

Art History 100-303

Athens/Babylon: Images and Metaphors of the American City

University of Pennsylvania, Department of Art History

Fall Semester 2007

Meyerson Hall, Room B6

Thursday, 3:00-6:00 PM

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Office hours: Tuesday, 2:00-4:00 PM

* E-mail is generally the best method of contact during non-office hours.

* Please allow 48-hours for an e-mail response.

GENERAL COURSE INFORMATION:

Topic and Scope of the Course: Americans have long had a love-hate relationship with their cities. Popular images of New York and Los Angeles oscillate between glittering pictures of wealth and culture to grim scenes of excess and violence, often teetering at the edge of disaster. Already at the dawn of the industrial age in the early 19th century, the grandiose plans for a new capital city on the Potomac were steadily undermined by the anti-urban visions of a Jeffersonian pastoralism. The rise of great industrial metropolises in the latter part of the 19th century was watched with a mixture of fascination and horror. On the one side lay the belief that the city represented the crystallization of social and technological progress. On the other side lay the fear that the city had become a monster. It was common to think of the industrial metropolis as a force of destructive nature, or else as an alien life form that had somehow escaped rational human control. In the twentieth century there were renewed attempts to rationalize the industrial city through planning and redevelopment, as though the city could become a benign machine. Almost as quickly, however, the new metaphors slipped into dystopian scenes. In the late 20th century the apocalyptic visions of decayed, burnt out cities became sources, both of horror and aesthetic delight. This course will investigate the ambivalent images and metaphors that surrounded American cities in the 19th and 20th centuries. It will particularly examine architectural images and attempts to control the physical environment of the city. Although the focus will be on the physical and architectural aspects of the built environment, it will be seen that these forms are always inflected by the perceived uses and users of these spaces. The people in the tenements, the crowds on the boulevards or the workers in the skyscrapers give sense and meaning to the urban forms.

To praise or to condemn the city has always meant representing cities through verbal and visual lenses, either calculated to persuade or unconsciously inherited as tropes. To portray the city, either as a den of corruption and decay or as an acropolis of enlightenment and culture, is to select views, build metaphors and construct portraits. It will be part of the aim of this course to untangle some of these ways of viewing or speaking about the city. What common forms do they take? Where do they overlap and where do they diverge? Images of the American city have cut across many modes of representation. This course will consider cities as imagined by planners and architects, as described by novelists and sociologists, and as depicted by painters and photographers. Thus, the historical documents will include literary works (Charles Dickens and Henry James); sociological and historical accounts (Lewis Mumford and Louis Wirth); architectural and urbanistic writings (Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch); paintings and architectural designs

(Thomas Cole and Daniel Burnham); and cinematic representations (*Blade Runner* and *Metropolis*). The course will investigate how these different forms of representation or knowledge have affected and still affect our mental images of the American city. Conversely, it will also investigate how concrete historical cities, as lived and perceived by their users, have informed urban representations. How does each form of knowing or seeing slice the city in a different way, revealing new aspects of the urban scene while excluding others? What is the relationship between cities, physically existing “out there,” and the various representations of them? What happens when idealized or utopian visions of the city become partially translated into actual buildings and streets?

Although Americans have long been ambivalent towards their own cities, this ambivalence has not always taken the same form. Much has changed in American culture and society since 1800, not only in the physical forms of cities but in the repertoire of urban images. At the same time, certain motifs seem to reappear at various intervals, particularly images of crisis and immanent destruction. Tracking the American city chronologically, this course will treat its urban imagery as a profoundly historical phenomenon. Just as modern cities contain physical fragments of their own historical unfolding, so too do contemporary images the city contain structural elements of earlier images that have survived into the present. The course will group documents and images of the city by historical period, in order to examine phenomena, which are either unique to each period or repeat from one period to the next. Within each period or particular example the “city” may signify something different, whether a dense urban core with towering skyscrapers or a pastoral setting for secular temples. As will be seen, the city itself has constantly been redefined, often in opposition to what the city is not: the countryside, the suburb or the landscape. Such lines, however, are never completely stable. In some examples, city and suburb will become oppositional, mutually defining terms, and in other cases the two will become indistinguishable. To understand the American city historically will mean also to understand its present in a richer, more complex way.

