Mission
The Barnard—Columbia Urban Studies program enables students to explore and understand the urban experience in all of its richness and complexity. It recognizes the city as an amalgam of diverse peoples and their social, political, economic, and cultural interactions within a distinctive built environment. Students study the evolution and variety of urban forms and governance structures, which create opportunities for, as well as constrain, the exercise of human agency, individual and collective. They explore the place of the city in different historical and comparative contexts, as well as in the human imagination.

Majors build an intellectual foundation that combines interdisciplinary coursework and a concentration of study within a single field. Through the two-semester junior colloquium, students study urban history and contemporary issues, and at the same time hone their interdisciplinary, analytical and research skills. This shared experience prepares them for their independent research project in their senior year. We encourage our majors to use New York City as a laboratory, and many courses draw on the vast resources of the city and include an off-campus experience.

Student Learning Outcomes
Having successfully completed the major in Urban Studies, the student will be able to:

- Apply concepts or methods from more than one social science or adjacent discipline to analyze an urban issue or problem.
- Describe the distinctive social, cultural, and spatial features of cities and illustrate their impacts on the urban experience.
- Apply basic skills of empirical reasoning to an urban problem.
- Explain how the idea of the city varies in different historical and comparative contexts.
- Demonstrate familiarity with a particular disciplinary approach to the city as an object of study.
- Demonstrate understanding of the history and variety of urban forms and governance structures.
- Articulate a well-defined research question, conduct independent research using primary sources and a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, and write a substantive research paper.
- Communicate ideas effectively in written or oral form.
- Organize and present group research projects.

Director: Aaron Passell (Term Assistant Professor, Urban Studies, Barnard)

Columbia College Advisor: Kathryn Yatrakis (Dean of Academic Affairs, Columbia College ret: Associate Professor of Political Science, adj.)

Urban Studies Faculty
Assistant Professors: Gergely Baics (History and Urban Studies), Deborah Becher (Sociology), Mary Rocco (Term, Urban Studies)

This program is supervised by the Committee on Urban Studies:

Director: Aaron Passell (Sociology)
URBS UN3992  - URBS UN3993  Senior Seminar: The Built Environment and Senior Seminar: The Built Environment 8

URBS UN3994  - URBS UN3995  Senior Seminar: New York Field Research and Senior Seminar: New York Field Research 8

URBS UN3996  - URBS UN3997  Senior Seminar: International Topics in Urban Studies and Senior Seminar: International Topics in Urban Studies 8

A research seminar in the department of specialization. This option must be approved by the Program Director.

A complete list and courses that fulfill requirements A–E can be found on the program’s website, urban.barnard.edu (http://urban.barnard.edu).

Appropriate substitutions may be made for courses listed above with the approval of the Program Director.

There is no concentration in urban studies.

URBS UN1515 Introduction to Urban Studies. 3 points.

This course is intended to be both an interdisciplinary introduction to the city and to the field of Urban Studies. As an introduction to the city, the course will address a variety of questions: What is a city? How did cities develop? How do cities function socially, politically, and economically? Why do people live in cities? What are some of the major issues facing cities in the early twenty-first century, and how can cities address these issues? As an introduction to the interdisciplinary field of Urban Studies, the course will present models of how scholars approach cities from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints, including architecture, planning, law, sociology, history, archaeology, anthropology, political science, public policy, and geography. Students will learn some of the major concepts in the field of Urban Studies, and will study the works of leading scholars in the field. Students in the course will approach cities from a number of disciplines, not only through the reading, but also through assignments that take place in different locations throughout New York City.

URBS UN2200 Introduction to GIS. 3 points.

Prerequisites: Must attend first class for instructor permission. Due to the high demand for our limited-enrollment spatial analysis course (URBS V3200) the Urban Studies program is offering an introductory course to the fundamentals of GIS (Geographic Informational Systems), specifically for non-majors. Students create maps using ArcGIS software, analyze the physical and social processes presented in the digital model, and use the data to solve specific spatial analysis problems. Note: this course does fulfill the C requirement in Urban Studies.

A complete list and courses that fulfill requirements A–E can be found on the program’s website, urban.barnard.edu (http://urban.barnard.edu).

Appropriate substitutions may be made for courses listed above with the approval of the Program Director.

There is no concentration in urban studies.

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Fall 2019: URBS UN1515

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URBS UN3308 Introduction to Urban Ethnographies. 3 points.

Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.

Prerequisites: Students must attend first class. This course explores how scholars from different social science disciplines have used ethnography to understand how immigrants and rural migrants experience as well as affect cities. Community, work, and health, in cities within and outside the US, are used as lenses. Students will also perform their own ethnographic research.

