
Units: 3-0-9 (H)
Prof. Lawrence Vale, Office: 10-497M, x3-0561, ljvale@mit.edu
Time: Mondays 3-6 p.m. in 10-401
Enrollment limited to 15 students, by permission of instructor
Office Hours: by appointment (via email)

This is a seminar about the ways that urban design contributes to the distribution of political power and resources in cities.

“Design,” in this view, is not some value-neutral aesthetic applied to efforts at urban development but is, instead, an integral part of the motives driving that development. Though many urban designers and architects often seem to regard “good design” as somehow independent from social and political factors affecting its production and use, design efforts are influenced by politics in at least two important ways. First, urban design proposals may be subject to challenge by a variety of groups during the planning process. Second, political values, whether tacit or explicit, are encoded in the resultant designs.

The class investigates the nature of the relations between built form and political purposes through close examination of a wide variety of situations where public and private sector design commissions and planning processes have been clearly motivated by political pressures, as well as situations where the political assumptions have remained more tacit. We will explore cases from both developed and developing countries.

Applying insights from architects, planners, political scientists, historians, anthropologists, and philosophers, we will analyze urban design from a variety of perspectives, including gender-based and class-based critiques. Cases discussed will include extreme examples of politically charged environments: Hitler’s megalomaniacal plan for Berlin and designs for new capital cities around the world (Washington, D.C., New Delhi, Canberra, Brasília, etc.). We will then explore less extreme settings for urban design-politics closer to home, by focusing on the origins and redevelopment of American public housing. Finally, the class will conclude with sessions exploring the design-politics of urban security and “urban resilience”—the attempt to rebuild (socially, politically, urbanistically) following sudden disasters.

The format of the class will be part slide lecture, part discussion. Participants will be responsible for four things: 1) Completion of readings in advance of each class; 2) Involvement in seminar discussions, including at least one short presentation; 3) A short paper that uses selected readings to extract the “design-politics” of a place or project; 4) A term paper on a topic analyzing both the design and political history of an urban design intervention, to be presented during the final sessions of the class. All final papers will be due on the date of the last class, though earlier submissions are welcome.
February 12


February 20 (Monday Classes Meet on Tuesday)

**Three Perspectives on the Politics of Design**

1. Political Science: How is political power constructed through space?


2. History: How is the past manipulated to serve the present?


3. Philosophy: How is meaning conveyed?


4. Science and Technology Studies: Do Artifacts have politics?


February 26

**Four More Perspectives on the Politics of Design**

1. Gender Studies: How does gender affect design?


Optional:
Helen Jarvis (with Paula Kantor and Jonathan Cloke) “Homes, Jobs, Communities and Networks” in Cities and Gender (Routledge, 2009), pp. 186-215.

2. Political Economy: Who benefits from urban development?


Optional:

3. Anthropology: Whose perspective matters?


4. Geography: How does urban space affect justice?


First Paper Assigned: Due in Class March 12, but presented to the class on March 19.

March 5

The Political Extremes of Urban Design 1--Berlin, From Pre-War to Post-Wall


Optional:  


March 12

The Political Extremes of Urban Design 2--Capital Cities

Required reading:


For further Reading:
Göran Therborn, *Cities of Power* (read all of it)


March 19: **Discussion of Exercise 1**

March 26: **No Class: Spring Break**

April 2: **The Design-Politics of Developing Public Housing**


April 9: **The Design-Politics of Redeveloping Public Housing**


April 16: The Design-Politics of Urban Security


April 23: No Class—Patriots’ Day

April 30: The Design-Politics of Urban Resilience


May 7
Student Presentations 1

May 14
Student Presentations 2

Assistance with Writing

The WCC at MIT (Writing and Communication Center) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts. The WCC is staffed completely by MIT lecturers. All have advanced degrees. All are experienced college classroom teachers of communication. All are all are published scholars and writers. Not counting the WCC’s director’s years (he started the WCC in 1982), the WCC lecturers have a combined 133 years’ worth of teaching here at MIT (ranging from 4 to 24 years). The WCC works with undergraduate, graduate students, post-docs, faculty, staff, alums, spouses and partners. The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including practicing classroom presentations & conference talks as well as designing slides). No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, helps you see new implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with all English as Second Language issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice. The WCC is located in E18-233, 50 Ames Street). To guarantee yourself a time, make an appointment. To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to https://mit.mywconline.com/ . To access the WCC’s many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, go to http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/ . Check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours and available appointments.

Departmental Note on Disabilities and Academic Misconduct:

Disabilities
If you have a documented disability, or any other problem you think may affect your ability to perform in class, please see me early in the semester so that arrangements may be made to accommodate you.

Academic Misconduct
Plagiarism and cheating are both academic crimes. Never (1) turn in an assignment that you
did not write yourself, or (2) turn in an assignment for this class that you previously turned in for another class. Please see me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism.