vancouver, what drug supplies the right metaphor for the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, the city near the mouth of the Mississippi River as it empties into the Gulf of Mexico? At the end of August, 2005, New Orleans took a near-direct hit from precisely the kind of dangerous hurricane that had been feared and predicted for many years. To give you a sense of the vulnerabilities in the first half of the phrase "urban studies," consider that Hurricane Katrina caused more than 1,600 deaths, and at least US$100 billion in property damage; the storm flooded 80 percent of the City of New Orleans and more than four-fifths of the metropolitan area's occupied housing units and business establishments -- a total of 228,000 homes, and 12,000 businesses.[24] The storm caused the single largest mass migration since the Dust Bowl agricultural droughts of the 1930s, and then turned New Orleans into the site of the largest "urban renewal" project in U.S. history. An urban studies perspective on Katrina and New Orleans highlights three crucial points.

Hurricane Katrina Landfall. This satellite image was taken approximately 9:45 in the morning of August 29, 2005. Washington, DC: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Public domain image.

First, historical and geographical urban research makes it clear that there are no "natural disasters," especially when it comes to cities; all cities have distinctive vulnerabilities, and the "disaster" only comes with social, political, or institutional failures in preparation and planning. There is a rich body of academic scholarship on the vulnerability of New Orleans, built mostly

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[24] Sources cited in Kevin Fox Gotham (2006). "Critical Theory and Katrina: Disaster, Spectacle, and Immanent Critique." Forthcoming in early 2007, *City*, sources on p. 2.

on very gently sloping natural levees right along the Mississippi, to the storm surge caused by the low-pressure core of powerful hurricanes.[25] A lot of academic work is ignored in the public realm, but media outlets began to pay a lot of attention to the risks in recent years, including the *Houston Chronicle*, "Keeping its Head Above Water: New Orleans Faces Doomsday Scenario" (2001), the *National Geographic Magazine*, "Gone With the Water" (2004), and the PBS show *Nova*, which reviewed the hurricane threat to the city in January, 2005.[26] And the vulnerability was only too well known inside local, state, and federal agencies responsible for emergency[27]

New Orleans, after Katrina, September 2005. Source: photograph from helicopter piloted by Commander Mark Moran, Lt. Phil Eastman, and Lt. Dave Demers, all commissioned officers of the NOAA Corps. Public domain image, via Wikimedia Commons.

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[25] For example, see Pierce Lewis (2003). *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*. Second Edition. Santa Fe, NM; Center for American Places; Craig Colten (2005). *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; Richard Campanella, Daniel Etheridge, and Douglas J. Meffert (2004). "Sustainability, Survivability, and the Paradox of New Orleans." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1023: 289-299; Ari Kelman (2006). "Nature Bats Last: Some Recent Works on Technology and Urban Disaster. *Technology and Culture* 47(2), 391-402.

[26] Cited in Gotham, "Critical Theory and Katrina," p. 15.

[27] John J. Macionis and Vincent N. Parrillo (2007). *Cities and Urban Life*. Fourth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice-Hall, p. xxi.

preparedness and disaster response. And so the human and political catastrophe of New Orleans in September, 2005 can be understood as one illustration of the proposition that "Cities reveal the best and worst about the human condition."

Second, urban realities and perceptions have become unhinged as the global mediascape tears events out of context and presents them to so many different audiences in varied circumstances. To borrow from E. Barbara Phillips, what you see depends on how you look at it, and in today's environment, what you see depends increasingly on the communications and media enterprises that so fascinated the Canadian cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan.[28] And so people's perceptions of "what really happened" in the disaster depended a great deal on the kinds of information they received. Kevin Fox Gotham, a sociologist at Tulane University, has analyzed the implications of the intense global media landscape that showcased the disaster even while shaping the societal response. "Hurricane Katrina was the nation's first urban disaster spectacle in which, day-after-day, massive audiences followed the drama in New Orleans on the Weather Channel, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, Fox News, all of which provided full coverage, hourly news summaries, and incessant commentary on the tragic event," Gotham writes.[29] "There have been many disasters in U.S. history, but never a televised media spectacle of an entire metropolitan area devastated by a major hurricane."[30] Gotham argues that "in the contemporary era, disasters are becoming a mode of spectacle in which the characteristic features of entertainment -- e.g., ephemerality, fragmentation, immediacy, and intense drama -- determine the representation of tragic events and catastrophes." And of course urban vulnerability is being commodified in the growing trend of "disaster tourism": in early 2006, Gray Line Bus Tours began offering tours through New Orleans neighborhoods, under the promotional title, "Hurricane Katrina: America's Worst Catastrophe!"[31]

