

AMST 334  
Urban America  
ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY  
CAS 228  
Thursday, 6:45 p.m.  
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## Course Introduction

Like *New England* and *The South*, this course on Urban America seeks to explore the relationship between culture and environment. Unlike those two courses, this course directs our attention to a specific type of environment, rather than to a region of the country. Since at least the days of Thomas Jefferson, Americans have had a love-hate relationship with cities. We will want to explore this ambiguous attitude. First, however, we'll have to understand what a city is: how, as a made thing, it represents planning and thinking, and aesthetic values. Then we can proceed to look at ways individuals and groups have reacted to this unique type of environment.

The course has been thoroughly revised **twice** since the first time I taught it in 2003. Three of the books for the course have been replaced. There are a number of reasons behind this revision. First, my sense is that fewer and fewer Roger Williams University students are very well acquainted with urban places. Most now live in suburban or even exurban communities. This very unfamiliarity with cities, large or small, famous or obscure, reinforces many of the negative city stereotypes. I've chosen some new books which will both explore and to some extent counter those stereotypes. Second, as more and more consumers compete for smaller and smaller supplies of energy, many analysts are beginning to question whether American - style suburbs are going to be sustainable much longer. If these men and women are correct this generation may be the last suburban generation, and coming to grips with urban life may be a task many of them will face. Finally, there are a number of new tools which are available for exploring cities... not only the central business districts, but the neighborhoods, as well. We'll be using these tools often, and we'll learn to use these tools together.

**WARNING:** This course should be considered experimental. It may head in quite unpredictable directions. Students in it will have to be both flexible and self-motivating. The best of them will also seize the initiative and explore the possibilities of what we're going to do with me. ***Some students are not comfortable in this kind of an environment. If you are a student who needs lots of structure and specific and predictable outcomes, you may want to consider taking another course instead of this one.*** On the other hand, if this sounds like a chance for you to break new intellectual ground, and you can trust me to be fair and flexible in my assessments, then this course could be just the thing for you.

As is the case in all my courses (and has been the case since 1972), the course introduction serves as a broad overview of the semester, but the syllabus constructed on a week by week basis. Also, as has been the case since 2000, is each course has a website which supplements and enriches the syllabus. Shortly I shall stop distributing the paper version (there will be printable version available on the website) and students will be responsible for going to the website and locating the work for the next class themselves.

The URL for the class website <http://amst334urban.homestead.com/>.

At the left of the home page is the navigation calendar.  
Click on the date to discover the week's work

### **Books for the course:**

There is a lot of reading for this course. Be warned! If you don't enjoy putting your nose in a book on a regular basis, this may not be a good course for you to take. (It seems like I'm giving a lot of warnings here. I don't want to scare everyone away, but I don't want anyone to be surprised about the amount of work, either.)

Jacobs, Jane

*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*  
Random House, 1972

Isenberg, Alison

*Downtown America*  
University of Chicago Press, 2004

Suarez, Ray

*The Old Neighborhood: What we Lost in the Great Suburban Migration 1966-1999*  
New York: The Free Press, 1999

Ezell, Kyle

*Get Urban: The Complete Guide to City Living*  
Dulles, VA: Capital Books, Inc. 2004

There will be other things I'll ask you to read as well. These will be drawn from the nearly endless list of resources available on the Internet.

## Why these Particular Books?

Jane Jacobs' ***The Death and Life of Great American Cities*** has been a favorite of mine for twenty-five years or more. Jacobs challenges the doom sayers who wail about what terrible places cities are. She challenges the orthodox view of city planners of the middle 20th centuries, whose theories of "Urban Renewal" did so much damage to vast swaths of the fabric of the city. Her thesis is that planners had never understood how cities actually work, and as you'll see simply by perusing the table of contents, she wants to tell us how things as simple as sidewalks function far beyond places of passage from point *x* to point *y*. She will also help us to understand the nature of urban neighborhoods, where the residential space is as important as the commercial space is.

Most Americans equate the Central Business District or "Downtown" with the idea of cities, and they assume that "downtown" has *always* existed in the form in which it exists today. Alison Isenberg's ***Downtown America*** challenges that idea. Her book will introduce us to the men *and women* who actually *created* the modern "downtown". Through this book, we'll learn why they made the choices they did, and what some of the consequences of those choices were.

Americans began to flee the cities for the suburbs in the years following the end of the Second World War. The pace accelerated with the building of the Interstate Highway System commencing in the late 1950s. Isenberg and Jacobs suggest some reasons why this happened. Ray Suarez' *The Old Neighborhood* analyzes first "white flight," and then later, "black flight" as the more affluent of the citizenry departed for the suburbs, leaving the poorest (and some of the richest) Americans in possession of the Cities themselves. Suarez was for many years a popular host of National Public Radio's ***Talk of the Nation***. He will take us to look at inner city neighborhoods in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cleveland, Brooklyn (now a part of New York City, but an independent city in its own right until the mid-19th Century), Washington, DC, and Miami. In each place we'll meet citizens struggling to save their old neighborhoods or wrestling with the decision of whether to stay or leave.

Finally, we'll take a look at what some are predicting will be an urban renaissance. There is evidence that this may be happening right now: A number of American Cities which lost population throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have seen that loss abate, and even reverse itself. More may see this happen as gas prices continue to rise and make the economics of commuting less and less affordable. Ezell *loves* city living,

and his book is a Primer on how to **Get Urban** successfully. We'll use it for an exercise in the imagination and simulation. More about that later.

## **Work for the Course.**

The work of the course falls into three overlapping sections.

In **Part One**, we'll ground ourselves in the tools we'll use to try to understand American Urban life, including theories proposed by Jane Jacobs. In

**Part Two**, we'll study aspects of urban life in America from both a historical and contemporary point of view. We'll look at the historic development of "downtown," and at "downtown" in contemporary America, as well. We'll also begin to look at new ways of living an urban life, and at the kinds of efforts which are going into reviving the idea of cities as good places to live and raise families.

**Part three** will constitute a series of reports on key American Cities which will be presented by teams of from four to five students. Currently my roster shows 30 students, which means at a minimum six groups of five students each. . Each group will prepare a presentation on one of the cities from the list below. The presentations will include something of the history, cultural life, characteristics of the contemporary population in terms of such things as wealth, education, and ethnicity, and an assessment of what it's like to live in that particular place at this point in the country's life. No two of these cities are alike, and therefore no two presentations have to be exactly alike. I'll let the class divide itself into teams. I'll let the teams indicate their choices of cities, but I may have to do some assigning of places, if too many want to choose the same place. This time around I'm going to allow students to choose from some smaller cities as well as larger ones.

## **The Cities (Alphabetical Order)**

Atlanta, GA  
Austin TX  
Boston, MA  
Chicago, IL  
Dallas, TX  
Denver, CO  
Detroit, MI  
Fargo, ND  
Houston, TX  
Long Beach CA  
Los Angeles, CA  
Miami, FL  
New York (Manhattan), NY  
Philadelphia, PA  
Phoenix, AZ  
Portland, OR  
Reno, NV  
Sacramento, CA  
Salt Lake City, UT  
San Diego, CA  
San Francisco, CA  
San Jose, CA  
Seattle, WA  
Washington, DC

The reason I've selected these particular cities is that there is a unique data source available for all of them that is unavailable for other cities. I am willing to entertain the suggestion of other cities in which groups might be interested, as long as students realize that certain kinds of things would not be as easily obtained.

There are twenty-four cities listed, five more than last time I offered the course, and I expect no more than eight groups . . . This should keep anyone from having to work with a city they absolutely don't want to work with. I'll have more information about this project for you shortly. I want to form the groups by the end of class on September 7, and I'd like to have the cities chosen by those groups by September 14. I'd like the first groups to present by the first week of November. So, roughly, we'll finish Part I of the course by midterm-time, and then work in parts II and III for the rest of the term. I'm expecting reports to run about 20 to 30 minutes or so, so we'll be able to do two a week, sometimes three, as necessary.

## Evaluation and Grading:

**Midterm Examination** (Take-home) on *Jacobs*, and possibly some of *Isenberg*, depending on how things go: 25% of final grade.

**Final Examination** (Take-home) on sections of *Isenberg* and *Suarez*, 25% of final grade.

**City Project:** 25% of Final Grade, divided into two parts . . . Individual contribution (20%) and overall group (5%). Each member of the group will write up his/her portion of the project in a form appropriate to what he or she does. No matter what the particular portion is, a bibliography will constitute part of the write-up.

**Urban Homesteading Simulation** 15%. This exercise, based on Kyle Ezell's *Get Urban*, will ask you to examine what kind of urbanite you might like to be (this will make sense once you thumb through the book, but the list includes *Post Industrial, Garden, Eclectic, and Blank Canvas*) and then choose an appropriate urban place to live...not just a city, but a neighborhood *within* the city, right down to the street and just maybe even the block or house level. There will be tools available to help you do this. One class towards the end of the semester will be a "housewarming party" for all of you.

**Intangibles** 10% (Attendance, participation, contribution to your group, and the like).

I've charted a very ambitious course for us. If it should turn out that this is too ambitious, I'll make corrections, but I'm going to expect everyone's best effort in this class, which is truly going to be a collaborative project if it works well. I'm raring to go, and I hope you are, as well.

## Attendance Policy:

I think it was Woody Allen who once remarked that 90% of success in life can be attributed to simply showing up. On the other hand, none of us is entirely in control of his or her schedule. I try to construct my attendance policy around these two points. I do take attendance, and I expect people to be here. I liberally excuse absences when I'm informed *in advance*, or when the cause is *truly* an emergency. The proper method of informing me of a conflict is by e-mail at the class e-mail address: [amst334\\_urban@msn.com](mailto:amst334_urban@msn.com). The class meets once a week. Consequently each absence deprives the class of 1/13 of a student's potential contribution to the group. Two *unexcused* absences will reduce

one's grade by one degree (i.e., from B- to C+). Three *unexcused* absences will result in no credit for the course.

Because group work is an important part of this class, attendance at group meetings is crucial, and dereliction of group responsibilities will result in a grade penalty for the course. Groups will, by and large, set their own rules. However, I will meet with each group at least once in the course of the semester, at a time mutually agreeable to all. Each group will choose a leader/contact person (by whatever method the group wishes to use). That person will receive extra credit for the extra responsibilities involved. These will include keeping a diary of the group's activities and organizing and chairing the class presentation.

## **Academic Honesty**

Most of you probably encountered Immanuel Kant's *What is Enlightenment* in your Core 102 Class. If not, it is worth a quick reading, and **This LINK** will bring you to it. Kant practically defines "enlightenment" as a product of the courage to use one's own mind. Simply put, lacking that courage, one's learning suffers, and one's contribution to the learning of others is diminished. Consequently, this course, like all Roger Williams University courses, subscribes to the University statement on plagiarism and issues of academic honesty generally. These are found in the most recent copy of the University Catalogue, or on line **HERE**.