Texts and Ideas: Visible and Invisible Cities

The experience of living in a city is one vital thread that connects us with our ancient, medieval, and early modern ancestors, and that continues to provide a unifying element in millions of our contemporaries’ disparate lives across the globe. During your studies at NYU, urban life will be a constant environment and stimulus, whether you find yourself in New York, Florence, Accra, or Shanghai.

Visible and Invisible Cities aims to supply conceptual frameworks and historical contexts for this experience. The course centers on the ways in which human communities have been theorized and imagined within the Western tradition from classical antiquity through to the Renaissance. The particular intellectual focuses of the course are the city, conceived since Aristotle as the proper habitat of humankind, and the relationship between the family or household and the state. The primary texts encompass utopian writings and works of political theory, but also texts describing and analyzing real-world communities. In addition to literary and philosophical texts, we also look at visual and cartographic representations of cities and urban space.

Visible and Invisible Cities combines features of two different types of Texts and Ideas courses, one that follows through a particular idea, or related set of ideas, through history, and another that explores the relationship between two periods of cultural history (in this case the ancient world and late-medieval and Renaissance Europe). The course aims to expand your knowledge of intellectual history and literature, and to help you gain a sense of how traditions of thought evolve over time. It will also help you to refine your skills in analyzing and engaging critically with complex texts, ranging from the canonical (Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Dante, Boccaccio, More, Shakespeare), to texts long marginalized from the canon and only now becoming visible (Christine de Pizan, Moderata Fonte).

Some of the questions the course will consider are:

- What answers have past ages evolved to the question of what the perfect human community would be like?
- What factors have been determined as critical to the construction (and destruction) of communities?
- In what ways have the relationships between the individual, the family, and the community or state been conceived?
- What role has the notion of the city played in political thought?
- In what ways has urban space been conceived and represented through visual media?
- In what ways have factors such as gender, class, race, and religion inflected the conceptualization and use of urban space?
- How has the notion of the city played out in imaginative literature—as ideal, as dystopia, and as locus for human experience and agency?

Assessment
*15% Attendance at lecture and section and participation in section.
*20% Short papers. These are response papers (2-3 pages long) that will be assigned on some weekly readings (due before the relevant section).
*15% Final paper. This is a longer writing assignment (6-8 pages) comparatively analyzing any two of the primary texts read for the course.
*15% Creative project. This is a writing/video assignment (6-8 pages/10-15 minutes) reflecting on any aspect of contemporary urban life, using theoretical or comparative material deriving from the course.
* 15% Mid-term exam. Identification, short answer, and short essay.
* 20%. Final exam. Identification, short answer, and short essay.

Course outline

Week 1. Introduction and historical overview

   Sept 2. The city-state and the modern city
   Morgers Herman Hansen, “Cities, States, City-States, and City-State Cultures”

   Sept 4. Perspectives on the city
   Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities, chapter 1-3
   Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City”

Week 2. Foundations: Plato

   Sept 9
   Plato, Republic [extracts]

   Sept 11
   Plato, Republic [extracts]

Week 3. Foundations: Aristotle

   Sept 16
   Aristotle, Politics, Bks 1-2
Sept 18
Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk 7

Week 4. The city imagined 1

Sept 23
Virgil, *Aeneid* Bks 1-2

Sept 25
Virgil, *Aeneid*, Bks 4-5; Bk 8, lines 306-69

Week 5. The city moralized

Sept 30
Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Good and Bad Government*

Oct 2
Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3, lines 1-21; Canto 8, lines 66-93; Canto 10, lines 1-93; Canto 28

Week 6. The city imagined 2

Oct 7
Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Introduction to Day 1; Day 1, stories 1-3

Oct 9
Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Day 3, story 1; Day 2, story 5; Day 4, story 1; Day 6, Story 2

Week 7. The household and the state

Oct 14. No class

Oct 16
Leon Battista Alberti, *The Book of the Family*, Day 3 [extracts]

*Mid-term examination*

Week 8. The household and the state

Oct 21.
Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, Book I (to chapter XXX)

Oct 23.
Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, Book 3, chapters; Robert C. Davis, “The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance”

**Week 9. The city described**

**Oct 28. Praising the Renaissance city**
Leonardo Bruni, *Panegyric of the City of Florence*

**Oct 30. Mapping the Renaissance city**
Jacopo de’ Barbari, *Map of Venice*
Leonardo da Vinci, *Map of Imola*

**Week 10. The city and memory**

**Nov 4**
Petrarch, letter to Giovanni Colonna on the ruins of Rome
Raphael, letter to Pope Leo X on a proposed map of ancient Rome

**Nov 6**
Joachim du Bellay, *The Ruins of Rome*

*Creative project due*

**Week 11. The comic city**

**Nov 11**

**Nov 13**

**Week 12. Utopias 1**

**Nov 18**
Thomas More, *Utopia*, Bk 1

**Nov 20**
More, *Utopia*, Bk. 2

**Week 13. Utopias 3**

**Nov 25**
Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*

**Nov 27. No class**

*Final paper due: Nov XXX*


Week 14. Utopias 4

Dec 2
Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women*

Dec 4
Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantuagruel* (abbey of Thelème)

Week 15. The breaking of bonds

Dec 9
Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Acts 1-3

Dec 11

*Final examination: Dec XXX*