OVERVIEW

This course explores urban life in premodern Europe from a multidimensional and comparative perspective. Starting in antiquity and ending in the eighteenth century, it asks how urban societies work and how images of urban life are constructed.

We will begin with key theoretical readings that emphasize the social dimension of urban life and invite us to think of urbanites as creative users of cities. Indeed, throughout this course we will pay special attention to everyday life and adopt a bottom-up approach, exploring how people of different backgrounds (e.g., religion, gender, and class) have experienced, imagined, and struggled with urban life. Can this rich archive of urban experiences from the past teach us lessons for the metropolises of our time?

The thematic approaches will be combined with case studies of particular urban societies of the past. These include ancient Athens, imperial Rome, medieval Nuremberg, Renaissance Venice, and early modern London. As we will see, many premodern urban societies faced similar problems, but this did not necessarily lead to similar solutions. Examining these case studies will shed light on the dialectic that runs deep in the history of the European city: that of practical setbacks on the one hand, and utopian aspirations on the other.

Lectures will be complemented by historical documents, literary and visual sources, and key texts from the research literature. All readings and visual sources will be made available online through the course site. In addition to three reflection papers, two creative writing assignments will provide opportunities to develop a personal approach based on your particular experiences of urban life.
COURSE GOALS

The goal of this course is to explore, from a comparative perspective and on a long timescale, how urban societies work and how images of urban life are constructed. By exploring a wide range of historical, visual, and literary sources we will probe how people in the past have experienced urban life and its challenges.

These course objectives align with the general goal of Cultures and Contexts, which is to prepare you for life in a globalized world. Through critical engagements with primary cultural materials, Cultures and Contexts introduces you to the ways that humans come to understand themselves as members of the social, religious, national, and regional collectives, and with the dynamics of cultural interaction and influence. As a part of the College Core Curriculum, it is designed to extend your education beyond the focused studies of your major, preparing you for your future life as a thoughtful individual and active member of society.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

20% Active participation and attendance

10% Midterm exam in class on March 10 (study guide will be distributed)

20% Final exam: date TBA (study guide will be distributed)

20% Two creative essays (each counts 10%)

- Each essay should be no less than 3 and no more than 4 pages long
- See instructions in the syllabus
- Submit to recitation instructor

30% Three reflection papers (each counts 10%)

- Each paper should be no less than 3 and no more than 4 pages long
- For each paper, you choose one of two assigned topics. In your answer, draw on lecture notes and assigned readings
- Submit to recitation instructor
Course Policies and Expectations

- Please be punctual to lectures and recitation sections.
- You will be responsible for all assigned readings in addition to material covered in lecture. Familiarity with readings and lecture content will be necessary to do well in the course.
- You will be expected to have completed the assigned readings before section meetings and to be an active and informed participant. It is recommended that you do the readings in the order in which they appear on the syllabus.
- Please turn off all phones during class and recitations. Laptop use is acceptable only for note-taking.
- Lectures and sections form an essential part of the course and should not be missed unless you have a medical or family emergency. Unexcused absences will adversely affect the participation component of your overall course grade. Students with more than three unexcused absences from lectures and/or recitations will be failed from the course.
- All work must be completed to pass the course. Extensions for the papers will not be granted, so please plan accordingly. A late paper will be penalized at the rate of one grade per day: e.g. from B+ to B. If you submit your paper more than 72 hours after the deadline, it will receive an F.
- Papers should be double-spaced, with page numbers, standard margins, and standard 12pt font. If you use footnotes, please format them according to the rules of the current Chicago Manual of Style (CMS). A useful summary of the basic CMS rules is available here: [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)

Religious Holidays

During the first two weeks of the semester, please notify your recitation instructor of any planned absences due to religious holidays. Details on NYU’s policy may be found at: [https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-calendar-policy-on-religious-holidays.html](https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-calendar-policy-on-religious-holidays.html).

Collaboration and Plagiarism

For your essays, you may find it useful to discuss your ideas with your peers. However, all written work you submit for evaluation must reflect your own approach to the topic. Plagiarism of any kind will, without exception, result in failing the course. Please take note of NYU’s official policy on plagiarism: [http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html](http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html). Please also familiarize yourself with the Statement on Academic Integrity issued by the College Core Curriculum office.

Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities ([212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980) or [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu)) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.
COURSE TIMELINE

SOURCE = historical or literary (primary) source

**Week 1: What is a City? Introduction**

L1: January 28
L2: January 30 (➢ Start thinking about Creative Assignment #1, see below)


Lewis Mumford, “What is a City?,” 92–96.


**Creative Assignment #1 (NYC):** As we discussed this week, Kevin Lynch speaks of the “image of the city,” and Michel de Certeau writes that urbanites “make use of spaces that cannot be seen.” Is this a contradiction? Your answer should take the form of a personal essay (3–4 pages) that will form the basis for discussion in section. Be sure to link the theoretical approaches to your own experience of New York City and illustrate your answer with concrete examples. **Paper due on February 5.**

**Week 2: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Ancient Greek Polis**

L3: February 4
L4: February 6
➢ Creative Assignment #1 due in section on February 5


**SOURCE:** Thucydides, *Pericles’ Funeral Oration* and related documents [Asmonti, pp. 121–131]

**SOURCE:** Treatise by the ‘Old Oligarch’ [Asmonti, pp. 170–174]


**Week 3: Inventing Traditions: Rome, “Capital of the World”**

L5: February 11
L6: February 13


Week 4: Daily Life in the Ancient Mega-City

L7: February 18 (Questions for Reflection Paper # 1 will be handed out)
L8: February 20

SOURCE: Roman graffiti (from: Brian K. Harvey, Daily Life in Ancient Rome, 144–150)

SOURCE: Juvenal, Satire 3.

