Proseminar in Contemporary Urbanism: Theory and Representation.

1. **Course description: Class contents.**

This critical introduction to the theories and forms of representation of urbanism is structured as a series of weekly analysis of notions and elements that can allow us to intervene in contemporary processes of spatial production. The course will begin with a session dedicated to the concept of urbanization—which we will read as a socio-spatial process of territorial structuring ultimately shaping the world at large—and then we will mobilize this planetary framework to investigate how the urban process has radically transformed previous spatial concepts and challenged our disciplinary means of praxis, thus creating new spaces for action, but also new disciplinary responsibilities and uncertainties. With that purpose, instead of relying on an inherited, static vocabulary of spatial levels (such as city, metropolis, or region), the seminar opts for discussing a set of categories that can help us to portray the urban as a multilayered, dynamic and transcalar phenomenon, affecting environments and artifacts, humans and non-humans alike. A phenomenon where the construction of agglomerations is a crucial component of the production of territorial and global regimes of production, circulation, and governance.

Together with: 1) the concept of urbanization, the course will thus study the following dimensions of the urban: 2)geographies, 3)establishments; 4)scales; 5)networks; 6)dynamics; 7)human citizens; 8)non-human citizens; and 9)resources. These categories are intentionally transcalar. They are thought of as tools that can link different realms of intervention or study to a broader conceptualization of the urban phenomenon as a terrestrial process. In this sense, they seek to create a conceptual framework that is equally capable of addressing interventions happening within settlements or vast territorial transformations, and of interrelating what happens inside agglomerations to the human and physical geographies that sustain them. In other words, by conceptualizing the urban as a system of territorial structuring, the course aims to produce instruments that capture with precision the many scales at which urban morphological and socio-environmental processes take place, and the ways in which these scales are interlocked.

In order to accomplish this analysis of the urban as a process affecting diverse environmental, geographical, and political layers, the seminar will complement urban theory with literature coming from allied fields such as anthropology, ecology, geography, and political theory. Similarly, it will situate today’s urban praxis within a broader disciplinary history of projects and theories that considered the urban in territorial or planetary terms. By analyzing this body of texts and designs, the class ultimately seeks to foster a critical dialogue about the conditions of contemporary urbanism and to co-construct theoretical and representational instruments that address, question, and challenge the environmental and social transformations that accompany urbanization.

2. **Course description: Your work.**

The seminar is a collective exercise of dissection of key questions in contemporary urbanism. Participation thus requires actively engaging in weekly discussions among students and faculty, and the development of an individual graphic and textual research project that will also be shared and discussed in the class. In particular, the class requirements consist in the following:
For the 12 credit track

- **Weekly Responses.** Every week students have to write a short response paper (250-300 words) to one of the texts, and to upload the document to the class blog.

- **Weekly Presentations and in-class discussions.** Every week a team of 2-3 students will present the readings for that session. On Monday prior to the class, the students in charge will meet the Teaching Assistant to refine the content of the presentation. After this conversation, students will upload to the class Stellar site a pdf with their presentation, including any additional material they want to discuss. For the presentation, it would be helpful to situate the authors in context; extract short citations that synthesize the authors’ arguments and positions; identify urban projects that highlight the spatial issues brought forth by the theme; draw on additional visual and spatial examples to illustrate the discussion and raise questions to engage all participants.

While readings will be discussed collectively, the class will be divided in groups of 2 students, each of which will have to lead the response to a particular text.

- **Semester long research: The Terrestrial Project.**

  Russian philosopher Boris Groys has argued that in the domains of art and architecture processes of discipline construction involve progressively incorporating to each field’s archive those elements that remained outside of it; that is, a changing, outside reality that has been neglected, or considered off-limits and external to the discipline in question. This process of incorporation not only allows updating a discipline’s social relevance by reconnecting it to external transformations. It also fosters a process of self-interrogation and critique; a reevaluation of the tools of intervention, means of representation, and theoretical frameworks that a discipline has used so far. In this sense, Groys’s analysis counters formalist theories of artistic evolution, which tend to portray evolution as the result of internal, autonomous processes of disciplinary self-reflexivity, rather than a derivative of the interrelation between art practices and an external social sphere.

  Primarily, the research project is an opportunity for you to start exploring an artifact / space / condition affecting contemporary urbanism that you find relevant, and thus worthwhile incorporating to our discipline’s “archive” as a catalyst for new possibilities of urbanity. Second, and in line with the theoretical agenda of the class, the exercise asks you to understand these possible urbanities as part of a reframing of urbanization that equally comprises agglomerations and the global geographies that sustain them. In that regard, the research exercise suggests two interrelated, conceptual orientations: the terrestrial and the cosmopolitical. The terrestrial prioritizes engaging with the geographical and environmental factors that are affected by urbanization, hence incorporating discourses about ecology, metabolism and production as part of the urban vocabulary. The cosmopolitical mobilizes this geographic understanding of urbanization to question the economic, demographic, and social transformations the urban process entails in order to inquire possible forms of living in common.

