

URP 529: History of Urban Form
[Taught with Arch 523 and UD 713]
Fall 2020

Mode of Instruction: Online
Instructor: Robert Fishman (fishmanr@umich.edu)

This course has an important pre-requisite that is not listed in the College Bulletin: you have to love cities.

As an historian, I have often been accused of living in the past. This accusation is true.

As I see it, to turn to the past is not nostalgia, but a way to escape the limitations of our own time, and thus to extend the possibilities for action in the present.

Today, with everything defined as “urban” and “public” perpetually in crisis, the history of cities becomes a crucial source for a whole range of successful urban forms that are difficult to plan or even to imagine today: great public spaces and monuments; pedestrian-scaled neighborhoods; lively and beautiful streetscapes.

We will be examining a wide range of cities from all the major urban civilizations ranging from ancient times to the present. From this wonderful variety of historic urban forms we will be seeking timeless principles of urbanism through a kind of dialogue or conversation between two great urbanists whose work forms the bulk of the readings:

Lewis Mumford

Jane Jacobs

The course will also build on the concepts of a third great urbanist, Spiro Kostof, especially his concepts of organic, grid, and grand manner plans. In addition to the readings, class discussions, and papers based on the readings, students will be required to choose one city and to analyze its history in depth.

I expect that about half the class meetings will be “asynchronic,” i.e., recorded lectures posted on Canvas that can be viewed at any time. The other half will be online Zoom meetings with ample opportunity for class participation.

“The city,” as Lewis Mumford observed, “is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community.”