



Urban village, Guangzhou, China

UNDERSTANDING CITIES

INSTRUCTOR
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ISSUE

This course focuses on the urbanisation issues. Since crossing the threshold in 2007, over 55% of the global population now resides in cities. While cities offer opportunities for development and prosperity, they also bring challenges such as inequality, pollution, and climate change. At this crucial juncture, it is essential to explore the city through various themes to develop a comprehensive understanding. Thus, the key questions to consider are: What defines a city? How did cities evolve? And what will shape the cities in the future?

DESCRIPTION

This course will introduce basic ideas about what makes urbanity and how to understand it for students with diverse backgrounds but a common interest in cities. Initiated from an architecture-urbanism perspective, it would cover material across disciplinary boundaries in order to investigate the inter-related social, spatial, and economic issues. Through reading key texts, media, and scenarios, this course aims to equip students with the essential tools and knowledge to participate in public discourse and urban life as active citizens.

IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

The course aims to explore urban questions and to review scenarios that are related to the student and their daily lives/surroundings. Students would gain the skills to understand cities through i) Analytical reading of maps and the city, ii) Systematic thinking about urban networks and flow, iii) Observation and documentation of the urban environment.

COURSE SYLLABUS

The following themes and concepts will be discussed throughout the semester:

Lecture 1: The Urban Problem ----- The Urban Problem
Lecture 2: The Modernist City ----- Industrialization
Lecture 3: The Global City ----- Globalization
Lecture 4: The Livable City ----- Living Quality and Public Health
Lecture 5: The Consumer City ----- Commodification
Lecture 6: The Imaginary City ----- Representations
Lecture 7: The Hong Kong City ----- Public Housing

METHODS

The course will take the form of 13 weekly sessions of 2 hours and 45 minutes, organised into seven thematic sections to allow ideas and discussions to develop. The first part of the class will be a lecture on concepts and text, with questions posted to be discussed in the second half. There will be student group presentations, and two short quizzes based on the lecture/text will be given throughout the course to reiterate the key ideas.

DELIVERABLES

Weekly Journals

After each lecture, students draft a question or a critical comment along with one photo related to the lecture in an online sheet. This also serves as attendance for each student.

Course Project – Atlas of Invisible Hong Kong

Through the lenses of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Dung Kai-Cheung's *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, the final project of the ARCH1002 Understanding Cities course attempts to interpret Hong Kong's cityscape through a combination of literary text, imaginary maps, filmic imagination. Students of the course, who are from diverse academic backgrounds, work collaboratively to reveal hidden traces of historical memory of Hong Kong through multimedia presentations. Students will have to form a group of two for this project and select one of the suggested eight streets/neighbourhoods. The project consists of several stages with tutorial sessions to guide them through the process.

1. Urban Condition Collages Exercise: A David Hockney's style photo collage, attempting to capture the temporal dimension of the selected streets/neighbourhoods.
2. Literature Review: Comprehensive research on the historical transformation of the selected streets/neighbourhoods through a series of slides and maps collections. This can include analysis of the solid/void, public/private, and some other urban conditions of the selected streets/neighbourhoods through plan drawings.
3. Animated Frames: A series of animated photographs (GIF) attempting to capture the invisible dimensions of the selected street, such as traces of historical layers, collective memory of residents, public space activities, and so on.
4. Imaginary Maps: One imaginary map of the selected street is based on one of the themes of the Animated Frames exercise to reveal sensory and invisible dimensions of the urban context (approximately A1 size).

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Gain a basic understanding of the selected themes that influence the becoming of cities.
2. Acquire a basic knowledge of the complex historical, cultural, and social contexts that have shaped and sustained the cities.
3. Enhance the skills of exploration and observation and how to make verbal, visual and multimedia presentations
4. Enhance the ability to engage in independent and reflective learning as well as the skills of effective verbal and written communication.