  Researches will be both textual and visual. The text must: a) articulate a clear topic of study, b) elaborate a clear thesis statement explaining its relevance for contemporary urbanism; and c) mobilize the body of urban theory that is relevant for your study. The selected topic must be analytically explored, unpacking the main problems it entails, the different factors that have an impact on it, the central questions it raises for urban designers, and revealing the evidence that supports your argument. The analyses have to be expanded by graphic means. That is, mechanisms of architectural
representation (such as plans, maps, sections, axonometrics, diagrams, etc.) should act as methods of investigation in their own right (and not as mere appendix to the text) revealing factors as the components, materials, typologies, forms of production, technologies or scales that constitute your object of study.

The research process is structured in multiple stages: a proposal, a mapping and visualization set, a draft, a class presentation, and a finished version. This final document should be 3,500 words (not including bibliography and footnotes) +10 original illustrations.

The following milestones structure the work:

9.9. Proposal: First drawing and caption

Produce one visualization illustrating how the urban question you are addressing is spatially manifested and negotiated. Submit 1 pdf slide + 150 word caption.

09.30. Abstract and visualizations

Articulate your thesis and research question and develop 3 key drawings. Submit 500 words + annotated bibliography with 10 entries + 3 drawings with captions. An annotated bibliography is a list of citations to books, articles, and documents. Each citation is followed by a brief (usually about 150 words) descriptive and evaluative paragraph, the annotation.

10.28. Visualizations

Develop visual representations (6) + 50 words captions for each.

11.25. Compiled draft

Present a second iteration of your abstract and bibliography, together with a compiled, improved version of your 10 visualizations and captions.

12.9. Final presentation

Final compiled document of 10 visualizations and captions.

12.16. Final submission

Research paper and visualizations.

These different phases are further indicated in the class schedule.

For the 9 credit track (doctoral students)

Students in this track will complete the same weekly assignments than the other students. The specific format and content of the semester long research project will be individually discussed between each student and the instructor.

Attendance.

Work in the class will build sequentially. Therefore, student commitment to incremental development on a weekly basis is of great importance. The demanding nature and pace of this class necessitates regular attendance and requires that
deadlines are consistently met. Attendance in class and for the duration of all formal reviews is mandatory. Greater than two absences from class without medical excuse supported by a doctor’s note or verifiable personal emergency could result in a failing grade or a NE for the course; those missing more than 3 classes during the semester will receive a fail or NE. Persistent lateness will also contribute to a lowered grade for participation.

**Evaluation Criteria.**

25% Attendance and participation in discussions.

25% Seminar presentations.

50% Semester-long research project.

**Grading Definition.**

A. Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive knowledge, and a skilful use of concepts and/or materials.

B. Good performance demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.

C. Adequate performance demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems, and adequate preparation for moving on to more advanced work in the field.

D. Minimally acceptable performance demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems, but also demonstrating deficiencies serious enough to make it inadvisable to proceed further in the field without additional work.

F. Failed. This grade also signifies that the student must repeat the subject to receive credit.

NE. No record will appear on the external transcript.

**Academic Integrity and Honesty.**

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently. Plagiarism is a major academic offense. Read: [http://integrity.mit.edu](http://integrity.mit.edu).

**Writing and Communication Center.**

The WCC at MIT (Writing and Communication Center) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts. The WCC is staffed completely by MIT lecturers. All have advanced degrees. All are experienced college classroom teachers of communication. All are all are published scholars and writers. Not counting the WCC’s director’s years (he started the WCC in 1982), the WCC lecturers have a combined 133 years’ worth of teaching here at MIT (ranging from 4 to 24 years). The WCC works with undergraduate, graduate students, post-docs, faculty, staff, alums, and spouses. The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including practicing classroom presentations & conference talks as well as designing slides). No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, helps you see new...
implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with all English as Second Language issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice. The WCC is located in E18-233, 50 Ames Street. To guarantee yourself a time, make an appointment. To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to https://mit.mywconline.com/. To access the WCC’s many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, go to http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/. Check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours and available appointments.

**Student Performance Criteria. NAAB.**

Realm A: Critical Thinking and Representation

- A1. Communication Skills: Ability to read, write, speak and listen effectively
- A2. Design Thinking Skills: Ability to raise clear and precise questions, use abstract ideas to interpret information, consider diverse points of view, reach well-reasoned conclusions, and test alternative outcomes against relevant criteria and standards.
- A3. Visual Communication Skills: Ability to use appropriate representational media, such as traditional graphic and digital technology skills, to convey essential formal elements at each stage of the programming and design process.
- A5. Investigative Skills: Ability to gather, assess, record, apply, and comparatively evaluate relevant information within architectural coursework and design processes.

**Communication with the instructor.**

I will reply to your emails promptly, usually within 24-48 hours, excluding weekends. Office hours are by appointment. Please cc TA on all communication.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>For Class</th>
<th>In Class</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W1</td>
<td>09.2 Introduction</td>
<td>Read texts.</td>
<td>Presentation of the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2</td>
<td>09.9 Urbanization</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W3</td>
<td>09.16 Geographies</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W4</td>
<td>09.23 Establishments</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W5</td>
<td>09.30 Research project</td>
<td>Research: Submit proposal (1 drawing).</td>
<td>Presentation of proposals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W6</td>
<td>10.7 Scales</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W7</td>
<td>10.14 Networks</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>W8</td>
<td>10.21 Dynamics</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W9</td>
<td>10.28 Research project</td>
<td>Research: Submit 6 new drawings.</td>
<td>Presentation of research projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>W11</td>
<td>11.11 Veterans Day.</td>
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<td>No class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>W12</td>
<td>11.18 Non-Human</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W13</td>
<td>11.25 Thanksgivings.</td>
<td>Research: Submit full draft, with 10 drawings.</td>
<td>No Class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W14</td>
<td>12.2 Resources.</td>
<td>Read texts, submit response, present.</td>
<td>Presentation &amp; discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W15</td>
<td>12.9 Research project</td>
<td>Research: Submit final 10 drawings.</td>
<td>Final presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W16</td>
<td>12.16 No class.</td>
<td>Research: Submit 10 drawings + paper.</td>
<td>No Class.</td>
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</table>
**Weekly structure and readings**

(note: the definitive list of readings will consist in a selection of the texts included in the “Read” category below, in response to the conversations we have in class. The readings and projects included in the “Expand” categories are only references, not requirements).

**Week 1. Introduction**

Presentation of the overall course objectives, research methodology and assignments.

*Read*


**Week 2. Urbanization.**

The goal of this session is to historicize and unpack the notion of urbanization. We will analyze its roots, interrogate its conditions, and explore the infrastructures that support it. Ultimately, this session studies urbanization as a sociospatial process affecting the planet at large, and questions the relationship this notion maintains with other processes and concepts describing the world scale.

*Read:


*Expand Seeing:

Expand Reading:


**Week 3. Geographies**

This section discusses possible relations between urbanization and its terrestrial, geographical substratum; focusing on three main aspects: a) contrasting ways in which urbanists have conceptualized this relation; b) the challenges that are affecting this relation in our current age of climate change; and c) the technologies of construction and representation that mediate this relation.
Read:

- Volter M. Welter, “The Valley Region. From Figure of Thought to Figure on the Ground,” *New Geographies* 6, Grounding Metabolism (2014): 78-87.

Expand Seeing:

- Jim Wescoat, LCAU and Sheila Kennedy, Gradients of relocation.
- Matur / Da Cunha. https://www.mathurdacunha.com
- MIT Urban Risk Lab. https://urbantisklab.org/work

Expand Reading:

Week 4. Establishments

The goal of this class is to interrogate how the central, historic categories that urban theory used to describe settlements and their surroundings (such as city, village, countryside) operate today. Said in another words, we will enquire how the process of urbanization has challenged or hybridized previous (but still crucial) spatial categories, and how this has motivated a reconsideration of our tools of spatial intervention.

Read:


Expand Seeing:

− Christopher Lee, Common Frameworks: Rethinking the Developmental City in China, (Cambridge, MA: Graduate School of Design, 2016).

Expand Reading:
− Antonio Font et al., The Explosion of the City: Morphologies, Observations and Motions within Recent Territorial Transformations in the South Europe Urban Regions (Barcelona: COAC, 2004).
− Angelo Bucci, Sao Paulo. Reasons for Architecture (Texas, AU: The University of Texas, 2011).
− Rural Urban Framework, Transforming the Chinese Countryside (Birkhauser Verlag, 2013).
Week 5. Presentation of Research Projects

Week 6. Scales

Here we will address existing and emerging scales of spatial articulation, treating them from a bio-political point of view. That is, as forms of articulating political relations, but also of structuring life. In this regard, the session will delve into two crucial categories of analysis: the elusive, scalarly indeterminate notion of “territory,” and the related notion of “border.” The original meaning of territory referred the space outside the city. What can it mean now, if urbanization lacks an outside? Can it help us to conceptualize and articulate spatial structures that exceed the metropolitan scale? Is the consideration of different territorial possibilities also a way to reconfigure borders?