Third, urban political analysis reveals the simple point that power and ideology matter. What happens in a city reflects the society that produced that it -- and the city itself often plays a role in the emergence of new kinds of political practices. And here the situation in New Orleans is frightening indeed. All cities are the product of histories of different social and political forces, and what we see today is simply a snapshot of the residue of the decades, generations, or centuries that produced a particular place. But with the speed and scale of a catastrophe like Katrina, we see these legacies wiped away to present unusual opportunities for whatever political system is currently in place. In the United States in the last generation, the urban landscapes produced by the "welfare state" of the 1960s and 1970s have fallen out of favor, replaced by a nearly ubiquitous emphasis on making cities attractive to large corporations, powerful investors, high-income professional workers, and wealthy homeowners. In this new policy emphasis, there is often very little room for the needs of poor people, especially poor people seen as 'different.' As a city with a disproportionately high poverty rate and a large population of African-American residents, New Orleans was particularly vulnerable to the inequalities of these new policies. It quickly became clear after Katrina that the city would be used as a blank slate, as a template for radical policy proposals. Conservative commentators and public officials moved quickly to

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[28] Richard Cavell (2003). *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
[29] Gotham, "Critical Theory and Katrina," p. 16.
[30] Gotham, "Critical Theory and Katrina," p. 16.
[31] Gotham, "Critical Theory and Katrina," p. 32.

"Patriot Inaction." New Orleans, Lousiana, Lower Ninth Ward, July, 2007 (Elvin Wyly).

"frame" and define the problem – shifting the focus away from the inequalities of racism and urban poverty in order to blame the inherent failures of liberal, welfarist policies of assistance. One conservative commentator argued that America's welfare state had been too generous, and thus it had created in New Orleans and other cities a dependent "underclass," and a "dangerous criminal class – yes, likely the same African Americans we see looting now," as well as helpless women, children, and elderly who showed up at the Superdome "expecting their government to take care of them."[32] The conservative solution was to "rebuild New Orleans' moral levees"[33] on a clean slate that would become a free-market city-state ruled by principles of small government, low taxes, and a sacred commitment to property rights. Post-Katrina urban policies have thus presented an unprecedented opportunity for a more "pure" version of the urbanism that the U.S. Republican Party prefers. Its principles were proclaimed most clearly by the widely-read conservative columnist for the *New York Times*, David Brooks, who wrote a week after the storm about "Katrina's Silver Lining":

> "...Katrina was a natural disaster that interrupted a social disaster. It separated
> tens of thousands of poor people from the run-down, isolated neighborhoods in

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[32] N. Gelinas. (2005). "A Perfect Storm of Lawlessness." *City Journal*, September 1. Jamie Peck (2006). "Liberating the City: From New York to New Orleans." *Urban Geography* 27(8), 681-713.

[33] T. Sowell. (2005). "Who Will Rebuild New Orleans' Moral Levees?" *Investors Business Daily*, September 7, A14.

which they were trapped. ...It has created as close to a blank slate as we get in human affairs, and given us a chance to rebuild a city that wasn't working."[34]

Brooks argued in favor of "cultural integration" – in order to "integrate people who lack middle-class skills into neighborhoods with people who possess those skills and who insist on certain standards of behavior" – while giving the displaced the option "to disperse in to middle-class areas nationwide." And for New Orleans, "the key will be luring middle-class families into the rebuilt city, making it so attractive to them that they will move in, even knowing that their blocks will include a certain number of poor people."[35] Many poor residents displaced from New Orleans saw these kinds of proposals as a blatant land grab to prevent them from returning home. It's not too much of a conspiracy theory to note that one of the prominent architects who got involved in the redevelopment was Andres Duany, who had a few years earlier written an essay titled "Three Cheers for Gentrification."[36] After Katrina, Duany told the *New York Times*,

"For a city to become a city that's planned, it has to destroy itself; the city literally has to molt. ... Usually this takes 20 years, but after a hurricane, it takes five years. The people can see the future in their own lifetime."[37]

We're Back! New Orleans, Louisiana, Lower Ninth Ward, July, 2007 (Elvin Wyly).

