

INVISIBLE METROPOLIS

Robin Nagle
New York University

Freshman Honors Seminar
College of Arts & Science

Overview

This class explores two questions. First, how can we make sense of the disorder that is inherent to so much of city life? Urban centers can seem chaotic, even destructive. There are too many people crammed into too little space, putting ecological limits under stress and jeopardizing the integrity of much urban infrastructure. How can we interpret this confusion to recognize its creative, even artistic, processes?

Second, what makes any particular city distinct from any other city? Why are both New York and San Francisco exceptional, for instance, and what makes New Orleans so different from Paris? Any city's rhythms, conglomerations, and flows are unique, and they give rise to singular sensations created through individual histories that are often poorly understood (or forgotten).

We will make sense of the apparent disarray of urban life, and explore the conundrum of urban singularity, by focusing on the unseen. We'll concentrate on four frames of reference -- nature, history, structure, and sensation -- to consider elements of a city that are essential to its individual spirit but that are not always obvious. As we explore a diverse set of readings, we'll consider how our four themes work together. Through them, we'll ask what a city represents about basic human sociality and creativity.

By the end of the semester, you will have a sense of several approaches to the study of the urban, along with a set of resources and research tools that will equip you for further city-focused investigations. Our primary concentration is New York, but we'll also draw on examples from other places.

The Books (available through the NYU Book Center and on reserve at Bobst)

Baker, Kevin. 2006. *Paradise Alley*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Cantwell, Anne-Marie and Diana diZerega Wall. 2003. *Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City*. New York: Yale.

Duneier, Mitchell. 2000. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Sullivan, Robert. 2005. *Rats: Observations on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants*. New York: Bloomsbury.

The Films (on reserve at Bobst)

Lee, Spike. 2006. "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts." HBO Documentary Films | Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks.

Miller, Bennett. 2006 [1999]. "The Cruise." Lions Gate.

The Requirements

You must attend class each week. You must read the assigned texts, participate in real-time and online class discussions, complete the writing assignments by their due dates, and come on at least two excursions (see below). Readings encompass a few articles and/or book chapters each week, but you will also read three entire books. In addition, there are three films to watch. These are on reserve at Bobst.

Writing assignments include a response paper each week, online class-related postings, and a 12- to 15-page final research paper. You'll share your final project as a brief presentation in the last two weeks of the semester.

Response papers need only be 250 words (one double-spaced typed page) in which you react to what you're learning, framed by questions that we'll bring up in class. They are always due on the Thursday class session. Each week one student's paper will be chosen at random to be posted to our class blog.

Please do not turn in hand-written essays. If you don't own a computer and/or printer, the NYU Computer Labs have both.

The research paper explores a topic of your choosing, approved by me, that is relevant to class themes and that includes at least two of our four organizing rubrics. There are deadlines throughout the semester designed to help you develop this paper.

When you write, check your grammar, your spelling (not only with spell-check), the structure of your sentences and your paragraphs. This is a chance for you to pay attention to the craft of writing. For your final paper, you'll be paired with an editing partner to give and get constructive criticism on your works-in-progress.

Grading

Class attendance and participation: 20%

Response papers: 30%

Final research paper: 30%

Other miscellaneous requirements (fieldtrips) and deadlines (research paper steps): 20%

The Excursions

Visit the African Burial Ground National Monument in Lower Manhattan by October 10. It's in the lobby of the federal office building at 290 Broadway and is easy to reach by subway. If you'd prefer, it's a medium-ish walk from Washington Square.

Choose one of the fieldtrips listed below (you're welcome and encouraged to do all of them). For the first two, we'll go as a group.

- A tour of the city's discarded but still usable (even edible) trash with local Freegans; in early October, exact date TBA. This will be at night, probably around 8:30p.
- A tour of the North River Sewage Treatment Plant in Harlem; date TBA.

• This is for you to do independently on the weekend of October 4 & 5. Go here <http://www.ohny.org/> and choose a tour of a building, a facility, or some other corner of New York that is normally off-limits to the public. This event only happens one weekend a year and is a wonderful opportunity to visit an otherwise invisible place. There are a wide variety of tours scheduled throughout all five boroughs.

INTRODUCTION

1. September 2

Class participants, themes, expectations, overall goals; what to keep in mind when reading, when writing; excursions

September 4

Your first writing assignment is due today. Where are you from? Is it a rural, urban, or suburban place -- or something in between? What element(s) of your hometown might qualify as "invisible," and why? Remember, you only have to write 250 words -- one page, double-spaced. If you'd like, you're welcome to write up to 500 words.