Purpose of the Course: The primary purpose of this course is to allow students to engage in a particular intellectual problem in depth and thereby actively to develop creative and critical thinking. As an interdisciplinary humanities course, it intends more generally to deepen skills of close reading, persuasive interpretation, and cogent writing. The course will emphasize writing assignments as well as class discussion of the readings. As an introduction to art history also, the course seeks to provide students with a range of conceptual, visual and verbal skills essential to the description and analysis of works of art and architecture. In learning to look closely at objects, students will be able to develop skills in visual literacy, including formal analysis, iconographic reading and material description. The close observation of visual images will be treated with the same weight as the evidence of texts. Through a series of selected examples around a single theme, the course will give students a foundation in the historical understanding architectural objects and a capacity critically to analyze primary and secondary texts related to those objects.

Class Format: This course will be a seminar course focused on the discussion and analysis of texts and visual materials. Students are responsible for having read the required readings before each class and should be prepared to discuss the content in detail. Evaluations will be based on written assignments and class participation, including attendance.

Required Texts: All assigned readings, as well as images related to those readings, are available through the Blackboard site for the course. Students are responsible for printing out the readings.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

September 6: Introduction

September 13: Forms and Words: Twin Aspects of the Urban Image

Anselm L. Strauss, "The City As a Whole," in *Images of the American City*, pp. 5-17; Sam Bass Warner, "Slums and Skyscrapers: Urban Images, Symbols and Ideology," and Thomas Reiner and Michael Hindery, "City Planning: Images of the Ideal and the Existing City," in *Cities of the Mind*, pp. 181-95, 133-47; Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, pp. 1-13, 46-90; Alex Krieger, "The American City: Ideal and Mythic Aspects of a Reinvented Urbanism," *Assemblage*, No. 3, July 1987, pp. 38-59.

September 20: Rome and Arcadia: Civic Representations in the Early Republic 1790-1820

Thomas Jefferson, "Query XIX," in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 239-241; Charles M. Harris, "Washington's Gamble, L'Enfant's Dream: Politics, Design, and the Founding of the Nation's Capital," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, v. 56, July 1999; Sarah Luria, "George Washington's Romance," in *Capital Speculations*, pp. 3-37; James Machor, "Civilization and the Order of Nature," in *Pastoral Cities*, pp. 71-120.

September 27: Boom Town: Speculators and Boosters on the Frontier, 1810-50

William Cronon, "Dreaming the Metropolis," *Nature's Metropolis*, pp. 23-54; John Reys, "Cities for Sale" and "Towns by the Tracks," in *The Making of Urban America*, pp. 349-412; Diane Shaw, Chapters 1 and 4 in *City Building on the Eastern Frontier*, pp. 1-18, 64-86.

October 4: Last Days of Sodom: Decay, Catastrophe and Moralizing Romanticism, 1820-60

Christine Stansell and Sean Wilentz, "Cole's America" and Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, pp. 3-21, 79-103; Hans Bergmann, "Five Points: Sketches of Hell," in *God in the Street*, pp. 115-133; Charles Dickens, "New York," in *American Notes*, pp. 72-87; George Lippard, "The Devil-Bug's Dream," in *The Quaker City*, pp. 369-393.

October 11: Skyscrapers and the Emergence of "Downtown," 1880-1915

Daniel Bluestone, "'A City under One Roof': Skyscrapers, 1880-1895," in *Constructing Chicago*, pp. 104-151; Thomas Bender, "Skyscraper and Skyline," in *The Unfinished City*; William R. Taylor, "New York and the Origin of the Skyline," In Pursuit of Gotham, pp. 23-33; Henry James, "New York Revisited," in *The American Scene*, pp. 57-88.

1st paper assignment due in class!

October 18: The Aesthetics of Order: City Beautiful and Urban Masses, 1890-1920

Charles Mulford Robinson, "What Civic Art Is," in *Modern Civic Art or The City Made Beautiful*, pp. 24-36; William H. Wilson, chapters 3 and 4 in *The City Beautiful Movement*, pp. 53-95; David Brownlee, Chapter 2 in *Building the City Beautiful: The Benjamin Franklin Parkway and the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, pp. 13-37; Paul Boyer, Chapters 17-19, in *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America*, pp. 252-283.

