

URB-403

Social justice and transition in the urban context

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Cursus	Sem.	Type
Architecture	MA2, MA4	Opt.
Systèmes urbains	MA2	Obl.

Language of teaching	English
Credits	3
Session	Summer
Semester	Spring
Exam	Oral
Workload	90h
Weeks	14
Hours	3 weekly
Courses	2 weekly
Exercises	1 weekly
Number of positions	

Summary

This course explores the connections between spatial justice, social equity, and the socio-ecological transition. Through theoretical insights and empirical case studies, it provides tools to critically assess urban transformations and imagine fairer and more hospitable cities.

Content

The course is structured around 14 sessions that combine theoretical insight and empirical investigation. It introduces students to key justice theories (Rawls, Sen, Fraser, Young) and applies them to the analysis of urban processes such as housing, mobility, infrastructure development, and ecological transition. Particular attention is paid to how technical systems, material infrastructures, and spatial arrangements participate in shaping unequal urban conditions and influence the possibilities for just and inclusive transitions.

Through thematic modules, the course covers topics such as green gentrification, energy precarity, mobility justice, responsible densification, participatory planning, and the management of urban commons. It explores the social implications of infrastructural and architectural decisions in contexts marked by climate urgency and resource constraints. Urban case studies from both the Global North and South provide a comparative framework to evaluate the role of planning, governance, and technical expertise in shaping urban futures. Students are invited to question how material configurations such as transportation networks, energy infrastructures, building standards, and public space arrangements can produce or mitigate social inequalities and environmental injustices. Students will gain tools to critically engage with the spatial, technical, and political dimensions of their practice, and to design solutions that are both ecologically responsible and socially inclusive.

Provisional synopsis (subject to change)

1. Session 1 General Introduction
2. Session 2 Classical Theories of Social Justice
3. Session 3 Spatial Justice: From the Right to the City to the Just City
4. Session 4 Socio-Ecological Transition and Inequalities
5. Session 5 Just Densification
6. Session 6 Housing, Climate and Justice
7. Session 7 Field visit
8. Session 8 Citizen Participation and Spatial Democracy
9. Session 9 Infrastructures, Care and Vulnerability
10. Session 10 Territories in Struggle: ZADs, Squats and Commons
11. Session 11 Global Cities, Urban Extractivism and Planetary Justice
12. Session 12 Decolonial Perspectives and Political Ecology of the Global South
13. Session 13 Envisioning Just Transitions
14. Session 14 Conclusion: Restitutions and Collective Synthesis

Learning Prerequisites**Recommended courses**

Science and technology in urban transformation

Learning Outcomes

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

- Define key justice concepts (distinguish core notions such as social justice, spatial justice, and environmental justice).
- Describe urban inequalities using spatial and socio-technical indicators
- Interpret urban transformations using justice frameworks
- Assess / Evaluate socio-ecological transition strategies (equity implications of densification, mobility, energy or yet housing interventions)
- Critique Reflect on their professional role in shaping just transitions

Teaching methods

- Interactive lectures and class discussions
- Case study analysis
- Role-playing and debate simulations
- Student presentations and discussion of compulsory readings

Expected student activities

Active participation in class / debate or role-play

Critical reading and oral presentation

Annotated mapping

Micro field inquiry

Assessment methods

In-class participation

30%

Active involvement in discussions, debates, exercises, and group work. Students are expected to engage critically with readings, contribute to group activities, and participate constructively in class.

Final written exam

70% Individual exam at the end of the course (1 hour), based on key concepts, case study analysis, and application of justice frameworks to urban scenarios.

Resources

Moodle Link

- <https://go.epfl.ch/URB-403>