ASSESSMENT SCHEME

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|--|-----|
| 1. Participation & Weekly Journal | 20% |
| 2. Topical Quiz I | 15% |
| 3. Topical Quiz II | 15% |
| 4. Course Project | 50% |
| 4.1. Urban Condition Collage: | 10% |
| 4.2. Literature Review Presentation: | 15% |
| 4.3. Final Project (Animated Frames + Imaginary Maps): | 25% |

Each assessment result will be released to students upon completion accompanied by written comments based on student progress and performance.

COURSE FORMAT

Teaching Days

Students must attend for F2F teaching during these teaching hours.

Teaching Day: Wednesdays 14:30-17:15

Location: ARC G04

Student Study Effort (Total: 140 hrs)

1. Class Contact: 39 hrs (Lecture, Tutorial, Critique)
2. Other Student Study Effort: 100 hrs (Self Study)

IMPORTANT DATES

Urban Condition Collage	27 January 2026, 11:00am
Literature Review Slides Submission	10 March 2026, 11:00am
Quiz I	11 March 2026
Quiz II	8 April 2026
Final Project Presentation	15 April 2026

FIELD TRIPS

Two field trips are organised to review the theoretical aspects discussed in lectures on urban contexts. Discussions during the field trips also help students with their imaginary map productions.

Cho Yiu Chuen and Lai Yiu Estates	18 March 15:00
Choi Hung and Ping Shek Estates	25 March 15:00

REQUIRED READINGS

Excerpts of Key Readings will be assigned according to the seven themes every week. Although the topics covered are hardly comprehensive, this collection of critical readings can be seen as an entry point to look at the contemporary city. The content of crucial reading might also be included in the quizzes.

L1: The Urban Problem	Mike Davis, Planet of Slums, 2005
L2: The Modern City	Jane Jacobs, The Life and Death of American Cities, 1961
L3: The Global City	Saskia Sassen, Global City, 1991
L4: The Liveable City	Charles Montgomery, Happy City, 2013
L5: The Consumer City	Michael Sorkin, Variations on a theme park, 1992
L6: The Imaginary City	Kai-Cheung Dung, Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City, 2009.
L7: Cities within the City	Ivan Valin and Natalia Echeverri: Density in the Territory, 2017

IMPORTANT NOTE TO STUDENTS

Expectations for Professional Conduct

The motto of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) is “Through learning and temperance to virtue”. This motto places equal emphasis on the intellectual and moral education of students. In addition to pursuing academic excellence, students of CUHK are expected to maintain and uphold the highest standard of integrity and honesty in their academic and personal lives, respect the rights of others and abide by the law. More information on undergraduate studies can be found in the UG Student Handbook. https://rgsntl.rgs.cuhk.edu.hk/aqs_prd_aplx/Public/Handbook/

Attendance

Class attendance is required in all courses. For an excused absence, the instructor must be notified and presented with documentation of illness or personal matter. Please note: **Three (3)** or more unexcused absences may result in a failing grade for the course.

Academic Honesty

The Chinese University of Hong Kong places very high importance on honesty in academic work submitted by students and adopts a policy of zero tolerance on academic dishonesty

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>.

With each assignment, students may be required to submit a statement that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

Third-Party Assistance

All intellectual work essential to the design project must be completed by the student and cannot, under any circumstance, be outsourced to a third party (including, but not limited to a company, consultant, alumni, and/or friend).

In the design studio context, students may utilize external resources, such as printing services for presentation materials, and/or laser cutting and 3D printing services for prototyping purposes. Use of such third-party services constitutes non-intellectual work done by others. It is only permitted with prior written consent from the studio tutor and acknowledgment of such work done by the third party.

Assistance from other students or friends for aspects of project production also constitutes non-intellectual work done by others; this is allowed only if declared and acknowledged in a written statement attached to any such work that has received assistance.

Under all circumstances, students must declare all work done by others by completing the school's designated form before assessment. This form must include a detailed explanation of the third party's identity (name and relationship to the student), when and how they were utilized, and the specific tasks they performed in the project. The completed form, signed by the student, must be endorsed by the tutor and presented during the final review. The school will collect and retain this form for record-keeping purposes.

Failure to follow this code of conduct may be considered a case of academic dishonesty, to be reviewed by a disciplinary board, and possible failure of the course.