[34] David Brooks (2005). "Katrina's Silver Lining." *New York Times*, September 8, Op/Ed, A29.
[35] Brooks, "Silver Lining," p. A29.
[36] Andres Duany (2001). "Three Cheers for Gentrification." *American Enterprise Magazine*, April/May, 36-9.
[37] Robin Pogrebin (2006). "An Architect with Plans for a New Gulf Coast." *New York Times*, May 24, B1,8.

Some observers began to see systemic connections between these kinds of arguments and other events around the world -- such as economic transition plans after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, foreign assistance and redevelopment plans in poor countries after earthquakes, floods, or civil wars, and the 'structural adjustment plans' imposed by the International Monetary Fund when poor countries experience foreign currency crises. Naomi Klein identifies a common theme in all of these seemingly disparate events around the world -- the use of a "shock doctrine" to advance a particular kind of "disaster capitalism."[38] The shock doctrine is the use of public confusion and disorientation after a massive crisis in order to achieve the political goals of imposing 'shock therapy,' replacing old institutions rather than rebuilding them. "Disaster capitalism" is the syndrome of corporate re-engineering of societies in the wake of disaster, putting the social goals of recovery into conflict with the goals of corporate profitability. Klein noted that the most prominent conservative economist of the last century had made it clear that crisis was opportunity; Friedman had written that

> "...only a crisis -- actual or perceived -- produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable." [39]

Klein wryly observed that "Some people stockpile canned goods and water in preparation for major disasters; Friedmanites stockpile free-market ideas." Friedman, ninety-three years old when Katrina hit, wrote what turned out to be his last public policy recommendation: an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal* advising that the devastation of New Orleans' public schools was an opportunity: a portion of the reconstruction money should be used for vouchers, which would be given to parents who could spend them at private institutions, many of them run by for-profit corporations. Disaster would make it possible to achieve what is usually very difficult: rapid and permanent privatization of what is perhaps the largest remaining public, non-profit activity in most cities -- public education. Friedman died less than a year after issuing his proposal. As Klein notes,

> "Privatizing the school system of a midsize American city may seem like a modest preoccupation for the man hailed as the most influential economist of the past half century, one who counted among his disciples several U.S. presidents, British prime ministers, Russian oligarchs, Polish finance ministers, Third World dictators, Chinese Communist Party secretaries, International Monetary Fund directors and the past three chiefs of the U.S. Federal Reserve. Yet his determination to exploit the crisis in New Orleans to advance a fundamentalist version of capitalism was also an oddly fitting farewell from the boundlessly energetic five-foot-two-inch professor who, in his prime, described himself as 'an old-fashioned preacher delivering a Sunday sermon.'"[40]

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[38] Naomi Klein (2007). *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism.* New York: Metropolitan Books.
[39] Milton Friedman (1962). *Capitalism and Freedom.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1982 Reprinted edition, p. ix, quoted in Klein, *Shock*, p. 6.
[40] Klein, *Shock*, p. 6.

The point of all this is that the "urban" in urban studies is very much up for grabs, and it matters very much for the future of particular cities and the people who call them home. Debate continues on the fate of neighborhoods in New Orleans, even as speculators snap up properties, some residents return home while others pursue new lives in other cities, and as federal money flows to private contractors involved in the redevelopment effort. Post-Katrina New Orleans is now serving as a policy laboratory and template for broader urban philosophies. But these philosophies are the subject of heated debate among urban social scientists. The sociologist William Julius Wilson led a petition signed by dozens of prominent (and very slightly left-leaning) researchers advocating "Moving to Opportunity in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina," emphasizing the dispersal and mixed-income redevelopment policies that are now the conventional wisdom in Washington, D.C. But the political scientist Adolph Reed believes that Wilson and his colleagues walked into a trap, because they