Read:


Expand Seeing:

− Le Corbusier, The Three Human Establishments (Chandigarh: Punjab Govt., Dept. of Town & Country Planning: 1979 [1945]).
− The Open Workshop. http://www.theopenworkshop.ca/Pages/A_Urbanism.html

Clara Oloriz, ed. Landscape As Territory (Barcelona: Actar, 2019).

Expand Reading:


Kerb 24, “Territory” (2020).


Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, Border as Method, Or, the Multiplication of Labor (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).


Week 7. Networks

Spatialized as infrastructures, networks constitute central, structuring elements of the urban; orchestrating its different modes of production, circulation, and metabolism. More broadly, the notion of network has become an intellectual tool helping to rethink other conceptualizations of the urban. The goal of this section is to explore key urban networks, and to analyze the relation they maintain with other instruments of sociospatial articulation.

Read:


– Matthew Gandy, Rethinking Urban Metabolism, City 8, no.3 (2004): 363-379.

Expand Seeing:

– Alison and Peter Smithson, Golden Lane Study (1952-57), and Berlin Hauptstadt (1957).


– Fritz Haller. Integral urban, a global model (1968-75).


– MIT Urban Metabolism Lab. www.urbanmetabolism.org/


Expand Reading:


– Ilka and Andreas Ruby, eds., Infrastructure Space (Ruby Press, 2017).

## Week 8. Dynamics

The intensification of urbanization after World War II and, especially, after the 1970s neoliberal turn has implied that forms of spatial organization are more than ever in constant flux. Urbanization relentlessly grows across the world. And yet, this is a highly uneven and variable process, where densification and growth coexist with degrowth, obsolescence and abandonment. This section analyzes some of the key ongoing dynamics that affect the urban, transforming as a result densities, urban forms, and the composition of populations.

**Read:**


**Expand Reading:**

- Daniel Abramson, Obsolescence: An Architectural History (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016)
- Sergio Lopez-Pineiro, A Glossary of Urban Voids (Berlin: Jovis, 2020)

**Week 9.**

**Presentation of Research Projects.**

**Week 10. Human Citizens.**

Spatial organization is, most fundamentally, a way to organize and coordinate life, both in its biological and political sense. In this sense, humans are simultaneously *actors* who can engage and participate in urban processes, and *subjects* of spatial regimes that regulate all facets of life (interpersonal relations, labor, health) in certain ways. This section will focus on the circular relations between these two conditions, analyzing conceptions of the human self as a political and biological entity and their translations to forms of spatial practice.

**Read:**


**Expand Seeing:**

- Leonid Sabsovich, Mikhail Barhseh, and Vladimir Vladimirov, *The USSR in Fifteen Years, and Domm-Kommuna* (1929)
Siegfried Ebeling, Space as Membrane (1930).
Constant Nieuwenheis, New Babylon (1957-74).
Ant Farm, Clean Air Pod (1970).
Archizoom, No-stop City. (1971).

Expand Reading:
Peter Sloterdijk, Spheres III. Vol. 3, Foams: Plural Spherology (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011), excerpts on immunity and social groups.


**Week 11. No Class**

**Week 12. Non-human Citizens**

After being historically considered in urban theory as a passive agent, subject to the transformations imposed on it by urbanization, nature is now being reconceptualized as an active agent with its own voice. The section studies how ongoing debates about the status of nature are affecting urban practices.

**Read:**


Expand Seeing:


Expand Reading:

Week 13. No Class.

Week 14. Resources?

Urban design has often treated as externalities the management of critical resources for the functioning of cities: materials, food, energy, and waste come and go, and are managed elsewhere. This last session studies how in our current situation of urbanism without an outside these elements no longer can be treated as externalities but as key factors of urban design, and brings to the foreground an alternative tradition of urban design interested in the integration of settlement and production.

Read:


Expand Seeing:


− Frank Lloyd Wright. Broadacre City (1932).


Expand Reading:
- Felipe Correa, Beyond the City: Resource Extraction Urbanism in South America (Austin: University of Texas, 2016).
- Jeannette Sordi, Luis Valenzuela, and Felipe Vera, eds., The Camp and the City: Territories of Extraction (Trento: ListLab, 2017).
- Eve Blau and Ivan Rupnik, Baku: Oil and Urbanism (Park Books, 2018).

Week 15. Final Presentation