

AMST 334  
Urban America  
ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY  
GHH 108  
T, TH 11:00 -12:20  
Spring, 2013

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## Course Introduction

Like New England, this course on Urban America seeks to explore the relationship between culture and environment. Unlike New England, 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 continues to evolve every time I teach it as I seek to respond to changes in the students who elect to take it. The first time I offered the course, many students were Historic Preservation majors. Now the course attracts a broader group of students. Consequently I've changed the focus in three ways. 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 negative city stereotypes which have been part of our culture since the days of Jefferson. 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 always be considered experimental. It may head in quite unpredictable directions, as it has in every previous offering. The more students take ownership of the course, the more this is true.

- 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 is constructed on a week by week basis. Also, as has been the case since 2000, each of my courses 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. (If there's no technological breakdown, you're seeing this even as I present it to you)

The URL for the class website is <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.)

These should be purchased and added to your personal library:

- Rybczynski, Witold;  
*City Life*  
Simon & Schuster Touchstone Book, 1996

- Jacobs, Jane,  
*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*  
Random House, 1972
- Terkel, Studs  
*Studs Terkel's Chicago*  
New Press, 2012
- Howells, William Dean  
*The Rise of Silas Lapham*  
New York, Penguin Books, 1983  
Kindle Edition Free at  
<http://tinyurl.com/bybaxyh>  
Also available on the Internet at [Project Gutenberg](#)

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?

What is a City? What does it mean to be *urban*? If one were to ask the proverbial "man (or woman) on the street" he/she would probably reflect on the size first. Cities are *big* places with millions of people in them—Places like New York or Los Angeles in this country, or London or Calcutta elsewhere. Witold Rybczynski's *City Life* will help disabuse us of that idea. Is Philadelphia a City? Was it urban at the time of the American Revolution? Today's Bristol has about the same population as Philadelphia had back then. How many would call Bristol a city, or urban?

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. After a long and productive life, Ms. Jacobs died in April, 2006.

If you've taken courses with me before, you'll note that I quite often include a work of fiction in the course. William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is about 19<sup>th</sup> century Boston. I chose it because I'm

assuming that many of you know Boston at least in part, and because much of Boston for example Beacon Street and Commonwealth Boulevard are still much the same as they were in Howells' day—at least physically. Some of the social problems about which Howells writes may still be with us, in one form or another. Be warned, there are no ZOMBIES in the book, no vampires, either.

Studs Terkel's *Studs Terkel's Chicago* is a substitute. To my dismay, I found out that our bookstore couldn't acquire *Division Street America*, my first choice. This book is new to me, and it looks like a good one. Studs Terkel was the foremost oral historian of his time: perhaps the foremost oral historian of all times. He spent most of his life in Chicago as a radio show host and reporter, all the time writing oral histories based on interviews with ordinary people. Division Street is a real street in Chicago, but the name was symbolic as well. Urban America is rife with divisions based on wealth, race, and other factors. We'll see that crop up in this book. While we're at it we'll experience Studs in other ways as well—including a marvelous website hosted by the Chicago Historical Society, [Conversations with America](#).

## 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 and examples provided by Witold Rybczynski.

\* 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 the various elements of a city and at those elements in contemporary America, as well. We'll read a novel about Boston as it was back in 1884. We'll see something of the social issues prevalent then, among them the difference between "old" and "new" money, and see if we can discover what's changed and what's remained the same in the intervening years.

\* Part three will constitute a series of reports on key American Cities which will be presented by teams of students. Currently my roster shows 31 students, which means at a minimum six groups of five students each. I would prefer slightly smaller groups, perhaps three or four persons each. Each group will prepare a presentation on one of the cities from the list I will publish shortly. 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 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.

I'm not quite ready to announce the list of cities yet. I want to give you a chance to participate in city selection. I'm going to create a space where you can introduce yourselves to each other and give some indication of what cities in the United States interest you, which ones you're familiar with, and which ones you'd like to become more familiar with. Each of our texts includes information about specific cities. But I don't necessarily have to limit your choices to those cities alone.

### Evaluation and Grading:

- \* Midterm Examination (Take-home) on Rybczynski and at least some of Jacobs: 25% of final grade.

- \* Final Examination (Take-home) on sections of Jacobs, 25% of final grade.

- \* City Project: 30% of Final Grade, divided into two parts . . . Individual contribution (20%) and overall group (10%). 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. It may be possible that I'll offer you the chance to try some website building using <http://sites.google.com> I've been playing with it, and it looks like fun.

- \* A project based on Howells. 15% This will be something in the line of a book report, but will also involve looking at contemporary Boston. More on that later.

- \* Intangibles 5 (Attendance, participation, and the like).

If you've had me before you know that these numbers are flexible and subject to change as the situation evolves. I'm not a scary grader, for those of you who don't know me yet.

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 my e-mail address: [mswanson@rwu.edu](mailto:mswanson@rwu.edu). The class meets twice a week. Consequently each absence deprives the class of 1/26 of a student's potential contribution to the group. Four unexcused absences will reduce one's grade by one degree (i.e., from B- to C+).

\* 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. Seeing as there's a Starbucks in the palace where my office is, I guess I can treat to coffee at these meetings. 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 there is a link on the website version of this introduction. 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. Again, the course website provides a link.