Urban Theory: Los Angeles Case Study

Architecture 608
University of Southern California
Spring 2023

Prof. Peter Ekman

125 Harris Hall (a.k.a. Verle Annis)
Thursdays, 2:00–3:50 p.m.

Course Description
Through critical scrutiny of greater Los Angeles, this course poses a series of questions about how to make sense of urbanism and urbanization more broadly. Los Angeles provides a compelling and consistently troubling case through which to investigate the complex interdependence of the spatial and the social: how the physical form of a city and the life lived within it call each other into being. Its peculiarities also equip us to appreciate the limits of a formalist approach to urbanism — a physical determinism which still imbues design practice in much of the world — and assert the role of theory and research in unlearning it.

We will first consider several major schools of urban theory — each an attempt to pose “the city” as an object of knowledge and target of intervention — and explore how, particularly since the middle of the twentieth century, Los Angeles has called prevailing conceptual frameworks into question, provoking their critique and revision. In so doing, we will survey the city’s historical geography, setting in perspective many features that observers have tended to single out as unique or definitive: e.g. its polycentric spatial structure, the role of automotive transport, the prevalence of open-lot housing typologies, and the annulment of traditional city–suburb binaries as levers for analysis and design.

The course’s second unit centers attention on the senses through which we apprehend, narrate, represent, and design urban space. In architecture and adjacent professions, visual perception has long been accorded uncontested primacy. We will theorize vision and visuality, first through a discussion of cartography and, differently, through an extended discussion of the driver’s-eye view from which the vast majority of L.A.’s everyday built environment is experienced and appraised. Then we will steer wide of vision, conceptualizing the materiality of the city through sound, taste, scent, and the kinesthetics of pedestrian life. Each of these conversations will afford perspective on processes formative of L.A.’s urban condition: transnational and internal migration, economic and racial segregation, the politics of housing and homeownership, redevelopment and displacement, transport and automobility, the governance of other critical infrastructures, de- and reindustrialization, commerce and consumption, artistic production, conflicts over public space, and the compounding climate crisis that has already taken hypertrophic form in Los Angeles, altering the status of architecture as a future-making proposition.

To understand the specificity of Los Angeles — both its enduring problems and its possibilities — a serious acquaintance with several other urban types is necessary. In the final third of the semester, we will undertake a series of experiments in comparative urbanism, staging conversations between Los Angeles and a set of cities with which, at first glance, it may not seem to have much in common. Much scholarship and most popular discourse presumes that the place is unique, an “island on the land” and, for better or worse, an exception to the inherited rules of development. If so — if there is truly no larger group of similar settlements to which it belongs — then it cannot properly serve as the “case study” indicated in the title of this course. To theorize Los Angeles — and “the” city by way of Los Angeles — we must be willing to grapple with its most ordinary, indeed unexceptional, qualities. Perhaps, as Wallace Stegner once posited of California, L.A. is “America, only more so.”
Learning Objectives

1. **Responsible Scholarship:** Developing the ability to properly cite sources (text and image) while demonstrating the fullest scholarly integrity and adherence to academic standards.
2. **Critical Thinking:** Developing interpretive skills (of designs, sites, and texts) and their communication, both orally and in writing.
3. **Critical Thinking:** Learning to diagnose, critique, and repair approaches to history that exclude or suppress narratives that would allow a more inclusive and illuminating understanding of the past.
4. **Disciplinary Vocabulary:** Developing a strong, varied, nuanced, and vivid lexicon for urban theory and urban studies.
5. **Disciplinary Knowledge:** Understanding the history and theory of architecture as a profession and urban studies as a field.
6. **Disciplinary Knowledge:** Developing knowledge essential to devising, executing, and communicating interventions in the built environment as a practitioner.
7. **Disciplinary Knowledge:** Learning to recognize, appreciate, reference, and critique sites and texts critical to the development of the profession in this region and beyond.
8. **Site Interpretation:** Learning to interpret cultural, vernacular, and other ostensibly unplanned or undesigned landscapes through field study and other forms of empirical research.
9. **Written Expression:** Learning to pose viable and conceptually interesting research questions, craft arguments, cite evidence, defend a thesis, effectively pair words with visual materials, and bring historical knowledge to bear on the present and future city.

Course Notes

Unless otherwise specified, each session will consist of a seminar-style discussion focused on the assigned texts. It is crucial that you do the reading before coming to class, and that you come ready to both talk and listen to your colleagues.

This course is required of students in the M.AARS (Master of Advanced Architectural Research Studies) degree program, but it is open to students from all disciplines and intellectual backgrounds.

Office Hours

Peter Ekman will hold office hours every Thursday between 4:00 and 6:00 in 339A Watt Hall. Come by to discuss any aspect of the course, urban theory, Los Angeles, places other than Los Angeles, or life in general. Plan to do so at least once before the end of the semester.