URBS UN3310 Race, Space, and Urban Schools. 3 points.

Many people don’t think of themselves as having attended segregated schools. And yet, most of us went to schools attended primarily by people who looked very much like us. In fact, schools have become more segregated over the past 30 years, even as the country becomes increasingly multiracial. In this class, we will use public schools as an example to examine the role race plays in shaping urban spaces and institutions.

We will begin by unpacking the concept of racialization, or the process by which a person, place, phenomenon, or characteristic becomes associated with a certain race. Then, we will explore the following questions: What are the connections between city schools and their local contexts? What does it mean to be a "neighborhood school"? How do changes in neighborhoods change schools? We will use ethnographies, narrative non-fiction, and educational research to explore these questions from a variety of perspectives. You will apply what you have learned to your own experiences and to current debates over urban policies and public schools.

This course will extend your understanding of key anthropological and sociological perspectives on urban inequality in the United States, as well as introduce you to critical theory.

Spring 2019: URBS UN3310

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URBS UN3315 Metropolitics of Race and Place. 3 points.
Prerequisites: Students must attend first class.
Course explores how the central cities and suburbs that make up American metropolitan areas are increasingly shaped by race/ethnicity. Class discussion and readings will trace the role of social scientists, foundations, urban planners, government actors, and private economic interests in this transformation of metropolitan American. The current consequences of the conflation of race/ethnicity and space on the regional landscape, such as gentrification, suburban sprawl, the mortgage foreclosure crisis, etc. will be the focus of student research and class projects.

URBS UN3420 Introduction to Urban Sociology. 3 points.
Prerequisites: Students must attend first class.
Examines the diverse ways in which sociology has defined and studied cities, focusing on the people who live and work in the city, and the transformations U.S. cities are undergoing today. Sociological methods, including ethnography, survey research, quantitative studies, and participant observation will provide perspectives on key urban questions such as street life, race, immigration, globalization, conflict, and redevelopment.

Spring 2019: URBS UN3420

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URBS UN3427 Imagining and Narrating the Urban. 3 points.
Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.
This course will explore the experience of urban space by examining how it is described in fine-grained, ethnographic accounts and in the thought experiments undertaken by science fiction writers. The purpose of the course is to focus on the evocation of the urban experience - how do we record or preserve what the city feels like as a physical place. Privileging the experience of space in this context is an attempt to complement conventional urban research that examines the dynamics of urban social life often without locating it in relation to the built environment of the city. Incorporating speculative or science fiction adds an experimental dimension (what would the city be like if...?) and emphasizes narrative, arguing that how exactly we describe and reproduce our experience is significant. Further, it raises an epistemological question about how we come to know what we know: can fiction "teach" us about the empirical world? How?

URBS UN3440 Shrinking Cities. 3 points.
While some cities thrive and struggle to house the global majority, others struggle with the effects of urban shrinkage—population loss, disinvestment and abandonment. The path to urban decline is paved by social, economic and spatial forces that result in shrinking cities. This class explores how to understand and engage with urban decline. It includes a consideration of sundry efforts to reverse, live with, and rethink urban decline in a variety of locales. The hope is that this exercise will shed light not only on iconic declining places like Detroit, but also on the nature of uneven development and how it is the rule rather than the anomalous exception within capitalist urbanization.

Course materials draw on disciplines such as planning, economics, architecture, history and sociology to help understand urban decline and its outcomes from a variety of perspectives. Over the course of the semester, we will investigate larger processes—globalization, deindustrialization and socioeconomic change—to understand how cities and communities responded to the consequences of these forces. We will engage with the global literature on shrinking cities but will be focused primarily on exploring the dynamics of shrinkage in US cities. To that end, following a wide-reaching examination of nation-wide phenomena, we will study in-depth a sample of cities to understand local and regional variations and responses. How do we treat cities that do not grow? Given the constrained or complete lack of resources in these places, to what extent should some cities be allowed to “die”? What is the impact on the residents that remain in these places?

Fall 2019: URBS UN3440

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URBS UN3450 Neighborhood and Community Development. 3 points.
New York City is made up of more than 400 neighborhoods. The concept of neighborhoods in cities has had many meanings and understandings over time. Equally complex is the concept of community used to describe the people attached to or defined by neighborhood. While neighborhood can be interpreted as a spatial, social, political, racial, ethnic, or even, economic unit; community often refers to the group of stakeholders (i.e. residents, workers, investors) whose interests directly align with the conditions of their environment. Community development is “a process where these community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems” that result from the changing contexts in their neighborhoods. Using a variety of theories and approaches, residents organize themselves or work with community development practitioners on the ground to obtain safe, affordable housing, improve the public realm, build wealth, get heard politically, develop human capital, and connect to metropolitan labor and housing markets. To address the ever-changing contexts of neighborhoods, community development organizations are taking on new roles and adapting (in various cases) to larger forces within the city, region and nation such as disinvestment, reinvestment, increased cultural diversity, an uncertain macroeconomic environment, and changes in federal policy.