No hand-written essays, please.

NATURE

2. September 9 & 11

This week's readings consider how a shared resource can become invisible and thus ignored, and what the long-term consequences of such ignorance might be.

Tuesday

Brekhus, Wayne. 1998. A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus. *Sociological Theory* 16(1):34-51.

Hardin, Garrett. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science* 162(3859):1243-8.

Thursday

Look at "Health of the Harbor: The First Comprehensive Look at the State of the NY/NJ Harbor Estuary, 2004." According to some students, this is quite dull. You don't have to read it cover-to-cover. Find parts that interest you and concentrate on those. <http://www.seagrant.sunysb.edu/hep/reports/harborhealth.pdf>

Look at the website for PlaNYC:

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/home/home.shtml>

3. September 16 & 18

What was here before Europeans arrived? How do we know? What insights might this knowledge give us, and why might such insights matter?

Tuesday

Sanderson, Eric. W. and Marianne Brown. 2007. Mannahatta: An Ecological Look at the Manhattan Landscape Prior to Henry Hudson. *Northeastern Naturalist* 14(4): 545-570.

http://www.wcs.org/media/file/NortheasternNaturalist_SandersonBrown2007.pdf

Look at the website for The Mannahatta Project, which is mapping the terrain and wildlife of Manhattan Island before the arrival of Europeans:

http://www.wcs.org/sw-high_tech_tools/landscapeecology/mannahatta

Thursday

Go here http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/newyork/filmmore/ps_01.html to read an excerpt of John McPhee's description of the terrain underneath New York City.

4. September 23 & 25

"Landscape" is a catch-all word suggesting bucolic gardens, or maybe an urban planner's vision of the shape of an area. This week we explore the more dynamic idea of landscape as a point of interpretive analysis and conflicting claims about rights, use, and the future.

Tuesday

Jorgensen, Anna and Marian Tylecote. 2007. Ambivalent Landscapes: Wilderness in the Urban Interstices. *Landscape Research* 32(4):443-62.

Spirn, Anne Whiston. 1996. Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted. In William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W.Norton; p91-113 (plus notes)

Hayden, Dolores. 1997. Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space. In *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*. Paul Groth and Todd Bressi, eds. New Haven: Yale UP, p111-33, plus notes.

Thursday

Jackson, J.B. 1994. A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time. In *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, p151-62.

Research paper topic due – a paragraph abstract

HISTORY

5. September 30 & October 2

Before Europeans arrived in the part of the world we call New York, who lived here?

What were their lives like? What imprint did they make on the land?

Tuesday

Unearthing Gotham, Part 2: Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 [p35-118]

Thursday

Look at this map of how the bottom of Manhattan was built out from its original shores:

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/newyork/maps/maps_pop.html

6. October 7 & 9

At the time of the American Revolution, one in five New Yorkers was enslaved. The only city in the colonies with a greater number of enslaved peoples was Charleston, South Carolina. Slave labor built much of New Amsterdam's and New York's infrastructure and met many of its initial municipal needs, like cleaning streets and digging canals. How do we understand the historical foundation of New York once we recognize the extent to which the city was founded on such an exploitation?

Tuesday

Unearthing Gotham, Part 3: Chapter 16 [p277-296]

Faherty, Duncan. 2006. "It Happened Here": Slavery on the Hudson. *American Quarterly* 58(2):455-66.

Lapore, Jill. 2005. The Tightening Vise: Slavery and Freedom in British New York. Chapter 2 of *Slavery in New York*, Ira Berlin and Leslie M Harris, eds. New York: The New Press; p59-89.

Thursday

Visit the African Burial Ground National Monument, 290 Broadway.

7. October 14 & 16

No class this week – use the time to get a jump on next week's reading. *Paradise Alley* is an engaging novel, but it's thick.

Even though we don't meet this week, you still have an assignment. For Wednesday: Research paper preliminary outline due in my mailbox at 14 University Place.

8. October 21 & 23

The Draft Riots of 1863 were among the bloodiest and deadliest uprisings in New York's history. Baker's novel reveals how an uneasy tension between newly emancipated slaves and newly arrived Irish immigrants became a horrific conflagration when a mandatory draft was imposed on anyone too poor to buy his way out.

Tuesday

Kevin Baker's *Paradise Alley*, first half

Thursday

Kevin Baker's *Paradise Alley*, second half

STRUCTURE**9. October 28 & 30**

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 revealed profound gaps in the nation's ability to respond to a significant natural disaster. More than that, it made visible the deeply scored fault lines that had fragmented New Orleans, and the country's relationship to New Orleans, long before the storm hit.