> "...remain strangely oblivious of their potential for playing into the hands of the retrograde political forces that would use their call to justify displacement.... They provide liberal cover for those who have already put a resettlement policy into motion that is reactionary and racist at its core."[41]

After a few years, the process of rebuilding -- and the struggles over how to interpret what the city means -- continued. As of late summer 2007, about 134 thousand households were receiving mail in Orleans Parish, down from 198 thousand before the storm; the labor force was about 158 thousand, compared to 202 thousand before Katrina; and the median fair market rent for a two bedroom apartment in the metropolitan area jumped from $676 US per month to $978 per month.[42] The next year, the Atlantic Hurricane season threatened to deliver a reprise of Katrina, as Hurricane Gustav headed directly for the Gulf Coast at the end of August, 2008. The timing had significant implications both for spectacle -- ephemerality, urgency, spectacle -- and politics: the U.S. Republican Party had to cancel most events for the first day of the Republican National Convention on September 1 to avoid the unsavory appearance of politics amidst crisis, and political journalists noted that the approach of the storm had the risk of reminding voters of the links between Republican presidential candidate John McCain and George W. Bush. On the day Katrina made landfall in 2005, "President Bush helped Senator John McCain celebrate his birthday with a cake that melted on a blazing hot airport tarmac, just as the president's approval ratings would in the weeks to come."[43] Fortunately, Gustav weakened significantly before landfall, the Federal government was somewhat better prepared, and evacuation efforts prior to the storm were more successful in 2008 than in 2005. Even so, three years after Katrina and one year after a Congressional deadline, New Orleans' levee system was still not fully upgraded to handle a Category 4 or Category 5 storm.

Shortly before the completion of some of the levee improvements in 2010, another disaster struck: the violent explosion of an offshore oil drilling rig, the Deepwater Horizon, in April. This disaster hit shortly after the new U.S. President, Barack Obama, initiated plans to allow more offshore drilling, based in large part on oil company assurances of the safety of

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[41] Adolph Reed and S. Steinberg (2006). "Liberal Bad Faith in the Wake of New Orleans." *Black Commentator* 182 (May 5).

[42] Amy Liu and Nigel Holmes (2007). "The State of New Orleans: An Update." *New York Times*, August 28, A23.

[43] Peter Baker (2008). "Storm Politics Present Risks and Rewards." *New York Times*, September 16, A1.

contemporary drilling technologies. The oil spill suddenly threatened to undermine Obama's credibility, just as Katrina had done for the Bush Administration. Things got worse with the confused and slow response by the federal government, and the lead company involved -- British Petroleum, which had a few years earlier officially changed its name to BP with an ad campaign promising a world "Beyond Petroleum." By the time BP managed to cap the deep underwater well in July, the Deepwater Horizon disaster had spilled almost five million barrels of crude into the Gulf -- making this the single worst oil spill ever.[44] The spill had also undermined a major economic foundation of New Orleans and the entire Gulf Coast -- the vast fleets of fishing and shrimping boats that supply all the seafood to grocery stores and restaurants throughout much of the United States. New Orleans was hit hard, again, this time in the depth of the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. The director Spike Lee, who was just putting the final touches on a five-year-after sequel to his documentary *When the Levees Broke*, quickly sent film crews back to New Orleans to add another segment on this newest disaster.

Sometimes, major events that happen <u>in</u> cities can raise questions <u>of</u> cities -- what they mean, and why they matter.

Sometimes the details of particular urban events become overwhelming, and it becomes difficult to see the fundamental, general questions that are raised by the fast-paced rush of current events. Part of the job of an urban scholar is to identify these general questions, and to encourage public discussion of big-picture ideas. In the case of New Orleans and Katrina, two scholars recently edited a book arguing that the storm and its political consequences raised foundational questions -- the title of their book is *What is a City? Rethinking the Urban After Hurricane Katrina.* They outline their purpose this way:

