A Political History of Urban Form

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Summary
The course offers an overview of the history of the city and the urban territory from antiquity to the contemporary age through the concept of urban form.

Content
The term urban and the neologism urbanization were introduced in the 19th century in order to address the all-encompassing spatial process through which society reproduces itself. Yet the urban, whose political nature is seldom questioned, casts a long shadow and includes millennia of city making.

The study of urban form focuses on the way both city and territory are physically constructed. Central to the study of urban form is the question of form understood as the concrete organization of physical entities. In this course we will maintain that form is always a product of political forces: no matter how intangible or elusive these forces are, they always leave concrete traces on the ground. City elements such as houses, roads, squares, parks, gardens, bridges, monuments, and infrastructure can be considered as forensic clues in order to understand and map power relationships at play in a specific historical moment. From the perspective of urban form, those city elements can be assumed as what reveals the nomos of the city. The word nomos comes from the Greek nemein which means ‘organization’ but also ‘orientation’. Every society implies a form of organization and orientation whose politics are inevitably reflected in the way the physical environment is constructed.

To decipher the nomos of the city is to learn how the physicality of the city reveals the power relationships that have produced it. The city is thus the most important historical index of these relationships and its close reading raises the most fundamental questions about city and its architecture: who builds a city? Who inhabits a city? And above all what is the ultimate purpose of a city?

The seminar will thus introduce each case study by paralleling the close reading of specific urban artifacts with an introduction to historical conditions that had produced these artifacts. Students will be trained to carefully look at and describe the city through the concreteness of its architecture. They will look at plans, drawings, paintings, photographs, and texts.

From Ancient Mesopotamia to the Early Islamic city, from workers’ villages in Ancient Egypt to the Poleis of Ancient Greece, from Classicist architecture in 17th century Paris to the single family cottage of the American suburbia, from the development of the medieval Bastides to the Squatters of 1970s Europe, we will research the relationship between urban form, architectural history and political thinking.

Course Sessions
Session 1 - From Circle to Rectangle
Early Human Settlements and the Rise of Domestication

Session 2 - How we Became Urban
Early Cities of Near East and Indus Valley

Session 3 - City of Work
Urbanism in Ancient Egypt

Session 4 - From Oikos to Polis
The architecture of the Ancient Greek Polis: Zagora, Athens, Piraeus, Olynthus

Session 5 - Conquest and Domestication
The making an Urban Empire from Territory to the Domus

Session 6 - Division and Multiplication
The Architecture of the Ancient Chinese City
Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, the student must be able to:

• Interpret in a critical manner the concepts developed during the course
• Argue the relations between political thought and urban form
• Develop a reflection on the relationship between historical conditions and the city morphology
• Elaborate a description of the city through the concrete elements of architecture

Expected student activities

Personal work during the semester, reading of texts, personal study of a theme.

Assessment methods

Personal work during the semester, presented and discussed during an oral exam.

Resources

Bibliography

· He Yeju, *Chinese Imperial City Planning History* (Beijing: China Architecture and Building Press, 1996), 11-34.
· Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 34-56.
- This session will look as the urban transformations of the last fifty years in light of class struggles that marked the passage from the industrial metropolis to the ‘Post-fordist’ City.

**Ressources en bibliothèque**

- The prehistory of home / Moore
- The city in history / Mumford
- La cité à travers l'histoire / Mumford
- The idea of a town / Rykwert
- Rituals and walls / Aureli
- The autonomous city / Vasudevan
- The new Blackwell companion to the city /Bridge
- The rational factory / Biggs
- Housing and Habitat in the Ancient Mediterranean / Bradley
- Uruk, the first city / Liverani
- The Ancient Indus / Wright
- Household and City Organization at Olynthus / Cahill
- The Piraeus / Garland
- Roman urbanism / Parkins
- The Roman House and Social Identity / Shelley
- Chinese imperial city planning / Shatzman
- Town Planning in Frontier America / Reps
- Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture / Vaughan
- Sécurité, territoire, population / Foucault
- The City as a Project / Aureli
- Interpreting the renaissance / Tafuri
- The Paris of Henry IV / Ballon
- Georgian London / Summerson
- The town house in Georgian London / Stewart
- Enclosure / Fields
- The secret history of domesticity / McKeon