SOURCE: Selected sources on grain supply and its social dynamics (from: Brian K. Harvey, Daily Life in Ancient Rome, 174–180)

Stephen L. Dyson, Rome: A Living Portrait of an Ancient City, 1–16.

Week 5: The City of Sins and the Christian City

L9: February 25
L10: February 27

➢ Reflection Paper #1 due in section on February 26


SOURCE: Codex Theodosianus (4th century): Regulations for Life in a Christian City


Joseph and Frances Gies, Life in a Medieval City, 1–10.

Week 6: “City air makes you free”: The Medieval City and its Social Cosmos

L11: March 3 (midterm study guide will be distributed)
L12: March 5

SOURCE: Charter of King Henry VI to the town of Nottingham (1449)

SOURCE: The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes (1192)

SOURCE: Guild Regulations of the Shearers of Arras (1236)

SOURCE: Guild regulation for the Oil Vendors and Grocers of Florence (1318)

Week 7: Connections and Walls

March 10 (균 midterm in class)
L13: March 12

**SOURCE:** Selected documents about crime prevention and gate-keeping in medieval London

**SOURCE:** Decrees of the Hanseatic League


Week 8: Spring break

Week 9: Space, Time, and Class in the Medieval City

L14: March 24
L15: March 26

**VISUAL SOURCE:** Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of Good and Bad Government on the City Life* (Frescoes in the Town Hall of Siena, ca. 1340). A link to a high-resolution image of these frescoes will be provided. Try to identify details that show the effects of good and bad government; based on your findings, compare the ‘good’ to the ‘bad’ city. For a basic orientation, watch this Khan Academy video analysis (link also provided on NYU Classes): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jk3wNadYA7k

**SOURCE:** Selected documents about town/gown controversies in Oxford and Paris (13th and 14th centuries)

**SOURCE:** Selected documents about city bells in medieval English towns

Chiara Frugoni, *A Day in a Medieval City*, 21–43.

Week 10: Urban Crises

L16: March 31 (균 Start thinking about Creative Assignment #2, see next page)
L17: April 2

**SOURCE:** Medieval English instruction for the treatment of lepers

**SOURCE:** Giovanni Boccaccio, Prologue to *The Decameron*

**SOURCE:** *Plague ordinance of the city of Marlborough*, 1665.
Creative Assignment #2 (city of your choice): In the next two weeks, you will read two texts in which noted historical figures—Bruni and Sanudo—praise their respective city. In section, you will analyze these texts and discuss to what extent the image they construct corresponds with historical reality. But what actually constitutes a great city from your perspective? Choose one example—i.e., your favorite city, with the exception of NYC—and describe it to a reader in the distant future. The target length for this assignment is three pages. As to content, you are free to experiment: as Bruni said 600 years ago, there is no default template for how to describe a city. Indeed, the more multifaceted your essay, the better: describing only physical and architectural features is not enough. You may also want to engage with the city’s history, its cultural offerings, and its social fabric. Paper due on April 8

Week 11: Utopia and Upheaval: The Renaissance City (I)

L18: April 7
L19: April 9
➢ Creative Assignment #2 due in section on April 8


SOURCE: Marin Sanudo, Diary: Selections about ethnic and religious minorities in Venice


Week 12: Utopia and Upheaval: The Renaissance City (II)

L20: April 14 (Question for Reflection paper # 2 will be handed out)
L21: April 16


Week 13: Empire, Trade, and Urbanism in Northern Europe

L22: April 21
L23: April 23
➢ Reflection Paper #2 due in section on April 22

SOURCE: Michel de Montaigne, Account of his stay in Augsburg in 1580 [recorded by his secretary], in Travel Journal, ed. and trans. D. Frame, 897–904.

Christopher R. Friedrichs, The Early Modern City, 3–15; 19–42.

Cowan, Urban Europe (1500–1700), 123–149.

Week 14: Transformation and Reformation: The Early Modern Period

L24: April 28 (Question for Reflection paper # 3 will be handed out)
L25: April 30

SOURCE: Jean de La Fontaine, Letter from the town of Richelieu to his wife (5 September 1663). [For background information about the town of Richelieu, please also read the two pages from A.E.J. Morris’s History of Urban Form]


Week 15: “Urban Odysseys” in the Eighteenth Century

L26: May 5 (Final exam study guide will be distributed)
L27: May 7
➢ Reflection Paper #3 due in section on May 6


Christopher R. Friedrichs, The Early Modern City, 329–333.

➢ Please use the opportunity to revisit and review the texts and topics we discussed. Familiarity with texts and lecture content forms an important aspect of preparation for the final exam.

Final exam: TBA. Please note that the final exam must not be missed unless you have a documented medical or family emergency. You cannot take the exam early and you should plan your end-of-the-semester travel accordingly.