For more than a century, city-dwellers—and especially New Yorkers—have been tackling these challenges. This course will examine both historic and contemporary community building and development efforts, paying special attention to approaches which were shaped by New York City. This urban center, often described as a “city of neighborhoods,” has long been a seedbed for community-based problem-solving inventions. The course will focus on the theories (why?), tools (how?), and actors (who?) within the field of community development practice and is organized around important sectors (housing, economic development, food systems, arts), case studies, and contested concepts (public participation, social capital, public space).

URBS UN3464 Urban Ecologies and Grand Infrastructure: Metropolitan Planning Issues. 3 points.
This lecture course is designed around different issues of metropolitan regions around the worlds that govern and plan urbanized, risky and vulnerable ecological systems and consequently large-scale urban interventions that change the landscapes of the regions. The reality of an age of drastic climate change and increasing number of natural disasters in urbanized regions raises issues of resilience and ecological governance. Metropolitan regions and the planning politics that lie beneath the regional plans and strategic initiatives are critical in the mitigation of some of these risks and in the understanding of regional politics. Historical and contemporary case studies will prepare the students to conduct their own critical analysis and reading of a case where several themes discussed in class will be further explored.

URBS UN3467 Excavating the Empire City. 4 points.
Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.
This course provides an introduction to the archaeology of New York City and what (and how) archaeological research contributes to our understanding of the city’s past. The course is organized chronologically and thematically. Students will explore each “stratigraphic layer” of history and discover how each relates to key themes and theories in urban studies. Readings and discussions will be enhanced by on-site learning at a number of NYC archaeology-related locations. There are no prerequisites.

URBS UN3480 From Homelessness to Foreclosure: NYC Geographies of Shelter and Home. 4 points.
This course will examine the social, political, and economic elements that have aligned in New York City to produce the most expansive infrastructure of homeless shelters in the United States, as well as ongoing changes in the city’s homeless policy since the housing foreclosure crisis. While we will focus primarily on the past 30 to 40 years in New York City, we will consider the history of homelessness and housing in the United States since the Great Depression. Major themes will include criminalization, origin myths, and representations of people who are experiencing homelessness. Key questions will include: In what ways is the current geography of homelessness the result of historical patterns of racism and discrimination? How does studying homelessness provide insight into the ways urban spaces are made? Why have shelters become the primary public response to homelessness in New York? How are race and gender central to the project of building a shelter infrastructure in New York? How are shelters experienced by those living in them? What are some of the ways people living in shelters organize to advocate for their rights and to resist mainstream representations?

URBS UN3485 Urban Political Economy. 3 points.
Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.
What are the processes driving social change in contemporary cities? How are urban spaces structured in power? This course introduces some of the main concepts, theories, and ideas of contemporary scholarship in urban political economy, with a focus on the history and institutions of New York City. We will approach urban politics and economy from a geographic and historical perspective in order to arrive at some consensus conclusions about how urban spaces and places are made. While New York City will be a primary focus, we will read case studies and history on other cities as well. Throughout the course we will emphasize the structural implications of class, race, and gender.
URBS UN3540 Urban Governance in New York City. 4 points. Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.

This course will introduce students to the study of urban governance, tackling the questions of how we organize cities and how we go about understanding that process. We will do this by looking at the case of New York City and, more specifically, at one if its neighborhoods. Accordingly, the assigned readings during the first part of the course will address urban governance both theoretically and—with regard to New York City—empirically. During the second half of the course, students will apply the covered readings to policy issues facing the neighborhood in question. In doing so, they will develop research skills and gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which concrete governance practices conform to but also always exceed our best attempts at theorizing them.

URBS UN3545 Junior Seminar: The Shaping of the Modern City. 4 points. Prerequisites: Non-majors admitted by permission of instructor. Students must attend first class. Enrollment limited to 16 students per section. General Education Requirement: Historical Studies. Introduction to the historical process and social consequences of urban growth, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present.

URBS UN3562 The City in Beta: Public Participation in the Design Process. 4 points. Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.

Prerequisites: Must attend first class for instructor permission. Preference is given to Urban Studies majors. Only 20 admitted. Exames local urban planning issues through the use of new technologies to facilitate multi-user, participatory planning and design. Examines the history and theory of the planning process and uses learned techniques to evaluate a live case scenario for which the students prepare recommendations using the Betaville software package.

URBS UN3565 Cities in Developing Countries: Problems and Prospects. 3 points. Prerequisites: Must attend first class for instructor permission. Preference to Urban Studies majors. This lecture course examines different facets of urban development and planning in cities of the developing countries. We will begin by studying common problems in developing urban regions, gaining an understanding of common settlement patterns and urban systems in changing metropolitan areas. The class aims to formulate a repository of concepts, urban trends, and terms around the ever-growing cities of the globe. We will also focus on specific issues in representative cities of the regions studied. These particular cases, which will be selected from cities in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, will present discussions of planning and policy development regarding water and sanitation, transportation and infrastructure, historic preservation, disaster risk reduction and housing. Students will also work in teams to analyze a particular urban problem in a developing city, and present team findings to the class via Canvas.

URBS UN3830 Eminent Domain and Neighborhood Change. 4 points. Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.

Prerequisites: Intro to Urban Sociology or equivalent or permission of the instructor. Students must attend first class for instructor permission. An examination of how the politics of eminent domain, as a government strategy for neighborhood change, plays out in the courts, city councils, administrative agencies, media, and the street. Readings drawn from law, history, planning, politics, economics, sociology, and primary sources. Emphasis on the U.S., with some international comparisons. This course will count toward Requirement A of the Urban Studies curriculum as a Sociology course.


This course will examine through readings, class discussions, and in class debate, the complex politics and governing of New York City—the key political institutions, and who holds urban political power, voting and elections, and the changing roles of the electorate will be covered. We will examine the structure or New York City government and how the New York City Budget is developed and adopted; the interplay between Mayoral and City council powers, the city charter, the process of governing and the role of political parties, special interest groups, lobbyists and labor unions. We will look back in the City’s political history and consider that time in the mid 1970’s when New York City suffered a major fiscal crisis and was close to financial bankruptcy. In this context, New York City’s relationships with the state and federal governments will also be covered.
URBS UN3992 Senior Seminar: The Built Environment. 4 points.
(year-long course, 4 points per term)

Prerequisites: Senior standing. Year-long course; participation is for two consecutive terms. No new students admitted for spring. Emphasizes the study of the built environment of cities and suburbs, and the related debates. Readings, class presentations, and written work culminate in major individual projects, under the supervision of faculty trained in architecture, urban design, or urban planning.

URBS UN3993 Senior Seminar: The Built Environment. 4 points.
(year-long course, 4 points per term)

Prerequisites: Senior standing. Year-long course; participation is for two consecutive terms. No new students admitted for spring. Emphasizes the study of the built environment of cities and suburbs, and the related debates. Readings, class presentations, and written work culminate in major individual projects, under the supervision of faculty trained in architecture, urban design, or urban planning.

URBS UN3994 Senior Seminar: New York Field Research. 4 points.
(year-long course, 4 points per term)

Prerequisites: Senior standing. Year-long course; participation is for two consecutive terms. No new students admitted for spring. Using New York City as a research laboratory, under the guidance of the faculty coordinator, students clarify basic theoretical issues related to their chosen research problem; find ways of making a series of empirical questions operational; collect evidence to test hypotheses; analyze the data using a variety of social science techniques; and produce reports of basic findings.

URBS UN3995 Senior Seminar: New York Field Research. 4 points.
(year-long course, 4 points per term)

Prerequisites: Senior standing. Year-long course; participation is for two consecutive terms. No new students admitted for spring. Using New York City as a research laboratory, under the guidance of the faculty coordinator, students clarify basic theoretical issues related to their chosen research problem; find ways of making a series of empirical questions operational; collect evidence to test hypotheses; analyze the data using a variety of social science techniques; and produce reports of basic findings.

URBS UN3996 Senior Seminar: International Topics in Urban Studies. 4 points.
(year-long course, 4 points per term)

Prerequisites: Senior standing. Year-long course; participation is for two consecutive terms. No new students admitted for spring. A year-long research seminar for students who wish to conduct a senior thesis project that focuses on cities outside of the United States. Topics relating to the rapid urbanization of Latin America, Africa, and Asia are particularly welcome. Seminar meetings will include discussion of relevant readings, as well as occasional class presentations and peer-editing assignments.

URBS UN3997 Senior Seminar: International Topics in Urban Studies. 4 points.
(year-long course, 4 points per term)

Prerequisites: Senior standing. Year-long course; participation is for two consecutive terms. No new students admitted for spring. A year-long research seminar for students who wish to conduct a senior thesis project that focuses on cities outside of the United States. Topics relating to the rapid urbanization of Latin America, Africa, and Asia are particularly welcome. Seminar meetings will include discussion of relevant readings, as well as occasional class presentations and peer-editing assignments.