Tuesday

Fischetti, Mark. 2001. Drowning New Orleans. *Scientific American* 285(4):76.

Comfort, Louise K. 2006. Cities at Risk: Hurricane Katrina and the Drowning of New Orleans. *Urban Affairs Review* 41(4):501-16.

Fleetwood, Nicole. 2006. Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event. *American Quarterly* 58(3):767-89.

Bourne, Jr., Joel K. 2007. New Orleans: A Perilous Future. *National Geographic*, August:32-66.

Thursday

Film: "When the Levees Broke," Acts I and II (Spike Lee, 2006; on reserve at Bobst)

10. November 4 & 6

When a life has been scarred by bad choices and misfortune, who defines the "proper" structure for rehabilitation? What if a self-defined effort at redemption contradicts the allegedly correct means of such change? Who feels the impact, and how?

Tuesday

Mitch Duneier's book *Sidewalk*: Introduction; The Book Vendor; The Magazine Vendors (p3-81)

Thursday

Mitch Duneier's book *Sidewalk*: The Men without Accounts; How Sixth Avenue Became a Sustaining Habit; Afterword by Hakim Hasan (p81-154; p319-330)

Research paper bibliography due

11. November 11 & 13

The built urban environment, to some extent, dictates the parameters and “flavors” of our experience in a city, but where did it come from? What can discarded architecture teach us? What can we learn by just meandering through a city? What would happen to a city if its human population suddenly disappeared?

Tuesday

Edensor, Tim. 2005. The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23(6):829-49.

de Certeau, Michel. 1988. Walking in the City. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: U California P, p91-109.

Wiseman, Alan. 2007. The City Without Us. In *The World Without Us*. New York: St. Martin's.

Thursday

See photos by Edensor here: http://www.sceng.mmu.ac.uk/british_industrial_ruins/

SENSATION**12. November 18 & 20**

In the last twenty years or so, a new vein of scholarship promises exciting tools for understanding urban life. If we stop giving almost exclusive priority to the visual and consider other sensual interpretive possibilities, what might we learn? Is such an approach merely frivolous, or does it suggest new insights the history and the contemporary life of a city?

This week we'll set up the presentation schedule for the last two classes.

Corbin, Alain. 1986. Introduction and Chapter 1, *The Foul and the Fragrant*. New York: Berg.

Smith, Mark 2007. Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History. *Journal of Social History* 40(4):841-58.

Roeder, Jr., George H. 1994. Coming to Our Senses. *Journal of American History* 81(3):1112-22.

Thursday

No class – Your professor is at the American Anthropological Association Annual Conference

13. November 25 & 27

Among the most invisible parts of any city are its practices of discard. This week we look at the long-term legacy of throwing out the trash, and consider who actually does this vital but often unseen and seldom celebrated work.

Tuesday

Unearthing Gotham, Chapters 13, 14, 15 [p224-276]

Rathje, William and Cullen Murphy. 2001. Part 1 of *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*. Tucson, AZ: U Arizona P; p3-78.

Reid, Donald. 1993. Chapters 1-3 of *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations..* Boston: Harvard UP; p1-36, plus notes.

Thursday

No class – Happy Thanksgiving!

14. December 2 & 4

Urban spaces have always been popular with rats, and urban populations have always been uneasy with their rodent neighbors. When Sullivan considers the historical and political contexts of our unnerving fellow city-dwellers, he reveals details about urban quests for public hygiene, safe food supplies, and mastery over nature.

OPTIONAL: Turn in a 5-page draft of your final paper. I'll get it back to you with comments by next Tuesday's class.

Tuesday

Robert Sullivan's *Rats*, Chapters 1 – 10 (p1-96, plus notes)

Thursday

Robert Sullivan's *Rats*, Chapters 11 – 20 (p97-219, plus notes)

GUEST SPEAKER: Dr. Robert Corrigan, rodentologist and research scientist, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

15. December 9 & 11 | Conclusions/Class Presentations/Teachings/Celebration

Your journey this semester has stressed the simple fact that the most vital parts of a city are often not easy to see. This week we consider what we've discovered about urbanness this semester, and ask how we can use our discoveries in our meanderings within urban space, in our thinking about the urban world, and in the wisdom we can share with others.

Tuesday

Film: "The Cruise" – on reserve at Bobst

Thursday – Last Class

Research paper brainstorm, troubleshooting, panic abatement

December 18: Final paper due in my mailbox at 14 University Place by 5:00p