> "...this book uses the Katrina experience to probe the fundamental questions of urban theory: What is the nature of a city, what are its social dynamics, what are its specifically urban processes and tensions, and what are a society's moral responsibilities to maintain (or restore) a city's people, its architecture, its economy, and its culture?"[45]
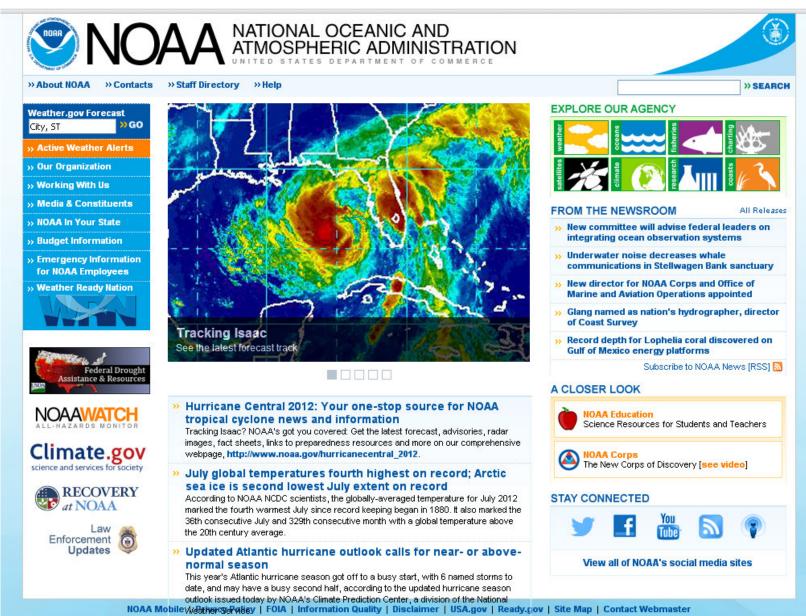
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[44] Campbell Robertson and Clifford Krauss (2010). "Gulf Spill the Largest of its Kind, Scientists Say." *New York Times*, August 2, A14.

[45] Phil Steinberg and Rob Shields, eds., (2008). *What is a City? Rethinking the Urban After Hurricane Katrina.* Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, p. 4.

Deepwater Horizon Explosion. Response crews battled the explosion of an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico on April 21, 2010. Eventually, the deep well-head on the ocean floor spilled almost five million barrels -- more than 200 million gallons, or about 950 million liters -- into the Gulf. Source: U.S. Coast Guard, public domain image via Wikimedia Commons.

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WHAT NOW?

Post-Katrina New Orleans and the Politics of Reconstruction
A special 10th anniversary issue of Perspectives on Politics

Urbanism happens in academic theory, and it also happens in the headlines. On the same day I was watching news coverage as Hurricane Isaac approached New Orleans, the prestigous political science journal *Perspectives on Politics* announced its special issue on New Orleans seven years after the disastrous Hurricane Katrina. Sources: U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and *Cambridge Journals*. Images reproduced pursuant to Sections 29 ("Fair dealing for the purpose of research, private study, education, parody, or satire") and 30.04 ("work available through Internet") provisions of Canada Bill C-11.

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Defining Urban Studies

These are just two vignettes from an almost infinite array of unfinished urban stories we could tell. I wish I had time to tell many other stories -- Hong Kong, Shanghai, Amsterdam, Singapore, Detroit, New York, London, Fort McMurray ... the list goes on and on, and I just can't write and think fast enough!

But if we were to try to step back from the details of individual city stories like these, what similarities and common themes would we see? **Urban studies** is the field devoted to these themes. There are three major ways to define this field.

First, urban studies can easily be defined by its *object of inquiry* -- people, places, and processes found in cities. So our subject might be said to focus on what's happening in the four hundred cities in the world with populations of at least one million, or perhaps just the nineteen "city-regions" with more than ten million people. Yet other questions immediately appear. What about smaller cities? Indeed, if size were the sole criterion, a city like Vancouver might not merit much attention: many people look "up" the hierarchy to the bigger, more powerful global cities like London, New York, or Tokyo, but "they rarely look horizontally to places like Vancouver," a bias that perpetuates the "marginalization of Canadian cities" overall.[46] Other questions matter, too. Does urban studies include suburban areas, places where "anti-urban angst" often prevails? Does it consider rural areas that are deeply shaped by their interactions with big cities?[47]

