

AMST 334  
Urban America  
ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY  
CAS 228  
T, F, 3:30 - 4:50  
Spring, 2008

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Week of **March 25, 2008**

For **Tuesday, March 25** (and **Friday, March 28**)

Welcome back, first thing: This week is going to be a little unusual, and is going to require us to do some playing by ear. On Tuesday, I expect to welcome Professor Witold Rybczynski to our class. Those of you who took **American Studies 100** or 110 from me will recognize him as the author of the book *Home: A short history of an Idea*, one of my favorites. Rybczynski is currently the Martin and Margy Meyerson Professor of Urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania. He's written nine books and writes frequently for **The Atlantic Monthly** and **Slate**, where his offerings include an appreciative obituary of Jane Jacobs. Whatever he has to say to us, I'm delighted to have the chance to introduce you to one of the premiere thinkers and writers on things urban, in America and abroad. I hope many of you will follow over to the Library to attend his 5:30 lecture in the Mary Teft White Center.

**Because we have a guest on Tuesday, and because I don't want a situation where I don't leave time for discussion and questions on your Jacobs paper, I'm changing the due date from *Friday the 28 of March to Tuesday, April First*. No this isn't an April Fool's Joke.**

In all likelihood we won't begin discussing the chapters/subjects below until Friday. I would like to have you begin reading as if they were to be discussed on Tuesday. I hope you'll also take some time to peruse the links I have provided--lots more visual information available for you from these sites.

We start to shift our focus from an analysis of what makes cities or city areas succeed or fail to a look at the archetypal image of the city generally, the Downtown

*When you're alone  
And life is making you lonely,  
You can always go downtown  
When you've got worries,  
All the noise and the hurry  
Seems to help, I know, downtown  
Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city  
Linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are  
pretty  
How can you lose?  
The lights are much brighter there  
You can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares  
and go  
Downtown, things'll be great when you're  
Downtown, no finer place for sure,  
Downtown, everything's waiting for you*

Petula Clark 1964

**Read**, in Isenberg, Alison, *Downtown America*  
Introduction, 1-12  
Chapter 1, *City Beautiful or Beautiful Mess?* 13 - 41  
Chapter 2, *Fixing an Image of Commercial Dignity* 42 - 77  
Chapter 3, *Mrs Consumer, Mrs Brown America*  
*and Mr. Chain Store Man.* 78 - 12

Unlike the Jacobs book which I've taught for a number of years, I'm using *Isenberg* for the only the third time. Students liked it before, and I hope you will too. There are a couple of things to consider at the outset. First, this is a book made in the mold of traditional history text. This means it is chronological rather than topical in the way it is organized, and the narrative presents many persons in specific places doing specific things. In this situation, one faces a need to consider how much detail to try to remember, and the danger is getting bogged down in the mass of factual information the book contains. To some extent you're helped here by the fact that Professor Isenberg has separated the documentation from the narrative--102 pages of footnotes and another 20 or so index pages indicate how thorough her research is. There will be little reason for you to pursue any of that material unless you have a personal reason for attending to it.

Isenberg has provided some assistance to you which should also help you sift out what you need to understand. **First, she provides useful subtitles for her chapters.** I haven't bothered to reproduce them on the class syllabi, but that doesn't mean you should ignore them and not meditate on them. Second, unlike Jacobs, she copiously illustrates this book. You won't have to find your own visual images. **I warn you like I warn my students in other classes. Pictures are serious! (They're also fun).** I mean that it is a mistake to consider them with relief in the "aha, less to read" way of thinking. *Pay attention to the captions. In many cases these illustrations relate to each other. Isenberg uses the captions to suggest how to look at them. Take her suggestions!*

## **NOTES ON THE READINGS**

### **Introduction**

- We tend to take "downtown" as a given...a natural outgrowth of the forces which create cities. What Isenberg suggests is that there is nothing inevitable about the way individual downtowns develop. Decisions of specific people have shaped the nature of downtowns, and because the development of the modern downtown is relatively recent in historical terms, it is possible to trace these decisions to their sources and evaluate the results, good and bad, which have followed from them.
- Downtown wouldn't have happened at all, if it didn't represent a cultural value. As you read the introduction, become aware of Isenberg's thesis concerning this. Be aware, too, that her interest has a personal source.

### **Chapter 1, City Beautiful or Beautiful Mess?**

- It isn't often that we think about gender differences with regard to the urban experience. Isenberg suggests that men and women experienced downtown differently, and that the "new" downtown was, in some sense, created by, and for women. What values associated with women become key in "beautifying" downtown? Some of you will note that the campaigns for women's rights leading to the passage of the amendment granting voting rights to women and the campaign to "clean up" cities are contemporaries. Can this be mere accident?

### **Chapter 2, Fixing an Image of Commercial Dignity**

- Perhaps the most important thing to recognize in this chapter is the importance of imagination in the creating of the new downtown; and imagination enhanced and stimulated by the work of commercial artists and photographers. The illustrations in this chapter are vital, and I plan to spend some considerable time discussing them in class. I'll follow the questions and links between the photographs in the captions, so think about them.

### **Chapter 3, Mrs Consumer, Mrs Brown America and Mr. Chain Store Man.**

- This chapter looks at changing patterns of consumerism, at a newer "scientific" approach to marketing, and at the pervasive influence of race and racial issues which shapes the form of downtown and downtown-like commercial areas in cities. Most of us are not as aware as we should be of the influence of legal segregation on matters like this, not only in the south, but the north, as well. Segregation was the national norm during the decades when downtown took its shape, and it distorted patterns which might have developed otherwise.
- Related to this were patterns of zoning by use, a relatively new idea in the early decades of the twentieth century. Look carefully at the plans for Akron and Hamilton, Ohio, (figs. 3.6, 3.7, and 3.8) and also at the racial map for Houston, figure 3.9, and see if you can see how these patterns effect not only downtown, but the pattern of urban life generally.

The internet version of this syllabus provides a number of links to websites with literally thousands of historic photographs of "Downtowns" around the United States. Take some time to look at the. (There are links to films and documentaries, as well).