

Decoding the City

AMCS/SUST 492 & HIST 4921 | Spring 2017



Mill Creek Valley in 1948. St. Louis Post-Dispatch photograph.

Location: Seigle Hall 111

Time: Tuesday, 6:00 – 8:30 PM

Instructor: Michael Allen, Senior Lecturer in Architecture & Landscape Architecture and Lecturer in American Culture Studies

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Course Description

Architecture and infrastructure are worthy of study in themselves, but often they signify more complex cultural meanings, mask efforts to erase or reorder the city, and conceal histories of injustice. This course presents methods for "reading" the built form of the American city to decode histories of architecture, culture, public policy, and economics. City space can be read literally, but this course will unpack the symbolic meanings of urban spaces, neighborhoods, buildings, and sites. Students learn methods for understanding and analyzing the city's form before delving into a specific case study of the Mill Creek Valley. As St. Louis' largest African-American neighborhood, but almost completely erased between 1959 and 1965 using city and federal funds, the site of the neighborhood remains a potent and under-examined part of St. Louis.

The course will examine the history of the neighborhood as well as related histories of federal and local urban renewal policies, African-American cultural history, and historic preservation. We will use local archives to attain and apply primary source documents vital to urban history including census records, building permits, municipal ordinances, and insurance maps. Additional readings will offer insights into possible methods for interpreting and commemorating places that illuminate the urban built environment's historic past. The final project in this course will entail students collaboratively working on a public interpretive project for Mill Creek Valley where they can apply both methods of decoding and curating the city. Attendance mandatory during first week.

The course counts toward the American Culture Studies major for day students, and fulfills the Humanities and Social Science requirements for the M.A. Program in American Culture Studies.

Readings

These books are required:

- Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Grady Clay, *Close Up: How to Read the American City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Larry Ford, *The Spaces Between the Buildings*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Boston: The MIT Press, 1995.
- Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Future of the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and the Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-1975*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Other required readings are accessible on Blackboard (<http://bb.wustl.edu>; denoted by asterisk on the syllabus) or will be distributed in class. Selections from *The City Reader* can be found in a digital copy posted on Blackboard.

Required Work and Grading

The required work in the seminar will include four papers, a final research and design project, field trip notes, participation in the course glossary, participation in discussion and attendance. The final grade will be based on this formula:

Assigned Papers	40%
Final Project	30%
Attendance and Participation in Discussion	30%

Papers and work will be graded numerically out of 100 points. Final grades will be letter grades based on the university's standard grading, calculated from the numerical grades.

Attendance and Participation

All students should attend each class session, take notes and participate in discussions. *Only one unexcused absence is allowed. A second unexcused absence will result in automatic drop of one letter grade for the final course grade.* If a student cannot attend a session due to a conflicting academic requirement, that student should notify the instructor in writing one week prior to the session that will be missed. If a student has a medical or personal reason for absence, likewise the instructor shall be notified in writing at least prior to the start of class. When in doubt, please contact the instructor. Your grade will thank you. All field trips will occur during class time and are mandatory.

Field Work

Due to the evening meeting time mandated by University College, three field work sessions are scheduled on Saturdays. Students are strongly encouraged to attend these sessions, because they connect course readings to actual urban sites where methods of investigation will be practices. If students cannot attend the Mill Creek Valley field session, students should arrange an alternate visit. *Visiting the Mill Creek Valley neighborhood and documenting conditions there will count toward the participation grade.* The Lafayette Square field session is not mandatory, but strongly encouraged. One trip will bring students to collections at two local libraries essential to the final research project. If students cannot attend that trip, substitute visits to the libraries shall be arranged or demonstration of familiarity with collections shall be provide dto the instructor.

Response Papers

There will be four assigned papers that will frame responses to the readings and site visits. Papers will allow students space to explore topics within the course readings and experiences. Writing should endeavor to be in the mode of an essay – that is, an attempt to present the student's critical ideas about the assignment, rather than an authoritative "answer." The papers are qualitative counterparts to the quantitative work of the final research project. The prompts for the papers will be distributed in class and posted on Blackboard, since course activity will influence the exact questions for each paper. Papers will be 5-7 pages long.

If any student needs an extension on one of these assignments, s/he should ask for one at the start of the class *before* which the paper is due. *One extension will be granted, but only if it is requested according to the requirement listed on this syllabus.* A request for extension after a due date will not be granted. Late assignments will lose 3 points for each day late regardless of the day. The instructor strongly encourages submission of late work because even a failing grade will improve the student's average and ensure a better final grade.

Papers shall be submitted via email or in paper.

Final Project

The final project in the course will be public history work conducted by teams, but graded individually. There will be no final research paper. Instead, students will partner with another student (there may be one group of three) to conduct primary archival research on the Mill Creek Valley neighborhood in St. Louis. The final assignment will be described in detail later in the semester, but will allow students to practice methods of decoding urban space presented in course readings. The final projects will synthesize information, and will be posted to a course website that will survive after the course is concluded. (Any student who does not wish to publish research should notify the instructor as soon as possible).

Final project topics will be reviewed in class on April 11 to ensure timely instructor and peer feedback. Teams will commit to a research project by the following class, April 18. Student teams then should complete original research outside of class meeting times. Student teams will present final projects at the last class meeting on May 9. Final projects are due May 11.

Academic Integrity

Students are responsible for adhering to the university's academic integrity policies (for a full articulation of them, see <http://studentconduct.wustl.edu/academic-integrity/>). In particular, students should produce original work and avoid various other forms of academic dishonesty, including falsification of data and misrepresentation of sources. Failure to cite and formally acknowledge your sources constitutes plagiarism, and will result in a failing grade (and likely disciplinary action within the bounds of Washington University's policies). *When in doubt, cite!*

Citations and Formatting

All work for the course should use either the Modern Language Association of Chicago Style of formatting, 11-point typefaces, standard margins and double spacing. Papers shall have titles and page numbers.

Schedule

Decoding the City: The Built Environment as Information System

January 17

Introduction

Film Viewed In Class:

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (1988; William H. Whyte, director)

<https://vimeo.com/111488563>

January 24

Lecture in Class:

The History and Evolution of the City of St. Louis

St. Louis City Plan Commission, "Physical Growth of the City of St. Louis" (1969):

<https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/archive/history-physical-growth-stlouis/>

Grady Clay, *Close-Up*, p. 1-109.

Kingsley Davis, "The Urbanization of the Human Population," *The City Reader*.*

Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *The City Reader*.*

January 31

Clay, *Close-Up*, p. 110-181.

Sam Bass Warner, "Evolution and Transformation: The American Industrial Metropolis, 1840-1940," *The City Reader*, p. 57-64.*

Ernest W. Burgess, "The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project," *The City Reader*, p. 161-169.*

February 7

Larry Ford, *The Spaces Between Buildings*, p. 1-82.

Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life**

Jane Jacobs, "The Generators of Diversity," *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*.*

Paper #1 Due

FIELD WORK #1: Saturday, February 11 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Lafayette Square/Darst-Webbe and Clinton-Peabody Housing Projects

Meet at northwest corner of Lafayette and Mississippi Avenues

Reading:

Norbury Wayman, *History of St. Louis Neighborhoods: Lafayette Square*:

<https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/archive/neighborhood-histories-norbury-wayman/lafayette/index16.htm>

Najeeb Hasan, "No Place Like Home," *Riverfront Times* (July 18, 2001):
<http://www.riverfronttimes.com/stlouis/no-place-like-home/Content?oid=2471460>

Kevin Lynch, "The Image of the Environment," *The Image of the City**

February 14

Larry Ford, *The Spaces Between Buildings*, p. 83-138.

Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," *The City Reader*, p. 321-327.*

February 21

Larry Ford, *The Spaces Between Buildings*, p. 139-211.

Ali Mandapour, "Social Exclusion and Space," *The City Reader*, p. 186-194.*

Films and Clips Viewed In Class:

Community Growth: Crisis and Challenge (1959)

The Dynamic American City (1956)

Koyaanisqatsi clip (1982)

Parking Craters: Scourge of American Downtowns (2014)

February 28

Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, p. 1-111.

James Baldwin, "A Report From Occupied Territory" (*The Nation*, July 1966).

<https://www.thenation.com/article/report-occupied-territory/>

Film Viewed In Class:

Expedition! St. Louis: The City Fights Back (1960)

March 7

Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, p. 112-228.

Paper #2 Due.

SPRING BREAK – No Class Meeting on March 14

Decoding Mill Creek Valley

March 21

Phillippe Bourgois, "If You're Not Black, Then You're White: A History of Ethnic Relations in St. Louis," *City & Society* (December 1989)*

Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, p. 1-42; 68-126.

FIELD WORK #2: Saturday, March 25 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Mill Creek Valley

Carpool from foot of Brookings Hall

Reading:

David Heymann, "Trouble With Terminators," *Places Journal* (June 2016)

<https://placesjournal.org/article/trouble-with-terminators/>

March 28

Lecture in Class:

Research Methods for the Built Environment

Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, p. 127-254.

FIELD WORK #3: Saturday, April 1 at 10:00 AM

Missouri History Museum Library and Central Library

Meet at Missouri History Museum Library, 225 S. Skinker Boulevard

April 4

Lecture In Class:

Model Cities in St. Louis

Ron Fagerstrom, *Mill Creek Valley: A Soul of St. Louis**

Clarence Perry, "The Neighborhood Unit," *The City Reader*, p. 486-498.*

Redevelopment Plan for Mill Creek Valley (1958)

Paper #3 Due.

Interpreting Decoded Places

April 11

Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*, p. 1-137.

Preliminary Proposals for Final Projects

April 18

Hayden, *The Power of Place*, p. 138-167; 188-209; 226-247.
Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Street in Bronzeville"*

Paper #4 Due

April 25

Guest Lecture in Class:
Black Artists Group
Ben Looker, Assistant Professor of American Studies, St. Louis University

Eric Avila, *Folklore of the Freeway*, p. 1-88.

May 2

Avila, *Folklore of the Freeway* p. 89-194.

Research Project Workshop

May 9

Presentations of Projects (Last Class Meeting)

May 11

Final Projects Due, 5:00 PM (No Class Meeting)