Second, the field can be defined by its *approach*. Urban studies is a vibrant and rich blend of theories and methods drawn from a variety of formal disciplines, all bound together by the attempt to understand multi-faceted phenomena of the city. And the goal of understanding cannot be divorced from the desire for action, for progressive change to improve cities and urban life. Consider how Richard LeGates and Frederic Stout survey the field:

> "'Urban Studies' is the term commonly used to refer to the academic study of cities. Knowledge about cities generated by social scientists and others is sometimes taught in a single program, sometimes dispersed among academic departments. The goal of these courses is primarily to teach students to *understand* cities, only secondarily to empower them to change cities. On the other hand, professional city planning, town planning, and regional planning courses explicitly train students to work as city planners. Often planning courses are taught as part of graduate or undergraduate professional degree programs; sometimes as part of geography, architecture, or departments in the social sciences. ... We feel planning and policy should be informed by understanding and that studying urban planning and policy can enhance understanding."[48]

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[46] Loretta Lees (2001). "Vancouver: A Portfolio." *Urban Geography* 19(4), 283-286, quotes from p. 283, 284.

[47] Most urbanists would respond "yes" to both questions.

[48] Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (2003). "Introduction." In LeGates and Stout, editors, *The City Reader*, Third Edition. New York: Routlege, 1-5, quote from pp. 2-3.

> There are three main ways to define urban studies: its object of study, its approach, and its stories of *what urbanists actually do.*

Wandering through an urban studies conference can be dizzying: utility-maximizing economists in the center of the room working out models of alternative urban futures, interpretive sociologists over there discussing the finer points of community ethnographies, savvy political scientists in a huddle formulating strategy to consolidate their power over the organization even while comparing notes on their local urban political machines, planners over there sharing insights on emerging trends in land-use policy and neighborhood design, space-infatuated geographers split between their own huddle of conversation on the meanings of space and place, and wandering amongst the other disciplines' crowds to gather intelligence, insight, and strategies for urban creativity, and so on...

On the good days, all of these experts from diverse fields bring specialized methods, languages, and modes of understanding to the table in an attempt to understand a particular urban phenomenon -- while leaving some of the unproductive disciplinary 'baggage' at home where it belongs. Indeed, we should even question the need to spend *too much* time trying to define our field, because drawing boundaries requires inclusion and exclusion, and some mechanism to 'police' the borders. Any academic discipline becomes dangerous when "discipline" begins to slip from noun to verb. Some of the most valuable insights come from inter-disciplinary research (efforts to fuse the approaches of several fields) and trans-disciplinary work (genuine syntheses of 'traditional' disciplines into new areas of inquiry).

And so we come to a **third** way of answering our question -- a more realistic, and perhaps more honest response: our field is defined in large part by the *actual scholarly activities of its protagonists*. And so things like circumstance, context, history, and personalities matter just as much as abstract principles, theories, and definitions. As one illustration, consider the circumstances around the birth of perhaps the most prominent journal in the field, *Urban Affairs Review*. The journal was established in 1965 by the co-founder and president of Sage Publications, "during days of urban unrest, protest over the Vietnam war, and a growing consensus that the condition of cities, in the United States and elsewhere, demanded concerted attention."[49] Sara Miller McCune, the publisher, was concerned at the time "that publications in the social sciences did not actively reflect the urban world -- they didn't cross disciplinary lines to study what was fully happening in, say, cities."[50] Miller McCune also launched a series of ambitious "Annual Reviews" that gradually became a "type of virtual community of interdisciplinary scholarly study directed at social critique and action"[51] as well as a deep concern for the intricacies of public policy.

So here we are: a dynamic arena of inquiry focusing on urban processes (while also considering the context of urbanization and rural-urban links), marked by a rigorous blend of distinct

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[49] Sallie A. Marston and David C. Perry (1999), "From the Series Editors," in Robert A. Beauregard and Sophie Body-Gendrot, editors, *The Urban Moment: Cosmopolitan Essays on the Late-Twentieth Century City.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, ix-xii, quote on p. x.
[50] Marston and Perry, p. x.
[51] Marston and Perry, p. xi.

approaches from varied disciplines, shaped by the particular circumstances of city life and academic developments in previous generations and today. In this course, our approach to urban studies is closely aligned with that of E. Barbara Phillips, who emphasizes a set of simple (but often ignored) principles for good inquiry:

1. *What you see depends on how you look at it.* Think of any urban issue that interests you: urban poverty, suburban traffic congestion, the economic race between your city and its competitors nearby or across the world. We can look at each of these issues in different ways, with various kinds of tools. We can sift through official government statistics or other data. We can talk to people – many of whom will see the issue from very different perspectives. We can walk around a neighborhood – or we can drive, which may very well give us a different perspective compared to walking the same route. We can travel amongst many different cities. And there are plenty of other tools as well. Even if we focus just on a single tool (the camera), it is clear that different people are prioritizing different things when they look at the city. This is clear when we consider the innovative maps made by urbanists like Eric Fischer, who has devised methods to "geo-tag" photographs on photo-sharing sites like Flickr.

> Four principles to guide the study of cities:
>
> 1. What you see depends on how you look at it.
> 2. How you define the problem determines its solution.
> 3. The questions you ask are just as important as the answers you get.
> 4. Differences of opinion on urban issues often result from disagreements over the "insider as insighter" doctrine.

2. *How you define the problem determines its solution.* In Vancouver and many other cities, one of the most widely-discussed urban problems is affordable housing. Many poor people – and a growing number of middle-class people – simply cannot afford the rising costs of homes. Defining the problem this way implies that the solution is to make housing more affordable. But this solution is fought bitterly, because not every one wants affordable housing: People who already own homes, and who view homes not just as places to live but as investments, want prices to keep rising year after year. Some urban experts, therefore, suggest that we need to define the problem differently – as a right to the city for all people, regardless of ability to pay.

3. *The questions you ask are just as important as the answers you get.* What are the most important cities in the world? Scholars, think tanks, and private companies have produced thousands of studies in recent years that have tried to answer this question. There's no single correct answer: it all depends on how importance is defined and measured. But the answers are not what really

matters: what really counts is that there is a large and growing industry of people and companies working really hard on questions like this.[52]

4. *Studying and talking about cities is shaped by where you stand on the "insider as insighter" doctrine.* This is the idea that "You have to be one to understand one. That is, outsiders cannot truly understand insiders."[53] Do you have to be a resident of a city before others can trust your statements about what's happening there? Do you have to be a resident of a particular neighbourhood to speak about that place? How long does it take to become an "insider" in a city? Do you have to be of the same race/ethnicity, or class, or religious commitment, or gender/sexuality, to talk about a particular community?

Questions like these don't have simple yes/no answers: remember, the questions we ask are just as important as the answers we offer. Answering these particular questions requires serious thought and good judgment – but in the end, there's never a universally-recognized correct way of doing things.

We'll use these principles to explore a wide range of urban processes, problems, and possibilities. We'll explore lots of different things. Some urbanists have helpfully organized the wide range of topics in urban studies into a small, manageable number of distinct themes:

"1. Cities and urban life vary according to time and place. ...
2. Cities reflect and intensify society and culture. ...
3. Cities reveal the best and the worst about the human condition. ...
4. Cities offer the promise -- but not always the reality -- of a better life."[54]

People, Practices, Policies, and Possibilities

In the final moments we have today, we will discuss the course syllabus, logistics, and our expectations for this course.

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[52] Phillips provides even more detailed consideration of this principle. In light of the dangers of supposedly self-evident truths, "as well as a commitment to tentative truths and multiple perspectives," she writes, "I don't provide definitive answers to anything you may have wanted to know about cities, suburbs, or postsuburban forms. I do not, for instance, say how and why riots happen.... Instead, my hope is that this book will help readers to choose more intelligently for themselves among competing claims and truths -- and value-laden statements -- about how cities and suburbs do work and should work." E. Barbara Phillips (1996), *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society, Second Edition.* New York: Oxford University Press, pp. x-xi.
[53] E. Barbara Phillips (2010). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society, Third Edition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. xxv.
[54] Macionis and Parrillo, *Cities and Urban Life*, p. xxi.