Artificial Intelligence

Students will be allowed to use AI research and writing tools in the literature review process without compromising the criticality and the originality of the written work. In this assignment, students are encouraged to use AI research and writing tools to enhance the breadth and depth of their inquiry. Students should demonstrate how AI tools contributed to their literature search, whether by expanding the range of sources, helping to refine keywords, or surfacing unexpected connections while maintaining the credibility and relevance of AI-suggested materials. To guarantee transparency and academic integrity, students will submit a record of their communication with the AI tool and include a brief reflection on how AI assisted in identifying key literature and shaping their argument, as well as any limitations or challenges encountered during the process. This approach is intended to boost both digital literacy as well as critical thinking, to encourage students to treat AI as a resource for discovery rather than a substitute for rigorous scholarly analysis.

Students may refer to Approach 3 of the CUHK ‘Use of Artificial Intelligence tools in Teaching, Learning and Assessments’ – A Guide for Students.

Student Work

Submission of course work documentation must be complete and correctly formatted. Missing or incomplete submission of the documentation folder will result in the grade for the course being withheld. This will prevent registration for the following term or delay graduation.

External Examination

Of paramount importance to the academic rigour and professional relevance of the architecture programme, the external examination process serves as a critical and impartial review mechanism. An invited panel of distinguished practitioners, academics, and industry experts convenes to rigorously evaluate the school's pedagogical ecosystem. This comprehensive audit scrutinises the fairness and consistency of the internal assessment process, benchmarks the standard and ambition of student work against national and international norms, and provides invaluable feedback on the intellectual and pedagogical direction of the curriculum itself.

As a cornerstone of this process and a mandatory graduating requirement, final-year students from both the Bachelor of Social Sciences (Architecture) and Master of Architecture programmes must present their final project and portfolio work in person. This formal defence before the external panel not only validates the authenticity and depth of their learning but also simulates a professional practice environment, demanding they articulate their design rationale, critical thinking, and technical resolution to an authoritative audience, thereby preparing them for the collaborative and discursive nature of the architectural profession.

Term 2: 7 January 2026 (Wednesday) – 15 April 2026 (Wednesday)

WEEK 01		
07.01	L1: Course Introduction	
WEEK 02		
14.01	L2: The URBAN Problem	Workshop: Urban Condition Collage
WEEK 03		
21.01	L3: The MODERNIST City How Did Cities Become?	Workshop: Urban Condition Collage
WEEK 04		
28.01	L4: The GLOBAL City Characteristics and Implications	
WEEK 05		
04.02	L5: The LIVEABLE City What Gets Cities Going?	Group Presentations Case Study 1-2 (Literature Review)
WEEK 06		
11.02	L6: The CONSUMER City Citizen or Consumers?	Group Presentations Case Study 3-4 (Literature Review)
WEEK 07		
18.02	PUBLIC HOLIDAY	
WEEK 08		
25.02	L7: The IMAGINARY City How Cities Are Represented	Group Presentations Case Study 5-6 (Literature Review)
WEEK 09		
04.03	READING WEEK	
WEEK 10		
11.03	L8: Cities within a City Notes on Hong Kong Public Housing	Quiz I
WEEK 11		
18.03	Field Trip I	
WEEK 12		
25.03	Field Trip II	
WEEK 13		
01.04	Discussion with Each Group on Their Final Project	
WEEK 14		
08.04	Discussion with Each Group on Their Final Project	Quiz II
WEEK 15		
15.04	STUDENT PRESENTATION/ PROJECT EXHIBITION	

Grade	Descriptor	Criteria	Points
A	Excellent	Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.	4
A-	Very Good	Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.	3.7
B+	Good	Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.	3.3
B			3
B-			2.7
C+	Fair	Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.	2.3
C			2
C-			1.7
D+	Pass	Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.	1.3
D			1
F	Failure	Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.	0

Written Feedback to Students

Term: _____

Grade: _____

Course Code: _____

Review: _____

Tutor: _____

Student Name: _____

Student ID: _____

Feedback from Course Instructor:

Achievements:

Challenges: