Wayne State University  
Department of Urban Studies & Planning  
UP 4460: Sustainable Cities

Instructor: Allison Laskey (alaskey@uci.edu)

Course Info: Winter 2019, 3 credits

Class Sessions: Tuesdays 11:30am to 2pm at 0174 Main

Office Hours: Tuesdays after class or by appointment

Format: Discussion-based seminar; readings will be posted each week, as syllabus may change

Course Description
We live in an increasingly urban world. According to the UN, since 2008 over 50% of humans are urban-dwellers. At the same time, humans are impacting the global environment at an unprecedented scale. Through the lens of the planner’s triangle, this course explores the ways in which people and their urban developments affect the environment, the way the natural world impacts cities, and how cities may be developed and redeveloped to create a more just, green, and prosperous urban future.

Learning outcomes
After taking this course, students will be able to:

- Recognize the opportunities and challenges urban development presents for sustainable development.
- Understand the particular impacts of climate change on cities, with consideration for uneven impacts globally.
- Understand the possibilities technology affords for improving sustainability in cities.
- Discuss the equity implications of different urban sustainability and development decisions and policies.
- Evaluate a city’s level of sustainability across several dimensions.

Course Requirements

- (25%) In-class participation, including 1 presentation of an assigned reading
- (15%) Midterm project presentation -- Pick a city and do a presentation on their climate action plans and sustainability initiatives. Midterm can be individual or group. proposal mtg wk 3, due wk 4. 1 pg Reflection due wk 8.
- (20%) Final paper -- 10-15 pg. Recommend 3-5 readings in order to explain, what would you like people to know about sustainability? Proposal due wk 5. Revision due wk 10. Revision 2 due wk 12.
- (15%) Final presentation -- Presentation of final paper in class.
- (20%) weekly reading responses (blogpost)
• (5%) in-class writing assignments

Course Outline

1. What is sustainability? What does a sustainable city look like?

Week 1: Current events to set the stage


What we will be studying this semester is newsworthy and immediately relevant, and it is not easy material to grapple with. This week will set the stage with current events in the news backed by science, to introduce the problems cities are facing in sustainability.

Week 2: How we got here and now

• Dayna Baumeister https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI2s7yI6eDI (especially 10:00-15:30; 16:20-20:00; and 21:30-25:45)

This week will introduce a brief ecological and geological history of the planet (Baumeister 2010) and introduce the fossil fuel era (Mitchell 2009) grown through a capitalist economy (Klein 2015). It will introduce the basis of global sustainability agreements through the Brundtland definition of sustainability (Our Common Future 1987).

Week 3: Urban theory today for cities past, present, and future
• [video - Burtynsky? 1605 movie?]

Rounding out our introduction to the fossil fuel era and beyond (Mitchell), we theorize how to think about cities on our planet today (Roy). A video will triangulate our visual relation to these themes.

Week 4: The three e’s/the planner’s triangle

A framework for sustainability in planning guides our analytic of sustainable cities (Campbell). The particular challenge of environmental racism must be part of that reckoning (Agyeman, Bullard & Evans 2002), as must the imminent close to the era of cheap fossil fuels (Mitchell).

Week 5: Cities and climate change [Carolyn Loh guest professor]
• Solecki, W., Rosenzweig, C., & Hammer, S. (2013). Urbanization of climate change. The Urban Transformation: Health, Shelter and Climate Change, 197.

Guest Professor Carolyn Loh will report on her research and equip us to compare sustainability plans across cities.
Week 6: Revealing disproportionate burdens


Since unsustainability was achieved by enforcing structural inequalities, we view theories dealing with racism, sexism, and settler colonialism as integral to building sustainable cities.

Week 7: Midterm presentations -- City sustainability plans and climate initiatives

2. Generating sustainable cities

Week 8: Ecological systems and waste

- A tidal wave of plastic. https://feature.undp.org/plastic-tidal-wave/#article

This week helps us think through supply chains of the materials economy (Leonard) in proximity to Earth ecology (Mollison). We examine the case study of plastic accumulation in cities, lakes, and oceans.
Week 9: Extreme weather, natural disasters, and uneven socioeconomic impacts


We take two case studies of the uneven effects extreme weather has had on U.S. cities: Chicago and New Orleans, then consider intensifying news about extreme weather near and far.

Week 10: Land and green building


This week we consider city-scale sustainability efforts and strategies for green building.

Week 11: Water delivery, control, and privatization

The first cities were located by a water source, and cities expanded according to water infrastructure. Modern water infrastructure has allowed unprecedented urban growth but is now facing old age, tightening budgets, and resource conflicts with public health implications.

Week 12: Transportation and connectivity

Today’s cities rely on fast flows of goods, people, and information. We examine mobility infrastructures for vehicles (Bajpai), bikes (Miller & Lubitow), and the internet (Starosielski).

Week 13: Residential inclusion and civic participation

The call for sustainability requires active citizen participation. Where and how can individuals affect large scale socioeconomic systems?

Week 14: Health, wealth, and sustainable city design
- Planet Earth II Cities episode (available on Netflix)
We contend with causes and solutions to public health and wealth disparities, remembering that cities are homes to wildlife as well as humans.

Week 15: Conclusion, final presentations