The American City  
(AMER 8000)

Course Description: The urbanization of the United States serves as a vehicle for exploring, analyzing, and representing important currents that flow through society. While the U.S. was once a majority-rural nation, currently 80% of the population resides in metropolitan areas. The city has been approached by Baudelaire and Benjamin’s stroller with a kaleidoscopic gaze as well as through numerical abstractions that inform and legitimate urban public policies. That is: not only do cities represent society, but their representations also inform the ways in which we engage it. In this course we will explore processes of urbanization and urban living from multiple vantage points, inviting in faculty from engineering, social sciences, law, and the humanities to guide us in our investigation. Our discussions will be grounded in multidisciplinary set of readings structured around various ways of knowing the city, as well as the production of artifacts based upon our explorations. Throughout, we will consider the ethics of research and representation. Individual and group projects, and journaling around the course readings, will play a central role in our discussions. Final projects can be designed to further students’ current or emerging research interests.

Additional Information: Through an analysis of the production of urban space we will examine several themes that are central to American Studies including: immigration, belonging, community and home; the color line and integration; citizenship, democracy and the political; the political-economy of place-making and performances of property; as well as, societal dimensions of environmental change.

Biographical Sketch: I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Human and Organizational Development in Peabody College and faculty in American Studies in Arts and Sciences. I was previously on the faculty at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Department of Geography. My areas of specialty include urban studies and environmental geography. My collaborative book project, A People’s Guide to Nashville, is under review with the University of California Press, and my other current book projects are entitled Social Mix & the City: the plight for justice and The Making of the Precarious City. For more information including syllabi, publications, news and events please see www.jamescfraser.com.
Some Course Objectives

Develop an understanding of multiple theoretical perspectives on the city (and some perspectives that are broader but applied to understand the urban);

Define, in multiple ways, the processes that constitute the city, its production, and the ways in which social (in)justices are reproduced (i.e., urban (re)development and neighborhood change in all of its complexity, contradictions, and paradoxes);

Understand, in detail, the actors (state, market, society sectors) and ideological/theoretical perspectives that are both driving and resisting these processes;

Understand the impact that urban public policy has had on cities throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and how these are connected to issues of social justice.

Assignments

Note: All assignments are to be completed and submitted through Brightspace. Folders will be set up for each assignment. Similarly, all reading will be located on Brightspace unless other arrangements are made.

Journaling: Keep a journal throughout the semester for the purpose of documenting and synthesizing your analytical thoughts both connected to the week’s readings, but more so for the development of your own ideas as you form an individual project for the semester. You will journal online in Brightspace, and I will review them intermittently. Entries can range in frequency and length with a minimum of one entry a week of at least 200-300 words (10%).

Discussions: Weekly discussion boards will be setup for everyone to contribute their reflections on the readings, more general thoughts about project work, and writing on relevant topics and resources. One original entry needs to be posted by the Tuesday prior to each class, and two responses/comments to other people’s threads by Wednesday prior to class. Entries need to demonstrate a concerted effort at drawing out topics of interest to you which come from the readings. In addition, you need to find and post additional resources on the topic you write about, for example, by finding a media story, report, or academic writing that connects to your entry. Entries should be at least 750 words and may range to 1500 words if needed. You will complete 10 of these for the semester. (20%)

Group Project: As a class we will engage in collaborative inquiry on a topic which we choose together. This will entail a moderate amount of effort in the sense of finding relevant materials to craft a publishable essay or research paper. More to come on this assignment. (20%).

Individual Final Project: The most significant assignment for the semester entails the creation of a project that you design and implement throughout the semester. This component of the course has the objective of demonstrating you developing expertise in a particular area of inquiry related in some manner to urban studies. The final project can take variety of forms that will we discuss the first week of class. Alternative to typical term papers with pre-specified requirements, you will propose the contours of a final project, present that to the class, and finally receive my approval to move forward with implementation. This process will involve four milestones including: (1) Individual Project Proposal Presentation; (2) Individual Project Proposal; (3) Individual Project Presentation; and, (4) Individual Project Submission. Since everyone’s final project will be unique, we will use the proposal process to firm up particular requirements for the final product. (50%)

Miscellany

Grading Scale: A (93-100), A- (90-92), B+ (87-89), B (84-86) B- (80-83), C+ (77-79), C (74-76), C- (70-73).