Communications

There will be a Blackboard site for ARCH 608. There you will find PDFs of most assigned readings (which are to be printed, marked up, and brought to class), a copy of this syllabus, and a repository of all communication related to the course (sent via Blackboard).

For all other inquiries, e-mail is best: pekman@usc.edu.

Assignments

There are three types of writing that you will be called upon to produce this semester. Each week (unless directed otherwise), having read the assigned texts for Thursday, you will write and submit a two-page (500- to 600-word) response, reflecting critically on some specific aspect of the materials at hand (either one individual text or a theme or trope that recurs across the week’s texts). The task is not to summarize, but to pose new questions of the texts — questions that you might then take up in the context of our discussion. These response papers will be due (via e-mail) at 12:00 p.m. every Thursday.
On March 23, you will submit a short paper (of 5 to 6 pages, or 1500 to 1800 words) that reflects on the sensory dimensions of urban life and the technologies involved in representing them. This paper will require no original research in textual sources beyond what has already been assigned, but you are encouraged to undertake some sort of field study to gather impressions and ground your argument.

On May 5, you will submit a longer paper (of 12 to 15 pages, or 3600 to 4500 words) based on original research and interpretation. Expect more attention to this assignment in the second half of the term. Expect, also, to stop by and discuss your proposed topic in advance of undertaking the paper. There is no final exam for ARCH 608; this paper takes its place.

**Grading Breakdown**

- Participation in discussion: 40%
- Weekly response papers: 30%
- Shorter paper: 10%
- Final paper: 20%

**Policies**

In a small class such as this one, lateness will be obvious and disruptive. We will always begin promptly at 2:00 and be done by 3:50.

All things being equal, the use of laptops, tablets, phones, and other electronics will not be allowed during class time. These technologies are useful, but they have become too useful; indeed, in a seminar they readily distract from the task at hand. If there is a specific reason why you need to make an exception to this rule, please do get in touch early.

**Attendance**

Attendance at every meeting is expected. Note: in the grading scheme above, no credit is given solely for showing up; there are only deductions for unexcused absences. It is assumed that you will attend class.

Naturally, absences can be excused when there is a good reason. If and when you need to miss class, please be in touch beforehand. And every student, per USC policy, can miss one class unexplained.

This course is being offered in person, not online. At certain points in the term, we may decide to meet outside. The pandemic persists, and conditions may change rapidly, but for now we are fully committed to pressing ahead in person.

**Academic Conduct**

Plagiarism — that is, presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words — is an academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism found in SCampus, Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards,” at policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable, and they will incur the severest punishment allowable. See additional information in SCampus for the full complement of university policies on scientific misconduct: policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.
PART I: CASING THE METROPOLIS

Week 2 (January 19)
From Chicago to L.A.: Organized Urban Research and the Question of the Center
Peter Galison, “War Against the Center,” Grey Room 4 (Summer 2001): 5–33.

Recommended:

Week 3 (January 26)
Case and Comparison in Urban Studies
Recommended:

Week 4 (February 2)
Mapping the Region: The View from Above

Recommended:
Glen Creason, Los Angeles in Maps (New York: Rizzoli, 2010).

PART II: THE CITY AND THE SENSES

Week 5 (February 9)
Boulevard, Highway, Strip: The View from the Road


**Week 6 (February 16)**

**Kinesthetic Metropolis: Walking as Writing**


**Week 7 (February 23)**

**Space and Taste: Edible Los Angeles**

City of Gold (film, 2015; dir. Laura Gabbert).


Alexander Tarr, “From Hog Farms to Hollywood” and “Welcome to the New Garden City,” in “Have Your City and Eat It Too: Los Angeles and the Urban Food Renaissance” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015), 16–70.

**Week 8 (March 2)**

**Tuning Up: City as Sound**


**Week 9 (March 9)**

**Sense and Scents: Atmospheric Urbanisms**

Carey McWilliams, “The Folklore of Climatology,” in *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1946), 96–112.


**Week X (March 16)**

**NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK**
Week 10 (March 23)
Downtown Field Study; or, Botanizing on the Asphalt
(MEET OFF CAMPUS)
(SHORT PAPER DUE)

PART III: UNEXCEPTIONAL L.A.: THEORY AND/AS COMPARISON

Week 11 (March 30)
L.A. as Detroit

Week 12 (April 6)
L.A. as New Jersey

Week 13 (April 13)
L.A. as Shenzhen
(MEET OFF CAMPUS)
The Forgotten Space (film, 2010; dir. Allan Sekula and Noël Burch).

Week 14 (April 20)
L.A. as the Randstad; L.A. as the Ruhr; L.A. as Veneto; L.A. as Euskadi

Week 15 (April 27)
L.A. as D.F.; L.A. as L.A.

APRIL 29 TO MAY 2: STUDY DAYS

MAY 5 (FRIDAY): FINAL PAPER DUE