

ARCH 409-201/509-201
“I CAN’T BREATHE”
DESIGN ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Mon/Thurs 1:30 – 3:00 pm
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This course examines the history, theory and mechanisms through which architects, designers, planners and other socially-conscious activists put their professional skills in service to the concept of justice

The resurgence of socially-conscious design is due in large part to groups of students and practitioners frustrated by the visible and widening gap between the haves and have nots across our shared landscape. The more recent concerns around the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the systemic, geographical injustice driving unrest around the nation, only serve to put a finer point on the importance of empowering people to take direct control over their environmental conditions. For some time now, a small cadre of design professionals have taken on the challenge of local empowerment with great enthusiasm and the resulting work has been both impressive and promising.

Labeled “design activists” by some and “social entrepreneurs” by others, this eclectic, committed, mission-driven collection of designers have brought together concerns of justice, accessibility, affordability, mobility, sustainability, and aesthetics into a small but growing sector of education and practice. The work of these broad-minded, multi-talented designers are presently impacting and improving lives, preserving local cultures, and fighting for justice; providing hope for the future of both the profession and society alike. By engaging in the kind of efforts that demonstrate the ability to collaboratively transform, and in some cases, actually save lives, their efforts serve to debunk the public perception that good design serves the most privileged only.

Rejecting the flawed, determinist position that posits design has the power to transform society alone, this course examines histories, essays, manifestos, interventions, strategies, theories, and works that – while impacting people in perhaps modest ways – hold the promise of significant social change over the long term. To establish a shared groundwork, the course introduces theories and examples of social change efforts that inform where we find ourselves presently. In weekly readings, videos, podcasts, and lectures addressing politics, culture, economics, civics, academia, design, and the urban environment, students are challenged to consider how the articulation of space both shapes and reflects political and social subjectivities and how that might influence the education, practice, projects, and finally the legacy of architects and designers.

In addition, students enrolled will receive a full scholarship to participate in the annual [Design Futures Student Leadership Forum](#) – which aims to engender leadership and skill-building for future leaders hoping to use design as a tool for social equity and positive change in underserved communities across the globe. (The scholarship will not apply to Taubman College tuition) Finally, students will ultimately be required to create a specific design activism/social justice project in response to such considerations of their choosing.