

URP 583: Race, Difference, and Social Justice in the U.S. City

Fall 2024

Instructor: Joe Grengs (grengs@umich.edu)

The next generation of urban planners and policy makers can be a part of the solution instead of perpetuating enduring institutions that divide people in cities. This course is a seminar that requires a commitment to student participation through in-class guided discussions; we learn with and from each other. A main objective is to gain a sense of history and societal change by examining the way that social relations have shaped and divided metropolitan areas of the United States. In turn, it shows how the built environment stemming from public and private actions over decades has produced a separateness in society that undermines democratic decision-making and damages our capacity to deliver the benefits of urban life in an equitable way. A social-justice framework – with special emphasis on systemic racism, but complemented with perspectives on ethnicity, class, and gender – reveals hardened divisions that must be confronted if planners hope to promote just, diverse, and sustainable places. The course aims to help planners and policy makers work successfully on urban problems by understanding the sources of such problems as poverty, residential segregation, and school inequality, and by strengthening a capacity for cultural humility and elevating an appreciation for difference. All students are welcome, regardless of previous exposure to these concepts, because all can contribute to our interpreting and understanding these complex but essential ideas.

Learning Goals:

- Understand the major principles of social justice and various dimensions of inequality in metropolitan areas of the United States.
- Analyze and interpret various theories to understand their strengths and weaknesses when you draw upon them in practice.
- Develop your capacity for critical independent thought.
- Cultivate a deepened sense of your own personal values, an acceptance of other viewpoints, and an understanding of the conditions that affect people living in cities.
- Advance your capacity to engage with others and build confidence in your ability to express your viewpoints on sensitive but essential subject matters.
- Practice cultural humility by reflecting on your own limits in knowledge and experience, examining your own values and behaviors, and fostering an appreciation for the rich complexities of communities that you will work with.

Course Requirements:

Course assignments include: Two short written reflections on personal identity; Weekly journal writing on readings and discussions; Participation in in-class exercises and case studies; Final paper on a case study.