October 25: Communities, Slums and Transients: Chicago School Sociology, 1910-30

Robert Fishman, "The Metropolitan Tradition in American Planning," in *The American Planning Tradition*, pp. 65-85; Robert Park, "The City" and Ernest Burgess, "The Growth of the City," in *The City*, pp. 1-62; Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life" in *On Cities and Social Life*, pp. 60-83; Carla Cappetti, "Maps, Models and Metaphors: Theories of the City," in *Writing Chicago*, pp. 34-58

Film screening – "Metropolis"

November 1: Dreams and Nightmares of "Megalopolis," 1920-40

Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of the Future*, pp. 108-140; Lewis Mumford, "Introduction" and "The Rise and Fall of Megalopolis," in *The Culture of Cities*, pp. 3-12, 223-299; Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Disappearing City," in *Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings*, pp. 70-112.

Film screening – "The City"

November 8: Highways, Housing and Urban Renewal: Modernist Urbanism, 1940-60

Marshall Berman, "Modernism in New York," in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*; Edmund Bacon, "Putting Ideas to Work – Philadelphia," in *Design of Cities*, pp. 264-306; Sommer, Richard, "The Urban Design of Philadelphia: Taking the Towne for the City," in Robbins and El-Khoury eds., *Shaping the City*, pp. 135-76; Paul and Percival Goodman, "A City of Efficient Consumption" and "A New Community" in *Communitas*, pp. 125-187

2nd paper assignment due in class!

November 15: Urban Villages and Suburban Flight: Fragmented Cities, 1960-70

Jane Jacobs, "Introduction" and "The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety," in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, pp. 5-71; William H. Whyte, "Are Cities Un-American?" in *The Exploding Metropolis*, pp. 23-52; James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," in *James Baldwin Collected Essays*, pp. 170-179; Jon C. Teaford, "Coming Apart," in *The Metropolitan Revolution*, pp. 90-124.

Film screening "Blade Runner," part I

November 22: Thanksgiving – NO CLASS!!!

November 29: Images of the "Postmodern" City, 1980-2000

David Harvey, "Postmodernism in the City: Architecture and Urban Design," in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 66-98; Mike Davis, "Fortress L.A.," in *City of Quartz*, pp. 225-263; Norman M. Klein, "Building Blade Runner," in *Social Text*, no. 28, 1991, pp. 147-152; Sharon Zukin, excerpt from *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyworld* in *The Blackwell City Reader*, pp. 197-207.

Film screening "Blade Runner," part II

December 6: Student Presentations

Final paper assignment due in class!

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

General Requirements:

The course requires close readings of the assigned pages; the active visual observation of materials presented in class; active participation in class discussion; one formal, oral presentation; and three interpretive papers. Students should be prepared to discuss all of the assigned readings for each class session. In addition, students will be expected to choose one or two readings over the course of the semester to briefly present to the class in a summary manner. Evaluations will be based on the quality of written assignments, attendance, and verbal participation in class.

Relative weight of course requirements:

- 1) First paper assignment, (20%)
- 2) Second paper assignment (20%)
- 3) Final Paper Assignment (40%)
- 4) Class Participation and Final Presentation (20%)

Policy on late assignments and class participation:

Late papers will be docked by one full grade and will not be accepted after two weeks.

Final papers will not be accepted after the first day of the final examination period.

Exceptions will be made only in cases of documented emergency (e.g. sudden hospitalization, death in the immediate family).

Attendance is essential to class participation. Two or fewer unexcused absences will not affect the class participation grade. However, each subsequent absence will deduct 25% of the class participation grade. Those with 5 or more unexcused absences will not receive credit for the course.

Please note: Except in cases of documented emergencies, incomplete grades are not given in this course.

Academic Integrity

All relevant University policies regarding Academic Integrity must be followed. This includes no cheating, no plagiarism and reporting any knowledge thereof. Please consult the Student Handbook or the appropriate web-page:

<http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/osl/acadint.html>

Exceptional Accommodations:

Any student who has a documented need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Student Disabilities Services, located at:

Stouffer Commons, Ste 300, 3702 Spruce Street, Philadelphia PA 19104-6027

Phone: (215) 573-9235

Additional Notes:

This syllabus is subject to change, in the event of unforeseen circumstances, or in the case that changes will significantly enhance the quality of the course.