Attendance: This class will be conducted with a focus on in-class discussions and activities.
Because of this format, you are expected to attend all class meetings.

**Reading:** Complete readings (and other assignments) prior to the class meeting for which they are scheduled. Bring your book or copies of the readings to each class.

**Participation:** Through communication, ideas are formed, revised, borrowed, and developed. It is through argument, description, explanation, and improvisation – within a community – that individual learning flourishes. This course requires full participation (including active listening, facilitating, note-taking, and question-asking) to create an environment of open and shared learning.

**Technology:** Laptop computers and other portable technologies should be used in class only as learning-facilitation tools. If you need to take a break during class to engage social media, emails, calls, etcetera, please step outside the room.

**Academic Honesty:** In order to avoid plagiarism, your assignments must provide full citations for all references: direct quotes, summaries, or ideas. While you are encouraged to develop your thinking with your peers, you cannot use their material without citing it. Work from other courses will not be accepted in this course. Allowing your writing to be copied by another student is also considered cheating. Please review the Honor Code for complete guidelines on academic honesty: [http://studentorgs.vanderbilt.edu/HonorCouncil/](http://studentorgs.vanderbilt.edu/HonorCouncil/).

**Gender-Fair Language:** Language structures thought and action. Biases in language can (and do) naturalize inequalities. Imprecise language also signifies un-interrogated values. For these reasons, the use of gender-fair language is expected in this course. For example, do not use words like “mankind” or “men” when referring to people in general; alternate between “she” and “he” instead of always using “he,” or construct sentences in the plural instead of the singular so you can use “they” or “them” and avoid the problem altogether.

**ESL/LD Students:** Course requirements can be adjusted to serve the needs and capabilities of ESL and LD students. Please speak with the professor during the first week of class to make arrangements.

**Note:** Each week we will read selected chapters from the assigned readings.

**Class Schedule**

**Week 1 (January 11)**
Topic: Urban Encounters

**Introductions & Course Review**


**Week 2 (January 18)**
Topic: Home in the City


**Week 3 (January 25)**  
Topic: Segregation & the Color Line


**Week 4 (February 1)**  
Topic: Industrialization, Modernity & Urban Life  
**Guest:** TBA, Vanderbilt University


**Week 5 (February 8)**  
Topic: Suburbanization


**Week 6 (February 15)**  
Topic: Public Housing, Slum Clearance & Urban Renewal  
**Guest:** Leorotha Williams (History), Tennessee State University


**Week 7 (February 22)**  
Topic: Lyndon Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’ & Community Action  
**Final Project Proposal Presentations**  
**Guest:** Rhonda Williams (History), Vanderbilt University


**Week 8 (March 1)**  
Topic: The Rise of the Neoliberal City  
**Final Project Proposals Due**


**Week 9 (March 15)**  
Topic: Integration Debates  

**Week 10 (March 22)**  
Topic: Post-Industrial Urban Development, Gentrification, and its Discontents  
*Guest: Sara Safransky (Geography), Vanderbilt University*  

**Week 11 (March 29)**  
Topic: Property and Personhood  
*Guest: Chris Serkin (Law), Vanderbilt University*  


**Week 12 (April 5*)**  
Topic: Citizenship and Belonging in the City  
*Guest: Paul Kramer (History), Vanderbilt University*  


**Week 13 (April 12*)**  
Topic: Political Ecologies of the City  


**Week 14 (April 19)**  
Topic: Touring the City  
*Final Paper Presentations*  
*Field Trip: ‘Touring Nashville’*  

**Week 15 (April 26)**  
Topic: Urban Utopias  
*Final Projects Due*  
